

Perverse Modernities

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and Lisa Lowe



IMPOSSIBLE DESIRES

Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures


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IMPOSSIBLE DESIRES

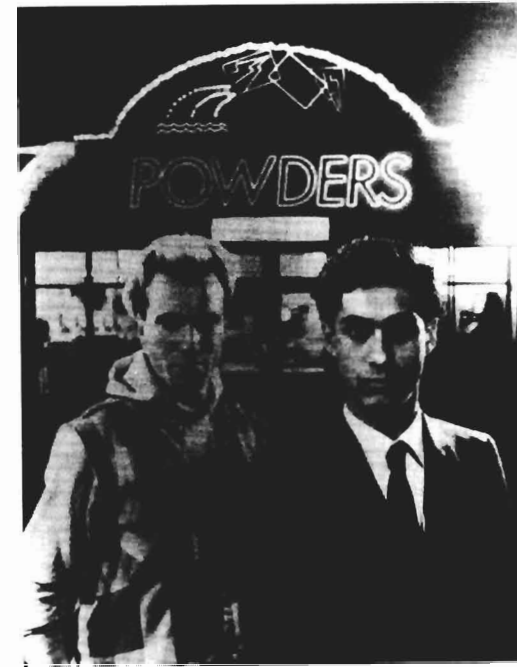
An Introduction

 In a particularly memorable scene in *My Beautiful Laundrette* (dir. Stephen Frears, 1985), British Pakistani screenwriter Hanif Kureishi's groundbreaking film about queer interracial desire in Thatcherite Britain, the white, working-class gay boy Johnny moves to unbutton the shirt of his lover, the upwardly mobile, Pakistan-born Omar. Omar initially acquiesces to Johnny's caresses, but then abruptly puts a halt to the seduction. He turns his back to his lover and recalls a boyhood scene of standing with his immigrant father and seeing Johnny march in a fascist parade through their South London neighborhood: "It was bricks and bottles, immigrants out, kill us. People we knew . . . And it was you. We *saw* you," Omar says bitterly. Johnny initially recoils in shame as Omar brings into the present this damning image from the past of his younger self as a hate-filled skinhead. But then, as Omar continues speaking, he slowly reaches out to draw Omar to him and embraces Omar from behind. The final shot frames Omar's face as he lets his head fall back onto Johnny's chest and he closes his eyes.

The scene eloquently speaks to how the queer racialized body becomes a historical archive for both individuals and communities, one that is excavated through the very act of desiring the racial Other. For Omar, desiring Johnny is irrevocably intertwined with the legacies of British colonialism in South Asia

and the more immediate history of Powellian racism in 1960s Britain.¹ In his memory of having seen Johnny march (“we saw you”), Omar in a sense reverses the historical availability of brown bodies to a white imperial gaze by turning the gaze back onto Johnny’s own racist past. The scene’s ambiguous ending—where Omar closes his eyes and succumbs to Johnny’s caresses—may suggest that Omar gives in to the historical amnesia that wipes out the legacies of Britain’s racist past. Yet the meaning and function of queer desire in the scene are far more complicated than such a reading would allow. If for Johnny sex with Omar is a way of both tacitly acknowledging and erasing that racist past, for Omar, queer desire is precisely what allows him to remember. Indeed, the barely submerged histories of colonialism and racism erupt into the present at the very moment when queer sexuality is being articulated. Queer desire does not transcend or remain peripheral to these histories but instead it becomes central to their telling and remembering: there is no queer desire without these histories, nor can these histories be told or remembered without simultaneously revealing an erotics of power.

Upon its release in 1985, *My Beautiful Laundrette* engendered heated controversy within South Asian communities in the UK, some of whose members took exception to Kureishi’s matter-of-fact depiction of queer interracial desire between white and brown men, and more generally to his refusal to produce “positive images” of British Asian lives.² The controversy surrounding its release prefigured the at times violent debates around queer sexuality and dominant notions of communal identity that took place both in South Asia and in the diaspora over the following decade.³ In New York City, for instance, the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association waged an ongoing battle throughout the 1990s over the right to march in the annual India Day Parade, a controversy I will return to later in this chapter. And in several Indian cities in December 1998, as I discuss in detail in chapter 5, Indian-Canadian director Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* was vociferously attacked by right-wing Hindu nationalists outraged by its depiction of “lesbian” sexuality. These various battles in disparate national locations speak to the ways in which queer desires, bodies, and subjectivities become dense sites of meaning in the production and reproduction of notions of “culture,” “tradition,” and communal belonging both in South Asia and in the diaspora. They also signal the conflation of “perverse” sexualities and diasporic affiliations within a nationalist imaginary, and it is this mapping of queerness onto diaspora that is the subject of this book.



Johnny (Daniel Day-Lewis) and Omar (Gordon Warnecke) in *My Beautiful Laundrette* (dir. Stephen Frears, 1985).

Twenty years later, Kureishi’s film remains a remarkably powerful rendering of queer racialized desire and its relation to memory and history, and acts as a touchstone and precursor to much of the queer South Asian diasporic cultural production that I discuss in *Impossible Desires*.⁴ The texts I consider in this book, following Kureishi’s lead, allow us to dissect the ways in which discourses of sexuality are inextricable from prior and continuing histories of colonialism, nationalism, racism, and migration. In Kureishi’s film, as in the other queer diasporic texts I examine in this book, queer desire reorients the traditionally backward-looking glance of diaspora. Stuart Hall has elegantly articulated the peculiar relation to the past that characterizes a conservative diasporic imaginary. This relation is one where the experience of displacement “gives rise to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins,’ to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning.”⁵

If conventional diasporic discourse is marked by this backward glance, this “overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for ‘times past,’”⁶ a queer diaspora mobilizes questions of the past, memory, and nostalgia for radically different purposes. Rather than evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history, what is remembered through queer diasporic desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles. Joseph Roach, in his study of Atlantic-rim performance cultures, uses the suggestive phrase “forgotten but not gone” to name that which produces the conditions for the present but is actively forgotten within dominant historiography.⁷ Queer diasporic cultural forms and practices point to submerged histories of racist and colonialist violence that continue to resonate in the present and that make themselves felt through bodily desire. It is through the queer diasporic body that these histories are brought into the present; it is also through the queer diasporic body that their legacies are imaginatively contested and transformed. Queer diasporic cultural forms thus enact what Roach terms “clandestine counter-memories” that bring into the present those pasts that are deliberately forgotten within conventional nationalist or diasporic scripts.⁸ If, as Roach notes, “the relentless search for the purity of origins is a voyage not of discovery but of erasure,”⁹ queer diasporic cultural forms work against the violent effacements that produce the fictions of purity that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies.

Significantly, however, Kureishi’s excavation of the legacies of colonialism and racism as they are mapped onto queer (male) bodies crucially depends on a particular fixing of female diasporic subjectivity. The film’s female diasporic character Tania, in fact, functions in a classic homosocial triangle as the conduit and foil to the desire between Johnny and Omar, and she quite literally disappears at the film’s end. We last see her standing on a train platform, suitcase in hand, having left behind the space of the immigrant home in order to seek a presumably freer elsewhere. Our gaze is aligned with that of her father as he glimpses her through an open window; the train rushes by, she vanishes. It is unclear where she has gone, whether she has disappeared under the train tracks or is safely within the train compartment en route to a different life. She thus marks the horizon of Kureishi’s filmic universe and gestures to another narrative of female diasporic subjectivity that functions quite literally as the film’s vanishing point. Kureishi’s framing of the female diasporic figure makes

clear the ways in which even ostensibly progressive, gay male articulations of diaspora run the risk of stabilizing sexual and gender hierarchies.

My Beautiful Laundrette presents a useful point of departure in addressing many of the questions that concern me throughout this book. As the film makes apparent, all too often diasporas are narrativized through the bonds of relationality between men. Indeed, the oedipal relation between fathers and sons serves as a central and recurring feature within diasporic narratives and becomes a metaphor for the contradictions of sameness and difference that, as Stuart Hall has shown, characterize competing definitions of diasporic subjectivity.¹⁰ For Freud, the oedipal drama explains the consolidation of proper gender identification and heterosexual object choice in little boys, as masculine identification with the father is made while feminine identification with the mother is refused. In his 1952 work *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon resituates the oedipal scenario in the colonial context and shows how, for racialized male subjects, the process whereby the little boy learns to identify with the father and desire the mother is disrupted and disturbed by the (black) father’s lack of access to social power.¹¹ Fanon’s analysis, which I engage with more fully in chapter 3, makes evident the inadequacy of the Oedipus complex in explaining the construction of gendered subjectivity within colonial and postcolonial regimes of power. While I am interested in identifying how queer diasporic texts follow Fanon in reworking the notion of oedipality in relation to racialized masculinities, I also ask what alternative narratives emerge when this story of oedipality is jettisoned altogether. For even when the male-male or father-son narrative is mined for its queer valences (as in *Laundrette* or in other gay male diasporic texts I consider here), the centrality of this narrative as the primary trope in imagining diaspora invariably displaces and elides female diasporic subjects. The patriarchal and heteronormative underpinnings of the term “diaspora” are evident in Stefan Helmreich’s exploration of its etymological roots:

The original meaning of diaspora summons up the image of scattered seeds and . . . in Judeo-Christian . . . cosmology, seeds are metaphorical for the male “substance” that is traced in genealogical histories. The word “sperm” is metaphorically linked to diaspora. It comes from the same stem [in Greek meaning to sow or scatter] and is defined by the OED as “the generative substance or seed of male animals.” Diaspora, in its traditional sense, thus refers us to a system of kinship reckoned through men and suggests the questions of legitimacy in paternity that patriarchy generates.¹²

Diaspora
(seeds)

These etymological traces of the term are apparent in Kureishi's vision of queer diasporic subjectivity that centralizes male-male relations and sidelines female subjectivity. This book, then, begins where Kureishi's text leaves off. *Impossible Desires* examines a range of South Asian diasporic literature, film, and music in order to ask if we can imagine diaspora differently, apart from the biological, reproductive, oedipal logic that invariably forms the core of conventional formulations of diaspora. It does so by paying special attention to *queer female subjectivity in the diaspora*, as it is this particular positionality that forms a constitutive absence in both dominant nationalist and diasporic discourses. More surprisingly perhaps, and therefore worth interrogating closely, is the elision of queer female subjectivity within seemingly radical cultural and political diasporic projects that center a gay male or heterosexual feminist diasporic subject. *Impossible Desires* refuses to accede to the splitting of queerness from feminism that marks such projects. By making female subjectivity central to a queer diasporic project, it begins instead to conceptualize diaspora in ways that do not invariably replicate heteronormative and patriarchal structures of kinship and community. In what follows I lay out more precisely the various terms I use to frame the texts I consider—*queer diasporas*, *impossibility*, and *South Asian public cultures*—as they are hardly self-evident and require greater elaboration and contextualization.

Queer Diasporas

In an overview of recent trends in diaspora studies, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur suggest that the value of diaspora—a term which at its most literal describes the dispersal and movement of populations from one particular national or geographic location to other disparate sites—lies in its critique of the nation form on the one hand, and its contestation of the hegemonic forces of globalization on the other.¹³ Nationalism and globalization do indeed constitute the two broad rubrics within which we must view diasporas and diasporic cultural production. However, the concept of diaspora may not be as resistant or contestatory to the forces of nationalism or globalization as it may first appear. Clearly, as Braziel and Mannur indicate, diaspora has proved a remarkably fruitful analytic for scholars of nationalism, cultural identity, race, and migration over the past decade. Theories of diaspora that emerged out of Black British cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly those of Paul

Gilroy and Stuart Hall, powerfully move the concept of diaspora away from its traditional orientation toward homeland, exile, and return and instead use the term to reference what Hall calls “a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity.”¹⁴ This tradition of cultural studies, to which my project is deeply indebted, embraces diaspora as a concept for its potential to foreground notions of impurity and inauthenticity that resoundingly reject the ethnic and religious absolutism at the center of nationalist projects. Viewing the (home) nation through the analytical frame of diaspora allows for a reconsideration of the traditionally hierarchical relation between nation and diaspora, where the former is seen as merely an impoverished imitation of an originary national culture.¹⁵ Yet the antiessentialist notion of cultural identity that is at the core of this revised framing of diaspora functions simultaneously alongside what Hall terms a “backward-looking conception of diaspora,”¹⁶ one that adheres to precisely those same myths of purity and origin that seamlessly lend themselves to nationalist projects. Indeed while the diaspora within nationalist discourse is often positioned as the abjected and disavowed Other to the nation, the nation also simultaneously recruits the diaspora into its absolutist logic. The policies of the Hindu nationalist government in India in the mid- to late 1990s to court overseas “NRI” (non-resident Indian) capital¹⁷ is but one example of how diaspora and nation can function together in the interests of corporate capital and globalization.¹⁸ Hindu nationalist organizations in India are able to effectively mobilize and harness diasporic longing for authenticity and “tradition” and convert this longing into material linkages between the diaspora and (home) nation.¹⁹ Thus diasporas can undercut and reify various forms of ethnic, religious, and state nationalisms simultaneously. Various scholars have pointed out the complicity not only between diasporic formations and different nationalisms but also between diaspora and processes of transnational capitalism and globalization.²⁰ The intimate connection between diaspora, nationalism, and globalization is particularly clear in the South Asian context, as the example of NRI capital underwriting Hindu nationalist projects in India makes all too apparent.

Vijay Mishra importantly distinguishes between two historical moments of South Asian diasporic formation: the first produced by colonial capitalism and the migration of Indian indentured labor to British colonies such as Fiji, Trinidad, and Guyana in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and the second a result of the workings of “late modern capital” in the mid- to

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late twentieth century. Significantly, in addition to producing labor diasporas, colonial capitalism also produced what Kamala Visweswaran terms a “middleman minority” that served the interests of the colonial power and acted as a conduit between British colonial administrators and the indigenous populations in East Africa and other locations in the British Empire.²¹ The legacies of this initial phase of South Asian diasporic formation in the nineteenth century are apparent in the second phase of migration engendered by globalization in the mid- to late twentieth century. Mishra defines this diaspora of “late modern capital” as “largely a post-1960s phenomenon distinguished by the movement of economic migrants (but also refugees) into the metropolitan centers of the former empire as well as the ‘New World’ and Australia.”²² While South Asian migrants in the 1960s were allowed entry into the UK primarily as low-wage labor, the class demographic and racialization of South Asians in the United States was strikingly different. Vijay Prashad has pointed out how the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which shifted the criteria for U.S. citizenship from a quota system to “family reunification,” encouraged the immigration of large numbers of Indian professionals, primarily doctors and scientists; this demographic was particularly appealing to the U.S. government in that it was seen as a way to bolster U.S. cold war technological supremacy.²³ Visweswaran argues that this professional technocratic elite in the United States functions in effect as a latter-day middleman minority, working in collusion with dominant national interests in both the United States and in India. Mishra, Prashad, and Visweswaran thus point to the ways in which South Asian diasporic formations engendered by colonial capitalism (in the form of labor diasporas) and those engendered by globalization and transnational capitalism (in the form of a bourgeois professional class) function in tandem with different national agendas.

Clearly, then, the cultural texts that emerge from these different historical moments in South Asian diasporic formation must be seen as inextricable not only from the ongoing legacies of colonialism and multiple nationalisms but also from the workings of globalization. Indeed theories of diasporic cultural production that do not address the imbrication of diaspora with transnational capitalism shore up the dominance of the latter by making its mechanisms invisible. In an astute critique of Paul Gilroy’s influential formulation of black diasporic culture in *The Black Atlantic*, Jenny Sharpe argues that globalization provides the unacknowledged terrain upon which the diasporic cultural pro-

ductions that Gilroy celebrates take shape. Sharpe notes that the transnational cultural practices that Gilroy draws on are rooted in urban spaces in the First World: “to consider London and New York as global city centers is to recognize the degree to which Gilroy’s mapping of the black Atlantic follows a cartography of globalization.”²⁴ Sharpe’s analysis is a particularly useful caution against a celebratory embrace of diasporic cultural forms that may obscure the ways in which they are produced on the terrain of corporate globalization. Thus just as diaspora may function in collusion with nationalist interests, so too must we be attentive to the ways in which diasporic cultural forms are produced in and through transnational capitalist processes.

The imbrication of diaspora and diasporic cultural forms with dominant nationalism on the one hand, and corporate globalization on the other, takes place through discourses that are simultaneously gendered and sexualized. Feminist scholars of nationalism in South Asia have long pointed to the particular rendering of “woman” within nationalist discourse as the grounds upon which male nationalist ideologies take shape.²⁵ Such scholarship has been instructive in demonstrating how female sexuality under nationalism is a crucial site of surveillance, as it is through women’s bodies that the borders and boundaries of communal identities are formed. But as I argue in chapter 5, this body of work has been less successful in fully addressing the ways in which dominant nationalism institutes heterosexuality as a key disciplinary regime. Feminist scholarship on South Asia has also, for the most part, remained curiously silent about how alternative sexualities may constitute a powerful challenge to patriarchal nationalism.²⁶ Nor has there been much sustained attention paid to the ways in which nationalist framings of women’s sexuality are translated into the diaspora, and how these renderings of diasporic women’s sexuality are in turn central to the production of nationalism in the home nation.²⁷ In an article on Indian indentured migration to Trinidad, Tejaswini Niranjana begins this necessary work by observing that anticolonial nationalists in India in the early twentieth century used the figure of the amoral, sexually impure Indian woman abroad as a way of producing the chaste, virtuous Indian woman at “home” as emblematic of a new “nationalist morality.”²⁸ The consolidation of a gendered bourgeois nationalist subject in India through a configuration of its disavowed Other in the diaspora underscores the necessity of conceptualizing the diaspora and the nation as mutually constituted formations. However, as I elaborate in chapter 6, Niranjana’s article still presumes the

heterosexuality of the female diasporic and female nationalist subject rather than recognizing institutionalized heterosexuality as a primary structure of both British colonialism and incipient Indian nationalism. The failure of feminist scholars of South Asia and the South Asian diaspora to fully interrogate heterosexuality as a structuring mechanism of both state and diasporic nationalisms makes clear the indispensability of a queer critique. A queer diasporic framework insists on the imbrication of nation and diaspora through the production of hetero- and homosexuality, particularly as they are mapped onto the bodies of women.

Just as discourses of female sexuality are central to the mutual constitution of diaspora and nation, so too is the relation between diasporic culture and globalization one that is mediated through dominant gender and sexual ideologies. Feminist theorists have astutely observed that globalization profoundly shapes, transforms, and exploits the gendered arrangements of seemingly “private” zones in the diaspora such as the “immigrant home.”²⁹ But while much scholarship focuses on how global processes function through the differentiation of the labor market along gendered, racial, and national lines, how discourses of sexuality in the diaspora intersect with, and are in turn shaped by, globalization is only beginning to be explored.³⁰ Furthermore, the impact of globalization on particular diasporic locations produces various forms of oppositional diasporic cultural practices that may both reinscribe and disrupt the gender and sexual ideologies on which globalization depends.

The critical framework of a specifically *queer* diaspora, then, may begin to unsettle the ways in which the diaspora shores up the gender and sexual ideologies of dominant nationalism on the one hand, and processes of globalization on the other. Such a framework enables the concept of diaspora to fulfill the double-pronged critique of the nation and of globalization that Braziel and Mannur suggest is its most useful intervention. This framework “queers” the concept of diaspora by unmasking and undercutting its dependence on a genealogical, implicitly heteronormative reproductive logic. Indeed, while the Bharatiya Janata Party–led Hindu nationalist government in India acknowledged the diaspora solely in the form of the prosperous, Hindu, heterosexual NRI businessman, there exists a different embodiment of diaspora that remains unthinkable within this Hindu nationalist imaginary. The category of “queer” in my project works to name this alternative rendering of diaspora and to dislodge diaspora from its adherence and loyalty to nationalist ideologies that

are fully aligned with the interests of transnational capitalism. Suturing “queer” to “diaspora” thus recuperates those desires, practices, and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and nationalist imaginaries. A consideration of queerness, in other words, becomes a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora. Indeed, the urgent need to trouble and denaturalize the close relationship between nationalism and heterosexuality is precisely what makes the notion of a queer diaspora so compelling.³¹ A queer diasporic framework productively exploits the analogous relation between nation and diaspora on the one hand, and between heterosexuality and queerness on the other: in other words, queerness is to heterosexuality as the diaspora is to the nation. If within heteronormative logic the queer is seen as the debased and inadequate copy of the heterosexual, so too is diaspora within nationalist logic positioned as the queer Other of the nation, its inauthentic imitation. The concept of a queer diaspora enables a simultaneous critique of heterosexuality and the nation form while exploding the binary oppositions between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality, original and copy.

If “diaspora” needs “queerness” in order to rescue it from its genealogical implications, “queerness” also needs “diaspora” in order to make it more supple in relation to questions of race, colonialism, migration, and globalization. An emerging body of queer of color scholarship has taken to task the “homonormativity” of certain strands of Euro-American queer studies that center white gay male subjectivity, while simultaneously fixing the queer, nonwhite racialized, and/or immigrant subject as insufficiently politicized and “modern.”³² My articulation of a queer diasporic framework is part of this collective project of decentering whiteness and dominant Euro-American paradigms in theorizing sexuality both locally and transnationally. On the most simple level, I use “queer” to refer to a range of dissident and non-heteronormative practices and desires that may very well be incommensurate with the identity categories of “gay” and “lesbian.” A queer diasporic formation works in contradistinction to the globalization of “gay” identity that replicates a colonial narrative of development and progress that judges all “other” sexual cultures, communities, and practices against a model of Euro-American sexual identity.³³ Many of the diasporic cultural forms I discuss in this book do indeed map a “cartography of globalization,” in Sharpe’s terms, in that they emerge out of queer communities

in First World global cities such as London, New York, and Toronto. Yet we must also remember, as Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd point out, that “transnational or *neo-colonial* capitalism, like colonialist capitalism before it, continues to produce sites of contradiction that are effects of its always uneven expansion but that cannot be subsumed by the logic of commodification itself.”³⁴ In other words, while queer diasporic cultural forms are produced in and through the workings of transnational capitalism, they also provide the means by which to critique the logic of global capital itself. The cartography of a queer diaspora tells a different story of how global capitalism impacts local sites by articulating other forms of subjectivity, culture, affect, kinship, and community that may not be visible or audible within standard mappings of nation, diaspora, or globalization. What emerges within this alternative cartography are subjects, communities, and practices that bear little resemblance to the universalized “gay” identity imagined within a Eurocentric gay imaginary.

Reading various cultural forms and practices as both constituting and constituted by a queer South Asian diaspora resituates the conventions by which homosexuality has traditionally been encoded in a Euro-American context. Queer sexualities as articulated by the texts I consider here reference familiar tropes and signifiers of Euro-American homosexuality—such as the coming-out narrative and its attendant markers of secrecy and disclosure, as well as gender inversion and cross-dressing—while investing them with radically different and distinct significations. It is through a particular engagement with South Asian public culture, and popular culture in particular, that this defamiliarization of conventional markers of homosexuality takes place, and that alternative strategies through which to signify non-heteronormative desire are subsequently produced. These alternative strategies suggest a mode of reading and “seeing” same-sex eroticism that challenges modern epistemologies of visibility, revelation, and sexual subjectivity. As such, the notion of a queer South Asian diaspora can be understood as a conceptual apparatus that poses a critique of modernity and its various narratives of progress and development.³⁵ A queer South Asian diasporic geography of desire and pleasure stages this critique by rewriting colonial constructions of “Third World” sexualities as anterior, pre-modern, and in need of Western political development—constructions that are recirculated by contemporary gay and lesbian transnational politics. It simultaneously interrogates different South Asian nationalist narratives that imagine and consolidate the nation in terms of organic heterosexuality.

The concept of a queer South Asian diaspora, then, functions on multiple levels throughout this book. First, it situates the formation of sexual subjectivity within transnational flows of culture, capital, bodies, desire, and labor. Second, queer diaspora contests the logic that situates the terms “queer” and “diaspora” as dependent on the originality of “heterosexuality” and “nation.” Finally, it disorganizes the dominant categories within the United States for sexual variance, namely “gay and lesbian,” and it marks a different economy of desire that escapes legibility within both normative South Asian contexts and homonormative Euro-American contexts.

The radical disruption of the hierarchies between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality, original and copy, that queer diasporic texts enact hinges on the question of translation. Many of the texts I consider here can be understood as diasporic translations of “original” national texts: for instance, in chapter 5 I read Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* against Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai’s 1941 short story on which Mehta’s film is loosely based. Similarly, in chapter 4, I situate Indian American director Mira Nair’s 2001 film *Monsoon Wedding* alongside its earlier manifestation as the Bollywood, Hindi language hit *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !* (Who Am I to You?, dir. Sooraj Barjatya, 1994). In most popular and critical discussions of *Fire* or *Monsoon Wedding*, both within and outside India, the earlier, “indigenous” blueprints of each film are conveniently forgotten and effaced. In restoring the prior text as central to the discussion of the contemporary text, and in tracing the ways in which representations of queerness shift from “original” to “remake,” I ask what is both lost and gained in this process of translation. Reading diasporic texts as translations may seem to run the risk of reifying the binary between copy and original; it risks stabilizing the “nation” as the original locus that diaspora merely attempts to replicate. Just as the nation and the diaspora are mutually constitutive categories, by extension so too do the “original” national text and its diasporic translation gain meaning only in relation to one another. Tejaswini Niranjana, in her study of translation as a strategy of colonial subjectification, observes that translation functions within an idiom of fidelity, betrayal, and authenticity and appears “as a transparent representation of something that already exists, although the ‘original’ is actually brought into being through translation.”³⁶ In the juxtaposition of texts that I engage in, the queerness of either text can only be made intelligible when read against the other.³⁷ Furthermore, reading contemporary queer representations (such as Mehta’s

Fire) through their “originals” (such as Chughtai’s short story) militates against a developmental, progress narrative of “gay” identity formation that posits the diaspora as a space of sexual freedom over and against the (home) nation as a space of sexual oppression. Rather, I am interested in how the erotic economies of the prior text are mapped differently within a diasporic context. Translation here cannot be seen as a mimetic reflection of a prior text but rather as a productive activity that instantiates new regimes of sexual subjectivity even as it effaces earlier erotic arrangements.

Finally, in its most important intervention into dominant nationalist and diasporic formations, the framework of a queer diaspora radically resituates questions of home, dwelling, and the domestic space that have long concerned feminist, queer, and postcolonial scholarship. Historians of colonialism and anticolonial nationalism in India have examined in detail the ways in which home and housing were crucial to the production of both a British colonial and Indian anticolonial nationalist gendered subjectivity in the nineteenth century.³⁸ Partha Chatterjee argues that in late-colonial India, “the battle for the new idea of womanhood in the era of nationalism was waged in the home . . . it was the home that became the principal site of the struggle through which the hegemonic construct of the new nationalist patriarchy had to be normalized.”³⁹ Contemporary nationalist and diasporic discourses clearly bear the marks of these colonial and anticolonial nationalist legacies of “home” as a primary arena within which to imagine “otherness” in racial, religious, national, and gendered terms. The “home” within both discourses is a sacrosanct space of purity, tradition, and authenticity, embodied by the figure of the “woman” who is enshrined at its center, and marked by patriarchal gender and sexual arrangements. It is hardly surprising, then, that the home emerges as a particularly fraught site of contestation within the queer diasporic texts I discuss in this book.

Just as the home has been a major site of inquiry within feminist postcolonial scholarship, queer studies has also been particularly attuned to the home as a primary site of gender and sexual oppression for queer and female subjects.⁴⁰ Yet while many lesbian and gay texts imagine “home” as a place to be left behind, to be escaped in order to emerge into another, more liberatory space, the queer South Asian diasporic texts I consider here are more concerned with remaking the space of home from within. For queer racialized migrant subjects, “staying put” becomes a way of remaining within the oppressive struc-

tures of the home—as domestic space, racialized community space, and national space—while imaginatively working to dislodge its heteronormative logic.⁴¹ From the two sisters-in-law who are also lovers in Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire*, to a British Asian gay son’s grappling with his immigrant father in Ian Rashid’s short film *Surviving Sabu*, to the queer and transgendered protagonists of Shani Mootoo’s and Shyam Selvadurai’s novels, home is a vexed location where queer subjects whose very desires and subjectivities are formed by its logic simultaneously labor to transform it.

Historian Antoinette Burton writes of how, in the memoirs of elite women writers in late-colonial India, the “home” itself becomes an archive, “a dwelling-place of a critical history rather than the falsely safe space of the past.”⁴² Similarly, the queer diasporic texts I discuss throughout this book provide a minute detailing and excavation of the various forms of violence and, conversely, possibility and promise that are enshrined within “home” space. These queer diasporic texts evoke “home” spaces that are permanently and already ruptured, rent by colliding discourses around class, sexuality, and ethnic identity. They lay claim to both the space of “home” and the nation by making both the site of desire and pleasure in a nostalgic diasporic imaginary. The heteronormative home, in these texts, unwittingly generates homoeroticism. This resignification of “home” within a queer diasporic imaginary makes three crucial interventions: first, it forcefully repudiates the elision of queer subjects from national and diasporic memory; second, it denies their function as threat to family/community/nation; and third, it refuses to position queer subjects as alien, inauthentic, and perennially outside the confines of these entities.

Impossibility

Because the figure of “woman” as a pure and unsullied sexual being is so central to dominant articulations of nation and diaspora, the radical disruption of “home” that queer diasporic texts enact is particularly apparent in their representation of queer female subjectivity. I use the notion of “impossibility” as a way of signaling the unthinkability of a queer female subject position within various mappings of nation and diaspora. My foregrounding of queer female diasporic subjectivity throughout the book is not simply an attempt to merely bring into visibility or recognition a heretofore invisible subject. In-

deed, as I have suggested, many of the texts I consider run counter to standard “lesbian” and “gay” narratives of the closet and coming out that are organized exclusively around a logic of recognition and visibility. Instead, I scrutinize the deep investment of dominant diasporic and nationalist ideologies in producing this particular subject position as impossible and unimaginable. Given the illegibility and unrepresentability of a non-heteronormative female subject within patriarchal and heterosexual configurations of both nation and diaspora, the project of locating a “queer South Asian diasporic subject”—and a queer female subject in particular—may begin to challenge the dominance of such configurations. Revealing the mechanisms by which a queer female diasporic positionality is rendered impossible strikes at the very foundation of these ideological structures. Thus, while this project is very much situated within the emergent body of queer of color work that I referenced earlier, it also parts ways with much of this scholarship by making a queer female subject the crucial point of departure in theorizing a queer diaspora. In so doing, *Impossible Desires* is located squarely at the intersection of queer and feminist scholarship and therefore challenges the notion that these fields of inquiry are necessarily distinct, separate, and incommensurate.⁴³ Instead, the book brings together the insights of postcolonial feminist scholarship on the gendering of colonialism, nationalism, and globalization, with a queer critique of the heteronormativity of cultural and state nationalist formations.⁴⁴

The impossibility of imagining a queer female diasporic subject within dominant diasporic and nationalist logics was made all too apparent in the battle in New York City between the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA) and a group of Indian immigrant businessmen known as the National Federation of Indian Associations (NFIA), over SALGA’s inclusion in the NFIA-sponsored annual India Day Parade. The India Day Parade—which runs down the length of Madison Avenue and is an ostensible celebration of India’s independence from the British in 1947—is an elaborate performance of Indian diasporic identity, and a primary site of contestation over the borders and boundaries of what constitutes “Indianness” in the diaspora. In 1992 the newly formed SALGA applied for the right to march in the parade only to be brusquely turned down by the NFIA. Later that same year, right-wing Hindu extremists demolished the Babri Masjid, a Muslim shrine in Ayodhya, India, setting off a frenzy of anti-Muslim violence. These two events—the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, and the resistance on the part of the NFIA to SALGA’s

inclusion in the parade in New York City—are not as unrelated as they may initially appear. Paola Bacchetta has argued that one of the central tenets of Hindu nationalist ideology is the assignation of deviant sexualities and genders to all those who do not inhabit the boundaries of the Hindu nation, particularly Indian Muslims.⁴⁵ Thus, while these two events are certainly not comparable in terms of scale or the level of violence, together they mark the ways in which terrifyingly exclusivist definitions of communal belonging are relayed and translated between nation and diaspora within the realm of public culture, through intersecting discourses of gender, sexuality, nationality, and religion. The literal erasure of Muslims from the space of the (Hindu) nation coincides with the symbolic effacement of queer subjects from a “home” space nostalgically reimagined from the vantage point of the diaspora. Indeed the battle between SALGA and the NFIA that continued throughout the 1990s makes explicit how an Indian immigrant male bourgeoisie (embodied by the NFIA) reconstitutes Hindu nationalist discourses of communal belonging in India by interpellating “India” as Hindu, patriarchal, middle class, and free of homosexuals.⁴⁶ This Hindu nationalist vision of home and homeland was powerfully contested by SALGA at the 1995 parade, where once again the group was literally positioned at the sidelines of the official spectacle of national reconstitution. One SALGA activist, Faraz Ahmed (aka Nina Chiffon), stood at the edge of the parade in stunning, Bollywood-inspired drag, holding up a banner that proclaimed, “Long Live Queer India!” The banner, alongside Ahmed’s performance of the hyperbolic femininity of Bollywood film divas, interpellated not a utopic future space of national belonging but rather an already existing queer diasporic space of insurgent sexualities and gender identities.

That same year, the NFIA attempted to specify its criteria for exclusion by denying both SALGA and Sakhi for South Asian Women (an anti-domestic violence women’s group) the right to march on the grounds that both groups were, in essence, “antinational.” The official grounds for denying Sakhi and SALGA the right to march was ostensibly that both groups called themselves not “Indian” but “South Asian.” The possibility of Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, or Sri Lankans marching in an “Indian” parade was seen by NFIA members as an unacceptable redefinition of what constituted the so-called Indian community in New York City. In 1996, however, the NFIA allowed Sakhi to participate while continuing to deny SALGA the right to march. The NFIA, as self-styled arbiter of communal and national belonging, thus deemed it appropriate for women

to march as “Indian women,” even perhaps as “feminist Indian women,” but could not envision women marching as “Indian queers” or “Indian lesbians”; clearly the probability that there may indeed exist “lesbians” within Sakhi was not allowed for by the NFIA.

The controversy surrounding the India Day Parade highlights how hegemonic nationalist discourses, produced and reproduced in the diaspora, position “woman” and “lesbian” as mutually exclusive categories to be disciplined in different ways. Anannya Bhattacharjee’s work on domestic violence within Indian immigrant communities in the United States, for instance, demonstrates how immigrant women are positioned by an immigrant male bourgeoisie as repositories of an essential “Indianness.” Thus any form of transgression on the part of women may result in their literal and symbolic exclusion from the multiple “homes” which they as immigrant women inhabit: the patriarchal, heterosexual household, the extended “family” made up of an immigrant community, and the national spaces of both India and the United States.⁴⁷ Sunaina Maira’s ethnography of South Asian youth culture in New York City further documents the ways in which notions of chastity and sexual purity in relation to second-generation daughters are “emblematic not just of the family’s reputation but also, in the context of the diaspora, of the purity of tradition and ethnic identity, a defense against the promiscuity of ‘American influences.’”⁴⁸ Both Bhattacharjee and Maira valuably point to the complex ways in which the gendered constructions of South Asian nationalism are reproduced in the diaspora through the figure of the “woman” as the boundary marker of ethnic/racial community in the “host” nation. The “woman” also bears the brunt of being the embodied signifier of the “past” of the diaspora, that is, the homeland that is left behind and continuously evoked. But what remains to be fully articulated in much feminist scholarship on the South Asian diaspora are the particularly disastrous consequences that the symbolic freight attached to diasporic women’s bodies has for non-heteronormative female subjects. Within the patriarchal logic of an Indian immigrant bourgeoisie, a “nonheterosexual Indian woman” occupies a space of impossibility, in that she is not only excluded from the various “home” spaces that the “woman” is enjoined to inhabit and symbolize but, quite literally, simply cannot be imagined. Within patriarchal diasporic and nationalist logic, the “lesbian” can only exist outside the “home” as household, community, and nation of origin, whereas the “woman” can only exist within it. Indeed the “lesbian” is seen as

“foreign,” as a product of being too long in the West, and therefore is annexed to the “host” nation where she may be further elided—particularly if undocumented—as a nonwhite immigrant within both a mainstream (white) lesbian and gay movement and the larger body of the nation-state.

The parade controversy makes clear how the unthinkability of a queer female diasporic subject is inextricable from the nationalist overvaluation of the heterosexual female body; but it also functions in tandem with the simultaneous subordination of gay male subjectivity. Thus throughout this book, I pay close attention to the highly specific but intimately related modes of domination by which various racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized bodies are disciplined and contained by normative notions of communal identity. The rendering of queer female diasporic subjectivity as “impossible” is a very particular ideological structure: it is quite distinct from, but deeply connected to, the fetishization of heterosexual female bodies and the subordination of gay male bodies within dominant diasporic and nationalist discourses.⁴⁹ *Impossible Desires* attempts to track the mutual dependency and intersections between these different modes of domination, as well as the particular forms of accommodation and resistance to which they give rise. Indeed, as my brief discussion of *My Beautiful Laundrette* suggested, and as I elaborate in the following chapters, queer female diasporic subjectivity remains unimaginable and unthinkable not only within dominant nationalist and diasporic discourses but also within some gay male, as well as liberal feminist, rearticulations of diaspora. Thus, in their elision of queer female diasporic subjectivity, gay male and liberal feminist frameworks may be complicit with dominant nationalist and diasporic discourses.

While the phrase “impossible desires” refers specifically to the elision of queer female diasporic sexuality and subjectivity, I also use it to more generally evoke what José Rabasa, in his analysis of the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico, calls “a utopian horizon of alternative rationalities to those dominant in the West.”⁵⁰ Noting that one of the rallying cries of the movement is “Exigido lo imposible!” (Demand the impossible!), Rabasa understands the Zapatistas’ evocation of pre-Columbian myths combined with a pointed critique of the North American Free Trade Agreement and former president Raúl Salinas’ economic reforms as articulating a particular vision of time, history, and national collectivity that runs counter to that of dominant Mexican nationalism. The “impossibility” of the Zapatistas’ subaltern narrative, argues Rabasa, lies in

its incompatibility with the “modern” narratives of dominant nationalism that relegate indigenous people to the realm of the pre-political and the premodern. The power of the Zapatistas thus “resides in the new world they call forth—a sense of justice, democracy, and liberty that the government *cannot* understand because it calls for its demise.”⁵¹ It may initially appear incongruous to begin a study of gender, sexuality, and migration in the South Asian diaspora with an evocation of an indigenous peasant struggle in southern Mexico. However I find the notion of “the impossible,” as articulated by Rabasa’s reading of Zapatismo, to have a remarkable resonance with the project engaged in throughout this book. The phrase “Exigíd lo imposible!” in relation to a queer South Asian diaspora, suggests the range of oppositional practices, subjectivities, and alternative visions of collectivity that fall outside the developmental narratives of colonialism, bourgeois nationalism, mainstream liberal feminism, and mainstream gay and lesbian politics and theory. “Demanding the impossible” points to the failure of the nation to live up to its promises of democratic egalitarianism, and dares to envision other possibilities of existence exterior to dominant systems of logic.

South Asian Public Cultures

Throughout this book, I attempt to read the traces of “impossible subjects” as they travel within and away from “home” as domestic, communal, and national space. In so doing, I ask how we can identify the multitude of “small acts,” as Paul Gilroy phrases it, that fall beneath the threshold of hegemonic nationalist and diasporic discourses.⁵² This project of mapping the spaces of impossibility within multiple discourses necessitates an engagement with particular cultural forms and practices that are at the margins of what are considered legitimate sites of resistance or the “proper objects” of scholarly inquiry. The term “South Asian public cultures,” in my project, functions to name the myriad cultural forms and practices through which queer subjects articulate new modes of collectivity and kinship that reject the ethnic and religious absolutism of multiple nationalisms, while simultaneously resisting Euro-American, homonormative models of sexual alterity. My understanding of the term builds on Arjun Appadurai and Carole Breckenridge’s definition of “public culture” as a “*zone* of cultural debate” where “tensions and contradictions between national sites and transnational cultural processes” play out.⁵³ It

is within the realm of diasporic public culture that competing notions of community, belonging, and authenticity are brought into stark relief. Such an understanding of public culture reveals the intimate connections between seemingly unrelated events such as the India Day Parade controversy and the destruction of the Babri Masjid that I just described. The queer diasporic public culture that is the focus of this book takes the form of easily “recognizable” cultural texts such as musical genres, films, videos, and novels that have a specifically transnational address even as they are deeply rooted in the politics of the local. But because queer diasporic lives and communities often leave traces that resist textualization, they allow us to rethink what constitutes a viable archive of South Asian diasporic cultural production in the first place.⁵⁴ Thus the archive of queer public culture that I track here also encompasses cultural interventions that are much harder to document, such as queer spectatorial practices, and the mercurial performances and more informal forms of sociality (both on stage and on the dance floor) that occur at queer night clubs, festivals, and other community events. This queer diasporic archive is one that runs against the grain of conventional diasporic or nationalist archives, in that it documents how diasporic and nationalist subjectivities are produced through the deliberate forgetting and violent expulsion, subordination, and criminalization of particular bodies, practices, and identities. This archive is the storing house for those “clandestine counter-memories,” to once again use Joseph Roach’s phrase, through which sexually and racially marginalized communities reimagine their relation to the past and the present. By narrating a different history of South Asian diasporic formation, a queer diasporic archive allows us to memorialize the violences of the past while also imagining “other ways of being in the world,”⁵⁵ as Dipesh Chakravarty phrases it, that extend beyond the horizon of dominant nationalisms.

This different mode of conceptualizing the archive necessitates different reading strategies by which to render queer diasporic subjects intelligible and to mark the presence of what M. Jacqui Alexander terms an “insurgent sexuality” that works within and against hegemonic nationalist and diasporic logic.⁵⁶ Indeed, the representations of non-heteronormative desire within the texts I consider throughout the book call for an alternative set of reading practices, a queer diasporic reading that juxtaposes what appear to be disparate texts and that traces the cross-pollination between the various sites of non-normative desires that emerge within them. On the one hand, such a reading

renders intelligible the particularities of same-sex desiring relations within spaces of homosociality and presumed heterosexuality; on the other hand, it deliberately wrenches particular scenes and moments out of context and extends them further than they would want to go. It exploits the tension in the texts between the staging of female homoerotic desire as simply a supplement to a totalizing heterosexuality and the potential they raise for a different logic and organization of female desire. Because it is consistently under erasure from dominant historical narratives, the archive of a queer diaspora is one that is necessarily fractured and fragmented. I therefore employ a kind of scavenger methodology that finds evidence of queer diasporic lives and cultures, and the oppositional strategies they enact, in the most unlikely of places—the “home” being one such key location. As we see in relation to “home,” often what looks like a capitulation to dominant ideologies of nation and diaspora may in fact have effects that dislodge these ideologies; conversely what may initially appear as a radically oppositional stance may simply reinscribe existing power relations. In my reading of the British film *East Is East* (dir. Damien O’Donnell, 2000) in chapter 3, for instance, I suggest that it may not be the gay British Asian son who leaves the home, but rather the seemingly straight daughter who remains, who most troubles the gender and sexual ideologies of “home” in all its valences. The daughter is able to effect the disruption of home space through the performance of the hyperbolic femininity embodied by the heroines of Bollywood, as popular Hindi cinema is known. It is this practice of citationality, where the daughter evokes different genealogies of racialized femininity, that marks her as “queer.” Queerness in this case references an alternative hermeneutic, the particular interpretive strategies that are available to those who are deemed “impossible” within hegemonic nationalist and diasporic discourses. The category of queer, in other words, names the reading and citational practice that I engage in throughout the book, and that I also identify within the texts themselves.

I employ this queer reading practice in chapter 2, where I consider the ways in which popular music functions as one of the primary manifestations and locations of transnational public culture in the South Asian diaspora. I read the music of British Asian bands of the 1990s through a queer diasporic frame by situating it alongside alternative media and cultural practices that allow us to hear different stories about South Asian diasporic formation in the context of globalization. The valorization by critics and audiences of the recognizably

oppositional class and race politics of the predominantly male “Asian Underground” music scene allows for a complex picture of racialized masculinities in postcolonial Britain to emerge. Yet it misses the more nuanced contestations of gender, sexuality, race, and nation by queer and female subjects that take place at the margins of this scene and in spaces (such as the home) that may not initially appear as crucial locations where globalization makes itself felt. I therefore counterpose my discussion of the “Asian Underground” with an evocation of other musical, cinematic, and literary representations that provide complex renderings of gendered labor and “home” space in the context of globalization. In her 2003 novel *Brick Lane*, for instance, the British Bangladeshi writer Monica Ali maps the contours of these marginal spaces through the story of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi immigrant woman garment worker who lives and works in a Tower Hamlets housing project in London’s East End.⁵⁷ Ali traces in minute detail the domestic landscape of Nazneen’s cramped flat that she shares with her husband and two daughters, and that also functions as a work space where she does piecework for a local garment sweatshop. The novel makes evident the way in which the seemingly “private” domestic space functions as a key site of globalization, one that is intimately connected to other national locations where goods are produced by women workers for transnational corporations. The careful attention that Ali pays to the domestic and urban spaces of immigrant London maps an alternative geography to that evoked by the militant, antiracist politics of Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) or Fun’Da’Mental, two of the best known British Asian bands of the 1990s. While Ali situates her novel in the same social landscape of London’s East End out of which a band like ADF emerged in the early 1990s, the music is unable to access the domestic geography of gendered labor that Ali so carefully details. Indeed, understanding the interrelation between diaspora and globalization through very particular forms of British Asian music, as various cultural critics have tended to do, rather than through the other musical forms and cultural practices that emerge out of the racialized and gendered spaces mapped by a text such as Ali’s, risks replicating a dominant model of diaspora that recenters a heterosexual masculine subject. The chapters that follow attempt to think diaspora outside of this masculinist, heteronormative paradigm.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the interrelations between racialized postcolonial masculinities, South Asian diasporic women’s labor, and queer articulations of diaspora as they emerge in the home. I read the configuration of queer

postcolonial masculinity in the Indian Canadian filmmaker Ian Rashid's 1996 short film, *Surviving Sabu*, which is set in contemporary London, through and against the depiction of masculine failure in V. S. Naipaul's classic 1961 novel of diasporic displacement, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, set in Trinidad. By juxtaposing these two very different texts, I work against a logic of oedipality that would position Naipaul's modernist fable as emblematic of an "older" diasporic model that is invariably superceded by the "new" understanding of diaspora articulated by Rashid's film. Instead I argue that Naipaul's novel provides a brutally accurate diagnosis of the impact of colonialism on racialized masculinity that is productively taken up and reworked through the queer diasporic imaginary of Rashid's text. Yet Rashid's gay male articulation of diaspora, as in Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette*, is dependent on the erasure of the female diasporic subjectivity and therefore has more in common with Naipaul's text than may initially appear. The splitting of a queer project from a feminist one that we see in *Surviving Sabu* raises the larger question of how to theorize diaspora within both a queer and feminist framework. I therefore end the chapter with a consideration of how female diasporic subjectivity—as it emerges in the 2001 British film *East Is East*—intervenes into the masculinist frameworks of both Rashid and Naipaul and provides an alternative ordering of "home" space. *East Is East* is set in Manchester in the early 1970s and follows the trials and tribulations of George Khan, a working-class Pakistani immigrant, his white English wife, and their biracial children. While the film's dominant narrative centers on George's relation to his sons and figures diasporic displacement primarily through the trope of damaged, wounded postcolonial masculinity, I employ a queer reading practice to instead draw attention to the seemingly tangential, excessive moment in the film where George's sole daughter engages in a Bollywood-style song-and-dance sequence. This scene offers a much more complex understanding of gendered diasporic subjectivity and Asian women's labor in the "home" than does the rest of the film, or Rashid and Naipaul's texts. As such, my reading of *East Is East* allows us to resist the troubling conflation of queerness as male and femaleness as straight that even progressive gay male texts such as Rashid's inadvertently enact.

Chapter 4 further explores this splitting of "queer" from "female," and "feminist," as it plays out within the realm of Bollywood cinema and the diasporic routes it travels. I begin by reflecting on the ways in which queer diasporic audiences reterritorialize "home" and homeland through their re-

ception of popular Indian cinema. These audiences exploit the tensions and slippages within the Bollywood text, and particularly the song-and-dance sequence, in order to articulate a specifically queer diasporic positionality, one that recognizes both the text and the viewer in motion. As such, a consideration of queer diasporic engagements with Bollywood forces us to extend and challenge notions of spectatorship and cinematic representation that have emerged out of both Indian film studies and Euro-American queer and feminist film studies. Throughout the chapter, I pay particular attention to representations of women's sexuality in Bollywood cinema, in order to gauge what it means for queer female desire to signify onscreen, given Bollywood cinema's intimate connection with Indian nationalism and the intense investment of nationalist discourse in regulating women's bodies. How does queer female desire trouble dominant notions of national and communal identity that emerge within the heteropatriarchal narratives of Bollywood cinema? Interestingly, it is often in moments of what appears to be extreme gender conformity, and in spaces that seem particularly fortified against queer incursions—such as the domestic arena—that queer female desire emerges in ways that are most disruptive of dominant masculinist scripts of community and nation. Indeed the most enabling and nuanced instances of queer female desire on the Bollywood screen transpire not through the representation of explicitly queer coded, visible "lesbian" characters but rather through evoking the latent homoeroticism of female homosocial space.

The second half of chapter 4 traces the ways in which the idiom of Bollywood cinema and its strategies of queer representation have been translated, transformed, and rendered intelligible for an international market by South Asian diasporic feminist filmmakers such as Mira Nair, Gurinder Chadha, and Deepa Mehta. I focus in particular on Mira Nair's film *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), which received tremendous international acclaim, and which I read as a diasporic translation of the hugely popular Bollywood hit *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !* (Who Am I to You?, dir. Sooraj Barjatya, 1994). Surprisingly, I find that in Nair's ostensibly feminist, diasporic rescripting of the neoconservative, nationalist politics of the earlier film, the queerness of female homosocial space that *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !* renders so distinctly is effaced. By substituting queer male characters for queer female space, *Monsoon Wedding* and other feminist diasporic translations of Bollywood such as Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and Mehta's *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002), ultimately evacuate

the possibility of queer female representation by splitting apart a queer project from a feminist one. Like Rashid's *Surviving Sabu*, they thus reinforce the impossibility of queer female desire and subjectivity that is at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies.

Chapter 5 turns to Deepa Mehta's earlier, controversial 1996 film *Fire*, in order to examine a diasporic representation of queer female desire and pleasure that does indeed signify on screen. The film and the fractious debates it generated provide a remarkably fruitful case study of the fraught relation between representations of queer female desire and discourses of diaspora and nation. I employ a queer diasporic reading practice that traces the multiple and contradictory meanings of Mehta's film as it travels between different national locations. Just as Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* can be read as a diasporic translation of the Bollywood hit *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !*, so too can *Fire* be productively read as the diasporic translation of another earlier, "national" text, namely the 1941 short story that inspired it, Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt."⁵⁸ Although Chughtai's story was only briefly mentioned, if at all, in the ensuing debates surrounding *Fire*, I reinstate it as a crucial intertext to Mehta's film. Both texts situate queer female pleasure and desire firmly within the confines of the middle-class home, thereby powerfully disrupting dominant gender and sexual constructions of communal and national identity in South Asia, as well as dominant Euro-American narratives of an "out," visible "lesbian" identity. Situating Mehta's film in relation to Chughtai's story critiques the film's apparent intelligibility to a non-South Asian viewing public through developmental, neocolonial constructions of "tradition" and "modernity." Instead it underscores the ways in which both texts produce complex models of female homoerotic desire that challenge a Euro-American "lesbian" epistemology that relies on notions of visibility and legibility. Furthermore, both texts put forth a narrative of marriage and the domestic space that interrogate colonial and nationalist discursive framings of female sexuality in general and female homoeroticism in particular. I place my readings of *Fire* and "The Quilt" within the context of South Asian feminist scholarship on gender and nationalism that, I argue, fails to adequately address alternative sexualities when considering the formation of Indian nationalism or the Hindu right. The *Fire* controversy makes all too apparent the necessity of theorizing alternative sexualities as central to the critique of religious and state nationalisms.

My final chapter examines contemporary queer South Asian diasporic liter-

ature that theorizes sexual subjectivity through processes of transnationalism and gendered labor migrations, as well as through the complicated negotiations of state regulatory practices and multiple national sites undertaken by queer diasporic subjects. As such, this literature interrogates our understandings of nostalgia, "home," and desire in a transnational frame. I argue that the Sri Lankan Canadian writer Shyam Selvadurai's 1994 novel *Funny Boy*,⁵⁹ and the Trinidadian Canadian Shani Mootoo's 1996 novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*,⁶⁰ make a timely intervention into the emerging field of South Asian American studies in that they place sexuality firmly at the center of analyses of racialization, colonialism, and migration. I look closely at how both texts rethink the category of "home" through the deployment of what I would call an enabling nostalgia, one that stands in marked contrast to the conventionally nostalgic structures of "home" and tradition called forth by contemporary state and diasporic nationalisms. Within the novels of Selvadurai and Mootoo, as in Chughtai's text, sexuality functions not as an autonomous narrative but instead as enmeshed and immersed within multiple discourses. In its recreation of "home" space, queer diasporic literature refuses to subsume sexuality within a larger narrative of ethnic, class, or national identity, or to subsume these other conflicting trajectories within an overarching narrative of "gay" sexuality. The novels of Mootoo and Selvadurai, like the other queer diasporic texts I consider throughout the book, do not allow for a purely redemptive recuperation of same-sex desire, conscribed and implicated as it is within racial, class, religious, and gender hierarchies. Indeed, as is so apparent in the scene from *My Beautiful Laundrette* with which I began this chapter, it is precisely from the friction between these various competing discourses that queer pleasure and desire emerge.


The framework of a queer South Asian diaspora provides a conceptual space from which to level a powerful critique at the discourses of purity and "tradition" that undergird dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies; but it also works to reveal and challenge the presumed whiteness of queer theory and the compulsory heterosexuality of South Asian feminisms. While my book limits itself to the analysis of queer South Asian and queer South Asian diasporic texts, I hope that the insights produced here on the illegibility and indeed impossibility of certain queer subjects and desires also allow for a richer understanding of a whole range of texts that have stood outside of dominant lesbian-gay and national canons. Through the lens of a queer diaspora, various writ-

ers and visual artists such as Nice Rodriguez, Ginu Kamani, Audre Lorde, R. Zamora Linmark, Richard Fung, and Achy Obejas (to name just a few)⁶¹ can now be deciphered and read simultaneously into multiple queer and national genealogies. Many of the objects of inquiry in *Impossible Desires* appear to be excessive, tangential, or marginal to recognized traditions; often they are but recalcitrant moments within larger narratives which are deeply invested in conventional gender, sexual, and nationalist ideologies. It is precisely at the margins, however, and in relation to sexuality and desire, that the most powerful and indispensable critiques of dominant formulations of nation and diaspora are taking place. My contention here is that the various regimes of colonialism, nationalism, racial and religious absolutism are violently consolidated through the body and its regulation. When queer subjects register their refusal to abide by the demands placed on bodies to conform to sexual (as well as gendered and racial) norms, they contest the logic and dominance of these regimes. Thus theorists of sexuality, as well as of race and postcoloniality, ignore the interventions of queer diasporic subjects at their own peril.

2

COMMUNITIES OF SOUND

Queering South Asian Popular Music in the Diaspora

 At a 1999 performance of queer South Asian art and culture in New York City, the high point of the show came as the stage went dark and the audience heard not the familiar strains of Bollywood songstresses Asha Bhosle or Lata Mangeshkar over the loudspeakers, as one might expect in such a venue, but rather the chilly electronic beat of Madonna's 1998 Hinduism-inspired CD *Ray of Light*. As the lights went on, a spotlight bathed the three South Asian drag queens who appeared center stage in a golden glow. The performers were replete with the henna tattoos, gold bangles, and the upper-caste facial markings popularized by Madonna during her brief bout of Indophilia in the late 1990s. As the largely queer South Asian crowd erupted in enthusiastic applause, the performers launched into a sexy and hilarious rendition of Madonna's faux-Sanskrit techno dance track "Shanti/Ashtangi." How can we read this scene of criss-crossing influences, appropriations, and translations, of South Asian diasporic queers performing Madonna at the height of her "millennial orientalist" phase?¹ This performance and its interpellation of a queer diasporic public culture functions as an ironic commentary on Madonna's penchant for cultural theft and tourism, particularly her appropriation of the cultural forms of queer and racialized subcultures. Furthermore, it reverses the standard circuits of commodification and appropriation whereby

book, a conventional queer or feminist reading would render this image intelligible by situating it within a familiar binary structure that equates queerness with modernity, visibility, sexual liberation, and revelation (embodied by Sekhon), over and against the tropes of “tradition,” concealment, secrecy, and modesty (embodied by her mother). A queer diasporic reading, in contrast, works against this neocolonial logic and allows us to identify the ways in which Sekhon evokes this series of binary oppositions—tradition/modernity, secrecy/disclosure, invisibility/visibility, queer/straight, first generation/second generation—only to overturn and disrupt them. In an interview with queer art critic Cherry Smyth, Sekhon explains her choice of Southall Market as the setting for her photographs:

I grew up in Southall and my mother tried to persuade me to go to Southall Market every Saturday morning. I hated it and I tried to avoid the inevitable standoff each week. Those mothers lagging behind Stepford Daughters, dragging trolleys all over Southall on the way to and from the market, I couldn't bear it. In the end she did stop asking but it was hard 'cause I couldn't do the simplest of normal things that was required of me . . . When you go there [to Southall], it's completely you and you're part of it, but all at once you're so invisible too, not being married and not straight.⁹

Both Sekhon's statement and the image allow for a more complicated formulation of the relation of queer female diasporic subjects to home space than one that is characterized merely by alienation and repression. While Sekhon clearly articulates the ambivalent relation of undutiful queer daughters to immigrant mothers who seek to inculcate heteronormative domesticity, the image both calls to mind and revises Ian Rashid's *Surviving Sabu* in its complex relay of desire and identification between the bodies of mother and daughter. Sekhon's queerness is formed in and through her relation to home space, even as it radically disrupts and reterritorializes this space. Her nude body—like Mina's performance in *East Is East*—places queer female subjectivity at the center of diasporic public cultural space. Through Sekhon's lens, we glimpse an alternative construction of diaspora organized around queer lives, desires, bodies, cultures, and collectivities, which remains utterly unintelligible and unimaginable within dominant state and diasporic nationalist frameworks. Sekhon's work, as well as the other queer diasporic texts and cultural practices I have engaged with in these pages, allows us to identify the ways in which those who occupy impossible spaces transform them into vibrant, livable spaces of possibility.

NOTES

1 Impossible Desires

1. For an analysis of the racist ideology espoused by the British politician Enoch Powell in the 1960s, see Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality*.

2. See Ian Iqbal Rashid, “Passage to England,” for a discussion of *My Beautiful Laundrette*'s reception by the “cultural left” in the UK in the 1980s.

3. In its most general sense, the term “communal” is used here and throughout the book to reference notions of community and collectivity; more specifically, my use of “communal” is meant to evoke the term “communalism,” which in the South Asian context names a politics of religious nationalism and the persecution of religious minorities, particularly on the part of the Hindu right.

4. The category of “South Asian” encompasses populations that originated from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Annanya Bhattacharjee provides a useful gloss on the term, which gained increasing currency in the 1980s and 1990s within progressive communities in the United States in order to signal a broad politics of coalition that rejected the narrow nationalisms of mainstream South Asian diasporic organizations. Bhattacharjee notes that despite its progressive valence, “South Asian” as an identity marker remains a deeply problematic term, given its origins in area studies and cold war rhetoric, as well as its capacity to evade questions of Indian regional hegemony. See “The Public/Private Mirage,” 309–10. Despite these limitations, I find the category “South Asian” invaluable in tracing the lines of commonality and difference between various experiences of racialization of diasporic communities within

different national locations. Clearly the history of racialization of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent is vastly different depending on religion, class, and nation of origin in each of these national sites. Nevertheless the term continues to be useful as it produces strategic transnational identifications that allow for a critique of dominant notions of community in both South Asia and the diaspora.

5. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 245.
6. Ibid.
7. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 2.
8. Ibid., 20.
9. Ibid., 6.
10. Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 245.
11. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 151–53.
12. Stefan Helmreich, "Kinship, Nation and Paul Gilroy's Concept of Diaspora," 245.
13. Braziel and Mannur, "Nation, Migration, Globalization," 7.
14. Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 244.
15. For an elaboration of how diasporic cultural forms reverse the diaspora-nation hierarchy, see Gayatri Gopinath, "Bombay, U.K., Yuba City."
16. Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 244.
17. For instance, as Anupam Chander documents, the right-wing Hindu nationalist government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) issued "Resurgent India Bonds" following the international sanctions imposed on India after its nuclear tests in 1998. The BJP promoted the bonds by appealing to the diasporic nationalism of NRIs in an attempt to encourage them to invest in the "homeland." See Chander, "Diaspora Bonds." See also Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 21, for a discussion of the Indian government's production of the category of "NRI" as an attempt to garner foreign exchange.
18. Another stark illustration of the double-sided character of diaspora was apparent during the savage state-sponsored violence against Muslims in Gujarat, India, in February 2002. The Hindu nationalist state government in Gujarat received the support of NRIs even while other anticomunialist NRI organizations in New York and San Francisco mobilized against the violence and the government's complicity in the killing and displacement of thousands of Indian Muslims.
19. Sunaina Maira, for instance, documents the ways in which second-generation Indian American youth in the United States are drawn to Hindu religious nationalist ideology as a way of fulfilling a desire to be "truly Indian." Maira, *Desis in the House*, 137.
20. I understand "globalization" and "transnationalism" as a range of processes that, following Arjun Appadurai's formulation, includes the global movements of labor, technology, capital, media, and ideologies. See Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference

in the Global Cultural Economy." While transnationalism is the result of the exigencies of late capitalism, I also concur with Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd's assessment that understanding transnationalism as the homogenization of global culture "radically reduces possibilities for the creation of alternatives"; "Introduction," in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, 1. This book is therefore concerned with the particular cultural forms and practices that arise out of, and in contestation to, transnational capitalism.

21. Visweswaran, "Diaspora By Design," 5–29.
22. Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema*, 235.
23. Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 74.
24. Jenny Sharpe, "Cartographies of Globalisation, Technologies of Gendered Subjectivities," forthcoming. I thank the author for permission to discuss her unpublished manuscript.
25. Some of the most influential works in the broad field of gender and nationalism in South Asia include the following: Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women*; Zoya Hassan, ed., *Forging Identities*; Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions*; Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin, eds., *Borders and Boundaries*.
26. Key exceptions include Ruth Vanita, ed. *Queering India*; Giti Thadani, *Sakhiyani*; Shohini Ghosh, "*Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !*"; Paola Bacchetta, "When the (Hindu) Nation Exiles its Queers."
27. See Purnima Mankekar, "Brides Who Travel," for an examination of representations of diasporic women's sexuality in Hindi cinema.
28. Tejaswini Niranjana, "Left to the Imagination." See also Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire*, for a discussion of Indian women's sexuality in the British Caribbean and discourses of both Indian and British nationalism.
29. See, for instance, Lisa Lowe's analysis of Asian immigrant women's labor in "Work, Immigration, Gender."
30. For collections that begin to map out this terrain, see Arnaldo Cruz Malavé and Martin Manalansan, eds., *Queer Globalizations*; Elizabeth Povinelli and George Chauncey, eds., *Thinking Sexuality Transnationally*.
31. Following from George Mosse's groundbreaking analysis of sexuality in Nazi Germany in *Nationalism and Sexuality*, an important body of work has emerged over the past decade that has unraveled the complex interrelation between discourses of sexuality and those of the nation. For a few key examples of this increasingly large and complex field, see Andrew Parker, ed., *Nationalisms and Sexualities*; M. Jacqui Alexander, "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization"; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather*; and more recently Licia Fiol Matta, *A Queer Mother for the Nation*.
32. Some exemplary instances of this growing body of literature in U.S. ethnic

studies include the following: Martin Manalansan, *Global Divas*; José Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad*; Robert Reid Pharr, *Black Gay Man*; Philip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men?*; David L. Eng, *Racial Castration*; Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*; Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides*.

33. See Martin Manalansan, "In the Shadow of Stonewall," for an important interrogation of contemporary gay transnational politics.

34. Lowe and Lloyd, *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, 1.

35. The imbrication of narratives of "progress," "modernity," and "visibility" is made obvious in what Alexander terms "prevalent metropolitan impulses that explain the absence of visible lesbian and gay movements [in non-Western locations] as a defect in political consciousness and maturity, using evidence of publicly organized lesbian and gay movements in the U.S. . . . as evidence of their ordinary status (in the West) and superior political maturity." Alexander, "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization," 69.

36. Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, 3.

37. I thank Alys Weinbaum for her thoughtful feedback on the question of translation.

38. Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*.

39. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 133.

40. Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Politics."

41. For an elaboration of the notion of "staying" for queer subjects, see Anne Marie Fortier, "Coming Home."

42. Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*, 29.

43. As such, I trace the genealogy of this project back to the rich body of radical women of color scholarship of the late 1970s and 1980s that insistently situated lesbian sexuality within a feminist, antiracist, and anticolonial framework. Such work includes Audre Lorde's *Zami*; Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*; Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back*; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*; Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls*.

44. Queer Euro-American scholarship has done the crucial work of revealing the heteronormativity of dominant U.S. nationalism. Such work includes Gayle Rubin's groundbreaking essay "Thinking Sex"; Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*; Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers* and *The Twilight of Equality?*

45. Paola Bacchetta, "When the (Hindu) Nation Exiles its Queers."

46. For a discussion of how the "Indian immigrant bourgeoisie" constructs itself as unnamed and universal, see Annanya Bhattacharjee, "The Habit of Ex-Nomination."

47. Bhattacharjee, "The Public/Private Mirage."

48. Maira, *Desis in the House*, 49.

49. I thank Chandan Reddy for asking me to elaborate on the specificity of different modes of domination.

50. José Rabasa, "Of Zapatismo."

51. *Ibid.*, 421.

52. Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts*.

53. See Appadurai and Breckenridge, "Public Modernity in India," for an explication of the term "public culture" in relation to South Asia. The authors use "public culture" in contradistinction to Habermas's notion of the "public sphere" as a depoliticized zone dominated by the mass media. Instead, the term "public culture" captures the sense of resistance, co-optation, critique, and agency with which subaltern groups interact with popular culture.

54. José Muñoz theorizes the ephemeral nature of queer cultural production in "Gesture, Ephemerality, Queer Feeling," 433. For an extended discussion of queer archives and public cultures, see Ann Cvetkovich, 1–14.

55. Dipesh Chakravarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 66.

56. M. Jacqui Alexander, "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization," 86.

57. Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*.

58. Ismat Chughtai's recently translated and reprinted work includes *The Quilt and Other Stories*, *The Heart Breaks Free*, and *The Crooked Line*.

59. Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy*.

60. Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night*.

61. See, for instance, the following: Nice Rodriguez, *Throw It to the River*; Ginu Kamani, *Jungle Girl*; Lorde, *Zami*; R. Zamora Linmark, *Rolling the R's*; *My Mother's House* (dir. Richard Fung, 1993); Achy Obejas, *Memory Mambo*.

2 Communities of Sound

1. I borrow this apt phrase from Josh Kun. For a trenchant critique of Madonna's penchant for cultural theft and tourism, see his article "Sayuri Ciccone."

2. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 12.

3. Muñoz understands "queer and Latino counterpublics" as "spheres that stand in opposition to the racism and homophobia of the dominant public sphere." *Disidentifications*, 143.

4. "Bombay, U.K., Yuba City."

5. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 16.

6. I elaborate on this relation between diaspora and nation that is effected by Bhangra music in "Bombay, U.K., Yuba City," 316–17.

7. While the Bhangra industry in the UK was, and continues to be, largely male-