Making space for India in post-apartheid South Africa: Narrating diasporic subjectivities through classical song and dance

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Abstract
Background/purpose: Diasporic associations and hometown groups fuel transnational exchanges and circulations. Their role has mostly been understood in terms of broader calculative agendas related to ethnic and national cultural politics. In South Africa, classical Indian singers, dancers and instrumentalists are an important part of these transnational landscapes. This paper focuses on the individual actors giving shape to these flows, and explores how a range of subjectivities is entangled with the materialities and forces present in classical performance spaces.

Methods and results: Drawing on fieldwork in Durban, South Africa, it explores how, and why organising actors assemble the matter of classical performance spaces. The paper also explores interconnections to Bollywood as another emergent diasporic site both in tension and accord with classical Indian performances.

Conclusion: Drawing from a feminist social practice approach, this paper argues that diaspora associative life is assembled through agents negotiating different gaps and discrepancies arising from the material and affective inhabitation of diasporic worlds.

A scintillating performance by Sudha Ragunathan held the nearly full house audience spellbound as she rendered a programme of pure bliss and skill. Krithi after krithi rolled off her voice as she sang in immaculate precision and harmony. Her effortless rendition thrilled the huge audience who sat spellbound by her outstanding programme (Indian Academy of South Africa, 2004).

1. Introduction

On the 9th of May 1993 after a gap of over four decades, diplomatic relations between India and South Africa were formally restored. Since then, the gradual transnational (re)materialisations of South African Indian life have arisen out of intersecting sets of commitments to develop closer ties with India. These include new desires of the Indian government to engage people of Indian origin in South Africa as part of its overseas diaspora strategy, and the increasing influence of Indian and South African Bollywood promoters and film producers (Dickinson and Bailey, 2007; Ebrahim, 2008; Munjal et al., 2013). Amidst these activities, various South African Indian conservative religious and cultural associations, formed during the apartheid-era system of separate development, are developing closer ties with India through transnational circulations of classical Indian performers, dancers and musicians. The term 'South African Indian' expresses a positionality that is constituted through a multiplicity of competing identifications, and expressed and negotiated in a diverse range of interconnected transnational spaces (Landy et al., 2004). Yet, as Hansen (2005) has argued, diaspora associations draw upon classical Indian music and dance to negotiate, order and control the boundaries and expressions of Indian diasporic identities, contributing to new contestations and dilemmas surrounding South African Indian ethnic, national and gender politics (see also Ganesh, 2010; Radhakrishnan, 2005; Ramsamy, 2007; Rastogi, 2008; Vahed and Desai, 2010).

In addition to being locations for negotiations over categorical politics, South African Indian classical performances are also sites of affective and embodied experiences. The quote at the start of this paper is taken from a description of a performance by an Indian classical performance by Sudha Ragunathan held the nearly full house audience spellbound as she rendered a programme of pure bliss and skill. Krithi after krithi rolled off her voice as she sang in immaculate precision and harmony. Her effortless rendition thrilled the huge audience who sat spellbound by her outstanding programme (Indian Academy of South Africa, 2004).

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1 Following Rastogi (2008: 235) I use the term 'South African Indian' rather than 'Indian South African' or 'Indo-South African' to respect South Africa as the primary affiliation. Indian, rather than South Asian, is used as people migrated to South Africa from ancestral villages, towns and regions located in the post-colonial nation of India.

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Carnatic singer at a 2004 Swami Thyagaraja music festival sponsored
by the Indian Academy of South Africa, an association involved in
the promotion of closer ties between South Africa and India. The
description alludes to deeply embodied and felt experiences of
being enthralled by the music’s sonic affects. Whilst there is
important critical work that has been done in thinking through the
implications of South African Indian diaspora associations’ trans-
national connections for collective negotiations of Indianianness (e.g.
Ganesh, 2010; Radhakrishnan, 2005), this paper aims to critique, and
open out, these discussions by exploring classical Indian per-
formances as a specific site for the production of a more ambiguous
and complex self. To do so, it shifts the focus of analysis from the
types of diasporic identifications represented by classical perform-
ances towards the spaces themselves; and examines how indi-
vidual organising actors relate to the human and non-human
materials, forces and elements assembled therein.

I use the case study of South African Indian associational life
to call for scholars of diaspora and hometown associations to
interrogate and engage with the wider turn to practice and
performativity in the humanities and social sciences in order to
enliven critical understandings. Diaspora actors are often un-
understood as possessing broader calculative and strategic agendas
related to political identity discourses, positions and practices in
the homeland (Quinsaat, 2013). Whilst recent work on home-
town associations has begun to produce more nuanced un-
derstandings of the range of subjectivities produced through the
activities of diaspora and hometown associations (Merce, 2008),
this paper explores how an affective, relational, social
practice understanding of migrant subjectivities can extend these
theorisations. To do so, it is guided by feminist scholarship that
explores the material and affective dimensions of the
subject (Grosz, 1994; Probyn, 2004). Feminist interrogations that
view body-subjects as assemblages or collections of, in Barad’s
(2001) terms, ‘intra-acting’ non-human and human compo-
nents, have reoriented understandings of identity away from pre-
existing named and sorted categories towards the multiple forces
and intensities that both constitute and circulate between bodies
and ‘provide the backdrop to and are active in producing what
comes to be understood as ‘a’ subject’ (Colls, 2012: 439). In this
understanding, subject-formation is a multiple process of
becoming, rather than being, one that is not wholly predefined
by neither categorisations, nor stable and finished. Such a
reading is useful for exploring the multi-dimensional agencies
that inhere in associational life; and second by providing open-
ings for further understanding the contingencies, discrepancies
and ambivalences involved in marshalling and cajoling trans-
national circulations and flows of bodies and materials through
sites of associational life.

In the next section of the article I will describe briefly previous
approaches to diaspora associations, before outlining debates that
have considered the relationship between affect and migration in
the production of mobile subjectivities. Following an overview of
research into South African Indian transnationalities, the discuss-
ion in the first half of the analysis draws attention to how organising
actor’s subjectivities emerge from and choreograph the
materialities of classical Indian performance spaces. Of specific
interest are the matters and forces that contribute towards the
making of perceived bonds between organisers, audiences and
performers. The paper then adds a further layer to questions of
complex subjectivities by discussing the overlaps between clas-
sical performance sites and the broader array of transnational sites
through which ideas of India are produced and negotiated,
fockussing specifically on Bollywood. Of interest are the points of
tension and accord between Bollywood and classical Indian per-
formances, and the subjectivities that emerge in their
negotiations. In doing so, the paper hopes to raise some questions
for future scholars of diaspora associations to engage with and
mark new directions for study.

2. Theorising diasporic associational life

Diasporic associational life, such as festivals, music and dance
performances, meetings, religious expression and worship, is a site
for the production of transnational and translocal belongings
(Merce, 2008). It provides a platform for the staging and
reproduction of ancestral cultural traditions that can act as mecha-
nisms for the expression of the dominant device of diaspora: the
recreation of a homeplace in new settings (Gal et al., 2010). These
mechanisms are of course also deployed by individuals in the
transnational social spaces of their everyday lives (Ley, 2004); a
key difference is that diaspora associations and groups employ such
spaces in order to perpetuate a sense of a collective identity sustained
by reference to common memories or myths about an ancestral
homeland’s location, history and achievements (Teoliyan, 2010).

Analyses of diaspora associations have most commonly focused
on the production of long-distance national identifications as a
discursive political process (Gal et al., 2010). A wide body of
scholarship explores the agency of diaspora associations in the
politics of their home countries, attending to the dynamics of home-
making involved (Brinkerhoff, 2011; Lyons, 2006; Sheffer,
2003). Related work focuses on the ways in which associations,
and the organising elites involved, can direct flows of remittances,
resources and knowledge in order to reproduce their own eco-
nomic and political agendas or positions (Mohan, 2006). Scholar-
ship exploring Hindu associations in North America perhaps
exemplifies this approach, drawing attention to the transnational
practices that allow diaspora elites to influence a range of Indian
political and economic concerns, such as remittance activities,
homeland identity preservation, and sectarian nationalist politics
(Biswas, 2004; Mathew and Prashad, 2000).

This kind of work is valuable in understanding the contested
nature of the practices of diaspora associations and the dilemmas
over competing identities they call to light. However, recent
scholars of African diasporas have pushed us to reconceptualise
the role of associations in mobilising around the shared and contested
predicaments that arise from ruptures with home and the forging
of local socialities (Merce, 2008). Studies focusing on the
convivialities, obligations and the gendered subjectivities on which
associations’ practices turn (Faria, 2011; Kleist, 2010; Merce
and Page, 2010) have dislodged dominant scholarly assumptions
that have in the past essentialised diasporic and hometown associations
as divisive, or even dangerous. By drawing attention to the ruptures
and inconsistencies involved, what ensues is an understanding of the
subjectivities underpinning diaspora elites’ mobilisations of
homeland ties as differentiated and multiplet located.

Whilst there is still further critical work to be done in under-
standing the intersectionalities of identity that inhere in trans-
national socio-geographic flows and connections — and their
politics — there is also room to consider an even more expansive
notion of diasporic selfhood, one that is attuned to the affective
forces of social life that are weaved from a distributed range of
experiences and material exchanges that cannot be “cleanly or
clearly cleaved into a set of named, known and represented iden-
tities” (Anderson and Harrison, 2010: 10). My use of the term ‘af-
factive’ here is drawn from previous work that articulates the
embodyed, physiological states that enable people to recognise
themselves as subjects in ways that are not wholly predefined
(Massumi, 2002). Most studies of diaspora associations have
focused on organising actor’s agency in terms of broader calculable
economic and political agendas (such as development, remittances


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or hometown politics), and the categorical identities that underpin them. But, as the above scholarship emphasises, agency must also be understood in terms of its affective dimensions, ones that are made through a range of desires and intimacies (Berlant, 2000). Understandings of diaspora associations need to also consider what other kinds of forces motivate the organising individuals that comprise diaspora associations, and the roles those forces play in transnational exchanges and circulations.

Holding open understandings of the self rather than privileging pre-defined concepts or symbolic categorisations has become central to deepening understandings of migration. Specifically, renewed emphasis has been placed on the performances and practices of material circulations across transnational and trans-local space (Coe, 2011; McKay, 2007; Tolia-Kelly, 2004), and on the complex register of emotional experiences and affects that arise and are transformed through transnational circuits and connectivities (Andrucki, 2013; Boehm and Swank, 2011; Christou, 2011; Ho, 2009). This work mirrors broader geographical scholarship on the range of localities through which multiple co-present relations are entangled with the production of self-in-society (Kraftl and Adey, 2008; Stewart, 2007; Thien, 2005). Conradson and Mckay (2007) affirm the importance of the affective states that accompany the dialectics of mobility and emplacement, but also the instabilities such constructions call forth. The corporeal intensities of the transnational and translocal circulations and encounters with an array of multiply-located bodies and materialities, they argue, are linked to the formation, and also breakdowns, of individual and community selfhoods (see also Faier, 2013).

Two connected interventions in cultural studies complement this work. First, scholarship examining musical performances, rituals and festivals organised by diaspora cultural associations offers insights into the ways that migrants move, feel and experience a dynamic and plural conception of home through animated sites and embodied practices (Farah, 2005). This work mirrors the broader turn towards practice-orientated approaches to music and performance that escapes categorical identity fixings by asking what music does rather than what it represents (Revill, 2005; Wood et al., 2007). The social practices and sensory forms associated with diasporic musical performance, such as narrative themes, linguistic registers and material styles, as Gilbert and Lo (2010) argue, “perform and activates a wide range of links with homeland and hostland” (151) and act as sites of “polycultural exchange but also as a zone of heightened affect” (155) where imagined pasts and futures can be expressed. Whilst many have argued that diasporic music and song are consciously engineered towards wider strategic goals, this work highlights the sensory experiences and meanings that bring diasporic cultural forms into being and give them shape. This work does not disregard collective inscriptions of homeland imaginaries, but fleshes out the underlying embodied practices and affective capacities that bring those inscriptions into being and also work to destabilise them.

Second, and relatedly, scholars of queer diaspora have drawn attention to the multiple performance practices that contest, negotiate, and heighten ideas of diasporic belonging (e.g. Manalansan, 2003). Gopinath’s (2005) work on South Asian public cultures, for example, unsets the connections between South Asian diasporic culture and the (re)production of normative nationalisms, arguing that a range of feelings, emotions, dreams and subject positions are realised through (dis)affinities with an array of socio-spatial identifications. By identifying the contexts in which diasporic nationalisms begin to break down, and the unstable assumptions on which they are based, this work escapes categorical fixings by retheorising diasporic subjectivities as a rich assemblage of sites, practices and materialities produced through multiple locations and temporalities.

3. South African Indian associational life

Indians in South Africa have multiple historical origins, producing a complex of identifications that are far from homogenous. Migration from India to South Africa began around 500 B.C., intensifying under Natal’s indentured sugar plantation labour system in the nineteenth-century (Kuper, 1960: 1). Approximately 152,000 linguistically (Telugu, Tamil, Hindi, Urdu) and religiously diverse (variants of Hinduism, Christianity, Islam) indentured labourers arrived from the Madras Presidency and Northern Indian districts between 1860 and 1911 (Lemon, 2009: 131). Approximately 30,000 ‘passenger’ traders from Gujarati villages followed, part of the long established Indian trader network that connected East Africa, East Asia, Mauritius and the West Indies (Bhana and Brain, 2000: 36). ‘Passengers’ were equally diverse linguistically (Urdu, Gujarati) and religiously (variants of Hinduism, Parsi, Christianity, Islam) (Kuper, 1960: 7–8). Their descendants now number some 1.3 million, approximately 2.6% of the South African population (Statistics South Africa, 2010).

In colonial and apartheid Natal, classical Indian song and dance came to play a particularly important role in sustaining the different Indian vernacular communities and promoting ties to India. According to Bhana and Bhoola (2011: 18), cultural performances were based around promoting so-called ‘traditional’ Indian values: the vernacular languages, correct behaviours and rich cultural and historical traditions of their region of origin. Some examples cited by Bhana and Bhoola include the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha (formed in 1925) supporting Hindi teaching and various Gujarati Hindu associations promoting the traditions and vernaculars of Gujarat, such as the Surat Hindu Association (formed in 1907). By the mid to late twentieth century, the significance of music in maintaining Indian regional identities was further heightened by the decline of other traditional emblems of Indianess, such as language and caste consciousness (Ebr-Vally, 2001). The strictures of apartheid played an important role in this process as the vernaculars associated with these broader regional distinctions disappeared almost entirely with the enforced teaching and use of English in Indian schools (Landy et al., 2004). Furthermore, different caste or regionally-focused cultural associations pooled resources to sustain Indian vernacular traditions, leading to a redefinition of Indianess within broad regional, linguistic and religious parameters (Bhana and Bhoola, 2011). Bhana and Bhoola describe how this was the case for the multiple Gujarati Hindu communities in 1943 with the formation of the umbrella organisation Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj (KHSS), and again in 1993 with the merger of the KHSS with the Surat Hindu Association and the Saptah Mandir into the Gujarati Sanskruti Kendra. Broadly defined, Indian vernacular traditions have remained the basis of a loose, shared sense of community, which continues to be promoted in the post-apartheid period by the associated cultural group through their transnational circulations of Indian performers (Hansen, 2005).

Although India is materialised in the lives of many Indian South Africans through performing arts programmes, Bollywood, food, clothing, festivals and increasingly heritage tourism, most South African Indians have little interest in claims that they belong to an Indian diaspora (Landy et al., 2004). Whilst diaspora associations continue to promote closer ties to India through traditional performances, rituals and festivals, for the majority of South African Indians, identification with India as a place of deep-rooted ancestral connection became obsolete over hundred and fifty years of indeniture, permanent settlement and apartheid (Rastogi, 2008). The Indian government placed international sanctions on trade and domestic travel between 1963 and 1993, severing South African Indian’s material flows and connections, and their spatial association with particular Indian locales (Landy et al., 2004). Furthermore,
during the later stages of apartheid there was an attempt by some associations to shed Indianess in favour of a broader black struggle/liberation consciousness (Desai, 1996). The descendants of the original migrants have long considered South Africa their permanent home: in 1960, 95 per cent of the South African Indian population were born in South Africa (Ginwala, 1985: 3).

Scholarship of contemporary Indian South African diaspora associational life has primarily focused on the role of classical Indian song and dance in the processes of ethnic boundary (re)making, drawing attention to contestations surrounding the authenticity, symbolism and identity politics associated with particular cultural forms (Kaarsholm, 2011; Vahed and Desai, 2010). Recent work has also demonstrated the complex positioning and articulation of Indian transnational life within the disciplinary tenets of faithed, racialised and gendered South African nationalist discourses (Radhakrishnan, 2005; Vahed, 2005). However, to focus on diaspora associational practices solely in terms of broader identity politics would be to miss the ways that diaspora associational practices take shape in relation to the heterogeneous elements and materialities of bodies, technologies and places that comprise them. In most cases, South African Indian associational life has been studied as a source of controversy, with scholarship primarily concerned with the impacts of associations’ activities rather than with the physical spaces themselves per se. One exception is Radhakrishnan’s (2003) account of how movements, embodiments and affects of diasporic performances attempts to, but also undermines, broader goals of resolving appropriate performances of Indian authenticity with the tenets and demands of multicultural citizenry in the Rainbow Nation. Radhakrishnan’s study is instructive because it makes a good case for why there ought to be an affective reconceptualisation of cultural spaces and performance. If we are to properly understand the role and significance of musical performances for the elites concerned, then there needs to be a move towards an approach that appreciates the multifaceted constitution of their diasporic selves.

4. Methodology

The present paper emerges out of a wider ethnography examining contemporary South African Indian transnational connections conducted in two periods of fieldwork in KwaZulu Natal Province, South Africa in 2004 and 2005. Although 26 participants (including academics, local officials, community activists and South African Indian newspaper and radio-station staff) contributed to the overall study, the analysis in this paper is based on fourteen interviews with the organisers of seven Indian South African Hindu associations involved in promoting closer ties between India and South Africa. In order to capture those with a strong desire to propagate ancestral Hindu cultural traditions, interviewed representatives were those who participated regularly in the outreach and social events promoted by the Indian Government’s KZN-based branch of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). Interviewees represented the heterogeneity of South African Indian Hindu communities (Tamil, Gujarati, Telugu), reflecting the background of associations with strong connections to India. I also conducted twelve interviews with local government officials, Indian high commission staff and attendees at events. The fieldwork also involved extensive observational work, attending, for example, local events, celebrations and public meetings organised by diaspora associations. As part of my research, I interviewed several of the organisers and attendees before, during and following an event to capture their impressions. Interview and observation work was supplemented by visual and textual analysis of news articles, promotional material, reports and websites.

The research took a narrative approach to the analysis of interview, observational and textual material in order to explore the motivations, discourses and technologies of diaspora associational practices. A narrative analysis aims to capture an individual’s process of story-telling as they attempt to imbue their recollections with significances (Riessman, 1993). Narration is a process of story-telling at particular biographical and historical moments, capturing a person’s interpretations within contexts and conventions that include not only the broader political and economic milieu but also the social contexts of the interview itself (Plattner and Bruner, 1984). In constructing narratives, Sandelowski (1991) argues, “events are selected and then given cohesion, meaning and direction; they are made to flow and are given a sense of linearity and even inevitability” (163). Using such an approach, analysis of interview and textual materials involved examining the ways respondents portrayed themselves and others, how individuals constructed past and future life events, taking note of how respondents explained their thoughts and feelings, and taking into account the social context of the interview itself.

5. Assembling and experiencing Indian classical performances

After a meal at a nearby restaurant, Vinod (male, late 50s), his wife, daughter and I get into a car to leave to attend a classical Kathak performance at Kendra Hall in Durban by Shri Abhimanyu Lal. In the car, Vinod, who has been closely involved in promoting Indian classical song and dance since 1993, chattered excitedly about the roots of Kathak in Hindu scripture, pausing every now and then to tell me about the difficulties of getting performers from Gujarat to Natal because of apartheid-era restrictions. Vinod felt that the lifting of diplomatic restrictions had opened up a sense of opportunity. He argued that it “was a new experience for us to have India at our disposal … we had to take advantage of this”. As we got out of the car and entered the main hall, decorated with a red carpet, twinkling lights and strings of chrysanthemums, Ramesh (male, late 60s) greets us, pointing out the design of the dome and the pillars. The hall, he explained, had been built over two years by a team of Indian artisans, or karigars, and felt, he said, “like our own bit of India in South Africa”. Once we arrived, we joined the buzz of the crowd, who were milling around the entrance styled impeccably in saris, sherwanis and kurtas, so that Vinod and his wife could catch up with the latest gossip with their acquaintances before the evening’s events began. The emotions, materialities, and visceral experiences that saturate musical and artistic performances are the focus of this section. In the narrative that follows, I trace organising actor’s recollections of participating in, and creating, Indian classical musical events, connecting individual and shared experiences of the materialities and embodiments of musical forms to the production of organising actor’s subjectivities.

Ramesh, Vinod, and other key actors like him in Durban’s Hindu associations, have been involved in formulating closer ties between India and South Africa since the resumption of formal diplomatic ties in 1993. These opportunities have emerged from the Government of India’s diaspora outreach strategies, which both promote and regulate cultural flows. 48% of the South African Indian population live in the Ethekwini municipality, which encompasses the
former Indian townships of Chatsworth and Phoenix, and around 80% live within the broader province of KwaZulu-Natal (Statistics South Africa, 2010). Under apartheid’s Group Areas Act, Indians were forced to live in circumscribed parts of Natal (Maharaj, 1997), and whilst the lifting of apartheid restrictions and processes of desegregation have seen out-migration to other provinces, Durban remains a hub for classical Indian performing arts. In 1996, the Durban branch of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs’ Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) was established, and has been central to the organisation of an intensive programme of India—South Africa cultural exchanges. In addition to such cultural programming, often organised in collaboration with local diaspora groups, the ICCR have organised numerous delegations and bilateral agreements. In 2010, the year of the arrival of the first indented sugarcane labourers from India, a mini Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Overseas Indian Day) was held in Durban with the aim of marking and building upon the city’s historic links with India (Singh, 2011). Due in part to these efforts, circulations of classical Indian performers between India and South Africa have dramatically accelerated since 1993.

Amongst migrant populations, music and dance may be used to recreate the culture of the past, but it is bound up with maintaining group identity through “wov[ing] connections and memories of a common homeland or place, allowing notionally, a return” (Baily and Colyer, 2006). Like many similar classical performances (Landy et al., 2004), the Kathak performance at Kendra Hall described above emerged out of a desire to bolster Indian vernacular identities. Vinod explained that he felt compelled by a sense of obligation to help promote a wider interest in Gujarat for those whom he felt were “losing touch with their roots”. He explained, “if we lose the language, we lose our culture and our community”. Yet, the vignette above also illustrates that the reproduction of collective identities are about much more than the performances themselves and the wider body of meaning they signify; they are saturated with a multidimensional spatial and temporal and array of objects, memories, experiences, events, materials, peoples and relationships that together coalesced into a wider performance environment.

Many organising actors recounted how the multi-sensorial presents of classical arts performances provided a route to an embodied sense of wellbeing. One evening, I sat with Venita (female, 50s) over tea and sweets discussing the Kathak performance at Kendra Hall. Although such performances are related to the bolstering of vernacular identities, such spaces are also imbued with an experiential value. Most organising actors I met expected to feel content and happy in classical performance spaces. When speaking of her experiences, Venita for instance recounted that “I can just relax and enjoy the music … being dressed up”. In addition to its experiential value, many respondents felt that performance spaces were an important part of their social lives. The Indian community as an over-arching socio-legal construct was introduced and institutionalised during apartheid’s system of separate development, during which period dense, tight-knit social networks developed that were based around intersections of religious, regional and class identities (Kuper, 1960). Contemporary transnational landscapes connecting South African Indians to different regions of India reproduce these social forms, even if the underpinning vernacular languages have disappeared (Vahed and Desai, 2010). Festivals, performances and events were where many organising actors expected to meet old friends and acquaintances based on these existing social networks, and share stories about family life and achievements. Venita described the Kathak performance as “one of the few times I can spend with my husband, meet up with our friends and catch up on the family gossip … I would say that is the main reason I went”.

The type of social network reproduced depended on the type of performance attended. More regionally specific cultural programming was where organising actors would meet friends and acquaintances that shared linguistic commonalities. An organised visit by dancers from a famous Tamil Bharatnatyam school would provide opportunities for socialising with friends and acquaintances from within the Tamil community. Since a broader South Indian diasporic identity developed under the Indian cultural institutions of apartheid (Ganesh, 2010), many Telugu Indians would also attend. The social relations enacted in these spaces often also encompassed adult children, who might have been schooled in regional Indian performing arts by their parents. For instance, I met Saroji in 2005, along with her daughter Pritty, at a classical South Indian Bharatynam dance recital he had organised. Pritty (early 40s) had trained in the dance as a teenager. Whilst she left KwaZulu Natal to train as a doctor in Cape-Town four years ago, she often returned to Durban to attend Bharatnatym performances and festivals with her parents. Asking why she attended, she said: “I like to see the dancers, their clothes, the makeup, the ways they move their hands and how they place their feet, just like I was trained”.

In contrast, bigger festivals such as ‘Melodies of India’ (2004), amongst others, were designed to showcase a range of classical Indian performances from different regions of India, but might also include more contemporary music such as Bhangra, a hybrid cultural form that emerged from Punjabi diasporas in the United Kingdom but whose popularity has spread elsewhere in the diaspora. Actors from across the spectrum of South African Indian associations would be invited, even if their associations weren’t specifically involved. These spaces also produced considerable overlaps between Hindu and Muslim communities, because of the political dynamics of apartheid and intersecting trajectories of migration (Kaarsholm, 2011). Muslim Gujarati’s might attend a performance by Gujarati Kathak dancers, even though Kathak is ostensibly based on Hindu scriptures, because this was a cultural form promoted under apartheid and something they grew up with. Conversely, Vahed (2005) has shown how the Islamic festival of Muharram in South Africa, known pejoratively by the white authorities as ‘Coolie Christmas’, incorporates Hindu rituals and scriptural elements through broader constructions of a unified Indian identity as a base for political mobilisations.

The social aspects of classical performances allow people to attach a range of significances and values to the performances beyond representations of a community, or a place. This is also what motivates Krish (male, 50s). For him, the physical minutiae of the performances are what matters more than what the performance symbolises, because it helps entangle him in feelings of mutuality with others watching the performances. Discussing a visit by some Indian Kuchipudi dancers, Krish said “you feel close to people when you go to these performances because we all appreciate the effort that has gone into doing things right”. The specific content of the performances allows collective recognition of cultural forms and finesse, and in doing so generates ideals of shared enjoyment and common purpose. Krish and Pritty are examples of some of the ways that relationships to the different physical and material properties of diaspora performances allow the reproduction of South African Indian social life, often over several generations and across differences.

Organising actors developed performances not only to maintain a range of socialities and relationships, but also to take advantage of the burgeoning opportunities to be captivated by seeing performances live. In the spring of 2005 I attended a performance by Shobana Rao, a ghazal singer and her troupe from New Delhi. After the performance, I caught up with Hitesh (male, late 50s), a South African Indian who had organised the performance and invited me along. After the show had finished, people streamed out of the hall, discussing animatedly the performance they had just experienced. The music’s stylistic tropes generated a buzz between audience
have acquired increasing salience as a public space for trans-
national materialisations of India. With the growth of modern
South African Indian diasporic dispositions that encompass sites in
India, North America and afar, Bollywood, as Hansen (2005) has
noted, also threatens the integrity of the South African Indian
experience provided by diaspora associations. In this section I
examine the porosities, circulations and overlaps between classical
performance spaces and Bollywood as a means of exploring further
the entanglements between organising actor’s diasporic sub-
jectivities and material practices.

There are important overlaps between classical Indian song and
dance and the contemporary Bollywood film industry. Playback
singers have been integrated into and are essential to popular In-
dian cinema since the 1930s, with recordings based on classical
Sanskrit drama, folk theatre (Morcom, 2007). With playback
singers, such as M. Balamuralikrishna discussed above, achieving
the same prominence as actors, their repertoires are a central part
of musical culture throughout the Indian diaspora, lending their
voices both to film compositions, classical recordings and live
performances (Bhattachariya, 2009). Many of the elites interviewed
grew up in the 1960s and became familiar with key playback
singers of the era, and often invited them to perform in South Africa
both during and after the lifting of diplomatic restrictions.

Anxieties about the materialisations of contemporary Bolly-
wood in South Africa have centred on whether clothing, attitudes
and consumption practices appropriately represent India (Radhakrishnan, 2005). Contemporary cinematic themes and
narrative plotlines have essentially remained unchanged, since
they reproduce the same clichés and tropes of the village dramas of
early Indian cinema, which itself ultimately derives from classical
Sanskrit drama and folk theatre (Morcom, 2007). Respondents
found going to watch a Bollywood movie a pleasurable, and family
friendly, leisure practice. But contemporary Bollywood encom-
passes a changed set of capitalist and consumer aesthetics, in part
to appeal to younger diasporic audiences in North America and
Europe (Therwath, 2010). As observed elsewhere in the Indian
diaspora (Mohammad, 2007), these changes have reconfigured the
relationships between the South African Indian diasporic self and
place (Ebrahim, 2008). Some elites found this troubled traditional
norms. For instance, Aakash (male, 60s) says that:

Bollywood has really taken over from the appreciation of
traditional culture. But Bollywood doesn’t show real Indian
culture. The dances and the music look Indian but it does not
feel Indian because now it is too Westernised. The girls don’t
wear saris anymore, and often it is not even filmed in India
anymore.

The minutiae of the modern Bollywood aesthetic discussed here
are contrasted with perceived ‘real’ Indian culture, the kinds pro-
vided through classical performances. Perceptions of Bollywood are
also mediated by generation and class, with Indian cinema most
often associated with younger people and the Indian working
classes, whilst classical performances are often the preserve of
wealthy elites (Hansen, 2005). But these tensions are also under-
pinned by feelings of loss akin to Marilyn Ivy’s (1995) view of
nostalgic desire as encompassing a range of emotions including
anxiety around the erosion of felt experiences (see also Boyin,
2001).

Most elites however, were ambivalent about Bollywood. Some
respondents spoke of the ways that Bollywood had generated
economic benefits for South Africa’s film industry and supported
closer relations between Indians and Africans (see also Ebrahim,
2008). For Pritty, growing interest from non-Indians and the
mainstreaming of Indian cinema in broader South African cultural

6. Negotiating Indian classical performances

As the above section demonstrates, elites frame classical Indian
performances around a complex, and ambiguous range of sub-
jectivities. But classical performances are just one of a set of
interconnecting sites in which Indianess is materialised in South
Africa (Landy et al., 2004). These also include online worlds, liter-
ature, comedy, clothing and food consumption practices, and leisure
spaces such as Bollywood films and entertainment shows.

Since the end of apartheid, contemporary Bollywood films and
entertainment shows (where actors, musicians and singers appear
together to recreate a film, scene or dialogue), particularly those
that are styled to appeal to the North American Indian diaspora,4

4 For a discussion of the complexity of Bollywood’s evolving aesthetic styles, and
its relationship to India and Indian diasporic identities, see Mehta et al. (2011) and
Mohammad (2007).
life through its incorporation into public television programming had allowed her to not only craft, but rewrite a new sense of self: 10 years ago I had to be apologetic for being Indian. There has been a fundamental change thanks to Bollywood ... When in High School I felt ashamed of being Indian and I didn’t want to talk about India. It’s gotten to the stage where I’m proud to be Indian. It fills me with pride that’s where I’m from, there’s my roots. At one point I was so ashamed about my name, really embarrassed.

Often, those elites who criticised the perceived dominance of contemporary South African Indian life by Bollywood were at once intrigued and drawn to the affects that its styles, registers and fashions produced. One afternoon I travelled to Sally’s (female, late 60s) house to interview her over tea and sweets. As we talked, she rummaged around in a drawer and pulls out a CD of playback recordings from the movie Lagaan, given to her by her grandson. Notes floated around us as she described the pleasure she felt in keeping up with new releases so that she could talk with her grandchildren about the latest heartthrobs, and a sense of enjoyment in hearing them pick up and incorporate Tamil words learnt from films into everyday speech.

To varying degrees, elites were beginning to capitalise on the new potentialities provided by Bollywood. Both the ICCR and KwaZulu-Natal Ministry for Arts, Culture and Tourism encourage Indian diaspora associations to incorporate contemporary Bollywood styles and aesthetics into their repertoire of cultural programming. Adapting their classical programming by incorporating modern dances and aesthetic styles, often organised in conjunction with local dance schools and contemporary choreographers, were part of these plans. Young Indian South Africans from Durban dance schools are one source of performers. Forty years ago, dance choreography was modelled precisely on Sanskrit traditions. According to Radhakrishnan (2003), as dance schools have developed and expanded particularly in the post-apartheid era, choreographers have begun to incorporate more modern Indian aesthetics, developing new hybrid styles. It is also a relational process, with teachers innovating and adapting classical and modern Indian styles to the particularities of the South African setting, by for instance incorporating repertoires from traditional Zulu folk dances. In fascinating ethnographic detail Radhakrishnan describes how these new fusion choreographies pose a radical challenge to the boundedness of classical Indian cultural traditions. Whilst respondents acknowledged that this variability had increased interest from younger generations, nevertheless the allure of their correct embodiments remained. For example, Athul stated that new dance styles are “not really India ... But I am happy that some of the younger generation are at least getting a feel for some of the Indian traditions”.

Amongst some respondents, I heard approval of Bollywood since it allowed some hope that it could act as a precursor for a broader interest in India and an eventual recovery of Indian languages. For example, when I met him in 2004, Dev’s organisation (male, late 50s) was campaigning to pressure Indian film distributors to screen Tamil language films in KwaZulu-Natal. He talked about the Hindi romances he had watched in the 1960s with affection, describing the grandeur of visiting the Shah Jehan theatre in Durban’s Indian Quarter and the ritual and performative qualities of disparaging, gently, the films; clearly they were an important part of his youth. But he also felt that for the current and younger generations, Tamil films had future potential to increase interest in local festivals and events such as Tamil New Year, or even encourage some form of physical visit to India, because of they way films could deepen the knowledge of South Indian traditions and languages.

Like Athul and Dev above, I heard other actors speak of their hopes that interest in Bollywood would provoke younger people to one-day visit India to discover their ancestral roots and connections. Some spoke of their hopes that younger South African Indians would eventually embrace more classical dance forms, or begin learning an Indian language, both of which had seen declining uptake. For instance, Krish said that it was only through “knowing the true India, the kind we bring through our work” that the younger generations could really recover their roots. Whilst Bollywood, for some, posed a threat to the long-term appreciation of classical Indian forms, for both Dev and Krish, generating spatial and temporal connections between different Indian diasporic sites and practices was a concrete means through which diaspora associations could anticipate and realise future South African Indian diasporic selfhood.

7. Conclusion

Scholars of diaspora associations more broadly, and South African Indian cultural organisations specifically, have mainly focused on the political and economic outcomes of their activities, on negotiations over underpinning categorical identity politics, and on the complex landscapes of home that are produced, resisted and contested. Less work examines the affective ‘doings’ of association life and the forces and matter that comprise it. In this paper, I have explored organising actor’s relationships and interactions with the constitutive elements of classical Indian performance spaces, as one way of exploring the diverse meanings and significances that can be drawn from them by the actors participating and assembling those spaces. The paper has shown the ways that a range of subjectivities emerges from and is negotiated through the material constitutions of classical Indian performances, as they form points of connection and overlap with a range of different sites through which India is experienced and negotiated. I conclude by showing how such an approach can enhance scholarly understanding of the work of diaspora associations as well as pointing to future directions for research.

First, by examining classical Indian performances through the material practices and affective forces of individual actors, the paper has deepened understandings of the role of agency in constituting sites of diaspora associational life. Whereas most studies of diaspora associations have focused on their wider calculable economic and political agendas, the agency discussed here is relational and affectual, one that produces and reproduces a wide range of subject positions. A discussion of their different points of connection, discrepancies and tensions has shown how, in the process of negotiation, organising actors can anticipate, realise and redefine past, current and future forms of South African Indian diasporic subjectivity.

Second, the paper has sought to illustrate an alternative way in which diaspora associations’ role in producing social differences (and similarities) might be explored in scholarship. This study of diaspora associations began not from understandings of India as a pre-existing physical location, but as a spatial array of interconnected sites, practices and non-human and human forces. This is not to dismiss the categorical orderings, politics and social differences that also underpin their practices, but to suggest that heterogeneous materials, bodies, objects and multidimensional presences come to compose their saliences and longer-term durabilities. In doing so, this suggests that the social differences produced through associational practices are full of instabilities, tensions and gaps, leaving room for critical refusal and transformation.

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