

[Go to old article view](#)

## Communication, Culture & Critique

Volume 8, Issue 1

March 2015

Pages 20–36

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### Hard Kaur: Broadcasting the New Desi Woman

Ethiraj G. Dattatreyan

**First published:**9 October 2014 [Full publication history](#)**DOI:**10.1111/cccr.12071 [View/save citation](#)**Cited by:**

0 articles last updated 12 March 2015



## Abstract

In the last 20 years hip hop has become an important site of identity construction for South Asian diasporic youth. In this article I examine the mediatized personae of Indian born and British raised recording artist Hard Kaur, who claims to be the first “Desi” female rapper. As Hard Kaur's music, music videos, and interviews travel to and are now being produced in India, the race, gender, and class constructions formed during her experiences in the UK are finding their way to a youthful Indian public. I argue that an analysis of Hard Kaur's mediatized interactions reveals the ways in which gendered norms are being contested and reaffirmed within a transnational imaginary.

**Enhanced Article Feedback**

The screen is black. Words flash onto the screen: “Who is Hard Kaur?” Next emerges the image of a short, slight woman wearing a cream-colored jacket, large hoop earrings, and a cream-colored flat cap. She stares into the camera and begins freestylin' into a mic, labeled with the now-ubiquitous logo of the international music video channel, “MTV.” Her voice is raspy but sure and confident. She moves, her head bouncing from side to side, her shoulders bobbing up and down, her fingers pointing at the camera. Some of the words she speaks are aspirated, marking her English utterances with the sounds of Hindi or Punjabi. Other words she deploys, “nuttah,” for example, reveal that she has been influenced by British slang (nuttah is an innocuous term for “crazy”). She raps:

I don't take orders, I demand-o  
 Always on missions like commando and destroyed, here I stand yo  
 Blood stained I can still taste the butta  
 My brother told me how to be a...head butta  
 I rock all stages from here to Calcutta  
 That's why they call me an original Nuttah (Shreedharan, 2008 )

She ends her rhyme with flair, holding the last syllable of “nuttah” with her mouth in a wide grin, shaking her head as if she knows she has captured the attention of many with her performance. She begins to laugh raucously as men off-screen begin chanting her name, “Kaur, Kaur, Kaur, Kaur, Kaur, Kaur, Kaur...” The camera pans left and the viewer is only now shown the man who had been standing next to her, wearing a blue blazer over a kurta top. He grins and claps his hands as Hard Kaur continues to laugh. Finally, Hard Kaur makes a “peace” sign and loudly proclaims into the screen: “WHAT? India, Hard Kaur! Remember the Name! The FIRST and ONLY!...big balls” (Shreedharan, 2008 ). As Hard Kaur turns away from the camera, the screen fades to black.

## Diaspora in the homeland: Remixing gender, reimagining nation

Over the last 6 years Hard Kaur, self-dubbed the first Desi female rapper, has taken India by storm, releasing several solo albums while acting in and/or contributing to the soundtracks of recent Bollywood films (see, e.g., Raghavan's [ 2007 ] film *Johnny Ghadaar* and Advani, Kumar et al.'s [ 2011 ] film, *Patiala House* ). As these albums and films have become popular in India, Hard Kaur has quickly attained Bollywood celebrity status and, for some, is seen as “the face” of India's nascent hip hop scene (Vintage East Exhibition, 2012 ). I look to Hard Kaur's mediatized representations to show how she deploys her experience in the UK and her relationship to hip hop to create a public persona that actively promotes what I call the *new Desi woman* . Here I use Desi to signal her connection to a discourse that originates among the South Asian diaspora in the United States, Canada, and the UK, where Desi, originally a Sanskrit word meaning “of the homeland,” is utilized to formulate a pan-South

Asian identity among dispersed youth (Marr Maira, **2002** ). However, I suggest Hard Kaur's version of Desi belonging is constructed on grounds that, rather than simply indexing departures, solidarities, and perhaps even distinct cultural formations outside of South Asia, reflect an affective commitment to engage with the spatialized cultural milieus of the homeland. Her commitment to engage with those within the subcontinent puts her gendered and racialized subjectivities into direct contact with historical discourses concerning the postcolonial nation state. By forging a public image of herself as a strong Desi female made resilient through her contact with other diasporas who reside in the UK as well as through her insistence in participating in the male dominated world of hip hop, she challenges the historical relationship between the female body and the cultural constitution of India as a postcolonial nation, one founded on the image of the woman as meek, subservient, and docile (Chatterjee, **1989** ; Spivak, **2010** ). Through this public image, or persona if you like, Hard Kaur is able to assert an ideology that suggests that not only the young women of the diaspora, but all of the subcontinents' globally scattered youth, are future-oriented, capable, and assertive rather than emasculated and weak, products of a postcolonial nation beleaguered by its past. In other words, Hard Kaur seeks to build a vision of a globally diffuse nation that is founded on a new formulation of a Desi woman typified in her assertiveness, strength, humor, and, importantly, marked in her ability to actively claim and make claims about the homeland.

In so doing, Hard Kaur offers an alternative to the dominant accounts of South Asian diasporic cultural formation in scholarly literature, where the diaspora are seen as either imagining themselves outside of or distinct from their homeland contexts (Gopinath, **2005** ) or, conversely, are nostalgic for cultural pasts (Ghosh, **1989** ; Purkayasha, **2005** ) and create either a facsimile of the homeland in their receiver country or, through financial remittance, contribute to the maintenance of regressive ideologies (cf. Blom Hansen, **1999** ; Cordbridge & Harriss, **2000** ). Rather, Hard Kaur reveals an active engagement with India and, as importantly, with the Punjabi and the Sikh community located within India, through her music, her talk in interviews, and in her public performances; an active engagement filtered through hip hop's aesthetics that enables her to wield a particular brand of politicality in India and for Indian youth that is aggressive, confident, and worldly. Here I utilize politicality not to gesture to formal politics and political apparati, but rather to point to the ways in which popular representations of subjectivity potentially challenge or reify existent culturally embedded power relations (Hall, **2006** ; Hay, **2011** ; Laclau, **2005** ; Nayak, **2004** ).

Dhiraj Murthy ( **2007** , **2010** ) has made a similar claim regarding the Indian diaspora and its relationship to the "homeland," arguing that, since India's economic liberalization in the 1990s, there has been an increasingly recursive pedagogical relationship between youth in India and diasporic youth in the UK, Canada, and the United States—made possible precisely because of traveling popular cultural forms. These exchanges, he argues, have allowed youth in India, primarily the urban elite, to bolster their confidence in the postcolonial nation-state by coming to see it as geographically unbound and rife with possibility. Tracing the rise of the electronic music scene in Bombay and Delhi in the 1990s, he reveals how technology-enabled interactions between diasporic musicians from the UK and the United States and Bombay- and Delhi-based musicians created a space for negotiation between the traveling narratives of marginalization and struggle and the nation-bound narratives of postliberalization and its possibilities. Murthy ( **2010** ) suggests that this dialogue between South Asian youth across contexts and through popular cultural practice and consumption has contributed to the formation among India's youthful urban elite of a majoritarian, secular political nationalist sentiment

resistant to the regressive Hindu nationalist politics that have emerged in the last two decades in India (also, in part, due to diasporic remittances).

An analysis of Hard Kaur's incursion into India, however, offers something a bit different than Murthy's ( 2007 , 2010 ) account of the electronic music scene in 1990s Delhi and Mumbai and the ways in which the scene was influential in shaping a celebratory transnational dialogue on the possibilities for a politics of secular nationalism in India. Hard Kaur's deployment of hip hop, no doubt, also points to a kind of diffuse belonging made possible through popular culture, a circuit that links diasporic youth with youth in India to, perhaps, (re)shape gendered aspirations through shared practice or a shared interest in popular forms. However, Hard Kaur's mediatized interactions with interviewers, the commentary that arises as a result of her performances and so on, more readily reveals how the hopeful politics of solidarity and empowerment across borders built on new articulations of South Asian feminisms through hip hop are fractured by historically produced counter claims of gendered, religious, ethnic, and even hip hop authenticity (see Mcleod, 1999 for a discussion on how group membership is determined through received signification that validates the speaker).

In what follows I assess the particular disjunctures between the diasporic experience Hard Kaur embodies and expresses in her linguistic and gestural significations and her interlocutors gendered expectations of her. First I analyze her interviews with entertainment channels located in India and in Canada, the UK, and the United States that cater to the South Asian diaspora. In these interviews I pay close attention to how she articulates a possibility for Indian youth, both men and women, to participate in a Desi transnational imaginary that is assertive and strong. I then show how her interlocutors challenge her assertions through subtle and not-so-subtle means by calling attention to the distance between Hard Kaur and the quintessential Indian woman. I follow this analysis with a reading of a controversial public performance in Punjab this year where Hard Kaur, in her engagement with audience members, offends members of the Sikh community. In this example I show precisely how her attempts to mark a new gendered space in and for the subcontinent are fraught with challenges that are linked to her complicated historically contingent identity as a Sikh Punjabi. I conclude by arguing that, because of her braided subjectivities that mark her as Sikh, a Punjabi, a woman, and a member of a globally dispersed South Asian diaspora, ultimately Hard Kaur has to resort to a vision of belonging that is predicated on late capitalist fantasies of consumption to suture the fragmentation that necessarily occurs when one straddles several historically situated social contexts in order to fashion a vision of Desi belonging across borders. Ultimately, Hard Kaur cannot help, as she utilizes images of consumption, to point to emergent exclusions within her vision of a borderless nation as well as put her status as a rapper in the global hip hop community in question precisely because of her ambiguous connection to space and place.

## In the limelight: Creating solidarities, encountering fissures

I began this article with a descriptive passage of a short clip from MTV India as an introduction to Hard Kaur's playful performativity and the ways in which she deploys particular lyrical and gestural moves to make claims about herself as a new Desi woman who traverses a borderless India. In her verse she begins by stating "she don't take orders she demand-o" and then immediately afterward, maps herself into the geography of India by providing her viewing audience a lyricized image of her touring from "here" to Calcutta (Shreedharan, 2008 ).

I return to this quote of her short verse to highlight her juxtaposition of diasporic female empowerment laminated onto the geography of the subcontinent to introduce two key themes that emerged out of my analysis of her interviews in India and/or for an Indian audience. First, in her interviews Hard Kaur argues that she is loved across India precisely because of her assertiveness, because of the gender play that she takes part in where she easily moves, in her clothing choices, her word play, and her gesticulations, between ultra-femininity and hyper-masculinity, typified by the hip hop uniform of the baseball cap, baggy jeans, and a t-shirt. However, she extends this a step further by arguing that her attitude and, presumably, her popularity in India, is simply reflective of how youth in India are reassessing what it means to be Indian in the 21st century. Take, for example, the following quote, from an interview produced by the Indian Music Project in 2008:

How we love your attitude, tho bilkul ke...So especially Indian ho ke jab se shuru kar se bathaana "ke choop choop raho, soft bolo," vo din gayai yaar, humko aagai badna hai thoda sa "dishoom dishoom karne padaigi, attitude rakna padaigaa." So this is the reason why the young generation, the youth of today believe that sorry we don't live in the Gandhiji days.

How we love your attitude, so they all...So especially to act like an Indian, from the beginning it's been said "Act quietly, speak softly." Those days are gone, we have to progress beyond this, "We have to do some 'dishoom dishoom', we have to have some attitude." So this is the reason why the young generation, the youth of today believe that sorry we don't live in the Gandhiji days. (Shreedharan, 2008 )

It is clear in the quote above that Hard Kaur rejects the image of the meek, docile "Indian" and directly connects this image to a Gandhian nationalist discourse of the past. Her resistance is important, not only because of the way in which she places herself in the contemporary national discourse of India, but also because of the generational break that her statement implies. By positing that the parents of Indian youth adhere to a Gandhian concept, she essentializes the older generation of Indians, whether within the nation or abroad, as holding attitudes from a previous era. This era is the birth of postcolonial discourse that emerges with the onset of the modern Indian state (see Chatterjee, 1993 ; Guha, 1988 ; Amin, 1995 ) and harkens to traditionality equated, even epitomized, by the figure of the docile Indian woman. Her assertion of a generational break, I suggest, allows Hard Kaur to cast this image as one of the past and equate it to an older generation of Indians, constrained by borders and weighed down by history while she simultaneously portrays Desi youth as borderless. In so doing she suggests that the gendered ways of being associated with an older moral order of India are now subject to influences outside of the cultural fields of the subcontinent. This, ultimately, allows her to posit a new horizon of political possibility for *all* "Indian" youth, young men and women alike, one that hinges on attitude.

Shukla ( 2003 ) has characterized this sort of reconfiguration of Indianness as a quintessentially diasporic endeavor. Second generation Indians in the UK and the United States, she argues, are prone to "derisively" take Indianness as play, breaking it down and eventually reconstructing it. The reconstruction process is not a linear one insofar as diasporic individuals consciously and

unconsciously derive identities using multiple cultural signs and symbols across multiple temporalities and geographies. What becomes evident in Hard Kaur's interviews is that she believes it is her experience in the UK with hip hop specifically, and as a putatively British Black subject, more broadly, which allows her to arrive at her critique of an antiquated national discourse that stresses passivity. By British Black experience I refer to the work of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, who identify, describe, and theorize the hybridity located in British immigrant youth subcultures (Gilroy, 1996, 2007; Hall, 1987, 1992, 2006), as well as more recent work that has focused on some of the tensions within the "new ethnicities" found in the UK and the United States that has more recently come to light (cf. Huq, 2006; Sharma, 2010). In all accounts, whether in the originary theorizations by the progenitors of cultural studies, or in the new iterations by their heirs, hybridity describes a new formulation of a Black identity based on shared experiences of immigrant communities in postcolonial Britain, Canada, and the United States, where popular culture plays a significant role in the realization and visibility of these social kinds. Scholars have pointed to the ways in which hip hop has forged new solidarities by creating a shared language to describe unequal power relations (Alim, Pennycook, & Ibrahim, 2009), a means to create social interaction across difference (Nair and Balaji, 2008; Sharma, 2010), and even a possibility for practice that resists patriarchy (Morgan, 2009).

Indeed, in Hard Kaur's narrative hip hop and its practices, specifically rapping, plays a significant role in creating the possibility for her to interact with African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the working-class neighborhood in Birmingham, UK, where she grew up. She recalls, "when I fell in love with hip hop and started hanging out with black girls in school...at this time there were very few women in hip hop. When we used to come to school on the bus girls used to do the singing for whatever new song that came out...and when the rap parts came on, I would do it" (Shreedharan, 2008). Here, Hard Kaur simultaneously marks how hip hop made possible her relationships across difference in her school days while noting how she was already breaking new ground by rapping as a woman in a moment "when there were very few women in hip hop" (Shreedharan, 2008). By linking her cross-cultural experiences with Black girls to her breakthrough within the hyper-masculinized domain of hip hop, Hard Kaur does important linguistic work to link her assertiveness to her particular hybridized experience in the UK that allows her to simultaneously challenge gendered and racialized norms that she faced while growing up in Birmingham, England (See Sharma, 2010; Nair and Balaji, 2008, for similar accounts of racial solidarity through hip hop, what Sharma calls an appropriation of identification).

However, even as she developed new relationships across difference through her practice of hip hop's forms, the Indian community in her neighborhood in Birmingham were divided on whether her forays into hip hop were appropriate. "Half of the community were shocked, the other half supported me," she tells her interviewer, a Canadian Indian journalist representing Darpan, a publication produced for the diaspora in Canada (Darpan Magazine, 2013). She discusses how, when British Indians heard that she was engaged with hip hop, they would tell her to "'gar pe bait, shaadi kar, bachai banaa, learn to cook' (sit in the house, get married, make babies)," prescribing the role of the traditional woman onto Hard Kaur (Shreedharan, 2008). Even her mother, she narrates, was confused by her decision to rap in clubs and to surround herself with Black people.

So she was like "thoo akale indian ladki music mai jayagee, wo bhi rap mai, therai ko

patha hai aaj thuk indian ladki...tho clubs mai jayagee. Oodhar kale hongai. Thu kya bahar jayagee? Ghoomaigee? Oh my god, tharai ko dar nahin lagtha hai? Rap vagara yai tho kale karthai hai." I'm like "tharai ko patha nahin hai mai unsaibhi jadha karab."

So she was like, "you are a single Indian girl, you are going into music, that too rap. Do you know that until the present no Indian girl...You are going to go to a club? There is going to be black people there. You are going to go out (of the safe home space)? You are going to spend time outside (hang out)? Oh my god. You don't feel scared? Rap and all this stuff, Black people do that." I'm like, "you don't know, I am even worse than them." (Shreedharan, 2008 )

Hard Kaur, by referring to her conversations with her mother in the domestic space of their shared home, indexes the intimacy of the scrutiny she received in Britain within the South Asian diasporic community as she forayed into the world of hip hop and her interactions across difference. The kinds of racialized and gendered anxiety that her engagements with hip hop evoked among her kin and in her larger Desi community provoke Hard Kaur to say, perhaps to her mother, and certainly to her Indian viewing audience as she recounts her "conversation" with her mother, that she is even worse than Black people. This linguistic move serves two dependent functions. First, to validate racialized assumptions about Black people in Britain that her audience, whether in India or abroad, may harbor in order to position herself in comparison as worse, or more aggressive than them. Second, to actively shed the gendered tropes of meekness, vulnerability, and purity that have historically confounded South Asian women at home and abroad (Spivak, 2010 ). The identificatory straddling that Hard Kaur engages within this instance, where stereotypes of Blackness are deployed as a move for self-validation, have also been discussed by diasporic scholars in the United States who have focused on Indian Americans and their engagements with Black culture through hip hop. Sharma ( 2010 ), for instance, argues that Indian Americans growing up in the United States can sometimes utilize "appropriation as othering" as a strategy that serves the twin purpose of solidifying or strengthening one's own social position within an in-group while distancing the demarcated out-group. While Hard Kaur demonstrates in several interviews a propensity for demonstrating a solidarity with Black people by narrating her experience of interaction in the Birmingham scene and in her collaboration with several Black hip hop artists, in this case she resorts to an othering that I suggest allows her to demonstrate her exceptionality as a Desi woman and legitimate her ability to speak for a generation of youthful Indians. While it is unclear whether these sorts of deployments of racial appropriation allayed or heightened the fears of her mother or others in her community during her early days in the hip hop scene in the UK as Hard Kaur doesn't take us deeper into her story of cross cultural engagement in her hometown, Birmingham; Hard Kaur takes pains to acknowledge the support she received in her pursuit of a career as an MC or a rapper from her mother as well as from others in the Indian community despite the "danger" she faced.

In an interview for Besharam ( 2013 ), an Internet show whose name literally translates to "Shameless," Hard Kaur recounts to her interviewer, a portly Sikh man in colorful clothes, how her mother was the driving force behind some of her decisions around what music to make once her career began to take off. She jokingly says that her mother called her after she had been doing several more commercial tracks and told her to do some real hip hop. Taken together, it becomes evident that

in simultaneously “othering” herself through her claims to Blackness and its supposed inherent danger, while concurrently claiming her Indianness by indexing her family relationships, ties to India, and her self-proclaimed mantle as a voice for Indian youth, Hard Kaur fashions an uneasy image of a new Desi woman that must cross the thorny borderlands of cultural and generational difference to lay claim to a borderless nation. Marr Maira ( 2002 ), in her ethnographic work on the South Asian electronic music scene in New York in the late 1990s, also points to the same kind of uneasy bricolage that allows her mostly Indian American informants to construct themselves at the interstices of tradition, familial obligation, and new social possibility. For Marr Maira's ( 2002 ) informants, this occupation of a liminal cultural and social space was definitively tied to a particular time in their lives, a youthful moment where they were still in school and the expectations of their community hadn't yet come to fruition. This is markedly different than Hard Kaur's experience, in part because of the different class position she holds in relation to Marr Maira's informants in New York, who are mostly middle class in comparison to Hard Kaur's working-class background. We can conjecture, perhaps cynically, that Hard Kaur's decision to make hip hop a career also shaped her narrative such that her engagement with the Black diasporas of the UK has to be regularly interjected into her biography as integral to the way she came to become a hip hop star (see Rose, 2008 , on the role of legitimation that the Black body signifies in hip hop). Interestingly, in her retrospective repeated across several interviews, Hard Kaur maintains to her Indian audience that her forays in the UK across these racialized, gendered, and class divides posed a far more difficult proposition than any challenge that she has encountered in India.

In her interview with Darpan, when discussing the obstacles to becoming a female rapper, she argues she was received in India with far more enthusiasm than by the diasporic Indian community in the UK because “India is really westernized and the UK is more old school” (Darpan Magazine, 2013 ). Here, Hard Kaur once again positions herself in relation to her multiple geographic contexts in simultaneity and, by claiming India is more “westernized,” suggests traditional norms in the subcontinent are loosening while the diaspora is holding more tightly to the past. “The West” acts as a signifier for modernity and the loosening of contingent cultural practice, however, the geographic specificity of the west is laminated onto the east, to India. Meanwhile, the diasporic community in the UK are not included in the West or are participants of “westernization.” Scholars of the South Asian diaspora (Ghosh, 1989 ; Shukla, 2003 ) have, in part, echoed this argument regarding the temporal and spatial dimensions of tradition and modernity, arguing that diasporic Indian communities have frozen their image of the homeland and continue to faithfully construct social roles in their new lived context accordingly. However, the idea that India is somehow more Western than the West is a newly emerging idea, one that I, along with Jaspal Singh ( 2014 ), are documenting in each of our respective research projects with participants in Delhi's hip hop scene who, like Hard Kaur, position urban India as the future, and the West, particularly the urban West, as the past. In voicing this claim, Hard Kaur does the work of placing herself squarely in India where she seems to suggest that gendered, racial, class, and ethnic divides are being actively dismantled.

However, her interlocutors do not so easily accept Hard Kaur's aggressive, vital image as belonging to India. Rather, in her interviews they stress the striking dichotomy that Hard Kaur's very ontology poses, and in so doing, reiterate her departure from a gendered normativity that would mark her as part of the subcontinent. Take, for instance, this quote from the Indian Music Project's interviewer, as he introduces Hard Kaur to her Indian viewing audience:



Born in 1979, Taran Kaur Dhillon never once imagined that she'd perform on stage to a rowdy crowd of hip hop heads. Destiny, however, had different plans for this young Indian girl, who once aspired to be like her auntie, dressed in a sari, playing the traditional Indian harmonium. Evolving from the good little Indian girl who didn't argue or answer back, she is now a fire breathing dragon, spitting rhymes here, there, and everywhere. With a punch so hard it'd knock you out from the other side of the room. (Shreedharan, 2008 )

In this quote the novice interviewer, an engineering student based in India, makes a point of tracing the distance Hard Kaur has come from her traditional past. He suggests she was once a “good little Indian girl” who aspired to hold onto tradition and remain Indian but became a “fire breathing dragon.” The interviewer, in this colorful introduction that stresses contradiction and cultural departure, creates an image of Hard Kaur that at once reifies how women in India should be, what sorts of engagements with music they should aspire to (the traditional harmonium), while othering Hard Kaur such that she is no longer a woman, or even a human, but a mythical dragon. This sort of boundary demarcation serves to limit Hard Kaur's claims to a new Desi womanhood and, in so doing, her claims to a borderless India. In this case, the stakes of this negotiation with her novice interlocutor and, even in my discussion above regarding Hard Kaur's narrativization of her relationship to the “homeland,” hinge on the imagined nation-state of India. However, if we peer a little closer, Hard Kaur's Punjabi Sikh heritage complicates her ties of belonging to the subcontinent even further, fracturing the idea of her diasporic positionality into two overlapping contexts of belonging, India, the nation-state, and the Sikh community.

Sikhs are a religious minority in India and, during the postcolonial period, agitated for the separate state of Khalistan, first along religious, then along linguistic and regional lines. In several interviews she reveals that the only reason why she came to the UK in the first place is because of the Delhi riots in 1984, an aftermath of the assassination of the then-prime minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. During this time, the independent Khalistan movement had reached a fevered pitch in Punjab and Gandhi had ordered a raid on the most holy shrine of the Sikhs, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, to eliminate the “terrorist threat.” Gandhi's assassination was retaliation for this attack, which precipitated the Delhi riots, where over 3,000 Sikhs were killed (Axel, 2009 ). Hard Kaur's father was among the casualties. She narrates, “I was five years old when my father was killed in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. There was fire everywhere—my mother and I hid ourselves in a cupboard. My brother was hidden in the fridge. The house was burnt down; a Bengali family next door saved the rest of us. I was too young to understand what was happening” (Glamsham.com, 2013 ).

Hard Kaur, in other interviews, relates how her father's death precipitated the possibility for her to discover hip hop, to find a voice for herself. This personal narrativization of her more complex connection to India as a member of the Sikh diaspora, a diaspora that holds its claims to displacement even within India (Axel, 2009 ; Tatla, 1999 ), is clearly also indexed in her stage name—Hard Kaur. Kaur is the suffix given to woman in the Sikh faith and translates into princess, or lioness. In several interviews she relates that the name “Hard Kaur” was given to her by a South Asian DJ who had heard her perform early in her rap career, a name that stuck. Yet, in one interview she deepens her relationship to the name, explaining the gendered significance of the prefix “hard,” in relation to the

traditional Sikh name, Kaur. "I was a 'soft' Kaur. I used to obey and follow everything, that people asked me to, which was not of worth I later realized. This world has made me 'Hard' Kaur" (Walia, 2013 ). Her connection and claim to the Sikh diasporic community through Kaur and through her reclamation of Kaur, not as "soft" but as "hard," not only challenges a national Indian image of the gendered female as meek, pure, and so on, but specifically addresses the Sikh communities notions of gendered norms.

While Hard Kaur's return to the subcontinent might raise an eyebrow, even prompt an "Indian" interviewer to describe her as someone who was once a good little Indian girl and that is now a fire breathing dragon, the Sikh community has had a much stronger, more vocal reaction to her gendered assertiveness. Since her rise to stardom there has been conflicting commentary, evidenced in Internet chat rooms, within the Sikh diaspora regarding Hard Kaur's public presence. Members of the community write comments that strongly condemn her as a disgrace to the faith because of her public flaunting of virtue while others, pointing to her personal history as a survivor of the 1984 riots, champion her or simply say they "like" her. Since early 2013, Internet chatter on Hard Kaur in Sikh-specific chat sites turned increasingly negative, a reaction precipitated by the reportage of several media outlets regarding a recent public performance she did in May of 2013, during a fashion show for Vero Moda, a clothing store located in Chandigarh, Punjab. During her performance, Hard Kaur, according to several newspaper accounts, insulted male Sikhs in the audience by commenting on their traditional appearance and their backward tastes in music. She also, according the media, compared one of the bodyguards at the opening to one of the Sikh Gurus. This reportage prompted a firestorm in Sikh Internet chat rooms and in Sikh newspapers in Punjab who have vehemently cast her out of the community or called for her to receive severe punishment. Take this comment, for instance, where a responder to a blog focusing on Hard Kaur's performative indiscretions says, "She is 50% responsible for her filthy behavior and thoughts the other 50% of the fault lays at the feet of her mother who raised a dirty whoore (sic) and not a kaur" (Sikhsangat.com, 2013 ).

What is at stake in these debates within the virtual Sikh diaspora regarding Hard Kaur's position in the community is twofold. First, with regard to this essay, these comments point to the kinds of dialogues regarding the relationship between group belonging and gender that a figure like Hard Kaur precipitates, debates that are not framed in relation to her claims to representing a globally dispersed Indian youth, but specifically in her claims of being a Sikh woman. While Hard Kaur, as we saw in the interview where she is called a fire breathing dragon, is certainly placed in opposition to the image of the female consonant with the normative Indian nation-state, in the Sikh community she is a flashpoint for far more intense discussions around gendered belonging and for the necessity to uphold the image of the Kaur within the Sikh diaspora. The commentary in these virtual Sikh Sangats (communities) capture Hard Kaur, precisely because of their personalized vitriol, as a Sikh rather than as an Indian or even as a Desi. Her identification as a westernized and wayward Kaur in many of the commentators' eyes highlights how, as the diaspora returns to the subcontinent, they have to negotiate multiple globally dispersed histories and identities that complicate any universalizing claims for representing a generation of Indians across borders.

Since the incident at the club, Hard Kaur has utilized mainstream media sources to publish public apologies. In her apology in the Times of India she claims the Sikh faith to refute the accusations that she verbally assaulted Sikhs at the club that night in Chandigarh. She states in a Times article, "I am a

*sardar* myself. Why would I mock my own religion? I was only saying that the doorman, who looked smart in his turban and beard is like a true follower of Guruji” (Nijher, 2013 ). By claiming religious belonging, Hard Kaur places herself into a series of identificatory contradictions, where tradition, modernity, the past, the present, and the future at once collide. In the next and final section I show how Hard Kaur, in her public persona as a rapper, attempts to suture these contradictions by producing a transcendent vision of a youthful nation undergirded by consumption.

## Conclusion: The perpetual party, suturing the nation through the construction of a consumerist fantasy

“Welcome to a new place...understand, I am revolution...” (Hard Kaur, 2007 ). In this concluding section, I show how Hard Kaur's music and her music videos offer us a way to see how Hard Kaur utilizes a commercially viable form of hip hop to avoid the essentialization she encounters as an Indian, a Sikh, and a Desi woman and to gloss over her own contradictory claims of belonging, by creating a utopic vision of belonging for all Desis. By commercially viable I simply mean that the hip hop esthetic that Hard Kaur chooses focuses on characterizing hip hop in all of its present day glamor, rather than employing an aesthetic that harkens to hip hop's more gritty and overtly political beginnings (See Gray, 2005 and Kelley, 2005 , for a discussion of hip hop's transformation into a commercially viable industry; see Chang, 2005 , for a history of hip hop). In so doing, Hard Kaur creates a vision of Desi collectivity that relies on ideas and images of a Desi hip hop that is distanced from her experiences growing up in Birmingham as a working-class immigrant, which she so readily shares in her interviews in ways that allow her to gain credibility on several fronts. Choosing to represent herself and the Desi community in a pastiche of consumerist images that, critically, are not connected to any particular place or space, of course, has several implications within the globally dispersed hip hop community concerning the authenticity of Hard Kaur as a rapper (McLeod, 1999 ). Moreover, Hard Kaur cannot help, even as she tries to create an image of a transcendent South Asian youth collectivity, to create exclusions of certain South Asian figures.

I focus on her video for *Ek Glassy* (Akash 68, 2007 ), touted her most popular song in India and the song that Hard Kaur says her mother urged her to make for Desis worldwide, which depicts what I call the perpetual party, an example of the kind of consumer fantasy filled with images of expensive merchandise and attractive and youthful male and female bodies that are all circulating in a culturally unmarked space that typifies the kinds of lifestyle depictions neoliberal expansion has produced since the early 1990s. The term neoliberalism indexes the shrinking of government regulations to support the expansion of the economic market through the opening of national borders to global trade and development (Harvey, 2005 ). While this process has also been called other names, globalization, for instance, to refer to the cultural dimensions of contact and exchange (Inda & Rosaldo, 2002 ), the point is that this process has intensified the flows of capital in all of its forms, across borders. Recalling Murthy ( 2007 , 2010 ) and his work on the electronic music scene in Delhi and Mumbai, the efflorescence of those scenes in the 1990s can be directly tied to the kinds of economic, social, and cultural openings made possible as a result of India's endorsement of neoliberal policies in the same time period.

In Hard Kaur's case, a depiction of the perpetual party allows her to diffuse the grounds of identificatory contention by constructing a place for the setting of the video that actively promotes her vision of youthful Desi collectivity. The space or place she constructs is the club space, where the past and, presumably, the future are kept at bay to allow for the possibility of an ever-unfolding present. The space of the club is essential for the new hybrid Desi ontology as it demarcates a culturally unsaturated space; a virtual nonspace that Auge ( 1995 ) argues only allows commercially validated lifestyle choices to emerge as victorious over historically contingent cultural meanings. In the video she creates a narrative that highlights the challenges to this presentist fantasy, challenges that materialize in specters of the past tied to the subcontinent.

A crowd of young “Desis” are gathered as Hard Kaur and her DJ begin performing the track. Young Desi men and women dance with each other, their bodies close, as Hard Kaur begins to rap. Several rehearsed dance numbers with Hard Kaur and her deejay pepper the video, creating a hip hop meets Bollywood choreographic spectacle. All of the young men in the video who are part of Hard Kaur's crew have baggy jeans, red t-shirts, and white sneakers on—B-boy uniforms signifying differentiation from the rest of the crowd. The rest of the men in the crowd are dressed more conservatively, they wear slacks and sweaters. However, all of the men, whether “conservative” or “hip hop” in their attire, wear nice watches. All of the young women are dressed provocatively except for Hard Kaur, who changes outfits several times during the video, oscillating between hyper-feminine dresses and B-girl gear.

Early in the video the viewer is introduced to the anachronistic visage of an Indian man in a white suit—a suit that harkens to the 1970s, and symbolic of both Hollywood and Bollywood's depiction of the disco hero of that era. He gawks at women as he preens at himself in the corner of the club. In her lyrics Hard Kaur mocks the man in the white suit, a stand-in for an outdated masculine figure. The man is depicted as socially inept, evidenced by his bodily comportment and style of dress, both of which are indications of his “backwardness.” Recall that Hard Kaur is asserting a new Desi female subjectivity, one that won't put up with this typecast chauvinist male character. Importantly, the chauvinist male character is not a traditional character. Rather, the dated modernity that this figure represents is anachronistic within the club's transnational social milieu, which has reassigned gender positionality such that women are ascendant.

Throughout the video women and men are at the bar drinking glass after glass of liquor—indeed, the title of the track, *ek (one) glassy (glass)*, tells the story of drunken debauchery at the club and what results. In one case the debauchery is put to an end as tradition intervenes. One of the girl's mothers enters the club dressed in *salwar kameez*, a traditional Punjabi top and bottom ensemble for women, to angrily scold and drag her daughter away. The young girl who is dragged away is earlier identified by the male rapper as “the one he wants to take home” (Akash 68, 2007 ). The record comes to a halt, and all that the listener can hear is the sound of Punjabi as the mother drags the daughter to the club's exit. In this intervention tradition becomes a powerful historical force capable of reasserting itself in the “new” social milieu in an instant. The awareness of this past functions as a dialectic foil, producing anxiety and wariness even as partygoers assert a certain “carefree” quality. As Hard Kaur raps, “You're at the club and your parents don't know” there is a shadow cast on the party and a constant need to hide from one's historical embodied past.

Literally standing above all of this in the DJ booth, beyond the dance floor's treacherous possibilities, are Hard Kaur and her B-boys. They survey the scene, beyond the historical reach of tradition or,

even, of the dated modernity the man in the white suit represents. In their position they control the party, they are the party. It becomes clear that their hybridized subjectivities, or what Vervotec ( 2009 ) calls transnational habitus, the ability to occupy multiple social milieus, are what allows them to transcend history, to create new spaces and places. The message here is that hip hop places one above and out of the fray and allows one to construct new universalizing possibilities. These universalizing aesthetics are created through participation in the perpetual party, a temporally dislocated and spatially nebulous event that could be here, there, or anywhere. Yet, in a recent article Sigler and Murali ( 2013 ) suggest that the culturally marked place and space are fundamental to hip hop as a discourse of belonging and are the crucial elements in any claims to authenticity for a hip hop practitioner. The specific places and spaces where hip hop manifests, such as on street corners, in parks, and in landscapes that directly reference New York, Atlanta, and so on, are usually embedded in the visual and lyrical content that the artists produce. Importantly, these significations of place and space also reference, even if in passing or obliquely, the uneven distributions of resources and historically produced segregation that produced hip hop as a moving discourse in the first place.

However, Hard Kaur, in *Ek Glassy* (Akash 68, 2007 ) as well as in many of her other videos, for instance, in *Alcohol* (Sony Music, 2012 ), the places and spaces that Hard Kaur depicts, are unmarked. Even in the cases where she gestures toward a particular place and space, say, for instance, in the video *My Girls* (Saregama, 2012 ), where graffiti walls form the backdrop to some of the scenes, these walls are clearly part of a set rather than located in a particular cityscape. This distancing from culturally laden spaces in her music and her music videos clearly supports her efforts to produce an imaginary of a borderless youthful nation undergirded by the image of assertive Desi woman. It allows her to dismiss the threats to new subjective possibilities for Desi youth while simultaneously creating a universalizing possibility for participation through consumption. Yet, by eschewing a specificity of place in her creative products, the hip hop infused images, sounds, and narratives that arguably have the greatest circulation, Hard Kaur has to obscure the continued salience of her own complicated history as an immigrant, a Sikh woman, and an Indian. Indeed, the decision to elevate the perpetual party as central to the construction of a new Desi subjectivity, a signifier of neoliberal triumphalism that banishes the past except for its odd or humorous remainders, limits the ways in which she can elaborate on or repudiate the ways in which history continuously reasserts itself in her own publicly available narrative.

Moreover, Hard Kaur, by obscuring place in her hip hop productions, positions herself to participate in a commercial hip hop that cannot access its own past, that cannot recognize its historical antecedents that are rooted in a particular historically produced spatiality. While this relationship to particular spatial terrains, a relationship that emerges in her interviews where she thematizes her youth in Birmingham as central to the construction of her hip hop persona, or she touches upon how Delhi was pivotal to her life trajectory, both places are obscured in an effort to construct a Desi utopia that transcends borders. As a result, Hard Kaur cannot help, in her efforts to create a new place of ontological possibility through her music, to disseminate a sense of historical aphasia that necessarily excludes the narratives of loss, struggle, and endurance that she so eloquently shares in her interviews, narratives that are populated by figures who cannot participate in the perpetual party she so hopefully casts as a revolution.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Arjun Shankar for all the fruitful discussions over the years regarding the Indian diaspora and how we are positioned politically, economically, and socially in and across nation-states. Without his insights this article would not have been possible. I would like to give a shout out to my colleague and dear friend Jaspal Singh, whose comments, as I was trying to finish a final draft of this article, helped me immensely.

## References

### Wiley Online Library

[Help](#) [Browse by Subject](#) [Browse Publications](#) [Resources](#)

[Agents](#) | [Advertisers](#) | [Cookies](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#)

[Privacy](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Media](#)

---

**WILEY**

[Wiley.com](#) [About Wiley](#) [Wiley Job Network](#)

Copyright © 1999-2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All Rights Reserved