

The politics of race in cultural distribution: Addressing inequalities in British Asian theatre

Manuscript ID CS-16-0132.R1

Abstract

This article has two aims. Firstly, it challenges the assumption in both policy and media studies of race that increasing the number of minorities in the media will automatically lead to more diverse content. Secondly it highlights how cultural distribution is a critical, yet under-researched, moment for racialised minorities working in the arts. Using a case study on ‘British Asian theatre’, the paper problematises a particular cultural policy approach that emphasises the need to attract ‘new audiences’. While the emphasis on bringing marginalised audiences to the arts is welcome, this article argues that attempts to address racial inequalities in production and consumption in this way, reinforces rather than dismantles them.

Keywords

cultural industries, racial inequalities, British Asian, cultural production, creative labour, race and representation

Introduction

For scholars of race and media, the question of inequality is central. The dominant approach is to explore this issue in terms of representation, with research showing the deeply damaging and reductive ways in which minorities appear in the media - either Orientalised/racialised or rendered invisible. Recent research into the cultural industrial context of symbol-making in relation to race has explored how the conditions of cultural production determine the form and nature of the representations being made (see Saha, forthcoming). This turn to production in scholarship is in some ways over-due since the cultural industries themselves, conscious of their public utility as well as economic value, have recognised that it has a problem with diversity in terms of the lack of minorities on-and-off screen/stage/page. The assumption underlying industry approaches to diversity is that the reproduction of 'negative', 'stereotypical' and reductive representations of racial and ethnic minorities will be solved by increasing the numbers of minorities working in the media. The emphasis on addressing (racial) inequality in the cultural industries is clearly a positive development, but in an environment where minority cultural labourers are constrained within an ever-intensifying commercialised production environment that stifles creativity and difference in favour of formula and homogeneity, it is questionable whether more minority participation in cultural production will make a significant difference to the quality or diversity of representations of race. In this article I develop this argument and think through the politics of race in relation to *cultural distribution*. My argument is that greater minority representation in cultural production cannot solve problems related to racial inequality in cultural content and audience interest/access because such efforts are undermined at the cultural distribution stage of production.

Following Garnham, I define 'cultural distribution' as the interface between production and consumption, that is, the process of finding - or making - an audience for a cultural work. Garnham (1987: 31) describes this as the 'key locus of power' and here I argue it represents a particularly critical moment for minorities working in the cultural industries. Cultural distribution is a fraught moment for media organisations. Audiences' responses to a cultural work are always difficult to predict and as such cultural industries respond by employing 'tight control' (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 32-33) at the distribution stage (in contrast to the relatively loose control given to the symbol creator), investing in forms of rationalisation such as formatting, publicity and market research (Ryan, 1991). Moreover, an increasingly commercialised environment produces risk averse behaviours, particularly in the case of minority cultural production, where there is a tendency to fall back on commonsense ideas about minority - and white - audiences.

This article explores the cultural distribution of minority production and attempts to address racial inequalities using a case study on what I broadly – and reluctantly - call British Asian theatre production. I demonstrate that the investment made by the Arts Council England (ACE) into the cultural distribution of 'culturally diverse arts' that was meant to produce greater inclusivity and cultural plurality instead produces a form of what Stuart Hall (1996:468) calls 'segregated visibility' - a mode of inequality felt in each of the spheres of production, consumption and representation. In my discussion of British Asian theatre I will consider in particular the case of the theatre company Rifco Arts. Rifco is one of the most commercially successful Asian theatre companies in the UK, yet it is also criticised for its populist style that, it is claimed, reproduces clichés and stereotypes about Asian culture and people, through plays such as *Bollywood Another Love Story*, *Where's My Desi Soulmate?*, and *Britain's Got Bhangra*. I will explore the production and distribution strategies adopted by Rifco and their specific attempts to engage a particular marginalised (Asian) audience

through an approach that includes aesthetic and outreach elements - including playing in regional venues, and audience development work. While they are certainly successful in this regard I ultimately want to complicate this picture by situating Rifco within the broader political economy of UK theatre, and unpacking a particular policy approach to the cultural distribution centred around 'new audiences'. My central argument is that 'new audience' strategies – launched from a cultural policy rationale and operationalized by theatre venues and companies - impede well-meaning and well-funded attempts to subvert existing forms of cultural marginalisation and exclusion, producing a form of segregated visibility that reinforces racial inequalities in production/consumption,

Race, precarity and cultural distribution

For Malik (2006), unpacking the challenges facing 'Black and Minority Ethnic' theatre, necessitates 'looking at issues of trust, cultural authority, notions of quality and risk, the dominance of European/Western theatre judgements, a lack of international vision; all factors that get to the heart of why British theatre is still deeply challenged by racial difference, and is itself extremely culturally specific'. Malik in this instance is referring to how racial hierarchies within theatre are enforced through taste and distinction that preserves the whiteness of theatre. Notions of quality and cultural authority, as Malik put it, alongside Eurocentric forms of judgement, are clearly important terms within which to explore the marginalisation of black and brown theatre in terms of both its production and consumption. However, I want to apply a cultural industries approach (Hesmondhalgh, 2013) to the question of racial diversity in the arts, which, as a tradition of the political economy of culture, pays closer attention to structural and labour context within which inequalities manifest. Theatre is considered a 'peripheral' cultural industry according to Hesmondhalgh

(2013: 18), since it has not experienced the same level of industrialisation as the core cultural industries, but that does not mean theories of media production do not apply. While it is associated with the patronage system (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 68), based on forms of sponsorship, as the entire cultural industries have shifted towards neoliberal economic models theatre too has found itself under increasing commercial and economic pressures. Referring to the case of British theatre, Bennett (2002: 49) highlights how ‘competition in what was essentially a mature and static market has greatly intensified in recent years’. Peacock (1999) identifies the moment of change in the 1980s, when, as Margaret Thatcher was opening the British media to deregulation and marketisation, subsidised theatre was forced to adopt the values of commercial theatre through the ‘imposition of business methods and the further weighting of the role of artistic director from the aesthetic towards the managerial’ (Peacock, 1999: 216). Fraser (2004: 48) makes a similar point when he stresses that ‘policy for subsidised theatre in the UK is moving towards the situation where market-based plans are required, focused on increasing audiences and widening access’. Fraser actually likens the current state of theatre production in the UK to that of the BBC, in that it ‘finds itself competing with more and more commercial offerings rather than developing the sort of programming that would be beyond the private sector’ (Fraser, 2004: 46). As Peacock (1999: 217) states, ‘The subsidised theatre is now, like the commercial sector, a commodity that can be purchased’.

The contribution of this article is to frame the analysis of inequality more explicitly in terms of the relationship between production and consumption, and how race is made and made sense of within this relation. In other words, I want to concentrate on how cultural distribution, as the interface between production and consumption, is the site where racial inequalities are not just made apparent, but reproduced. Solving racial inequalities in the cultural industries is mostly addressed by increasing the number of people of colour in the

workforce. This is done in the name of an equal opportunities policy, but there is also an underlying assumption that more minorities in the media will naturally increase visibility, while also diversifying the range of minority representation found in media content. Such an assumption has been called into question by scholars researching both the production of popular culture (Saha, forthcoming) and news (Wilson, 2000). As Gray (2016) argues, industry and academic reports have time and time again exposed the lack of diversity in the media yet despite this, nothing really changes. But rather than exploring why diversity management in the media industries has failed, Gray (2016: 246) suggests that diversity initiatives in fact act as a form of racial governance. As he states:

What if we shifted the angle of vision, treating inequality and the absence of diversity as a process? What if we see the absence of diversity, or more properly inequality, in media as a crucial component of the production of creative objects, labour relations, financing, distribution, and marketing, and not just discrete outcomes within the associated fields of production aimed at representational and demographic parity.

Rejecting the notion that inequality can be solved by the ‘exchange of bodies and experiences responsible for making content’ (ibid.) Gray argues for an approach that exposes ‘the assumptions, micropractices, social relations, and power dynamics that define our collective cultural common sense about the nature of social difference and the practices of inequality’ (ibid.). It is in this sense that Gray speaks of the ‘precarity of diversity’, which means that, rather than an objective fact that can be measured, diversity acts as ‘a technology of power/knowledge, a means of managing the very difference it expresses’ (Gray, 2016: 242) that *makes race*. With this argument, Gray further articulates the need for new approaches that tackles in a more concerted way race-making within the context of cultural production – an approach that is both attuned to the dynamics of creative labour, and treats racism and racial inequality not as an epiphenomena but as intrinsic to industrial cultural production of

advanced capitalist societies. This article follows Gray's lead in exploring the micropractices, social relations, and power dynamics that characterise Asian cultural production in the UK arts scene.

The article develops scholarship on racial inequalities in the media by using a cultural industries framework to highlight how the process of cultural distribution is the key moment where 'race-making' occurs. For Garnham (1987: 31) it is cultural distribution rather than cultural production 'that is the key locus of power and profit. It is access to distribution which is the key to cultural plurality'. Garnham comes to this point via a discussion of what makes cultural commodities distinct from other types of commodities that in turn then shapes the unique nature of their cultural production. Industrial cultural production can be characterised as a tension between the cultural industries' need for audience maximisation and the audience's demand for desire for novelty and difference. In other words the demand for a single cultural commodity is 'impossible to predict' and one way that media organisations deal with this is to make use of repertoires of cultural commodities in order to ensure success (in colloquial terms, throwing mud against the wall and seeing what sticks). Thus the moment of distribution is a critical yet under-recognised moment. Garnham (1987: 32) calls this the 'editorial function' of cultural production:

...the function not just of creating a cultural repertoire matched to a given audience or audiences but at the same time of matching the cost of production of that repertoire to the spending powers of that audience [...] it is a vital function totally ignored by many cultural analysts, a function as creative as writing a novel or directing a film.

Garnham here is challenging policy and research, that privileges the makers and the making of the cultural artefact. Indeed, in the relatively small amount of research into race and cultural production, the tendency is to focus on the symbol creators themselves; people of colour who make films, produce television shows, write plays, author novels and so on.

Garnham argues that it is ‘creating an audience or public for the work’ (ibid.) that is the critical moment for ensuring cultural plurality in the marketplace. In terms of this article’s concern with racial inequalities in production and consumption then it becomes clear that cultural distribution is absolutely key in the reception and recognition of minority cultural production. But how is such a process racialised? How does ‘creating an audience for a work’ become a form of race-making?

Garnham argues that instead of funding production and the making of art, arts funders should be investing in supporting cultural distribution. This includes investing in public libraries and public service broadcasting. It also involves developing ‘public-sector audience research and marketing expertise and ways of placing enhanced cultural choice in the hands of individuals and groups, choices which these distribution services would then enable cultural workers to respond to, perhaps helping them to be more nearly self-sufficient’ (Garnham, 1987: 36). In the UK ACE has in fact invested heavily in ‘new audiences’ and this, in some ways encapsulates what Garnham is calling for. Launched in 1998 the Arts Council’s New Audiences Programme was a £20 million initiative to reach ‘the significant numbers of people who did not engage with arts institutions and their activities (Khan, 2002: 13). While this specific initiative is now over, the emphasis on new audiences remains strong in ACE policy.

Moss (2005) maps UK cultural diversity policy, describing a shift from community arts (arts made by and for the community), to ethnic arts (engaging with ‘mainstream’ audiences), to multicultural arts (based on a stronger notion of equality between all cultures) to cultural diversity, which is the current term in vogue, and ‘encompasses not only various separate traditions, but also mixtures between them’. What each of these different policy approaches have in common is how they have had their own separate infrastructure in terms of policies, staff and budgets. Indeed, as Moss (2005: 190) states: ‘All this had the effect of

increasing expenditure on black arts, while ensuring that it continued to be regarded as separate from other British culture'. Thus for Moss, arts policy for culturally diverse arts remains segregated to an extent 'with regional arts council offices having designated cultural diversity officers and in some cases, separate budgets' (ibid.: 191). But Moss' broader argument is that culture in the UK context is wielded in a way to govern - where it seen now as a driver of change of social and economic conditions. In this way, for many in the arts sector, culture is being instrumentalised (ibid.). One implication is that, as Garnham (1987: 34) explains, creative artists unwittingly (or not) end up producing work 'for the only audience they know, namely the cultural bureaucrats who pay the bill and upon whom they become psychologically dependent even while reviling them'. Addressing the issue of racial inequalities, Cornel West (1990: 20) echoes this point, referring to a 'double bind' where black cultural critics and artists, 'while linking their activities to the fundamental, structural overhaul of these institutions, often remain financially dependent on them'. It is against this backdrop that Gilroy (1993b: 110-111) observes how the structure of arts funding coerces a reductive type of representation: 'The most unwholesome ideas of ethnic absolutism hold sway and [...] have been incorporated into the structures of the political economy of funding black arts. The tokenism, patronage and nepotism that have become intrinsic to the commodification of black culture rely absolutely on an absolute sense of ethnic difference'. This is the 'precarity' that I see as affecting people of colour working in the arts (and cultural industries more broadly). It might not be unique to minorities, but it is felt most acutely in how their patronage relies on representing their cultural diversity in an *ethnically absolutist* way that that arts funders recognise and can associate value with. As Gray (2016: 242) puts it 'diversity is also a technology of power, a means of managing the very difference it expresses'.

I highlight Gilroy's quote on the commodification of black culture, because the issues it raises are what I want to unpack in the following case study of the 'Asian' theatre company Rifco Arts. The funding of minority arts, especially, its emphasis on distribution and 'new audiences', does not produce 'cultural plurality' but instead acts as a form of governance that reproduces inequality and the marginalisation of racialised minorities. In his discussion of the cultural politics of black popular culture, Stuart Hall (1996: 468) refers to this form of spatial governance as 'segregated visibility':

the spaces 'won' for difference are few and far between, that they are very carefully policed and regulated. I believe they are limited. I know, to my cost, that they are grossly underfunded, that there is always a price of incorporation to be paid when the cutting edge of difference and transgression is blunted into spectacularization. I know that what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility.

The following case study explores how arts funding governmentalities (internalised and operationalized by venues and the theatres companies themselves) produces 'segregated visibility'. I argue that policy focused on 'new audiences' intended to bring the marginalised into the centre but in fact produced the opposite effect: a reification of difference and marginality. The analysis of Rifco reveals how cultural distribution 'blunts' the potential transgressions of minority cultural production.

The case of Rifco Arts - 'Our success lies in knowing what our audience wants'

Research context

Part of a broader study into British (South) Asian cultural production conducted between 2004-2009, that involved participant observation and over fifty interviews with British

Asians working in three cultural industries, this paper is based on an empirical study of Asian-led theatre companies. The research on theatre was based on twenty interviews with British Asian theatre producers and playwrights, as well as (predominantly white) artistic directors, marketing officers and PR/audience engagement consultants. Interviews were complemented by participant observation I observed and assisted in the production of a play by a well-known Asian-led theatre company, from beginning to end: building the set, sitting in on rehearsals, observing the press-call, watching the build up to the open night, and being with the producer and writer when the first reviews came in. As stated I adopted a cultural industries approach so that the micro-practices of social work could be set against the wider political economy context of the cultural industries. For instance, understanding the challenges facing people of colour in theatre requires recognising the increasing imposition of managerial techniques and forms of bureaucracy adapted from the commercial sector (Bennett, 2002). My approach to interacting with cultural producers was strongly influenced by Born's (2010: 191) 'sociology of cultural production', which aims to elicit producers' exegeses about their creative work' in order to elucidate 'the wider critical discourses that attach to the cultural object'. In other words, my interviews were focused on how respondents make sense of their work and experience, where I then analysed these narratives to see how they shed light upon the meanings behind the respondents' cultural works, and also cultural production itself. In this sense, I situate my approach within the sociology of creative work that McRobbie (2016) recently outlines.

British Asian theatre has been both enabled and constrained by cultural policy in the UK. After decades of neglect (documented in Naseem Khan's influential text *The Art Britain Ignores* (1978)), the Arts Council began a new phase in 1996 to make theatre more inclusive towards 'BME' communities. This included creating a staff position to deal with cultural diversity, and drawing a five- year action plan that aimed to improve diversity in the sector

(ibid.). This was followed by the creation of *decibel*, a £5 million initiative to raise the profile and strengthen the infrastructure of culturally diverse arts in England. These efforts generated a number of schemes that have attempted to increase cultural diversity and representation within the theatre, and to assist in the development and sustainability of culturally diverse-led organisations. Yet despite these initiatives, the actual realities for British Asian theatre are not as encouraging. The Sustained Theatre Consultation (2006) found that despite the Arts Council's achievement in increasing money to organisations categorised as 'culturally diverse', it was not 'to the extent it could and should have done for minority theatre practitioners. Compounding the situation further, there have been cuts in Arts Council funding, where a significant portion of its received income was diverted to the 2012 London Olympics. British Asian theatre has been seriously affected. For instance Tara Arts - one of the oldest British Asian theatre companies – lost half of its annual funding. The Watermans Theatre, which has mounted British Asian theatre for over twenty years, had its funding cut totally. It was against this backdrop that this research was conducted.

My research into British Asian theatre companies was anchored by an article written by playwright Parv Bancel in the now defunct *Asians in Media* website. In it, Bancel distinguishes between what he sees as two different types of Asian theatre: one that adopts a serious aesthetic and 'will challenge the way you think', and another that has a populist style 'where you check in your brain at the cloakroom and watch what amounts to Benny Hill with Asians on stage [...] both are vital and audiences should have a choice of variety. My only gripe is that there has been and there still is too much Benny Hill on stage at the moment' (Bancel quoted in Saha, 2013: 246).

Many of the other Asian playwrights who I interviewed to were quick to challenge the reductive nature of Bancel's framing, and maintained that the landscape of British Asian theatre in reality is much richer and diverse than the picture Bancel paints. But they also

distinguished their aesthetic style (and cultural politics) from what they saw as more populist and commercial forms of theatre. Respondents never singled-out a specific company, but they implied that a theatre company that was considered part of this more populist camp was Slough-based Rifco Arts. Rifco initially came together in 1996 as a small revue company, building its way up to more professional shows. In 2005 it was allocated regular-funding status (RFO) by the Arts Council of England (ACE), and in 2015 became an ACE National Portfolio Organisation, which guarantees funding between 2015-2018. Rifco is one of the best-known and commercially successful British Asian-led touring theatre companies, with popular plays such as *The Deranged Marriage*, *Meri Christmas*, *There's Something about Simmy* and *Britain's Got Bhangra*.

What is most striking about Rifco Arts is that their audiences are overwhelmingly Asian. In an interview with Rifco's Artistic Director Pravesh Kumar, he was explicit about its commitment to 'working-class [Asian] audiences who don't normally go to the theatre'. This is achieved by developing an aesthetic designed to appeal to them: the deliberate puns in the titles indicate its playful, hybrid style. Indeed, just as my other respondents articulated their aesthetics against what they consider a populist, commercial form of theatre as exemplified by Rifco, Pravesh also used Parv Bancil's dichotomy to place Rifco as a reaction to the 'hard-hitting sometimes, very edgy, very dark' form of Asian theatre that he felt alienated a particular British Asian audience.

Rifco Arts is committed to a community that has traditionally been excluded from the arts in general. More than any other Asian theatre company I researched, Rifco spent a significant proportion of its resources on audience development and working with a particular (predominantly Punjabi) British Asian community. This involved extensive outreach work in community centres, elderly homes and schools, as well as at the plays themselves where feedback sheets are handed out after each performance. Through this research, Rifco

develops an in-depth understanding of what exactly the community would like to see. As their website states: ‘Our success lies in knowing what our audience wants’.¹

However, this is not just a case of giving the audience what they want. In our interview Pravesh described a more dynamic relationship with the audience, taking them on a journey into the theatrical imagination. He describes it as a two-way dialogue with the audience: listening to their needs and also gently nudging their social values and perceptions of theatre. The long-term strategy is gradually to develop Rifco’s style by educating the audience in what Pravesh calls ‘theatrical language’. Thus audience development is not just about ‘bums-on-seats’ but also about developing their tastes so that they can begin to appreciate and consume a broader range of theatre. As he states:

We feel as we go along that we are developing that audience and teaching them a theatrical style of work... We call them a ‘new audience’ because a lot of them do not go to the theatre... So what we are trying to do is develop them with theatre language. [For instance] You don’t have to have a set. We don’t have to have walls, we can just change the costumes and the actor becomes somebody else. [...] Parv Bancil has got a valid point. What he is trying to say is we have a responsibility to our audiences to not blinker them, and to not give them entertainment only. And I agree with that. But I also recognise that our audiences are twenty years behind a theatre audience in this country. They haven’t been going to the theatre since they were children.

Thus for Pravesh, the working class Asian community does not yet have the cultural capital to be able to consume the more serious, critical aesthetic that he believes characterises much of British Asian theatre. According to Pravesh’s narrative, Rifco’s strategy is to develop its aesthetic in conjunction with the audience – from a more recognisable Bollywood style, to a more theatre-based style. Pravesh’s comments imply a much more interactive, and dynamic

¹ <http://rifcoarts.com/about-us> [last accessed: 20/2/17]

kind of theatre than the label 'Benny Hill Theatre' would indicate. Rifco might employ what many consider a populist, commercial style, but the company is also more closely engaged with marginalised communities than any other company I spoke to, and Rifco actually succeeds in attracting them. According to Garnham, a successful cultural distribution programme finds an audience for a work such that the cultural workers in question are 'more nearly self-sufficient'; Rifco appears to achieve just that. Yet when situated in the wider political economic context, their strategies can be read another way.

The spatial distribution of British Asian theatre

While the focus thus far has been on production, how their plays are 'distributed' is a crucial element of Rifco's success. This company stands out for prolonged runs in established (albeit, mostly regional) theatre venues. Where a play is mounted and for how long for ultimately determines its impact (both critically and commercially). When I asked respondents about the biggest challenges facing British Asian theatre, the most common response was not, to my surprise, the difficulty in getting their production commissioned or funded, but receiving a sustained run of nights at a theatre venue. In other words, it was distribution that was seen as the bigger obstacle. The problem of distribution facing minority theatre practitioners was articulated in two ways. Firstly, respondents felt that 'culturally diverse theatre' was only ever mounted at smaller regional theatres, with the larger, more central venues unwilling to take a risk on these productions. Secondly, respondents felt that a pressure on culturally diverse theatre to attract new audiences meant that companies producing a clearly defined (and dare I say reified) 'culturally diverse' identity benefited over the types of companies that questioned the ethnic and racial categorisations underlying 'culturally diverse'. These issues will each be unpacked in what follows.

Venues play a critical role in the shaping of British Asian theatre. Following the 2001 Eclipse Report, the Arts Council of England identified that venue provision was one of the biggest issues (and obstacles) facing culturally diverse theatre. One of the responses to the Eclipse report was the creation of the South Asian Touring Theatre Consortium (SATTC). Three venues – the artsdepot in North Finchley, the Watermans in Hounslow, and the Croydon Clocktower – formed a circuit around London for touring South Asian theatre companies, allowing smaller scale companies to be seen and have their work accessed by the ‘culturally diverse’ audiences who live in and around these areas. At the heart of the SATTC was a sustained audience development programme (Brahmachari, 2006), so emphasised that audience engagement appeared to be a greater priority than creative or aesthetic development. As an audience development consultant said to me, the aim was that ‘when an Asian theatre company comes into London he [sic] doesn’t have a one night stay or a two night stay, he has a sustainable stay over a period over four or five days accompanied by informed audience development campaigns’. Yet, for some respondents, the SATTC’s basis in regional theatre represents the physical manifestation of the marginalisation and ghettoisation of British Asian theatre. As one British Asian playwright provocatively states:

In other words what the Arts Council is saying is that the marginalised should be in the margins, that’s where we should be... In other words it’s almost as if to say, ok, you *darkies*, we’ll get theatres for you but make sure it’s sort of out *there*...

Indeed, a report (Brahmachari, 2006) commissioned by Tamasha and the Arts Council England presented voices that support this comment that the SATTC reflects the ghettoisation of culturally diverse work; as though the only place South Asian plays can work is on the margins of London rather than the centre.

Commercial pressure affects any theatre producer attempting to produce a play that is considered different or challenging, regardless of ethnicity. ACE’s criteria for commissioning

are based less on aesthetic considerations and more on establishing whether a company will meet certain targets or expectations regarding diversity and access, and how it might entice ‘new’ audiences (implicitly meaning non-white audiences). The same criteria apply to venues, whose funding is broadly dependent on meeting the same remit. While the attempt to engage marginalised audiences and companies is certainly a worthy development, the concern is that it has led to a culture of ‘box-ticking’ – that is a bureaucratic exercise - where Asian plays will get programmed simply because they are *Asian*. For respondents this is problematic because such programming becomes tokenistic, reflected in the ways that these productions are subsequently (under) resourced. Even though the emphasis on attracting new improves the chances that culturally diverse plays get mounted, because of economic pressures venues tend to commission the populist/commercial end of Asian theatre – or plays that have a particular Asian slant. As one playwright said to me, ‘one of the problems with venues is that there is an expectation of what British Asian work should be. So if a play comes along that doesn’t fit that preconceived expectation of what British Asian work should be, then as far as the venue is concerned, that is a bit problematic’. Another respondent referred to a venue exclusively booking populist ‘Asian theatre’ as ‘a very cynical game’. What emerges from this comment is a perception that the Arts Council remit has inadvertently promoted a certain kind of aesthetics that presents a clear (or overdetermined) representation of difference in order to ensure that a certain diversity tick-box is checked.

The above narrative echoes Paul Gilroy’s comment about the ‘ethnic absolutism’ embedded in the political economy of arts funding. I describe this as arts funding governmentalities, referring to how the organisation of arts funding, and the discourses that circulate around it, steers the production and distribution of minority theatre in particular ways, with epistemological consequences. I would add as well that while this case is in the context of the arts, its management follows a particular market/commercial logic. For

instance, the emphasis on ‘new audiences’ can be read in terms of the public utility of the arts. But in its implementation it emulates the niche marketing practices adopted by commercial enterprises where the targeting of specific audiences is seen as a cost-effective strategy in a sector that is much under-funded (Bennett, 2002). Thus despite being a heavily subsidised industry, a commercial rationale plays a significant role in the positioning of British Asian theatre, which inevitably relegates it to the margins, but in a way that it appears *visible*. In this way the physical distribution of British Asian theatre represents the spatial governance of race, where representations of difference are literally arranged in relation to the centre, depending on the nature of the representation and how it complies with the dominant nationalist discourse.

Audience development and ‘Asian work for Asian audiences’

One aspect of cultural distribution is where the work is physically placed. Another is marketing. The marketing of their work appeared a fraught moment for my respondents who felt that firstly, they were hindered by an assumption that *Asian work is for Asian audiences* as it limited their ability to reach wider audiences, and secondly, that their racial or ethnic identity was over-determined in the marketing of their work, which would deploy reductive racial tropes in promotional material (AUTHOR, 2015).

However, there has been an increasing emphasis in arts marketing upon ‘audience development’, shaped in part by the ACE’s original new audience initiative. Audience development in the context of culturally diverse arts represents a deliberate shift away from traditional marketing models that are believed to have failed minority audiences and producers. Audience development attempts to forge a deeper relationship between the theatre company and/or the venue and the audience, particularly those groups that have been ignored

or marginalised from the arts (not least non-white communities). Since it is centred on the particular needs of racialised and often working-class communities in relation to wider community politics, audience development is regarded as a more 'ethical' form of marketing. As such, the emphasis is not on profit but on engaging with, and encouraging participation from marginalised groups.

Audience development itself grew alongside a shift in cultural policy that sees the value of 'creative industries' in terms of their contribution to the economy and society through job creation, tourism promotion, urban regeneration, and combating social exclusion (see Hesmondhalgh, 2008: 556). Audience development can certainly be framed in terms of this latter dimension. Yet, once again, situating this practice in the wider context of the political economy of theatre paints a more ambivalent picture, where the market-setting unsettles any sense of progressive practice that audience development work may bring. The aim of this section is to demonstrate how this particular form of rationalisation disguises an ideological function of cultural policy focused on addressing inequalities in consumption.

Audience development work is generally distinguished from more conventional/traditional forms of marketing. As Pravesh described, it is more than 'just getting leaflets and posters out'. Pravesh described to me three facets of audience development work that distinguish it from traditional marketing. First, it is about building relationships between the theatre company, the venue, and community advocates. Second, audience development is interdisciplinary and entails outreach work: visiting communities and attempting to ascertain their needs and concerns and adapting the marketing and production to meet them. Thirdly, audience development is focused on the long term. Building a strategy that has in mind several productions over a period of time, where the focus is on building and maintaining a relationship with a core audience, results in repeat

visits, and gives the audience a sense of ownership over the space and work. Pravesh describes Rifco's audience development strategy as follows:

For instance we do something special. We bring in a team of language speaking leaflet distributors. *There's Something About Simmy* was a show that was 30% in Punjabi so we got Punjabi-speaking distribution team to go out in the community and not just give out leaflets but talk about it. To go into the community centres, and go, *aunty-ji* this show is on you must come and see it, it's for you. Because just giving *aunty-ji* a leaflet is just not going to work. She'll put it in her bag and walk-off. So it's really communicating.

This audience development entails building a deep and long-term relationship with a specific community, focused on engaging directly with the community's social and cultural circumstances and improving access.

An audience development consultant that I interviewed particularly wanted to stress the ethical dimensions to audience development work – by outlining two interventions made in marketing culturally diverse arts. The first is the outreach aspect of his work and, as he states, 'learning more about their diversity and more about how they live their lives as individuals, as families, as communities'. The second intervention is how the understanding gained from community outreach shapes the marketing material but also can transform the venue and the production itself. This was further elaborated by the consultant in the following account:

So for example I've worked with major institutions who when they would produce, or invite international musicians over they tend to use terms like exotic, Oriental, magical ... it reinforces stereotypes. We were trying to challenge these stereotypes by saying actually let's look at the art form, let's look at the individual, let's look at how this can get then be conveyed in the information we then translate back into the

communities. So we're not reinforcing stereotypes back in the communities. So when communities read about this show at a particular venue, they won't go yet again we're being stereotyped...

The way in which audience development is constructed in this account stresses that an engagement with local communities produces an understanding of the ways in which they can feel alienated by the typical design and marketing strategies employed by certain institutions for culturally diverse arts. The work of Asian cultural producers in particular, suffers from persistent Orientalist (re)presentation, and according to this narrative, it is precisely through audience development work that such institutions can be educated to provide more progressive representations of 'Other' cultures.

These narratives on audience development represent it as a critical intervention. The consultant's accounts in particular address what I have identified as the epistemological hazards facing Asian cultural production in how its cultural commodities are aestheticised and marketed. Yet, in a similar manner to the processes of commodification blunting the cutting edge of black and Asian cultural production, the market logic of capitalism can also subsume the progressive qualities of audience development work. For instance, the consultant later complained how the commitment to audience development from the 'corporate or bigger institutions' is at times 'tokenistic', in that they will only invest small amounts of money into projects – certainly not enough to produce a sustained campaign. As touched on earlier, the Arts Council has spent over £20 million on a new audience programme that was 'set up to encourage as many people as possible, from all backgrounds and every walk of life, to participate in and benefit from the arts' and to, 'break down the barriers, both personal and practical, that may inhibit people from attending arts venues and events' (ACE, 2004). Subsequently, venues and companies are pressured to demonstrate that they have a commitment to attracting and encouraging participation from new audiences. The

consultant's complaint is that certain institutions are only concerned with how audience development produces 'bums-on-seats' (particularly brown ones) with minimal engagement with building and sustaining a relationship with the audience – the very ethos of audience development. As such, audience development work is reduced to another 'tick-box' exercise, a superficial fulfilment of an Arts Council agenda, itself launched from a cultural policy constructed from neoliberal ideas around the 'creative industries', constructed in terms of regeneration, employment creation and entrepreneurialism.

I believe that the political motivations of individuals I interviewed are absolutely genuine. Yet, audience development as operationalized by theatre venues, merely resembles a form of niche marketing based on targeting ethnic minorities: as the consultant himself describes, his job entails 'translating' the needs and experiences of marginalised communities into marketing material. Audience development work can make progress in terms of incorporating peripheral groups into the centre of cultural activity, but it nevertheless feeds the logic of 'Asian people for Asian work'. This is most explicit during those times when theatre venues employ audience development strategies specifically for mounting 'BME' productions, but with relatively little attempt to engage a wider 'mainstream' audience. Pravesh himself, from the earlier quote describes targeting 'aunty-jis' in a more sustained way than conventional marketing practices would allow, but despite the caricature there is still the logic of niche that implicitly assumes this is the 'core' audience for brown theatre. Rifco are fortunate since they have a clearly defined core constituency: the working-class Punjabi community. Yet what the case of Rifco exposes is the challenge for those British Asian theatre companies who do not have an obvious synergy with a specific audience. Indeed, my research found that for a theatre company led by an Asian playwright or producer who is perhaps trying to break the mould of what 'British Asian theatre' means or represents, the default marketing strategy is nonetheless to target a vaguely defined 'Asian' audience,

even though the company aspires to reach a more diverse crowd. This is the case with conventional marketing and audience development.

The troubling issues I find in audience development work is not necessarily in their day-to-day application. Rather, it is a result of the role it assumes in the wider political-economic context of theatre, when operationalised by theatre venues and minority companies who internalise its race-making logics (hence the characterisation as a form of racialised *governmentalities*). Consequently, the potential for British Asian texts to unsettle and disrupt negative representations of Asianness in popular discourse is thwarted; audience development work acts as a tool of racial governance that relegates the counter-narratives of difference to the margins, where it can be safely contained. Audience development programmes have proved valuable in reaching out to audiences that have been traditionally marginalised from the arts, but as with the spatial distribution of the work of minority cultural producers, attempts to address racial inequalities merely reproduces them.

4. Conclusion

The cultural distribution of ‘Asian theatre’ leads to ‘segregated visibility’, in terms of how and where it is mounted, and how it is marketed. I concur then with Nicholas Garnham, that it is ‘the key locus for power’; in the case of minority arts it is where racial inequalities are reproduced and sustained. Through cultural distribution, culturally diverse arts is recognised and made visible, but positioned in a way that it cannot disrupt the core – a kind of *keeping at arm’s length*. Moreover, arts funding governmentalities, in the name of engaging ‘new audiences’ privileges certain types of representation of race – representations based on an ideology of ethnic absolutism that are acquiescent with the dominant culture which in the process reproduces and sustains whiteness and, by extension, racial inequalities. I argue that

the cultural distribution strategies explored here serve an ideological function of managing the demands for equality while keeping racial hierarchies intact.

However, while this would suggest a highly critical reading, I have presented a more nuanced account of the politics of production employed by Rifco Arts that underlines the ambivalence of commodification in relation to the cultural politics of race. The fact is black and Asian cultural producers have been enabled by cultural policies that have stressed the value of diversity on and off stage or screen. Even though I have attempted to problematise a particular diversity discourse that exists in the cultural industries, put simply, it is through these policies that racialised minorities who were once demanding to be heard, are now being heard. This no longer *the arts that Britain ignores* as Naseem Khan (1978) once famously put it. But the ground made is limited, and through arts funding governmentalities their disruptive/productive potential is contained. Transforming this situation will require more than just having more minorities working in the cultural industries. More attention needs to be focused to the distribution stage of cultural production if we are to attain cultural plurality and meaningful diversity in both production and consumption.

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