Desperately Seeking an Identity: Diasporic Cinema and the Articulation of Transnational Kinship

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Desperately seeking an identity
Diasporic cinema and the articulation of transnational kinship

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ABSTRACT Not all constructions of home in the diaspora produce virulent forms of patriotism. Visual culture offers diasporic populations the opportunity to enable an identification with the homeland that emphasizes shared affiliations and identifications. Tapping into the warehouse of images offered by western and non-western popular culture, the diasporic imaginary builds a transnational community of sentiment forged through kinship networks and affective ties. Specifically, the article argues that these narratives deploy a diasporic optic, a sideways glance that looks constantly at two or more worlds and moves in different directions at once. The diasporic optic offers the possibility of negotiating identities across differences through the use of media images.

KEYWORDS feminine narratives Indo-Canadian films media

Many overseas Indian Hindus... finance religious groups in India in the belief that the funds will be used to build temples, and educate and feed the poor of their faith. Many would be appalled to know that some recipients of their money are out to destroy minorities (Christians as well as Muslims) and their places of worship. (Rekhi and Rowen, 2002: A26)

Over the last two decades, Indians residing in the West have been charged with fomenting virulent forms of nationalism in the subcontinent. In the
mid-1980s, Sikh nationalism found its financial well-spring in North America and the UK. More recently, diasporic identifications with India have fostered the rise of a religious nationalism identified as Hindutva. The epigraph refers to debates emerging among immigrant Indians about their role and complicity in re-imagining the Indian nation within a narrow religious idiom. Through a meticulous documentation of the money trail, scholars, politicians and corporate figures have pointed out the different ways in which non-resident Indians (NRI) – as immigrant Indians are categorized – have participated in a particular brand of aggressive hypermasculine nationalism. Can the diaspora facilitate only this form of nationalist imaginary, one where nostalgia for a mythical past is parsed in the present as a violent patriotism? Do cultural representations offer an alternative imaginary practice? The field of visual culture, I argue, makes possible another form of identification with the homeland. The transnational circuits of popular culture permit immigrants to construct a community of sentiment that is articulated in the domestic idiom, one that emphasizes kinship and affective relations based on shared affiliations and identifications. This alternative practice offers a useful way to conceptualize the longing for homeland in the diaspora, recognizing rather than dismissing the desire for home, and does not inevitably regress into chauvinism.

Anderson (1992), in a follow-up to Imagined Communities (1991), highlights a form of long-distance patriotism that immigrants tend to nurture. In an effort to sustain their ties with the homeland, diasporic populations use new communication technologies to participate in a long-distance politics, shaping policies in the homeland but maintaining the sanctity of their lives in the West. Anderson argues that participation in homeland politics is motivated by a nostalgic desire to recreate a lost home. This gesture is not innocent; it lacks accountability and is irresponsible and immoral, he contends. The recent debates on NRI-sponsored Hindu nationalism are emblematic of the investments that immigrant communities make in the political project of constituting a long-distance home. Such projects tend to focus on the political apparatus and state machinery, which I characterize as a masculine inscription of community. By examining the communities of sentiment that diasporic populations establish through the use of visual culture, I offer a feminine mode of enunciation as an alternative to Anderson’s singular model of long-distance nationalism. I am setting up a distinction between feminine and masculine idioms of imagining community for analytical purposes; the dichotomy helps bring into focus the differences between the two modalities. In practice, diasporic imaginations of home tend to share elements of the two enunciatory practices and should not be reduced to a biologically deterministic position. I discuss the technology of gender and how it relates to a gendered mode of enunciation later.

To underscore the ways in which the diasporic imaginary mobilizes visual culture to imagine community, I examine the ways in which individual...
women use the cinematic medium to imagine a community of sentiment forged through kinship networks and affective ties. Through an analysis of Desperately Seeking Helen (1998) and New View, New Eyes (1993), two films made by Canadians of South Asian origin, the article highlights the discourses of belonging, identity and citizenship that are characteristic of a visual diasporic imaginary. Through a scrutiny of their representational practices, I argue that a diasporic optic allows the films to explore the grammar and rhetoric of the interstice, the ways in which gendered subjects locate themselves and negotiate between multiple cultural affiliations, and articulate how the processes of dislocation, affiliation and displacement are thoroughly racialized and gendered. The transnational communities imagined in these films find their locus in private, domestic, intimate mediated spaces. Nevertheless, these films also reference the mainstream forms of long-distance nationalism associated with NRIs – Sikh nationalism and the Hindutva project – but use these moments to imagine communities based on affiliation. I have singled out cultural products produced by the Indian diaspora, however the concept of the diasporic optic as a technology of seeing can be used for other immigrant populations.

Since the term diaspora is central to this article, a clarification of my use of the term is necessary. Diasporas emerge out of migrations of collectivities. They are long-term, if not permanent, community formations. Although aspects of separation and dislocation tend to be highlighted, these new communities also signify hope and new beginnings.

Over the last decade, diaspora has become a terrain of scholarly contention (Brah, 1996; Fortier, 2000; Gilroy, 1991; Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996). Cultural critics have written extensively on the implications of theorizing diaspora, while others have contributed to the debates by focusing on transnational exchanges between dispersed populations. Some definitions of diaspora foreground the religious origins of dispersal or the social factors that lead to displacement, while others characterize it by examining the impact of border crossing on individual subjectivity. Cognisant of the dilemmas and conversations that characterize attempts to define its contours, I use diaspora as a term to identify late 20th-century transnational migrations; it denotes multilocation and border crossings. My use of the term refers to an historically-specific matrix of economic, political and cultural relationships that helps constitute transnational communities – imagined and encountered. Within the context of the Indian diaspora, this article deals only with the experiences of post-1960s immigrants, whom Mishra (2002) has identified as constituting the second-wave diaspora.2

The emerging body of scholarship on the South Asian diaspora in North America has underlined the manner in which this community practises a form of long-distance nationalism that coincides with the interests of religious Hindu fundamentalism. The long-distance nationalism I singled out in the opening section of the article exemplifies the structure of feeling
and cultural expression that Mathew and Prashad (2000) identify as Yankee Hindutva. These scholars and others have unravelled the specific modalities through which Indian immigrants in North America seek to sidestep the marginalized identities ascribed to their dark skin by highlighting their cultural and civilizational distinction (Srikanth, 1999). In a related project, others have undertaken the theoretical task of reconceptualizing community within the context of diaspora. Shukla (1999) uses the Indian experience in the US to underscore the revisions in understandings of the nation state and national identifications that are required. Indianness, she argues persuasively, is at once ‘a language of locality, of serving to articulate migrants’ place in American society, and of (inter-)nationality, to shore up their position in a particular nation (and materiality) of India’ (1999: 21). Within the diaspora, India emerges as a source and site of complex identifications.

These scholars highlight the economic threads that make India not just a distant imaginary, but a key player that ‘claims and acts upon its migrants’ cultural citizenship’ (1999: 21). This article contributes to this growing body of knowledge on diasporic formations. Through its focus on the ways in which South Asians in North America mobilize visual culture as a resource in laying claim to complex affiliations and tenuous identifications, it broadens the scope of issues and identifies the ways in which transnational media practices facilitate such longings and desires. I also argue that the gender identity assigned to the locus of enunciation (that is, female enunciatory practice) reveals a radically different sense of India than in male-authored practices. Following de Lauretis (1987), I characterize gender as the product and process of a number of social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses and practices of daily life. Gender is not the property of bodies, but a set of effects produced in bodies and social relations. Thus, the feminine mode of visualizing culture is not biological, but is the effect of technologies of seeing, institutional practices and social discourses. I argue that technologies of seeing crosscut and intersect with technologies of gender to help constitute a feminine diasporic mode of enunciation that not only visualizes India differently, but also the transnational female subject as one that straddles multiple cultural and national borders.

In the analysis that follows, I underscore the visual culture mobilized by the diasporic imaginary. This gesture is not meant to set up a radical break from the imagined community of print capitalism; rather, it acknowledges the shared lineage even as I highlight the singular features of this idiom of imagining community.

**Diasporic optic**

In this article, I contend that the transnational flows of visual media products enable people from the diaspora to articulate community as affect, as a
phenomenology of experience. Tapping into the warehouse of cultural images that western and Indian popular culture have on offer, the diasporic community has produced a visual grammar that seeks to capture the dislocation, disruption and ambivalence that characterizes their lives. I characterize this representational grammar as being made possible by a diasporic optic.

Marking the paradigmatic shift entailed by the technology of the camera, Benjamin (1968) has theorized that it made possible a new optic. The camera's ability to zoom in and out, to enlarge, the use of slow motion and other technical capabilities allow the viewer to see images that escape natural vision. This optic makes visible a new structural formation of the subject. I use this insight to forward a diasporic optic, a way of seeing that underscores the interstice, the spaces that are and fall between the cracks of the national and the transnational as well as other social formations. If the community imagined by the diaspora is transnational in scope and produces a subject position that lays claim to and negotiates between multiple affiliations, the diasporic optic seeks to reveal this desire for multiple homes through specific representational strategies.

To elucidate the specificity of the diasporic optic, it is necessary here to make a brief detour into the representational forms of nostalgia. In their analyses of nostalgia, Boym (2001) and Stewart (1984) provide compelling accounts of how the desire for a home that no longer exists or never existed results in specific narrative practices. Moving beyond the realm of literature, Boym contends that this longing is best captured in visual terms as 'a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life' (Boym, 2001: xiii–xiv). She proceeds, however, to distinguish between two forms of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home through a series of truth claims; visually, this sentiment is captured by forcing home and abroad, past and present, into a single frame, an image that cannot be sustained. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, explores ways of inhabiting many places at once; rather than seek a return to a pristine homeland, reflective nostalgia thrives on the longing itself. The diasporic communities constructed by the films I examine here are characterized primarily by a reflective nostalgia, although strains of restorative nostalgia inform the ways in which they imagine India. Visually, this desire to inhabit many places is captured as a sideways glance rather than as a backwards look. I contend that the diasporic optic captures visually this reflective nostalgia; it looks constantly at two or more different worlds and moves in two different directions at once. It enables a representational archive that is simultaneously familiar, alien, domestic, national and transnational. This formulation goes beyond a new way of seeing and underscores how the crosscutting forces of transnational capital and media produce subjects and publics that are no longer confined within the representational politics of a single geographic nation.
Rewriting home

Within the diasporic imaginary, home is a contested and emotionally fraught terrain. As a primary site of identification, the term resists the multiple affiliations and shared identities that are characteristic of the diasporic experience. I have described as a masculine mode of enunciation practices that produce home in the diaspora by superimposing images of home and abroad, past and present, on each other. It is a backwards nostalgic look. In the rest of the article, I set out to unravel how a feminine diasporic imaginary deploys the sideways look to reconstitute home, maintaining the fidelity of multiple sites of affiliation. This is a fleeting look that does not reside in one place, but in several locales simultaneously. I classify this visual practice as feminine because it uses the domestic idiom of relationships; it centres on the affect and desire to produce home as a tenuous fragile web of relations. I explore specifically how this feminine mode of enunciation visualizes the female body as a site where discourses of East/West, home/abroad, past/present are produced and contested. Rather than assert that the world is my home, the feminine diasporic imaginary produces multiple sites as home, virtually and simultaneously, asserting a community of shared affiliations and longings. Home as a perilously shifting terrain – a site of dislocation and sustenance, a source of identification and disavowal – is a leitmotif of the feminine diasporic narrative. Recurring displacement, loss and return are themes that are articulated through a range of devices which I enumerate below.

New View, New Eyes (hereafter referred to as New View) is produced by Gitanjali Saxena, an Indo-German Canadian. Mixing the genres of the ethnographic film and travel documentary, the film is propelled by Saxena’s desire to understand India and her multiply fragmented identity. Divided into nine unequal segments, the film tracks Saxena’s train journey through rural India, offers broad sweeps of Bombay’s urbanscape, documents her visit with her extended family and shows Canada as seen through Indian eyes. Lacking a traditional narrative, some of the segments in the film explore stereotypes of India that are prevalent in the West, and other segments reveal in counterpoint the India that Saxena encounters. Her voiceover narrative is the unifying thread in the nine segments, which are entitled Miss Givings, Miss Fortune, Miss Conceive, Miss Adventure, Miss Taken Identity, Guru Masala, Miss Place, Miss Behave and Miss Sing(h). The names draw attention to the specificity of Saxena’s female identity in India. To elucidate stereotypes prevalent in the West about India – the exotic, mystical spiritual land – Saxena includes comments from various Indo-Canadians like herself who are travelling through India as well as those of other western tourists. Significantly, the only onscreen voices we see and hear are those of Indians, who remain for the most part unnamed and untranslated. The film reveals how the India she visits confounds her
expectations, and Saxena emerges at the end of the film with a more nuanced understanding of her racialized identity in Canada as well as in India. She begins the film with the assertion that ‘Everything is possible in India’ and ends it with the statement ‘Everything is probable in India’. Framed by these two statements, the single word difference in them indicates the subjective distance that Saxena travels during her journey. The home she re-imagines is no longer isolated to India or Canada, but is one that belongs to neither and both.

Eisha Marjara's *Desperately Seeking Helen* (hereafter referred to as DSH) follows a more traditional narrative structure. It is an autobiographical coming-of-age story interspersed with Bollywood-style fantasy. According to Marjara, the film is about an aeroplane and her childhood (Sternbergh, 1998). The protagonist is a young Indo-Canadian who is in India to track down the Bollywood star Helen. As we follow Marjara in this quest, through a series of flashbacks that include home film footage and reconstructed scenes, the narrative explains why she seeks to find Helen.

Growing up in the only Sikh family in Trois Rivières, Québec, Marjara rejects Barbie, Charlie's Angels and her mother to opt for Helen as her role model. In Bollywood cinema during the 1960s and 1970s, Helen acquired cult status, playing the figure of the femme fatale in over 700 films. In contrast to the ideals of good Indian femininity, the figure of Helen was repeatedly cast in the role of the vamp. Her character was typecast in a narrow mould: licentious, westernized, overtly sexual, given to drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes and, above all, performing lewd staged performances dubbed as cabaret. Helen's figure and those of other Bollywood vamps represented 'the antithesis to the ideal woman's embodiment of chastity, by her demonstrations of uncontrolled female lust and wantonness. With names like “Rosie” or “Mary,” she was parodied as either an Anglo-Indian (a racial outcaste) or a member of India's Christian minority. A demi-mondaine, she was often a cabaret dancer operating in smoke-filled bars, night clubs, or similar “foreign” dens of vice . . . where clad in a tight-fitting western gown she performed audacious dances' and tried to lure the hero (Kasbekar, 2001: 299).

As an adult, Marjara returns to India to find Helen, her childhood idol. Interspersed with this narrative of her search for identity, the film documents her anorexia. An important subtext to the film is her mother’s death. In 1985, while her mother and younger sister embark on a holiday to India, Marjara is unable to join them because she has been hospitalized as an anorectic. The Air India plane in which they are travelling explodes over the Atlantic ocean, killing all on board. Canadian-based Sikh nationalists, seeking an independent state from India, blew up the plane.

In Bombay, the film takes us through various Bollywood studios as Marjara persists in her search for Helen. She dons Helen's blonde wigs, witnesses contemporary films being shot, the new vamp dances that have
emerged and also meets other vamp figures. M arjara meets people who have come into contact with Helen in some capacity. The star, however, remains elusive to M arjara. On the edges of the screen, however, the viewer is repeatedly shown a veiled M arjara slipping through scenes and representing the imaginative trope of Helen. The narrative concludes when M arjara stumbles into a famous Bombay park, which contains a concrete, scaled-down Air India plane. In this plane, M arjara watches her double figure of Helen meet her mother’s ghostly presence. So, while M arjara’s quest for the real Helen remains endlessly deferred, by the end of the narrative the fragments of her multiple identities are pieced together.

The two films exemplify the manner in which ‘ethnic’ identities are constituted by the transnational flows of peoples, which bring the presence of new subjects into the metropolitan space of the West. Both films clear the space to make interventions into issues concerning the politics of the gaze, the relations of looking and the ways in which desire mediates these ways of looking. They also map the desire to belong onto cultural terrain, but one that does not map easily onto any one nation state. Through the idiom of nostalgia, they narrate the politics of diasporic community formation.

In the analysis of the films, I highlight the visual and rhetorical devices used to articulate a diasporic identity. I also underscore their use of other popular cultural artifacts to produce subjects and publics that are no longer confined within the representational politics of a single geographic space. Throughout, I also underscore how the diasporic optic facilitates the inscription of a transnational community of sentiment, a transnational kinship.

**Politics of the gaze**

The diasporic optic elucidates the implicit knowledge frames through which we examine the world. By looking sideways at both Indian and western ways of knowing, the diasporic optic does not reify these categories as binaries, but rather illustrates how the transnational flows of peoples and ideas necessarily shape both structures. It offers a view that is both global and local and helps produce a zone in which diverse positions are inscribed within the same epistemological space (Mbembe, 1992). Visually, the diasporic optic juxtaposes images of India with those of the West, however it slides between these two spaces to reveal how the transnational subject is produced in and by both locations.

In *New View*, Saxena travels to India for the first time as an adult to renew ties with her paternal family. She uses her outsider status to use the materials offered by this trip for a critical ethnography, the manner in which western ways of seeing construct the subcontinent as a tourist site par excellence. Straddling the insider/outsider position, Indian and Canadian, the
film that Saxena has produced fits Pratt’s (1992) definition of autoethnography. The film begins with a voiceover in which Saxena proclaims that she will shun the stereotypical images and characterizations that are the hallmark of western records of India. As she documents her travels through rural and urban India, the film falls back on traditional narrative strategies only to re-imagine a different India.

In her analysis of colonial culture in Latin America, Pratt (1992) uses the term autoethnography to refer to instances when colonized subjects represented themselves in the idioms of the conquerors: ‘If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations’ (1992: 7). Pratt identifies autoethnography as a subversive form of inscription that consciously draws attention to the constructed nature of the master narrative. It is a deconstructive practice that comments on existing stereotypes and rewrites them.

These autoethnographic tendencies are best captured in the opening frames of the film where Saxena declares that her film will not show beggars, tea stalls, religious ceremonies, narrow alleys and crowded bazaars - images characteristic of most mainstream western documentations of India. On screen, these disavowed images appear in dramatically distorted forms, signalling the producer’s desire to deconstruct and rewrite existing representational practices. Canada, which would normally remain absent, is presented visually as a grey urban sprawl with large cars on snowbound roads and little pedestrian traffic. Saxena adopts idioms characteristic of the ethnographic film not only to interrogate them, but to radically re-envision them.

In an equally significant deconstruction of the relations of looking that dominate the practice of ethnography, Saxena examines Canada through Indian eyes immediately after the opening frames I have just described. Sitting in their opulent home in India, Saxena’s aunt and uncle recall the peculiarities of Canadian life. They discuss in detail the unique features of a superdiscount store in Toronto and the abundance of goods available for purchase. The Indian relatives distance themselves from the store and its customers, asserting that the bags of peanuts, walnuts and dried fruits were tempting because they were inexpensive. But they are not Canadians and cannot consume such large quantities of food, the two assert. The aunt and uncle also comment with great amusement on the ubiquity of dinosaurs in public spaces and their fetishization in the West. Through this unsettling move, which is repeated a few more times in the film, Indians who are normally allocated the space of the native in ethnographic narratives turn out to be the observers, while the West comes under scrutiny. Repeatedly, the film sets up stereotypes about India that predominate in the West against stereotypes that Indians have about the West. This technique serves to underscore the impossibility of maintaining an ‘authentic’ culture in an age
of transnational flows. Cultures are brought into contact with each other on a quotidian basis, and now metropolitan cultures receive the same scrutiny that once was reserved exclusively for the peripheries.

How does the presence of these different cultures within the same social space affect individual subjectivity? This question is the central focus of DSH, which does not foreground an opposition between the West and India, but rather underscores diasporic identity formation as a negotiation between cultures and epistemes. M arjara’s quest for an identity is shown repeatedly as being shaped by western and Indian influences. As a child, we see M arjara playing with her Barbies beneath the dining table, setting up house for them and imagining herself as Barbie. In the background, her mother narrates the elements that are essential to Indian ideals of femininity: chastity, loyalty and service to the family. Similarly, even as M arjara narrates her mother’s difficult transition to Canada – her inability to find an instructor’s position and still maintain a pristine Indian home or her fear of driving on snowbound roads – on screen, the young M arjara is shown watching episodes of Charlie’s Angels. Barbie and Helen, Charlie’s Angels and her mother: these are the different models of femininity that the Indo-Canadian child simultaneously identifies with and disavows. The seemingly incommensurable sets of visuals encapsulate the multiple routes and roots of cultural identity that are central to diasporic identity formation (Gilroy, 1991). The images also highlight the emotional and cognitive costs of immigration and displacement, which are significantly different for M arjara and her mother. Through a personalized and intimate view, DSH traces the multiple cultural forces and transnational affiliations that come to bear on diasporic identity formation.

Saxena, on the other hand, repeatedly foregrounds the politicized terrain from within which her filmic practice emerges. New View illustrates forcefully how ‘orientalist’ images of India in North America travel back to the subcontinent and shape the ties that diasporic Indians seek to form with Indians. In several segments, she solicits comments from Western tourists about their expectations and experiences of India. Listening to remarks about the spiritual peace and harmony that Westerners experience in India, Saxena comments that the India she encounters is at odds with these experiences. She shares stories of sickness, food poisoning and other travel details with the Westerners and finds that she ‘feels at home’ in their company, yet she also finds that she relates to the carnival of colours that India represents quite differently. To her, India is an unsettling experience rather than one of harmony; ‘Once there was a girl, who went all the way to India; To find herself. When she arrived she was surprised to find; That there was no one there’, she declares. Through such assertions and the contrasts between the India that Saxena encounters and the India of her fellow travellers, New View visually produces a rhetoric of the interstice. It repeatedly reveals how the global and the local intersect and crosscut.
New View also returns insistently to the politics of enunciation: who can speak for whom and how; who can be represented and who can represent themselves; when they can speak; whose language needs to be translated; what space is available for the articulation of subordinated knowledges, and so on. Throughout the film, Saxena refuses to translate Indians who do not speak English. Repeatedly, the observations made by Indo-Canadians and western tourists are juxtaposed with the comments of roadside vendors who make their living by selling their wares to tourists. While the westerners’ stereotypical and romantic expectations of India are jarringly audible, the rural Indians’ perceptions of the tourists remain untranslated. Most viewers of the film do not understand the contempt and disdain the rural vendors feel for tourists and the prices they are willing to pay for baubles. Instead, the rural Indian remains inscrutable and visually exotic. The refusal to translate in this and other instances heightens the opacity of difference. It also underscores the ways in which sedimented knowledges and colonial histories continue to shape contemporary lives in the West and India.

Visualizing identity

Like most diasporic narratives, both films explore issues of belonging and unbelonging, manifest as feelings of affiliation and estrangement. By exposing the range of influences that shape their identity, the films illustrate the manner in which diasporic subjects expand the scope of community. Diasporic communities facilitate a definition of cultural nation that is elastic and can be expanded seemingly endlessly to include all those who share a cultural affiliation. The transnational subject is one who shares affiliations across national and cultural borders. Home also becomes a site that is no longer limited to the geographic space of a single nation state.

In his exegesis on diasporas, Clifford (1994) specifies that the phenomenon compels an examination of how ‘there’, as a site of solidarity and connection, is articulated ‘here’. DSH and New View underscore that diaspora and diasporic identities emerge at the surface of the interactions between global and local networks. The images of India produced in these films are shaped by and respond to conditions ‘here’ in the diaspora. New View articulates the sense of alienation that the Indo-Canadian experiences from the India in which she is travelling. The narrator looks Indian, has an Indian name, but does not speak any Indian language and thus cannot communicate with those around her. On her train journeys, other passengers are curious about her and speculate in Hindi among themselves over why a single woman would travel by herself. Even though she senses some of these questions, Saxena can only remain mute. Her inability to communicate prevails even with the extended family she visits. New View reveals the domestic sphere within which her female relatives’ lives are...
circumscribed – a sharp contrast to her freedom to travel alone. Nevertheless, the film also reveals the power the women wield within the family as decision makers. Lacking a common language, Saxena is unable to forge ties with her paternal family, the express purpose for her visit.

By the end of the film, although unable to identify fully with fellow tourists or her extended family, she finally meets an Indian woman in New Delhi with whom she feels instantly comfortable sharing pizza and mutton curry. Although she has finally found a kindred spirit, Saxena is no longer interested in asking the questions about India that she had set out to explore in the film. Instead, she contrasts the comfort she feels with this Indian stranger with the racial amnesia that her Canadian friends practise. The hope signified by her newfound cross-continental friendship is captured on screen through a tight close-up of a young Indian girl reciting a rhyme in English. Community is both deterritorialized and reterritorialized across cultural and national borders. Although Canadian and Indian landscapes, worldviews and ways of seeing appear radically incommensurable, the film repeatedly reveals that they are contaminated by each other and the flows of people across continents. Through these juxtapositions, New View makes possible a transnational affective community of shared longings.

In her provocative analysis of diasporas, Brah (1996) distinguishes the desire for home from homing desire. The latter, she argues, is the desire to feel at home by physically or symbolically remembering places as habitual spaces that provide some ontological security. In her study of the Italian immigrant community in London, Fortier (2000) utilizes this concept to understand the ways in which it facilitates the creation of a sense of place, a structure of feeling that is local in its materialization, while its symbolic reach is multilocal. For Saxena, as I have just illustrated, geography no longer plays an important role in forming affiliations. The community she embraces in the film expands to include all those with whom she shares a cultural vocabulary, including western tourists and her extended family. The different Indias that each of them inhabits serve as the foundation for the transnational affective community she brings into being.

The complex threads that forge affective communities across geographic spaces are evoked in DSH in a more poignant manner. Marjara refuses unequivocally to align herself with any one culture, and the film reveals her ability to form affiliations with both Canadian and Indian cultures. As she traipses through the streets of Bombay and landmark Bollywood sites in her quest for identity, the film reveals the ways in which a diasporic identity is forged through multiple identifications.

DSH underscores the material effects of multiple identifications. As an adolescent, as previously mentioned, Marjara suffers from anorexia and is hospitalized. While the filmmaker refuses causal connections, clips juxtaposing her younger self playing with Barbies and watching Charlie’s Angels with her hospital photographs suggest that an anorectic self is the route to
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white femininity available to her. The film also highlights Marjara's ambivalences towards her mother, who was a college instructor in India, but was forced to opt to be a homemaker in her new world. References to the mother evocatively and painfully capture the manner in which Indian immigrants' horizons are shaped by racialized discourses. The mother repeatedly presents herself as a negative role model: 'don't grow up like me', she urges her daughter. Within such a matrix of interwoven possibilities, Marjara turns to the Bollywood icon Helen as a key site of identification.

Her selection of Helen merits some discussion. As I have already elucidated, Helen is the archetypal vamp of Hindi cinema. DSH's reference to Helen as a signature character from 1960s and 1970s Bollywood makes the film particularly salient to first generation immigrants. Helen was very popular with this generation of cinema viewers and was often referred to as the 'H-bomb with the H for Helen'. For many immigrants, watching 'Indian films permits the community in diaspora to maintain a contact with India that is no longer a geographical territory for them' (Kabir, 2002: 94), and we find that Marjara's family is no different. Indeed, for Marjara, Helen becomes the contact zone through which she is able to negotiate between ideals of Indian and western femininities.

Within Bollywood grammar, Helen epitomizes the non-Indian woman, the racial other. Although the antithesis of Indian femininity, the vamp's role is often more of an equal to the hero than the heroine. The vamp's role is also feminine in that she is present on screen to evoke desire and be the sex object. Dressed in campy feather boas, elbow-length gloves and fishnet stockings, the figure of Helen represents the rebel who does not seek social acceptance. Marjara's selection of Helen as a role model is thus not whimsical, but reflects the complicated ways in which messages about ideal femininity are altered in the transnational circuit of images.

While Marjara might have consciously dismissed Barbie and her mother as possible role models, they continue to play an important role in her adult life. In particular, her adolescent anorexia gains salience and shows the implacable ways in which the subtexts of ideal white and Indian femininity intersect in Marjara's identity formation. The film ends when Marjara discovers in the concrete Air India plane that her quest for the icon has to be endlessly deferred; the desire reflected through and in the imaginative trope of Helen can survive only a long-distance relationship. The grounded plane nevertheless becomes the site where the binaries of Indian femininity available to her, the mother and Helen briefly come into contact.

Helen also allows Marjara to identify with other Indians, including the taxi driver who transports her from the airport to her hotel. He and other Indians regale Marjara with their memories of films starring Helen. The figure of the vamp becomes for Marjara not only a source of personal identification, but one through whom she is able to form a community of experience with a range of Indians.
DSH reflects how the transnational circulation of Bollywood films provides Indians in the diaspora with a specific image of India which, in turn, shapes the ways in which the diasporic subject imagines home and homeland. Affiliative ties are no longer experienced merely as shared geographical and experiential realities, but also become part of an endless loop of images shaping ideas of the diaspora and the home, the collective perception. The affective communities that the diaspora re-imagine are not unanchored in locality, but rather are powerfully shaped by the transnational circuits of media, capital and politics.

Gilroy (1991) contends that the key operating principles within the cultural practices of diasporic identity formation are social remembrance and commemoration. Working from within such a conceptualization, I envisage media images of India and Indians as central to the ways in which diasporic subjects mobilize memory. The diasporic optic underscores the manner in which media images and popular cultural icons provide the access routes for the imaginative formation of a community of sentiment.

In New View, Saxena emphasizes through numerous strategies how her journey of self-discovery is located within globally circulating narrative traditions about India and Indians. In a segment entitled Guru Masala, Saxena highlights the western fascination with India as a mystical and exotic locale. As a white Hare Krishna devotee waxes eloquently on the charms of 'eternal India', a series of images are shown on screen of temple sculptures, elephants, erotic carvings and other representations characteristic of the tourist heritage industry. On these images are superimposed a recipe that unfolds slowly: ‘1 searching westerner; 2–3 mantras; 6 sexual positions; smoke of incense; promises, promises; stories of inspiration; holy water; combine the above ingredients to taste and shake vigorously; If practiced daily, it is guaranteed [sic].’ While the viewer never gets to find out the results that this recipe is guaranteed to produce, the segment is juxtaposed with another India where young men express with religious fervour their desire to restore Hindu suzerainty over the land. They speak in Hindi and assert the merits of a nation reconstituted within a religious idiom. The incongruity of these sets of images reveals how Saxena does not belong to the Indias envisaged either by the western tourist or the resident Indians: ‘I speak in spurts and starts; That is where my story exists; In the cracks of the world’, Saxena declares.

Both narratives embed different kinds of desire for belonging and definitions of home. As I have just shown, Marjara’s narrative offers a community of sentiment that is forged through a collective archive of media images. DSH simultaneously registers the variety of long-distance nationalism that Anderson (1992) deplores as irresponsible. The desire for a Sikh homeland and the results of such nationalist longing come to reside in the story of Marjara’s family. The Québécois separatism that remains subterranean throughout the film, on the other hand, registers the form of
metropolitan nationalism that Anderson traces. As an immigrant in Canada, Marjara finds herself thus positioned both outside and inside within multiple sets of national identities, not just those of Canada and India. DSH and New View do not ignore the mainstream reconstruction of a mythical homeland, but instead repeatedly turn their attention away from such a definition to constitute a more tenuous and elusive home based on affect and experience.

DSH maps the multiple forces and vectors that are constitutive of diasporic identity, one that is constantly in flux. Marjara does not offer a simple logic of affiliation with Indian culture or with Canadian culture. Oscillating between the two cultures and the icons of femininity they have on offer, Marjara neither endorses nor rejects either, but seeks partial affiliations with them. At the same time, Marjara as diasporic subject firmly rejects the position of native informant or representative that is often conferred upon immigrants.

Through her autobiographical narrative, structured by nationalist claims and narratives of belonging, Marjara points out unequivocally that she cannot represent anyone but herself. This refusal to function as a native informant provides the transformative charge of the film. DSH does not promote an anthropological gaze that distances and renders the immigrant an object of a knowledge exercise.

The autobiographical frame for this fantasy carries the weight of memory and allows Marjara to situate herself within the narrative. Brah (1996) points out that the technologies of autobiographics help expose the contradictions embodied in the production of identity. The autobiographical mode functions as ‘a disruptive device’ revealing the narrative as an interpretive retelling, vulnerable to challenge. Through its strategic use of icons from ‘Indian’ and North American cultural warehouses, DSH forces us to think about how these devices facilitate a collective archive, linking subjective and collective memories. New View and DSH evocatively reveal the centrality of media products in contemporary imaginations of community.

**Masala remix**

In this section, I underscore the irritated position, the unstable terrain, from within which the diasporic optic emerges. In particular, I elucidate how the transnational circulation of cultural products not only produces an endless feedback loop, but also how the visuality of film makes possible an alternative articulation of community.

DSH, in particular, underscores this strategy. Through the use of a series of media icons, the film reveals how transnational popular culture – the desires and identifications it produces – allows diasporic subjects to opt for a mix-and-match of role models from different cultures. The narrative does
not present an either/or choice and instead permits a conjunctive narrative, one that foregrounds the identifications and affiliations that are made possible through transnational media culture.

DSH traces a young Indo-Canadian’s desire to find a cultural space to anchor her multilocational, multicultural identity. The ubiquitous figure of the Barbie doll offers one route to femininity to Marjara. Black-and-white home film footage shows her enacting elaborate make-believe games with her collection of Barbies. In the film’s economy, Barbie offers the path to assimilation and an identity modeled on white western notions of femininity. Similarly, the protagonists of Charlie’s Angels, the television programme that Marjara grows up watching, offer her an identical western-centred female identity. No other Canadian or North American female figure is offered as a possible role model. In sharp contrast, the Hindi films that the family watches on home video offer her the possibility of forming affiliations with Indian ideas of femininity. From these images, Marjara opts for the figure of Helen. A third possibility, and the only non-media figure available to her, is that of her mother. Saxena articulates a similar set of concerns about the limited repertoire of cultural images, but in a more direct manner. As her narrative oscillates between Canada and India, the camerawork registers the two countries through visual stereotypes. The film reveals an urban, snow-burdened, grey-toned and orderly Canada, while India emerges as a dazzling whirlwind of colours and activities. However, New View also dismantles the stereotypes underpinning these visual postcards through the use of voiceovers and other aural devices such as doubling the sound, the use of echoes or producing a time lag between the visual and the verbal texts.

Visually, New View reveals India to us principally through the visible frame of a train window, drawing attention to the situated and partial nature of the knowledge made available. In addition, the producer uses a number of cinematic devices, such as slowing down or speeding up the film, the use of blurred edges and the abundant use of soft focus, to further denaturalize India. These and other strategies call into question the politics of representation, the visual grammar we have available to image alien cultures.

Marjara’s DSH, on the other hand, foregrounds the slippery terrain of media images from within which individual identifications are produced. The Helen that Marjara seeks and the Indian sense of belonging that she craves do not represent a nostalgia that can be characterized as melancholia or hypochondria of the heart. Neither do they represent a homesickness for a home that never existed. Marjara formulates a nostalgia that dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging. It does not seek to restore a simpler time when the narrator could opt for a particular brand of gender identity by her choice of toys, whether she imitated Barbie or Helen. The film and the brand of nostalgia it enables represent moving in
two directions at once. Marjara thus creates in the film a reflective nostalgia that permits the formation of a creative self rather than one that rebuilds a homeland with muscular determination.

Transnationally-shared images become the medium through which these films register tenuous webs of affiliation. The visual terrain from within which the narratives emerge circulates across national borders in an endless loop, facilitating a community of shared recognition. The diasporic optic makes available an India that is not so much a motherland or a site for cultural reproduction as it is an ambivalent location from which to articulate fissiparous identities. The diasporic optic of the films underlines the transnational subject’s inability to relate entirely to both Indian and North American cultures. Yet, rather than assert the need for one particular set of affiliations, the shared language of media culture permits the films to effect an unstable reconciliation across differences.

The diasporic optic maps the desire to belong onto cultural terrain, but this does not map easily onto any one nation state. The journey to India affirms the tenuousness of the transnational female subject’s identity as neither Indian nor Canadian, but one that straddles cultures and seeks multiple affiliations and identifications. It is always contextually developed and remains unstable. The sideways glance characteristic of the diasporic optic reveals eloquently how an affiliation to multiple locations forces not only a deterritorialized identity, but also effects a problematic politics of contested loyalties and shared heritages.

The diasporic optic simultaneously permits a shared visual language of cultural agency. It reveals the ways in which visual culture is mobilized to signify a shared epistemological space made possible by popular culture. DSH and New View deploy a recognizable and fluid repertoire of popular culture images through which the fragmented identity of the transnational female subject is articulated. They integrate in their narratives popular representations of India and the limited visual repertoire available to inscribe diasporic identity within such a confining visual grammar. Consequently, the films include a number of deliberate devices and cinematic strategies to reveal the relational nature of identities and the provisional nature of such narratives. The diasporic optic of the films underscores as well the modalities through which woman’s body becomes the contact zone, where Indian ideas about North America and Canadian ideas about India come to reside (Ahmed, 2000).

Speaking from the margins and of the margins, these films force a recognition that one cannot think of the nation exclusively from within the bounds of a geographic space; one must acknowledge the ways in which the master narrative of nation is rewritten by and from the margins. If we were to characterize Anderson’s robust, to-die-for nationalism as a metropolitan form, one that originates in the West and promotes an historicism characteristic of Enlightenment rationality, the fragile and tenuous
communities facilitated by diasporic populations in the West could be defined as promoting an affective community.

The two films require us to rethink our conceptualizations of nation and the diaspora, how the crosscurrents that flow through and across these terrains help re-imagine India and the diaspora. Furthermore, they emphasize how an enunciative modality that is gendered as feminine helps decentre the rhetoric that is associated with metropolitan forms of imagining community.

Bridging cultures

In the two films I have explored here, the narrators look sideways constantly, moving in two different directions at once, as they seek to articulate the complexity of their diasporic identity. They offer disconcerting juxtapositions of Canadian and Indian cultures, practices and mores. This narrative strategy enables the films to foreground issues of migrancy, the politics of enunciation, the poignancy of displacement and the politics of the gaze.

The transnational female subject resists the dominant assimilationist narrative, the liberal argument of inclusive national identity that would position these women permanently in the margins. Instead, she foregrounds simultaneous identifications with India and North America. The diasporic identities she carves out respond to the specificity of the racialized discourses that govern her quotidian existence in Canada.

The films register a new way of looking and forward a rhetoric of the interstice. DSH and New View articulate a way of seeing that represents a constant negotiation between the anthropological and the autobiographical gazes. Anthropological discourse is distancing; according to Kumar (2000), it imposes on the diasporic subject the flat weight of being an object of a knowledge exercise. She is always the native informant and powerless to change the narrative. The autobiographical discourse, however, is self-transformative because it enables the narrators to situate themselves in the narrative. Through the use of autobiographical elements, the films help foreground how women as gendered subjects negotiate and participate in transnational discourses enabled by the flows of global capital. They reveal as well how women who occupy the margins can use their locations productively to interrogate metropolitan languages of identity, nationality and citizenship.

Rejecting the global versus local binary, the films are also able to formulate a rhetoric of the interstice. They repeatedly reveal the multiple ways in which the global is embedded within the local. They problematize the terms ‘India’ and ‘the West’, presenting them not as oppositional categories, but as entities that have to be understood in relational terms. In charting the
geographies of experience, they cross numerous cultural borders. They reveal not just the differences between the East and the West, but also those within the East. They are thus able to underscore the nearness and intimacy of difference.

From within the diasporic optic, India is a malleable sign that allows the narrators to articulate an identity that accommodates and simultaneously distances the concerns of North American multicultural politics. In these narratives of belonging, popular cultural products emerge as the locus for the maintenance and constitution of a shared identity. The films reconceptualize belonging with India and Canada through the strategic consumption of media products; diasporic identities, they reveal, are interpolated within a global economy of mediated signs. They use media products as circuits for the formation of imagined communities - media forms that themselves attest to the migrations and movement of peoples and their ideas. The terrain from which community is abstracted grows beyond the geographic space of the nation, the diasporic optic avers. Such an expanded terrain reveals the manner in which immigrant experiences straddle a multiplicity of cultural and national borders. Simultaneously, the films evoke poignantly how diasporic women oscillate between subject and object positions: exoticized, romanticized, reviled and denigrated.

The imaginary and affective space made possible by the transnational flows of media products helps re-imagine community. The narratives elicit a feminine nationalism: speaking from the margins of Canadian and Indian societies, they inscribe community as networks of family, kin and friendship. Belongingness, they attest, is rooted not in grand narratives, but in the mundane practices of everyday life. The imagined community conceptualized here is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life. Home is about the lived experience of a locality and not some mythical dream. The diasporic optic of the films promotes an aesthetics of estrangement and longing. Highlighting an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, they seek a relationship between individual biography and the histories of multiple nations.

The sideways glance of the diasporic optic highlights the inability to perfectly translate all cultures. Although some aspects remain untranslatable, the diasporic optic reveals that these differences are not insurmountable. The sideways glance offers the possibility of negotiating identities across differences rather than dwelling on them. It underscores the shared meanings and symbolic codes that help constitute a long-distance community of sentiment.

The diasporic identities that the transnational female subject forges point out the central role that media images play in producing a shared terrain, a common terrain of experience. The diasporic optic reveals the effect that sedimentation and iteration provide, how individual identities, in India and in Canada, are constantly being reconstituted, always already becoming.
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Notes

1 Anderson (1992) isolates the logic of capitalism (and the media economy) as responsible for contemporary forms of long-distance nationalism:

Characteristic of our time is the famous photograph of a miserable Peloponnesian gastarbeiter sitting in his dingy little room in - perhaps Stuttgart? His grandfather in Baltimore would have had as humble decorations sepia prints of his deceased parents, left behind in Peloponnesian graves. . . . But he himself has on the wall a handsome Lufthansa travel poster of the Parthenon, with a German-language subscription inviting him to take a ‘sunny holiday’ in Greece. It is his choice not Lufthansa’s. The Parthenon which he may well never have seen before with his own eyes, is not a private family memory, but a mass-produced sign for a ‘Greek identity’ which only Stuttgart had encouraged him to assume. (1992: 8–9)

2 Mishra (2002) identifies two waves of South Asian migration that coincided with two distinct moments in the history of capital. The first moment of classic capitalism produced the movement of indentured labour to the colonies (South Africa, Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana) for the production of sugar, rubber and tin for the growing British and European markets. This he designates as the old Indian diaspora of plantation labour. The second moment of late modern capital is characterized by the movement of economic migrants into the metropolitan centres of the former empire and the New World.

3 Rajagopal (2000) cautions us against making the assumption that nationalist expression abroad is coterminous or continuous with that at home. The current scholarship on diasporic Hindu nationalism indicates that this brand is significantly different from the indigenous variety, but informs and is informed by the version predominant in India.

4 In 1990s India, anecdotal evidence points out that Helen has acquired the status of a key camp figure in gay subculture.

5 The destruction of this aeroplane also plays a central role in Srinivas Krishna’s Masala. In the Indo-Canadian immigrant imaginary, this event is a defining moment.

6 Helen Richardson, the actress whose screen name is Helen, is of Spanish and Burmese origin. Her racial otherness in the films is signified through more overt markers of alterity: hair, dress, name and behaviour.
References


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