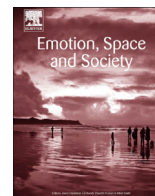




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Making space for India in post-apartheid South Africa: Narrating diasporic subjectivities through classical song and dance

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ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

1. Introduction

On the 9th of May 1993 after a gap of over four decades, diplomatic relations between India and South Africa were formally restored. Since then, the gradual transnational (re)materialisations of South African Indian¹ life have arisen out of intersecting sets of commitments to develop closer ties with India. These include new desires of the Indian government to engage people of Indian origin in South Africa as part of its overseas diaspora strategy, the growing

role of South African Indian diaspora entrepreneurship, and the increasing influence of Indian and South African Bollywood promoters and film producers (Dickinson and Bailey, 2007; Ebrahim, 2008; Munjal et al., 2013). Amidst these activities, various South African Indian conservative religious and cultural associations, formed during the apartheid-era system of separate development, are developing closer ties with India through transnational circulations of classical Indian performers, dancers and musicians. The term 'South African Indian' expresses a positionality that is constituted through a multiplicity of competing identifications, and expressed and negotiated in a diverse range of interconnected transnational spaces (Landy et al., 2004). Yet, as Hansen (2005) has argued, diaspora associations draw upon classical Indian music and dance to negotiate, order and control the boundaries and expressions of Indian diasporic identities, contributing to new contestations and dilemmas surrounding South African Indian ethnic, national and gender politics (see also Ganesh, 2010; Radhakrishnan, 2005; Ramsamy, 2007; Rastogi, 2008; Vahed and Desai, 2010).

In addition to being locations for negotiations over categorical politics, South African Indian classical performances are also sites of affective and embodied experiences. The quote at the start of this paper is taken from a description of a performance by an Indian

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

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

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

In the next section of the article I will describe briefly previous approaches to diaspora associations, before outlining debates that have considered the relationship between affect and migration in the production of mobile subjectivities. Following an overview of research into South African Indian transnationalities, the discussion in the first half of the analysis draws attention to how organising actor's subjectivities emerge from and choreograph the materialities of classical Indian performance spaces. Of specific interest are the matters and forces that contribute towards the making of perceived bonds between organisers, audiences and performers. The paper then adds a further layer to questions of complex subjectivities by discussing the overlaps between classical performance sites and the broader array of transnational sites through which ideas of India are produced and negotiated, focussing specifically on Bollywood. Of interest are the points of tension and accord between Bollywood and classical Indian performances, and the subjectivities that emerge in their

negotiations. In doing so, the paper hopes to raise some questions for future scholars of diaspora associations to engage with and mark new directions for study.

2. Theorising diasporic associational life

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

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

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

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

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