#BrownGirlTakeover: Representing Queer Desi Female Artists in Virtual Spaces

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Middletown, Connecticut

May 2019
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude for the support and guidance to the following individuals in no particular order: Kate Galloway, Su Zheng, Balraj Balasubrahmanian, Debra Shore, Sandra Brough, Paula Matthusen, David Nelson, Hari Krishnan, Roger Matthew Grant, Eric Charry, Malinder Tooray, Bianca Maieli, Swathi Jaisankar, Aarthy Sundar, my dear friend Sumati, Aditi, and Suhail Yusuf Khan. In addition, I would like take this opportunity to bring attention to my mentors, Saskia C. Kersenboom, Julie Searles, and Matthew H. Allen, for their encouragement and influence that has shaped my work and myself as a scholar, along with the love and emotional support from my partner, Justin, my mother and grandfather, along with the rest of my family and close friends.
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INTRODUCTION

“I don’t know where you’re getting it from...you’re acquiring things from the Internet.” posted one user when describing her father’s reaction to her ‘coming out’ as bisexual (see Figure B1 in Appendix B). Another user posted a similar reaction on the online forum, Empty Closets, under the chat room called ‘Indian lesbians’; to which she explains that as a first-generation Indian-American, her parents “didn’t even know gays existed” until they moved to the United States (Figure 0.1). Similar sentiments continued to flood the forum by other users, expressing a sense of invisibility and bewilderment of each other’s existence.

This thesis examines the multifaceted representation of the queer Indian-American female identity in the performing arts and the way in which the Internet and use of social media have challenged both - the lack of visibility and presumed

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1 All images are my own unless otherwise mentioned.
2 For all images referenced but are not included in the text, please refer to Appendix B.
perceptions of queer desi\textsuperscript{3} female artists of color within mainstream music and the performing arts. Presented in the form of three case studies, the objective of my thesis is to examine issues regarding race, representation, identity, diasporic communities, and sexuality, and the ways in which social media and other online platforms provide the tools for fostering a music culture. How does the reciprocity of social media and other digital platforms, both challenge and shape the identity of queer Indian-American female artists in music and dance? How do these artists in particular, negotiate any public ‘pushback’ and/or challenges faced due to their sexual orientation?

**Fieldwork and Methodology**

In January of 2016, I found myself back in the small village of Thirupugalur in Tamil Nadu, India, to complete a bharatanatyam workshop. During my 5-week stay, notions about homosexuality and queerness were casually discussed between myself and the other dancers. However, I found myself in a male-oriented discussion about life as a gay male in India and the diaspora, leaving me me to wonder – where is the representation of queer Indian females? Over the course of two years (2017-2019), I continued to dwell on this question as it shaped the focus of this thesis, and in turn, I have collected an abundance of materials in order to support and inform this body of research. The data collected includes interviews over Skype, e-mail,

\textsuperscript{3} A term used to popularly amongst South Asian Americans; refer to a person from South Asia. For further discussion, see Chapter 1.
telephone, and in-person, with the artists covered in the following chapters (DJ Bianca Maieli, M-Tooray, IndianRaga), along with personal accounts from students and other individuals who identify as part of the Indian-American or ‘desi’ community. By employing a digital-ethnographic approach through what Gayathri Gopinath calls a queer diasporic lens, I have also acquired an abundance of personal photographs and videos from my time in South India, along with digital screenshots, user comments, and online posts from the artists and organization discussed in the following chapters, in addition to my fieldwork on various LGBTQIA online message boards dedicated to Indian and Indian-American queer women such as Empty Closets, LGBT Chat, and Quora, among others. According to Gopinath, adopting such approach allows one to uncover the “ways in which the diaspora shores up the gender and sexual ideologies of dominant nationalism on the one hand, and processes of globalization on the other” (Gopinath 2005: 10). As cited by René Lysloff, scholar Michael Frishkopf argues that implementing a digital framework as the foreground to study music communities provides, to a certain extent, an environment that is under the researcher’s control, and mobilizes access to materials and individuals within the community of said focus, outside of the conventional method of “physical displacement” (Lysloff 2003: 236). Furthermore, “the Internet provides a new materiality through which social interaction and group formation can take place and from which new possibilities for subjectivity and group identity can emerge” (Lysloff 2003: 236).
Literature Review:

Views on homosexuality and the broader LGBTQIA community have radically shifted the socio-political structure of American society within the last twenty to thirty years. With the repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) policy in 2011, the federal legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, and even the growing consciousness and integration of non-binary gender pronouns, the increase in visibility of sexual minorities has carried over into the scholarship of queer musicology and ethnomusicology. This socio-political shift has informed the way in which both disciplines analyze and approach queer music culture within the most recent years (2013 to 2018), by establishing a fundamental, theoretical framework known as intersectionality (Peraino 2013; Hammond 2014; Brooks 2015; Dubowsky 2016; DeCoste 2017; Krell 2018). The concept of intersectionality first became a widespread analytical approach thanks to Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 with the publication of her essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” As cited by Sharon Smith, Crenshaw defined intersectionality as an analytical framework that serves to explore the way in which race, gender, age, and

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4 LGBTQIA is an abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Ally; it functions as an umbrella term to refer to the community as a whole (LGBTQIA Resource Center 2019).

5 Although positive shifts have been made, it is important to emphasize that this is only the beginning of normalizing and integrating queer discourse within mainstream society.

6 The repeal of the federal policy, Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, made effective on September 20, 2011, allows individuals within the LGBTQIA community to openly disclose and serve in the United States Armed Forces without negative repercussions.

7 On June 26, 2015, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of legalizing same-sex marriage in all fifty states.
religion collectively contribute in the production of social injustice (Smith 2014). The recent scholarship produced, all employ an intersectional approach in some capacity, however, it is the stratifications implemented under this overarching framework that will serve as the main focus. These shared stratifications or ‘themes’ that have been addressed within the discipline of musicology and ethnomusicology include: race, gender roles, subcultures, social justice, and forms of political activism, as well as the impact of technology and use of digital media. In turn, I will explore the following question - how do these themes relate to recent queer music scholarship?

Issues regarding race and queerness is an emerging area of focus that serves to undo the white-European hegemonic perspective that has dominated queer scholarship in both musicology and ethnomusicology (Barg 2013; Peraino 2013; Hansen & Hawkins 2018; Hung 2018; Krell 2018). According to Eric Hung, this lack of diversity within queer music scholarship is attributed to the broader issue of America’s long-standing history of marginalizing non-white individuals, resulting in a lack of historical documentation and thus, presents America’s LGBTQIA history from a predominantly white-European perspective (Peraino 2013; DeCoste 2017; Hung 2018; Krell 2018). Hung illuminates this generalization by examining the tragic life and death of experimental composer, Julius Eastman. Eastman was at the forefront of New York’s experimental music scene in the 1970s and 1980s, however, “his decision to foreground both his blackness and his homosexuality in his
compositions and performances alienated many collaborators and early chroniclers of experimental music” (Hung 2018: 131).

By surveying recent queer music scholarship, the lack of musicians of color represented within music’s history, is in fact a pattern that further endorses Hung’s line of inquiry regarding the correlation between historical figures of color and the lack of historical documentation. To elaborate, Daniel Callahan’s research on the relationship between experimentalist composer, John Cage, and his lifelong partner and collaborator, choreographer, Merce Cunningham (2018), presents detailed historical accounts of these well-respected white American-European artists with the help of adequate and accessible historical documentation, including primary sources like compositions, interviews, and handwritten letters. In contrast, Eastman’s full disclosure of his sexuality, in conjunction with his racial identity as African-American, triggered the downfall and marginalization of Eastman and his music, resulting in the lack of compositions preserved and even the complete absence of an obituary and/or announcement informing the public of his death. Furthermore, the lack of diversity in queer music scholarship has been further perpetuated due to many scholars’ hesitation and even defensiveness in researching issues of sexuality, due to issues of privacy and different cultural views on same-sex relations (Hung 2018; Krell 2018).

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8 This alienation and depletion of his music career lead to chronic substance abuse and homelessness, resulting in his death on the streets of New York in 1990. Despite the preservation efforts pioneered by Mary Jane Leach, only a small portion of Eastman’s documents and compositions have been recovered (Hung 2018: 131).
Most obviously, same-sex desire and transgender issues are not openly discussed topics in many parts of the world, and there is often no ethical way for outsiders to bring up these issues. Also, scholars understandably do not want to risk outing their informants and thereby put them in difficult and possibly dangerous situations. (Hung 2018: 132)

However, despite the increase in diverse queer music scholarship within recent decades, scholars such as Hung, Krell, and Peraino, stress that this is only the start of ‘race-ing’ queer music scholarship. As pointed out by the authors mentioned above, the emergence of queer music scholarship is embedded with sincere intentions of shedding light on the marginalized LGBTQIA community. However, in doing so, the empirical nature of academia further marginalized subcultures within the LGBTQIA community, particularly those of color and/or woman-identified individuals.

Additionally, the intersection of race and sexuality according to Judith Peraino, has been “politically cemented” in United States history and the development of nationalist rhetoric due to the highly publicized cases of Matthew Shepard⁹ and James Byrd, Jr.¹⁰ resulting in the ratification of the 2009 federal legislation for preventative measures against the execution of hate crimes.¹¹ Thus, “the representational subjects

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⁹ In October of 1998, openly gay student, Matthew Shepard (21-years old) was brutally attacked and left to die outside of Laramie, Wyoming. Shepard’s death became one of the most notorious anti-gay crimes in American history that sparked protest and a movement against bigotry.

¹⁰ James Byrd Jr. is considered to be one of the most recent lynching victims in United States history. Just months before Matthew Shepard’s murder, James Byrd, Jr. was abducted and brutally murdered by three white supremacists in June of 1998 because of the color of his skin.

¹¹ Signed into office by former President, Barack Obama, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 serves to provide adequate funding and services for state, local, and tribal jurisdictions in order properly investigate and prosecute hates crimes.
at the nexus of race and sexuality are men, relegating women to a special subclass or consigning them to the background altogether” (Peraino 2013: 829).

The issue of gender roles presents itself as another common theme throughout this thesis and stems from issues of race and representation, as discussed above (Devitt 2013; Fanshel 2013; Peraino 2013; Schweig 2016; DeCoste 2017; Hansen & Hawkins 2018). In relation to Kyle DeCoste’s ethnographic work dedicated to the all-female New Orleans brass band, the Original Pinettes, DeCoste points out that the only available scholarship on brass bands focuses almost exclusively on race and how this particular music practice that originated from military culture, “became racially encoded as black” (DeCoste 2017: 182). Furthermore, both the military and the use of brass instruments have a long-seeded history of prescribing to strict gender roles and thus, positions women at a disadvantage. Therefore, the human construction of “gendered meanings through the relationship between musical instruments and the musicians who play them” reinforces the position of power and control that one gender has over an entire music tradition (DeCoste 2017: 196).

The cross-cultural phenomenon of gendering musical instruments and/or a music genre, as seen with male-dominated genres like heavy metal, hip hop, and remix culture (Fanshel 2013; Schweig 2016; DeCoste 2017; Hansen & Hawkins 2018), mirrors the social and legal principle of the ‘one-drop rule’\(^\text{12}\) in relation to

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12 The one-drop rule stems from America’s long-standing history of slavery and segregation of African-Americans through the implementation of Jim Crow. This racial classification system failed to recognize individuals with multi-racial identities and automatically classified
gender and sexuality. DeCoste illuminates this line of inquiry by drawing upon the work of feminist jazz historian, Sherrie Tucker, who argues that women in all-female ensembles have historically been sexualized, especially those who play male-gendered instruments and thus, calls into question one’s sexual orientation. The correlation between all-female ensembles and male-gendered instruments parallels the ‘one-drop rule’ in that, if one band member identifies as queer and/or if one member plays a male-gendered instrument, then the entire ensemble falls under the subordinate label of ‘queer.’ These dangerous assumptions also present themselves in terms of what is considered ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ attributes within a particular culture (Devitt 2013; Fanshel 2013; Salerno 2016; Schweig 2016). Rosalie Fanshel’s article on American singer-songwriter, Bruce Springsteen, explores the way in which Springsteen employs homoerotic imagery in both his lyrics and performance, while simultaneously maintaining an ‘All-American,’ hypermasculine image, thus calling into question “larger assumptions about the valorisation of masculinity in rock ‘n’ roll more generally” (Fanshel 2013: 360). Furthermore, the socio-cultural fashioning of them as the lesser, non-white; this rule asserts that any individual with even one ancestor from sub-Saharan Africa is considered black.

13 Gendered instruments have been an integral part of the formation of power dynamics within varying music cultures. For example, in some African cultures, the drum is considered a masculine instrument. Similarly, European classical music cultures have a similar history, except its source of contention was primarily with wind instruments like the flute, which has been viewed throughout history as a “harsh” and “energetic” masculine instrument (Steblin 1995: 130).

14 Fanshel provides her readers with the queer lyrical content within Springsteen’s music like his 1998 song, “My Lover Man.”

15 Fanshel draws upon the work of B.K. Garman by providing an excerpt from Garman’s book, A Race of Singers: Whitman’s Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen (2000), which states: “Gay men have been so feminised and the working class so
a masculine and feminine identity also presents itself in Rachel Devitt’s work on the role of music in queer performances of femininity within drag culture.\(^{16}\) Like Fanshel, Devitt argues that the concept of gender roles is both a social and cultural construct that is dependent on the collective investment of others. However, within the last twenty to thirty years, notions of what constitutes something or someone as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’\(^{17}\) are now viewed as self-defining concepts that take on a variety of forms based on the individual. This sense of gender customization is supported further through Stephanie Salerno’s dissertation on the Canadian-American singer-songwriter, Rufus Wainwright, and his emotional performance of his song cycle, *Lulu*. By foregrounding this particular music performance, Salerno argues that Wainwright’s outward emotions about personal suffering serves bring forth the visibility of male public mourning.

Another common theme within recent queer music scholarship is the concept of subcultures (Devitt 2013; Morcom 2013; Taylor 2013; Morad 2014; Brooks 2015; Roy 2017; DeCoste 2018). The notion of subcultures can best be described as a group of individuals within an overarching society, who share similar values and customs that separates them from that particular society and thus, forms a subdivision within

\(^{16}\) Devitt argues that “femme gender performers critically stage their own consumption of the popular music they enjoy, interrupting its narratives and rhythms with their choreography and reterritorialization it with their dancing bodies” (Devitt 2013: 427).

\(^{17}\) “In recent decades, however... femme for many LGBT people is no longer solely the provenance of cisgender women, but is also often utilised by trans* women and trans* men, gay men, and anyone else who approaches femininity vis-à-vis queerness and for whom femininity resonates as a queer strategy” (Devitt 2013: 430-1).
this overall society. This shift in approach, narrows the focus of study in order to avoid a general or ‘universal’ scope which oftentimes produces pockets of underrepresentation, especially those marginalized because of their sexual orientation. However, it is important to note that queer subcultures do not function as a fixed structure but rather, as a mobile and heterogeneous social category that is in constant shift to adhere to “group affiliations and self-transformation” (Taylor 2013: 199) and as a way to carve out a space for “resistant queer sexualities and merge queer sensibilities with pre-existing cultural forms” (Taylor 2013: 194). According to Jodie Taylor, Rachel Devitt, and other scholars, queer subcultures are always in a battle with mainstream heterosexual narratives due to the constant appropriation, exploitation, and fetishization of queer ‘cultural products’,18 as in the case of Madonna’s 1990 hit song and music video “Vogue.”19 “While this may not be malicious, [queer subcultures] are made more vulnerable to exploitation, largely due to inequitable dealings between marginalised queer subjects of colour and those people (heterosexed and/or white) who are afforded greater social privilege and power” (Taylor 2013: 198). The notion of ‘subcultural capital’ still remains a present threat to queer subcultures, however, this threat extends beyond the fear of appropriation by mainstream artists, to also include the subculture itself (Taylor

18 “All too commonly, the queer subculturalist’s voice and their cultural products have been subsumed into heterosexual narratives of stylistic resistance and ‘hipness’” (Taylor 2013: 198).
19 In Taylor’s article about queer subculture and popular music, the author uses the example of Madonna’s single “Vogue” as a way to contextualize the constant threat of being erased and financially exploited by their heterosexual counterparts.
Since the very nature of subcultures exists under a larger societal framework of universally shared values, queer uses of music and style can not only serve as a distinctive marker of cultural difference from mainstream heterosexual society, but can also operate as a mode of affiliation and communal identification from the dominant heterosexual society. Essentially, both mainstream cultures and subcultures can serve as reciprocal processes of music and stylistic borrowing where, to a certain extent, appropriation and financial exploitation can occur within both cultural societies, ‘by’ both societies. This negotiation and assertion of power, presents itself as another theme that has foregrounded recent queer music scholarship - social justice and political activism.

Similar to both the concept of gender and subcultures, queer social justice and political activism can adhere to a variety of different methods of presentation, aside from the obvious protest rallies and institutional events (Taylor 2013; Hammond 2014; Morad 2014; Jones 2016; Balen 2017; DeCoste 2017; Hansen & Hawkins 2018; Krell 2018). According to Jodie Taylor, the cultural ‘vocabularies’ or ‘markers’ of queer activism and feeling are multifaceted concepts that do not always present itself in an immediate and recognizable form, like organizations, institutions, or cultural groups (2013). Therefore, one can engage in forms of political expression and

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20 Taylor argues that the music structures of queer popular music “borrow, manipulate and queerly reconstitute a variety of translocal popular music forms including punk, pop, rock, folk…these excessive announciations problematize conventional logics of … ‘subcultural capital’” (Taylor 2013: 199).
advocacy by simply identifying with a particular subculture in form of consumer consumption21 and active social participation both on and offline. For example, Rachel Kuo argues that hashtags can be used as a form of social justice because it promotes the circulation of a particular cause while also inciting participation from others, contributing to both an “individual and collective identity, and organize for collective action” (Kuo 2018: 496).

Postulating along a similar trajectory, the use of technology and digital media functions similarly, in that the internet provides leeway for marginalized communities to carve out their own space of interaction while at the same, offers flexibility to experiment and explore ways of self-representation (Brooks 2015; Roy 2015; Dubowsky 2016; Waugh 2017; Hansen & Hawkins 2018; Hung 2018). Recent queer music scholarship has fully integrated the use of technology and digital media as part of the common narrative within a body of research and thus, parallels the larger, overall workings of everyday society. Similar to the fluidity of masculine and feminine gender roles, online virtual platforms foster the ability for an individual to “perform multiple ‘selves’ in the (relative) anonymity of virtual spaces, as well as the emotional and symbiotic relationship that the Post-Internet generation holds with its technological devices” (Waugh 2013: 234). The flexibility provided by virtual spaces in relation to identity experimentation and formation also coincides with the music industry’s technological advancements. As argued by Hansen and Hawkins, the use

21 For example, attending concerts, purchasing fan memorabilia, subscribing to band memberships, and online fan forums.
of recording equipment and video editing tools provides an artist with complete control over the construction of their identity and public self-image, as seen in Azealia Banks’s music video, “Chasing Time.” “As such, Banks’s persona is embedded within the production techniques themselves, which intersect with a legacy that has packaged females in the excessive tropes of the sexual commodity” (Hansen & Hawkins 2018: 168). Despite an artist or user’s complete control over the construction of their online self-image, it is important to acknowledge the role and collective action employed by online/digital media spectators. Just as the use of online communities provide LGBTQIA youth with a sense of community and support, especially for those whose sexual identity is under construction, the representation of queer music cultures through music videos and other forms of digital media provides both the artist and user a reciprocal form of support and media representation.

To reiterate, the socio-political views on homosexuality and the broader LGBTQIA community have dramatically shifted in American history within the last thirty years. Recent queer music scholarship has begun to reflect this dramatic shift through the implementation of intersectionality as a standard, methodological tool as a means for music scholars to conduct a more accurate and descriptive account of marginalized communities and their music culture and practices. Within this inclusive

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22 For example, the user can be positively or negatively affected by a music video and can therefore, enable or disable methods of online circulation (like posting the video on Facebook or blocking the video from your virtual content) and the same can be applied to the artist employing the music video.
framework, presents five overarching themes that have been analyzed within recent queer music scholarship, including issues of race, gender roles, subcultures, social justice and political activism, as well as the impact of technology and digital media. The growing area of focus between racial issues and queerness serves to undo the white, European-American hegemonic perspective that has dominated queer music scholarship. However, the very acknowledgement of this deficit in queer scholarship serves as a starting point for future shifts. In relation to the second overarching theme of gender roles, serves as a both a social and cultural construct that is dependent on the collective investment of others. The third theme addressed is the concept of subcultures. This centralized approach serves to avoid a general or ‘universal’ scope, which oftentimes produces pockets of underrepresentation, especially those marginalized because of their sexual orientation. However, like the fluidity of gender, queer subcultures do not function as fixed structures but rather, as a mobile and heterogeneous social category that is in constant shift to adhere to “group affiliations and self-transformation” (Taylor 2013: 199). Since the very nature of subcultures exists under a larger, societal framework of universally shared values, queer uses of music and style can not only serve as a distinctive marker of cultural difference from mainstream heterosexual society, but can also operate as a mode of affiliation and communal identification from the dominant heterosexual society. This negotiation and assertion of power, also presents itself in the theme of social justice and political activism. Queer activism is a multifaceted concept that may not always present itself in a recognizable form (Taylor 2013). Therefore, one can engage in forms of political
expression and advocacy by simply identifying with a particular community or subculture, or even participating in the communal practice of choral singing. And lastly, the final theme that has dominated recent queer music scholarship is the impact of technology and use of digital media. Rather than treating the use digital media in relation to music as a separate entity, recent queer music scholars have seamlessly integrated examples and notions of social media and online circulation as part of the common scholarly narrative. Similar to the fluidity of masculine and feminine gender roles, online virtual platforms foster the control and accessibility for an individual to “perform multiple ‘selves’ in the (relative) anonymity of virtual spaces, as well as the emotional and symbiotic relationship that the Post-Internet generation holds with its technological devices” (Waugh 2013: 234). Queer music scholarship within the last thirty years has strayed away from the use of empirical and over-generalized, theoretical frameworks, and have moved to a more individualized approach in the hopes of establishing a representational space for underrepresented communities. Although many of the issues addressed within queer music scholarship provide no clear and direct answer, it is the very acknowledgement of these scholarly deficits that serve to foreground the increase of representation within future queer music scholarship.
“What happened to the Vedic dykes?”
Female Same-Sex Relations in Indian History

Figure 0.2 The Rajasthan School, painting (left); Replica of a bronze statue from the Chola period, 7th to 10th centuries AD (center); Two Women Making Love, 18th cent. painting (right). Collection of Giti Thadani.

In the fall of 2016, I found myself binge-watching a new docuseries called *Gaycation*. Hosted by Canadian actress, Ellen Page, along with her friend and co-host, Ian Daniel, this televised series explores LGBTQIA culture in different parts of the world, including the United States, Brazil, Japan, and the Ukraine. Nonetheless, it was Ellen and Ian’s trip to India that particularly stood out for me. In the episode, the two hosts managed to interview LGBTQIA activist and representative of the Godrej India Culture Lab, Parmesh Shahani, along with other gay-identified males, and were also invited into the recording studio to listen and speak with the all-hijra24-singing group, The 6 Pack Band. Ellen’s co-host, Ian, even managed to get a taste of the nightlife in Mumbai by attending a male-only, gay nightclub, leaving...

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23 Based in Mumbai, India, the Godrej Culture lab is an organization that curates diverse cultural programs in the form of discussions, film screenings, and exhibitions.
24 Often referred to as the ‘third gender,’ the hijra community refers to intersexed individuals and/or individuals who are “ceremonially emasculated males” and identify as the female gender (Rellis 2008: 228).
Page to pose the question - “where are the women?”. By the end of the episode, they did in fact manage to interview a lesbian couple. But unlike the men they freely interviewed in both rural and urban settings, the two females remained anonymous, insisting that their identities be concealed due to the threat of physical harm and violence. This is one example of many instances where there appears to be an imbalance of representation between queer Indian males and queer Indian females. This lacuna has led me in my research to propose the evocative question originally posed by archaeologist and lesbian activist, Giti Thadani, “What happened to the Vedic dyke?”

Thadani has argued that it was not until 1500 B.C. when the Aryans invaded India, that the act of homosexuality began to experience bouts of suppression. This fluctuation between “relative repression and freedom” continued into the 19th-century under British colonial rule, where this “relative repression” as described by Nayan Shah, transformed into a blatant crusade for the destruction of lesbian temple iconography, literature, and music (Shah 1998: 485). For example, Thadani provides a first-hand account of her visit to the Lingaraj temple in Bhuveneshvar, India, where she witnessed the masculinization of temple iconography - “the breasts of a goddess being cut, then polished over with orange, and a new male divinity was born” (Thadani 1996:1-2). Despite the censorship of female same-sex relations depicted in

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25 Giti Thadani is an archaeologist and lesbian activist based in Delhi, India. In the 1990s, she is the founded India’s first lesbian organization called, Sakhi Collective, and has “spent several years driving around India exploring temples and museums in order to understand the representations of the female divinity in ancient Indian culture” (Subramanian 2013).
literature, music, art, and temple iconography, Thadani, along with other scholars, have managed uncover and preserve these valuable forms of documentation (Figure 0.3).

Historically speaking, the symbolic representations of oral, visual, and/or textual traditions have stressed the importance of ‘passing on one’s own tradition’ in order to contribute to a larger collective identity. However, the interpretation of these contributions can result in the appearance of ‘universality’ or ‘objectivity.’ This singular approach of adhering to one perspective, establishes a canonical way in which the stories ought to be written and interpreted. And thus, curating India’s history as a monolithic heterosexual perspective where homosexuality is considered a “foreign” or “Western” practice.

[T]he so-called ‘objectivist’ reading of history, in not questioning heteropatriarchal order or the ideological constructions of heterosexuality, simply projects its own heterosexist position into the domain of study. It thereby proclaims the state of heterosexuality as a universalized truth, and aligns itself to other heterosexual discourses in postulating ‘homosexuality’ as the foreign other. (Thadani 1996: 5)

A telling example of these generalizations can be actualized by a quote from India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, from his 1946 book entitled The Discovery of India:

It is clear from Greek literature that homosexual relationships were not looked upon with disfavor Indeed there was a romantic approval of them…[a] similar attitude is found in Iran, and Persian literature is full of such references…[t]here is no such thing in Sanskrit literature, and homosexuality was evidently not approved nor at all common in India. (Thadani 1996: 5)
According to Nehru’s statement is unquestionably false, not only regarding the outright denial of the existence of same-sex relations in Indian culture, but the very ‘evidence’ he uses to support his argument is inaccurate. In fact, gender and sexuality scholars Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai have made it a point to compile ancient works of Indian literature on same-sex love dating back from over 2,000 years ago. Aside from the most notable Sanskrit text on erotica, the *Kamasutra* (c. 4th century), Somadeva Bhatta’s 11th century story cycle entitled *Kathasaritsagara* is another piece of Sanskrit literature that depicts same-sex relations and sentiment. This story presents the premarital love of princess Somaprabha for a married woman named Kalingasena:

> While still in the sky, Somaprabha saw her beauty, capable of bewitching even an ascetic’s mind, and with feelings of love aroused, wondered: “Who is she? If she is an incarnation of the moon, then how does she shine during the day? If she is Rati, where is Kama? ...I am sure she and I were female friends in a previous birth. My mind which is overwhelmed with affection for her, tells me so. Therefore, it is only appropriate that I should choose her as my friends once again. (Vanita & Kidwai 2000: 86)

As described by Vanita and Kidwai, limitations in the English language does not accurately define the word ‘friend’ is this particular passage. In its original language, the term used is *svayamvara sakhi*. The word *svayamvara* means ‘self-chosen lover/bridegroom’ and is “generally used for the ceremony in which a woman selects her husband from a group of suitors. Here it is unexpectedly joined with *sakhi* (female friend)” (Vanita & Kidwai 2000: 86).

The notion of homosexuality as a non-Indian practice, continues to be upheld by some today. However, this belief has been refashioned to demonize Western
culture, specifically the United States, as the culprit of these ‘unnatural’ desires. This mentality was not only propagated by works of literature, but continued into the 1980s and ‘90s in the form of English-language advertisements in India. In her book *Queering India*, Ruth Vanita describes English-language advertisements in twentieth century India to have a “subtext that represents homoeroticism as a seamless part of urban middle-class life” (Vanita 2002: 138). This troublesome perspective continues to be upheld in parts of India today, and has disseminated throughout parts of the diaspora, causing tensions between first and second-generation Indian-American queer females and their parents.

**A Clarification on Terminology**

Before I proceed further, it is imperative that I clarify my use of the term ‘queer.’ The focus of my research is solely on female same-sex relations, specifically female-born individuals, who self-identify female and whose sexual preference is other than heterosexual. My use of the term ‘queer’ in this body of work prescribes to the same approach taken by anthropologist Naisargi N. Dave, in that it functions as both a means of convenience, as well as a textual assertion of solidarity (Dave 2012: 20). By definition, the term ‘queer’ can best be defined as something or someone that is “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Halperin 1995: 62).

Historically, the term was used as slur to refer to an individual that is perceived to be

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gay or lesbian. However, in more recent time, ‘queer’ has been redefined within American society to function as an umbrella term to represent those within the LGBTQIA community. Furthermore, I found that when I spoke with the artists described in the following chapters, they would interchange the words ‘gay’ and ‘queer.’ Thus, as a precaution to not mislabel I felt it would be best to use the broader term of ‘queer.’

Chapter Summaries

The three case studies presented in the following chapters have been intentionally organized to demonstrate a deliberate and diverse progression from queer female artists in popular music to the representation of the queer female identity within a classical performing arts environment. The first chapter “Pussy Power” is an analysis of self-identified queer female DJ, Bianca Maieli, and her signature sound of sampling Bollywood film songs and Hindu temple instruments with Latin American rhythms, paying homage to both her South Indian and Colombian roots. This chapter aims to demonstrate the malleability of social media and the use of other online platforms as a way to represent the many “extensions” of one’s self. Chapter two, “Bhangrā Funk,” examines North America’s first female Ḍhol-player M-Tooray and her online circulation techniques as a means to not only assimilate the Ḍhol in mainstream North American popular music, but also as a means to curate an all-inclusive, pan-Indian digital culture. And lastly, the third chapter,
entitled “The Pollution of a Tradition?”, is an in-depth performance analysis looking into the public reception of the dance video, “Revelations: Celebrating LGBTQ Stories Through Bharatanatyam.” Funded by the MIT-based arts organization IndianRaga and uploaded to YouTube in November of 2017, the “Revelations” video presents the story of a daughter ‘coming out’ to her mother through a south Indian classical dance performance. Through the employment of Susanne Langer’s ‘continuum of feeling’ in conjunction with the use of audiovisual aesthetics, the “Revelations” video has the ability to reach a diverse demographic.
CHAPTER 1

“Pussy Power”: A Case Study of DJ Bianca Maieli

With a sheer black veil around her head, and the name “Maieli” superimposed in an Arabic-like script draped across her eyes, the user is encouraged to scroll down, uncovering the script from her face to reveal the main menu of the official website of DJ and music producer, Bianca Maieli Kurian.

In this chapter, I intend to explore the dissemination of desi culture, particularly regarding the identity of the queer Indian female in music. As a self-identified queer woman, DJ Bianca Maieli has established herself as a desi hip hop artist within the music industry and has showcased her music on various online platforms in order to bring forth the current cultural and identity problems many women of color face. With tracks such as “Pussy Power,” “Mesha’s Lament,” and “Rly wanna come c u (Aaliyah remix),” DJ Maieli herself, along with her musical works and internet representation will serve as the base of my analysis in order to address the following questions: In what way (if any) does the use of social media and online music platforms shed light on queer women of color? What challenges
does this particular subset of women face? Since the desi culture refers to those within the South Asian/Indian diaspora, is the pressure for acceptance and/or risk of alienation lower in terms of sexuality?

**DJ Bianca Maieli and the Extension of Her ‘Many Selves’**

Born and raised in East Los Angeles, California, DJ and music producer Bianca Maieli was raised by her mother who is originally from Colombia, and her father who is from India (Figure 1.2). Despite her parent’s separation at a young age, Maieli explains that both parents remained present in her life and encouraged her to participate in extracurricular activities such as piano lessons and playing in her high school band. However, it was not until a friend showed her the basics of beat matching, that sparked her interest to pursue a career as a DJ. Although this “self-taught” DJ has not produced any physical albums, Maieli has managed to successfully establish herself within the Los Angeles music scene due to her strong Internet and social media presence. As described in the opening of this chapter, the banner to her official website functions as an interactive prompt that reveals or uncovers to the user to the many layers that make up the artist, Bianca Maieli. Once the user scrolls down, the site’s navigation bar appears with a series of tabs that will take the user to various sub-sections (or “parent pages”), such as a link to her blog, her tour schedule, a photo gallery, and access to her music, all of which reveal to the user, the many layers that make up DJ Maieli. And like many artists today, DJ Maieli
also provides links to her social media accounts like Twitter (1,135 followers), Instagram (2,185 followers), Facebook (672 ‘likes’), and SoundCloud (1,118 followers). However, unlike some mainstream artists who have a public and private social media accounts, DJ Maieli does not make such distinction, providing her users with a sense of transparency and relatability through her integration of childhood photos and personal accounts that share the same space with her promotional and professional material. For example, in December of 2017, Maieli posted a message announcing the passing of her “Ammachi” or grandmother, on both her Instagram and Twitter account. This heartfelt message accompanied by a photograph of Maieli as a young child with her grandmother, essentially memorializes this moment in her life so it is not just a part of her cognitive memory, but also lives as in a virtual space that can be re-visited not only by Maieli but by her followers, who have the access to go back through her archive of posts. The creation of a temporal timeline through old posts allows the one to gain “snapshots” into various moments throughout a person’s life and can further illustrate the depth and complexity of self-presentation within virtual spaces.

Figure 1.2 DJ Maieli as a child with her parents.
As argued by both, Driver and Maliepaard, the use of the Internet is an organic, flexible, and ever-changing space for those (particularly the LGBTQIA youth) to experiment with ways in which to represent and define themselves. This sense of fluidity or “culture of simulation” that “may help us achieve a vision of a multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy comes from having access to our many selves” (Driver 2007:170). The ability to display and access our “many selves” is made relevant in her Instagram post provided above (Figure 1.3). As the viewer, I am provided several levels of information as DJ Bianca Maieli as a granddaughter and as a Muslim Indian-American. In her caption, she refers to her grandmother as “Ammachi” which is indicative of the Dravidian language of Malayalam, commonly spoken in the Indian state of Kerala, and is further reinforced with the visual image of her grandmother wearing a sari. Another
cultural (and religious) marker, is the closing quote she provides in Arabic, which reads “Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un” and translates to mean “Truly! To Allah we belong and truly, to Him we shall return.” Unfamiliar with this phrase, I took to the Internet and discovered that the phrase, “Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un,” is an excerpt from Islam’s sacred text, the Qur’an, in the second chapter or surah, “Al-Baqara,” and is often recited repeatedly by Muslims in face of tragedy such as death.

DJ Maieli’s choice of words and use of language when posting public comments on social media, act as a verbal/textual indicator of her ethnic roots thus, appealing to her South Asian fans while simultaneously informing others of her cultural identity. Provided on the following page, Figure 1.4 is an Instagram post from March of 2016 of an old photo of her grandparents with the caption: “Appachan n Ammachi, India circa 1954?” By integrating the Malayalam language into her post by referring to her grandparents as “appachan” and “ammachi,” she is informing her followers of her ancestral roots while also presenting a correlation amongst those with similar upbringings. Through the use of visuals icons like emojis as cultural-markers, DJ Maieli is able assert her cultural roots, as seen on her “about me” section on her Instagram and Twitter accounts. She incorporates the Indian and Colombian flag emojis (see Figure B.2 in Appendix B) as an immediate visual assertion of her cultural roots and ties to communities that crossing borders on a local, national, and international scale, but also within various cultural, social, and ethnic sub-sets. Aligns herself with various facets and sub-facets of a diverse range of communities: Los Angeles music scene, Indian-American and Colombian-American diasporas, females
of color in the music industry, among others. Essentially, the various virtual spaces DJ Maieli has created for herself and her image as an artist and music producer, are representative of her “extended self” to which, can be defined as being “composed of both our notion of ‘the self’ (what is ‘me’) and our belongings (what is ‘mine’), and is considered ‘not to be limited to external objects and personal possessions, but also includes persons, places, and group possessions,’ as well as words, ideas, and artistic creations” (Swanson 2012: 7).

Therefore, Maieli’s choice in her display of the Colombian and Indian flag emojis are “possessions” that “function as illustrations of the self that are easy for others to recognize, judge and comment on” (Swanson 2012: 7-8). However, Maieli would not necessarily agree with my analysis in terms of marketing to a particular ‘community’ or group, at least not on a conscious level, as she explains to me in an interview via-email:

**Iannitti:** Is there a particular ‘image’ or environment you are trying to create on your social media accounts? (i.e. your reasoning for posting photos, music tracks, and/or comments promotional purposes)

**Maieli:** I don’t think I actively try to create a specific environment but I do want to send a message of acceptance and love with anything I do and post.

**Iannitti:** Is there a central message you try to communicate with your fans through your various social media accounts?

**Maieli:** Not consciously but I guess Be Yourself would be a good theme because I’m hoping others can be as comfortable in their skin as I’ve grown to be comfortable in mine.
Despite Maieli’s admission that she is not consciously putting forth a particular public image, the image she has created for herself, deliberate or not, is the co-construction of her Colombian and South Indian identities, resulting in the formation of a third and overarching identity as desi.

“Mimosas & Samosas”: Desi Culture and the Indian Diaspora

This past October, DJ Maieli celebrated the one-year anniversary of her radio show, “Mimosas & Samosas.” This monthly radio show is broadcasted on WAXX.FM, a pirate radio station,\(^2\) in order to showcase not only her own work but also to promote emerging artists of color within the surrounding Los Angeles area. It is evident based on both the name of the radio show, along with the choice of promotional images, Maieli is clearly channeling a desi demographic. Her choice in fusing images of ‘traditional’ or conventional images of women in Indian dress (first two images in Figure 1.5) with technological elements through the use of emojis and the very medium in which these images are being advertised, is a way to discount the perception that Indian culture is static and ancient.

\(^2\) “A person or organization transmitting (and formerly also receiving) radio programs without official authorization” (Oxford Dictionary 2019).
Although she claims it’s not deliberate, her use of images and choice in the title is channeling the desi community through the use of visual cultural markers. For example, the advertisement for “Mimosas & Samosas” shown above in Figure 1.5, is a photo of herself sporting “John Lennon-like” sunglasses, prayer beads on her right wrist, and a t-shirt that has the image of an Indian women wearing a nose ring, veil, and a māng tikka.28 By physically placing herself in the advertisement, DJ Maieli essentially positions herself as a representative of the South Asian culture she appears to be marketing for not only the show, but also as the type of demographic she is aiming toward - the desi or South Asian community. However, as mentioned in the opening of this chapter, DJ Bianca Maieli is bi-racial and therefore identifies with both, the Indian and Colombian culture. Although it may appear that she partakes in more South Asian events and such, there are times in which she will publicly assert her cultural ties to South America by posting a comment in Spanish (see Figure B.3), and/or by DJ-ing for an event or club that is celebrating a particular Latin American holiday, such as the event she took part in on July 20th that celebrated Colombia's

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28 A piece of Indian head jewelry that ornaments the middle of one’s forehead.
Independence from Spanish colonial rule in 1819. This flexibility between her racial identities is not uncommon amongst individuals who are biracial or have multiple racial identities as discussed by Geetha Reddy in her article, “Fluidity Amidst Structure: Multi-racial Identity Constructions Across the Life Course of Malaysians and Singaporeans” (2018). Reddy explains that multiracial individuals have the ability to channel their different racial identities based on a given social situation, environment, and/or a specific time in one’s life. This “selective prevalence” affirms that “multiple rationalities can co-exist within the same individual” (Reddy 2018: 10). However, this flexibility between multiple identities, she argues, is made possible only “because their multiple identities are recognised by Others [institutions, governments, individuals]” (Reddy 2018: 10). Therefore, in the context of DJ Maieli, the fluidity of her cultural identities is fostered through her own cultural assertions (like the flag emojis) and use of public online platforms as a means to gain recognition of both, her Colombian and Indian roots, while also fostering her identity as desi.

The word, desi appears in connection with Maieli in the form of hashtags, club events, and her own self-recognition as a desi female. But before I proceed, it is important to first address the following questions - What is the desi culture? and What are the associations surrounding the use of this term? To answer the first question, it is important to know the derivation of the word itself. “The word ‘desi’ comes from Sanskrit [“desh”] and means ‘from the country’ or ‘of the country’” (Kurwa 2008, 29 see Figure B.4 and Figure B.5.)
In terms of context, the term ‘desi’ is typically used amongst South Asian immigrants when referring to a person or an object from the Indian subcontinent and often implies “shared values and bonds” (Kurwa 2008, NPR). In my interview with Suhail Yusuf Khan, professional Sarangi player from Delhi, the term “desi” has multiple interpretations depending on context and the environment in which one is situated in:

…if you were to call someone desi in India it means someone who is very rural, someone who has not been urbanized, who hasn’t really adapted to the metropolitanism, the cosmopolitanism, the multiculturalism, the gentrification going on in the cities...as far as I’m concerned coming from India. Desi in countries like the UK and the United States means you’re either a “fresh” person who has just arrived in the country and you are still trying to adapt to the norms, to the culture norms, to the societal practices or the way of living in the western society as well so that person is consider desi as well so that person is also consider desi amongst the Asian and Indian ethnic groups, so these are the two main differences of calling someone a desi in India or desi in abroad. (Personal Interview Dec. 7, 2017, Middletown, CT)

Additionally, the term desi also holds historical relevance with India’s past struggle with Great Britain. In 1903, Britain declared Bengal would be partitioned into two regions; in protest of this decision, the Indian people united together to boycott all foreign goods as an economic tactic to destabilize British rule which, then became known as the “swadeshi movement.” Despite this failed attempt to destabilize British rule and prevent the separation of Bengal, the ideology and practice behind the swadeshi movement continued spread throughout the country. The Swadeshi movement was later revitalized during the country’s period of mass nationalism between 1940 and 1947 that was fore fronted by Mahatma Gandhi as a means to
support and foster domestic goods, while also preserving India’s cultural ideology against colonial rule (Trivedi 2007: 2).

When applying the historical context behind the term, desi, to the formation of one’s identity as ‘desi,’ I cannot help but to refer to Helen Kim’s article, “A ‘Desi’ Diaspora? The Production of ‘Desiness’ and London's Asian Urban Music Scene” (2012). Kim argues that desi or “desiness” is a variant of the diaspora “where a focus on one’s ‘roots’ can be a way of establishing and negotiating new ‘routes’ and spaces” (Kim 2012: 560). This argument is particularly poignant, especially in regards to first and second generation Indian-Americans where there is a sense of displacement experienced due to one’s intentions of preserving one’s cultural roots while trying to simultaneously assimilate to another culture. However, as described by Stuart Hall, identity is both a social and cultural collective that functions on the investment of others’ ideas of who they are (Hall 1990; Kim 2012: 565). Thus, the desi identity is one of flexibility and is susceptible to change depending on context, location, and societal (and intrinsic) influence. Bharatanatyam dancer and first-generation Indian-American, Aditi, exemplifies both Kim and Hall’s notions on identity. Born in Seattle, Aditi and her family moved a few times throughout her childhood; by the age of five, her and her family left her birthplace of Seattle to move to Texas for a year, followed by a six-year stay in Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay), India. Following her six years in India, Aditi and her family moved to Singapore where she lived for the remainder of studies until she received her
acceptance to an undergraduate university in the United States. In my interview with

Aditi, she expresses some confusion surrounding her identity:

For me, I’ve had a lot of confusion...or...uh.... navigating my identity was always really tough and I still don’t have a grasp as to what I am...when people ask me if I’m like, Indian or American or Indian-American, I tend to identify as Indian-American um but at the same time, I feel like there are different parts of me that are more Indian and parts of me that are more American so it depends on like, what is being asked, and the context of what it is. Um but for sure, I definitely feel that when it comes to when I’m over here [in the United States], I participate in more cultural activities...like Indian cultural activities like, I tend to go to the temple a lot more....

(Personal Interview, Oct. 25, 2018, Middletown, CT)

This sense of “confusion” and societal pressure to subscribe to a singular/single culture (Indian or American) described by Aditi, was also mentioned discussed by bharatanatyam dancer and first-generation Indian-American, Sumati. However, this feeling of confusion, she explains, was imposed upon her by others specifically, Indian-born citizens of her parents and grandparents’ generations:

…. at like some point probably in middle school...someone came to visit us...like a family friend from India, came to the U.S. and stayed with us and um, he was talking about this new term that had started to become more commonly used called “ABCD” - American Born Confused Desi hahaaaaa!
And then I got I was confused like, why? I mean, I understood that this is referring to me because you know, I am this American born and of Indian-origin, right? But why the “C”? Why am I confused? So… you know I had to figure out then that people perceive me and my generation as confused because they don't understand why we tend to have these two identities. Um and I think that some people of my generation, generally, do go through some confusion because I think that they feel that they need to pick one....you know? Am I Indian or am I American? For me, there was never an “either or” - I am both. So I guess for me I never really felt confused about it you know, it was very clear to me that I am an American citizen with Indian ancestry....and there is nothing confusing about it. I think if people thought I was confused because I was doing Indian cultural activities, you know like Indian dancing ....Carnatic music….um, maybe they thought I was confused because they thought that I should be American because I was born in America but you
know you become what your parents inculcate with you so if they inculcate you with Indian culture … that’s kind of what you are going to absorb. I never felt like I need to use the word Desi Because I always just said I am Indian to people so…um…. you know, it was more of a term that was imposed upon me by other people. (Personal Interview via FaceTime, Oct. 27, 2018)

Therefore, the term ‘desi’ also presents a generational discord between Indian-born parents and their American-born child as described by Aditi:

...I find that a lot of younger couples are coming here and having kids here and um, there kids are findings like sort of a dissociate...they can’t really associate with their parents as much because their parents were brought up in a way that is very conservative once again, um and or even like the way they dress up sometimes and I know that like my mom she wears her bindi everywhere and I hate to admit…. I hate to admit the fact that I, like, in the past....ask[ed] her like...do you really have to wear it everywhere? [P]art of that is just because the negative stigma that that's sort of comes with it, um especially in the political situation that we are in currently today. wearing a bindi on your head is not only Brave but second of all the reason is brave is because, you will get called out for it Like my mom has gotten like stares in the convenience store or like at the supermarket, so because of that, … I've asked her in the past to like … “tone down” …. I regret doing that.... And if anything, I've just been so proud that my mom has stuck true to like what she believes to be her core values and the fact that she wasn't going to change herself or a simulate. So yeah like there's definitely a negative connotation to when it comes to desis but it really depends on the context of like what you're talking about. (Personal Interview Oct. 25, 2018, Middletown, CT)

In relation to DJ Maieli, Maieli considers herself desi but would not claim her music as being categorized as exclusively ‘desi’ as she explains:

Desi to me means anyone from the South Asian diaspora and so I would consider myself Desi, I don’t know if I would consider my music “Desi” although there are South Asian elements I don’t think its exclusively “Desi” music. (Personal Interview via E-mail, Apr. 2, 2018)
DJ Maieli is able to embrace both her Colombian and South Indian heritage, given the type of environment she resides in. With Los Angeles’ large Latin American population, as well as a booming South Asian community, DJ Maieli has been able to gain recognition from both communities and can therefore, establish herself within both music scenes, as seen in Figure 1.6. This past April, Maieli performed at Fade nightclub during their ‘Latin Bass’ night called, “Sucia Bonita” which is Spanish for beautiful or pretty (“bonita”) dirty (“sucia”). The integration of her Arabic-like inspired logo (“Maieli”) with a Latin American themed-event, exemplifies the desi culture. Although her music may not be exclusively categorized as “desi,” DJ Maieli, like Sumati and Aditi, participates in events, talks, and workshops that connect her to her South Asian roots (see Figures B.6 and B.7). Even in the way in which she curates her website and various social media accounts, her choice of clothes, accessories, body art (henna, tattoos), as well as the sonic makeup of her music, and the very artists and musicians she collaborates with connects her to both, her cultural roots and the broader South Asian community. For example, DJ Maieli has produced several tracks by self-acclaimed desi rapper, Horsepowar, who is first generation Punjabi-Canadian, and has collaborated on numerous occasions with self-identified queer dhol player, M-Tooray (Video 1.1)
The image above, features Horsepowar on the far left, DJ Bianca Maieli in the middle, and M-Tooray on the right, performing together at the Sunset Club in Los Angeles, California. This particular image holds great significance in the sense that it exemplifies the multilayered apparatus which is desi culture, encapsulating a series of historical, cultural, generational, societal, political, religious, and geographical associations. To elaborate, Horsepowar was born in Canada to a North Indian Punjabi family and is a member of the Sikh religion, where DJ Maieli is of the Muslim faith, self-identifies as queer, and has cultural ties to both Colombia and the South Indian state of Kerala. Furthermore, the use of digital technology to document such collaborations serves as a form of engagement between the artist(s) and their audience “in productive and reproductive ways, intensifying cultural engagement” (Ray 2017: 112).
“Being queer just adds an extra layer of fear, guilt, and shame, etc. depending on how you were raised,” explains Bianca Maieli in response to my question about the apparent invisibility of queer females of color specifically, those within the Indian diaspora. In her article, “Lesbian Women of Color: Triple Jeopardy,” Beverly Greene explains that although Indian and South Asian lesbians living within the United States have more opportunities to connect with the widespread lesbian community, there still remains a sense of invisibility and marginalization. Part of this can be attributed to the expectation that Indian lesbians must fulfill a particular “generic lesbian mold” that has been instituted by the majority perspective and thus, overlooks important cultural differences that “Indian lesbians are left to negotiate” (Greene 2013:131). Aside from the negotiation between one’s Indian and American culture, Indian lesbians are also left to face attitudes of racism and ethnocentrism. For example, in an interview conducted by Susan Heske with two Indian lesbians named Utsa and Khayal, she admits that when she first met Khayal, her appearance did not meet her original conception of what a lesbian should look like.
I know when I first met you Khayal, you were in traditional dress. I was somewhat taken aback to find that you were a lesbian. And in thinking about that I realised that as a white woman I have a very narrow-minded conception of lesbianism in other societies…. (Heske 1986: 135)

Another factor that contributes to this invisibility is that of fear, explains Maieli: “I can’t speak for others but I know a big thing holding me back was fear, fear of what my family would think and what others in the community might say or think. That’s a huge factor for all South Asian women regardless of orientation” (Personal Interview via E-mail, Apr. 2, 2018). When she first “came out” to her parents, Bianca Maieli explains that her parents initially had a negative reaction but after finding the right partner several years later, they have now become more accepting of her sexuality. Her mention of finding the “right partner” is in reference to her relationship with her fiancé, Saima Ahmad (see above Figure 1.8). She adds further:

It’s been a journey but I’m very proud of how far my parents have come. Most of my family is very accepting however there are other family that I’m not out to and I’ll cross that bridge when I get there. (Personal Interview via E-mail, Apr. 2, 2018)

Regarding discrimination within the Indian community, Maieli explains that her Indian family is very accepting of her sexuality and that she has been fortunate to not have experienced any intolerance directly. However, she does in fact, admit that she may have received some “awkward” stares from uncles and aunties. In terms of navigating within the Los Angeles music industry, Maieli has not directly experienced difficulty booking gigs but explains that if she has, she is unaware of it:
Maybe without knowing it, maybe there’s someone who isn’t booking me because of my ethnicity or sexual orientation but I wouldn’t know it. I don’t seek out gigs, so the people that approach me to play are people who are fans of my music and already know what I’m about. (Personal Interview via E-mail, Apr. 2, 2018)

From her response, it is clear that DJ Maieli has cultivated a strong following (particularly online), that enables her complete authority and choice over the type of environment she performs in. Unlike some artists who have compromised their own image in order to establish a successful career in the music industry, DJ Maieli has formed a network of individuals who share similar values, interests, and socio-political views and has essentially, created safe space to freely express herself, while also representing the individuals marginalized due to their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality.

I love to see queer women of color coming up, and we’re seeing so many of them making it in the music industry – Syd tha kid, Kehlani, & Hayley Kiyoko to name a few, so I want to keep that trend going and hopefully inspire more queer women and women of color to showcase their art and hopefully I can be an example because I didn’t have that representation of myself growing up. (Personal Interview via E-mail, Apr. 2, 2018)

Maieli’s online engagement and transparency with her sexuality reinforces Susan Driver’s notion that “online musical dialogues, friendship networks, and like events helps queer youth to count the heteronormative ethos of their social environments” (Driver 2007:198) while counteracting the ethnocentrism faced by many queer South Asian females within the broader lesbian community. For example, Figure 1.9, provided below, are photos she posted on her Instagram from her younger brother’s birthday celebration. On the right, is a picture of Maieli and her partner, Saima,
wearing traditional Indian clothes and accessories, and the photo on the left is them with Maieli’s two younger brothers and her father. These photographs serve to challenge this “generic lesbian mold” Greene refers to, while simultaneously serving as role-models for queer Indian females. These two photographs hold extreme significance for LGBTQIA youth, especially those within the Indian diaspora because it provides a sense of hope for those contemplating “coming out” to their parents. The mere fact that Saima and Bianca are wearing Indian clothes not only diversifies the perceptions of the broader predominantly white, European-American lesbian community, but also serves to challenge perceptions shared within the Indian community as well.

Figure 1.9 Maieli and her fiancé, Saima Ahmad (left); Maieli’s father and brothers (right).

Aside from promoting her music and sharing personal photos with her fans, DJ Maieli also utilizes her social media accounts to promote social movements and ideologies that align with her moral values. For example, DJ Maieli and her partner, Saima Ahmad, are co-founders of the blog/podcast series called, BRWN HIVE in
order to promote up and coming artists, especially female artists, as a means to showcase their work and help spread their music. Another way in which DJ Maieli uses her media presence to shed light on queer women of color in music is through her active participation in workshops, panel discussions, and other forms of community engagement. For example, Maieli participated in a panel discussion entitled, “Being Queer in the Indian Music Industry: Challenges and Opportunities” in June of 2016 in Surrey, Canada, as part of an event called “Bhangra: She” (see Figure B.8). And as recent as this past April, Maieli also was a guest speaker and DJ, for the event, SESSO Sessions. This collaborative event was sponsored by SheSaid.So, an organization for women who work in the music industry, as well as the organization, Intersessions, which sponsors music production workshops throughout California and parts of Canada. Through her community engagement, strong online presence, and her overall transparency with her sexuality, DJ Maieli serves as a role model for budding queer female artists of color, while also representing the deconstruction of the dominant, heterosexual narrative that makes up portions of India’s history.
“Bollyhood,” Missy Elliot, and the Autonomy of Remix Sampling

Figure 1.10 Images of DJ Bianca Maieli performing at various events.

“I think as South Asian women we always hide facets of ourselves from our family and community and live double lives and being in performing arts kind of presents this authentic self that is extremely vulnerable.”

- DJ Bianca Maieli

DJ Maieli has developed her own musical style that places an emphasis on female empowerment and brown beauty through her choice of artists to cover and what lyrics are to be mixed. Essentially, Maieli has total control when it comes to constructing a unique and memorable mix for her consumer/listening audience. When asked to describe her music-making process, Maieli explains that her creative process “varies” in terms of prescribing to a particular formula or approach to constructing a music track, to which she elaborates further - “Sometimes it can start with a melody in my head, or I’ll start playing around with a vocal sample or a drum pattern and then build from there.”30 Her somewhat ambiguous answer is indicative of the very nature of the remix process. According to Edward Navas, author of *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling*, the art of remix is parasitical in the sense that it is reliant

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30 (Personal Interview via E-mail, Apr. 2, 2018)
on “cultural value to be at play” (Navas 2007: 4) because remix itself has no formal structure and is thus considered a meta-genre which, “subsumes a wide variety of styles and genres” (Anderton 2012: 421).

Sampling in Remix is mainly used as a recombinant tool that successfully proposes the old as new and the conventional as innovative because Remix allows for history to be suspended. The act of sampling in Remix privileges space [and] dismiss[es] time…”. (Navas 2007:160)

Furthermore, the art of sampling tracks into a remix, functions as a “cultural glue” that can adhere to a variety of musical forms based on the needs of a particular culture or cultures. In alignment with Jacques Attali’s notion that music reflects the fabrication of society (Attali 1985: 4), Navas positions remix in congruence with said notion, stating:

...I consider Remix to be the result of the domestication of noise on a meta-level of power and control, as simulacrum and spectacle. Applying Attali’s theory of noise to Remix exposes how and why Remix is able to move with ease across media and culture, both formally and conceptually. (Navas 2007: 6)

To contextualize, Bianca Maieli’s use of remix and beat-making serves as an autonomous tool that positions herself as both, an authoritative figure and as a representation of a series of subcultures (queer, desi, female, Muslim, etc.) within the Los Angeles music scene. The role of the DJ can therefore, be viewed as what Reynolds refers to as “crusaders fighting for a cause” (Reynolds 1999: 275) that construct meta-tracks or remix, in order to depict “an abstract emotional narrative with peaks and valleys” (Reynolds 1999: 273). Furthermore, Bianca Maieli’s role and responsibilities as a DJ or “crusader,” bringing together a variety of musical forms
and cultures, and subcultures, parallels her method of online circulation through the
use of hashtags or “textual marker[s]” (Bruns et al. 2013: 316). “Because of their
algorithmic construction, hashtags organize, link, and archive conversations and also
make conversations more visible by trending them…[and] connect together salient
issues, events, experiences, and beliefs” (Kuo 2018: 498).

“Indo-Rain”

Supplied with the caption - “I wanted to make a cumbia track that used
Bollywood and missy elliott samples… so I did. Hope you enjoy :)” (see Figure B.9),
DJ Maieli premiered the track, “Indo-Rain” to her SoundCloud account. Since the
track’s upload three years ago, “Indo-Rain” has been played almost 7,000 by
SoundCloud account users, it has accrued 175 ‘hearts’ and has been ‘reblogged’
almost 50 times (Video 1.2). Complete with user-generated hashtags like #bollyhood,
#bollywood, #maieli, #cumbia, #missy elliott, and #saathiya, Maieli utilizes
SoundCloud’s hashtag search-function in order to make her content searchable to the
public, increase online circulation of her music (which leads back to her), while also
unifying individuals under a shared “textual marker” (Bruns et al. 2013: 316). “Their
[hashtags] primary value may be in elevating and circulating discourse, but these
hashtags also help establish grounds for participation, build individual and collective
identity, and organize for collective action” (Kuo 2018: 496). In relation to the
hashtags associated with the song, “Indo-Rain,” Maieli not only sonically merges her
ethnicity (Bollywood song - India; cumbia beat - Colombia; and Missy Elliott - America) but also textually. For example, by generating the hashtag, “bollywood,” any Bollywood enthusiast and/or person from within the Indian diaspora who searches the word, ‘Bollywood’ in SoundCloud will not only find DJ Maieli’s “Indo-Rain” but also, other songs and podcasts tagged under ‘Bollywood.’ The same can be said with the use of the hashtags, “cumbia” and “missy elliott.” Since each hashtag is representative of a particular community of users, DJ Maieli is creating the opportunity for these different communities to access “Indo-Rain,” generating a meta-like community or ‘fan base.’ This meta-like fanbase, generated by Maieli, not only parallels the “many selves” that makeup her unified identity, but also serves as a reflection of her music and the very meta-genre of remix.

![Figure 1.11 Play-bar of her track “Indo-Rain.”](image)

The musical structure of “Indo-Rain” is grounded in a cumbia rhythm that is representative of her Colombian heritage, and includes the fusion of samples from Missy Elliot and of the Bollywood film, Saathiya. Maieli isolates a stanza from Missy Elliott’s 1997 song “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly),” which says: “When the rain hits my
I take and [inhale, cough] me some indo.” Along with another stanza from the song, “Can We” by the R&B trio, SWV, featuring Missy Elliott. Maieli splices the track, “Can We,” and then isolates the stanza only Missy Elliott sings: “Can we get kinky tonight? I got so many things on my mind, I never seen a guy so fly, I like it when you do me, do me.” Although these two stanzas are from two different songs, Maieli seamlessly merges them within the track in order to create a single and unified vocal part. The very incorporation of Missy Elliott’s voice operating within this track functions as the representative ‘voice’ or sonic embodiment, of female empowerment, gender equality, and sex positivity. In her article entitled “Black Women Queering the Mic: Missy Elliott Disturbing the Boundaries of Racialized Sexuality and Gender,” Nikki Lane argues that through Elliott’s music, her actions, and even the way she dresses, challenges heteronormativity and male-dominance within the rap industry while also making “bold statements about racialized gender and sexuality that fall outside the notions of propriety in both dominant culture and in hip-hop culture” (Lane 2011: 778). For example, the music video for her 2004 hit, “I’m Really Hot,” shows Elliott sporting parachute pants and a puffy jacket while she raps about her beauty and self-image without conforming to the “pre-prescribed notions of beauty” (George, 2016, www.dazeddigital.com). Maieli puts Missy Elliott in dialogue with the Hindi song, “Chupke Se,” featured in the 2002 Bollywood film Saathiya (‘Companion’ in Hindi). The film is a romantic drama about a wealthy, upper-class man named Aditya who meets Suhani, a middle-class woman, and the two fall in love despite their class differences. Prescribing to one of the common narratives depicted
in many Bollywood films - forbidden love, Aditya and Suhani secretly elope and return to their respective lives in order to keep their marriage hidden from their families, hence the context behind the song, “Chupke Se.” The song-structure itself is an exchange between the male and female protagonists (Aditya and Suhani) who both express their love and commitment to each other while also reflecting on the deceit in which their vows have been based on. In the context of DJ Maieli’s “Indo-Rain,” Maieli isolates the first stanza of the piece that is sung by the male protagonist (Aditya), who sings the following:

**Doston Se... Doston Se Jhootee Mooti Dusaron Ka Naam Le Ke**
Lying to the friends, and in the name of others

**Phir Meri Baatein Karna, Yaara Raat Se Din Karna**
I still talk about You, My beloved, from night till day

**Lambi Judai Teri Bada Mushkil Hai**
Your long separation makes it very difficult

**Aahon Se Dil Bharna, Yaara Raat Se Din Karna**
To fill my heart with tears, My beloved, from night till day

**Kab Ye Poori Hogi Door Ye Doori Hogi (x2)**
When shall this finish, and this separation shall be over

**Roz Safar Karna, Yaara Raat Se Din Karna**
Walk onwards everyday, My beloved, from night till day

Maieli then splits and isolates the second stanza of “Chupke Se” to which, the female protagonist Suhani sings the following lines:

**Chupke Se Chupke Se Raat Ki Chaadar Tale**
Secretly, underneath the blanket of the night

**Chaand Ki Bhi Aahat Na Ho Baadal Ke Pechhe Chale**
May there not be the noise of the Moon's footsteps, let's go behind the clouds

**Jale Katara Katara, Gale Katara Katara**
Every part of my body burns, every part melts

**Raat Bhi Na Hile Aadhi Aadhi**
May the night not pass, even half

**Raat Bhi Na Hile Aadhi Aadhi Ye**
May this night doesn't pass, even half
Chupke Se Chupke Se Raat Ki Chaadar Tale
Secretively, underneath the blanket of the night

The samples Maieli isolates in both, “Chupke Se” and the two Missy Elliott songs, are then placed in dialogue with each other, solidifying the overall song-structure of “Indo-Rain.” The following table serves as a visual skeleton of song and the way in which Maieli positions these different two songs from different genres into a single and cohesive product. The repurposing of these samples, therefore, open the door to generate other levels of meaning and association (cultural, social, political, etc.). I believe that the way in which she puts the male vocal part in dialogue with Missy Elliott’s line: “when the rain hits my window, I take and [inhale, cough] me some indo” serves to represent queer women of color dismissing this male voice that speaks of “lying to friends.” In contrast, the female voice in “Chupke Se” sings of physical and emotional intimacy that must remain hidden from family and friends and therefore, exemplifies Maieli’s comment regarding South Asian women hiding “facets of [themselves] from [their] family and community.” However, this particular stanza sung by the female protagonist is then challenged with Missy Elliott’s forward candid proposition, “can we get kinky tonight?” as a means of combating the stereotypical image of the coy and yet, flirty female, by asserting a more direct narrative where the woman has complete control over her sexuality and sexual interactions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. R. Rahman, Murtaza Khan, Qadir Khan (Male Voices)</th>
<th>Missy Elliott</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doston Se... Doston Se... Jhoootee Monti Dusaron Ka Naam Le Ke Lying to the friends, and in the name of others</td>
<td>Missy Elliott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phir Meri Baatein Karna, Yaara Raat Se Din Karna I still talk about You, My beloved, from night till day</td>
<td>Missy Elliott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lambi Judai Teri Bada Mushkil Hai Your long separation makes it very difficult</td>
<td>Missy Elliott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aashon Se Dil Bharnaa, Yaaras Raath Se Din Karna To fill my heart with tears, My beloved, from night till day</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phir Meri Baatein Karna, I still talk about You,</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Roz Safar Karna, Yaara Raat Se Din Karna Walk onwards everyday, My beloved, from night till day</td>
<td>Missy Elliott</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sadhana Sargam (Female Voice)</th>
<th>Missy Elliott</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chupke Se Lag Ja Gale Raat Ki Chaadar Tale Chaand Ki Bhi Aashat Na Ho Baadal Ke Poochhe Chale Secretively, embrace me, underneath the blanket of the night May there not be the noise of the Moon’s footsteps, let’s go behind the clouds</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>Missy Elliott</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion:

The repurposing of existing music into a remix opens the door to other levels of meaning and association which parallels the complexity of the desi culture. The term desi has adopted many associations as it made its way to North America and can be viewed in the context of this thesis, as an umbrella term that unifies people of varying degrees of South Asian/Indian ancestry. As seen in the case of Bianca Maieli, the coexisting of Colombian, South Indian, and American roots have resulted in the negotiation and formation of her desi identity. This constant negotiation is further complicated when the layer of queerness is added into the mix. However, to reiterate the works of Driver and Maliepaard, DJ Maieli’s online engagement enables her to “achieve a vision of a multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy comes from having access to our many selves” (Driver 2007:170). Through her community engagement, strong online presence, and her overall transparency with her sexuality, DJ Maieli serves as a role model for budding queer female artists of color, while also representing the deconstruction of the dominant, heterosexual narrative that makes up portions of India’s history. With her growing fanbase and professional network, DJ Bianca Maieli is contributing to an overall collective that serves to challenge both, the perceptions of the broader lesbian community and Indian community, while also paving the way for queer women of color to showcase their music.
CHAPTER 2

_Bhangrā Funk_: A Case Study of Female Ḍholi M-Tooray

![Figure 2.1 Still frames of M-Tooray featured in a recent music video.](image)

In April of 2018, female Ḍholi M-Tooray posted the following comment on her Instagram page:

> Love is love no matter what form it comes in. To show same sex queer relationships in an Indian music video is unheard of and groundbreaking. This proves the negative mentality towards gay in desi and other ethnic cultures is changing. This shows Queer as the new normal.

This powerful statement was accompanied with a brief, video excerpt featuring M-Tooray in the premiere of Mickey Singh’s new music video that is comprised of pro-equality lyrics and imagery ([Video 2.1](#)).

In this chapter, I will explore the way in which North America’s first female Ḍhol player, Malinder Tooray, known by her stage name, M-Tooray, cultivates a space for herself both on and offline as a queer brown female musician in Los Angeles. As a member of the desi community, M-Tooray embraces her North Indian,

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31 Mickey Singh is a Punjabi-American desi singer-songwriter, known for combining American music like jazz and hip hop with Punjabi music.
Punjabi roots through her musicianship with the dhel. This double-headed instrument when discussed in its original context, functions as a method of broadcast, signaling to those within the surrounding environment of a particular event and/or occurrence. According to Gibb Schreffler, the only time the dhel could be considered as “music” is when it is accompanying other instruments within a popular music setting (2010). In relation to M-Tooray and her career as a professional dheli, what are the ways in which she is calling forth people’s attentions? Through the use of digital ethnography, I argue that M-Tooray’s role as a dhel player, LGBTQ activist, and her social media presence, contribute to the growing circulation and visibility of not only her professional music career, but also fosters an online, pan-Indian community and culture.

North America’s First Female Dheli

Born in Los Angeles, California, Malinder Tooray is one of three children raised in an Indian-American household. “I am first generation American Sikh...Both
of my parents are British so they’re not your typical Indian uh, parents from India.”

In an interview with the magazine, *Mandala Weddings*, M-Tooray explains that she first became interested in the traditional Punjabi instrument known as the dhol at the age of thirteen when one of her cousins left their instrument behind. “I started when I was at the age of 13, my cousins had left the drum behind. So I figured I may as well learn it. The rest is history!” (*Mandala Weddings* 2016). She explains further, that her two younger brothers (Figure 2.3) also became interested in the dhol and together, with the help and support of their parents, the three siblings began to book gigs for various Indian-American cultural events, specifically for Punjabi weddings and holidays. Fast-forward to twenty-years later, Malinder and her two brothers still perform together and continue to book gigs throughout the LA area under their group name, DholNation.

![Figure 2.3](image.png)

*Figure 2.3* Childhood photos of M-Tooray with her two brothers (*right & left*). Photo of her mother (*center*) and of her father (*left*).

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32 (Personal Interview via Phone, Jan. 17, 2019)
Two Punjabs?: An Overview of Punjab’s History

Entrenched in a complex history, the Punjab region extends across two different countries: Pakistan and North India. For the sake of brevity and adherence to the overall focus of this chapter, when I refer to ‘Punjabi culture,’ I am specifically referring to North India’s multifaceted culture that is completely dictated by religious influences such as Sikhism and Islam, and the intersections of different social castes. In alignment with Gibb Schreffler’s definition of ‘Punjabi culture,’ this “open-ended,” malleable network refers to “an indefinite set of common understandings of symbols that have been learned by people with many similar experiences” (Schreffler 2010: 26). With the Punjab region’s long history of migration, territorial disputes, and tribal conquests, the male-gendered instrument known as the dhol, represents the Punjabi identity as a whole and thus, serves as a regional symbol, that is connected not only to the all-male, Punjabi folk dance, known as bhangra but has since developed an association with the widespread South Asian diaspora music scene (Schreffler 2010).

The earliest historical account of Punjab, India, can be traced back to the 4th century with Alexander the Great. At this time, Punjab’s geographic makeup was heavily divided by independent rulers. These divisions continued to fluctuate under the rulings of varying empires33 and territorial negotiations, especially during the Islamic invasion of India in the late 12th century with the establishment of the Delhi

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33 Maurya Empire (circa 321-185 BCE), Gupta Empire (4th-6th century CE), and the Harsha Empire (circa 606-647 CE).
Sultanate. Nonetheless, the most significant part of Punjab’s history that remains relevant to this chapter, is the emergence of the Sikh religion in the 15th century during the Mughal rule by a man named Nanuk. The rise of this religious sect incited centuries of violence and conflict under the predominant Muslim rule. However, with the decline of the Mughal Empire by the 18th century, a man by the name of Ranjit Singh, established himself as the maharaja (‘great king’) of the Sikh kingdom, who effectively unified the Punjab territories. Following his death in 1839, the British sought the opportunity to intervene, which ultimately lead to the annexation and establishment of Punjab as a province under the British Empire. The Punjab province remained under British control until February of 1947 when the British government declared its withdrawal from India. In response, political negotiations ensued between the British and Jawaharlal Nehru of Indian National Congress Party, along with the representative of the Muslim League, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Since both Indian leaders had a difference in views with the territorial treatment of the province, it was decided that a partition was to be established between Pakistan and India.

This demographic logic belied an on-the-ground reality, in which Hindus and Muslims—alongside Sikhs, Christians, and others—had lived side by side in all parts of the subcontinent for centuries. Yet, with the stroke of a cartographer’s pen, families and communities found that, virtually overnight, they had become religious “minorities” who now lived on the “wrong” side of the new border. (Sreenivas 2017)

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34 “Whereas Jinnah called for a national homeland for Muslims, whom he feared would be politically disenfranchised in a Hindu-majority India, Nehru insisted upon a united India that encompassed the entire subcontinent” (Sreenivas 2017).
The implementation of this division lead to a mass of people fleeing their homes in seek of religious refuge\textsuperscript{35} - Muslims crossed over to Pakistan while Hindus and Sikhs relocated to India (Figure 2.4). Chaos and violence ensued between the two religions, resulting in the bloodshed of around a million people and lingering tensions between the two countries that still exists today.

\textbf{DholNation: An Overview of the Construction, History, and Cultural Context}

The history of the Punjab \textit{dhol} is muddy territory with no direct timeline of its origins. However, the first piece of literary evidence that mentions the word ‘\textit{dhol},’ stems back to the 17th century during the Mughal Empire. For example, the religious

\textsuperscript{35} Although Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs lived beside each other for centuries, the partition inadvertently separated many individuals from their religious communities thus, making them “minorities” in their own homes.
text, Dasam Granth (circa 1690), the word ḍhol is mentioned within the context of military band instruments, especially the kettledrums. “This link between the ḍhol and kettledrums persists to the present in the ḍhol-tāsā groups associated with Muharram festivals in South Asia and the Diaspora” (Schreffler 2010: 354).

The physical construction of the ḍhol consists of a large, hollow wooden barrel to serve as the main body and resonator of the instrument with two drumheads on enclosing either side of the hollow barrel. The drumheads are typically constructed from goatskin:

Historically made of goatskin, one drumhead (puṛā) is thin while the other is thick, to facilitate the two contrasting levels of pitch of the ḍhol. The treble head or “feminine” side is called variously māḍīn, tāl or puṛā. The bass head or “masculine” side is called nar, dhāmā/dhamā, … or bam. (Schreffler 2010: 411-412)

Another element that permits the production of the ḍhol’s boisterous sound is the use of two wooden sticks. The bass head of the drum is struck with a wooden stick that is curved almost at a 45-degree angle, called daggā. While the treble head is struck with a straight wooden stick referred to as chaṭī. For example, M-Tooray has

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36 The compositions within the Dasam Granth are commonly used in Sikh liturgies.
37 Muḥarram is the first month in the Islamic calendar and is one of the four sacred months in the calendrical system.
38 The wooden body of the ḍhol is constructed from the wood of Mango and “Indian rosewood” trees.
39 By the 1990s, ḍholis began to opt for plastic drums heads for convenience and economic reasons.
included the daggā and chaṭī as part of her logo, which also features a pair of hands in the añjali mudra (gesture) and the head of a drum (Figure 2.5). Also, within rural Punjabi culture, the dhol is often adorned with decorative tassels and/or pom-poms called phuhmmaṇ, as a means to “beautify objects of which one is particularly proud” (Schreffler 2010: 448).

They adorn the reins of horses and cattle, just as they do the mirrors and rears of trucks and rickshaws. Given the status of the dhol in Punjabi culture, it is not surprising that one rarely sees a dhol without phuhmaṇ-s. They are like the dhol’s clothing. Styles of phuhmaṇ vary, as do methods of making them. Older styles used rawhide fringes in their design, while most contemporary dhols have yarn pom-poms on the end. (Schreffler 2010: 448)

With regards to technique and aural aesthetics, most performances begin with the articulation of drum pattern called the toṛā, which sets the tempo and begins the rhythmic cycle of the piece. The toṛā functions as a structural marker that signals the beginning and end of a performance. The toṛā also serves to sonically mark the end of a vocal/instrumental section and/or change in rhythm (Schreffler 2010: 477). Another basic technique played on the dhol is the girgirā or ‘roll,’ which involves the chaṭī to rest on the treble head of the drum and tightly rebounds (Schreffler 2010: 473). The chaṭī strokes are typically accompanied with alternating daggā strokes in the bass head of the drum.⁴⁰

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⁴⁰“Dholis may create the effect of a timbre accent by placing a given stroke at a slightly different place on the drumhead. For most dholis, this is the extent of variation in chaṭī strokes. Some dholis, however, have a more explicit approach to varying chaṭī strokes that reflects a system akin to the tabla-like classical approach. They make a clear differentiation between open and closed strokes and between different points of contact on the drumhead” (Schreffler 2010: 472-73).
Individuals who are heavily associated with the dhol are of the agricultural community called Jatts, many of whom are of the Sikh religion (referred to as Jatt Sikhs),\textsuperscript{41} due to their practice of the folk dance, bhangrā. The relationship between the folk dance of bhangrā and the dhol go hand-in-hand; you simply cannot have one without the other. Given how popular bhangrā, it’s surprising to know that this particular folk dance was not historically documented until the late 19th century. The dance is stems from the spring harvest festival called, Vaisakhi, celebrated in mid-April. Within a traditional performance context, the dholi is positioned in the center of the dance space while the dancers move around the center-space, throwing their hands in the air and bending both knees in synch with the dhol’s rhythmic pattern (Video 2.2). One of these popular rhythmic patterns associated with the Indian Punjab, is a pattern named after the dance itself. The bhangrā rhythm is commonly composed in a four-measure cycle, however, there are also aesthetic variants of this popular rhythm. For example, Figure 2.6 presents one of the common variations of the bhangrā rhythm, where the first half of the cycle is expressed with three bass strokes.

\textsuperscript{41} In actuality, “the Jatt Sikh, the normalized, dominant identity in Punjab, is farthest from the actual identities of dholis. Furthermore, because of this social distance coupled with the Jatt Sikh dominance within the society, knowledge about the lifestyle of dholis in the contemporary Punjab ranges from marginal to none” (Schreffler 2010: 70).
“Men’s Business”: (Un)gendering the Dhol

Within the ḍholi communities, females very seldom touch the ḍhols, much less tap on them or tinker with playing them. Speculations could be made as to why this came to be, but the only empirical answer is that it is simple custom that the ḍhol is “men’s business.”

(Gibb Schreffler 2010: 74)

It comes with no surprise that the gendering of musical instruments occurs across all music cultures worldwide. From the “masculine” wind and percussive instruments like the Bulgarian gaida (bagpipe) and the kweli drum native to Chad, to the stereotypical “feminine” instruments like the South Indian sarasvati vīṇa and the European pedal harp, the gendering of instruments intersects with levels of professionalism, hereditary castes, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and even urban-rural areas (Doubleday 2008: 5). Ethnomusicologist, Veronica Doubleday, draws upon the anthropological work of Alfred Gell and his theory of agency in order to illuminate the way in which humans apply social power and position to objects relative to their culture.

The anthropologist Alfred Gell’s theory of agency readily applies to musical instruments. He argues that significant objects (such as dolls, cars or works of art) occupy positions as social agents in human culture (Gell 1998, 7). They have a personhood of their own, and they become 'enmeshed in a texture of social relationships' (ibid., 16-17). Gendered meanings are part of an instrument's personhood, and as such they are fluid and negotiable.

(Doubleday 2008: 4)

In relation to the male-gendered ḍhol, professional ḍholis are typically born into a ḍhol-playing caste such as the Bazingars, Mirasis, and Jogis, and thus, are always linked to their particular ethnic identities. However, according to Gibb Schreffler,
there are few exceptions to this rule most of which, are situated outside of these professional castes and most popularly occur in the Punjab diaspora.

In North America and, especially, in the U.K., many women now do play the dhhol. These are not renegades in that context; Ustad Lal Singh Bhatti of California has several female students himself. Once, while in Canada, even Garib Dass taught dhhol to a young woman. It appears that as long as this phenomenon is outside the traditional dholi society in effect in Punjab, it does not threaten the norm... Within Punjab yet away from the mainstream world of the hereditary professionals, the practice of women playing the dhhol has been entertained in but a handful of instances. (Schreffler 2010: 74-5)

Therefore, Gell’s notion of agency as flexible and negotiable, is exemplified in the case of M-Tooray and other female dholis outside of Punjab society and within the diaspora. In accordance with Pat Kirkham and Judy Attfield, once the relationship between an object and gender are formed, the gender-object association becomes accepted as “normal” and thus, “invisible” (Kirkham & Attfield 1996: 1). “Invisible” in this context, simply means that the gender-object association with an instrument is so deeply integrated within a society, that it does not stick out from societal norms. In present-day, North American society, for example, the piano is commonly viewed as a gender-neutral instrument (Stronsick et al. 2018: 897); and thus, remains invisible in the sense that it does not fall outside of societal perceptions.

Figure 2.7 M-Tooray (right) with two upcoming female dholis: Jasmine Solano (right) and Melanie Fiona (center).
In contrast, M-Tooray’s career in a practice that is culturally and ethnically “male,” even amongst the Punjabi diaspora, has the potential to begin a larger discussion regarding issues with gender. Therefore, M-Tooray has ceased this distinction as an opportunity to stand out and thus, capitalize on her career and title as North America’s first female ḍholi by paving the way for aspiring female ḍholis (Figure 2.7).

**From Bhangṛā to Bhangṛā Funk**

![Figure 2.8 Images of M-Tooray collaborating with BFunk.](image)

With an influx of Punjabi migration to the United Kingdom and shortly after, to the United States, bhangṛā was first reconfigured in the 1950s and began to operate as Punjab’s ‘national’ identity and thus, expanded the scope of what it means to ‘do bhangṛā’ (Schreffler 2013: 384).

As a descriptive term it appropriately captures the music’s fusion of traditional folk bhangra lyrics and beats with urban black and pop sounds into a new and distinct genre of British bhangra dance and music. Interestingly, this genre is informing the composition and reception of bhangra music more generally throughout the South Asian diaspora in exciting ways; for example, it has been a benchmark for the production and development of bhangra music in North America. (Dudrah 2002: 363)
As a result of this reconfiguration, the dhol in both its regional and diasporic context, serves as a multidimensional semiotic tool that has the ability to “evoke a number of sentiments and associations through its significance on many different fronts” (Schreffler 2010: 2). However, when the dhol accompanies bhangra in a traditional and/or fusion dance performance, the dhol is considered a functional instrument or tool, that will accompany the dance and/or music being performed, but the drum beats themselves are viewed as separate and yet, complimenting sonic patterns that draws attention to the music/dance, but it is not the music itself. “[T]he playing of the dhol could be said to always be a ‘call’ in so far as it attracts a gathering of people and communicates that something is happening” (Schreffler 2010: 499). Therefore, the dhol’s primary function is that of a broadcasting system, capturing the attention of those within the surrounding environment. For example, the following is a video clip of M-Tooray and her brother announcing the arrival of the groom by leading a pre-wedding procession known as baraat42 (Video 2.3).

Although she continues to book gigs for Punjabi-American weddings and traditional bhangra performances, M-Tooray has been pretty vocal about her mission to completely enculturate the dhol within mainstream popular music such as rap and hip hop.

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42 Baraat is a pre-wedding procession for the groom and is commonly practiced in North Indian. “Baraat is a ritualized journey that maps out the new relationships between the two families involved and in which various emotions and social identities are explicitly acted out” (Booth 2007: 63). The groom is typically led on horseback and is followed by friends and family to the wedding hall.
I’m trying to find ways to make it trendy for the younger generation so we don’t forget our culture, you know? So we don’t forget art and history...this is music that shouldn’t be forgotten...I love playing the ḍhol for dancehall, reggae and other forms of African music because I feel like it's such a unique sound but uh, I just want to change the world with music and bring all sexualities, all genders, all races, colors, all ages together. (Personal Interview via Phone, Jan. 17, 2019)

As an avid fan of Biggie and Tupac, M-Tooray recalls feeling a sense of cultural disconnect as a child from her friends because she was only permitted to listen to Bollywood film songs and bhangrā:

I wasn't allowed to listen to hip hop growing up. My parents didn't like the foul language. I really wish that they let us listen to it because... it would have helped me understand why there's so much racism. I didn't have knowledge about where racism stemmed from and why everyone was so segregated. Music was a way of expressing [this]…. (Veylex 2018)

According to Nitasha Tamar Sharma, the alignment of brown and black identities, specifically from the perspective of South Asians, is the repurposing of existing racial categories into one’s own approach to shaping their racial identity.

By sampling they recast meanings of ethnicity and race -- overlapping yet distinct phenomena -- through relations with co-ethnics and other minorities. Thus, instead of imagining ethnicity as a chosen and malleable self-expression and race as a ‘problem’ fixed and imposed by others, they find that race provides a sense of self-efficacy and empowerment. By claiming their non-White status, the artists reconcile their racialization by others with the affiliations and politics that they themselves have elected. (Sharma 2010: 89)

This sense of solidarity between South Asian and Black and/or African American culture has manifested into the appropriation of hip hop and rap influences within South Asian American music; as seen in her numerous music collaborations, as well as her own compositions. For example, M-Tooray performed with her friend and fellow desi artist, DJ Maieli, at City of Bhangrā’s annual art festival in Vancouver,
Canada. One of the pieces they performed was a part of DJ Maieli’s remix of Canadian rapper, Drake’s 2016 single, “One Dance”, while M-Tooray applies improvisatory rhythmic patterns on the ḍhol. When applying Schreffler’s definition of the ḍhol as a multidimensional semiotic tool, the ḍhol in this particular performance setting represents not only the complexity of the Punjabi culture but also the broader South Asian diaspora,43 as well as a common affinity with black culture. A prime example of this is presented in M-Tooray’s collaboration with the popular LA-based dance company, BFUNK. Founded by dancers, Chaya Kumar and Shivani Bhagwan, BFUNK offers classes in what they refer to as “BhangrāFunk,” which is a hybrid dance that includes influences from Bollywood, bhangrā, and hip hop (Video 2.4). This common affinity with black culture as discussed by Anjali Roy in her article, “Black Beats with a Punjabi Twist,” can be attributed to the “‘diaspora space’ [that] enables the black brown sonic contact ‘through accentuating rather than dissolving cultural difference in the performance of new Punjabi/Indian/Asian ethnicities’” (Roy 2008: 95). This accentuation is therefore “marked by a shared...South Asian pan-ethnic identity…. [where] the brown ethno-racial identification enables a productive movement between a conventional notion of diaspora oriented toward an ancestral homeland and a politically charged space that centers minority experiences in the postcolonial era” thus, unifying those with varying degrees of South Asian ancestry under the collective identity as ‘desi’ (Hsu 2013: 388-389).

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43 Including a wide array of different and shared cultural influences that tie a number of religions, languages, castes, ethnicities, and even countries under a unified category and/or social identity.
In the case of M-Tooray, she exemplifies the desi identity because she has managed to establish herself in several different facets within the Los Angeles music scene - from leading the customary groom’s procession at numerous Punjabi-American weddings, to collaborating with fellow queer desi artist, DJ Bianca Maieli. To contextualize, despite both M-Tooray and DJ Maieli are of Indian ancestry, there lies several layers differences. For instance, Malinder’s parents are from Punjab, North India and raised both her and brothers as members of the Sikh religion. DJ Maieli, however, is of the Muslim faith and is biracial, given that her mother is from Colombia and her father is originally from Kerala, South India. Figure 2.9, is a photo taken of M-Tooray and DJ Maieli performing at the Latin American club called Subsuelo in Los Angeles, California (Video 2.5). M-Tooray essentially recognizes and promotes these cultural differences, prefacing her Instagram post with the caption: “It’s always a pleasure having fun with my brown sister [DJ Bianca Maieli] and bringing our diaspora communities together!” This sense of solidarity is intended to emphasize the diverse ethnic groups that make up the large landscape of India, while also rewriting Punjab’s bloody past between the Muslims and Sikhs. Furthermore, this statement also foregrounding the fact that both artists, identify as
queer women of color and frequently engage in collective action for the education and visibility of queer women of color, especially those within the South Asian diaspora.

Curating a Culture: Circulations Practices and the Formation of an Inclusive Online Community

Figure 2.10 Photos of M-Tooray with her fiancé, Kumari Suraj.

As a self-identified queer woman, M-Tooray explains that it took several years for her family to understand and accept her:

I'm a queer brown girl. At the age of 6 is when I first became curious about my sexuality. As I got older my feelings for women progressed and got deeper and deeper. I didn't know what to do with these feelings. I was just a kid and didn't know how to bring it up and I knew my parents would have no idea how to handle that…. Coming out was very hard - I came out at 18. I met a girl that was also queer. Before meeting her, I had no exposure to other gay people at all...We were having dinner at my parents’ house and I grabbed her hand and told my family I had a confession to make and I was like "she's my girlfriend." And they were like, "yea, she's your friend." I was like, "no, she's my girlfriend - we're in a relationship - I'm gay." Things did not go well. I left home for a week because I was scared. I didn't know what I did wrong - I just wanted to be with this person...It was a struggle for years, but over time my mom started understanding. Now she'll happily tell everyone that she has a gay daughter. It's amazing - I thank god every day that I have the best mom...
ever. I appreciate every gay person that came before me. It's because of the struggles they overcame that we're at where we're at today. (Veylex 2018)

Furthermore, in a personal interview with M-Tooray, she explains that it took some time but she finally feels comfortable in her own skin, and has channeled this into the way in which she presents herself online. She followed-up by stating that she would not have ‘come out’ in any other way and looks back at that part of her life with a sense of pride:

Honestly, there is no other way I would have wanted to ‘come out’. So I’m proud of myself for stepping up with how I felt because uh, I’ve always been a firm believer and I get this from my mom, is that you know, if you don’t stand up for what you believe in and what you want to be to be happy then, it won’t work your way. So I was like, if I want to be happy and this is my life then, “Mom and Dad, I’m gay”. (Personal Interview via Phone, Jan. 17, 2019)

Her transparency about her sexuality, in conjunction with her notoriety as North America’s first female ḍholi, M-Tooray has successfully curated an all-inclusive culture on her various social media platforms. In the interview, she also adds that she has embraced her role of as a representative and mentor particularly for queer Indian/desi females. Due to her successful career and heavy online following, she has received countless messages from Indian and desi females who are struggling with their sexuality and will often personally reach out to them via phone or even in person. M-Tooray explains that as someone who has experienced adversity within her own Indian-American community because of her sexuality, she believes in the importance of forming a strong network of supporters.

As part of the Indian diaspora, queer desi females are not only left to negotiation between their Indian and American culture, but they are also faced with
attitudes of ethnocentrism and notions of a preconceived racialized identity where “race works as the ‘master’ category of that subsumes other potentially ‘transruptive’ identities, positions, and experiences” (Kim 2015: 51). Therefore, the use of social media and other online platforms provides “an alternative to users’ repressed physical reality” (Hsu 2013: 387). According to Susan Driver:

    Online communities help to provide multilayered spaces of self-representation, support, and belonging for youth who are marginalized on the basis of their gender and sexual differences. (Driver 2007: 171)

Furthermore, “Online groups provide queer girls with mediated forms of community through which to disclose changing and variable aspects of selfhood as a mobile process of exchange” that is mutually reinforcing for queer and questioning female youth and young adults (Driver 2007: 172). For instance, within the past 5 years or so, M-Tooray has ventured into the world of modeling, marketing herself as a “tomboy,” “queer,” “androgynous” model, explaining that there is limited representation, especially for androgynous Indian females within the local and mainstream fashion industry:

    I also want to recognize the androgynous Indian girls because that’s…another world that hasn’t really been touched on. You know, there are a lot of beautiful androgynous girls out there…. (Personal Interview via Phone, Jan. 17, 2019)

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44 Androgyne or androgynous can be defined as person who is “partly male and partly female in appearance” (Oxford Dictionary 2019)
Her success as a model has included walking the runway in LA Fashion Week, a feature in an advertisement for Calvin Klein (see Figure B.10 in Appendix B), Michael Costello, and even for the 2018 Coachella festival. Her most recent photoshoot broke new grounds by being the first queer female featured in South Asian Bridal Magazine.
In celebration of magazine’s release, she posted a photo (Figure 2.12) to her Instagram with user-generated hashtags like #queerfashion, #tomboy, and #bridalwear and tagging other Instagram accounts like Vogue India, Brown Girl Magazine, and Dapper Q,\(^{45}\) as a way to increase online circulation, while also unifying individuals under a shared “textual marker” (Bruns et al. 2013: 316).

Additional examples of M-Tooray’s use of this particular circulation method includes her use of motivational and body positive hashtags such as #darkskinbeauty, #femalepower, #confidence, and the title of this thesis - #browngirltakeover. Therefore, the use of user-generated hashtags, the tagging feature enabled on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, along with musical collaborations, and her budding career as a model, contributes to musical experience and image curated by M-Tooray, in that the “musical assemblage becomes an aggregate of mediations - of discourses, embodied experiences, social relations, visual representations, technologies, physical and virtual sites, and other processes and entities that ‘carry’ while transforming, translating, and modifying musical sound...” (Born & Haworth 2017: 609). Furthermore, this notion of unifying a diverse range of individuals under a shared textual marker and/or common interest, also plays itself out in relation to social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, in that individual users with varying degrees of differences such as geographic location, ethnicity, age, religion, etc. are unified through mutual online friends, interest-specific message boards and/or

\(^{45}\) Dapper Q is a queer fashion and empowerment website that is specifically geared towards the transgender community, as well as masculine presenting women; Dapper Q has been a champion for the “unconventionally masculine” and is known for using their large fanbase to promote underrepresented menswear designers.
fandom of a particular band or musician. M-Tooray herself, further supports this line of inquiry by acknowledging the use of the internet and social media as forms of promotion for both, her professional career as a ďholi, while also serving as a role-model for South Asian queer female youth by publicizing her political, cultural, moral, and other personal views, to which she explains:

I find that social media plays an important factor, a lot of people today want to see videos and pics. Social media is key to marketing and advertising. Posting videos and images daily can definitely captures my audience. I love interacting with my followers and fans. I am so humbled that they can understand my passion and drive. It gives me a direct line of communication to liked minded [individuals]. (Mandala Weddings 2016)

To contextualize, I have constructed an interactive network diagram (Map 2.1) in order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of online dissemination and interconnectivity on the popular social media site, Instagram. Depending on the subjectivity of the viewer, the list of people included within this diagram may appear to be random, such as former Project Runway contestant and fashion designer, Michael Costello, and the infamous Indian singer, Bappi Lahiri, known as the “Disco King” - but how are these two individuals from radically different backgrounds and professions relate to M-Tooray? In relation to Wendy Hsu and her article, “Mapping The Kominas”, Hsu argues that the use of social media sites like Facebook and MySpace “articulates the embeddedness of digital media in physically embodied social life and a seamless

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46 It is important to note that depending on the viewer, some connections and persons included in this diagram may to be more obvious than others; the same can be said in relation to the individuals included in this diagram such as DJ Rekha who was the founder of Basement Bhangra in New York City.

47 Bappi Lahiri is known as a successful music director in the 1980s and he is credited for introducing disco beats within Indian popular music.
connection between on and off-life social dynamics” (Hsu 2013: 394). This line of inquiry is further theorized by the work of Born and Haworth to which they argue that the incessant use of the web and other forms of digital media helps foster the dissemination and publicization of contemporary music genres - “the web as a medium stimulates an intensification, expansion, and democratization of this discursivity - whether the discourse is aesthetic, critical, political, commercial, or playful - inciting participation, and speeding up its production and circulation” (Born & Haworth 2017: 611). The integral relationship between one’s life online and offline can therefore, be viewed as a unified representation, that has the ability to function under multiple sub-categorical frameworks within a larger network. Like the concept of desi, one’s virtual life informs and operates under a larger categorical framework, while simultaneously nurturing other sub-facets that make up an individual and/or community.

The “Instagram Social Network Map of M-Tooray” elicits the user to select a person from list 48 provided in order to view the type of relationship the selected individual has in relation to M-Tooray. The type of relationship is indicated by the type of line that connects these individuals to Malinder - the solid green line indicates a close friendship and/or performance collaboration that has been documented on her various social media accounts, while the dotted blue line indicates that these individuals know of each other in a relative context (i.e. - only know each other via

48 The people included on this list are those specifically featured on Malinder’s Instagram account, and include fellow dholis and musicians, dancers, etc.
the Internet) and are considered an ‘acquaintance.’ Although, I am making the distinction between online and offline relationships through the use of this diagram, I would like to reiterate that I am merely pointing out these distinctions as a way to further corroborate the intensification of circulation and participation that is incited through the use of online platforms that has essentially, blurred the lines between one’s life on and offline.

![Instagram Social Network Map of M-Tooray](image)

**Figure 2.13** Photo of the Instagram Social Network Map

For example, if one were to select M-Tooray’s good friend and fellow collaborator, DJ Bianca Maieli (*shown above in Figure 2.13*), one would see that not surprisingly, DJ Maieli has several mutual friends with M-Tooray, as indicated by the green line. These friends and/or fellow collaborators include Indo-Canadian rapper, Horsepowar, whom both Maieli and M-Tooray have collaborated with on almost a yearly basis, desi singer-songwriter, Mickey Singh, who has also performed with both Bianca and Malinder, Bhangra singer, Sukhbir Singh, as well as professional dancer and
Bollywhack founder, Kumari Suraj. Although this interactive network diagram provides a visual aid for the deep interconnectivity that online platforms cultivate, it does, however, have its deficits. For example, although there is the distinction between the degree of familiarity, as indicated by either the solid green line or by the dotted blue line, there is no contexts provided to further specify the type of relationship and in what contexts. Another deficit this diagram generates is the lack biographical information provided for each of individual listed. Therefore, the diagram is reliant on the user to look up each individual artist to gain insight on their background information and thus, does not accurately present the complexity of M-Tooray’s South Asian/professional network. For example, Indian singer and music director, Bappi Lahiri was born in Calcutta in northwest India, where desi singer-songwriter, Mickey Singh is originally from the city of Hoshiarpur, located in India’s state of Punjab where, in comparison, M-Tooray herself, was born into a first-generation Punjabi-American household in Los Angeles, California. Despite the diagram’s deficits, it is important to view this interactive diagram as a simulation experiment; that elicits the user to inquire further about these relationships and thus, use of the diagram itself, further stimulates the circulation of M-Tooray professional and personal image through the type of relationships formed and with whom.

\[49\] Complexity in terms of the diverse makeup of M-Tooray’s followers which include artists from different religious backgrounds (Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, etc.), sexual orientations (queer, pansexual, heterosexual, etc.), ethnic/racial origins (North Indian, South Indian, Indian-American etc.).
Conclusion

Since Malinder Tooray was first featured in Mickey Singh’s music video this past April (as shown in the beginning of this presentation), Malinder has taken on an additional role as a mentor for young, queer desi females.

There's been more and more people reaching out after I was in the Mickey Singh music video. That was the first Desi video that showed a same sex couple in an intimate way. People have messaged me asking for advice on how to come out. (Veylex 2018)

The use of online message boards and other virtual platforms serves as a mutually reinforcing, mobile exchange process that encourages users to experiment with one’s self-presentation or identity. In relation to M-Tooray and her career as a dhol player, the curation of her various online spaces like Facebook and Instagram, transforms and contributes musical sounds or “calls” played by M-Tooray. Through her music collaborations, strong online presence, and her overall transparency with her sexuality, M-Tooray is contributing to the visibility of queer women in the Indian diaspora.
CHAPTER 3
The Pollution of a Tradition?: Addressing Queer Themes in Bharatanatyam

“Wonderful choreography on such a taboo subject!” commented a YouTube user in response to the dance production entitled, “Revelations: Celebrating LGBTQ Stories Through Bharatanatyam”. Although one can assume the intentions of this comment was positive, I cannot help but deconstruct the use of language in this very statement in order to ask - Why is it “taboo”?  

Although the “Revelations” video would not be classified as a ‘typical’ bharatanatyam performance, I argue that IndianRaga’s deliberate choice in audiovisual aesthetics and use of public platforms, in conjunction with the dancers’ emotional investment, has produced a work of art that is accessible in a more global context, while simultaneously challenging what constitutes a classical tradition.
Eternally Auspicious: 
A Look into the Roots, Formation, and Technical Structure of Bharatanatyam

Her beauty, eros, and performing arts are an affirmation of vitality, fertility, and growth. The sheer presence of such woman brings luck as a ‘nityasumaṅgalī’.
(Kersenboom 2013:721)

Rooted in the temple dance known as sadir or dāsī āṭṭam, the South Indian dance tradition known as bharatanatyam, was originally practiced by a hereditary lineage50 of female dancers and musicians known as the dēvadāsi.51 This talented and highly educated52 community of women were considered extremely auspicious53 due to their marital union to a deity,54 along with a reputation for possessing mystical

50 “Murai” meaning hereditary right.
51 Sanskrit Dēvadāsi (dēva = “god” and dāsi = “servant”) and in Tamil it’s Tēvatāci.
52 “Many dēvadāsi were literate, having a level of education that women of higher social status were denied” (Allen & T. Viswanathan 2004: 71).
53 The dēvadāsīs have also been referred to as nityasumaṅgalī (‘ever auspicious women’) because they will never enter the realm of widowhood, a realm which, in Hindu society is considered inauspicious.
54 “They are brought to the temple like brides, well-dressed and adorned with ornaments, auspicious objects and accompanied by their kith and kin and to the accompaniment of holy music. After an elaborate ritual, the temple priest of the deity, ties the sacred necklace
powers to eliminate ailments, like dṛṣṭi āratī (‘evil eye’). Since the dēvadāsi were ritually dedicated to a particular deity, they were the only ones qualified to conduct certain daily temple rituals for the gods such as the puspāṅjali, and the kumbāratī-cāmara (see Figure B.11 in Appendix B). Aside from carrying out daily temple rituals, some dēvadāsi women acquired patrons and would often perform in the royal courts, and participate in festival rituals and religious processions that would extend outside of the temple walls.

When the procession stopped for a moment to allow the god, mounted on a throne in a pavilion, to relax, the dēvadāsi dancers would perform a dance concert (nāṭya kaccēri) for the deity as if he were a king in court. Such a concert resembles the concert suite now considered classical. It incorporates the best of South Indian lyrical poetry, music, and drama, expressing love that bespeaks a strength other than heroism on the battlefield or victory of good over evil. Such nāṭya performance is a form of bhakti devotion: a melting and total surrender to become part of the Divine, dissolving the boundaries of the Self. (Kersenboom 1998: 544)

As discussed in above passage, these devotional dance concerts performed by the dēvadāsi serve as the antecedent of what has now evolved into one of India’s internationally recognized, classical dance forms known as bharatanatyam.

(botu/thali necklace) around their neck to symbolize their marriage with the deity. However, the rite to separate or cut off her from her clan, is not performed” (Tarachand 1991: 7).

55 A short dance piece practiced by the dēvadāsi in the inner sanctum of the temple that served as a daily offering for the deity.

56 “The surplus value of this dance offering was in the triple rotation of the potlamp, the kumbhārati, which immediately followed. It is believed to annihilate the effects of the evil, jealous eye called dṛṣṭi” (Kersenboom 2013: 17).

57 “On such occasions the temple courtesans could be heard and seen singing and dancing village forms such as the stick dance (kōḷāṭṭam), the clap dance (kaikottikali), boat songs (ōṭam), and swing songs (uṇjal)” (Kersenboom 1998: 544).
Comprised of an extensive lineage of predecessors, bharatanatyam’s ancestral roots can be traced back to the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu (see Figure B.12) through early foreign accounts; the first stems back to the 10th century BCE by a Phoenician source. Aside from early foreign trade accounts about dancing girls and musicians, exists an extensive amount of literature produced between 100 BC to 600AD by early Sanskrit grammarians like Kātyāyana. However, it is important to note that these early testimonies are the first in terms of historical documentation and therefore, it has been argued that the dēvadāsi tradition can be traced back as early as to the Indus Valley civilization (Cir. 3300 BCE - 1600 BCE).

Regarding historical accounts by the early Tamil people, the earliest description of a dēvadāsi woman can be found in Tamil poetry (Caṅkam). Composed between 100 BC and 300 AD onwards, Caṅkam poetry evolved from a type of bardic composition that were then transformed into a series anthologies, such as Pattupāṭṭu (“Ten Songs”) and the great Tamil epic, Cilappatikāram (“The Tale of the Anklet”).

[B]ards in these early works situates them in the public sphere, centered around the king...and at times even ritual events are mediated by bardic specialists... Among these various bards, the female vīrāli (skilled one) and pāṭini (songstress) are the earliest Tamil antecedents to the later devadāsi. Their arts of song and dance are not mere entertainment; rather, they deliver efficacy of power and valiance to the king and his country.... (Kersenboom 2013: 717-718)

Following the collapse of the Buddhist dynasty (Kalabhras), arose the Pandyas and Pallavas kingdom in 575 CE, sparking a religious ‘revival’ of Hinduism in response to the dominating presence of Jainism and Buddhism (Kersenboom 1987: 17). This ‘newfound’ devotion to Hinduism resulted in the construction of intricate stone
temples dedicated to prominent Hindu gods like Lord Šiva and Vishnu, thus producing a new generation of bards,\textsuperscript{58} who would express profound devotion to their favorite deity through the intensity of bhakti.\textsuperscript{59} However, at the start of the 8th century CE, many of these female bards began to undergo a ritual dedication to Hindu temples, leaving behind their migrant lifestyle to reside within the temple. Shortly after,\textsuperscript{60} a man by the name of Vijayalaya sought the opportunity to overthrow and capture the territory of Tanjore (now Thanjavur) during an internal dispute.\textsuperscript{61} To mark this successful conquest, Vijayalaya erected a goddess temple in devotion to Nishumbhasudini (Durga), thus sparking the rise of the Chola dynasty (Nilakanta Sastri 1955:166).

Known as one of the longest-ruling dynasties in history, the Cholas gained great power around 850 CE and ruled for about four hundred years.\textsuperscript{62} During this time, the Chola empire began to expand and increase in power, a series of temples were erected to celebrate their numerous conquests; lining the temple walls with inscriptions and thus, revealing the names and deeds of women connected to these temples. The Chola period marked great flourishment; particularly for female temple

\textsuperscript{58} Similar to bards during the Cañkam period, female bards under the rule of the Pallavas would make pilgrimages throughout Tamil Nadu to various sacred places in order to “sing in ardent praise of the local manifestations of their beloved godking” (Kersenboom 2013: 718).
\textsuperscript{59} A Sanskrit term meaning “devotion”; Bhakti is an intense, mutual emotional attachment and love expressed toward a personal god.
\textsuperscript{60} Around 850 CE.
\textsuperscript{61} Dispute between the Pandyas and Pallavas.
\textsuperscript{62} The Chola empire was overthrown in 1279 CE as a result of the Pandya conquest.
dancers as well as female court dancers who were often supported\(^{63}\) by wealthy patrons and religious devotees, along with the king himself. Both types of dancers were incredibly wealthy and viewed in high regards.\(^{64}\)

After the collapse of the Chola dynasty in 1279 CE, Muslim forces from north India made their way to the south of India in an attempt to eradicate followers of the Hindu faith. Word of this imposing threat prompted immediate action from three southern Hindu states who band together to create the great Hindu empire, *Vijayanagara* (“City of Victory”). Under the rule of the Vijayanagara empire (1336 CE - 1646 CE), emerged a “very self-conscious form” of Hinduism which, not only promoted “a clear distinction of religious, philosophical, and artistic values, but also by an increase of caste-distinctions and caste-consciousness” which lead to numerous internal disputes and the rise of the Brahmin\(^{65}\) caste (Kersenboom 1987: 34). Due to its strong central government, its mission to preserve Hindu culture, along with the growth of the caste system, Vijayanagara began to formulate their own identity as a unified southern nation, distinct from North India’s Muslim culture - rejecting Brahmin traditions, the use of Sanskrit and establishing the South Indian language of Telugu as the official court language. The separation between the Muslim North and the Hindu South also translated into the emergence of a distinct, South Indian musical

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\(^{63}\) According the temple inscriptions, land was given to dancers as a means to perfect and sustain their art form.

\(^{64}\) Anukkiyar Parvai Naikaiyär was highly respected court dancer during the Chola empire and is most notably known for her generous donation to the Thiruvarur temple (Kersenboom 1987: 27).

\(^{65}\) Even in present-day India, the Brahmin caste still remains in power as a high-ranking caste within Hindu society.
system (Karnāṭic music) that coincided with the formulation of temple and court
dance.66

Following the fall of the Vijayanagara empire in 1565 AD, the royal court of
Tanjore, among others, declared independence and continued to uphold and protect
the Hindu culture. However, it was not until 1676 AD when a new dynasty of
Maratha descent was established, that the Tanjore kingdom rapidly developed into the
main crux of Hindu culture and arts. In relation to dance (known as sadir at the time),
the most notable persons who come to mind are the Tanjore Quartet. Consisting of
four brothers,67 the Tanjore Quartet were highly skilled musicians who “hailed from
the dance lineage of the Brihadisvara68 temple of Thanjavur” (Ramani 2018:
Sahapedia.org) and were employed by King Serfoji II to serve in the royal court of
Tanjore (Thanjavur). They are credited for being the first to codify aḍavu lessons
(dance steps), establish a set repertoire pattern for a Karnāṭic performance (margam),
along with their efforts to assimilate music and dance repertoire practiced in the royal
courts, with those practiced in the temples (Kersenboom 1987: 42).

66 Composer, Annamācārya (1408-1503 AD) contributed numerous works to the South
Indian repertoire, along with Purandara Dāsa (1484-1564 AD), who also formalized basic
training exercises for South Indian vocal music.
67 Cīṇṇaiyā (born ca. 1802), Pōṇṇaiyā (born ca. 1804), Civāṅgantam (born ca. 1808), and
Vaṭivēlu (born ca. 1810).
68 Refer to Figure B.13 in Appendix B.
The Maratha dynasty continued to prosper and rule over Tanjore until the death of its king, Shivaji II, followed by Tanjore’s immediate annexation by the British in 1856 AD. This prompted the rapid decline of the patronage system that had supported the dēvadāsi for over nine centuries. By the start of the twentieth century, the royal courts retracted financial support to the temples thus, depriving the dēvadāsis access to food and shelter.

Many dēvadāsi lost their livelihood and homes, some turning to prostitution. Because of this, dēvadāsis were viewed in general as prostitutes by the Victorian-educated Indian middle and upper classes, and their dance was seen as degraded, not fit for respectable company. (Allen & Viswanathan 2004: 72)
The decline of the dēvadāsis’ social and religious status prompted the Madras Presidency\(^{69}\) (an administrative branch of British India) to take-action by formally issuing a ban on all temple dancing in 1910. This sparked a nationalist movement lead by the Madras-based upper class in order to reform and construct an art form that would serve as a staple in South Indian classical cultural heritage (Zubko 2014: 18).

They began the process of creating what is known as Bharata Nāṭyam through a selective piecing together of existing dancers’ techniques and theoretical and practical ideas from Sanskrit texts. The initial technical aspects of the dance form were drawn from the inherited performing arts traditions of the devadāsi community. (Zubko 2014: 18)

However, due to the degradation of the dēvadāsis’ status, pioneers of this ‘reform’ movement began to modify and ‘sanitize’ the dēvadāsi repertoire in order adhere to the socially constructed criteria deemed suitable for a ‘classical’ performing arts heritage. According to Rachel Zubko, only a handful of dēvadāsis continued to practice their particular hereditary style (such as T. Balasaraswati) but under a dance that was now renamed as Bharata Nāṭyam. As a result:

\(^{69}\) The Madras Presidency ruled from 1639 to 1947 when India gained independence. Due to India’s large geographic territory, this presidency served as an administrative branch for British rule over the entire southern peninsula.
a gradual shift to new upper-class Brahmin dancers resulted in the
performance on concert stages... While retaining and building upon elements
of an original Hindu framework, Bharata Nāṭyam became and continues to be
an amalgamation of text and practice, ancient and modern, religious and
secular, and local and global. (Zubko 2014: 18)

These efforts are most notably attributed to both, E. Krishnan Iyer (1897 - 1968) a
lawyer turned dance revivalist, who performed dēvadāsi repertoire in Madras as a
means to preserve this dance tradition; along with Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904 -
1986) who is credited for reconstructing temple dancing into what is now,
bharatanatyam. As a Brahmin woman who married an English theosophist, Devi was
a highly trained classical ballet dancer and theosophist and would often travel outside
of India, particularly to western countries like Australia and England. When she
returned to India, she began to study a local dance tradition from Tamil Nadu. Devi
viewed the dance as a precious art form but believed it to be a “degraded treasure that
had fallen into the hands of women of ‘ill repute,’ as many urban, upper-caste
communities categorized devadasis... [and] determined that it needed to be cleaned
up, purified, and handed over to ‘women of quality’ as a means to elevate the dance
to a respectable and elite status (O’Shea 1998: 47). Her goal of purifying and
redefining the dance as a national symbol of Indian culture, was put into effect by
establishing the Kalakshetra school, where she taught a carefully crafted version of
the dance, eliminating śṛṅgāra\textsuperscript{70} or erotic sentiment, replacing it with bhakti
(religious devotion), as well as incorporating Western classical dance techniques and
exercises, along with stage aesthetics like set designs and stage lights. As the Indian

\textsuperscript{70} Śṛṅgāra is erotic love and/or desire.
Nationalist movement continued to thrive, so was their mission to sanitize and condense the dance into a more general and universal product. Thus, eradicating the cultural diversity and nuances of what was once a *murai* (hereditary rite) and into a pan-Indian art form performed by the Indian elite at the expense of the dēvādāsi.

In other words, the devadasis were threatening not just because they were a group of women living outside of Britain Victorian standards and the somewhat parallel upper class of Indian images of womanhood, but also because they represented, for the new nation, an uncomfortable diversity of cultural practices and cultural origins. (O’Shea 1998: 55)

Shortly after India’s independence from Great Britain in August of 1947, a new legislation was endorsed and passed by middle and upper-class Indians, banning the dedication of young, dēvādāsi girls to Hindu temples and stripping this community of their status as temple ritual specialists.71

The post-1947 period was one of intensive research, publication and hard work, propagating the traditional dance termed *dāśī āṭṭam* (dance of the dēvādāsi) or *cinḍa mēḷam* (small band) under its new name *bharata nāṭyam* as post-colonial, national heritage. However, this labour was not the labour of dance, but labour ‘on dance’; dancing itself was no longer a profession but turned into a luxury performed by a cultural elite. (Kersenboom 2013: 18)

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71 “The Dēvādāsi Act (1947) did not only forbid the offering of *puṣpāṇjali* and its *kumbāratī-cāmara* ritual by female ritual specialists, it also stipulated a penalty of 500 rupees or six months’ imprisonment for any ‘incident of dedication of women to idols’ after November 26, 1947” (Kersenboom 2013: 17).
In the most basic approach, there are three main elements that make up a bharatanatyam performance (Figure 3.5). The first, is *nṛtta* or “pure dance” and refers to the 9 families of abstract dance steps called *aḍavu*. It is the first and foremost element a budding dancer will study with their guru for the first five years of training. Each of the 9 aḍavus are comprised of about 6 variations in order to make up one aḍavu ‘family’. Each of the 9 families are accompanied with (1) abstract hand gestures known as *nṛtta hastas* and (2) and phrases of spoken syllables called *aḍavu solkaṭṭu*. During a typical lesson, the *nāṭṭuvanār* or “dance master” will call out the accompanying aḍavu solkaṭṭu in an accented pattern while beating a wooden block, sonically mimicking the set of dance steps being articulated by the dancer. Although these step patterns and hand gestures have no meaning when presented by itself, but

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72 Refer to Figure 3.9 in Index.
73 “Nṛtta is disciplined within the prescribed aḍavu groups; rhythmical segments have simple set-up, yet, are innately rigorous in nature; are totally devoid of glamorous movements, and postures; no glossy, picturesque poses in the process; firm stamping of the feet, with aḍavus precisely executed for the rhythm patterns, resulting in parallel description of the arrangement through word and sound…” (Raghavan 2010: xxx).
“when strung together can convey an aesthetic theme of flow of movements” (Pasricha & Venkataraman 2002: 23). To contextualize, the first aḍavu family is referred to by its solkaṭṭu pattern: Teyyā - tei and is commonly used as a warm-up exercise. First, the dancer will take the most basic starting position called aramandi (see Figure B.15) and then, they will extend both arms out and position their hands in the patākam mudra (see Figure B.16) in order to begin the first aḍavu sequence pictured in Figure 3.6. While the naṭṭuvanār recites the rhythmic pattern, the dancer will emulate the sonic rhythmic pattern through the slapping of their feet. In the case of the first aḍavu family (Teyyā - tei), the dancer will slap their right foot on the first beat (TEY-yā) and will then slap the left foot on the second beat (TEI). Each variation within a single aḍavu family will be rehearsed in three different speeds (Video 3.1).

Figure 3.6 1st aḍavu family (Teyyā - tei) shown by Priyamvada Sankar. Courtesy of Dr. V. Raghavan Centre for Performing Arts
The second element that makes up bharatanatyam is referred to as *nṛtya* or “expressive” dance. *Nṛtya* is an interpretive dance that uses facial expressions, hand gestures, eye and body movements in order to convey a series of emotions and themes. The dancer will stream together a set of hand and body gestures that are similar to that of the nṛttta hastas used during abstract dance but in this context, these mudras take on socio-cultural meanings that help construct the narrative of the dance performance. For example, if the dancer uses the mudra, *siṁhamukham*, as pictured in Figure 3.7, depending on the context of the piece, this particular mudra can be interpreted as a cow or as Lord Śiva’s *vāhana* or ‘vehicle’ - *nandi* (“bull”).

Lastly, the third and foremost element is that of drama - *nātya*. According to Leela Venkataraman, *nātya* can be best defined as the “theatrical elaborations such as narrating a story appropriate dramatics involved” (Venkataraman 2002: 23). In the most basic sense, *nātya* is formed by the way in which the dancer acts out the entire dance composition as a whole, in order to convey the different characters and mythological themes75 pertaining to the overall narrative of the piece. In addition, the concept of *nātya* can also take a more literal approach, especially in many

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74 Vāhana means “that which carries” in Sanskrit. In Hinduism, each deity has their own vāhana or animal vehicle, and it is believed that the use of these animal vehicles is a way for the deities to “connect strongly to the natural world” (Pritchett 2013).

75 Most bharatanatyam compositions are based on sections of Hindu epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.
contemporary bharatanatyam performances today, through the use of elaborate costumes, props, and stage lighting. In order for a dancer to accurately and effectively depict the narrative, the dancer must be well-versed in the technique of abhinaya.\textsuperscript{76} The concept of abhinaya is very complex and will extend beyond the scope of this case study. Therefore, for the sake of brevity and simplicity, abhinaya can best be defined as the medium through which the thoughts and emotions of the dancer (bhavas)\textsuperscript{77} are transmitted to the audience (rasa)\textsuperscript{78} through the use of physical and facial gestures.\textsuperscript{79} According to Dr. V. Raghavan, a dancer will only develop an expertise in abhinaya with sufficient education, research, and maturity.\textsuperscript{80}

To clarify further, it is important to recognize that the use of these expressive gestures should never be approached or viewed as a merely form of imitation but rather, as the melding between the self and the dance. To contextualize, T. Balasaraswati\textsuperscript{81} (Figure 3.8) gained the reputation and title as the “Queen of

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\textsuperscript{76} Abhi-naya \rightarrow nī + abhi = “to bring the content closer” (Raghavan 2010: xxvii)

\textsuperscript{77} Emotion or mood.

\textsuperscript{78} Literally means “taste”; it’s a particular kind of “aesthetic pleasure that penetrates the spectator when the dancer expresses the appropriate feeling” (Natali 2009: 96).

\textsuperscript{79} Many refer to the Nāṭya Sastra, the Abhinaya Darpana, and other performing arts compendiums.

\textsuperscript{80} “Maturity in abhinaya and its full blossoming will grow only as the dancer gradually grows” (Raghavan 2010: 101).

\textsuperscript{81} T. Balasaraswati was born into a dēvadāsi family of highly respected court musicians and dancers who served in the Tanjore royal courts.
Abhinaya”82 during her successful and rich career as a bharatanatyam dancer. In a number of accounts, Bala’s bhakti-oriented approach and her ability to coalesce “into one with any composition that she performed or taught was something special as her imagination for the abhinaya improvisations would flow on and on, and her extraordinary skill would immerse the student or the viewer in a state of ecstasy” (Ramani 2014: The Hindu).

With regards to the bharatanatyam performance itself, the repertoire is organized and presented in a particular order known as a margam, meaning ‘path,’ and includes several types of dance compositions that are typically performed.83 Aside from slight deviations, the standard bharatnatyam performance is presented in the following order: Alārippu, Jatisvaram, Śabdam, Varṇam, Padam(s), Javali, Thillāna, and Ślokam. In relation to the “Revelations” video, the performance is not a complete margam and instead, presents a narrative through a single dance composition, containing some elements of a thillāna.84 For instance, the dance is

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82 Ramani 2014, The Hindu.
83 It is important to note that there may be slight variations of the margam order depending on which bani or ‘school’ a dancer is from.
84 A thillāna is a fast and energetic piece that concludes a bharatanatyam performance; it’s intended to showcase the dancer’s technique and understanding of complex rhythmic patterns (nṛtta). Organized into three sections (pallavi, anupallavi, and caranam), this particular dance is musically accompanied by rhythmic drum syllables (solkattu) that are sung to a melody set to a particular rāga (melodic mode) and tāla (rhythmic cycle). The first section (pallavi) functions as the main section that is generally repeated several times, with the vocalist repeatedly singing the main line of solkattu set to the principle melody of piece. Each passage begins with graceful body movements, which then give way to abstract aḍavu sequences (korvais) executed in 3 speeds (slow, medium, and fast). In the final section (caranam), there is often a short sequence of nṛtya, accompanied by a sung passage of sahityam or lyrics, paying homage to a particular deity or guru.
accompanied by a pre-recorded instrumental piece (no vocalist or naṭṭuvanār) that is comprised of the familiar instruments like the tanpura (drone), mridangam (double-headed drum) and the violin, but has also integrated the Western classical instrument of the cello. The music featured in the video itself, however, is an adaptation of a contemporary thillāna composition by Smt. Jayanthi Kumaresh (Video 3.2). Another distinguishable element, is the dance structure itself. Although the dance contains elements of a thillāna, the performance is organized similar to that of a varṇam, in the sense that the structure alternates between nṛtta and nṛtya passages and even so, the piece does not completely prescribe to any one of the particular compositions within a margam. Therefore, it is important to preface that some artistic liberties have been made, both practical and aesthetic, and thus, the “Revelations” video should be viewed as an artistic interpretation or variant of this classical art form.

85 In general, a live ensemble to accompany the dance is more widely preferred.
86 The violin was adopted into Carnatic music about two centuries ago, under the rule of Rāja Serfoji II (ruled 1798-1832) of Tanjore. Balaswami Dikshitar (1786-1859), brother of trinity composer, Muthuswami Dikshitar, was first introduced to the European violin while working as an interpreter for the British governor, Pigot. Although Balaswami studied the instrument for a few years and made significant contributions for adapting the instrument for Carnatic music, Vadivelu (1810-1845), of the Tanjore Quartet, is most notably credited for popularizing and ultimately, standardizing the violin as part of the Carnatic music practice.
87 A varṇam (means “color”) is the central and most complex piece of an entire bharatanatyam performance; it balances both ‘pure’ or abstract dance (nṛtta) with expressive dance (nṛtya).
“Revelations: Celebrating LGBTQ Stories Through Bharatanatyam”

Figure 3.9 IndianRaga’s YouTube channel.

Founded by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2012, IndianRaga is an Arts education startup that provides the media platform, technology, and other resources for an artist to experiment and collaborate with other fellow artists on both a national and international scale. According to their mission statement provided on their official webpage, IndianRaga strives to become the “largest community of artists and mentors in the world who produce authentic, yet ground breaking new works in the performing arts.”

With over 250,000 subscribers on their YouTube channel (Figure 3.9) and over 550,000 ‘likes’ on their Facebook page, IndianRaga continues to flourish and thrive, carrying out their mission of integrating Indian classical performing arts with popular and/or a mainstream music and dance to a global forefront. This organization offers an array of resources and opportunities for artists around world such as workshops, online courses, and a fellowship

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88 www.indianraga.com/about-2/
89 IndianRaga is popularly known for taking Indian classical and semi-classical genres and integrating popular music/dance elements like Trap and EDM.
90 IndianRaga has a partnership in London and Singapore, and has collaborated with over 40 cities globally.
program, which is how the “Revelations” video came into existence. Recipients of this fellowship consists of bharatanatyam dancers, Aarthy Sundar and Swathi Jaisankar. Not only did these two perform the piece, but they also collaborated to develop the concept and choreography behind the “Revelations” video.

“A Coming Out Story of a Daughter to Her Mother”: A Descriptive Plot Analysis

The dance opens with the entrance of the two main characters - the first, is the mother (Aarthy Sundar) who begins to dance downstage, followed by her daughter (Swathi Jaisankar) who stands off to the side to observe (Figure 3.10). Aside from the obvious subtitle in the opening of the video, as well as the plot summary supplied in the caption, the viewer is given several ‘indicators’ to confirm both a generational difference as well as a familial connection. For instance, as mentioned above, the mother situates herself downstage indicating a sense of authority, while the daughter

91 “I was born in Chennai, in South India. And um, me and my family lived out there for about 5 years and then we moved to the United States in ‘99 and we moved around a little bit. We were in Chicago first, and then New Jersey, and now we have been in Texas for the past 12 years or so. And I have been learning Bharatanatyam dance since I was about 9” (Skype Interview with Aarthy Sundar, Mar. 16th 2018 at 2:00pm).
92 “So basically, I was born in India. I am from Chennai but I moved here to New Jersey um and I’ve been living in New Jersey ever since...I’ve been doing bharatanatyam for about 14 years and along the way I have tried to pick up other dance forms” (Skype Interview with Swathi Jaisankar, Mar. 16th 2018 at 2:00pm).
93 “A Coming Out Story of a Daughter to her Mother.”
94 In a theatrical sense, ‘downstage’ means that performer is close to the audience and towards the front of the stage. In contrast, ‘upstage’ refers to a performer being situated away from the audience and towards the back of the stage.
stands off to the side in order to first, observe and then try and mimic her mother’s actions (see Figure B.17).

**Figure 3.10** Mother (right) demonstrating dance steps as daughter observes (left).

Another visual indicator that confirms this line of thought can be realized through the choice in wardrobe. For example, the daughter is wearing a *lehenga choli*, an outfit popularly worn by youth and young adults, along with a blue *dupatta* (scarf) wrapped over her chest and around her waist, indicating that she is a student and thus, establishes her position in the relationship. In contrast, the mother is wearing a sari which is commonly worn by young adults and elders, along with wearing a *thali or botu* necklace, thus indicating marriage (see Figure B.18). The exposition of the performance represents the daughter’s early childhood, where she is learning how to act through observing and mimicking the actions of her mother. This is expressed through the mother’s demonstration and elaboration of some of the basic

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95 This type of Indian dress consists of a *lehenga* or a long skirt and a *choli*, or a sleeved blouse that reveals the midriff.

96 The dupatta is worn either on one’s shoulder or around one’s neck; if a dupatta is tied in the manner depicted above, it indicates that they are going/leaving a dance class.
ardavu families to her daughter. As mentioned in the previous section, the 9 ardavu families makeup the first and foremost basic element and it is the first thing a young bharatanatyam dancer must master before they are allowed to progress further. For example, Figure 3.11 depicts the mother and daughter rehearsing the 7th ardavu family (Dit Dit Tei).

![Figure 3.11](image)

**Figure 3.11** Mother and daughter perform the 7th ardavu family (Dit Dit Tei).

With minor corrections by her mother, a temporal progression begins to unfold as the daughter’s efforts begin to improve ([Video 3.3](#)). This temporal growth from child to young adult, is further expressed when the mother and daughter become in-sync with each other and begin to dance as a collective unit. When the transformation of her daughter into young adulthood is realized, the mother begins to introduce her daughter to the prospect of a male suitor. This particular dialogue is demonstrated through a series of nṛtya passages and begins with the daughter viewing her reflection in the mirror while her mother hovers behind, assisting her daughter with her wardrobe and admiring her daughter’s physical beauty and maturity (Figure 3.12).
Figure 3.12 The daughter admires herself in the mirror while her mother assists.

This transformation from child to young adult, prompts the mother to discuss with her daughter the idea of finding a male suitor. This dialogue is expressed when the mother proceeds emulate a strong, hypermasculine figure by proceeding to puff out her chest, broaden her shoulders, and uses the śikhara\textsuperscript{97} mudra while pointing to her daughter (Figure 3.13).

Figure 3.13 Mother uses śikhara mudra (circled) to suggest a male suitor for her daughter.

\textsuperscript{97} Although each mudra holds several interpretations depending on the context in which it is being used, the use of the shikhara mudra in the “Revelations” video is used to represent the liṅgaṃ. The liṅgaṃ is an abstract, phallic symbol used to represent Lord Śiva but, in this context, the shikhara mudra is used to indicate a male-figure.
While her mother discusses the prospect of a male suitor, the daughter begins to show visible signs of hesitation which gradually begin to unfold into signs of uneasiness and then into complete distress. A sense of confusion grows over the mother’s face as she presses her daughter further in the matter, causing the daughter to lash out by rejecting the śikhara mudra, thus marking the climax of the performance (Figure 3.14; Video 3.4).

**Figure 3.14** The daughter rejects the idea of a male suitor.

At this exact moment, the instruments (violin, cello, mridangam) refrain for 1-beat, followed by a dramatic shift in tempo. The violin enters with a melodic passage that sits on $Ri_1^2 (D)$, creating an unstable, melancholic sound that is characteristic of the kāpi rāga to which the composition is set to (see Figure B.19). As the mother puts her hand up to her head in confusion, the daughter tries to physically reach out to her mother but she is immediately rejected when her mother turns away. With an intense shift in mood and overall body language, the mother proceeds to express her disapproval by pairing the śikhara mudra, representing a male figure, with its
opposing counterpart, the *katakamukha* mudra\(^9_8\) representing a female, thus making her feelings known while the music begins to descend downward (Figure 3.15).

![Mother uses śikhara and *katakamukha* mudra to express her views on romantic partnerships.](image)

**Figure 3.15** Mother uses śikhara and *katakamukha* mudra to express her views on romantic partnerships.

The breakdown of this relationship is further realized and reflected through an evident shift in the treatment of the spatial environment. As both women begin to separate from each other, the mridangam returns, providing a defined pulse as an undercurrent for the violin and cello. Once situated on opposite ends of the space, the daughter expresses sheer confusion and pain, while the mother begins to look back on her daughter’s upbringing, expressed through her hand ascending in a linear motion upwards. Visibly upset, the mother and daughter spatially separate and begin to operate through dance as two autonomous units. This estrangement is then further accentuated when the mother and daughter begin the same nṛtta passage but in opposing directions (Figure 3.16, Letter B.). As the nṛtta passage is underway, the

\(^9_8\) The *Katakamukha* is used to express holding a flower; it is also used to represent the goddess who is often depicted holding a lotus flower and in some cases such as this one, it can be used to refer to a female figure.
music begins to shift back and forth in different speeds\(^99\) while the melody starts to tap into the lower register (Video 3.5).

**Figure 3.16** Mother and daughter begin to dance in opposing directions.

As this particular passage continues, the viewer is presented with a powerful image of the mother and daughter attempting to make contact with each other (Letters C. & D.). As each person attempts to literally (and figuratively) reach out, the instrumentation completely abstains, with the exception of the drone and the violin which, sustains on the tonic, Sa (C).

\(^99\) a common characteristic in a thillāna composition
Figure 3.17 Mother and daughter cross paths after a separation.

With no success, the tension continues to rise as the tempo reaches its top speed, until it finally dissipates when the mother and daughter accidentally cross paths (Figure 3.17), prompting the music to stop for 1-beat on the point of impact. The mother and daughter then join hands (see Figure B.20) and proceed to reconcile their differences through a series of nrtya gestures. At this exact moment, the overall mood of the performance undergoes another dramatic shift that is expressed not only in their body language and facial expressions, but also within the music itself. The violin rests on the pillar tone, Pa (G) of the rāga, occupying the middle register. Both women engage in a dialogue to settle their differences and ultimately, find common ground. Following this exchange, the daughter reveals to her mother that she has a partner, inciting the melody to sustain on Ni₂ (B) in the upper register.
At first, the mother appears to be a bit surprised and hesitant but ultimately agrees to meet her thus, resolving $Ni_2$ to the high $Sa$ (tonic). While the daughter walks out of the frame, the mother appears hesitant and even a bit nervous as she awaits, wrestling and clutching her hands tight. With the company of her partner, the daughter returns into the frame to introduce her to her mother, concluding the piece with the mother greeting and invited her daughter’s partner inside their space (Figure 3.18).

**Engaging in Sentiments: The Impact of Audiovisual Aesthetics**

![Figure 3.19 Still frames from the “Revelations” video.]

In a joint-interview with Aarthy and Swathi, both dancers describe their research and creative processes behind the dance:

**Aarthy:** ...I know for a lot of the pieces I have done, I have just scoured the Internet for personal stories that people have written about, um, and kind of reading through those, and kind of getting an idea of people’s experiences and of course, talk to a couple of people who have gone through these experiences in real life, um, to get their process of emotions and the journey that they’ve been through because everyone’s story is a little bit different so to do the best justice to those emotions and portraying a complicated issues, so yea, a lot of research beforehand.

**Swathi:** ...I mean coming-out and telling your parents is like a huge thing and we can’t even imagine what it would be like for someone to be going through that because we have never experienced that. So I researched coming out
stories from people who had gone through the whole experience and tried to bring out the emotions I [would] imagine ...they would be feeling.

As mentioned above, a large amount of research was consulted in order to produce a relatable storyline. Regarding the formation and execution of the dance itself, both dancers sought alternative modes in order to transform and completely embody their characters. Admittedly, both dancers identify as heterosexual and therefore, have expressed that they have never had to ‘come out’ to their family and friends. Although they may not be able to relate first-hand regarding sexual orientation, both dancers employed their own personal instances of strife as a means to meld themselves within the composition.

Iannitti: Do you try to, um, bring in any type of personal memories or emotions that you try to equate with the choreography?

Aarthy: Yea definitely! So with the mother-daughter piece, the “Revelations” piece, while it was a story about a daughter coming-out to her mother, that I mean was the central conflict but at the end of the day, it was a conflict between a mother and daughter. Um, so that’s really relatable to, you know, everyone - I know I’ve been there with my mom so you know. So I even talked to her before I started choreographing the piece to kind of gage what her react? What would she tell me? And then, down the line, how would she change her mind and if she would change her mind - so it was just sitting down and having this discussion with her as if we are in those roles just to see what would happen if this was a reality.100

Swathi: Another aspect of this dance...was the mother-daughter feud. So from that, definitely personal experiences. For example, even picking my college...I definitely had arguments with my own mom about it and these are huge life decisions so definitely getting some of those emotions and personal experiences to help with the stance. That helped a lot.”101

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100 Aarthy Sundar, interview by B. Iannitti, Mar. 16, 2018, transcript.
101 Swathi Jaisankar, interview by B. Iannitti, Mar. 16, 2018, transcript.
One can argue that both Aarthy and Swathi’s psychological process of imagining themselves in a position similar to that in the “Revelations” video, mirrors a similar sentiment expressed/utilized through abhinaya within the context of a ‘traditional’ bharatanatyam kutcheri (“recital”). As discussed at the start of this chapter, bharatanatyam is often defined as a blending of nṛta or rhythmic elements, nṛtya which is the combination of rhythm with expression, and nātya or dramatic elements, in order to conjure abhinaya, the overall essence or soul of this art form (Sharma 2013: 15). As described in the Nāṭyaśāstra,102 abhinaya can be expressed in four major forms: the body (angika), words (vacika), use of costumes and make-up (aaharya) and lastly, the manifestation of different states of the mind and feelings through acting (sattvika). Therefore, “...we can surmise here that abhinaya is not only an art of acting, but also an artistic process by which sentiments (bhavas) of a feeling or emotions are produced” (Sharma 2013: 15). In her autoethnography entitled, “Dancing in-between Spaces”, Aadya Kaktikar, presents a series of methods such as drawing and journaling, as a means of channeling one’s own perceptions and restructuring them into a receptive medium. Thus, “building upon their embodied knowledge, students create multiple layers of meaning, moving from the obvious depictions to abstract forms; a process that forms the bedrock of traditional abhinaya technique” (Kaktikar 2016: 121). Theorizing along a similar line of inquiry is the

102 Written by the sage, Bharata Muni in ca. 200CE, the Nāṭyaśāstra is a detailed treatise on the performing arts; functioning as a “how-to” guide for expressing different emotions (anger, grief, etc.), vocal techniques, and the classification of musical instruments, among others.
work of Carrie Noland. According to Noland, the embodiment process is closely linked with the notion of *agency*.

Embodiment is a process whereby collective behaviors and beliefs, acquired through acculturation, are rendered individual and ‘lived’ at the level of the body. Agency, it follows, is the power to alter those acquired behaviors and beliefs for purposes that may be reactive (resistant) or collaborative (innovative) in kind. (Noland 2009: 9)

As described in the interview, both dancers not only sought guidance from outside sources, but they also underwent an internal process of tapping into their own personal experiences of conflict and rejection. The feelings activated from such memories, although painful, are completely relatable to many regardless of sexual orientation. Therefore, the dance does in fact, have personal meaning to them even though they themselves, have never experienced rejection in this particular context and thus, utilized their agency as the choreographers to channel their emotions in a LGBTQIA narrative.

Arguably, the same can be said for the viewer in terms of empathetically connecting to imbedded sentiment(s) in a performance. American philosopher, Susanne Langer and her concept of the ‘continuum of feeling’ serves as the appropriate framework to exemplify this argument.

For Langer the continuum of feeling is transcorporeal and manifest in all our activities, behaviors and interrelationships with others. With regard to artistic production and reception, feeling is what links the creator and the ‘beholder’ of the work, and the work itself is a form of language that organises and distributes feeling. In a dance performance we not only discern affectual differences in the movement of bodies, we move in the same time as the performance and participate in a common distribution of feeling. (Atkinson & Duffy 2015: 96)
Langer’s ‘continuum of feeling’ can be reinforced further with Brian Massumi’s theory of affect, in the sense that affect involves a range of autonomic processes “that operate ‘through’ the senses...linking habitual memory with to future action” (Atkinson & Duffy 2015: 96). To contextualize, the online viewer or ‘beholder’ in this case, is exposed to the dancers’ projected emotions, which are then transferred to the viewer. As a recipient of said transference, the viewer then undergoes a process of identifying and then classifying these emotions in relation to their own psyche and thus, becomes subjective. This reciprocal process between the viewer and the performer/creator is further enhanced with the use of audiovisual aesthetics such as lighting and video-editing.

In this case, video editing a dance performance inhibits the artist to dramatize and place further emphasis on the message they are trying to convey. Through frame-editing, manipulation of perspective, panning, and other recording/editing features, the artist mobilizes the role of the viewer, granting them access to details and perspectives that would otherwise get lost on stage. According to music video scholar, Carol Vernallis, music videos function as a critical enforcer of popular culture, especially when presented on the popular online platform - YouTube. Creators of such videos tend to employ a number of audiovisual/technical aesthetics as a means to combat distraction from web advertisements and other “attractions outside of the frame” (Vernallis 2013: 456).

With YouTube in mind...these videos may tap into primitive ‘fight or flight’ responses: objects coming from a distance or entering from the side can seize the viewer’s attention, holding her [viewer] within the clip, rather than letting
her daily with other engaging Web attractions outside of the frame. (Vernallis 2013: 456)

This ‘fight or flight’ technique was used at the very beginning and end of the “Revelations” video. For example, the video opens with the mother who is posted at the back of the stage, begins to dance downstage towards the viewer as a way to caption their attention. Once the mother is situated at the front, the viewer’s attention continues to be sustained when the daughter enters left (stage right) into the frame.

Unlike many of YouTube’s viral DIY videos, the “Revelations” video was recorded in a studio with professional-grade equipment as part of IndianRaga’s Fellowship program. Such technological advantages have produced a high-quality video with the use of more lucrative editing and recording effects such as tracking shots. Tracking shots have been “an essential technique, because it supports the music’s pace in relation to the video’s environment and provides a respite for rapid editing” (Vernallis 2013: 456). A prime example of this method was utilized when the mother and daughter are in conflict and dance in opposing directions; especially during the segment when the mother and daughter try to reach out to one another (Figure 3.20). When the mother attempts to contact her daughter, the camera at first, is focused on the mother but then as she turns around and tries to physically lean towards her daughter, the frame begins to move on a horizontal axis towards the right-side of the frame (stage left).
Today music videos are also staged more in depth and on the horizontal. Perhaps the new cameras create a greater three-dimensionality, and digital intermediate can more easily separate objects from the background, bringing some objects close while leaving others in the far distance (but all remain clearly visible through strong demarcation). (Vernallis 2013: 456)

To contextualize, let’s return back to the moment when the mother first mentions the prospect of a male suitor. The frame is situated behind the mother and is focused on the daughter’s facial expression creating a spatial dimension that is further enhanced by the contrast between the black backdrop and their bright blue and green apparel (Figure 3.21).

Another telling example is during the climax of the piece. When the daughter rejects the idea of a male companion, the performance space dramatically shifts in mood as
the stage light changes from green to red. The perspective shifts behind the daughter and her powerful gesture of rejecting the śikhara, providing the viewer access to the mother’s reaction as the lens is focused directly on her face (Figure 3.22).

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 3.22** A close-up shot focusing on the mother’s face.

Although a viewer may have the ability to be emotionally impacted by a performance due to Langer’s concept of the autonomous ‘continuum of feeling,’ it can also, quite arguably, serve as a ‘double edge sword’ in that a viewer’s embodied knowledge and associations, beliefs, and values, can color the performance in an alternative or unintended ‘light’ so to speak. With subjectivity leaves space for alternative and individualistic associations of embodied knowledge and thus, can produce reactions from others that can be very diverse.
“You have debased your own culture”: A Debate with Online Reception

“[T]he othering of ‘homosexuality’ as foreign contains ... an entire ideological presupposition of history or tradition as a closed system...where change could only come from the outside - as pollution.”

(Giti Thadani 1996: 6)

As to date, the “Revelations” video has received 2 thousand ‘likes’ and 34 ‘dislikes’, along with almost 70,000 views, since its upload to YouTube in November 2017. Overall, the public reception of the piece has been very positive with 241 comments published by users, such as the following:

Figure 3.23 Positive comments posted to the video’s YouTube page.

In addition to the published YouTube comments, Swathi informed me of some of the private messages she received from viewers who were personally impacted by the video.

Swathi: So definitely, there were a lot of positive feedback which was very nice to see. Some people messaged us separately. So one person in specific said “even my own family and friends don’t understand what I have to go through every day” and they [the person who messaged Swathi] were transgendered and so they were explaining kind of like their own experiences and said that they could really relate to this video and were shocked as to how well we portrayed the emotions this person was feeling when they had to come out to their own family and friends.
Although the reception from YouTube users has been uplifting, the choice in words and attitude embedded within these positive comments illuminate a mentality in which the act of addressing queer themes in a ‘classical’ art form is seen as a revolutionary, or even a “taboo” approach (Figure 3.24).

To reiterate, the comment made in Figure 3.24 is genuine and embedded with positive sentiment but why does the inclusion of a same-sex theme equate to being “taboo”?

When asked about receiving any negative comments from viewers, both dancers described these negative critiques in a twofold. On one side, there are members of the LGBTQIA community who feel that the ending is not realistic and has the potential to create a false sense of hope, as explained by Aarthy in the passage below.

**Aarthy:** Yea, there were a few people who were not happy. But we expected this going in it but some people were saying - “okay, so like what are you saying? That all coming-out stories end like this?” “This is a fantasy” “Not all stories end this happily, families are torn apart because of this.” “This is not sending an accurate message.” Um and that is definitely something we considered when going into this piece. We had to think about the progression of the story and how we would end it. We thought really long and hard about it and we thought it would be more uplifting and sending the message of “this is what could be” you know? I mean, any story of anyone coming-out like obviously it’s very difficult and there’s going to be a lot of friction and tension but you know, every story can possibly go well if both parties are willing to see the other side and come to an understanding. So that was the kind of approach we took…[W]e just thought that showing a piece where the family is torn apart at the end wouldn’t be very, uh, I don’t want to say the word entertaining but uh, you know it wouldn’t be very - it would be too much of a
downer and so we decided to put a little more of a positive spin on it too. To show what could be an ending though not all stories end that way.

And on the other side, there were those who feel that they “ruined” bharatanatyam by implementing a same-sex narrative.

**Swathi:** ...there were a lot of people who could relate to this video and um, I think negative feedback - there were people who did not agree with this idea and were more close-minded about this.

**Aarthy:** ...we also of course got like what Swathi was saying, the close-minded people saying “this is not what bharatanatyam stands for” “you’re ruining the art form by talking about such ‘unconventional’ issues”

**Swathi:** ...bharatanatyam it is a very traditional art form and used only to talk about myths, gods and goddesses and all of that stuff. So through IndianRaga we’ve done so many pieces that have pushed the boundaries and talk about issues that people can relate to this time and day. Aarthy, I think you may have talked about this but her transgendered piece last year that she did, this “Revelations” piece that we did, and I did one more piece with a girl named Surya which as a salute to soldiers so that talked about soldiers going to war and their emotions about it. So yea, it’s definitely nice to talk about these issues but yea, we definitely get negative feedback on it as well from people who are like “no, bharatanatyam is only for gods and goddesses and telling these stories.

As discussed in the previous section, a performance such as the “Revelations” video will incite emotions that are first transferred to the user, and then undergoes a classification process by associating the transferred stimuli with one’s own biographical history and beliefs. This process of association can therefore, evoke a range of individualized affective-emotional responses (both positive and negative), which can then be materialized by posting these emotional declarations on the video’s YouTube page, such as the following:
If we were to entertain these not so favorable comments and critiques mentioned by the two dancers, as well as the comments made by users on the video’s YouTube page, it is very evident to see that these statements are emotionally-driven with deep personal sentiment and lack of historical, cultural, and even scientific facts. The first side of the critique stems from individuals within the LGBTQIA community. Some individuals felt that the dancers were making ‘light’ of a situation, which for some individuals, it has cost them their family and, in some cases, their own life due to their sexuality. However, I argue that the decision to create a positive and uplifting ending coincides not only with the overall mission of the IndianRaga organization, but also serves as a way to combat general perceptions of Indian culture and their attitudes towards homosexuality. Mind you, during the time this video was recorded and published, Section 377 of India’s Penal Code was still in effect which deemed same-sex relations to be criminal, so why would they further perpetuate this negative
narrative? If anything, concluding with a positive ending should be viewed as a form of socio-political commentary made by IndianRaga against the Indian government. The very foundation of IndianRaga serves to foster Indian classical art forms by reconfiguring them in ways in which combat the common perception that these ‘classical’ and ‘traditional’ art forms remain as static fixtures in India’s ancient past. If the ending were to be changed, what would that say as a reflection of the Indian culture and community?

The other set of critiques faced by the “Revelations” video, claim bharatanatyam should only be reserved for religious and mythological stories and not for “politically loaded messages” (Figure 3.25). This notion of stripping the ‘tradition’ or “debasing” the culture from bharatanatyam due the video’s queer narrative, falls completely flat when approaching this argument from a logical, historical, and scientific lens. First and foremost, homosexuality as well as other sexual orientations other than heterosexual, are not a form of mental illness or some type of psychological deficit. In fact, much of the scientific research conducted on sexuality and sexual orientation, has proven that much of it can be attributed to biology, among other factors.103 Regarding the argument that bharatanatyam should not be used for politics and should be reserved for Hindu mythology, is a complete contradiction. As discussed in this chapter, bharatanatyam itself, is a socio-political, constructed art form that served as the crux of the Indian Nationalist Movement in the 20th century; therefore, the very basis of bharatanatyam is rooted in political

103 Balthazart 2012; O’Hanlan et al. 2018.
sentiment. The correlation between politics and the arts is not a new phenomenon; in fact, if we look at the history of the Tamil film music industry, some of Tamil Nadu’s prominent political leaders began in the film industry and used their notoriety and position to push their own political agendas.\textsuperscript{104} Lastly, the notion that bharatanatyam repertoire should be reserved only for Hindu mythology is problematic for two reasons. The first, is that the inclusion of Hindu mythology is a recent occurrence that stems from the Indian Nationalist Movement to promote a pro-Hindu agenda. In reality, the original bearers of bharatanatyam’s origins, the dēvādāsis, did not just reserve their art to ritual and religious duties, and would also perform secular, and often comical repertoire.\textsuperscript{105} The second reason is in regards to the Hindu mythology itself. As a result of Rukmini Devi’s efforts to sanitize the art form (20th century), much of the erotic sentiment ($\text{sri}g\text{\textgra}$) was stripped away, along with any form of homosexuality and/or homoerotic sentiment which has continued to be censored even prior to Devi’s crusade to save this art form (Vanita & Kidwai 2000).

\textbf{Conclusion}

The dancers and choreographers of the “Revelations” video, not only sought guidance from outside sources, but also within their own psyche in order to present an affective and effective abhinaya. Therefore, the dance does in fact, have personal

\textsuperscript{104} M.G. Ramachandran was an actor turned politician of the political party, DMK. Same can be said for Tamil Nadu’s former Chief Minister, Jayaram Jayalalithaa.

\textsuperscript{105} The “chicken song”, along with other comedic art has been outlined in Saskia C. Kersenboom’s work with the dēvādāsi, Smt. P. Ranganayaki.
meaning to them even though they themselves, have never experienced rejection in this particular context and thus, utilized their agency as the choreographers to channel their emotions in a LGBTQIA narrative. With regards to public reception, however, the video’s ability to relate and connect to a wider and universal audience is contingent upon a variable of factors. Although a viewer may have the ability to be emotionally impacted by a performance due to Langer’s concept of the autonomous ‘continuum of feeling,’ it is dependent on the viewer in terms of how one chooses to classify and direct these sentiments.
CONCLUSION

Figure 4.1 Photo from New Delhi’s Pride March in 2017. Courtesy of Rebecca Conway of The New York Times.

While in the early stages of writing this thesis, India’s Supreme Court ruled in favor to repeal Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which deems homosexuality as a criminal offense. Following this announcement in early September of 2018, news quickly began to circulate around the globe and sparked a flood of responses from the public in the form of blog posts, Facebook status updates, and photos in celebration of this historic event. This has led me to wonder how this repeal will unfold and take shape within the Indian-American diaspora in the coming years and more specifically, - how this will shape the future of the artists discussed in all three chapters?

The first chapter “Pussy Power,” presents a case study on Los Angeles-based artist, DJ Bianca Maieli. The way in which she recycles musical tracks into a remix creates potential to present other levels of meaning and association and thus, parallels

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106 Gettleman et al. 2018
the complexity of the desi culture. The term desi has adopted many associations as it made its way to North America and can be viewed in the context of this thesis, as an umbrella term that unifies people of varying degrees of Indian ancestry. With DJ Bianca Maieli, the coexisting of her Colombian, South Indian, and American roots have resulted in the negotiation and formation of her desi identity. This constant negotiation, as argued by Maieli herself, is further complicated when the layer of queerness is added into the mix. Her unique amalgamation that makes up DJ Maieli’s identity is reflected not only in her music and brand as an artist, but also in the way in which she has cultivated a space for herself online. To reiterate, online engagement and the use of virtual platforms like social media, enables one to “achieve a vision of a multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy comes from having access to our many selves” (Driver 2007:170). Through her community engagement, strong online presence, and her overall transparency with her sexuality, DJ Maieli serves as a role model for budding queer female artists of color, while also representing the deconstruction of the dominant, heterosexual narrative that makes up portions of India’s history.

Furthermore, the use of online message boards and other virtual platforms serves as a mutually reinforcing, mobile exchange process that encourages users to experiment with one’s self-presentation or identity, as seen with M-Tooray. With her career as a dhol player and fashion model, the curation of her various online spaces like Facebook and Instagram, transforms and contributes musical sounds or “calls” played. Her oscillation between performing in traditional Punjab performance
settings and her musical collaboration with local desi hip-hop artists, M-Tooray has created a diverse network of individuals all of whom are united under the mutual connection of knowing (in some capacity) Malinder. In addition to DJ Maieli and M-Tooray, the “Revelations” video discussed in the third chapter, also contributes to the visibility and representation of queer desi women. The video’s ability to relate and connect to a wider and universal audience is contingent upon a variable of factors. Although a viewer may have the ability to be emotionally impacted by a performance due to Langer’s concept of the autonomous ‘continuum of feeling,’ it is dependent on the viewer in terms of how one chooses to classify and direct these sentiments, as seen with the flood of positive online reception.

The overturn of Section 377 has led me to wonder what type of effects and actions will unfold within the next decade or so as a result. Could this repeal prompt an influx of literature, scholarly research, and representation within mainstream music, film, and media for queer Indian and Indian-American? This thesis only scratches the surface of the representation and intersectionality of queer Indian-American female artists in music and the performing arts. Looking ahead, I plan to elaborate on this thesis by concentrating on the network of queer female desi artists shared between DJ Maieli and M-Tooray in the Los Angeles area.
By drawing upon the work of Wendy Hsu and her concept of ‘digital diaspora,’ I too, will adopt a similar methodological approach through various ethnographic methods in order to break down “the virtual-vs-real binary that is implied in much of the discourse...” (Hsu 2013: 394) and present a seamless connection between one’s social dynamics both on and offline. In doing so, enables me to critically approach this LA-based network of female desi artists on a multitude of intersecting issues including generational differences, racism, religion, immigration, gender, sexuality, ethnocentrism, and biracialism; ultimately, highlight the music culture fostered by this empowered group of queer desi female artists.

107 “My notion of the digital diaspora …foregrounds the Internet as a productive site of social interactions and community formation around and across the boundaries of nation, ethnicity, race, and religion. By inserting the term ‘digital,’ I insist upon digital sociocultural processes as not only sites of my research inquiry, but also objects of my study” (Hsu 2013: 394).
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APPENDIX A: Interview Details


Jaisankar, Swathi. March 16th, 2018. Skype Interview, Massachusetts, United States.


Maieli, Bianca. April 2nd, 2018. E-mail Interview, California, United States.

Sumati. October 27th, 2018. FaceTime Interview, Massachusetts, United States.


Tooray, Malinder (M-Tooray). January 17th, 2019. Phone Interview, California, United States.
APPENDIX B: Fieldwork Images

Figure B.1 Post from the online forum, Empty Closets. Screenshot by B. Iannitti Nov. 24th, 2017 at 9:34pm.

Figure B.2 Instagram profile information. (Screenshot by B. Iannitti Oct. 21, 2018 at 4:11pm).

Figure B.3 Instagram post celebrating her mother on Mother’s Day (Screenshot by B. Iannitti Oct. 21, 2018 at 2:05pm).
**Figure B.4** An event poster celebrating Colombia’s Independence. (Screenshot by B. Iannitti Oct. 21, 2018 at 9:22pm).

**Figure B.5** Maieli (right) and friend at a Colombian music event. (Screenshot by B. Iannitti Oct. 22, 2018 at 1:05pm).

**Figure B.6** Promo for “Desi Dance Party.” (Screenshot by B. Iannitti Dec. 10, 2017 at 9:51pm).
Figure B.7 Advertisement for “Global Diwali Party” at Pataka Cafe. (Screenshot by B. Iannitti Nov. 8th 2018 at 11:55am).

Figure B.8 Advertisement for Bhangra-She event. (Screenshot by B. Iannitti Oct. 22, 2018 at 1:05pm).

Figure B.9 Caption and hashtags for the track “Indo-Rain.” (Screenshot by B. Iannitti Nov. 4th 2018 at 2:38pm).
Figure B.10 M-Tooray featured in a Calvin Klein advertisement. (Screenshot by B. Iannitti Dec. 9th 2018 at 9:38pm).

Figure B.11 Kumbhadīpa (“pot lamp”) with tattudīpas (“plate-lamps”) behind. Courtesy of Saskia Kersenboom.
Figure B.12 Map of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Courtesy of MapsofIndia.com.
Figure B.13 Brihadisvara Temple. Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India. February 2016. Courtesy of the author.

Figure B.14 A chart of the 9 aḍavu families

9 Aḍavu Varieties

1st: Teyyā - tei
2nd: Teyyum tatta - Teyyum - tāhā
3rd: Tat - Tei - Tām
4th: Teihat - Teihi
5th: Tattei - Tāhā
6th: Tei - Tei - Tā
7th: Dit - Dit - Tei
8th: Tet - Teitattā
9th: Tā - Tei - Tei - Tā
Figure B.15 *Aramandi* shown by Priyamvada Sankar. Courtesy of Dr. V. Raghavan Centre for Performing Arts.

Figure B.16 *Patākam* mudra. Courtesy of the Dr. V. Raghavan Centre for Performing Arts.

Figure B.17 Daughter mimics her mother.
Figure B.18 Mother wearing a thali or botu necklace symbolizing marriage. (Screenshot by B. Iannitti April 21st, 2018, 4:48pm).

Figure B.19 Notes of the Kāpi Rāga.

Figure B.20 Mother and daughter join hands and reconcile. (Screenshot by B. Iannitti Mar. 15th, 2019, 7:38pm).