

The world is sound? Geography, musicology and British-Asian soundscapes

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This paper contributes to recent geographical engagements with sound and music by exploring the benefits of a geographical approach conversant with musicological and ethnomusicological tools and agendas within a specific political and empirical context: British-Asian cultural politics and contemporary dance music. Doing so, it suggests, sheds new light on an existing body of anthropological and cultural studies literature that critically highlights the commodification of exotica in this type of dance music. The paper shows how analysing the spatial politics of British-Asian musicality evokes the dynamic complexities around identity, belonging and the geographies of British popular culture and British-ness generated through this mode of cultural production.

Key words: *British-Asian dance music, cultural politics, geography, musicology, identity*

Introduction

Over the last ten years or so a growing body of geographical scholarship has explored a range of issues around music, listening and politics. Since Susan Smith's influential reflections on the 'soundscapes' of social, political and cultural life (1994), research has progressed on a diverse range of themes, including the links between music and historical geographies of citizenship and the nation-state (Leyshon *et al.* 1998a; Revill 1995 2000), music practices and the transgression of hegemonic spatiality (Kong 1995a; Valentine 1995), musical performance, reception and the production of space (Smith 2000; Saldanha 2002), and listening practices and the timing and spacing of memory (Anderson 2002 2004). However, despite early calls for geographical approaches attuned to musicality (Kong 1995b, 193), there has been a notable lack of geographical research that adequately engages with musicological interests in the politics of musical form and content (for notable exceptions see Revill 1995; Smith 2000). It is to these themes that this paper responds.

The analysis of music within the social sciences raises inherently geographical questions, particularly around how musical practice carves spaces of performance, expression and culture, and how it shapes social spaces of identity, belonging and community. For the most part, however, geographers have been reluctant to treat music as a cultural product through which one can usefully trace these geographical issues. Geographical approaches conversant with musicological agendas and tools hold the potential to effect a genuinely progressive analysis of the spatial politics of music; analyses that respond in new ways to the reverberations of pleas that musical soundscapes be considered as seriously as geographers have considered landscapes with respect to their significance for experience, expression and emotion as dimensions of human life (Smith 1994, 237). This paper explores the benefits of a fluid geographical approach sensitive to musicological and ethnomusicological interests in musical form, content and negotiation. In particular I show how this type of approach offers new perspectives on existent anthropological and

cultural studies writing on a specific context: that of contemporary British-Asian¹ dance music and the politics of identity.

British-Asian culture constitutes an important part of contemporary urban life in Britain. Since the decline of Empire, increasing numbers of South Asian immigrants have traced imperial routes to source and settled in Britain's major cities. Successive generations of British-born Asians have enriched British social and cultural life, whilst facing real, often violent, struggles against forms of institutionalized racism still engrained in British society.² The emergence and recognition of forms of popular and material culture deemed distinctively 'British-Asian' in origin – the Chicken Tikka Masala, London's west-end musical 'Bombay Dreams', the BBC's Asian network – lend support to assertions that for the development of a genuinely progressive, non-racist British society in the twenty-first century, we must rethink what it means to be British.³ Such post-colonial concerns about the place of transnational British-Asian culture have been explored within British anthropology and cultural studies (see Sivanandan 1983; Brah 1996; Alibhai-Brown 2001) and increasingly within social and cultural geography (see Crang and Dwyer 2002; Tolia-Kelly 2004).

Dance music is an important, popular and dynamic mode of British-Asian cultural production. This body of music – pioneered by prominent musicians like Talvin Singh, Nitin Sawhney and Sheila Chandra – offers forms of musical expression by artists who actively negotiate fluid, transnational influences through their work as they do in their lives as British-born Asians. Their sounds combine pop, UK drum and bass, jungle and urban beats with South Asian – mostly Indian – stylings and sensibilities. Take Talvin Singh, for example. His sound combines tabla and turntable, sitar and sampler, it is a sound that emerges from his Brick Lane studio in London's East End, is played on the dance floors of hip UK and US clubs, and at music festivals and concert halls across Europe and North America. His beats, tones and chords, however, evoke geographical imaginations of an Asia elsewhere. Singh's sound belies easy placement. In fact his amalgamation of music from 'East' and 'West', as well as his synthesis of disparate Indian sounds, creates new soundscapes. As I proceed to show, joint geographical and musical engagements with this music evoke the ways that these important modes of cultural production map a progressive politics of identity and difference in Britain; a cultural politics that

remaps the rigidity of national and ideological borders, but still finds roots in sound. Reflecting the dynamism of postcolonial identity politics, musicians such as Talvin Singh, Nitin Sawhney, Badmarsh and Shri and Sheila Chandra construct new worlds of sound.

Reappraising the critique of exotica

As I have suggested, existing social science scholarship on British-Asian dance music has emerged primarily from cultural studies and anthropology (see Sharma *et al.* 1996; *Postcolonial Studies* 1998; *Theory Culture Society* 2000; Hutnyk 2000a). This significant and innovative body of work is characterized by a collective commitment to Marxist critique and radical political agendas. For example, in a themed 'Music and Politics' issue of the journal *Theory, Culture and Society*, Koushik Banerjea (2000) responded to popular claims that the music of British-Asian artists such as Talvin Singh, Nitin Sawhney and Badmarsh and Shri represent the sounds of an 'Asian underground' by posing the question 'Sounds of Whose Underground?' In fact, Banerjea's provocative question is directed at Talvin Singh, who in 1997 named his first album 'Anokha: Soundz of the Asian Underground'. The album was an anthology of the 'Soundz' that people could expect to hear at Singh's former fortnightly promotion, Anokha, held at the Blue Note club in Hoxton Square, London. Banerjea's question is directed at what he perceives as Talvin Singh's heavily sanitized version of a British-Asian 'dissident diaspora', and the article probes the extent to which Singh's 'underground' can genuinely claim to be subversive or dissident:

We might be riven by endemic racism and class division, but on the dancefloor we can still come together as a nation. When the lights dip and Talvin trips we're all 'One Nation Under a Groove'. Or so the story goes. Feel good one-worldism is the policy and the club nights, amongst others, like Anokha, Sitarfunk, Outcaste and Swaraj the practice. Marked by the ready appropriation of *bindis*, *saris*, incense and the more narcoleptic aspects of Ravi Shankar, these are spaces which offer a primarily middle class constituency a sanitized Asian 'other'. They allow for white folk to rub shoulders with a carefully constructed exotica and for the perpetuation of a myth of multiculturalism. (Banerjea 2000, 65)

Banerjea's cautionary tale warns that Talvin Singh's commodification of exotica brings the underground

to the surface. It sweetens the sour taste of 'dissident diaspora' to suit a middle-class palate. For Banerjea, Anokha's apparently radical agenda lends itself seamlessly to the requirements of white cultural hegemony, making it decidedly liberal: 'Attending Anokha might not change the world but it certainly convinces enough punters that they are better people' (2000, 66). Within social geography and race studies these criticisms of liberal British multiculturalism are, of course, not new (see May 1996; hooks 1992). Banerjea and this group of commentators maintain that while sanitized versions of the 'dissident diaspora' and elements thereof are commodified and consumed through the cultural economy of British-Asian dance music, the voices clamouring for the recognition of Asian working class demands in housing, employment, education and asylum policy grow fainter. The real struggles lie here, these authors maintain, and their aims are to bring these struggles to the surface. This group of scholars readily defines itself as 'people who are careful not to give up political agency and the need to respond to the inequalities and exploitations that afflict our lives today' (Kalra and Hutnyk 1998a, 336). This critical Marxist tone has prevailed in much of the anthropological and cultural studies literature on contemporary British-Asian dance music, and it signposts timely and thoughtful warnings against over exuberant celebrations of a depthless British multiculturalism.

John Hutnyk's book *Critique of exotica* (2000a) continues in this vein, but points to the sharper and more forthright politics of bands such as The Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) and Fun^{Da}Mental. According to Hutnyk, music from these bands tackles a real politics of racial subjection in Britain's South-Asian working class communities. Produced by the renowned record label 'Nation', the likes of ADF and Fun^{Da}Mental are kept at arms length by 'Asian Kool' artists, such as Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawhney, because 'Nation's politics are a little hot for chart success' (Hutnyk 2000a, 8). The ADF's protest rap 'Free Satpal Ram' illustrates their commitment to radical and direct politics. Satpal Ram is a British-Bengali man currently in jail serving the fourteenth year of a life sentence. He was the subject of a racially motivated attack by a group of six men in a Birmingham restaurant. Satpal defended himself, inflicting wounds on one attacker that subsequently proved fatal.⁴ ADF, Kalra and Hutnyk suggest:

are less a music group within the... 'Asian Underground' category as they are a group of cultural

workers who use music to express the frustrations and experiences of young Asian males in the East End of London. (1998b, 351)

Perhaps this comment also provides a clue as to why this body of scholarship has characteristically declined from any serious examinations of the *musicality* of any of the music with which it engages. Musical analysis seems to not go beyond explorations of the lyrical expression in Bhangra music (see Kalra 2000) and in ADF tracks (see Kalra and Hutnyk 1998b; Hutnyk 2000a 2000b). These are analyses of *music* and *politics*, where the 'and' marks a gap, a deferral from the political event to its mediated, musical representation. *Music* and *politics* remain distinct. In this type of analysis political intention is located exclusively in explicitly political words, and political potential is construed as what these words might do. The *politics of music*, I suggest, emanates from and diffuses through other dimensions of music as well. A geographical engagement with musicology is well positioned to explore the spatial politics that inheres in musical form, expression and negotiation, to tease from musical sources new questions around place and belonging, identity and difference, and to apply a scholarly geographical imagination to what musicologists refer to as 'the reality of music making' (Berliner 1994, 16). For musicology has long attempted to locate the meaning of music not solely in those external (political or otherwise) realities that it may represent, but also in the aesthetic resources it brings forth to constitute realities (see Cook 1998, 74–84). The approach to the *politics of music* set forth in this paper, then, signposts a fully integrated analytical approach that evokes both the multiple ways music is always fully inside a society that is dynamic, and the multiple stakeholders (composers, performers, listeners, dancers, etc.) involved simultaneously in the doing of musical activity and the doing of society.

To dismiss the work of 'Asian Kool' artists because of its detachment from visceral racialized subjection on the grounds of the artists' and listening publics' class status forecloses on effective, progressive and situated analyses of the politics of British-Asian dance music in the context of nascent and expanded notions of post-territorial, syncretic British-ness. That this music may be produced and consumed by both a white and non-white suburban middle class resident in Britain does not mean that this middle class does not face its own identity struggles in Britain's contemporary multiculturalism. The

British-Asian middle class constitute a significant proportion of Britain's immigrant population today and recent histories of political lip service paid to multiculturalism have reified the autonomy of many second and third generation immigrant cultures that continue to be underpinned by white hegemony (Brah 1996, 17–48). Direct activism against white hegemony has punctuated these histories (see Sivanandan 1983) and cultivated racialized urban territorialities sometimes characterized by rigid boundaries or 'frontlines' (Keith 1993). Fortress hegemony remains intact and its manifestations are ever more subtly and ideologically woven into the political economy of British society (see Gilroy 1987; Back and Nayak 1999). British multiculturalism, many would argue, is a tool that simultaneously reifies the boundaries that demarcate ethnicized communities as it cultivates the privileges of whiteness (see Hall 1996a).

At the same time many second and third generation South Asians grow up in Britain straddling white/non-white identities. Growing up in England as an Asian means confronting existential tensions between the negotiation of territorial belonging in place, and one's epidermal 'difference' that physically, if not psychologically, marks one apart from white British-ness. As Talvin Singh says, 'In Britain I'm considered Indian, and in India I'm considered British. I'm almost fucking white there' (Singh quoted in Lawson 1998, 102). Middle-class subjectivities do not always mean that such versions of not-quite-British-ness – and for that matter not-quite-Indian-ness – are particularly comfortable to negotiate, nor does it mean that such modes of identity find adequate cultural expression, particularly in British society. What contribution does British-Asian dance music make to the re-negotiation of spaces in British popular culture (the dance floor, the music chart, the recording industry, music television, for example) that have been underpinned either by hegemonic whiteness, or by the antinomies of polemic racialized difference? If many of these musicians are self-consciously engaging with issues around 'race' and identity, then how and why does the music subvert modes of racism dangerously endemic in popular culture (yes, even in the middle class)? To address these questions, the rest of this paper signposts geographical engagements with, firstly, production and expression, and secondly, consumption and performativity. On both counts I aim to stress the importance of maintaining a degree of integrity to music as an art form.

Production and expression

In his book *Thinking in Jazz*, the musicologist Paul Berliner outlines the importance of considering the soundscapes of home and environ as crucial to the development of cultural definitions and expectations of music (1994, 22). Experiences of home, familiarity and strangeness, social activity and sociability are likened to a process of osmosis by which artists acquire an initial base of musical knowledge. Of jazz musicians in particular, Berliner writes '[t]here is in fact a lifetime of preparation and knowledge behind every idea that an improviser performs' (1994, 17). Regarding British-Asian dance music as expressive in similar ways allows us to refigure the spaces of culture and politics through music in much the same way as cultural and economic geographers have used commodity culture to explore British-Asian transnationality (see Crang *et al.* 2003).

Conceptualizing music as an art form evokes and politicizes the subjectivities behind it, bringing to the fore the experiences and connections that tie apparently disparate and incongruent fragments of noise together, and produce unique and complex rhythmic patterns. The album 'Anokha: Soundz of the Asian Underground', might usefully be reconsidered in this way. For example, in track no. 2, the frenetic dance song 'Flight IC408' by the State of Bengal, there are some structural and acoustic similarities between the tightly knit, synthesized, repeating pattern of syncopated and staccato beats that roll through the duration of the track, and the cyclically repeating drum, clap and rhythmic patterns that characterize North Indian classical music. Whilst musicological work has sought to trace the connections between Hindustani rhythmic structures and the cultures that produce them (see Clayton 1993), critical ethnomusicological enquiry accompanying this research has also productively asked whether music's boundless diversity lends itself to such strict rhythmic/cultural definition (Clayton 1997). 'Flight IC408's' sonic qualities are hard to pin down, hard to define according to predetermined musical or cultural languages. Instead, they evoke connections between here and there, the traces and echoes of this and that, in a piece of music whose repetitive rhythmic structure evokes a familiarity that unfurls before the listener. Flight IC408 is in fact a scheduled, daily Indian airlines flight from London to Calcutta, and in this sense it is worth asking what these cyclical rhythmic patterns express about travel, stretched affiliation and the diasporic experience of

shuttling to and fro. As one commentator has written, this song is about the meaning of the imaginary air-space-time that aeroplane traverses (Hsu 2003).

Of track no. 8, 'Heavy Intro', by Amar, Talvin Singh himself asks in the album's sleeve notes how this young vocalist manages so seamlessly to sing R&B vocal melodies in Hindi with 'the *internation* and attitude of Indian music' (my emphasis). Musicologically speaking, Singh's play on the word 'intonation' is important. Music theorists have long noted the inadequacy of the Western staff notation system for representing the array of sounds that can be produced on any one musical instrument (Cook 1998, 51–73). Amar's disposition to his voice, and his effortless use of a vocal tablature that slides continuously from one note through others such that there is no way of telling where notes start and begin, is technically characteristic of many different types of Indian music (Cook 1998; Clayton 1997). That this attitude permeates the R&B melodies Amar sings prompts the double meaning of Singh's clever use of the term 'internation'.

Importantly, paying attention to what musicians themselves have to say, both in print and performance, allows a movement beyond tired equations of these musical sensibilities as 'fusion' or 'hybrid', and instead to a reconceptualization of the music as expressive of new versions of whole-ness; new versions of British-ness, or versions of a new Britishness. Sounds evade fixity and easy definition, they are difficult to draw boundaries around and their semiotic properties are rarely grounded in predetermined structures of language or culture (Revill 2000, 605). Music is thus uniquely polysemic, transgressive because of its mobility (Said 1991; Revill 2000, 605–10). This also means re-acquainting ourselves as researchers with reviews and articles in the glossy 'style' magazines; the 'scene commentary' described by Hutnyk and Sharma as apolitical and anti-intellectual (2000, 56). It is in these publications that musicians contextualize their music:

He [Ustad Sultan Khan – Indian classical drummer] used to diss me for playing fusion music, but for me it was never fusion. These elements existed together for me and I don't separate them. (Talvin Singh quoted in Lawrence 1999, 23)

An approach conversant with musicological ways of understanding musicality, attention to the innovative and syncopated musical forms expressed in British-Asian dance music, facilitates insights into the ways that such subjectivities come into (sonic)

representation. These modes of representation, as Stuart Hall suggests, play a constitutive, not merely after-the-event role, in culture, identity and politics (Hall 1996b, 443). Of Amar's contribution to the Anokha album, for example, Talvin Singh goes on to say in his sleeve notes that 'Amar's got the ticket to take it overground', indicating that for this 'underground' there is a politics behind the struggle to make such expressions mainstream. This representational complexity allows us in turn to lock musicology back into geographical concerns about the spatialities of culture, identity and the place of music in reconstituting the nation-state:

Since the mid-eighteenth century classical genres have been defined by practitioners and musicologists as a transcendent language of individual self-expression, above concerns of economy, polity and society. Such a definition has its own historical geography, one linked to the rise of the nation-state and bourgeois society. (Leyshon *et al.* 1998b, 6)

As an art form music is inherently political, and recognition of such facilitates an appreciation of the subversive mutations that British-Asian dance music continues to generate as it seeps through and redefines the contours of British popular culture and the recording industry. The musicologist Gerry Farrell suggests that when South-Asian musical elements are transferred into Western [pop] music contexts they generate new meanings (1988, 191; 1997). British-Asian dance music also expresses new ethnicities and identities (and will continue to do so); expressions in which a generation of British-Asians may find cultural resonance.

The subtext to the thoughts outlined in this section is that in terms of production and expression, caution must be exercised when we raise concerns about the exoticizing tendencies of British-Asian dance music. For, as researchers where are we to draw lines between the appropriative elements of exotica, and geographical imaginations of an aesthetics of 'homeland' distant and different from daily inhabited territories? The Marxist critique of the trinketization of Asian Kool and the commodification of sanitized exotica must, I feel, be handled with care. It is, for example, with alarm that Kalra and Hutnyk regard 'the Beatles, the sitar/guitar and the unholy alliance with Ravi Shankar' (1998b, 341). Yes, Ravi Shankar did express concern about the rise of 'Indian pop' in the 1960s, describing it as 'a real hash, they made a real hash of it . . . and with their eyes, they all looked stoned' (*The Southbank*

Show). However, he and George Harrison remained close friends until Harrison's death. Shankar's 2002 album 'Chants of India' was in fact produced by Harrison. Friendship, of course, transgresses 'unholy alliances'. To demand more disciplined sonic representations of British-Asian politics and life is to run the risk of re-inscribing the bogey of authenticity, and perhaps even to cut against the grain of an Indian classical music tradition that as Gerry Farrell emphasizes 'relies for its continued existence on successive generations of musicians to give it fresh impetus and direction' (1988, 191). It is worth remembering that when Ravi Shankar – now a doyen of Indian classical music – started writing musical scores for Indian films in the 1960s, he was himself widely chastised in India for being the first of a serious group of classically trained musicians to enter the mainstream.

Consumption and performativity

There is a constant interplay among sound, discursivity, language, and representations thereof that takes place when human beings make and listen to music that must be considered with its own particularities in mind. I am taking *discursive* here to mean the kind of relationalities that can be established through various linguistic and nonlinguistic modes of human communication (principally speech, music, visual images, and bodily movement). (Monson 1996, 209)

When music enters the public realm, either via performance or by compressed media, new questions arise for the researcher. The bland empirical data regarding who is listening to British-Asian dance music, how often, where, why and through what media, promises to reveal invaluable and as yet neglected understandings of listening patterns. However, recent geographical engagements with the non-representational and performative are well positioned to do more, particularly to speculate on the new relational meanings generated by bodies that struggle to negotiate as yet unfamiliar sonic phenomena. Here, musicological interests in the myriad ways that musicians and listeners make use of music (Monson 1996, 210) are also of interest to geographers.

Consider Sheila Chandra's 1982 top ten hit 'Ever So Lonely' with the band 'Monsoon'. At a time when positive representations of Asians in the media were few and far between, not only was it remarkable that a top ten hit should emerge whose

vocals were sung over a classical Indian drone carried along by a sitar and tabla *raga*, all of which was augmented by a pop riff played on synthesizers and electric guitars. As Chandra herself remembers the song was remarkable for other reasons:

I mean the amazing thing about that record is that in the middle all the other synth instruments are pulled out and in the middle eight, people on the dance floor are essentially dancing to a classical *raga*, and they've got so used to the cross rhythms that that's what they're dancing to and they don't think twice about it. And that was the really subversive thing. (Sheila Chandra in *The Southbank Show*)

Certainly Sheila Chandra never regarded 'Ever So Lonely's' chart success as 'success' in itself. For her, the real success was the song's ability to get listeners dancing to what was essentially a basic Indian *raga*. If British-Asian dance music is able to renegotiate the colour-coded reifications that pervade British popular culture, then this type of dance is certainly a form of postmodern resistance: all the more canny because dancers are unaware of how their dance blurs boundaries, of how they dance to the tune of the snake charmer's un-namable pastiche. That Sheila Chandra's audience, and many of those at Talvin Singh's 'Anokha', may have been white and middle class only adds to the sweetness of that 'success'.

The ability to dance and for the body to pre-reflectively comprehend rhythm is intrinsically linked to the legibility and conventions of dance music. That listening to music is an aesthetic and bodily experience is an issue that Talvin Singh, for one, appears to be all too aware of:

'Club culture has moved on and in a way gone full circle to the point where a DJ and some psychedelic lighting just isn't sufficient. The idea of going into a room and dancing is dying' reflects Singh. 'People need a different type of nourishment. You listen to Tibetan Bowl music on CD and it's one thing. You hold the instrument in your hand and experience it and it's entirely different. I think people need that direct experience, whether its DJ'ing, or doing visual mixing with sound samples, people want to get into something and feel it . . .' (Lawrence 1999, 29)

Geographical scholarship on music has suggested the importance of acknowledging musical immediacy as a communicative and generative practice, wherein sounds appear to speak to us directly, cutting through formal and symbolic boundaries, and cultivating

their own immanent political geographies (Revill 2000, 605; Smith 2000). Despite these valuable insights, this aspect of direct musical experience and the legibility of rhythm are understudied in this context (for an exception, see Revill 2004). That the abstract sounds in this musical form can make the body on the dance floor stutter and hesitate in the face of uncharted rhythmic soundscapes also invokes elements of subversiveness worth exploring. What does it mean to not quite know how to dance to the rhythms and beats, to have to recast pre-reflective bodily knowledge and to actually have to think about a practice so characterized by spontaneity – dancing? This brings contemporary geographical debates around non-representational practices and performativity sharply into focus, as Catherine Nash stresses ‘even untrained dance is culturally learned and culturally located’ (2000; also see Thrift 1997). Pursuing these questions facilitates ways of re-thinking the relationships between determining social structures and personal agency, and more importantly it clears space for re-thinking the performance of contemporary British identities. One American journalist touches upon some of these issues in his descriptions of a scene at Singh’s ‘Anokha’:

The sound falls again to an ambient purr, and then the pace quickens sharply and ‘Decca’ turns dissonant and wild and contrapuntal. The percussive effects of a conventional drum kit joined with the sound of an Indian tabla . . . are mixed with the waaaaa of electronic keyboards as Singh compresses and expands and punctuates waves of sound. The groovers hesitate for a moment, waiting for a coherent beat, and then they begin to move and try to find a way to match their bodies to Singh’s abstract rhythms. He’s not giving them what they know: danceability and instant gratification. Instead he’s dissecting tempo, melody, syncopation – assumptions. (Lawson 1998, 101)

Dance, performativity and negotiation are research trajectories that shed light on the immanent ways that British-Asian dance music signifies a postcolonial cultural politics of identity and belonging. Listening, as Susan Smith asserts, is centripetal, it pulls you into the world (2000, 622). As the same journalist comments, ‘In this enveloping cocoon of Anokha, the outside world drifts from consciousness, and for a few hours the only point of reference becomes the reality imagined in the music’ (Lawson 1998, 102). Recent ethnomusicological and biomusicological engagements with the concept of ‘entrainment’ – itself borrowed from mathematics and the physical

sciences – are useful in this context as they have sought understandings of the ways that the embodied negotiation of rhythm links people by providing common frameworks of identification (Lomax 1982; Clayton *et al.* 2004).

Writing some six years ago, one can readily see that fragments from within the cocoon that the journalist quoted above speaks of now also cultivate the world outside. Past scholarship on musical subcultures suggest that music practices territorialize sub-cultural identity and produce actual and metaphorical gaps in hegemony, inside which there is productive consumption, experience, translocality and connection to elsewhere via sound, body and capital (Saldanha 2002, 34). Inevitably, as time proceeds, as capitalism subsumes difference, these gaps inside fold to the outside, the underground moves over-ground. For Talvin Singh, as we know, political potential is located in this struggle to turn hegemony inside out.

Conclusion

Geographical writing on music and sound is rich, diverse and growing. It is a fairly obvious point to say that geography is uniquely positioned within the social sciences to be able to contribute to research on some of the more geographical issues of concern to musicologists and ethnomusicologists; particularly those around musical practice, participation and the shaping of social spaces, networks and communities, and how musical aesthetics vary and mutate between and through regions and cultures. One of the challenges confronting the future of geographical research on music and sound, however, is to take up these research agendas in ways that remain sensitized to the realities of music making and musical practice. As I have suggested, approaches attuned to musicological and ethnomusicological expertise holds the potential for genuine insights into the spatial politics of music. This approach requires the marrying of more traditional social science research methodologies attuned to exploring what music (re)creates in and through the world, with the employment of an awareness and technical knowledge of what musical practice is. For social scientists with little or no musical or musicological training (such as myself), this requires the building of new research networks and collaborations.

In speculating on such methodological departures and research questions in a specific context, this paper has had to think through long-standing

concerns about contemporary British-Asian culture. Its prevalence is evident to anybody familiar with modern urban Britain, such that it is hard to not worry about the over-exuberant valorization of ancestries and epidermal difference that celebrates this trendy thing called 'Asian'. Some of the concurrent tensions of which Hutnyk and others warn seem relevant now more than ever. Satpal Ram is still in prison, so to speak. However, the complexity and generative messiness that geographical readings of British-Asian dance music evoke is heartening. For this messiness generates new meanings and new trajectories for understanding and bringing into (sonic) representation the polysemic routed spatialities and imaginaries that comprise this thing called British-ness.

Almost ten years ago now, Stuart Hall asked the question 'What is this "black" in black popular culture?' (1996a), at once refuting any sense that one had to be black *or* British, but instead giving voice to the identification of black *and* British *and*. . . . His question, as valid today as it was in 1996, still challenges on many fronts. Not least because it allows us to ask why, for example, do we need a BBC Asian network, or a West End musical called 'Bombay Dreams' to affirm a polyvalent, 'Asian' friendly sense of British-ness? The *and*, it seems, has been surreptitiously replaced by the *hyphen* and the gaps, the spaces in between, that it signifies in British popular culture. The thoughts outlined here argue for new modes of understanding British-Asian cultural production. The methodological departures that I have argued for offer ways of re-stitching the very fabric of British popular culture, of continually remapping the contours and disparate fragments that comprise what it means to be British, such that we can now productively ask why is this British 'British-Asian'?

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Notes

- 1 'British-Asian' is shorthand for British-born people whose ancestral roots lie within South Asia.
- 2 A report by Sir William MacPherson in 1999 identified 'institutionalized racism' that percolated through British society, particularly in the police and judicial system. The report was commissioned by the government following the failure of the courts to bring to justice the men who stabbed

Stephen Lawrence – a young black British teenager – to death in a racially aggravated assault in South London.

- 3 Arguments for the story of British-ness to be retold in less exclusionary terms were made in a seminal report on 'race' relations in Britain published in 1997 by the Runnymede Trust, a well-respected independent organization.
- 4 For more on the circumstances surrounding Satpal Ram's case, see ADF (nd).

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