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The parallax view: the art of envisioning the South Asian American diaspora

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies six South Asian American artists whose creative projects reveal the diasporic experience as a persistent negotiation of living in multiple historical and geographical locations. To fully understand the proposals made by their work I introduce the parallax view that enables us to see from two or more vantage points at once. This framework is well suited for art that seeks to expose the private traumas and contradictions that affect and order the lives of South Asian Americans. The artwork examined here also shows that living in the diaspora is not defined by a linear process of assimilation, but is often undercut, fragmented, and mediated by multiple spatial and subject positions. Out of the conditions of diaspora, these artists deploy critical strategies to survive in a society that refuses to give South Asian Americans visibility, political agency, and space to effectively participate in the public sphere.

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Introduction

Questions about immigration and the immigrant's presence within the United States are now again topics of national debate. This is in large part due to the resurgence of racist rhetoric tacitly sanctioned by the Trump administration. The murder of Srinivas Kuchibhotla and wounding of Alok Madasani, two South Asian aviation engineers working for Garmin in Olathe, Kansas in February of 2017 directly resulted from this rhetoric and highlighted the particular plight of South Asian Americans living with white supremacy. Rather than being a solution to racism, as so many fantasise, and no matter how hard they work to be model minorities, South Asian Americans were awoken to a racist power structure that continues to deny them the public and political space to take control of your life. That President Donald Trump did not immediately tweet his condolences or repudiate the shooting revealed what Vijay Prashad outlined as the structural message of the state's view of the South Asian American diaspora: 'We want your labour, we don't want your lives' (2000, 87). Without control over how they are seen in the public sphere, South Asian Americans are reduced to their visible physical traits that can be construed as Middle Eastern, Muslim, terroristic, and deeply other, which makes their claim to a space in today's America even more tenuous. The persistent threat of physical violence also reveals the fatal contradiction of American civil society that on the one hand celebrates its cultural pluralism, and on the

other denies its immigrants of colour full representation (and protections). While the immigrant's vulnerable status haunts the U.S.'s self-ascribed identity as a liberal democratic society, it more tragically constitutes the central trauma organising South Asian diasporic subjectivity. As Vijay Mishra noted, 'For diasporas this question always remains a trace, a potentially lethal "solution", around which their selves continue to be shaped' (1996, 422). The artists that I write about in this essay brave this trauma, taking on the political responsibility of interrogating the contradictions of American pluralism to reveal both the visible and hidden realities of diasporic life, its facts, and fictions. Their art is produced from the agonistic space of violence and exclusion, and is an expression of the ontological desire to be in the U.S. as transnational subjects, plainly, and fully.

The artists that I have chosen to write about in this essay belong to what Vijay Mishra calls the 'new diaspora', those who came after the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, an era defined by late capitalism, hyphenated identities, global mobility, and increased visibility, (1996, 422). They all work within the United States. Gautam Kansara, Ranu Mukherjee, and Hasan Elahi were born and or raised in the U.S. The others, Jaishri Abhichandani, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, and Asma Kazmi, came to live here from South Asia as teens or young adults. Their work is based on photographic documentation, archival, and historical research. The artists then combine the collected information in creative ways to produce a compelling visual experience. Their videos, animations, photographs, and drawings resist the dominant representations of diasporic life by uncovering the often-hidden practices, knowledge, and subjectivities of the diaspora that destabilise or negate these representations. Their art consists not merely of objects meant for passive consumption but constitutes theoretical proposals that demand on the part the audience a responsive mode of viewing in which two or more vantage points are occupied in order to perceive the full depth of their critiques. More precisely their art requires that we take a parallax view of the conditions of diaspora.

Parallax is the apparent displacement of an object caused by viewing it from two (or more) positions. The parallax was used by seafarers from ancient times to measure distances based on stellar and planetary positions. The term entered art by way of photography to denote an error of perspective caused by the dissimilar views of an object that emerge between the camera's viewfinder and the lens. Perceived as a distortion in need of correcting, parallax denies the camera complete control over the object to be captured since what the photographer's eye sees differs from what the lens records. The gap between the eye and the lens opens up a space for the contingent and the unconscious to seep into the photographic image. The so-called error in perspective was also how photography gained entry into the fine arts as it was no longer believed that the photographer was merely a technician reproducing an objective reality. The hidden and unconscious desires are also present in the photograph, making it an ambivalent, theoretical construct. As Benjamin wrote about the dual nature of photography:

It is indeed a different nature that speaks to the camera from the one which addresses the eye; different above all in the sense that instead of space worked through by a human consciousness there appears one which is affected unconsciously. (1972, 7)

Benjamin's discovery of the uncanny that lies within a photograph can also be understood as the implicit parallax view it offers, where there is more than one perspective present. Therefore, as the contemporary world puts a lot of faith in a photograph's verisimilitude,

the parallax underlying its creation represents its excess or supplement, haunting it by refusing its perceptible truth.

It is significant to note that parallax views are not oppositional or obfuscatory, but further enhance our visual understanding of an object. As Slavoj Žižek explains the clarifying effect of parallax: ‘We do not have two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see from the first perspective’ (2006, 29). The artists of the South Asian diaspora can be seen as attempting to fill the gap between the hegemonic perspective of diaspora and the traumatic realities – some carried over from South Asia, others produced here at home – that problematise the celebratory trajectories and anodyne representations of achievement and assimilation. Utilising collage, video, drawing, and animation, the artists presented in this essay allow us to encounter this ‘other perspective’ and offer new vantage points to view the less visible, recurrent, and unsettling realities of diaspora. Their complex and layered imagery represents the multiplicity of cultures and experiences of the South Asian diaspora and produces a parallax view through which to witness its diversity. Many started with the traditional tools of documentation such as photography and video, but later turned to collage, animation, installation, and new media technology to bring further depth to their work. Their art, I argue, makes visible the traumatic nature of South Asian diasporic visibility and offers a necessary critique of the contradictions of the political practices that belie the proclaimed American core values of equality and freedom. The artists and their work are shaped by the social struggles, economic forces, and political ideologies of the present moment. Since some of their concerns overlap, I have grouped the artists’ work according to the specific parallax view that is being engaged. These I have called *the parallax of surveillance*, in which the artist reveals the social and cultural constructions and resistance to the gaze of power, *the parallax of memory*, in which the idealised memory of the diaspora is challenged by viewing the contingent, difficult and suppressed ordeals of migration, and the *transnational parallax*, in which we see diasporic subjectivity constituted through cross-border alliances, shifting identities, and global travel. All of these works utilise the parallax to resist the dominant culture’s demands for a parochial and non-political diasporic community, and implicitly critique the complacency and complicity of middle-class South Asian Americans for their capitulation to these demands.

The parallax of surveillance

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew’s series, *An Indian from India* from 2001 was created as a response to the public disclosure of their origins that is required of diasporic South Asians. Once they are classified under the white gaze of racial surveillance they are then understood through the stereotype of the ‘good’, docile, apolitical immigrant. *An Indian from India* disrupts this mode of classification and puts on view its fictional construction. Matthew arranges the photographs in this series as diptychs. On one side is a facsimile of an archival image of a Native American taken in the nineteenth century (Figure 1). The sepia tone, pose, and lighting instantly suggest the subjects were under the control of the photographer and his gaze that sought to reveal a truthful view of the sitter. These types of photos are by now understood as part of the project of suppression of Native Americans who were reduced to types and taxonomies, and then made to conform to White culture by learning English language and habits of dress. On the



Figure 1. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew *Noble/Savage*, from “An Indian from India” series, 2003 24 x 30 inch Archival pigment print Annu Palakunnathu Matthew Courtesy sepiaEYE.

other side of the diptych is the self-portrait of Matthew also dressed in her native’ attire, a sari. Like the Native American she too is shown in another image in the reformed dress of Western business attire (Figure 2). By juxtaposing the two images, the viewer can see that although she is the ‘other Indian’, the one from India, she shares a history with the Native American Indian. They are both seen as being the subject of ethnographic photography and its desires to control the other. The critical effect of the diptych emerges from the fact that Matthew, existing in a different century and originating from the other side of the world, subjects herself to the same postures as her counterpart. Through the visual correspondence of the two subjects, she entices the viewer to come closer, inspect, compare, and contrast the two ‘Indians’ on view. The parallax embedded in the photographs creates a dialectic relationship between the image and the viewer who does not merely consume the image but responds to the inherent ambivalence of racial classifications.

Moving back and forth between the time and space of Matthew’s portraits, the viewer fails to find a secure ‘transcendental’ gaze in these images of Indians. In her analysis, Bak-rathi Mani identified the productive effect of this disorienting view:

Such a failure of representation requires us, as viewers, to contend with unsettling feelings, feelings that emerge from sensory experiences of history and memory ... But such feelings are precisely the place from which to think about the relationship between visibility and representation in Asian American exhibition cultures. By beginning with images that haunt us, rather than welcome us in, we can identify new ways of seeing ourselves. (2015, 212)

In viewing the Indians side by side, the viewers become aware of the localities, contingencies, errors (Columbus mistaking the Americas for India), and the subjugation of bodies



Figure 2. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew *Tom & AnnuAfter*, from "An Indian from India" series, 2001 24 x 30 inch Archival pigment print Annu Palakunnathu Matthew Courtesy sepiaEYE.

that happened to be born on the wrong side of the ethnographic camera lens. Stepping away from the photographs, the viewer begins to question the basis of the American values of equality and justice when national power dynamics are organised around racial hate and rapacious greed. To the diasporic viewer of middle-class sensibilities, the parallax view that Matthew's images provide travels even more deeply into the trauma that structures their life, and brings out the chilling awareness that their visibility in America is not a cause of celebration but a fatal trap. The parallax view offered in Matthew's photography is an agent of agitation and a means of refusing dominant power its representations of the nation's minorities.

The national gaze of surveillance that structures the visibility of the South Asian American diaspora as recognisable and disciplined was restructured after the 9/11 terror attacks on the World Trade Centre. Ever after that event another type of surveillance, organised as a response, came to traumatically effect the South Asian American diaspora. More specifically, it was the racialised body of South Asian American Muslims residing in the United States that became a target of surveillance and social violence. However, since visual markers such as skin colour, attire, and facial hair were associated with a Muslim identity, many non-Muslims, especially Sikhs, were subjected to increased public scrutiny and routine violence. Instead of coming to critique the surveillance and mischaracterisation

of South Asian American Muslims as enemies of the state, Hindus moved in the opposite direction by embodying the signs of the ‘good’ immigrant. As Aparajita De observed,

In its politics of belonging and disavowing any allegiance within a greater fraternity, the South Asian (Indian) diaspora has been quick to identify itself as a nonthreatening, unified, and consumable identity, rescripting itself through Bollywood as overwhelmingly Hindu, largely Indian, and primarily educated and upper class while distinctly excluding that identity from the immigrant labor diaspora primarily composed of Muslim South Asians who have been easily branded ‘the real enemy’. (2016, xvi)

The art of Hasan Elahi disturbs the illusion of safety offered by the state’s practices of surveillance and reveals the trauma inflicted on the diaspora community through these practices. The psychic and bodily violence that came with the increased scrutiny of South Asian American Muslims from Pakistan and Bangladesh after 9/11 inspired him to use the camera along with the tracking capabilities of new media such as GPS to bring attention to the contradictory realities of being Muslim in America.

Hasan Elahi’s *Tracking Transience* is an ongoing project where the artist posts on his website images and the location of places he has visited each day of his life since 2002.¹ By 2016 he had collected over 70,000 photos of restaurants, urinals, parking lots, and airports. Later these images are grouped and exhibited as nodes, such as airports and unmade beds (Figure 3). By now the origin story of *Tracking Transience* is well-known due to Elahi’s outspokenness about his treatment after returning to the U.S. from a trip abroad in 2002. Although a naturalised American citizen, he was detained by immigration authorities in the Detroit Metropolitan Airport as a possible terrorist who was storing explosives. By looking at Elahi’s well-organised calendar, the officials determined that he was an artist and not a terrorist. However, instead of simply being released, Elahi was told that he



Figure 3. Hasan Elahi tracking transience: Stay v1.0, medium: C-print. Dimensions: 30 inches × 40 inches/75 cm × 100 cm. Date: 2011. Credit: courtesy of the artist.

still had to check in with the FBI office in Tampa, Florida, where he was living. Elahi shared this absurd story on the Colbert Report, Ted Talk, and New York Time's Op-ed page, always pointing out the tragic-comic condition in which he would live for the next six months after his initial interrogation. Checking in with the FBI office in Tampa, he underwent nine polygraph tests before he was finally and completely cleared of suspicions of being a terrorist threat. Although he was no longer a person of interest, the FBI suggested that Elahi regularly check in with them because due to his name and race he was anticipated to be subject to more questioning at a later time. He would thus never be free.

During the ensuing six-month ordeal, Elahi started taking pictures of every bed he slept in, every meal he ate, and every toilet or urinal he visited, in addition to other mundane things he did. He then uploaded pictures and location information on his public website, which he learned was visited by the FBI, NSA, and even an IP address connected to the White House. In his public talks, Elahi projects a playful, almost irreverent quality onto his practice of collecting, collating, and then exhibiting the minutiae of his everyday activities. However, organising and signifying the project is the trauma that lies at the core of what some might consider not merely repetitive but maniacal record-keeping. This is how Elahi describes the two levels of his work in an interview with fellow artist Wafaa Bilal:

Yes, there is the smartass side to that. ... but there are also a lot of other things that are happening underneath. Of the things to keep in mind, and Wafaa, I know you have been in much more traumatic situations when you are fact-to-face with authority – Saddam Hussain in your case or the FBI in my case – when you are face-to-face with someone on that side of the table with that much power of life and death over you, you are basically reduced to your animal functions and you become the ultimate Other. You become the animal and you do whatever you have to do to get out of that situation. It's a very primal instinct. (Barnabe and Kina 2017, 41).

In the reiterations of Elahi's serial images, the underlying trauma operates to destabilise the viewer's gaze. Standing before the boundless number of images, sometimes covering entire walls in art museums and galleries, the visitor has no sense of control or security of knowing what the FBI is actually looking for.

The parallax view offered by these images does not emerge merely from the act of taking over surveillance from authority, a gesture known as *sousveillance* (self-surveillance) but the very nature of surveillance itself. What Elahi reveals through the perspective of his quotidian images is not that social bodies are always subject to the surveilling gaze of authority but to show its failure – 'By putting everything about me out there, I am simultaneously telling everything and nothing about my life' (Elahi 2011). His images thus lay bare the imprecise and racist nature of surveillance and subsequently compel us to question its logic and ethics. As Dutt-Ballerstad explains the existential questions Elahi's work generates about both his place in the U.S. and that of the government that surveys him,

imposed by surveillance ... , masked under the shield of 'protection from harm' is an overpowering emotion of intense fear, a fear of being watched without knowing who is watching. Can such a logic of state-sponsored terror produced by a system of surveillance (in the name of protection) ever be justified? (2016, 117)

In *Tracking Transience*, the parallax view emerges from a supersaturation of images that is rooted not merely in their repetitive, prosaic nature but in their sheer quantity, to which there is no foreseeable limit. On the surface, the sublime vision of having one's life on display crystallises the trauma of surveillance and the fear it engenders in racialised South Asian Americans. But below the surface, *Tracking Transience* shows us the power of the returned gaze, of Elahi the partial subject whom the FBI will never know completely. In his theory of cultural mimicry demanded by the state, Homi Bhabha outlines the disruptive nature of the partial subject's gaze, 'the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and "partial" representation rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence' (2012, 127). The pictures in *Tracking Transience* place the surveyor's existence under scrutiny and reveal the fiction of surveillance in which the South Asian Muslim is essentially a terrorist and the state essentially ethical.

Parallax of memory

South Asian American artists have also critically used memory, either their own or that of their elders, to add another dimension of experience and meaning to the diasporic present. As with the parallax of surveillance, the dynamics of memory, which can never be totally caught and controlled, archived and exhibited, comes to antagonise the collective diasporic and larger national cultural spheres. Memory cannot be bound to a territory or made subject to disciplining. Instead, it has a 'subversive potential' that 'can undermine geographical definitions of diaspora and, in particular, the idea that the lost homeland is the defining moment of diasporic identity' (Baronian et al. 2007, 12). Memory is constituted by each individual's singular recollection of the sounds, smells, textures, and time of a place, which means that the concept of home – be it India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh – is always multiple. Another characteristic of memory that makes it defiant and decentering is that it never conforms to the dominant culture's desire for a disciplined diasporic subject. In the space of memory, conjured, and jogged through performance, song, storytelling, and other creative acts, the diasporic subject can resist the flattening practices of the nation-state's identitarian ideologies that require a singular allegiance to the new homeland. The video and animation of artists Jaishri Abachandani and Matthews capture what Said once called the 'belligerent intelligence' of memory. They provide a parallax view of the multiple ways in which the traumas of exile, violence, and alienation are mediated by memory, and open up new ways to understand the diversity of the South Asian American diaspora.

The parallax of memory is active in Jaishri Abachandani's video, *Bijli: Heart of a Drag Queen* (2006), which focuses on a drag dancer named Bijli, an Urdu name that translates as 'lightening' (Figure 4).² Bijli came to New York from her native Pakistan in 1989. After being an undocumented immigrant for five years, she registered for asylum based on gender identity persecution. Further setting her apart from the mainstream representation of the South Asian diaspora are her lack of education and her working-class background. She spent some years of doing odd jobs and dancing on the side, but now Bijli is a well-known and sought-after performer living a settled life of negotiated routine. When she lived in a Pakistani neighbourhood of Coney Island, Brooklyn, she presented herself as a male in order to be accepted. In Manhattan, by contrast, where she performs in



Figure 4. Jaishri Abichandani. 2006. *Bijli: Heart of a Drag Queen*, Digital video, 2 minutes and 30 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

nightclubs and parties, Bijli wears glittery clothes to give full expression to her dance and her transgender identity. But adding further dimensionality to the gendered spaces she inhabits in New York City is the memory of her past in Pakistan, a mother she lost at a young age, and her faith in Islam that she still maintains by praying alone at a mosque dressed as a man. In making her video *Bijli: Heart of a Drag Queen*, Abachandani offers the dancer a space to synthesise and fully explore her complex and fluid identity. It is through an intimate performance of a famous Urdu song, *Payal Mein Geet Hain Cham Cham Ke*, that Bijli invites us to share the space of her memory. Bejewelled and wearing a fancy woman's dress she looks straight into the camera addressing an anonymous viewer. The dark lighting and blue hue add to the otherworldly atmosphere evoked by Bijli's haunting performance. After hearing her song and reading the text next to the video monitor, provided by Abachandani, the viewer may gain a further understanding of the complex nature of Bijli's displacement and desire.

payal mein geet hain cham ke, tu lakh chale ri gori tham ke,

payal mein geet hain cham cham ke.

there are songs in your anklets. No matter now gingerly you step, belle,

there are songs in your anklets.

*Tu piya se mil kar ayi hai, bas aaj se neend pariya hai, kyun dekhe sapne
balam ke, tu lakh chale ri gori cham cham ke. Payal mein geet hain cham
cham ke.*

You have returned from meeting your beloved. From now on sleep will not be yours. So why dream dreams of your lover? No matter how gingerly you step, there are songs in your anklets.

*Maine bhi kiya tha pyar kabhi, ayi thi yahi jhankar kabhi, ab dekhun mein
sapne balam ke, tu lakh chale ri gori cham cham ke. Payal mein geet hain
cham cham ke.*

I had also loved once. The same sounds rang from my feet once. Now I dream dreams of my lover while songs ring from your ginger steps, belle. There are songs in your anklets.

The lyrics were written in 1932 by Hakim Ahmad Shuja, the famous Urdu poet whose relatives were well-known Sufi mystics from Lahore, Pakistan. His son, Anwar Kamal Pasha, added music to the poem and put the song in the film *Gumnaam* in 1954. Famously performed by Iqbal Bano, Bijli would have grown up with the song as a favourite that defined her and many other Pakistani Americans' memories of home. An Urdu speaker would also know that in Sufi ghazals or songs, the gender of the singer is ambiguous since the pronouns 'I' and 'you', as in English, are not marked as masculine or feminine. The singer's embodiment of ambivalence is in stark contrast to the heteronormative identities of the South Asian Muslim diaspora, where gender is clearly defined and any suggestion of ambiguity unwelcome. In Abachandani's video of Bijli, we are witness to the singer's navigation through the densities of cultural memory to find herself again in a safe and recognisable place. Drawn from her memory, the song offers Bijli a space to escape the agonistic condition of transgender subjectivity where her desire for love and acceptance is defined not by oppositional gender categories, but by the comforting ambivalence of mystical Islamic poetry and the Urdu language.³

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's *Open Wound* (Figure 5) is a series of photographic animations that is concerned with how the trauma of Partition continues to influence the processes of national identification in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as well as for those living in the diaspora. In the South Asian countries to this date, there exists no public conversation about or memorial to the world's largest forced migration and refugee crisis, with over one million dead and fifteen million displaced victims of the dismemberment of India. This government-sanctioned amnesia does not extend to the diaspora, where artists and historians are archiving stories of Partition and giving public voice and vision to the memories of that trauma. The 1947 Partition Archive, for example, founded by Guneeta Singh Bhalla in 2010, collects on the digital cloud interviews of South Asians that witnessed the traumatic events. Matthew's *Open Wound* series offers another mode of remembering Partition. First, she visits the homes of the victims of



Figure 5. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *OpenWound - India*, Encyclopedia 1947, Stories of Partition, 1997-2000 16 x 11.5 inch Digital Animation on iPad by Artist Selected work: Aruna, Deesh, Kohli, Malti, Meena, Bery, Neeti, Puri, Rajesh.

Partition and interviews them and collects images from family albums and present-day portraits that she takes. Through digital animation, she overlays their old photographs with contemporary images that include family members, children, and grandchildren in order to show the effect of time on the individual and their family. Snippets of the interviews are added to the animation and communicate not only the horrific events but also the crucial idea that trauma resides not only in the minds of the victim and witness, but can be passed on to later generations.

Matthew's interviews and photography from the Pakistan and Bangladesh sides of Partition were conducted with families living in North America. Among these diasporic victims of Partition was A. Haleem, whose tragic story is presented in a text that runs alongside his changing portrait.⁴ While he transforms before our eyes from a young adult to his present elderly state we read about the horrific choice his mother was forced to make between saving her son (him) or a daughter they never saw again. In this and all of the other animated photographs of *Open Wound*, memory and emotion bleed out of photographs and into the present as Matthew's works reveal how trauma never dies as its memory subconsciously structures lives even in later years and subsequent generations. By making the effect of memory clear and activating it through the animation of crossfades and text, Matthews is providing a parallax view of family snapshots. She urges us to go beyond the curated images of happy family portraits and search out the difficult stories of loss that caused migration to happen. The way the animations are exhibited is also significant in revealing the two views of Partition, the familiar familial and the state-sanctioned amnesia. Matthews carves out encyclopaedias published soon after Partition and places iPad minis inside them, with the animation running so the viewer can better sense the dissonant views of the trauma (see Figure 5). In revealing the persistence of the memory and trauma of Partition in the diaspora, Matthews hopes that the *Open Wound* series will also forge a bond with more recent refugees within the community.

As Matthew's states on her video page: 'The stories strongly parallel those that I collected in India and echo accounts of recent refugees from Syria, Iraq, and other countries in conflict' (Accessed November 26, 2017. <https://vimeo.com/179370177>) The parallax view of the Partition photographs thus also reveals the South Asian diaspora's political responsibility to use their memory to bring understanding to the newest diaspora communities that come as refugees and are currently trying to forge a space to live in the U.S.

The transnational parallax

The parallax view that South Asian American artists use to interrogate the ethics and practices of global power is framed by their transnational subjectivity. It is a perspective that emerges from the artist's perceived connections to spaces and social conditions outside of the U.S., and their art and aesthetics are based on 'constantly shifting identities and social-political and historical issues' (Chang 2008, 122). The South Asian American artists whose work is produced through these connections offer new perspectives of diaspora as a global condition and provide a necessary critique of parochial representations of identity. The transnational parallax also reveals the hidden history of colonialism and its reincarnation as neo-liberal capitalism that sustains the global condition of inequality and environmental disasters. Edward Said's discussion of the exile's perspective further elaborates this transnational parallax: 'Because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation' and therefore there is a tendency, 'to see things not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way' (Said 1996, 60). The transnational parallax thus offers a deep focus that allows us to see how present-day global crises of unchecked development, environmental damage, mass migration, and war are connected to a long history of state-driven systems of economic exploitation.

The first artist whose work incorporates the transnational parallax is Ranu Mukherjee. Her work is based on research, collecting photography, painted images, and digital imagery animated into 'hybrid films'. The transnational components of these films are drawn from stories she heard growing up about her family's forced migration from East Bengal after Partition, as well as thinking about the way objects act as cyphers that can reveal both our past and future trajectories. At first glance, her hybrid films suggest a cinematic narrative through the use of fade-outs, flicker, and the widescreen format. However, Mukherjee seeks to disrupt the singular perspective of a cinematic narrative by using images that derive from multiple cultural sites that are made to collide with and echo cultural processes of creolisation and migration. In Mukherjee's *Abundance Picture, as Told By the Element Itself*, (Figure 6) from 2011 we are immersed in a three-and-a-half-minute animation of hyper-saturated colour fields sampled from early twentieth-century Indian lithographs of the Hindu gods and goddesses.⁵ The colours reference Mukherjee's first introduction to Hindu art in her childhood home. The animation also incorporates a family story of children smuggling gold over the newly defined border between India and East Pakistan following Partition in 1947, and it weaves into the non-narrative presentation other elements that include references to environmental degradation, landscape painting, and the story of the Hindu god Krishna and the Gopis (acknowledged by the hand-drawn and photographed clothing hanging on tree branches). The pictures pulse with rhythm but have no sound, thus putting them into a cultural



Figure 6. Ranu Mukherjee. 2011. Still from *Abundance Picture, as Told by the Element Itself*, Hybrid film (Blu-ray disc), 3 minutes and 32 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Wendy Norris, San Francisco.

nebulous where the scene can be taking place anywhere between India and the United States. The strategy of omitting sound also makes us focus on the movements of the images within the animation and think about how the large ruptures of history, such as Partition, inflect the retelling of mythological and personal narratives. This work and Mukherjee's other hybrid films are concerned with revealing the transnational traumas of forced migration, the exile's transformation, and 'how the epic enters into the everyday' in the stories we hear about our family's relocation in the diaspora (Mukherjee 2011). The parallax view of the transnational condition of displacement in her art reveals how the fragmentary in diasporic culture is not history's detritus but fertile signs of the excesses and abuses of global capitalism that puts the lands and bodies of the diasporic subject in danger of violence while misrepresenting the true causes as economic forces.

The transnational parallax also shows us how war and death are encountered differently in the South Asian American diaspora, which is the subject of Gautam Kansara's video piece, *Untitled (The Kansara Show)*, 2017 (Figure 7). For the past decade Kansara's photography, sound, and video work has been concerned with questions of how different generations of his family relate to one another, their memories, and lives lived outside of India. His early work documented his family's dynamics at gatherings in the home of his maternal grandparents, who left India in 1947 to settle in London, where Kansara's mother was born. Both his parents were educated in London and moved to the U.S. The family routinely returned to the grandparents' house in London. It was on those occasions that Kansara recorded and photographed conversations around the dinner table and other parts of the flat in West London, creating an archive over six years. His video installations based on this archive offered a window into the poignant and challenging moments of diasporic life, such as nostalgia, loneliness, and anxiety about growing old so far away from home. Kansara's more recent work explores how social media is shaping the way we process information, interact with one another, and remember major and mundane events. In his latest work on this subject, Kansara has returned to focus on his family



Figure 7. Gautam Kansara, 'The Kansara Show, Part 1' still from a 2-channel video installation. 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

using footage of conversations to create multi-channel video installations, photographs, and performances. Registering how international current events are processed by himself and his parents, these works speak to a larger concern with how the absurd reality of these events is processed in daily life and private discourse. As he describes his recent work in a recent email, 14 November 2017: 'this is an attempt to visualize that internal process of negotiating life in the face of observed circumstances which are involved in all of our live's private dramas, traumas alongside collective memory, news and current events'.

'The Kansara Show, Part 1' puts on view a sparring session between his parents regarding the U.S. government's practice of drone strikes on Middle Eastern towns and villages. The video installation is produced through an analogue process of recording moving images of art objects off of television screens. In the layered video, we see *New York Times* front pages with prominent headlines being placed one on top of the other. The papers overlay a fragmented video of Kansara and his parents discussing the subjects of these headlines and especially the use of drones. Kansara himself is present in two ways, he sits between his parents as they exchange opposing opinions; his interjections show that he sides with his mother. He is also present through yet another layer of video which shows his hands arranging and rearranging the footage of the conversation with the newspapers. Kansara's burden is felt through those hands that try to understand how the political and personal fit together. The very audible conversation that at times grows loud and emotional is an important part of the work and gives coherence to the video and its underlying message. Through the succession of images of newspapers and other scraps and patches of paper, it is his mother's voice that breaks through in her appeal to frame the drone strikes as another instance of the inhumane mechanisation

of war. His father, on the other hand, occupies a position on the drone strikes based on an unequivocal trust in the same mechanisation as a way of saving lives in the longer run.

The video not only gives us a view of a family conversation about the almost invisible wars taking place on the other side of the world. It also reveals a transnational parallax where the postcolonial sensibility – registered in Kansara’s mother’s loud appeal to see the violence of technology as simply murderous – comes to frame the drone strikes. The angst and anger in her voice reverberate with the centuries of traumas borne by South Asian bodies through their resistance to Western economic and social injustices committed in the name of progress. White Americans, however, are tone deaf to the sophisticated and historically grounded opinions offered by South Asian American citizens. Indeed, from the time of Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman they would rather see South Asians as good workers, overdetermined by tradition and spirituality, and never participating in politics (Prashad 2000, 11–20). South Asian Americans, not wanting to draw attention to themselves, are complicit in this representation. As Vijay Prashad observed,

South Asian Americans prefer to detach themselves from the minutiae of democracy and to attach themselves solely to the task of capital accumulation. All the while, there is a sentiment that we will be praised by white supremacy and left alone to do our own work at society’s margins. (Prashad 2000, 3)

Kansara’s mother’s voice breaks through this torpor and demands recognition. Her desire to claim a space to speak her truth carries with it the lessons learned in 200 years of colonialism, stories of her grandparents’ struggle for freedom, and the social traumas experienced in the diaspora. *The Kansara Show, Part 1* offers us a view of current events seen through a transnational parallax of the South Asian American who sees global events as Said’s exile ‘not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way’ (Said 1996, 60).

The transnational parallax engendered in the South Asian American diaspora is also being used to show how the endangerment of Muslim bodies is a direct result of the way Islam is represented across the world. Both in the West and in the Middle East certain political groups have a stake in fixing Islam as an ahistorical religion. In the West, nationalist parties use stereotypes and Orientalist tropes to represent Islam as the West’s Other whose diasporic communities need to be surveyed, disciplined, and contained in order to protect society. In the Middle East, but also in the diaspora, Islamic fundamentalists deny the heterogeneity and historical transformation of Islam and also survey, punish, and contain those that seek to liberalise it as a means to protect it from Western influence. By revealing the social and aesthetic history of Islam in her work, Berkeley-based artist Asma Kazmi seeks to dispel the fictions perpetuated by global political players. Through a series of drawings called *Palimpsest* (Figures 8 and 9), Kazmi puts the Islamic past and present into a productive dialogue. In the drawings, she focuses on the complex and long history of the visual representation of Muhammad in the Islamic world. The project began after Kazmi spent a couple of summers in Paris where she kept hearing and seeing the slogan ‘Je Suis Charlie’. The phrase was a proclamation of the French citizens’ allegiance to the satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, and the secular liberalism that protects the magazine’s right to caricature the image of Muhammad. Kazmi wanted to interrogate the implications of the public utterance of that phrase on Muslims living in the West. She was especially interested in the psychic violence the diaspora



Figure 8. Asma Kazmi *Palimpsest: The Mohammed Series*, screen print and drawing, 11" × 18", 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

endured upon seeing the history of Islamic tolerance and the nuanced relationship Muslims have with the memory of Prophet Muhammad erased and suppressed.

The drawings in *Palimpsest* were created through a process of erasure that calls attention to how signs and symbols of Islam are resignified in the West, resulting in a skewed reality of their meaning. Muhammad, as Kazmi explained, is for Muslims an exemplary figure. His daily habits and practices, which were recorded in texts, are demonstrations of how to ethically navigate the world. Damage to his form is like damage to a



Figure 9. Asma Kazmi *Palimpsest: The Mohammed Series*, screen print and drawing, 11" × 18", 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

Muslim's own body, which is why it is rarely represented in images. However, in Europe, the freedom to represent Muhammad in his human form had become an index of the secular principles of its society. This freedom, nationalists, and the mass media repeat, is what the Muslim diasporic community seeks to undermine when they protest Muhammad's representation. Kazmi puts these two interpretations into dialogue in her drawings by overlaying covers of the Charlie Hebdo magazine featuring caricatures of Muhammad with historical images of the Prophet (in one instance, a seventeenth-century Persian painting, in another, a twentieth-century Algerian postcard; [Figures 8 and 9](#)). The viewer is given a new vantage point to observe and realign Islamic practices with history. As Kazmi explained to me in an email, 24 November 2017,

The final works are layered manuscripts where images are drawn and erased, and drawn over again to build a sequence of strata on paper. These layers chart a nonlinear, unwritten history of representation within Islam and also consider depictions of Muslims and Muslim culture by others.

From this point of view, Kazmi asks her viewers to recognise both the historical reality of Islam's representation of Muhammad but also, and more importantly, the persistence of Orientalist desire in the West to see Muslims as Other, thereby subjecting them to potential physical and psychic violence. The transnational parallax view operating in *Palimpsest* thus provides an enhanced view of the tragic situation in which Muslims living in the West are caught.

Conclusion

The parallax views of the South Asian American diaspora constructed by these artists reposition the dominant culture's perception of their community and also demand of the community itself a responsive self-understanding. By negotiating the perilous traps of identity politics based on Orientalist and racist stereotypes that represent the community as the eternal other, their work gives greater depth of field and historical context to the ways South Asian Americans are constructing their lives. The parallax view contained in their art makes use of the critical gaze of the partial subject, diasporic memory, and transnational subjectivity in order to move us to another understanding of how dominant culture sustains itself by structuring desire and obscuring from view the history and traumas that bind minority cultures together. Their art also proposes another way of existing in the U.S. that requires the community to become aware of its complacency and thus its complicity in its own suppression. Unmasking a disingenuous 'model minority' trope that in truth serves only to disempower and obscure South Asian American visibility, the artists discussed here offer new horizons for the creation of relationships and social-political subjectivities within diaspora communities – they offer hope, in other words, to live plainly and fully as South Asian Americans.

Notes

1. <http://elahi.umd.edu/track/>.
2. To see this video use this link <https://vimeo.com/20099556>.
3. I thank Taymiya Zaman for providing the linguistic and cultural context to help make this interpretation.
4. <https://vimeo.com/179370177>.
5. <https://vimeo.com/32691501>.

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