

**The Postcolonial Cultural Economy:  
The politics of British Asian cultural production**

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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Anamik Saha, 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2009

## Abstract

This thesis is an investigation into the production of British Asian cultural commodities. While the hybrid qualities of contemporary British Asian vernacular cultures have largely been celebrated within cultural studies for de-essentialising fixed notions of national identity and disrupting racist nationalist discourse, the thesis considers how this political potential is determined during the process of commodification. As certain radical cultural studies theorists have argued, capitalism is inscribed with a neo-colonial logic that has the effect of transforming British Asian cultural forms in particular, into Orientalist sites of exotica, thus undermining their transruptive capacity. Yet such accounts lack a sustained engagement with the cultural industries and cultural production, and subsequently fail to adequately explain how such a process actually occurs.

Reconceptualising commodification as a technology through which capitalism governs the counter-narratives of difference, this thesis is an empirical investigation into the experiences of British Asian cultural production in the culture industries. It focuses on the production of Asian cultural commodities in three cultural industries: theatre, broadcast television, and book publishing. Drawing from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of trade literatures, publicity materials and the commodities themselves, the research elaborates accounts of British Asian cultural production, providing a deeper and multi-layered reading of what occurs during the commodification of Otherness. It is through the concept of the *postcolonial cultural economy* that this thesis argues that a sociological approach to the cultural industries and cultural production, framed within postcolonial concepts of epistemology and power, is the most effective way of conceptualising the political effectiveness of particular anti-racist cultural strategies. I argue that such an approach provides a more nuanced understanding of the complex relation between capitalism and race as it occurs in the global cultural economy, revealing the spaces from which effective cultural-political interventions can be held.

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## **Chapter 1 – Introduction to the Postcolonial Cultural Economy**

This thesis is an investigation into the politics of British Asian cultural production. When I speak of ‘politics’ I refer to the potential of British Asian cultural commodities to produce forms of multiculturalism that unsettle modern western societies through the disruption of racist, nationalist discourses. The specific research aim is to see what happens to this potential during the process of commodification. Based upon an ethnographic study of symbol creators working in the theatre, broadcasting and publishing industries, the aim is to track the British Asian cultural commodity through its manufacture, to see how particular stages of production and their various rationalised processes impact upon the politics of the British Asian cultural work. Through analysing the micro details of cultural commodification I intend to engage a larger discussion on capitalism and the governance of difference in the global cultural economy.

The rapid growth of the ‘cultural industries’ in the twentieth century has seen the intensification of cultural commodification and the proliferation of cultural commodities. While Marxist approaches have focused on the implications of this in terms of private ownership and the exploitation of labour, theorists interested in race and culture have considered its epistemological effects. A certain radical cultural studies approach to British Asian cultural production in particular, sees commodification as the means through which neo-colonial ideology transforms the ‘hybrid’ British Asian cultural entity into exotic absolute difference. It is exploring this notion that is the subject of this thesis. However, in contrast to the cultural studies accounts to which I refer, this research is based upon an empirically grounded study that is focused on the actual processes of commodification. To this end, I introduce the concept of the ‘postcolonial cultural economy’, a theoretical and methodological framework designed to produce a more nuanced account of the effects of commodification upon the politics of British Asian cultural production and the counter narratives of difference.

In this opening chapter I will delineate the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy. The concept emerges from a critical engagement with three theoretical debates that are pertinent to the issue of the politics of British Asian cultural production and the potential for (multi)cultural entanglements and transruptions. To begin, I will outline the debate to which this research initially responds. This concerns a particular strand of British Asian cultural studies, which follows in – and is a shift from – the ‘new ethnicities’ tradition conceived by Stuart Hall (1996b). I consider how this body of work makes a vital theoretical intervention in terms of resituating textual accounts of the cultural products of these new ethnicities from celebratory hybridity-talk into the more fraught issue of the commodification of race. But then I offer a counter-argument and demonstrate how an overly simplistic understanding of commodification and cultural production undermines its critique. More precisely, I argue that these literatures lack an adequate empirical framework in which to sustain their argument regarding the supposed ideological transformation of British Asian cultural texts into exotic goods during commodification.

As such, the remainder of the chapter will consider two bodies of literature that provide the material for a more solid theoretical foundation for research into the politics of British Asian cultural production. The first is a particular postcolonial approach to globalisation that helps us understand how commodification operates within the global cultural economy, where the production of cultural commodities constitute particular discursive formations that disrupt or reinforce the nation’s sense of (racial) identity. The second is a growing heterogeneous body of work loosely labelled ‘cultural economy’, that produces a suitably complex and nuanced interpretation of commodity production, and allows for a more sensitive account of commodification as it unfolds through a shifting relation between structure and agency. While these two fields initially appear to have little in common, I argue that it is when considering their most productive elements in conjunction – indeed, through a notion of the *postcolonial cultural economy* – that we form an approach that recognises the complex and often contradictory processes of commodification, whilst keeping in sight questions of meaning, epistemology and power. The aim of this chapter is to prise open a space within these bodies of literature, in which to establish the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy. This then provides the

framework for the following ethnographic research into British Asian cultural production in the theatre, publishing and broadcast television industries.

### **British Asian cultural studies**

To begin, I will outline the particular debate in which this thesis initially intervenes. This debate has occurred within what I loosely call ‘British Asian cultural studies’. Even though I give it a name, ‘British Asian cultural studies’ should not be considered a formal, or even coherent field of research<sup>1</sup>. The use of the label is primarily functional, allowing me to bracket together literatures spanning over a variety of disciplines, which have adopted a critical cultural approach<sup>2</sup> to exploring the expressive cultures and vernacular forms of British-based individuals of South Asian descent. However, as I shall demonstrate, there *is* a thread that runs through this field that connects the beginnings of British cultural studies’ earliest encounters with race to a particular debate regarding the production of British Asian hybrid identities, and commodification’s implication in this process.

### New Asian ethnicities

An immediate genealogical point in British Asian cultural studies is Stuart Hall’s *new ethnicities* intervention<sup>3</sup>, which marked a significant moment in the history of British cultural studies as a whole. Hall was speaking from a sub-discipline of cultural studies that was the first to engage with the emerging multicultural questions, positioning itself as a counterpoint to the ethnocentric and nationalist

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<sup>1</sup> Bhattacharyya (2003) address directly what she calls ‘South Asian cultural studies’, though this is intended to rebalance the form of Asian cultural studies in the US, that focuses on east Asian cultures. However, I refer specifically to ‘*British* Asian cultural studies’, as the literatures I am referring to emerge specifically from the context of British cultural studies, as shall be made evident.

<sup>2</sup> Solomos and Back (2000) distinguish the critical cultural approach from a sociology of race relations tradition. The race relations tradition is predominantly interested in racism as a social phenomena and the way it regulates racialised communities linked to specific social conditions (Bulmer and Solomos, 1999). The critical cultural tradition that British Asian cultural studies operates in, takes as the objects of its analysis the cultural forms of racial discourse. In particular there is a focus on the politics of representation in relation to popular culture, as a way of understanding how meaning is attached to race and ethnicity within modern formations of national identity and globalised subjectivities. It is this critical approach that frames my analysis of the politics of British Asian cultural production.

<sup>3</sup> Hall originally described the *new ethnicities* moment in an ICA talk given in 1989.

beginnings of British cultural studies in the 1970s (Huq, 2003a). Paul Gilroy (1993a) in particular, exposes a reactive quality to early cultural studies attitudes to racial identity, highlighting how attempts to define notions of ethnicity were ‘mobilised often by default rather than design’ (5). This was particularly evident in approaches to Asian youth, which were narrow and racialised, with young Asians pathologised as victims of skinhead violence - or ‘paki-bashing’ (Bose, 2003; Rupa Huq, 2003a). Further depictions of young Asians as studious and conformist (Zuberi, 1995), yet paradoxically unable to integrate into mainstream British society, evoked the common racist, *Indophilic*<sup>4</sup> perception of a fundamental racial and ethnic difference between white and Asian youth<sup>5</sup>. This was most evident in the cultural accounts of the emerging Bhangra music scene (in particular, see Banerji and Baumann, 1990; and Gillespie, 1995) where there was a frequent slippage into an essentialist version of Asian culture – epitomised by Baumann’s claim that Bhangra is ‘Asian music for Asians’ (quoted in S. Sharma, 1996: 35) – marking second generation<sup>6</sup> Asian youth as absolutely different to their white British counterparts. Rupa Huq (1996) provides a detailed critique of the early press and cultural studies accounts of Bhangra youth culture, and highlights how they often perpetuated stereotypes of Asian youth, repressed by draconian parents scared of western influences on their children. For Sanjay Sharma (1996), these early studies of Asian participation in youth culture were often fixed within what he considered the neo-Orientalist, white ethnocentric gaze of academia.

It is for this reason that Stuart Hall’s (1996b [1989]) paper on new ethnicities was crucial to the development of a more sophisticated, critical approach to British Asian vernacular cultures that would avoid crude essentialist formulations. With

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<sup>4</sup> Sharma and Sharma (2003) and Sayid (2006) define ‘Indophilia’ as a particular variant of Orientalism premised upon the opposition between normative Western practices and establishments against which the South Asian ways of living appear as distortions and aberrations. See also Vijay Prashad (2000) for an historical overview of Indophilia in the West.

<sup>5</sup> Even influential subcultural theorist, Dick Hebdige (1979: 58) once remarked that ‘Pakistanis [sic] ... were less easily assimilated than the West Indians into the host community ... sharply differentiated not only by racial characteristics but by religious rituals, food taboos and a value system which encouraged deference, frugality and profit motive’.

<sup>6</sup> It is notable that an account of the first generation’s foray into British life is generally lacking. Indeed it is interesting that Bhangra frequently gets hailed as the first expression of truly British Asian culture, as Puwar and Powar (2004) in their ‘memory work’ on the Indian cinema scenes of Coventry in the 1970s see similar forms of hybridity occurring in the spaces created by the first generation of South Asian immigrants.

contributions from Paul Gilroy (1993a, 1993b), Kobena Mercer (1994), and Les Back (1996) amongst others, the focus of the new ethnicities project was to challenge and deconstruct an unrelenting racialised nationalist discourse based upon fixed notions of identity and ethnicity, but without falling into simple, relativist anti-essentialist politics (Back, 1996). Stuart Hall's paper specifically address a shift he sees taking place within black cultural politics, from 'Identity Politics One' to a new politics of plurality, which exploded essentialist approaches to black and Asian identity. Following the post-war migration from the colonies into Britain, as part of a strategy to unite non-white communities in the face of the severe racial provocation of 60s and 70s Britain, anti-racists reclaimed and politicised the term 'Black', as a banner term under which racialised communities could join. Subsequently, 'Black' was defined solely in terms of oppression, where the diverse communities of the African and Asian diaspora joined together through the unifying experience of racism. While such a strategy was vital to the anti-racist movements of the time (Gilroy, 1987; Hall, 1991b; Brah, 1996), it unwittingly foregrounded male Afro-Caribbean identity as the primary black experience, in the process 'silencing' Asian cultures, and black women in particular (Hall, 1996b), since unity was predicated on setting aside cultural differences for the sake of the political goal.

Yet out of this silence emerged a new artistic and cultural movement (particularly evident in fine art, music, cinema and literature) that was concerned equally with both contesting racist representations of black and Asian folk, *and* deconstructing notions of black culture as homogenous and fixed. The effect was recognition of the plurality of voices within the 'black' experience, leading Stuart Hall to famously remark that we were witnessing 'the end of innocence...the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject' (Hall, 1996b: 443). Thus, constructing a non-essentialist version of ethnicity was central to the new ethnicities approach to the new culturally diverse artistic and cultural practices, recognising 'that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position' (ibid.: 447). As Hall states, 'ethnicity, in the form of a culturally constructed sense of Englishness and a particularly closed, exclusive and regressive form of English national identity, is one of the core characteristics of British racism today' (ibid: 446). Thus for Hall, the capacity of the new black arts in disrupting fixed notions of ethnic national identity

produces an effect that 'Britishness cannot be what it was before' (Hall, 1997). Effectively, new ethnicities refers to a shift from a politicised category of 'Black', to an (anti) anti essentialist notion of ethnicity, stressing the syncretic, transnational constituents of black and Asian cultures and identities (Gilroy, 1993a; 1993b).

It was in this way that new ethnicities theory provided the theoretical basis for a new critical form of British Asian cultural studies, which would allow for a more sophisticated analytical framework that was able to acknowledge the multi-positioned, complexly constituted identity of contemporary South Asian youth cultures. In fact, the timing of this theoretical shift serendipitously paralleled the emergence of what is widely recognised as the second significant moment in the cultural history of British Asian lived experience: what Sanjay Sharma (1996) calls the post-Bhangra scene<sup>7</sup>. This tag actually referred to a remarkable diversity of genres, from the chilled-out drum & bass of Talvin Singh, to the militant hip-hop of Fun^da^mental, to the lo-fi indie noise of Cornershop. While it appears nonsensical to pigeonhole such a diverse array of acts into a unitary scene<sup>8</sup>, an undeniable similarity between these musicians and DJs is their fusion of Indian musical influences with western genres of popular music, namely electronica, hip-hop and rock<sup>9</sup>. It was this radical and innovative hybrid aesthetic, as an expression of the originality and innovation of British-born Asian youth, which captured the interest of academics and journalists alike.

Thus, the emergence of post-Bhangra music became the perfect vehicle for *British Asian cultural studies* – distinct from those earlier sociological and anthropological accounts of Asian youth cultures – to explore and articulate new (Asian) ethnicities and anti-essentialist cultural politics. Zuberi (1995) and Huq (1996) for instance, illustrate post-Bhangra as an expression of a confident second generation that disrupts persistent stereotypes of Asian youth as passive, submissive, conformist and

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<sup>7</sup> This scene has gone by numerous other titles such as 'Asian Underground', '2<sup>nd</sup> Generation', 'Asian fusion' and 'New Asian Kool'. While I do not particularly like 'post-Bhangra' for it insinuates a stylistic development over Bhangra and suggests that Bhangra as a moment is over, I find it preferable to the dubious, media-constructed labels just listed.

<sup>8</sup> Huq (1996) argues that the music press' attempts to compartmentalise such a diverse range of sounds had a racialist edge.

<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps the 'straight' indie/rock style of Indian-fronted acts like Echobelly and Babylon Zoo that explains why these two bands in particular (who attained a considerable degree of commercial success) feature very rarely in discussions of post-Bhangra.

*caught-between-two-cultures*. Rattansi (2000) sees new British Asian syncretic cultures challenging the very notions of Britishness, while Sanjay Sharma (1996: 40) similarly remarks how the new musics enable Asian youth to articulate and deploy a sense of 'Asianness' that is 'not necessarily in opposition to notions of being Black, and, though more problematically, even British'. It is evident in all these accounts that we are not returning to the essentialist traps that caught out many writers in their narratives on Bhangra; it is precisely these snares that these theorists of British Asian cultural studies seek to avoid when they stress the diversity of not just Asian music but Asian cultures as a whole<sup>10</sup>.

### Hybridity and resistance

A key concept in new ethnicities theory and British Asian cultural studies is hybridity. Hybridity is one of the most recurrent conceptual leitmotifs in postcolonial/cultural studies, and also perhaps the most contentious. Even though the concept has lost some of its critical currency as writers have moved onto fresher articulations of increasingly globalised subjectivities, a consideration of British Asian arts cannot and should not attempt to sidestep this debate; as I have suggested, hybridity has played a central role in discussions of British Asian cultural politics, whether in an explicit, implicit, or even disparaging form. As I shall argue in the second part of this chapter, the political potential of British Asian cultural entities lies in their hybrid character. In fact, it is a particular debate on hybridity that produced the discourse in which this research first attempts to intervene. The aim of the remainder of this opening section is to demonstrate how this discourse unfolds.

British Asian cultural studies deploy a version of hybridity that is framed through a notion of resistance (as opposed to a postmodern frame that describes it as a mere quality of increasingly globalised identities). This specifically draws from postcolonial theory, where hybridity is characterised as a site of 'in-betweenness' that can destabilise colonial discourse from within. In postcolonial debates, hybridisation is considered as intrinsic to 'all forms of radical transformation and

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance, Nasta's (2002) critiques of hybridity in a study of British Asian literature, Sawhney's (2001) mapping of the shifts in British Asian cinema, and Godiwala's (2003) similar examination of the hybrid genealogy of British Asian theatre.

traditional renewal' (Papastergiadis, 2000: 189). This is the argument of Homi Bhabha, who is perhaps the most influential proponent of hybridity. Bhabha particularly focuses on how hybridity exposes the contradictions inherent in colonial narratives, highlighting the coloniser's *ambivalence* in respect to the colonised Other. Utilising the Lacanian conceptualization of mimicry as camouflage, Bhabha demonstrates how colonial subjects conform to Eurocentric narratives but simultaneously expose the ambivalence at the heart of colonialism (Pieterse, 1995). On the surface, such mimicry appears as a conformist assimilation into the dominant culture; as Braithwaite states, 'it was one of the tragedies of slavery [...] that it should have produced this kind of mimicry' (1995: 203). However, Bhabha (1991) argues that it is precisely this mimicry that disrupts the colonial discourse by *doubling it*. Paradoxically, the coloniser needs repetition to reinforce his position of dominance, but through imitation of the coloniser's culture their strategic political intentions are transformed into uncertainty. Subsequently the simple presence of the colonised Other within the textual structure is enough evidence of the ambivalence of colonial discourse, an ambivalence that destabilises its claim for absolute authority or unquestionable authenticity.

Stressing the ambivalence or hybridity that characterises the site of colonial contestation, Bhabha (1990; 1998) has subsequently encouraged a rigorous rethinking of nationalism, representation and resistance. Hybridity, Bhabha argues, subverts the narratives of colonial/nationalist power and dominant cultures that, through the process of disavowal, constructs the Other as absolutely opposed to the Self in order to justify colonial conquest. It follows that hybridity dismantles colonial discourse that asserts the fixity of the subject, instead demonstrating how subjects never cohere to an absolute form (Bhabha, 1995; Papastergiadis, 2000). Hybrid postcolonial subjectivities consequently represent a disruptive intervention into colonial discourse, through the reversal of colonial disavowal that creates an ambivalent space from which subversion emerges. Thus hybridity blurs, destabilises or subverts the hierarchical relationship between centre and margin (Pieterse, 1995),

challenges concepts of cultural purity, and produces counter-narratives from the margins<sup>11</sup>, undermining the totalising boundaries of the dominant culture.

The potential of the hybrid subject features (to varying degrees) in the work of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. Though they do not come from the literary field of postcolonial theory, I believe the writers of new ethnicities theory produce a more accessible way of applying postcolonial analysis' hybrid deconstruction of the coloniser-colonial, Self-Other binaries to contemporary western race cultural politics<sup>12</sup>. Integral to Stuart Hall's theories on social transformation (Papastergiadis, 2000), Hall deploys the concept of hybridity to challenge contemporary essentialist formulations of ethnicity that construct and assert difference and distinguish the dominant group (who denies itself ethnic status) from the 'ethnic' Other (Hall, 1991a). Hybridity refers to the process of differentiation and exchange between the centre and periphery, and exposes how ethnicity is fluid, constantly constructed and reconstructed and, to a greater or lesser degree, mutable. It follows that this hybrid version of 'ethnicity', when appropriated and redefined can be used strategically as an ideological tool for subcultural interests. Therefore, in the politics of new ethnicities, hybridity adopts a critical role, as it becomes the method to counter the dominant version of national identity, which exists in terms of its absolute relation to a reified form of difference.

Though Paul Gilroy is more ambivalent about its usage, the concept of hybridity is nonetheless evoked in his (1993) conceptual framework of the black Atlantic, in its 'desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity' (ibid.: 19). In this influential work, Gilroy argues for a notion of diaspora that rejects racial or cultural essence whilst acknowledging that displaced populations carry with them an imprint of the shared *experiences* of colonialism, racism, oppression and migrancy. I would argue that this line of enquiry follows a particularly postcolonial trajectory, which calls for the deconstruction of constructed Imperial essentialisms, and the notions of authenticity and cultural purity on which racial marginalisation is premised. Gilroy (2004) has noted more recently

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<sup>11</sup> Sangari (1995) argues that the unique positionality of *hybrid* postcolonial writers of being both inside and outside of (neo) colonialism, creates new narratives that challenge and disavow notions of authenticity.

<sup>12</sup> See also Les Back (1996) and his theories on 'intermezzo culture'.

that, as the British nation continues to wallow in its state of postcolonial melancholia, the logic of ethnic absolutism is reactivated, and the fact of hybridity must 'be excised from the tidy, bleached-out zones of impossibly pure culture' (ibid.: 137). Consequently, the convivial, and at times, defiant hybrids of British Asian cultural works in this sense can play an important role in a cultural form of anti-racist politics that de-essentialises prevailing (and in Bhabha's rhetoric, intervenes in the repetition of) cultural stereotypes. It is precisely in this way that I consider the disruptive political potential of British Asian cultural entities – a point I shall develop later in this chapter.

### The commodification of race

It is in these terms that British Asian cultural studies has framed its mostly textual accounts of British Asian art and culture. For instance, Nasta (2002) explores the politics of hybridity through an examination of British Asian literature and the novels of Kureshi and Rushdie. Godiwala (2003) adopts a Foucauldian approach to examine the hybrid genealogy of British-Asian culture and theatre, situating what she labels 'English-Indian-ness theatre' into a postcolonial frame of resistance. Similarly, Rupa Huq (2003a, 2003b) situates herself within the new ethnicities project, stressing the diversity of post-Bhangra and South Asian youth culture, believing that the essentialist threat has still not dissipated<sup>13</sup>. However, a certain radical cultural studies strand in this field has felt the need to challenge excessively *culturalist* readings of post-Bhangra and British Asian cultures. In the process, it has developed some of the most sustained critiques of the concept of hybridity. These writers argue that the immoderate valorisation of the hybrid quality of British Asian cultural production deflects attention away from the racial violence, and socioeconomic marginalisation that continues to blight South Asian communities in the UK<sup>14</sup> (Hutnyk et al, 1996; Kalra et al, 2005). The challenge then, is to counter the tendency to overdetermine the supposedly liberated spaces opened up by new hybrid British

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<sup>13</sup> For further examples of similar British Asian cultural studies literatures, see Kaur and Terracciano (2006) on theatre, Sanjay Sharma (2006) on music, Ranasinha (2007) on literature, and, Sawhney (2001) on cinema.

<sup>14</sup> In some ways, this critique mirrors criticisms of postcolonial theory that is accused of avoiding questions of agency, sidelining actual material conditions and the political and economic realities experienced by subaltern communities (Parry, 1995; Dirik, 1994)

Asian cultural forms, and their ability to disrupt racialist, nationalist discourses. Instead, these writers would rather expose the flagrant neo-Orientalism<sup>15</sup> they see operating in both the corporate appropriation of South Asian forms in the cultural industries (Karla and Hutnyk, 1998), and what they consider excessive ‘hybridity-talk’ in the academy (Ash Sharma, 1996; Hutnyk, 1997; Ahmad, 2001).

There is not the space to enter this debate in full<sup>16</sup>, but the most compelling argument – and the one that directly informs this research – is an argument regarding the commodification of hybridity. Marxists conceptualise commodification in terms of the conversion of a service or object that has not been previously considered in economic terms (such as culture), into a commodity with exchange value. The commodification of culture, and the vast proliferation of cultural goods that has resulted, is subsequently critiqued in terms of how social elites use their power to bring cultural work into their private property, restricting access to others (primarily through copyright law), or in terms of how commodity fetishism hides the exploitation of labour that has gone into its production (see Hesmondhalgh, 2008: 55-58). However, the commodification of hybridity argument to which I refer takes a different tack, stressing the ideological dimension of commodification that transforms the potentially disruptive hybrid entity into absolute racial difference for the purpose of sustaining racial hierarchies and affirming the status quo.

John Hutnyk (1997) for instance, challenging the valorisation of hybridity in readings of British Asian cultural production, argues that since the hybrid Asian cultural form is itself commodified it cannot have any disruptive effect upon the capitalist system. As he states, ‘hybridity and difference sell; the market remains intact’ (ibid.: 122). Hutnyk is arguing that the celebration of the hybrid object precisely fails to recognise the process of commodification that transforms hybrid British Asian cultures into exotic goods. Due to the lingering colonial desire for Otherness, south Asian cultures in particular ‘remain a site of mystery, aroma, colour

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<sup>15</sup> This notion of ‘neo-Orientalism’ that the writers adopt is taken from Gayatri Spivak (1993) who refers to a particular management of the Other in the West designed to deflect attention away from the exploited Third World subaltern and the First World urban proletariat.

<sup>16</sup> The collection, *Debating Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Difference* (Werbner and Modood, 1997), alongside Kalra et al; (2005) *Diaspora & Hybridity* provide good overviews of the key debates.

and exotica' (ibid.: 120), whereupon the hybrid constitution of British Asian cultural forms, paradoxically becomes the very quality that is exoticised and marketed as the product's unique selling point. Ash Sharma (1996) makes a similar point when he describes how 'the vital, independent cultures of socially subordinated groups are constantly mined for new ideas with which to energise the jaded and restless mainstream of a political and economic system based on the circulation of commodification' (ibid.: 17). Echoing Stuart Hall's (1978) Althusserian version of the mass media as an ideological state apparatus, Ash Sharma (1996: 17) argues that it is 'the workings of hegemonic cultural industrialism' that re-configures and reshapes hybrid Asian identities into an essentialised subject. Thus, using the example of post-Bhangra musics, Sharma (1996: 16) stresses that through commodification 'this Othered music becomes a deterritorialised site in which liberal notions of cultural diversity and difference are incorporated within the terroristic violence of racialised capitalism'. As Sanjay Sharma (2006: 321-322) describes more succinctly, 'if the 1970s and 1980s were characterised by invisibility and marginalisation, then the 1990s was about recognition and celebration, but this was inextricably linked to the commodification of all things Asian'.

The argument regarding the commodification of difference has occurred in other discussions of race and popular culture, perhaps most famously in bell hooks' (1992) essay 'Eating the Other'. According to hooks, 'within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture' (21). hooks places particular emphasis upon commodification as the production of fantasy of the sexual encounter with difference, echoing Stuart Hall's (1996b: 467) remark that global postmodernism loves nothing more than 'a bit of the other'. Furthermore, corresponding to the arguments of the radical cultural studies critique outlined above, for hooks, the commodification of Other is not just a frivolous taste for difference. Instead, it constitutes an ideological process that sustains the status quo and the marginalisation of non-white groups, tied up with (and this time evoking Paul Gilroy) an 'imperialist nostalgia' (hooks, 1992: 25) that longs for the primitive Other. Paul Gilroy (2000a) offers a similar account in his critique of the 'image world of corporate multicultural' (255), where the corporeal schema of the ideal black body has been commodified by the 'corporate traffickers in black culture' (ibid.), reproducing and sustaining the Manichean colonial vision of difference, and

absolute racial types. Returning to hooks, even those attempts by people of colour to produce counter discourses and oppositional narratives through symbol creation are limited, since 'their power to ignite critical consciousness is diffused when they are commodified' (hooks, 1992: 33).

### Critiquing commodification

The strength of these arguments – what I subsequently bracket together as the 'commodification of race thesis' – is in how they stress the capitalist, industrial context of the politics of representation and recognition that cultural studies approaches to race and difference tend to ignore. Yet, somewhat ironically, the commodification of race thesis lacks an engagement with the process of commodification itself. Most references to commodification with regard to the production of racial meaning, are cursory; a shorthand to describe capitalism's co-option of the counter-narratives of racialised difference, and the production of its own form of corporate multiculturalism. What is specifically lacking is an understanding of the materialities of commodification. It is in these terms that Nick Stevenson (2002), for instance, critiques the seminal text *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al, 1978) and its analysis of representations of race in news reporting. While Stevenson acknowledges Hall et al's exemplary complex account of ideological production, he argues that it is undermined by the failure to tackle the nature of the determinate relation between material structures and symbolic forms, and how they interact during actual cultural production at the institutional level. Critical political economists Mosco (1996) and Garnham (2001 [1979]) also write against a version of commodification that overdetermines ideology (which Mosco attributes to a particular tradition of communications research), but on more Marxian grounds, that it deflects attention away from the real effects of commodification, that is, the extraction of surplus value, and the concealment of absolute and relative forms of labour exploitation through commodity fetishism (Mosco, 1996: 147).

The particular problem of the commodification of race thesis in its current form is that it rests upon a determinist, and what I consider a too-convenient, version of commodification in its critique of the politics of hybridity and difference. While it makes an important intervention in terms of exposing how the unruly and disruptive

effects of difference and hybridity are subsumed by capitalistic production, it fails to demonstrate *how this process actually occurs*. For instance, bell hooks states how critical race consciousness is ‘diffused’ by commodification, but does not explain how and where this diffusion happens. Ash Sharma and John Hutnyk similarly argue that British Asian cultural entities are ‘co-opted’ by the cultural industries, but do not explain the historical context of this co-option nor the means through which the process actually operates. Furthermore, Hutnyk’s particular version of the cultural industries (or indeed, *culture industry*, since he primarily draws from Adorno’s account of cultural commodification) neglects agency that forecloses the autonomy and individuality of the cultural worker, and ignores alternative modes of production, such as independent – or non-corporate – cultural practices. Thus, I argue an investigation into the politics of British Asian cultural production demands a new approach, which treats seriously the micro-process(es) of commodification at the institutional level of analysis, but also considers how this process impacts upon racialised epistemologies and the counter-narratives of difference. It is precisely this intervention that the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy attempts to make.

The major problem with the overdetermination of commodification is that it leaves the cultural commodity with no agency. Hesmondhalgh (2002: 16) notes that Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1997) analysis of cultural commodification suggests that the battle has already been lost, and culture has fully been subsumed into the logic of capital. The same sense is apparent in the radical cultural studies approach outlined above, whereby blanketing culture as ‘commodified’ effectively renders cultural products politically ineffectual. Even though this research is focused on exposing the negative forms of commodification – that is, commodification as the means through which capitalism attempts to govern difference – it is nonetheless vital to understand that commodification is an ambivalent and sometimes contradictory process. This will be explored in more detail in the second half of this chapter when I consider cultural economy and cultural industries literatures as a more productive route towards attaining a more acute understanding cultural commodification. To conclude this section I reiterate that to truly ascertain the effects of commodification upon the politics of British Asian cultural production, we need to pay closer attention to the material circumstances through which commodification occurs. The aim of the rest of the chapter is to consider the theoretical fields that can provide a more productive

solid framework for research into the commodification of British Asian culture in this way.

### Situating the postcolonial cultural economy

The purpose of this opening half of this chapter was to outline the specific debate this thesis engages regarding the commodification of British Asian cultural entities, whilst highlighting the limitations of the forms in which this debate has so far taken place. In particular I wanted to expose a deterministic reading of cultural production that produces somewhat lethargic explanations of the capitalist production and overdetermination of race, without fully understanding the complex ways in which such a process occurs. This introduces the central research question to this thesis: *how can we attain a more astute understanding of how hybrid British Asian cultural commodities are transformed into reified, racialised difference during commodification, and how can we use this knowledge to develop strategies to disrupt this process?* It is in this way that the concept postcolonial cultural economy represents a potential intervention, as a more nuanced approach to the governance of difference in modern capitalist societies. As stated, this is a deliberately interdisciplinary approach that considers postcolonial theory alongside a certain cultural economy/cultural industries approach to commodification and cultural production. In the remainder of the chapter I will describe the key concepts that I draw from each field, highlighting why their unexpected synthesis can help us better ascertain the political potential of British Asian cultural commodities.

### **Postcolonial cultural production in the global cultural economy**

It has been suggested that far from being an absolutely determining, subsuming process, commodification is better understood as ‘complex, ambivalent and contested’, to use David Hesmondhalgh’s definition (2007: 4). However, in order to develop a more acute understanding of how commodification operates in the governance and regulation of the counter-narratives of difference, it needs to be set against the broader workings of global capitalism. Put another way, an exploration of the politics of British Asian cultural production requires a knowledge of the regimes

of power that characterise what Appadurai (1990) calls the global cultural economy, through which commodification occurs. In this way, we see how British Asian cultural production occurs as part of a complex colonial legacy; both determined by and working against a neo-colonial logic that is diffused in postcolonial times, but still has powerful effects. To this end I draw from a particular postcolonial approach to globalisation to frame my ethnographic study of British Asian cultural production. In this section I consider the work of key writers in this field, and highlight their use in terms of helping us think through notions of power and resistance in the postcolonial cultural economy. Thus, the postcolonial perspective of globalisation provides the context upon which to set analytical work on cultural production and commodification; it provides the frames of power and opposition that attune us to how and why these processes come to be racialised – which is the crux of this thesis.

#### Ambivalence and transruptions in the new global order

In the first half of this chapter I delineated a particular radical cultural studies argument that asserts that capitalism's inherent neo-colonial character transforms British Asian hybrid cultural entities into sites of exotica during the process of commodification. This is a very persuasive point but, as suggested earlier, is open to critique since this version of cultural production tends towards economic determinism. A more nuanced understanding of capitalism's attempts to manage and regulate difference can be developed by addressing those postcolonial theorists engaged with the shifting formations of globalisation, particularly the work of Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha and Arjun Appadurai. While debates on globalisation's effects on culture have often found themselves split into a crude heterogeneity/homogeneity dichotomy (Appadurai, 1990: 295), these theorists have provided some of the more sophisticated accounts of what happens to indigenous cultures under global capitalism, painting an elaborate and varying dynamic between the local and the global. Appadurai (1990), for instance, counters a certain leftist communication studies perspective<sup>17</sup> that simplistically equates globalisation to Americanisation<sup>18</sup>, stressing the unevenness of global flows from a variety of international metropolises

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<sup>17</sup> Though he does not mention them directly, Appadurai is probably thinking of what Hesmondhalgh (2002: 33) calls the 'Schiller-McChesney tradition' of political economy. See Mosco, 1996: 82-91.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Tom McPhail (1981) on 'electronic colonialism'.

that are indigenised within the new societies that they enter. Hall (2000) extends this point when he states that, while the neo-liberal character of globalisation tends towards cultural homogenisation, it is more accurately characterised as a process marked by contestations. This is elaborated in a passage worth quoting in full:

[Globalisation] is a hegemonizing process, in the proper Gramscian sense. It is 'structured in dominance', but it cannot control or saturate everything within its orbit. Indeed, it produces as one of its unintended effects subaltern formations and emergent tendencies which it cannot control but must try to 'hegemonize' or harness to its wider purposes. It's a system for *con-forming difference*, rather than a convenient synonym for the obliteration of difference. This argument is critical if we are to take account of how and where resistances and counter-strategies are likely successfully to develop. This perspective entails a more discursive model of power in the new global environment than is common among the 'hyper-globalizers' (ibid.: 215)

Much like Appadurai, Hall shifts away from the simplistic dichotomies of the 'hyper-globalizers', and describes how the new world system is marked by *différance*: not a scale between total uniformity and total difference but rather a weave of differences and similarities that refuse to split into binary oppositions. Hence, Hall suggests that within the very 'shadow' of globalisation (ibid.: 216), sites of resistance and intervention emerge. This echoes Bhabha's notion of the colonial system marked by ambivalence, an ambivalence that destabilises its claim for absolute authority or unquestionable authenticity. Therefore, rather than equating globalisation to cultural imperialism or, inversely, an absolutely heterogenising force, a more accurate reframing sees the new global system as structured in dominance, striving for uniformity, but marked by an ambivalence that creates sites of contestation.

Within this particular discourse of globalisation we see the re-emergence of the concept of hybridity. However, this is not a simplistic postmodern version of hybridity as cultural syncretism and bricolage. Nor is it, as Hall states, defined by its relation to fully formed subjects split into either traditionals or moderns. Instead we discover a reconfiguration of hybridity as cultural *translation*. This is found in Homi Bhabha's slight reemphasis of the concept in a talk given to the British Council (1997), when he resituates hybridity outside of the coloniser/colonised context (as

outlined earlier), into the postcolonial nation. Here, Bhabha reiterates how nationalist discourses become destabilised when the core areas of the nation state are transformed into multivocal, multivalent and, indeed, ambivalent networks that project the periphery internally onto itself. Hybrid translations are defined as 'cultural cross-references' (ibid.) that mark the disjunctions of power to be contested. As he states, the hybrid is not there to be found in an object, rather 'it is a way of knowledge, a process of understanding or perceiving the ambiguous, anxious movement of transit or transition that necessarily accompanies any mode of social transformation.' Thus the counter-hegemonic value of the hybrid moment is better described as the political movement of transition, marking a time of cultural anxiety. As Hall (2000) similarly states, the hybrid translation is anxious, agnostic and ambivalent.

The theme of hybrid translation is developed in a slightly different manner in Barnor Hesse's (2000) notion of cultural entanglements and *transruption*, though the underlying principles are the same. Hesse is discussing multiculturalism, which he situates within a narrative of postcolonialism, arguing that its political configuration in the west is constituted by its colonial foundation. Indeed, we may now think of Edward Said's (1991) notion of Occidental imaginative geography (which previously constructed representations of the distant (external) Orient) as turned in on itself – a form of regulating ex-colonial subjects as their bodies enter the former Imperial metropolis (a notion I deal with in more detail in the next chapter). As such Hesse, in an implicit reference to Bhabha's notion of ambivalence, is interested in those moments when the multicultural interrogates – at times unwittingly – the ontological status of the nation's imagined communities (much like Gilroy's description of the conviviality of multiculturalism). According to Hesse, this is countered by a highly dubious race-relations narrative of governance that is structured discursively around a (racially unmarked) British perception of the problem of national identity following post-war immigration. This notion of the racialised forms of governmentality is a point that needs punctuating. Hesse, in a similar way to Edward Said (1991: 3), adopts Foucault's concept to describe the political, regulatory and representational dimensions of European/white racism in the West and the relation between power and knowledge that is used to sustain and govern the racialised distinction between European and non-white. It is the aim of this thesis to discover how these

governmentalities operate in the production of cultural commodities based on race, where commodification acts as *a technology of racialised governmentalities*. In the empirical chapters that follow I will explore how such a notion explains the circumstances through which British Asian cultural commodities are produced.

In light of this, Hesse offers potential for a counter-strategy through a notion of *cultural transruptions* that alludes to the form of hybrid translations highlighted above. Transruptions emerge from those discrepancies in society - whether historical antagonisms or social inequalities - that underline cultural differences. It follows that in their exposure of such discrepancies, transruptions open up the nation to different 'challenges, interrogations and representations' (2000: 16). As he states:

Transruptions are troubling and unsettling because any acknowledgement of their incidence or significance within a discourse threatens the coherence or validity of that discourse, its concepts or social practices [...] It comprises any series of contestatory cultural and theoretical interventions which, in their impact as cultural differences, unsettle social norms and threaten to dismantle hegemonic concepts and practices (ibid.: 17).

It is precisely the potential for cultural commodities to produce 'contestatory' cultural interventions that is the subject for my research. Thus, the idea of 'transruption' adopts a central role, serving as an analytical tool from which to measure the political capabilities of the British Asian cultural commodities that feature in this thesis.

#### From the commodification of race to the *racialisation of cultural commodities*

The literatures referenced thus far are useful in helping us think through the new regimes of power that characterise globalisation, the nature of their operation (in relation to capitalist ideology and the governance of race and difference), and the potential sites of resistance and counter-strategy that arise in such a context. These particular postcolonial approaches to globalisation debates bring a route to understanding how the epistemological and the aesthetic intersect with the economic in the global cultural economy. Postcolonial theory in its original literary studies incarnation has been criticised for not being properly attuned to the material, or even the political economy. However, when it has stepped into the field of globalisation it

has been forced to deal with precisely these questions. This is most evident in the work of Arjun Appadurai, whose research heavily informs the theoretical basis of this research. I am in particular drawing from two of his most cited essays.

The first is his work on the status of difference in the global cultural economy (Appadurai, 1990). I briefly alluded to his argument earlier but to reiterate, according to Appadurai the new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order. It is these disjunctures that are of interest to Appadurai, since their examination reveals new ways of disseminating the complex relations between politics, economy and culture. Drawing from Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities, he describes how they occur between five dimensions, or landscapes, that constitute the topography of the global cultural economy. He defines these landscapes as ideoscapes, financescapes and ethnoscapes, which form the base (though this is not in the Marxist sense of the word as this infrastructure is too unstable to be conceptualised in this way) upon which mediascapes and technoscapes sit, providing the materials and means for the imagined worlds of nation-states, multinationals, and diasporic communities, as well as sub-national groupings and movements. The crucial point is that these landscapes are irregular and perspectival, in that they assume different forms depending on the angle of vision. Furthermore the relation between these scapes is 'deeply disjunctive and profoundly unpredictable' (1990: 298). Thus, while the hegemony of capital and nation attempts to dominate the social imagination, their efforts are contested and complicated by the interventions of various actors and movements in the disjunctures of the global order. Again, the stage is literally set for the counter-discourses of difference. It is the contestation between the dominant imagined national identity in the centre, and the counter projections of diasporic communities on the periphery that is the subject of this research.

Within these disjunctures (and occasionally breaching them) are the uneven flows of capital, people, technologies and commodities. This introduces the second theoretical concept I draw from Appadurai (1986): the social life of the commodity. In his introduction to the collection *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai attempts to reconceptualise the relation between use value and exchange value through a notion of the commodity as having a social life. By this he means that the good has a life-

span that exists over time and space, where the meaning imparted onto it at one point, for instance, the very beginning of the production pole, is not necessarily the meaning derived from it at a later point of consumption. In fact, the most variance between meanings occurs when the commodity covers the greatest spatial, temporal and social distance. While Appadurai in this article is mostly concerned with the nature of economic value in the context of differing 'regimes of value of space and time' (ibid.: 4), I am interested in his notion of how different knowledges are imparted on the commodity at various points during its social life. Crucially, Appadurai understands that this occurs, not just at the singular point of production and at the singular point of consumption, but *within* production and *within* consumption. In other words he is acknowledging that the commodity phase consists of numerous stages of manufacture, where different meanings and knowledges – whether technical, aesthetic or social - are inscribed onto the cultural good at each of these stages.

This is particularly pertinent for my research since we begin to see a movement away from a simplistic determinist notion of the cultural commodity that underpins the discourses of the commodification of race outlined above. Instead, it leads us to a more discursive model, where different aesthetic, social and cultural values, produced through a dynamic relation between structure and agency, are imprinted on the commodity during manufacture. This is where I introduce the notion of the *racialisation of cultural commodities*, by which I mean the reification of the cultural commodity as absolute racialised difference. Indeed, a key aim of this research to explore the relation between rationalised cultural production and ethnic absolutism/essential difference. Here I want to reaffirm that by conceiving commodification as a sequence of events we obtain a more nuanced perspective of how capitalism attempts to determine production through standardisation, but also how these processes can be contested by individual social actors who apply their own set of values and meanings to their work. It follows that the dynamic between structural determinants and oppositional behaviours has deep ramifications on the transruptive potential of the commodity. As we shall see, the more complex version of commodification to which Appadurai alludes correlates with the body of cultural economy/cultural industries theories I refer to in the following section.

In Appadurai's formulation therefore, flows of cultural commodities play a key role in the construction of the imagined worlds of the various communities of the global populace. Thus, within the context of the nation state, the hybrid translations of diasporic communities – for instance, in the case of this research, the plays, novels and television dramas of 'British Asian' cultural producers – have the capacity to transrupt nationalist and racialist discourses through the foregrounding of the fluid, transnational constitutes of culture. Therefore, drawing from what I have loosely labelled a 'postcolonial perspective of globalisation', we begin to produce a notion of the postcolonial cultural economy that characterises the production of culture as an ambivalent site that overlaps with the heterogeneous terrain of the postcolonial world. In the opening section of this chapter, I engaged with the debates on the commodification of race and highlighted my dissatisfaction with the nature of discourse. By reformulating the question to address the *racialisation of cultural commodities*, within the particular globalisation framework I have just outlined, not only attunes us to how capitalist hegemonic forces attempt to govern race and difference, but points to ways in which transruptions of racialised governmentalities might occur.

### **Unpacking British Asian cultural production**

Having set the wider global cultural economy context, we can now address the issue of commodification and cultural production. In the first half of this chapter, I highlighted how discussions on the commodification of race too often fall into an economic or ideological reductionism, which is unable to adequately explain how the hybrid entity is transformed into reified difference. As such I argued that an exploration of the politics of British Asian cultural production requires a more sustained engagement with the actual *processes* of commodification to see how this effect is produced. In this final part of the chapter I want to evaluate the theoretical approaches that will best aid this task. Earlier I proposed a notion of commodification as a technology of racialised governmentalities, and it is the discursive quality of cultural production that I believe needs to be stressed if we are to move on from the simplistic, determinist accounts of capitalist ideology that can limit critical cultural approaches to race. To this end my concept of the postcolonial

cultural economy, as the suffix suggests, draws from a loose body of work called ‘cultural economy’ that has sought to deconstruct the economic reductionist categories used in the older traditions of economics and political economy theory (du Gay, 1997). However, the theoretical framework posed by the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy additionally draws from a tradition defined as a *cultural industries* approach (Hesmondhalgh, 2008). While cultural economy provides the broader discursive context to postcolonial cultural commodification, a cultural industries approach provides the analytical tools and concepts to unpack the specific processes of cultural production. This distinction will be made clearer, but as I shall explain, it is in the intersection of the two fields that the most productive route towards commodification practices emerges. As I shall argue, this allows for a more sophisticated account of the complex ways in which the aesthetic, the epistemological, and the economic interplay in particular recurrent ways with regard to the production of racial meaning.

#### A cultural economy approach to cultural production

As stated, the theoretical approach broadly defined as ‘cultural economy’ is a diverse field, where one would struggle to plot its theoretical or empirical boundaries<sup>19</sup>. As such it is better regarded as an approach, rather than a coherent discipline or theory. ‘Cultural economy’ followed the cultural turn in the social sciences, what Amin and Thrift (2004: xii) call an ‘explosion of interest in all things cultural’, that marked a shift away from critical theory views that economic rationality determines culture. Rather, it contended that cultural processes are embedded in the economic production of goods, whereby the economy itself is ‘constituted through informational and symbolic processes’ (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001). What unites this highly heterodox approach to economic knowledge is its challenge to the neoclassical hegemony in the disciplines of economics and traditional political economy. In fact, cultural economy is chiefly premised on two important principles

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<sup>19</sup> This interest in the cultural dimension of the economy has spread across a wide range of disciplines, beyond humanities and into the social studies of finance, management and business studies as well, with research subjects as diverse as the theoretical fields they are being produced in. Certainly the essays included in two readers in particular, *Cultural Economy* edited by Du Gay and Pryke (2002), and *The Blackwell Cultural Economy Reader* edited by Amin and Thrift (2004), seem to have little in common between them except for a broad interest in the relationship between the economic and the cultural.

that challenge the very ontological status of the economy as it occurs in the aforementioned disciplines.

Firstly there is the rejection of the supposed dichotomy between the economy and the sociocultural upon which neoclassical economics and traditional political economy are founded. Instead there is a growing understanding that the economic and cultural spheres are not externalities but part of the same. As Slater (2002: 59) states: 'economic and cultural categories are logically and practically interdependent: neither can be reduced to or separated from the other'. In neoclassical economics such a dichotomy leads to a constricting emphasis on scarcity and the most efficient method of resource allocation (Smelser and Swedberg, 1994). As Amin and Thrift (2004) highlight, the pursuit of prosperity is a cultural performance, which cannot be reduced to the economic, or even for that matter, the cultural. Du Gay (1997) goes as far as suggesting that economic and cultural categories are actually 'hybrid'. Thus the very term 'cultural economy' is deliberately designed to fuse two apparently separate spheres that are not actually separate at all. Amin and Thrift's idea of economic activity as a performance leads to a second principle of cultural economy theory, that the economy itself is a discourse, or rather, is discursively constructed – a notion that Du Gay (2000) attributes to Stuart Hall. For Du Gay and Pryke (2002: 2) economies should be seen as 'a form of representational and technological (i.e. "cultural") practice that constitutes the spaces within which economic action is formatted and framed'. Furthermore, Amin and Thrift (2004) describe the knowledge/power dimension to cultural economy exposing the narration of the economy, and the formation of 'economic subjects' who have been configured to perform in and understand particular forms of discipline (the economy as an institution).

There are two key aspects of cultural economy that particularly inform this research. The first regards the dismantling of the ontological distinction between culture and economy, which in turn collapses the opposition between creativity and commerce (see Jackson, 2002: 3). The extent to which this dichotomy is entrenched in contemporary attitudes to art and the market, is such that the very notion of the cultural commodity being equal to, or even representing art or 'authentic' cultural expression, remains controversial (at least outside of postmodernist thought). In fact

it is the persistence of such a distinction that Nicholas Garnham (1990) argues has impeded public policy in the cultural sector that he suggests can only respond reactively to market process ‘which it cannot grasp or attempt to control’ (155). According to Garnham (2000), the emancipatory project of Enlightenment was that industrialism and the capitalist mode of production would emancipate mankind from material necessity. Thus, Garnham’s argument is a reminder that the market is equally capable of liberating as it dominates. However, this should not be mistaken for a libertarian position. Rather, Garnham’s emphasis is on how it is capitalism, rather than the market itself, that corrupts cultural production<sup>20</sup>. Thus, the argument is not that we should develop a more sympathetic view of the market. Rather, what I take from cultural economy (and Garnham’s cultural industries position<sup>21</sup>) is a less contentious point that the sooner we can transcend a simplistic, economically determinist version of the market, the sooner we can develop a more nuanced and suitably complex *critique* of commodification.

This brings us onto a second aspect of cultural economy that is critical to this research: its ability to recognise and interpret the complexities and contradictions of economic production, with a particular empirical stress on the micro-process of production. Essentially, cultural economy theory seeks to emphasise how economic processes are much more complex than simplistic supply-and-demand economics or macro political economy explanations. As a way of stressing this point the practice of cultural economy generally takes the form of empirical research<sup>22</sup> stressing the cultural dimension of the economic (as opposed to the reverse as occurs in traditional political economy). Therefore, since this research is based upon empirically approaching the notion of commodification as a technology of racialised

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<sup>20</sup> Garnham states: ‘I think it is crucial, however, to separate the concept of the market from the concept of the capitalist mode of production, that is to say, from a given structure of ownership and from the special features derived from labour as a market commodity. In terms of this relationship between consumers, distributors and producers of cultural goods and services, the market has much to recommend it, provided that consumers enter that market with equal endowments and that concentration of power is reduced, controlled or removed’ (Garnham, 1990: 164).

<sup>21</sup> The distinction between cultural economy and cultural industries traditions shall be made more evident shortly, but as I shall additionally add, there is some overlap. Indeed, Garnham’s (1990: 154) stand against a discourse ‘that defines culture as a realm separate from, and often actively opposed to, the realm of material production and economic activity’, is not unlike the argument developed by cultural economists.

<sup>22</sup> I shall develop the empirical aspect of cultural economy – in particular drawing from Bob Jessop’s (2005) notion of ‘cultural political economy’ and the combination of a micro and macro empirical approach – in the next chapter on methodology.

governmentalities, cultural economy's stress on the cultural and discursive aspect of economic production (without losing sight of structure), 'can not only can enrich our interpretive understanding of economic phenomena, but can help us explain them better' (DiMaggio, 1994: 27).

### From cultural economy to cultural industries

However, cultural economy is still limited in helping unpack the politics of British Asian cultural production. I actually have deeper reservations about cultural economy that I shall come to shortly, but one immediate limitation is its apparent disinterest in cultural production (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 43-44b). Although the media industries would seem to provide the perfect site to observe and interpret the interplay between culture and the economy, there have been very few examples of a cultural economy approach to this field. Thus, in order to gain a stronger understanding of the process of cultural production I engage with a body of work that David Hesmondhalgh (2002; 2008) defines as the *cultural industries approach*.

While there are many overlaps with cultural economy, the cultural industries approach has its own separate genealogy. As Hesmondhalgh (2002: 15-18) outlines, the cultural industries approach originates from the work of French sociologists such as Morin and Miège who rejected Adorno and Horkheimer's version of a unified *culture industry* based on a uniform logic, instead preferring a plural notion of the *cultural industries*, that connotes how there are different forms of cultural production, each with their own unique qualities. Additionally Miège and Morin challenged the Frankfurt School's nostalgia for pre-industrial forms of cultural production, and – like Walter Benjamin – highlighted how new technological advances could also produce new innovative forms of culture. Similarly, while Adorno and Horkheimer conceptualised commodification as a blanket process where culture had already been subsumed by capital, the French sociologists argued that this spread was actually uneven and incomplete, and that the production of culture is always contested (ibid.).

In the same way that the postcolonial theorists outlined above interpret globalisation as uneven, ambivalent and contested, writers from the cultural industries tradition

interpret cultural production and commodification as a similarly elaborate and complex process. In contrast to political economy traditions<sup>23</sup>, and in particular the Schiller-McChesney model (see Mosco, 1996; and Hesmondhalgh, 2002), that tend to focus solely on macro-level concerns such as ownership, concentration and the influence of corporate and political interests, the cultural industries tradition is multifaceted and attempts to make connections between micro processes of cultural work, and its broader economic, political and cultural context. As such, it incorporates a more critical approach to the political economy (see Garnham, 1990, 2000, 2001; Golding, 1978; Murdock, 1987), a sociological approach to industrialised production (see Ryan, 1992; Negus, 1999; McRobbie, 2004), and when it intersects with cultural studies, an additional emphasis on the textual, and cultural meaning (see Hesmondhalgh, 2000; Fiske, 1989). This allows for the more nuanced approach to cultural production that I am looking for, which crucially, can account for its contradictions, ambivalences and complexity, something that the less critical forms of political economy are unable to do (Hesmondhalgh, 2008). Subsequently, again, in contrast to the Schiller-McChesney version of political economy, the cultural industries approach has been able to ‘offer *explanation* of certain recurring dynamics, rather than polemically bemoaning the processes of concentration and integration that are a feature of capitalist production – including media production’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2008: 553).

In my view, this is where cultural economy and cultural industries meet<sup>24</sup> – in their ability to appreciate the complexity and contradiction in cultural production, understood in terms of the complex dynamic relation between structure and agency. The cultural industries approach however, is inevitably more apposite to my research

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<sup>23</sup> There is not the space to give political economy approaches to the mass media the attention it deserves. As stated Mosco and Hesmondhalgh delineate the various versions, from a neo-classical model, to the Schiller-McChesney tradition, to a European critical sociological approach. Despite its political commitment and the centrality of questions of power and ideology (and in fact, the frequency to which references to ‘cultural imperialism’ and ‘colonialism’ appear in critical political economy accounts, would suggest a convenient overlap with postcolonial studies), its lack of interest in the media text is just one reason why its use to my analysis is immediately limited. In fact, Hesmondhalgh (2002) has noted that it has a rather dismissive attitude towards the products of popular culture. However, there will still be references to certain political economy theories throughout this research; in fact a dose of political economy is often needed to balance the ease of which it is to overstate the autonomy of the symbol creator.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, Angela McRobbie is one important theorist who’s work straddles the line between cultural economy and a sociology of media production approach. Keith Negus and Paul Du Gay similarly feature in both cultural economy and media production literatures.

since it has a specific interest in the details and particularities of cultural production and the distinctiveness of the cultural good (see Garnham, 1990; Fiske, 1989; Ryan, 1992). As shall be laid out in more detail in chapter two, this research is based on tracking the British Asian cultural commodity through various stages of production, to see how certain industrial processes amount to racialising technologies. As such, with its interest in the sites of production at both the micro institutional level, and macro political economy level, the cultural industries approach is best equipped to explain the context through which these processes occur. Indeed, central to the cultural industries approach is the notion that it is the production process itself (or more precisely, the access to distribution), which is ‘the key locus of power and profit’ (Garnham, 1990: 161-162). This is what Garnham refers to as the ‘editorial’ stage of production, described as 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. (ibid.)<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, as Mosco (1996) and Hesmondhalgh (2002) observe, there has been an increase in market research and quantification methods, an attempt to manage the unpredictability of the market, which has become more competitive in recent times. Basically, these authors are referring to the rationalisation of cultural production, which itself has been commodified (Mosco, 1996). This becomes a critical point in this research for it is precisely in the way cultural production is rationalised within the editorial function of cultural production (see also Ryan, 1992), which is where I argue the racialisation of the cultural commodity occurs. As such, it is the editorial function of production that becomes this research’s focus, rather than the actual creative process, which tends to be the subject of research in cultural policy and cultural studies alike.

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<sup>25</sup> This quote appears in a cultural policy document Garnham produced for the GLC in 1983, where he is writing against a particular policy tradition that places the creative artist at the centre of its policy, launched from a particularly adverse and what Garnham believes is a problematic and limiting attitude towards the market. For Garnham, cultural plurality is dependent not on spending money on the artist or the cultural artefact, but improving access to distribution through the editorial function; that is, creating an audience or public for the work, rather than producing cultural artefacts or performances.

Thus the purpose of this research becomes unpicking the editorial process through which commodification occurs. The cultural industries approach is again strong in this context, conceptualising cultural production as occurring through a complex dynamic between structure and agency. In particular, it emphasises the role of human action in cultural production. In this discourse the emphasis is on the autonomy of the cultural worker, and how as a consequence, broader sociocultural divisions are inscribed onto business practices. Thus it draws attention to the distinctiveness of the new cultural occupations (McRobbie, 2002; Banks, 2006), in the form of ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Negus, 1999), or even ‘complex professionals’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2002)<sup>26</sup>. This has resulted in a shift from a ‘production of culture’ perspective (which attempts to understand the impact of forms of industrial production on cultural artefacts), to a focus on the ‘cultures of production’ (Du Gay, 1997; Negus, 1997); that is, ‘how *structures* are produced through particular human *actions* and how *economic* relationships simultaneously involve the production of *cultural* meanings’ (Negus, 1997: 84). According to this perspective, cultural production is not just economic activity, but acted through the ‘messy, informal world of human actions’ (ibid.: 94). Utilising the work of Bourdieu, Negus describes how creative work is not just contained within an organisation but occurs across broader, social, economic and political contexts where aesthetic judgments are made and cultural hierarchies established. As such, Negus’ own research into cultural production focuses on how class divisions, lifestyles and habitus intersect with corporate practices; how knowledge is collected about consumers, how this influences strategies, and how this knowledge becomes the ‘reality’ that guides the industry personnel (Negus, 1999).

While there is a danger that this kind of analysis goes too far the other way, giving the cultural worker too much autonomy<sup>27</sup>, the strength of the cultural industries approach is that it retains questions of power and control. As I shall describe in the following chapter and throughout the thesis, the cultural industries have seen an increasing shift towards marketisation, in terms of the adoption of neoliberal models in both the commercial and subsidised sectors, and this has not gone unnoticed by

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<sup>26</sup> Hesmondhalgh (2002: 53-54) actually critiques the ‘cultural intermediary’ version of the new cultural work found in Featherstone (1991) and Lash & Urry (1994), for misappropriating Bourdieu’s original concept.

<sup>27</sup> This is my doubt about Negus’ argument in particular, which I believe goes as far as suggesting that economic decisions are based on individual whim.

those researching the cultural industries (Galperin, 1999; McRobbie, 2002; Born, 2004; Banks, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2008). Thus the task of this research becomes unpacking the cultures of production of the editorial function, constituted through a dynamic between the text, complex professionals and the surrounding political economy of the media industries, which forms the arena through which racialised knowledge is produced and managed.

### Limitations of cultural economy/industries approaches

While the details of cultural production will be explored in more detail in subsequent chapters, the main point is that a cultural economy and cultural industries approach brings to this research the analytical tools with which to unpick commodification. To reiterate, the aim of this research is to explore how capitalism, through the commodification process, attempts to govern the transruptive potential of British Asian cultural commodities. Earlier in this chapter I argued that attempts by a strand of radical cultural studies to tackle this issue, slip into a simplistic, determinist account of commodification that undermines its very claims regarding the capitalist, neo-colonial co-option of British Asian culture. It is for this reason that I draw from cultural economy and cultural industries approaches to cultural production, as they are attuned to the complexities – and contradictions – of cultural production, and how commodification is better conceptualised as a shifting dynamic between structure and agency, than as a process explained entirely by its economic base.

However, that is not to say that these approaches are enough by themselves to tackle this research on British Asian cultural production. In particular, there are concerns over using cultural economy as the sole basis for an engagement with the politics of postcoloniality. Quite simply, while cultural economy provides an astute account of the cultural dimension to economic production, it can lose sight of issues of power in the process. Amin and Thrift (2004) describe the emergence of cultural economy as a reaction to the ‘economic’ hegemony that has dominated social sciences. Yet the danger is it veers too far the other way, slipping into a cultural reductionism that in turn neglects political economy issues. This is the particular argument of Miller (2002), who laments how the cultural turn in social science has replaced concrete concepts of commodities and capital with abstract notions of a ‘knowledge’ or

‘information’ or ‘symbolic’ economy, which has seen important developments in political economy neglected in the current cultural zeitgeist<sup>28</sup>. Essentially, I argue that in collapsing the categories of economy and culture, cultural economy loses its political impetus (see also Hesmondhalgh, 2006: 43-44b). This inevitably has ramifications for its use in discussions of race and racism.

Furthermore, cultural economy and cultural industries are both lacking a deeper engagement with the textual and the politics of representation. Cultural economy’s emphasis on the *performance* of economic activity is helpful in terms of unravelling the dynamic to the production of the cultural artefact, but not so helpful in terms of thinking through the determinate relation between structure and the artefact’s content and symbolic form. The cultural industries approach encounters similar problems; while it retains the issue of power and control in its analysis of the production of culture, this is often addressed in terms of regulation and policy (see Garnham, 1990). David Hesmondhalgh (2006: 40-44) highlights the influence of cultural studies on cultural industries theory, in its focus on the media/cultural text, but apart from his own attempt at making a connection between the production of racial meaning in the cultural industries in the case of an Asian electronic dance record label (Hesmondhalgh, 2000), I see very few examples of a cultural industries approach to textuality and the politics of representation<sup>29</sup>, let alone race<sup>30</sup>. In this research, my interest is not just in how oppositional narratives are marginalised within discourse, but how they are symbolically determined too. Since cultural industries’ immediate form of praxis is regulation, its use in explaining how Indophilic forms of Orientalism are produced through commodification is limited by itself.

It is for this reason that I foreground the postcolonial dimension to this research. With regard to the limitations of cultural economy, postcolonial theory helps us ground the elaborate interplay between culture and economy within the complex

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<sup>28</sup> See also Jessop (2005) and Du Gay and Pryke (2002) for a more critical form of cultural economy, that is aware to its short-fallings.

<sup>29</sup> Garnham (1990) in fact argues that there is too much emphasis on the ideological dimensions of commodification.

<sup>30</sup> Talbot’s and Bose’s (2007) study of the effects of regulation of ‘night-time economies’ on black urban cultures is one example, though this does not deal with textuality.

legacy of colonialism. Cultural economy's base in cultural theory in fact correlates quite neatly with the postcolonial perspectives outlined above (particularly Appadurai's social life of the cultural commodity and Stuart Hall's poststructuralist approach to media and representation), but an emphasis on the historical and structural postcolonial context is still needed in order to retain questions of power and resistance. In relation to the cultural industries approach, postcolonial theory injects the politics of representation into an analysis of media/cultural production. While it treats popular culture seriously, the cultural industries approach – particularly those from a political economy of culture perspective – as stated, can nonetheless neglect the form and content of the media text (see Hesmondhalgh, 2008: 40). Thus postcolonial theory's emphasis on textuality and epistemology addresses what I believe is lacking in the cultural industries approach. In summation I argue that combining elements from each of these disciplines I have touched on, through a notion of the *postcolonial cultural economy*, best equips us for an exploration of the elaborate field through which British Asian cultural production occurs. It is precisely in the merging of their strongest qualities that we are led to a more progressive route towards unpacking the commodification of race and the racialisation of cultural commodities.

### **Conclusion: The postcolonial cultural economy intervention**

As mentioned above, one of the few engagements with race launched from a cultural industries perspective is David Hesmondhalgh's (2000) study of the record label Nation Records. Managed by Aki Nawaz, member of Asian<sup>31</sup> hip-hop act Fun^da^mental, Nation is known for its diverse range of acts that encompass world music groups and more radical fusion-based projects. In this article Hesmondhalgh focuses in particular on one of the bands on the label, Transglobal Underground, and the sample of a Pacific Island women's choir in their track 'Temple Head'. Hesmondhalgh's approach is unique in that he is interested in the politics of

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<sup>31</sup> I define them as 'Asian' for the purposes of this argument, but the group itself is mixed-race, and while the 'Asian' signifier is particular evident in their music – both sonically and lyrically – theirs is a more *radically* hybrid sound (to use Hutnyk's terminology) synthesising hip-hop (and African American Islamic radicalism and Black Panther discourses), punk, and quwwali singing.

hybridity but in relation to new digital technologies utilised in the genre of electronic dance music. While he considers the ethics of this sample within the context of the song (that is, the way in which the decontextualised sample is transformed into an exotic signifier) he explicitly states that he does not want to produce a solely textual analysis of the music. Instead he extends this issue of exoticisation to copyright law, framing this moment within external sampling politics and new technology discourses.

Bringing us full circle, this is a key point worth punctuating. Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental – along with Asian Dub Foundation – feature regularly in British Asian cultural studies encounters with music, because of the coupling of experimental fusions of musical genres and cultures with a radical anti-racist agenda and activist work outside of the music itself. However, these studies often are limited to solely textual analysis, focusing on the lyrics (S. Sharma, 96; Hutnyk, 1996b; Kalra et al, 1996), the aesthetic quality of the music (Huq, 2003a) or use of imagery (Hutnyk, 1996b). I wish to stress that I am not necessarily criticising, or even problematising these accounts, which offer valuable critiques, especially with regard to the exoticisation of British Asian cultures. Indeed, Hesmondhalgh (2000) draws a similar conclusion to these writers when he states that the mainly white consumption of Asian ‘fusion’ acts suggests that “‘hybrid’ acts may be limited in their cultural effects’ (ibid.: 299). However, where Hesmondhalgh differs from this particular school of British Asian cultural studies, is in the way he situates sites of resistance within the cultural industries. For instance, speaking more generally of the issue of black marginalisation in the music industry, he identifies ‘different musical-political issues’ that need to be addressed:

the ‘whiteness’ of indie and rave culture; the lack of respect accorded to black British musicians working within the hip hop tradition by both black and white audiences; the racialised tripartite division of the press with the (white) rock and dance press thriving and the (black) R&B press barely surviving; and the difficulties faced by black music radio stations (ibid: 301)

Thus for Hesmondhalgh issues of invisibility, marginalisation and commodification are never simply resolved within the text (whether through conscious lyrics or provocative sampling) or even through external political activism. Rather, as

Garnham (1990) would maintain, the struggles occur in the production – or ‘editorial’ – process, from day-to-day personal conflicts, to work cultures and forms of rationalisation, to larger tensions with the structures of the cultural industries themselves. It is these factors – no matter how unpredictable and entangled – that determine cultural output.

It is in these terms that I frame my postcolonial cultural economy critique. As I have outlined in the second half of this chapter, I argue that a combination of the most progressive aspects of postcolonial/globalisation studies with cultural economy/cultural industries discourses is the most productive way of gauging the politics of British Asian cultural production. This means grounding cultural economy research within postcolonial (and political economy) themes of power and imperialism to prevent a slip into the kind of culturalist reductionism that afflicts research that has followed the cultural turn in social sciences. It means recognising that the global cultural economy is an uneven, heterogeneous, unpredictable terrain but nonetheless ‘structured in dominance’ that manages the shifting hierarchies of racial difference (Hall, 2000). It necessitates marrying an approach that combines questions of political and economic power, ownership and control with one concerned with notions of textuality and representation, and being equipped for the complex ways such a relation is played out. Furthermore it demands empirical data that challenges the form of ‘epochal theorising’ that renders micro-level relationships and contextual details banal and insignificant (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002), but also grounds the ‘messy, informal world of human actions’ (Negus, 1997: 94) within larger structures, themselves mediated through political and economic determinants.

As I shall describe in the following chapter, it is in these terms that an intervention based upon a notion of the postcolonial cultural economy adopts an ethnographic approach to unravelling the politics of British Asian cultural production. Such a methodology, I will argue, is suitably attuned to the micro-processes of cultural work, and is responsive to the complexities and contradictions that characterise cultural production. In this chapter I described the need for empirical material to shed maximum light on the racialising forms of commodification, yet, critically, it is important to ground this empirical material within a suitable analytical framework. Thus, it is through the theoretical foundation formed by the concept of the

postcolonial cultural economy that we can interpret this empirical data appropriately, specifically considering the way it relates to the larger (racialised) structures of globalisation and capitalism. I believe that it is precisely through this route that the need for the explicitly interdisciplinary character of the postcolonial cultural economy intervention shall become evident.

## **Chapter Two – Unpacking the postcolonial cultural economy: Researching British Asian cultural production and the cultural industries**

The aim of this research is to discover what happens to the transruptive potential of the British Asian text during the process of commodification. To do this I conducted an ethnographic study of British Asian cultural production as it takes place in three different cultural industries: theatre, book publishing (specifically fiction), and broadcast television. The original aim was to track the production of a commodity throughout its commodity phase, which I broke down into five stages – conception, commissioning/content acquisition, distribution, design and packaging, and marketing. My approach was informed by the principles of the postcolonial cultural economy as outlined in the previous chapter; the nature of the concept is such that it describes both a theoretical framework *and* a methodological intervention.

As I argued, those literatures that have attempted to tackle the issue of commodification and its effects upon the politics of British Asian cultural production, often slip into an economic determinism since they lack a fuller engagement with cultural production to effectively ascertain the complex interplay between structure, process and individual agency. In essence, there is an absence of the empirical material needed to elaborate the relation between how particular symbolic objects are produced and distributed by specific economic agents, and how this occurs against macro-structural processes that attempt to control micro-level behaviours. It is through this dynamic relation that the transruptive potential of the British Asian cultural commodity is mediated. As such, through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of trade publications, newspaper articles and other ephemera of cultural production, the postcolonial cultural economy intervention is effectively an attempt to *sociologise* accounts of British Asian cultural production in relation to racial epistemologies. Such an approach, I believe, will provide a deeper and richer reading of what occurs during the commodification of the British Asian cultural work.

This chapter will map out in detail the nature of this research into the politics of British Asian cultural production. To begin I will briefly return to the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy to highlight how and where a methodological intervention needs to occur. This will in turn reveal the empirical tools needed to unpick the issue of the commodification of race and the racialisation of cultural commodities. However, before I enter a deeper discussion of my research methods, I will introduce the actual subject of the research – the British Asian cultural commodity – outlining what is meant when I describe a cultural work as ‘British Asian’. Then I will introduce the fields of research. As stated, I chose the theatre, publishing and television industries as the fields in which to conduct my research into the production of British Asian cultural commodities, and this section of the chapter will explain why I specifically chose these industries and why they provide appropriate fields for my research.

The rest of the chapter details the nature of my research. Firstly I will explain why ethnography is the most suitable method for the postcolonial cultural economy intervention. I then introduce my particular ethnographic approach: a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation and analysis of trade literatures and ethnographic ‘artefacts’. Since interviews play a predominant role in my research, the following section will describe in more detail the research respondents: British Asian cultural producers, or symbol creators, and various other complex professionals. The final part of the chapter will then provide reflections upon my experience in the field, in particular focusing on the issues that emerge from researching participants who are, broadly-speaking, of the same social class, ‘race’ and even generation as the researcher. In light of this I will describe what status I give to such data: how I treated interview transcripts, secondary sources, and other visual materials, as narratives to unpick and analyse in order to make sense of how the respondents, as cultural producers, construct and attach meaning to their practice and the environment in which they work. I argue that it is precisely this ethnographic material, when set within the disjunctures of the global cultural economy that provides a deeper understanding of the context through which cultural transruptions occur. It is this elaborate and richly layered setting that becomes the object of study in the remainder of the dissertation.

## **Methodology and epistemology and the postcolonial cultural economy intervention**

As I have suggested, the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy is both a theoretical framework *and* a methodological intervention. As discussed in the previous chapter, the postcolonial cultural economy brings together two theoretical disciplines and their subsequent methodological prescriptions. Even though postcolonial theory is not renowned for its empirical grounding (not least because it emerges from the field of literary studies) it is of particular importance in this instance since the centrality of epistemology in its analysis has immediate methodological consequences. This is what I take from the work of Edward Said and his famous text *Orientalism* (1991 [1978]). According to Said, Orientalism represents the epistemological and ontological distinction made between the Orient and Occident. It is historically and materially defined, a collection of institutions and discourses, 'a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient' (ibid.: 3). Said consequently describes Orientalism as a form of 'imaginative geography' (ibid. 71) which 'legitimizes a vocabulary, a universe of representative discourse particular to the discussion and understanding of the Orient'. Imaginative geography produces Orientalist representations, a result of social processes that obscure and distort 'positive geography' or positive knowledges of actual realities. It follows that, in this postcolonial era<sup>32</sup>, Occidental imaginative geography is forced to turn on itself, as it attempts to manage the insertion of former colonial subjects into the Imperial heartland. As will become more apparent throughout the thesis, it is this process from which contemporary forms of Indophilia emerge.

The concept of imaginative geography suggests that we look at the Orient (or Orientalised subjects) through certain lenses that contain and manage what we see. According to Said these lenses are produced through two processes. Firstly, Said draws from Foucault's notion of discourse, and the idea that to constitute an object

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<sup>32</sup> As Stuart Hall (1996a) states, we can describe 'postcolonial times' as not just the chronological moment following decolonisation, but a new epistemological era, 'a time of "différance"' (242).

(for instance, ‘the Orient’) is to have power over it. Understanding Orientalism as a discourse reveals how the West produces a network of knowledges whereby the Orient is constructed and governed ‘politically, sociologically, ideologically, militarily and imaginatively’ (ibid. 3). Secondly, Said uses Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, whereby he describes the relationship between the Occident and the Orient as a relationship of power and domination and ‘of varying degrees of a complex hegemony’ (ibid.: 5). For Said it is hegemony that gives the imperial discourse ‘durability and strength’ (ibid.). As I described briefly in the last chapter, my research is an attempt to figure the ways in which commodification – and its institutions and discourses – acts as *a technology of Occidental imaginative geography* which attempts to govern representations of South Asian cultures in particular ways (and sustain the dominant discourses of a racially pure British national identity). In light of this, the research is focused on unravelling how, and the extent to which, imaginative geography operates through commodification, through a discursive construction of ideology; as Hall (1988: 9) states, ‘ideology (like language) is conceptualised in terms of the articulation of elements’. It is in this sense that commodification is the object of research.

This is where a cultural economy/cultural industries approach provides a potential methodological route. In the last chapter, I highlighted how these literatures produce the most nuanced understanding of economic life, and a less determinist and more complex approach to cultural production in particular. Indeed, my method draws from Jessop’s (2005) notion of *cultural political economy*, which stresses the adoption of both micro *and* macro approaches in research on economic practices. More precisely, it highlights an approach that deals with the ‘bottom-up’, that is, an approach that looks at ‘how particular economic objects are produced, distributed and consumed in specific contexts by specific economic and extra-economic agents; traces their effects in the wider economy and beyond; and explores how different subjects, subjectivities and modes of calculation come to be naturalised and materially implicated in everyday life’ (ibid. 144). This is then coupled with an approach that considers the ‘top-down’, that is, how macro-structural properties selectively reinforce certain micro-level behaviours, thereby contributing to the reproduction of a more or less coherent economic order. It is additionally interested in how agents operate within these structures and certain frames of action; and how

the 'reproduction of an economic order occurs through the complex strategic coordination and governance of their various heterogeneous elements' (ibid.). In short, the postcolonial cultural economy intervention is aimed at ascertaining the dynamic between macro and micro dimensions of cultural work (against the regimes of power that Said outlines) that constitutes the elaborate and richly layered cultures of production through which the British Asian cultural commodity is produced, and subsequent cultural transruptions are mediated. As shall be explained, I considered an ethnographic approach as the most suitable method for researching this subject. However, before I enter this discussion into actual methodology, I need to introduce and detail the main subject of the research: the British Asian cultural commodity

### **Defining 'British Asian'**

In this thesis the reader will find frequent references to 'British Asian television', 'British Asian literature', and 'British Asian theatre', but how is the term 'British Asian' actually defined? In other words, what does it mean when a product is described as 'British Asian'? Does it refer to the cultural identity of the people who conceived the text? Is it the content that is being described as 'British Asian'? Is it a particular aesthetic, or style? Of deeper political concern, is the term even as neutral or innocent as it may appear? The phrase 'Asian' or 'British Asian' has lacked critical engagement in prior research on the cultural forms created by British-based producers with South Asian heritage (except for a notable contribution which I shall discuss shortly), to the extent that it has assumed commonsense status. This is particularly the case with the strand of British Asian cultural studies I delineated in the previous chapter. Thus for instance, despite adopting a critical register, Godiwala (2003), and Sawhney (2001) quite matter-of-factly refer to 'British Asian theatre', and 'British Asian cinema' respectively, without interrogating what such a term actually means. A brief overview of its etymology and the debates that followed its conception will highlight the political risks in the uncritical use of the category 'British Asian', and in the process, lead to the (re)formulation of its signification that attempts to overcome these potential hazards.

Nasta (2002) finds that 'British Asian' was first coined – at least officially – in 1988 by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), in a recommendation that suggested that people of Asian origin should no longer be classified as 'black'. As touched on in the previous chapter, this was a particular response to the anti-racist movements of the 1970s and 1980s in which the term 'Black' was reclaimed and politicised as a way of uniting the Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities, but unwittingly essentialised black identity, 'silencing' in particular black women and the Asian communities (Stuart Hall, 1991b; 1996b). Thus the CRE recommendation was an attempt to recognise the particular experiences of the Asian community, marking a shift from a counter-politics of racial solidarity, to 'one of ethnic pluralism' (Ticktin quoted in Nasta, 2002: 182). It was probably not until the 'Asian Underground' scene of the mid-1990s however, that 'British Asian' gained real political impetus, as a step towards the normalisation of South Asian second-generation youth born in the UK as primarily British (S. Sharma, 1996; Huq, 2003a). Since then, 'British Asian' has entered the everyday vernacular of British life, and is the common description of people in Britain of South Asian<sup>33</sup> heritage.

However, mirroring similar debates that occurred within Afro-Caribbean communities over the ethnic category 'black'/'Black'/'Blak' (see Henry, 2002; Hall, 1996c) several writers have challenged the particular discourse of multiculturalism that launched the category 'British Asian'. For instance, Kaur and Kalra (1996) critique the term and other similar categories (including 'Asian' itself) as at best, too rigid, and at worst slipping into an essentialism that reifies racial difference. Sayyid (2006) takes up this argument in his introduction to *A Postcolonial People...* and suggests that 'British Asian' signifies a superficial relationship between Asian and British, and that such a separation allows for 'the possibility of disaggregating the British from the Asian' (ibid.: 7). Furthermore, according to Sayyid, the term valorises the subsumption of the 'Asian' into the 'British', in the process collapsing

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<sup>33</sup> That is, originating from the Indian sub-continent, including India, Pakistani, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, sometimes via particular postcolonial routes (e.g. Kenya and Uganda). It should be noted as well that the use of 'Asian' in British English excludes East or South East Asians (who are defined by their country of origin or more problematically, as 'Oriental') and central Asians.

the multivariied and culturally differentiated identities, histories, and struggles of South Asia into a historicist narrative of Britishness<sup>34</sup>.

To overcome these challenges, Kalra and Kaur fabricate the term 'Br-Asian' (1996), which Sayyid later binds as 'BrAsian' (2006). While Kalra and Kaur initially define 'Br-Asian' much in the same way as 'British Asian' is used – as referring to 'those of South Asian backgrounds resident in Britain' (1996: 219), the writers prefer 'Br-Asian' since they believe it foregrounds the transnational, translocal, and translatory qualities of South Asian diasporic texts (ibid.). Thus for Kalra and Kaur, echoing Stuart Hall's (1996a, 2000) application of Derrida's notion of *différance* to new forms of postcolonial identity politics, 'Br-Asian' is a more fluid concept than 'British Asian', highlighting the constantly shifting identifications and representations of Br-Asian communities. Sayyid draws from Derrida more directly whilst stating his case for 'BrAsian', using Derrida's concept of 'under erasure' – erasing a term because it is inadequate, by showing the erasure in the same instance. Thus for Sayyid, 'BrAsian' is intermediate and even ironic, highlighting the ambivalence of any kind of national identity. Consequently, 'BrAsian' is a confusion rather than a resolution, reflecting the cynicism felt by 'BrAsians' over nationalism and the dominant mythology of Britishness (ibid.: 8).

While I sympathise with this critique of 'British Asian', I nonetheless find 'Br-Asian' (or BrAsian for that matter) unsatisfactory. Of immediate concern is that the removal of the 'British' prefix preserves the 'whiteness' of British national identity (for this reason I would have found '*BritAsian*' slightly more appealing than 'BrAsian', though this still is less than ideal). A fuller discussion is beyond the scope of this chapter, but fundamentally my argument is that the term 'BrAsian' does not necessarily resolve what 'British Asian' fails to do. I argue that a notion of 'British Asian' can still be retained in light of the critique Kalra and Kaur, and Sayyid offer; that is, it's possible to use the term whilst stressing an anti-essentialist politics. Sawhney (2001) for instance, in his study of 'British Asian' cinema, stresses the diversity of styles and genres that 'British Asian' films encompass, stressing just one commonality – that they all usually work within relatively low budgets (58). This

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<sup>34</sup> See also Rattansi (2000)

might have been intended as a tongue-in-cheek comment, but for me it echoes Gilroy's (1993) *Black Atlantic* that stresses the pluralism of black cultures, held together through the shared experience of racism and social, cultural and economic exclusion. While I acknowledge Rattansi's point (2000: 128) regarding the 'impossibility' of the term 'British Asian'<sup>35</sup>, I believe it can still be of use, as long as we stress a fluid, shifting, and, ambivalent version of identity that is conscious of, and works against, the structures of dominance in which it is reified as absolute difference. There is certainly an irony when I discuss the racialisation of a commodity, when I am effectively doing the same thing by identifying the said commodity as 'British Asian'. This remains a contentious issue, but a distinction at least can be made between a political motivation in marking an ethnic location from which to speak (as Stuart Hall asks us to do) and a more problematic commercial motivation imposed from the top down.

Returning to the issue at hand, how do I define a 'British Asian' cultural commodity? An appropriate starting point is Kalra and Kaur's (1996: 229) notion of a localisation of global flows related to South Asia, expressed in the socio-cultural context of Britain. Nasta (2002) further specifies a British Asian text as a reimagining of Britain through British *and* Asian eyes (though this does not exclude those texts that choose to fix their gaze beyond this nation's borders). In light of these formulations, I define a 'British Asian' cultural commodity as any text produced (though not exclusively) by British residents of South Asian heritage that articulate a particular South Asian experience, the production of which occurs in the UK. Therefore, when I refer to British Asian theatre, British Asian television or British Asian literature I am referring to a text that *articulates a significant part of its identity as of South Asian heritage* (adapted from Sayyid, 2006). It should be stressed that the British Asian cultural commodity can, and does, span a multitude of styles, genres and narratives within popular culture, though I am aware that by using this label I am grouping together artistic and cultural forms that aesthetically speaking may have little in common. The quality they do all share is the *capacity* to disorientate and transform British culture as Sanjay Sharma (2006: 326) suggests, whether tacitly or explicitly.

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<sup>35</sup> Which he argues 'hides an extraordinary and, to even the most knowledgeable, a bewildering variety of labyrinthine cultural differentiations.'

It is this proposition that forms the heart of this research. As such, I refer to British Asian in its most non-essentialist, fluid definition that foregrounds its potential to destabilise nationalist discourses of Britishness<sup>36</sup>.

## The fields of research

To recap, the aim of this thesis is to discover how the process of commodification – that is, the transformation of culture into a commodity with economic value – affects the transruptive potential of the British Asian cultural commodity as a postcolonial hybrid translation. Since I was challenging a particular determinist approach to commodification, I purposefully chose a multi-site approach, in order to see whether its emergent epistemological effects vary in the differing political economies through which British Asian cultural production occurs. Consequently, I picked three sectors of the cultural industries<sup>37</sup> to conduct research – book publishing, theatre and broadcast television – for the reason that they each have a distinct political economy, where the market, the state and the audience interface in contrasting ways<sup>38</sup>. In this section I will briefly outline their unique structural environments (which will be expanded further in subsequent empirical chapters), establishing the ways in which they represent three differentiated fields for an exploration of cultural

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<sup>36</sup> It is worth reflecting briefly on what terms British Asians refer to themselves. No substantive study has been done into this, but it is notable that none of my respondents rejected the term. However, several of the Muslim interviewees would additionally refer to themselves as British Muslims. This however, was not necessarily in opposition to British Asian but merely highlighted how their religious identity played a bigger role in their sense of self. It should be noted that all of my respondents are of a certain generation and of a certain age – between 20-50. From personal experience I have found that ‘British Asian’ resonates less with the younger or third generation; those who do not define themselves as ‘British’ will choose their religious identity or specific country of origin to mark their identity. The colloquial word *desi* (which in Sanskrit means *of the country*) is also common, and highlights a diasporic bond similar to ‘Asian’. Again, this is based upon anecdotal evidence. Regardless, it can simply be stressed that a term such as ‘British Asian’ has different meanings for different people in different temporal and spatial settings.

<sup>37</sup> Garnham (1990: 156) defines the ‘cultural industries’ as, ‘those institutions in our society which employ the characteristic modes of production and organization of industrial corporations to produce and disseminate symbols in the form of cultural goods and services, generally, although not exclusively as commodities’. This last point is important since it allows us to include public service terrestrial television (specifically the BBC) as part of the cultural industries, even though it does not actually *sell* a product. (Rather, it is a service paid for by the individual through a flat license fee.)

<sup>38</sup> They are additionally unique in that they each produce different types of cultural commodities. According to Ryan’s (1992: 75-91) formulation, the publishing industry produces private goods, theatre produces quasi-private goods, and broadcast television produces public goods.

commodification. This will then provide the basis for a more thorough description of my particular ethnographic practice in these fields in the final section of the chapter.

### Book publishing

The book publishing industry can be regarded as a market-based economy<sup>39</sup>; industrial methods are used to produce and distribute cultural goods, which are themselves produced by largely traditional or pre-industrial means. Subsequently it provides an example of commodification – and the transformation of culture into units with surplus value – in its most relatively ‘straightforward’ form. Thompson (2005: 15) highlights the centrality of profit to the publishing industry when he characterises publishers in the ways in which they ‘acquire rights in certain kinds of symbolic content and then speculatively invest capital to transform that content into physical books which they hope they can sell in sufficient quantities and at a suitable price to generate a profit’. The publishing industry in the UK was originally based on a patronage model, but has seen a shift towards a market-based system (Golding, 1978; Thompson, 2005) and a concomitant growth in corporate production. This has followed the ascendancy of neoliberal economics in the west where deregulation and marketisation has led to increasing media conglomeration and concentration (Garnham, 1990; Hesmondhalgh, 2002). As such, since the 1970s the publishing industry has seen ‘high levels of merger and acquisition activity’ (Thompson, 2005: 54) particularly through the acquisition of formerly independent publishing houses, which are integrated into the structures of large corporations. This invariably has had an effect on editorial output, whereby editorial activities have been restructured so that they are no longer as heterogeneous as they were in previous decades, but fit in line with the overall strategic priorities of the corporation (ibid.). It is for this reason that Golding (1978) argues that publishing should be considered a mass media industry, driven by the neoliberal culture of twentieth century communications. However, it should be acknowledged too that despite the increasing concentration typical of deregulated cultural industries, there remains a relatively large number of small independent publishers, since the market is highly diverse with relative low

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<sup>39</sup> Though certain specialist sections of the industry may receive government subsidies. For instance, poetry presses sometimes receiving funding from the Arts Council England.

costs of entry (aided by new technological developments). Additionally with editorial activities being restructured in the corporate houses, there is space for enterprising individuals to fill in gaps and take risks the large corporations are afraid to (Thompson, 2005). In short, the publishing industry represents one pole of a particular form of cultural commodification, dominated by global corporations, but containing within it spaces where economic agents can intervene and produce new cultures of production that are not necessarily framed purely by profit-motivation.

## Theatre

Providing what I consider the opposing pole of commodification to publishing is the UK theatre ‘industry’ which is mostly subsidised and supported by the state. In the following chapters the relationship between theatre and the British government through arts funding (administered by the Arts Council in its various regional forms) will be discussed in more detail. The more pressing issue in the context of this discussion is whether the concept of commodification can apply to theatre production since it is such a heavily subsidised industry, and one that does not initially appear as driven by profit. David Hesmondhalgh (2002: 13), for instance, prefers to characterise theatre as a ‘peripheral’ cultural industry since it has not experienced the same level of industrialisation as other sectors such as broadcasting and publishing<sup>40</sup>. Fundamentally this is because it does not produce a physical commodity like a book or CD – the ‘commodity’ is the live performance itself. Furthermore unlike those industries, apart from a few exceptions, theatre does not deal with ‘mass’ audiences, and thus, reproduction remains based on non-industrial or semi-industrial methods (ibid.). Additionally, theatre maintains an aura of ‘high art’, and does not obviously appear to be in the business of selling commodities.

Yet 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

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<sup>40</sup> Though he stresses how commercial theatre, such as big budget musicals, replicate the same production structures and processes as the core cultural industries.

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' (ibid.: 46). As Peacock (1999: 217) states, 'The subsidised theatre is now, like the commercial sector, *a commodity that can be purchased*' [added emphasis]. Consequently it is important to recognise that the process of cultural commodification – and in particular, the increasing adoption of rationalisation techniques typical of the cultural industries as a whole – is as applicable to British Asian theatre as it is in the more explicitly market-driven sectors. Yet, the heavy state involvement in UK theatre produces a very unique setting in relation to the other industries of my study, something that will be revealed in subsequent chapters.

### Broadcast television

In very crude terms, if publishing can be characterised as a purely market driven economy, and theatre a state subsidised industry, then broadcast television in the UK represents a mixed economy. Moreover, in contrast to publishing and theatre, its entire form is industrial<sup>41</sup>. Even though the recent trend in British broadcasting can also be generalised as an increasing shift towards marketisation (again, part of a global shift towards neoliberal economic models), public service broadcasting – in the shape of the BBC and Channel 4 in particular – remains a significant segment of

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<sup>41</sup> This is precisely how Theodore Adorno (1991) distinguishes between two sets of cultural production: those based on a combination of pre-industrial or traditional production, and industrial manufacturing techniques (for instance books, and CDs), and those where, as I have said, the very form is industrial (television, newspapers and films would come into this category). Theatre does not strictly fall into Adorno's formulation, but would exist in its own category, which begins with traditional and pre-industrial forms (e.g. writing a play), but then uses semi-industrial means to produce and sell its 'products'.

the UK broadcasting scene. The relation between British Asian programming and the political economy of broadcast television will be detailed further in the following chapters, but generally speaking, public service broadcasters such as the BBC and Channel 4 (a commercial channel but with a public service remit) are the only terrestrial channels that commission and broadcast British Asian television. This is a consequence of a public service obligation for these particular channels to produce 'minority-interest' television (the normative understanding of Asian programmes as 'minority-interest' is a particular theme of chapters four and five). Asian programming of course can be found elsewhere; with the proliferation of new digital channels, there has been an ever-increasing amount of Asian channels available on cable and satellite networks, often catering for specific communities (e.g. Punjabi or Bengali), and broadcasting programmes syndicated from the Indian sub-continent. However, for the purposes of this research the focus is terrestrial television, since it provides a unique example of commodification as an overt interplay between the state and the market.

Even though it would appear that public service broadcasting is in some ways insulated from the market, as alluded to earlier, the BBC has found itself under increasing commercial pressure<sup>42</sup> to generate consistently high ratings in order to justify its relevance (and therefore its licence fee). As such, the BBC's focus has drifted increasingly towards more populist offerings (Born, 2004: 471-482), rather than programmes that develop, as Fraser described above, the sort of programming that is beyond the private sector. Similarly, Channel 4 has also been facing commercial pressure, in this instance against the backdrop of falling advertising revenue, to the extent that in recent years it has argued that it should receive a portion of the license fee in order to remain competitive (James Robinson, 'Channel 4 boss sets sights on license fee', *The Guardian*, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2005). These issues will be touched on again in this research but I wish to stress how broadcast television – and specifically public service broadcasting – provides an example of a different form of commodification of British Asian cultural production, one that Garnham (1990) admits is particularly difficult to study, since it occurs through a particular

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<sup>42</sup> Compounded by the most recent Royal Charter where borrowing limits were restricted to almost half of what the BBC were hoping to receive (Rob Shepherd, 'Licence fee to rise by 3%' in *Broadcast*, 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2007).

intersection between the market and the state. For these purposes, broadcast television provides another context through which to examine the scope for commercially produced British Asian cultural transruptions.

Despite this sketch, none of these industries should be regarded as representing a pure marketing economy or a pure planned economy. What should be stressed is how the state/market interfaces in each of these industries are differentiated, and also dynamic, fluid and overlapping, varying over temporal and spatial dimensions. This is important to recognise, otherwise there is again the risk of slipping into a determinist and functionalist account of the cultural industries. As shall be made evident, my research is interested in the shifting relations between these broad (that is, dynamic, fluid, overlapping) political economic structures, the behaviours, interventions and social actions of economic agents, and how these constitute the cultures of production through which cultural transruptions are mediated.

### **An ethnographic approach to British Asian cultural production**

When considering the most appropriate methodological approach to research the politics of British Asian cultural production, it is necessary to return to some of the theoretical themes discussed in the previous chapter. To reiterate, in response to previous research in this field that has slipped into either a textual or economic determinism, I propose that commodification acts as a technology of racialised governmentality, and an Occidental imaginative geography that constitutes the Orientalist gaze of the Other, and South Asian cultures in particular. This has two methodological implications. Firstly, it suggests that the production of culture is a discursive practice, a notion I explore in more detail in chapter four. And secondly, it reveals as the object of my research the space in-between the political economy and the text, and how the dynamic between these macro and micro dimensions determines the cultures of production through which potential cultural transruptions are mediated. Subsequently, it is those symbol creators and cultural intermediaries that operate in this space who became the main focus of this research. The aim is to consider the ways in which their behaviours, and their narratives on the experience of British Asian cultural production, produce knowledges about how cultures of

production are constituted, and the effects this has on the transruptive potential of the British Asian cultural commodity. For this purpose, I considered ethnography the most appropriate method for this research.

Ethnographic research into race and racism has been fraught with difficulties and controversy. Since the 1980s ethnography has fallen under critical scrutiny in relation to the politics of cultural representation, which is increasingly seen as implicated in a process of structuration, dominance and exclusion (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Yet while this has seen the development of new critical forms of ethnography in the fields of gender in particular, this has been less evident with research in racial and ethnic studies, which has tended to sideline questions of method, practice and politics. This has had negative ramifications, in the worst cases, producing a 'zoological' approach to ethnic minority communities (Alexander, 2006). Despite a general consensus within social science that categories of race are politically and socially constructed, this has not prevented continued non-reflexive empirical research into racial and ethnic groups that paradoxically reifies those racial categories researchers seek to deny (Alexander, 2006; Nayak, 2006). Social anthropological ethnographies of race have been particularly criticised for slipping into a neo-Orientalist gaze, with epistemological outcomes that constitute the neo-colonial management of the Other (Sharma et al, 1996; Hutnyk, 1996a). Within British sociology<sup>43</sup>, ethnographic practice has been shaped by the 'race relations' tradition (see Solomos and Back, 2000) taking as its object of study bounded communities and the 'problem of the immigrant' (Alexander, 2006). While more politically orientated than the social anthropology tradition, the race relations school has been criticised for the pathologization of immigrants and their children, without an adequate recognition of the Imperial context to their arrival, and the lingering neo-colonial ideology that defines and sustains modern racial formations (Lawrence, 1982).

Once again, it was Stuart Hall's paper on new ethnicities that marked a new moment, spawning a more critical ethnographic approach to race and ethnicity which has

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<sup>43</sup> In North America sociological approaches to ethnographic research has been modelled by the Chicago School. See Alexander (2006)

taken more seriously 'the contours of race in the research process' (Alexander, 2006: 399). Bridging the gap between ethnicity theories, neo-Marxism, sociological approaches to race and racism, and anthropological accounts of cultural difference, the new ethnicities framework has 'reinvigorated a multi-disciplinary engagement with 'culture' and difference - certainly at the level of theory and cultural production - in the ethnographic "field"' (Alexander, 2004: 137). Such an approach has produced a reimagining of ethnographic approaches to race that deconstructs fixed (racist) reifications of race, but at the same time grounds this deconstruction within historical, social and cultural processes, which in turn does not deny the realities of 'race' (Bulmer and Solomos, 2004). It is the new ethnicities approach to the negotiation and construction of race and difference in the field and in writing that directly informs this research. With my interest in cultural production and the neo-colonial management of difference, the new ethnicities approach provides an understanding of the complex spectrums of racism that characterise contemporary racial politics. Moreover, it recognises that cultural and ethnic identities are fluid, but 'subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power (ibid.: 7). In this way the new ethnicities moment provides the historical and structural postcolonial context necessary for this research into the politics of British Asian cultural production.

Ethnography is the most appropriate method for this research because it allows for a proximity to the subjects, through which to see how they make sense of their work, mediated through a web of social and economic relations. Thus, the space between the political economy and the text that I refer to above becomes the 'field' of research (Born, 2007), and the site where I would 'immerse' myself. For the purposes of this research I use Davis' (2008: 5) broad interpretation of ethnography as 'a research process based on fieldwork using a variety of mainly (but not exclusively) qualitative research techniques but including engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time'. Georgina Born's (2004) study of the BBC is an exemplary ethnography with particular relevance to this research; indeed, Born's approach to media organisations and cultural economic work was precisely what I tried to emulate (which, for reasons that shall be shortly explained, was an overambitious task). Aside from her analytical insight into a critical period in the BBC's history, what is striking about Born's research is the wealth of material she drew from following her fraught immersion into an organisation steeped in

bureaucracy and internal politics. Born (ibid.: 20) uses ‘interviews, dialogues and meetings, scenes observed, anecdotes and revelations, and excerpts from broadcasts and from other people’s writings’ to paint a unique and vivid picture of an institution undergoing profound change. The multi-layers of narrative that her ethnography excavated produced a thick and rich description of the new cultures of production emerging within age-old and notoriously rigid structures, conveyed through field notes, and the (mostly untreated) accounts of her respondents who worked at the BBC. It was similar cultures of work that I wanted to capture in relation to British Asian cultural production, which I would set against the disjunctures of the global, postcolonial cultural economy. Subsequently I adopted a similar ethnographic approach (see also Born, 2007), predominantly based on interviews, but incorporating participant observation where possible, and the collection of ethnographic ‘artefacts’, to see how respondents, as Negus (1999: 11) states, ‘perceive and imagine the world in which they are working’.

Where my ethnographic approach encountered difficulties was in relation to the question of immersion. Marie Gillespie (1995: 54) critiques certain research that describes itself as ‘ethnography’ despite ‘an apparent absence of an awareness of what validates ethnography as a genre, namely fieldwork based upon intensive, long-term participant observation’, and it is a lack of intensive long-term participant observation that slightly unsettles the description of my method as ethnography. The scope for immersion was always going to be difficult for this particular project, in terms of subject and sites of research. Firstly, since the research was spread over multiple sites, and over a relatively short period of time (certainly compared to Georgina Born’s research in the BBC that spanned over five years), immersion in the field(s) raised fundamental logistical problems. Yet the depth of immersion was ultimately determined by the temporalities, spatialities and particularities of the sites and individual case studies that formed my research. Quite simply, British Asian cultural production does not exist in a single bounded space nor is it continually ongoing; rather it occurs *sporadically*, and is *dispersed*. In other words, there are only so many British Asian cultural commodities – be it a book, a play or a television programme – being produced at any one time and since these cases are usually small-scale or not significant enough to garner much public attention, it is difficult to know about their existence, especially during their production phase. As such, even though

I was able to draw upon a small network of Asian media contacts from my past experience of working in the cultural industries, the few times I learnt of a project that was currently in or about to enter production mostly occurred through luck. For instance, at the opening night of a play I was researching, I met by chance the Asian producer of a theatre company which was that week due to start pre-production of its latest play. In another example, following a paper I gave at a conference at Manchester University, a young man from the audience told me about his second novel which he was just about to finish and forward to his agent. These instances formed just a handful of cases that I was able to research as they were happening, allowing for participant observation and other similar methods based on sustained involvement over a period of time.

Even in these instances, immersion was difficult. While theatre proved most suitable for ethnographic methods since production is concentrated over a fixed amount of time (usually two or three months from pre-production to the end of a run or tour), it was much more difficult to conduct this kind of method with television and publishing case studies, since production is stretched out over a much longer period of time. For instance, after several discussions, the author who approached me in Manchester agreed to allow me to follow the progress of his novel as it was sent to publishers. However, while he had originally believed his novel to be finished, this subsequently was not the case and he spent a further year redrafting, providing me little opportunity to see the publishing process in action. (By the time he had sent off the final manuscript I had just started writing this chapter.) Therefore, while my original research plan was to find a British Asian cultural text in its conception stage, and track it through its production into a commodity (assuming that it would last no longer than a year), I realised very quickly that this was an unrealistic aim. Subsequently, much of my research was effectively retrospective, using as case studies British Asian cultural commodities that had already been produced and sold.

Yet, obtaining a deeper understanding of these case studies still necessitated immersion in the field of production. While many of the case studies were taken from the past, in order to get a richer sense of the cultures of production in which they occurred, I tried to experience as many different media environments and settings as possible. For instance, I went to numerous media events and conferences,

such as a job fair for aspiring Asian filmmakers, and a Channel 4 event where a panel of channel executives held a Q&A with an audience consisting of up-and-coming black and Asians directors/producers. In another instance, I sat in a corporate meeting between a respondent and executives regarding the development of a new educational book. In less formal settings I 'hung out' at press nights, launch events, media fairs, and at times participated more directly, such as handing out flyers or helping to unload a theatre set from a van. Furthermore, through a sustained placement in the field I was able to draw from a rich source of non-interview material, and in particular ethnographic 'artefacts'. In particular I amassed a significant collection of publicity material, whether posters, newspaper reviews, theatre flyers or book jackets. I made notes whenever I encountered an interesting or relevant billboard poster or TV trailer. Additionally I would take photos of interesting scenes I encountered, whether the press-call for a play, or a table display of British Asian novels in a high street bookstore. These experiences and accounts, while not appearing as interview transcripts, took the form of field notes, and in those cases where they did not necessarily directly relate to a specific case study, they nonetheless contributed to the overall picture of cultural production I was trying to grasp. As such, these materials provided a significant bulk of my empirical data, which I treated as narratives and discourses to interpret in the same way I approached my interview transcripts.

In summary, my research effectively consisted of finding suitable cases, identifying and interviewing the key individuals involved in their production, and elaborating their narratives with further material taken from general interviews and conversations with cultural workers, trade journalism (which helped piece together an understanding of the cultures of production), other ethnographic artefacts (such as publicity materials, newspaper reviews) and the texts themselves. Even though Marie Gillespie veers towards drawing up an ethnographic checkbox, she does eventually concede that ethnography is better thought of as an 'ethos' than a prescribed set of methods, and it is such an attitude that informed my approach. In fact, it was when several methodological issues emerged during fieldwork, that ethnography and its sensitivity to questions of methodology and the production of knowledge became a useful resource, as I shall discuss shortly.

## The research subjects

Since my particular ethnographic approach was predominantly based on interviews it is worth describing in more detail the individuals whose narratives constituted the bulk of my material. The nature of the ethnography was such that the research focus was on how respondents attach meaning to their work and make sense of the industry they work in, and how these narratives produces knowledges about the relation between commodification of race, and the racialisation of cultural commodities. My informants can be organised into three groups. The first (and main) group consisted of individuals who were involved in the conceptualisation and creation of British Asian texts: what various cultural industries theorists have labelled ‘symbol creators’. I chose 9-10 such individuals from each of the three industries of my research. These included authors (publishing), scriptwriters (theatre and television) and producers/directors (theatre and television). As we shall see, since British Asian cultural commodities are mostly produced independently – or at least, on the periphery of ‘mainstream’ or corporate cultural production, and consequently in less rigid and less bureaucratic spaces of the cultural industries – symbol creators in these sectors are usually involved throughout the entire production process, and subsequently provided the majority of the empirical material I drew from. It should be noted as well that this particular section of respondents consisted of almost entirely British residents of South Asian extraction (except for one person: a producer of a South Asian theatre company, who is white English). In addition to belonging to the same broad ethnic group, respondents were, generally speaking, of the same social class (lower-middle to middle-class, though many had working class roots), and generation (mostly second generation, born of immigrant parents). Differentiations occurred in terms of particular ethnic identity (e.g. Punjabi, Pakistani, Bengali), gender, and regional base. Also worth noting is that I broadly shared a similar background, raising particular methodological issues that I shall address shortly.

The second group of respondents were cultural workers (or what David Hesmondhalgh labels ‘complex professionals’) – not necessarily British Asian – who had been involved at specific points in the production of a particular British Asian

cultural commodity. Such respondents included designers, marketing managers and press officers. These individuals are generally not present at the conception of the cultural good in question, but contribute to its production at a latter stage. Initial interviews with British Asian cultural producers revealed that the key areas of production (in terms of what the respondents felt had the greatest impact on their work) were commissioning/content acquisition, scheduling/placement and marketing and sales. As such I interviewed workers involved at these stages of production in order to get a more robust understanding of the production process, with specific regard to British Asian cultural goods. Often these encounters would occur organically, following interviews with the symbol creators, who would introduce me to people they had worked with on their projects. For instance I spoke to the press and marketing officers at the Lyric Theatre who were involved in the marketing of a Rasa Theatre production, and a buyer at Foyles bookshop who worked on the *Books For All* scheme (a project that attempted to raise awareness of black and Asian publishing), who was referred to me through a participative British Asian author. To reiterate, since they came from 'outside' the original production, these respondents provided a different, but nevertheless, valuable layer of narrative on the production of British Asian cultural commodities to be extracted and interpreted.

Following this second group of respondents, I found I still had gaps and questions regarding certain aspects of production and subsequently approached complex professionals who would know about these specific details, but perhaps had not directly worked on British Asian cultural commodities. For instance, through another introduction from this second 'tier', I interviewed the editorial director of a major publishing house, who had not worked on anything specifically 'Asian', but was able to provide a detailed account of the commissioning process, in addition to giving his general opinions on the state of publishing with particular regard to British Asian literature. Thus, these respondents were not able to speak about a particular case study, or a specific cultural good, but would provide further elaborations of the cultures of production in their particular industry. In addition, whenever possible, I spoke to people I encountered in the publishing/theatre/television industries and asked them about their occupations, and reflections and experiences of working in their particular fields. Though these were not formal interviews, their accounts would constitute field notes, which contributed to my broader understanding of cultural

production. Subsequently, the accounts from this second and third group of cultural workers allowed me to gain a wider perspective of how cultural commodities are made and distributed. They additionally produced first-hand narratives of the production of culturally diverse arts from an ‘external’ perspective, thus adding extra layers of narratives to the accounts provided by the British Asian symbol creators to whom I spoke.

In terms of sampling, my concern was less with obtaining a scientifically generated cross-section of cultural producers, but to get a broad and diverse range of voices from people working in the sectors of interest. Similarly, with regard to the main group of respondents, I was not focused on getting a representative sample of British Asian respondents. In other words, I was not necessarily focused on obtaining a sample of British Asian respondents from all ethnic or religious backgrounds, since from my own experience in the cultural industries, I felt that this would occur naturally – no particular ethnic group, whether Gujarati or Tamil or Pakistani, dominates cultural production<sup>44</sup>. The same applied to gender; I was confident that a balance of male and female respondents would occur naturally, and this was indeed the case. However, I was focused on speaking to cultural producers from throughout the British Isles, since I wanted to avoid the usual London-centric account of British Asian cultural production. Subsequently my research took me as far south as Exeter, and as far north as Glasgow, with stopovers in most of the big metropolitan cities in-between. Overall, I interviewed 55 individuals, each interview lasting between 45 minutes and one hour. I was reluctant to spend any longer on interviews, not least because my respondents could often only afford to allocate me an hour of their busy schedules, but also because I felt shorter, concentrated interviews would produce more useful material. In those cases where I felt we had not covered all of the topics I wanted to discuss, I would request another interview, and respondents were nearly always kind enough to agree. Shorter interviews also meant that it was easier to transcribe the interviews in full (rather than the sections I decided were important) – something I was keen on doing for methodological reasons, with my focus on

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<sup>44</sup> Though we do see evidence of under-representation. For instance, according to the *Bookseller/decibel* (2006) ‘Ethnic Diversity in Publishing’, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are underrepresented in the workforce, relative to national demographics.

*narratives* of production, rather than the ‘facts’ of the respondents’ accounts. This issue will be discussed further in the concluding section of this chapter.

Before I continue with my reflections on the experience of doing fieldwork, I should add some detail on anonymity. Mitch Dunier (2001) notes how in sociological research, the general practice is to anonymise respondents, for the sake of confidentiality, and for protecting respondents, particularly those implicated in research involving vulnerable groups (though this was something he himself challenged in his own research). While I would have preferred to have anonymised my interviewees for the sake of protecting their privacy, giving them the freedom to say what they want to say without fear of retribution (particularly if they were criticising the practice of an employer or organisation with whom they were involved), I realised very early on that this would be impossible. Quite simply, I was asking questions about specific cultural productions (since an important facet of this research is its interest in the text and its cultural meaning) that would have been impossible to detail without revealing the identity of the cultural producer. Since these commodities were in the public domain, so too were the identities of the people involved in their production. As such in every interview I began by explaining to the respondent that I would be using their real names, and that they should be aware that the material they would give me would be used in the public domain. This brought up issues regarding truth, representation and realism that I explore in the following section.

Interestingly, no one objected to their identity being made public, apart from three respondents. One was a British Asian who worked in television whose identity he wanted to keep secret since he did not want to be pigeonholed as an ‘Asian director/producer’. While it meant we could not talk directly about a documentary he had made, I asked him more general questions about the nature of producing Asian programmes for television, and indeed, asked him about his reasons for wanting to be anonymous, which produced very interesting material. The second respondent was also an Asian working in television, but someone who I was speaking more informally with. Her stories were based on criticisms of the channel she worked for, and as such she asked for anonymity since she did not want to jeopardise her job. The third person was in a senior position of a publishing house who again wanted to

remain anonymous so that he could have more freedom to express himself without fear of retribution. In both these latter cases I had to respect their wishes, and make sure that I would not use any material that would inadvertently reveal their identities. Interestingly, I found very little difference between the nature of those interviews, and the rest where the identity of the interviewee was to be made public.

### **In the field: Methodological issues, difficulties and resolutions**

Edward Said's (1991: 71) notion of 'positive geography' of the 'Orient' (which is obscured by imaginative geography) is woolly and vague on detail, and with its allusion to positivism it leaves itself open to critique. However, it would be too easy to read the concept of positive geography as constituted by a positivist notion of objectivity – I believe Said is painting a more complex picture. Effectively it deals with understanding the structures from which knowledges are produced, firstly by situating the strategic location of the author and then discovering the strategic formation of the text through analysing relationships between texts and how groupings of texts acquire referential power. If we apply this to our own methodologies, it teaches us to firstly reflect on our own positionalities and examine how this might influence how we see and read the 'Orient'. Said is effectively asking us to locate ourselves 'vis-à-vis the Orient' (ibid. 20). Indeed, this raises the question of reflexivity, which has assumed a central position in recent discussions of qualitative methodologies and its epistemological and philosophical underpinnings. In this section I shall outline these debates, with a specific focus on how they address the methodological uncertainties I felt while reflecting on my own status in the research field.

### Reflections

The central concern that emerged whilst conducting my research was when I considered the implications of interviewing people who *are like me*. As highlighted earlier, I generally shared the same status, and the same racial, social, economic and generational background of my main (i.e. British Asian) respondents. Furthermore as I already had experience working in the cultural industries (mostly through my work

as a musician), I shared, and participated in, the same social circles and spaces as respondents, though mostly indirectly. This immediately raised questions regarding detachment and the risk of merely reproducing the worldview of respondents (Duneier, 2001: 343-344). However, there were also obvious advantages too. Sharing a similar background, and the same spaces, also meant that gaining access was relatively easy. I actually found that people were very open to being interviewed, due to their own generosity, but also I felt because being approached amounted to a form of recognition for their work, something that many of the respondents felt they lacked.

One finds that discussions of 'insider' ethnography such as this – that is, writing ethnography from an insider's point of view – have predictably fallen into arguments for (see Edwards, 1999), or against (see Hammersley, 1992; Haller, 2002), but equally predictably, my experience found a combination of both. As such, regardless of whether these experiences in the field were 'positive' or 'negative', they raise methodological issues that need engagement. Firstly, I sensed that there was an assumption made by British Asian respondents that I would naturally share their viewpoints and their politics. This had immediate advantages in that I felt respondents were more comfortable and open with me. But it additionally led to some awkward moments where it was assumed we shared the same values when this was not the case. For instance one respondent felt he could share a chauvinistic view of the organisation he was involved with, which I found very troubling. Similarly, when I felt the need to challenge certain views of a respondent, the defensive reaction sometimes felt more amplified, since my assumed compliance was shattered, almost amounting to a betrayal. What became particularly apparent in most cases however, was that interviews with respondents were underpinned by a shared knowledge, language, values and politics which led to many unspoken assumptions, and as such I had to refocus my analysis on unpacking what was being assumed (through normative, commonsense language), and what was *not* being said.

A second, related issue was how respondents themselves perceived me. For instance despite how my status as a researcher was clear, I also represented to them their potential audience, which called into question the degree to which they were telling me the 'whole truth' about their work, and not just producing a marketing/sales

pitch. There are many epistemological problems with such an assumption, which I shall unpack shortly, but regardless, when the perception of me switched from a researcher to a potential buyer of their product, it gave the interview a dynamic that I was acutely aware of, but in the early stages of research, did not necessarily know how to deal with. Additionally, at times I felt that respondents saw me as a connection to, or facilitator of, wider networks. If they knew a peer or rival or a potential collaborator was also interviewed then this would also lend a particular dynamic to the interview. On one occasion, a writer learnt that I had interviewed a well-known film/television director, and would press me for an introduction. In another instance, an actor I interviewed suggested that I throw a party at the end of the fieldwork where I would invite all my respondents, which would provide her with an opportunity to meet a director I had interviewed. Again, this called into question the neutrality of interviews, where the shared backgrounds of researcher and the researched meant that both parties had a heightened sense of possible hidden agendas.

This again raises the issue of detachment and objectivity. Moreover, sharing a similar subjectivity as my respondents meant that I developed bonds and friendships in such a way that I often did not notice. Initially I felt it was important to create a rapport with respondents, firstly because it would produce a more open interview, and secondly, because I was aware that I might need their further assistance, whether in the form of an additional interview, or an introduction to a contact. Yet I found that this initial rapport would quickly turn into friendships. For instance, outside of interviews I would get invited to a lot of their events – as a researcher, as a customer, but also a friend – and since I was keen to ‘immerse’ myself in the field, I rarely turned these invitations down. Additionally, because of the nature of the interviews, and how I *did* mostly share their politics and values, interviews were quite pleasant experiences, so meeting up with them at plays, conferences and press nights, but also the informal spaces of the pub, their homes, or even in one case, an Arsenal football match, felt like a natural extension of the interview. In effect I was becoming friends with a lot of my respondents; I was meeting very interesting, creative people who, if I had met them outside of the research context, I would have immediately been drawn to. However, this of course raises particular ethical problems. Firstly, what effects do such friendship have on my analysis and writing? Can particular

relationships affect me on a sub-conscious level? In one case I felt compelled to critique a certain narrative, but was wary since it was produced by someone that I liked, to the extent that the act of criticising their work felt like disloyalty. Indeed, another question regarded how much they wanted to engage with my written work. Interestingly, only one person asked for a transcript of the interview (which I gave them); I felt respondents did not generally ask for transcripts since there was an implicit trust that I would represent them in the 'correct' way (though one respondent half-jokingly said they would sue me if I misrepresented them).

### Resolutions

Many of these issues were resolved through a basic notion of professionalism, and professional integrity, by following the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice (2002). For instance I knew that I had to set aside personal relations in order to write my analysis with integrity. With regard to the respondents who wanted to meet another one of my interviewees, I made it clear to them how I felt that this might compromise my research, and waited until my fieldwork was completed before I eventually put them in contact. I found that retaining a notion of professional practice was often enough to know when and how to draw boundaries between my research and personal life. Yet it was still necessary to find a theoretically robust route to maintaining critical distance. And this came from a recognition that all the methodological issues I encountered fundamentally emerge from philosophical and epistemological issues regarding the status of realism in my research.

Essentially, many of the anxieties regarding being given the 'truth', or whether the particular context of an interview would prevent respondents from presenting their 'true' selves, emerge from a positivist or naturalist legacy that still lingers in sociological research. As Silverman (2001) describes, positivist research is based on gathering 'facts', the aim of which is to generate data that is valid and reliable, independent of the research setting. The problem with positivism is that it depends on the idea of there being a single, fixed, external reality. This raises deep philosophical questions; as Hammersley (1992) highlights, the researcher cannot claim to represent an independent social reality: researchers effectively produce a

representation of their participation in the field, rather than a reflection of the phenomenon studied. Echoing Hammersley's point is Holstein and Gubrium's (2004) notion that interviews are 'active'. This is particularly apposite to my research since my methodological approach is predominantly based on in-depth interviews. According to Holstein and Gubrium, interviews are active in the sense that, 'meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondents replies, it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter' (ibid.:141). Silverman (2001) similarly stresses how we should not be treating interview questions and answers as passive filters towards some truth about people's identities; instead we should understand that the interviewer and interviewee actively construct a version of the social world. However, that does not mean that interviews are meaningless beyond the context in which they occur (see Miller and Glassner, 2004). Rather, drawing from Bhaskar's concept of 'transcendental realism' (see Davis, 2008), we can both recognise how the production of knowledge about society is a social process itself, and retain the idea that society is a knowable object and something we can research. As Davis adds (ibid.: 22), 'the level of social structure may not be studied directly but only observed in its effects on human actors, yet this is not to deny its reality or to suggest that it cannot be a legitimate object of study and theoretical attention'.

Social research has attempted to resolve this tension through an emphasis on reflexivity: how, as researchers we are sensitive to and take account of, our own implication in, and effect on, that object. According to Davis (ibid: 4), reflexivity means attempting to get a handle on 'the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research'. It is fundamentally different from naturalist or positivist ethnography in that it understands that the researcher is part of the social world he or she is studying. Yet, to reiterate, reflexivity does not necessarily reject a commitment to realism; rather it, 'undermines naive forms of realism which assume the knowledge must be based on some absolutely secure foundations' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2005). It does not matter either if research is political (i.e. critical theory/realists, feminists) or more covert in its politics, 'the primary goal of research is, and must remain, the production of knowledge' (Davis, 2008: 17). Thus a reflexive approach to social research understands that social research is an active process, and that trying to

maintain absolute detachment is not only futile but can actually potentially produce interesting material in itself.

It is this last point that informed my approach to interviews with respondents. I left behind any goal of getting to the 'truth' of British Asian cultural production and instead altered the interviews to focus on how the cultural producer constructs meanings about his or her work and experiences, within the context of the interview. The task then became thinking through how the knowledges that emerged could be used, and deconstructed to reveal, as Holstein & Gubrium (2004: 149) state, 'the *how* and the actual *what* of narratives of lived experience'. As such my approach resembled to a degree the kind of critical research described by Wainwright (1997) which entails a much more focused approach to interviewing, in which questions are asked about specific issues derived from broader social theory. In terms of validity, the notion of pre-conceived questions determined by social critique is likely to be challenged by traditional social scientists, but for critical researchers validity is precisely predicated on using prior knowledges to uncover the processes of power that lie underneath the social phenomena being researched. As Wainwright states:

For the critical ethnographer validity depends upon getting beneath the surface appearances of everyday life to reveal the extent to which they are constituted by ideology or discourse. Thus, rather than commencing the process of data collection with an 'empty head' the critical ethnographer is pre-armed with insights gleaned from social critique.  
(Wainwright, 1997)

Such an understanding, in my view, helps the researcher overcome the 'ethnographic fallacy' (Dunneir, 2001: 343-344) which produces an 'inappropriate concreteness' (ibid.: 343), where observation is taken at face-value, obscuring the less visible structures and processes that engender and sustain the phenomena in question. Thus, in approaching research on British Asian cultural production, my focus is precisely on the process as a particular (socio-cultural) dynamic between structure and the economic agent, informed beforehand by the critique offered by the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy.

Returning to the methodological issues raised earlier, Keith Negus (1999) in his research in music production becomes a useful guide, using interviews as way of

excavating the cultures of music production and how they relate to corporate structures. Consequently, my approach to interviews (and indeed, other empirical material) like Negus was not founded on the idea that interviews are a simple reflection of reality, or that they are simply constructed. Instead, as Negus suggests, 'These meanings I have then sought as much as possible, to place within their organisational, historical, social and geographical contexts' (ibid.: 11). And it is such an approach that informs my work and the status I give to respondents' narratives. Whether interviews, or trade publications and newspaper articles, or other ethnographic ephemera, my focus was on how these narratives, grounded within an awareness of the surrounding structural contexts, produce knowledges about how complex professionals perceive their work, and imagine the world they work within.

While at times, respondents' narratives were used as explanations of how certain cultural processes occur (since they are experts in their respective fields, their accounts would directly inform my understanding of cultural production and specific processes and procedures), my focus was on how their narratives are shaped by social and cultural discourse. Thus, when I felt a respondent was feeding me a marketing pitch for their latest production, this in itself was interesting material, in terms of it producing a particular narrative about this kind of work, and the respondent's attitude to their occupation and practice (and me as a researcher/consumer). Similarly, when I felt a white respondent was overemphasising their commitment to equal opportunities practice, this too became an interesting narrative on attitudes to race and representation in the workplace. Indeed, encountering narratives of racism potentially posed the most difficult questions, since my focus was precisely on shifting away from a particular race relations approach to the media (see the concluding chapter) that such narratives tend to constitute. Yet, my interest was not in ratifying or falsifying claims of racism, but rather *contextualising* these narratives within the postcolonial cultural economy. Therefore, it was important to discover the ways in which these narratives are set against their wider contexts as Negus argues. In effect, the aim of the fieldwork was to excavate layers of narratives produced by multiple sources – whether interviews, field notes, ethnographic artefacts – and see how these layers reveal knowledges about the cultures of production through which British Asian cultural production occurs, and cultural transruptions are mediated. From the subsequent material

excavated, the task was then to disentangle the ways in (and extent to) which such material is produced by and through neo-colonial processes.

## **The research**

In the next chapter, starting with the conception stage in the production process, I shall begin to present the results of this excavation. First I provide an overview of the five chapters that follow. To reiterate the purpose of this research is to examine the effects of commodification on the transruptive potential of the British Asian cultural commodity, framed through the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy. To do this, I look at five stages in its production, treating each one separately, and consider how certain processes and mechanics at each of these stages come to racialise the British Asian cultural entity in particular reductive ways. Before I begin however, I should stress that even though I have deliberately chosen to perform multi-site research, this thesis will not be a formalised comparative study of the British Asian theatre, broadcast television and publishing industries. As I have described, this thesis is structured such that each chapter deals with a specific stage of production. Since each industry contains its own unique production cycle that do not neatly run in parallel, certain industries will feature more in particular chapters than others. For instance the marketing stage of production in theatre contains much more activity than it does in broadcast television (in the particular case of British Asian programming). Similarly, design and packaging is a crucial point in publishing, but less so in the other industries. However, there will inevitably be a contrasting of the different experiences of production, not least since one of my main research aims is to see the degree to which certain epistemological patterns recur in each industry. My point is simply that the comparative work will be loose rather than methodical.

As stated, the five chapters that follow each focus on a particular stage of production of the British Asian cultural commodity. To remind the reader, they are conception, commissioning/content acquisition, distribution, design and packaging, and marketing. While I tackle these stages in a broadly chronological order, cultural production should not be regarded as a linear production line. Rather, as Hesmondhalgh (2002: 54-55) states, these stages overlap, interact and sometimes

conflict. To begin, in chapter three, I look at the very start of the commodity phase: conception. Its purpose is to demonstrate how commercialism plays an inextricable role in British Asian cultural politics. As such, it introduces the key themes that will be the central focus in this thesis, through the narratives of British Asian symbol creators. In some ways this chapter is not unlike the empirical research typically found in British Asian cultural studies, in its central focus on cultural producers, and the meaning they attach to their art in relation to wider postcolonial and anti-racist politics. However, where this intervention differs is in grounding the discussion of cultural racial strategies within the issue of commodification. The aim is to show how British Asian symbol creators feel the effects of commodification and rationalisation even before the production process has formally begun. Hence this chapter opens the narrative on how particular racist ideology comes to bear upon the work of British Asian symbol creators, through the rationalised industrial techniques that attempt to standardise production and the British Asian cultural commodity in particular ways. It is the task of the remainder of the thesis to unpack how these ideological effects manifest during the production of the cultural commodity.

In chapters four and five I look at the commissioning/content acquisition and distribution stages of production. Even though distribution occurs towards the end of the production cycle, I place these two stages together since they often overlap – for instance, the scheduling of the TV programme or theatre production is often decided during the commissioning process – where one stage directly informs the other. In chapter four I describe how the commissioning/content acquisition stage of production is the moment when British Asian cultural producers first directly encounter the rationalisation of cultural production. While I highlight the difficulties British Asian cultural producers face in getting their concepts/products commissioned in an increasingly conservative production climate, the chapter's primary concern is to demonstrate how it is at this stage of production that the racialisation of the cultural commodity – by which I mean its marking as absolute racial difference – 'formally' begins. In particular I examine how the commissioning/content acquisition stage of production sets in motion certain positioning/branding strategies that have specific racialising effects on the British Asian cultural commodity – a process that has more pronounced effects in subsequent stages of production. In chapter five, I demonstrate how the particular

strategies adopted for British Asian cultural productions that first emerge at the commissioning stage come to have more explicit racialising effects during their distribution. (By distribution I am referring to the circulation of the good and its physical placement in the market.) In particular, I examine how the British Asian cultural commodity comes to be marginalised on the periphery of the cultural sphere, depending on its particular narrative, and how it relates to the dominant nationalist discourse. I argue that the distribution stage of production represents the temporal and spatial manifestation of what I call the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital that underpins cultural production.

Chapters six and seven deal with the design/packaging and marketing stages of production respectively. Once again, there is overlap between these stages, where the design of the British Asian cultural commodity and the adoption of various PR strategies follow an overall marketing logic. In chapter six, which tackles the design and packaging stage of production, I examine the way in which the British Asian cultural product is represented in the marketplace whether as a book jacket, TV trailer, or publicity poster/flyer. The chapter argues that it is at this stage of production that the racialisation of the cultural commodity is perhaps most pronounced. I demonstrate in particular how we see more explicit manifestations of Orientalism in the way that British Asian cultural commodities are aestheticised. As such, in this chapter I argue that the design/packaging stage of production represents the visual manifestation of the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital. In chapter seven I will demonstrate how the marketing process, and, in particular, the practices of product qualification (that is, identifying a commodity's unique selling point) and niche marketing, sees a further manifestation of the racialisation of the cultural commodity. It considers how 'Asianness' becomes a product's USP (unique selling point), and unpacks the ethical and political dimensions to this practice. The chapter will demonstrate how the marketing process is the formal manifestation of the neo-colonial ideology that I argue is an inextricable feature of the capitalistic production of culture that fixes the British Asian cultural commodity in particularly reductive ways. Moreover, in this chapter I argue that that the foregrounding of a commodity's Asianness in a marketing campaign, and the targeting of Asian audiences in particular, is paradoxically at odds with the profit-maximising character of capitalism, which would benefit from stressing the universal aspect of such

commodities in order to maximise sales/audiences. As such, this final empirical chapter reiterates the neo-colonial dimension of commodification, whose primary role, I argue, is sustaining the regulatory practices of racialised governmentalities, rather than accumulating surplus value.

The aim of the concluding chapter is to reflect on the contribution to scholarship on race and capitalism made by the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy that has underpinned this research into the politics of British Asian cultural production. In particular I address more directly what I believe are its theoretical and methodological contributions to this field of study. The main part of this chapter however, deals with what I consider the postcolonial cultural economy approach's political intervention. While this thesis has primarily dealt with the governing processes of commodification, that is, the way in which capitalism manages the production of the British Asian cultural commodity in particular negative and reductive ways, the concluding chapter of this thesis considers those instances where the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital is transcended, allowing successful cultural transruptions to emerge. As such, it returns to some of the themes in the opening chapter, and reiterates how commodification is better conceptualised as an ambivalent and contradictory process. From such a notion, it concludes with a consideration of some of the ways in which British Asian symbol creators can stage and mount counter-strategies and resistance through their cultural/industrial practice.

### **Chapter Three – The conception of the British Asian cultural commodity: Cultural politics and discourses of commerciality**

The focus of this chapter is the opening stage of cultural production – the conception stage. This is the process of symbol creation (Hesmondhalgh, 2006: 4-5), that is, the physical materialisation of an initial idea or concept, whether in the form of a theatre script, a manuscript for a novel, or the development of a television programme. Objects produced by the cultural industries resist homogenisation since their use values are novelty and difference (Garnham, 1990), and subsequently workers involved in the occupation of symbol creation are given a relatively large degree of autonomy by executives and owners in order to produce original work (Ryan, 1992; Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Thus, in this chapter on the conception of the British Asian cultural commodity, the focus is symbol creators and the meaning they attach to their texts. More precisely, I am interested in gauging the role of cultural politics in the practice of respondents involved in the production of British Asian cultural commodities. Using interviews with these symbol creators, I consider the degree to which they think through their work in terms of the politics of representation, and wider British Asian cultural politics.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, with its focus on British Asian cultural expression as reflecting broader postcolonial identities and politics, this part of the research is not dissimilar to that found in cultural studies. However, where this chapter differs to those literatures is producing a less textual account, and instead grounding the issue of cultural politics within the process of commodification and industrial production. As I outlined in chapter one, there has been a tendency in cultural studies to treat culture and the economy, creativity and commerce, as two dialectical entities. In this chapter I want to problematise this distinction and demonstrate how commerce and cultural politics are bound up in each other; to deconstruct the notion that a cultural work firstly exists in a pre-commodified ‘pure’ artistic or political form before it is commodified and drained of its disruptive

qualities<sup>45</sup>. By demonstrating how commercialism figures at the conception of the British Asian cultural commodity – before the formal processes of cultural production have even begun – we see how capitalism and race exists in a more complex relation than previous research on the commodification of race suggests. In essence, this is the intervention of the postcolonial cultural economy.

The chapter will be split into two sections. Firstly, I argue that commercialism is the central tension in racial cultural politics. To illustrate this point I outline a particular debate on British Asian popular culture, which typifies critical approaches to artistic and cultural practice. This debate has taken place within British Asian theatre, replaying a recurrent discourse in cultural politics that posits a serious, critical aesthetic against a populist, vernacular style. As I shall argue, such a discourse is constructed precisely in terms of a dialectical tension between commercialism and artistic integrity. While I highlight the ways in which this discussion defines the way respondents reflect on their practice and politics, I end this section by arguing that such a discourse is unhelpful in unpacking cultural commodification because it does not appreciate the entangled ways the commercial intersects with the aesthetic and the political. To this end, the aim of the second half of the chapter is to produce a more nuanced reading of the effects of commercialism upon racial cultural politics. I do this by examining the role of commodification in two critical debates that frequently frame the work of British Asian cultural producers: the burden of representation, and authenticity politics and questions of sensationalism/cultural dilution. My intention is to demonstrate how situating an empirical discussion of cultural politics within the framework of the postcolonial cultural economy (that places equal emphasis on the economic and the cultural) produces new knowledges about capitalism's management of difference. It should be noted that unlike the rest of the thesis, which will engage more carefully with each sector's particular industrial context, this chapter will deal more generally with British Asian cultural production, commodification and the issue of racial cultural politics. Its purpose is to

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<sup>45</sup> This is most evidently the case with television, which has an entirely industrial form (i.e. the development of the TV show happens within the industrial production), but in the cases of theatre and publishing, which both begin with pre-industrial forms of production (i.e. the writing of a play, or a novel), this is less obviously so.

introduce the key themes that will become the main focus in the remainder of this thesis.

### **The politics of populism and ‘Benny Hill Theatre’**

As stated, this chapter begins with a recent debate in British Asian theatre, as a way to introduce how commercialism is an inextricable tension at the centre of racial cultural politics. It might be surprising to use theatre in this context, since this cultural sector appears the least commercially driven of all the industries I am studying. However, as shall be revealed in this chapter and the rest of the thesis, the question of the commercial plays an increasingly decisive role in theatre (particularly through the adoption of rationalised industrial techniques), as it does in the publishing and television sectors. It should be noted that while theatre consequently becomes the main focus of this opening section, the issues that emerge are universal to all forms of artistic and cultural practice. The reason I employ this specific debate is that it exemplifies a discourse that continues to frame critical approaches to vernacular cultures and cultural politics.

It begins with an article, written by playwright Parv Bancil (2007) for the Asians in Media website (AIM), where he distinguishes between two sets of aesthetics that characterise British Asian theatre:

There are two types of (Asian) theatre at present: One where you hopefully are engaged in an experience that will challenge the way you think, or give you an insight into a world or relationships that are uncomfortable, situations you may have not ever thought about. But the stories are about human beings, the more we open ourselves up to these different experiences the broader minded we can become.

The other type is where you check in your brain at the cloakroom and watch what amounts to Benny Hill with Asians on stage. But 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.

What is later abbreviated as ‘Benny Hill Theatre’, according to Bancil, consists of those British Asian companies who employ a populist style of theatre that he

believes caricature South Asian cultures, using reductive stereotypes for comic effect. The reference to the comedian Benny Hill itself connotes a particular kind of English, saucy, 'seaside post-card' humour; evoking Stuart Hall's remark that global postmodernism loves nothing more than 'a bit of the other'. Bancil's argument is based upon marking a clear distinction between this populist style, and a more serious, *transruptive* aesthetic that challenges the audience, which he argues is under-funded and ignored. In a counter-response, also published in AIM, Chandrika Patel (2007) rejects such a dichotomy, describing the topography of British Asian theatre as a 'complex landscape that is impossible to define unlike the characteristics of the Benny Hill Show'. I certainly sympathise with Patel's view; if one was to consider the work of British Asian companies such as Tara Arts, Tamasha, Rasa, Conspirators Kitchen, Naach and Rifco, it would be a difficult task to split them into the two separate camps Bancil outlines. Patel's conclusion that 'a more constructive and critical response to the experiences of those who work in and consume this industry is needed in the future development of this industry' (ibid.), in fact, echoes the aims of this chapter.

Yet, my research has found that, regardless of Bancil's reductive and somewhat crude framing, many of my respondents spoke about their aesthetics in relation to this tension between a serious, critical style, and a more populist, *commercial* form, mostly aligning themselves to the former. Of course, such a discourse is not unique to British Asian cultural production and replays an existing choreography in critical approaches to artistic and cultural practice, operating on a dichotomy between high art and mass culture, fine art and popular culture, 'selling out' and 'keeping it real'<sup>46</sup>. Each of these binary oppositions rests upon a fundamental tension between creativity and commerce, which, as I argued in chapter one, produces a rather simplistic interpretation of the politics of cultural production. Regardless, this discourse is how respondents framed their work, and therefore it needs to be treated seriously. By examining the ways in which such a choreography is restaged in the particular debate I am referring to, we get an initial sense of the role of commercialism on British Asian cultural politics. Therefore, in this opening section, I unpack how British Asian theatre practitioners narrate their aesthetic and political vision in relation to

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<sup>46</sup> See Basu & Werbner (2001)

Bancil's notion of 'Benny Hill Theatre', before I explain why I believe such a discourse ultimately limits a discussion on cultural politics.

### Introducing the commercial

While the respondents did not always refer specifically to 'Benny Hill Theatre', they employed other labels that essentially convey the same meaning. For instance, there were (disparaging) references to 'saris and samosas theatre', 'bums-on-seats theatre', 'da exotic theatre', and 'BME theatre'<sup>47</sup>. One respondent acted out a caricature of a bumbling Indian waiter, describing this populist style as 'the sort of *buttbuttbutt* business' (the '*buttbuttbutt*'-part uttered in a stereotypical Indian accent). While many of these references were tongue-in-cheek, they still allude to a real sense of how respondents perceive their aesthetics in relation to other theatrical styles, and British Asian cultural politics in general. The various ways in which these issues are narrated reveal three issues that I want to outline, proving an initial illustration of how the political is mediated through a perception of the relation between commerce and creativity.

Firstly, there is the assumption that 'Benny Hill Theatre' and its variations are primarily commercially motivated. This is made apparent in the label 'bums-on-seats theatre', a term used by Lalitha Rajan, producer of the Glasgow-based Ankur Productions, which she equated to Bancil's notion of 'Benny Hill Theatre'. In theatre, 'bums-on-seats' is a common vernacular term – and indeed, was used normatively by several of the respondents – referring to audience attendance. Yet the term has a negative connotation, as Lalitha intends, describing a populist style of theatre that is perceived to prioritise attracting the largest audience over creative innovation and artistic expression. Such a style, more recently, has been equated with a particular Bollywood aesthetic, as expressed in the following quote from Ed Higginson – producer of Rasa theatre company in Manchester – in his assessment on the difficulties in bringing in British Asian audiences:

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<sup>47</sup> 'BME' stands for 'Black and Minority Ethnic' – a preferred official term referring to non-white groups.

Asians don't watch theatre. Spoken-word theatre is not really a historical cultural legacy – it's dance, it's music. Theatre which is stuff like Kathakali etc is different, but the text based theatre is not a sort of, it does not necessarily have a deep historical root that people will rush to it because something's on. It's also about encouraging audiences. Now, problematically a few years ago people were seeing Bollywood as a key to doing that – let's put Bollywood on stage and therefore people will come through the door – and yeah that worked, and has worked and hopefully worked to get people through the door and stay and see other things, but whether that will be the case now I do not know.

This quote raises several issues that will be addressed at different stages during the thesis, particularly its allusion to 'tick-boxing' and how Asian theatre is commissioned specifically to attract the Asian community, who are constructed in particular ways (which Ed attempts to rationalise in terms of their historical non-relation to spoken-word theatre). Of immediate concern is Ed's perception of how a populist vernacular Bollywood-style aesthetic was considered the best way of enticing (Asian) audiences 'through the door' and indeed, getting their 'bums on seats'. It is this Bollywood-influenced sub-genre that Parv would label 'Benny Hill Theatre'. While Ed attempts a more balanced interpretation of this scenario, through discussing the emphasis on Bollywood-style theatre as a way of encouraging Asian audiences who do not traditionally come to the theatre (the subject of chapter seven), there is still implicit in his comment a suggestion that such a strategy was a cynical one. Subsequently, according to Lalitha's caricature of 'bums-on-seats theatre', the perception is that the fad for Bollywood theatre in particular, prioritises commercial success over what Lalitha later describes as the 'theatrical imagination'.

The second issue that emerges from the discourse on 'Benny Hill Theatre' is that the more populist forms of British Asian theatre, as Lalitha again expresses, 'play to the lowest common denominator'. This begins to unravel a relationship between commercialism and aesthetics. What is suggested in this reference to 'lowest common denominator' theatre is that such plays literally reduce the theatrical imagination to base-level characterisation and storytelling in order to appeal to the largest number of people. For many of the respondents, the danger with a more *commercial* form of theatre is not just that it gives precedence to audience numbers rather than artistic innovation, but how in the process, it makes aesthetic choices that have deeper, and potentially dangerous, political ramifications. I suggested earlier

that, even though Parv Bancil admitted there was a place for ‘Benny Hill Theatre’, there was nonetheless the insinuation that such theatre is often based on reductive, stereotypes of South Asian cultures. This was discussed more explicitly by several of the respondents. For instance, when I asked her to respond to the notion of ‘Benny Hill Theatre’, playwright Atiha Sen Gupta had the following to say:

I am for the cause that we need to put Asian stories in the theatre and on the TV; we need to show them to the world. But when you do it like that [‘Benny Hill Theatre’], I feel like it’s not taking us forward. I can’t explain it ... *Rafta Rafta* to give you an example, was just hammy acting, it felt like a white guy being commissioned to research Indian people and come up with a play. It felt so inauthentic, hammy, stereotypical. Like <puts on Indian accent> ‘lets do the Bhangra!’. It felt like that and that is not all we are. It felt Bollywood-ish and tacky. They’re feel-good-fun, but *Bend it Like Beckham* makes light of us but at the same time there is something serious behind it. When it’s just presenting how silly we look when we dress up and when we’re dancing I find that patronising and it puts us back.

This last view was echoed in an interview with Nirjay Mahindru – founder of the theatre company Conspirator’s Kitchen – who stressed how Bollywood-style theatre damages the rest of the ‘artistic Asian community’, which subsequently becomes ‘viewed as the community that is going to make you laugh; the bumbling idiots who walk around in glorious Technicolor’.

It is interesting that Atiha equated *Rafta Rafta* - a major production at the National Theatre, written by Ayub Khan-Din (who wrote the film *East is East*) - to ‘Benny Hill Theatre’, as this was not a view shared by all the respondents. Similarly, Gurinder Chadha’s film *Bend it Like Beckham*, is acknowledged by Atiha for ‘having something serious behind it’, but was criticised by some of my interviewees for perpetuating the same tired stereotypes about Asian families. This neatly illustrates how the issue of cultural politics, and what constitutes positive and negative representations, is never clear-cut. Nevertheless, Atiha’s view is a common one; what she understands as ‘Benny Hill Theatre’ is based on the usual archetypes of Bollywood, Bhangra dancing and exotic dress, which she attributes to a particularly *white* Indophilic gaze of South Asian culture. In an interview with Parv Bancil, he takes this further and adds a culinary ingredient into the mix when he uses another

name for Benny Hill-style productions: 'saris and samosas theatre'<sup>48</sup>. Essentially Parv, Nirjay and Atiha are highlighting the neo-Orientalist dimension to what they perceive as an excessively populist vernacular aesthetic, where South Asian cultures are reduced to fetishised signifiers often centred around anthropological themes of clothes, food, kinship and ritual – not unlike those early empirical forays into Asian cultures I outlined in chapter one. Indeed, Nirjay's description of Asians appearing in 'glorious Technicolor' vividly captures the exoticisation of South Asian cultures in this way.

The third issue that arises from Parv Bancil's contrasting of British Asian theatre styles concerns the question of audience, which in turn relates to bigger issues concerning multicultural politics. The suggestion is that the more populist style of British Asian plays is paradoxically too culturally specific and insular, or even *parochial*. This was made most evident in the interviews with Ed Higginson at Rasa, including the following quote, stemming from a discussion on the comparison of Rasa to another more populist British Asian theatre company, Tamasha:

I mean you could compare our work to Tamasha. [But] Tamasha ... a lot of it feels very ... has a certain bent to it ... which is a little urban or a little maybe bordering into the world of TV at times, or soap. And sometimes certain things written with a bit of a slant that, this is that community... so for instance *Strictly Dandia* which was very Gujarati [...] and I don't know whether as a non-Gujarati if you could really properly engage in it because of the way it was written. Whereas Rani, [co-founder and writer of Rasa] because of her cultural background, education, experience and everything else that is thrown into the mix, I think she might use very particular stories from very particular people and identities but is able to write it so it becomes totally universally understood and universally applicable and doesn't feel like this is just one culture. [...]

I think often if you write about something which is very particular you often end up exposing something that is very universal if you write it in the right way. I think there is some writing I think in the BME sector – whatever you want to call it – of theatre which often takes an aggressive standpoint in terms of this is the difference, this is the issue, these are the divisions and sometimes therefore can often be off-putting for a mainstream white audience. Whereas our work I think would speak to everybody and as many people as possible. So it can always be enjoyed by a black audience I think,

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<sup>48</sup> 'Saris and Somosas' and its variations is a term often used to refer to what is seen as a rather contrived, state-sponsored version of pluralist multiculturalism. See Kundnani (2004)

most of our work, which I think people often have a difficulty conceiving, because ‘black people are going to black work, and Asian people should go to Asian work’ – but I often think there is an affinity between ... you know... because of its universality and what Rani [scriptwriter and co-producer of *Rasa*] writes, it can be enjoyed by all communities.

In the opening section of this quote we see that Ed shares a similar view of British Asian theatre as Parv Bancel<sup>49</sup>, distinguishing *Rasa* from *Tamasha*, suggesting that *Tamasha* adopt a more populist vernacular style not unlike television soap opera. In the process he believes *Tamasha* constructs its narratives around a very particular Gujrati identity that has little resonance outside that community. His attitude towards this is revealed in his somewhat deprecating reference to theatre from the ‘BME sector – whatever you want to call it’, which he believes stresses ethnic difference in an aggressive and exclusionary way. Ed’s perception of this particular style of theatre echoes what Stuart Hall (1997) calls ‘minority arts’, which tends to reinforce difference and a fixed notion of identity. In contrast, for Hall, the potential of the ‘new culturally diverse and artistic practices’ (ibid.) lies in its ability to transrupt racialised discourses of national identity to the extent that ‘Britishness cannot be what it was before’, a theme explored in chapter one. Thus, returning to Ed’s comment, the populist vernacular aesthetic of the ‘BME sector’ is troubling since he believes it is ethically in opposition to his ideals of multicultural politics. He conceives *Rasa*’s work as needing to ‘speak’ to everyone, not just Asian audiences. He stresses how despite its South Asian foundation, *Rasa*’s stories are universal stories. It is precisely in highlighting the universal dimension to a particular experience from which counter-politics emerges.

The critical point is that in Ed’s view, the theatre establishment does not share these politics. Or rather, standardised industry practice, based on the rationalised logic of niche marketing, insists that ‘black people are going to black work, and Asian people should go to Asian work’. Consequently, a major theme in this research is how such logic is based on a neo-colonial ideology of absolute racial difference, where the Other must not be allowed to pollute the Self (Bhabha, 1994; Gilroy, 2004). I shall touch on this again shortly (though it will be explored in more detail in chapter seven), but for now I want to highlight how Ed’s comment describes how *Rasa*’s

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<sup>49</sup> It should be noted that my interviews with Ed took place before Parv’s article was published.

attempt at universality, and in Homi Bhabha's words, reaching a wider humanity, is disrupted in the very production process. This introduces the notion of commodification as a form of racialised governance: the representational dimension of white racism that governs the racialised distinction between European and non-white. Returning to the immediate concern of this chapter, we begin to see how a discussion of cultural politics cannot ignore issues of commercialism. I shall unpack this further in the remainder of the chapter. Firstly, however, I want to present the opposing view to Parv Bancel's argument, and suggest that in order to move this argument on, such a dichotomisation of aesthetics is actually limited, and not necessarily helpful.

### The case of Rifco Arts

While I agree with Chandrika Patel's counter to Parv's article, that the landscape of British Asian theatre in reality is much richer and diverse than the picture Parv Bancel paints, many of my respondents nonetheless distinguished their aesthetic style (and cultural politics) from what they saw as more populist and commercial forms of British Asian theatre. The respondents were reluctant to explicitly single-out a company, but it became increasingly clear that a theatre company that was considered part of this more populist camp was Slough-based Rifco Arts. Rifco formed 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, making Rifco the only RFO in Slough, and the only professional British Asian Theatre company in this region. During its history the company has produced many commercially successful plays, such as *The Deranged Marriage*, *Meri Christmas* and most recently *There's Something about Simmy*. The first striking thing about Rifco Arts is that their audiences, in the main, 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 that specifically appeals to them; the deliberate puns in the titles indicate its playful, hybrid style. Indeed, in the same way that the respondents in the previous section articulate their aesthetics against what they consider a populist, commercial form of theatre, Pravesh describes

Rifco in terms of the same dichotomy Parv Bancil outlines – but from the opposite end of the pole. Discussing the creation Rifco Arts, he says:

[T]he reason I started the company was because I thought of what we call British Asian theatre was very hard-hitting sometimes, very edgy, very dark and didn't really, access the huge audiences that go, for example, to see a Bollywood film, or go and see a Punjabi drama, or would go and see all those things that are still relevant to that audience. They felt quite alienated from a lot of the stuff that was quite angry. And they felt that, you know, yes that's valid but when I go out I want to have some entertainment in my life, I have got enough drama at home!

Pravesh critiques the kind of 'very edgy, very dark' British Asian theatre (ironically, the exact same words that Parv Bancil used in an interview to describe his own work) for alienating working-class British Asian audiences with stories that are not relevant to their lives, or at least do not fulfil their need for escapist entertainment.

Subsequently, Rifco has spent a lot of time developing its plays in a way that would attract a community that has traditionally been excluded from the arts in general. While Rifco is often used as an example of 'Benny Hill Theatre' (after seeing Rifco's most recent play one of my respondents dismissed it as 'panto'), Pravesh's account of their aesthetics is much more reflexive than the reductive label would suggest:

AS: How would you describe Rifco's aesthetic?

Pravesh Kumar: I would say we purposefully started off with a deliberately populist, colourful work. We're moving away from that.

AS: So that was understood from the outset?

PK: Absolutely. Because I set the company up to do a certain thing. To represent someone like my mother who wouldn't go to the theatre. To represent young British Asians who are listening to Bhangra music, or listening to Bollywood. You know, who would go to Bollywood nightclubs. I wanted to bring them in. So I wanted to be relevant. So I started off with that. And now we're on a journey with them I think. Because our next work isn't so colourful, isn't so ... because some of that work has been a bit larger than life, because Bollywood is. But we're toning it down.

This notion of going on a 'journey' with the audience is very important in terms of how Pravesh perceives Rifco's aesthetics. Rifco, more than any other British Asian theatre company I researched, has spent a significant proportion of its resources on

audience development and working with a particular British Asian community. This involves extensive outreach work in community centres, elderly homes and schools, as well as at the plays themselves where feedback sheets are handed out at each performance (the aim is to get at least one hundred feedback sheets per theatre run). In its research, Rifco attempts to reach an in-depth understanding of what exactly the community would like to see, in addition to obtaining audience feedback on a specific play. However, this is not just a case of then giving the audience what they want. As implied in the previous quote, Pravesh would prefer to create a more dynamic relationship with the audience, taking them on a journey into the theatrical imagination. As he continues,

PK: I mean we did a show called *The Deranged Marriage*. [We] didn't really want to touch arranged marriages to be honest with you because everyone goes, oh arranged marriages, god! But what we did, was we did a show that was based on an arranged marriage, but it wasn't about arranged marriages at all. It was about a lot of other topics, about homosexuality, about how we treat widows in our society, and how young people can find themselves in a situation very quickly by a family rollercoaster. So we deal with a lot of topics within the community without them being hard-hitting and without them being too dark. I mean, you could say in a way, I have been accused of sugarcoating them occasionally. But it works, and it brings that audience in, in huge numbers.

This narrative suggests a two-way dialogue with the audience: listening to their needs and also gently challenging their social values. Yet, the long-term strategy is to gradually 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 literally developing their tastes, so they can begin to understand and consume a broader range of theatre. As he continues,

[W]e feel as we go along that we are developing that audience and teaching them a theatrical style of work. They are not used to coming in and seeing no set. In my next piece of work it's going to have a very minimal set, but it will bring in that audience that we get. So we're building trust with this new audience. We call them a 'new audience' because a lot of them do not go to the theatre. And in our audience development we do a lot of feedback. We get them to write on our blogs, they write to us, we give them audience development feedback forms... A lot of them don't come and see theatre but they are coming to see our work. So what we are trying to do is develop them with theatre language. 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.

So we're really trying to do that. And our work will become more theatrical in style, and less entertaining. [...]

[Parv Bancil has] got a valid point. What he is trying to say is we have a responsibility to our audiences that 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 (e.g. including a minimal set and multi-role actors). Pravesh's comments imply a much more interactive, and dynamic kind of theatre than the label 'Benny Hill Theatre' would indicate. Of course, despite Parv Bancil stating his belief that there needs to be a space for this kind of theatre, the label is still nonetheless condescending and reductive, and he clearly believes this form of theatre is not just politically unengaged, but also problematic. Yet I would argue the ethical outcomes are less clear-cut. Rifco might employ what many consider a populist, commercial style (and I certainly share these misgivings, which shall be made more evident in later chapters), but the company also demonstrate an explicit and close engagement with marginalised communities, and more than any other company I spoke to, actually succeeds in attracting them. Similarly, echoing David Hesmondhalgh's critique of hybridity highlighted in chapter one, whilst it is easy to identify and valorise a counter-hegemonic discourse in some British Asian plays, when the vast majority of the audience are still white and middle-class, how transruptive can they really be considered to be?

### **The politics of representation in the postcolonial cultural economy**

In previous chapters I have detailed how the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy was conceived to develop a more complex reading of the fluid, complex relations between the aesthetic, the ethical and the commercial. Subsequently, I

would argue that the debate over ‘Benny Hill Theatre’ is actually limiting, in that it is reductive and is not attuned to the elaborate ways in which commercial forces play on cultural politics. Even though I have focused entirely on theatre, the debate on ‘Benny Hill Theatre’ is a discourse present in all genres and forms of artistic and cultural practice. In the remainder of the chapter using cases from the three industries I am studying, I shift away from simplistic dichotomies based on a crude split between commerce and creativity, and look more closely at how commercialism actually impacts upon the aesthetics and politics of British Asian cultural producers during symbol creation. I do this by exploring the ways in which respondents relate to two debates that frame the ways in which British Asian cultural politics are often discussed, but on this occasion ground their reflections on this issue within the context of the cultural production. Effectively in the remainder of the chapter, I begin to operationalise the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy, through situating this discussion of cultural politics within commodification and the conception of the British Asian cultural commodity, which, as I shall demonstrate, produces new knowledges about the complex ways commercialism really comes to bear upon the politics of British Asian cultural production.

#### Finding the right level of Asianness: the burden of representation

For most of the respondents, speaking of cultural politics came naturally, yet there was an accompanying malaise or ambivalence about the expectation to represent the British Asian community in their work. As Gilroy (1993b: 98) has stated, ‘In the ironic milieu of racial politics, where the most brutally disposed people have often also proved to be the most intensely creative, the idea that artists are representative public figures has become an extra burden for them to carry’. Certainly, this ‘burden of representation’ has figured widely in discussions of racial cultural politics (Hall, 1996b; Mercer 1994; Gilroy 1988 & 1993b). Huq (1996) in particular deals with this issue in relation to British Asian expressive cultures using the case study of the post-Bhangra music scene. In this example she describes how British Asian musicians at times resent the burden of having to speak on behalf of – or to – what is in fact a heterogeneous community, even if their music doesn’t sound particularly Asian. Furthermore, and importantly for this thesis, Huq describes how the burden of representation is intrinsically bound up with media representation ‘because of the

mass media's role in legitimation of cultural production' (ibid.: 67). However, there is little discussion of how the media actually enforces this burden. This is what I attempt to explore in the following section, by grounding this debate within the framework of the postcolonial cultural economy. Through this route we see how certain themes begin to emerge – themes that will become the central focus of analysis in subsequent chapters, as I begin to unravel the process of commodification.

When addressing the issue of the burden of representation, most of the respondents gave a similar response: while they were keen to express a particular British Asian experience, they did not want to be fixed within it. I had been expecting a more hostile reaction, an attitude of *I want to be considered just an artist, not an Asian artist*. However, the more ambivalent, and at times indifferent, response was not so surprising. After all, I chose my respondents because they had demonstrated, to varying degrees, an engagement with British Asian themes in their work – perhaps a British Asian cultural producer who did not deal with these issues might have been more resentful of the 'British Asian' tag<sup>50</sup>. When I asked respondents about why they felt the need to address British Asian issues, some stated that it was simply because, like writers from any background, their stories were informed by autobiographical material. This was the case for the author Preethi Nair, who wrote about South Asian characters, because that was her frame of reference. As she said to me in an interview: 'I chose an Asian family [to write about] only because that's what I know. I always think that as a writer you write about what you know.' As such, since racial identity is a major axis in the subjectivities of many British Asians, this theme features strongly in their work. However, most of my respondents spoke about a desire to create narratives about British Asian experience, precisely because they felt that such narratives were neglected and absent in the public sphere. In an interview with the poet Daljit Nagra, he spoke about this at length:

AS: Did you know from the outset that you wanted to write about the British Asian experience?

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<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Rupa Huq (1996) highlights how Sonia Aurora-Madan of indie rock band Echobelly refused to do interviews with the ethnic press since she felt her music had nothing to do with her Asian identity.

Daljit Nagra: Yeah I did. Because when I first started writing I was just writing like English poets were and I didn't find it very interesting myself and I wanted to ... I realised the reason I was writing, what I wanted to write, was because of an emotional need which was to write about Indian-ness, Indians living in Britain. That's what interested me and I wanted to write about that. I also felt that the poetry I was reading wasn't really meant for me. By not meant I mean, I guess, in terms of content. Because obviously the emotional stuff is, you know, talking in values we can all relate to. But the actual content was for someone else. I wanted to write stuff which was more in mind of people of my background. People like me. I wanted other people to write like that as well so that I can enjoy other people's writing who spoke directly to me. And I had seen it in novels done very successfully and well, you know Naipaul – it's remarkable – and Rushdie and people like that. But I hadn't seen it successfully done in poetry I guess.

When reading this quote one is reminded of Stuart Hall's articulation of the politics of new ethnicities and finding an ethnic location and language to speak from.

Certainly, Daljit's unique use of language – a hybrid mix of Punjabi and English, which he calls 'Punlish' – is a central feature of his award-winning poetry. Writing about Asianness inevitably becomes about the politics of recognition, since these discourses traditionally have either been marginalised to the outskirts – via what Hall (1996c: 468) calls 'segregated visibility' – or transformed into sites of exotica, through the 'major discursive strategy' of stereotype (Bhabha 1994: 66). Thus, many British Asian cultural producers find themselves in a position where they feel an obligation/political motivation to counter Orientalist discourses, and produce more positive – or indeed, transruptive – representations of British Asian identities.

My respondents articulated this positionality in varying tones. For instance, television executive producer, Tommy Nagra – former head of the Asian Programmes Unit (APU) at the BBC – spoke about his commitment to Asianness in a fairly matter-of-fact way, through a notion of 'specialisms':

I'm a firm believer in specialisms. Just like you have a specialist in gardening, or a specialist in motoring programme, you get specialists in Asian programming. It was an area I was interested in anyway. I grew up in Hansworth, I'm a Birmingham boy, I come from a Punjabi family, I'm big on my culture! I'm into it, proud of it! So I really found myself having the opportunity to make programmes about things that I was interested in, which is always great, and if you get paid for it even better!

Thus for Tommy, it was a fairly logical step to specialise in Asian programming, due to his 'insider-knowledge' of the British Asian experience. Television director and writer Neil Biswas on the other hand, spoke in terms that expressed a more mutinous political spirit:

It goes back to [...] the idea of stereotypes or archetypes and our representations. The word 'representation' is very important to me, and the idea that where do you get the chance to actually affect the representations of the immigrant community, you know? And if you don't affect it then are we forever going to be associated with the way that these archetypes are there? [...] If someone doesn't break the moulds then these moulds will continue to have a life, continue to be reproduced because people are so fucking lazy – if I'm really honest – they have no time, they don't give a fuck. They will quite happily put Mr Singh, a Gujrati man with a turban on his head just for the hell of it, in a corner shop, because that signifies the Other. Ultimately we will always be the Other unless we are in the middle of something.

Mr [Harry] Singh, the non-Sikh Gujrati shopkeeper, was a reference to a character Neil was faced with when adapting the Tim Pears novel, *In A Land of Plenty* for the BBC. In the event Neil changed his name to the more authentic Harry *Ganatra* (a Gujrati surname), and gave him a more central role, literally plucking him from the periphery and placing him 'in the middle' of the story, or indeed, the centre of discourse. In a similar vein, Daljit Nagra describes the centring of the British Asian experience as a 'neat revenge', in reaction to a racist Britain:

It almost feels like a neat revenge because when I grew up I was in a white area and it was almost shameful to be Asian, to have an Asian name, because it's quite a hostile racist area. And now I can use that same identity [...] and exploit that, where I was kind of exploited or abused for my very existence I can turn that existence round now, and you know turn the gaze round as it were, and say, yeah I am Indian, I know you need some Indian poets, so here, look I am Indian, and I am going to be as Indian as possible - make what you can of it. [...]. I think there's a fine line, because if you become too Indian maybe people won't want to know, and it's finding the right level of Indian-ness.

These notions of 'neat revenge', reversing 'the gaze', and being 'as Indian as possible', describe a defiant form of cultural politics, expressing an identity that has otherwise been – and continues to be - ridiculed, mocked and excluded via Indophilic representations. This quote is also interesting for its allusion to the question of commerciality, where Nagra's ethnicity or difference becomes another selling

opportunity in the global postmodern cultural economy, though he has to ensure ‘the right level of Indian-ness’ so that such difference does not alienate or repel. This is a theme I shall shortly return to.

As much as many of my respondents felt an ethical urge to counter stereotypical and reductive images of Asianness, there was an equal frustration at how they felt Asianness was all they were allowed to write about. Lingering in the shadow of the politics of representation is the thorny question of authenticity, and who can write for whom. It was common for my respondents to talk in terms of authenticity and what narratives felt more authentic than others. For instance Atiha Sen Gupta’s earlier comment on *Rafta Rafta* and how it ‘felt like a white guy being commissioned to research Indian people and come up with a play’ characterises a more predictable discourse on authenticity politics. Yet, what I found more revealing was how many of the respondents felt bound up in authenticity; not just in terms of the burden to represent their communities, but the way a demand for authenticity prevents them from speaking outside of ethnicity. Parv Bancil touches on this theme when discussing one of the most successful British Asian playwrights, Ayub Khan Din, and how he believes Din ‘has to write about the Asian issues in order to get seen’, because, Parv suggests, ‘*they* are not interested in anything else he writes [...] about white English people and about human stories’ [emphasis added]. Parv’s reference to ‘they’ is not specified, but he is clearly alluding to the theatre establishment, depicted as the gatekeepers who determine what narratives are produced by whom. As stated this has the effect of binding British Asian cultural producers within an ethnic niche. As Nirjay Mahindru elaborates:

One of the things I’d really love to ask British Asian writers, is why don’t you ever write scientific fiction? In other words why is it when it comes to us, when it comes to us why is that what we go is, let is just explore us? It’s never expected of Harold Pinter for example that he should just write a Jewish play and explore being Jewish. What is expected is have you written a good play of whatever the subject is that interests you at that particularly point in time? We haven’t even reached that stage yet. We haven’t reached that stage. The stage we have reached is, we are Asians and that’s our lot. [...] For example, one of my passions, one of my nerdy passions is space – you know, the moon landings and stuff like that. So if I wrote a play about the moon landings – that’s nominally got sod all to do with being an Asian. And if I sent that off to venues or to the Arts Council or whatever, one of the things that they would say is where is the Asian story, where’s the Asian

angle? Being cynical about it I could imagine the venues going, hey man where are the saris? Where are the samosas or those nice girls we can ogle at? What's this about Neil Armstrong? Leave that stuff for whites! So we seem to be so limited in terms of our own imaginations.

Nirjay's narrative on having not 'reached that stage' of being able to write outside of Asianness encapsulates a tension that dominates the sphere of British Asian cultural politics. Again, what is particularly pertinent for this thesis is how Nirjay's account indicates that the inability to move beyond certain stories is a consequence of arts funding governmentalities (in the case of theatre) that regulate narratives of race, reducing them to the usual fetishised ethnic signifiers ('saris', 'samosas', and sexualised images of Indian women). Nirjay clearly holds the Arts Council and venues responsible for this, and in chapters four and five, I will be exploring his contentions regarding the role and effects of such institutions in British Asian cultural production.

What I found more intriguing were the stories of respondents who did not necessarily feel that this straitjacket of authenticity had been thrust upon them, and rather, that they had been lured into this position by the market. This is the theme of Daljit Nagra's poem 'Booking Khan Singh Kumar' (an ironic – indeed, *essentialist* – composite of Muslim, Sikh and Hindu surnames). I asked Daljit to explain a particular line that seemed to resonate with this research: 'Did *you* make me for the gap in the market/Did *I* make me for the gap in the market'. He replied,

[O]ne of the things about that line for me is, there didn't seem to be any Asian poets from before, and I felt I had been sucked into this vacuum, I think I was being coaxed into it. And one way of being coaxed into it was that I could probably get a poem published at will if I wanted. So that was a clear sign wasn't it? So if I wrote about something else, say I wrote about English experience that didn't have a brown face or name in it, it probably would have been tougher to get published.

What I find most interesting about Daljit's comment is how it describes how he was 'coaxed' into writing about Asianness. Following the notion of commodification of racialised governmentalities, the way in which the respondent narrates this experience illustrates the market's role in controlling and managing the author's position in discourse. This is a subject I explore in more detail in latter chapters. Within the subsidised sector, we see similar forms of coercion through economic

means. The following account from Lalitha Rajan at Ankur Productions suggests at how Asian cultural producers come to be institutionally fixed in an ethnic niche:

I went to a conference in London years ago when I was first setting up a company there were a lot of people saying that ‘I don’t want to be seen as a South Asian anymore I want to be seen as an artist’, and I think yes, that should be our aim, that people go beyond recognising you as a niche artist. But I think that comes only if we stop playing those games to get the funding. And I think that’s a double bind.

Lalitha’s quote raises a particularly salient point in its reference to funding ‘games’: in the competition to win funding, many British Asian artists find themselves having to enter an ethnic niche to fulfil a particular Arts Council tick-box (as I shall explore in chapter four), but then find themselves fixed within it as they become reliant on the resources reserved for that niche. Cornell West (1990: 20) too refers to this ‘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’. Stressing the ideological dimension to this scenario, Paul Gilroy (1993b: 110-111) remarks that, ‘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’. These examples specifically refer to the case of publicly funded arts, but as Daljit Nagra’s comment from above suggests, the commercial market works on a similar neo-colonial ideology, which privileges certain reified versions of Asianness.

It is unpacking this notion of how the commodification of black culture is inextricably bound with an ideology of ethnic absolutism/cultural essentialism that becomes the central task in the remainder of the thesis. To conclude this section I want to underline the point that situating the burden of representation within the framework of the postcolonial cultural economy shows how it is enacted through the presence of economic cultural institutions (whether the market or a state funding body). In this sense I argue that the burden of representation is one way in which capitalism, through commodification, attempts to govern the counter-narratives of difference. This is a theme that unfolds further in subsequent chapters. Therefore, in

contrast to the fairly crude and simplistic understanding of commercialism that underpins the discourse on ‘Benny Hill Theatre’, re-contextualising the discussion of cultural politics in terms of commodification provides a more acute sense of how commerciality impacts upon the politics of British Asian cultural production. In the remainder of the chapter, I apply this approach to one more contentious issue regarding Asian cultural politics as it figures at the conception stage of production. This in turn will highlight further the need for a more elaborate account of the intersection between economics, aesthetics and cultural politics as the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy maintains.

### Chicken Tikka Wraps: sensationalism and cultural dilution

The reflections of my respondents on their aesthetics in relation to arts funding and niche marketing tend to support Gilroy’s argument that such practices are based on an ideology that reinforces an absolute sense of difference – though it is the aim of the rest of the thesis to see how this unravels empirically. The fixing of British Asian cultural producers into a niche is additionally tied to a perception that their productions are for, or should be targeted at, Asian audiences (as shall be explored in chapter seven). In this section I want to focus on the tensions that arise for those British Asian cultural commodities designed specifically for a ‘mainstream’ audience. This is particularly the case with television. As one television director/producer who wished to remain anonymous, said to me:

I think maybe the difference between TV documentary and other craft-forms that you are dealing with like plays, books, films, is that TV is a mass medium and it’s a mass appeal medium so it has to be this catch-all thing. And we’ve long since stopped making films for niche audiences; the whole idea is to pull in as many people as you can.

As will be described in chapter four, the television industry has found itself under increasing commercial pressure where ratings dominate commissioning decisions to the extent that the mainstream terrestrial channels can no longer afford to target ‘niches’. Or put another way, for ‘niche’ or ‘minority-interest’ programmes to get commissioned for a prime-time slot they need to be *perceived as having* mainstream

appeal<sup>51</sup>. If we relate this back to the conception stage, this has a clear effect on the form and range of narratives directors/producers feel they can develop and produce, which in turn has wider ramifications for British Asian cultural politics, and provides a further illustration of how commercialism is an inextricable force in British Asian cultural production.

Essentially, respondents find that having to tailor the stories for the so-called mainstream audience has certain diluting, reductive consequences for their narratives and politics. As the anonymous respondent continues:

So you're always faced with this problem of how you convey whatever subject you make, how do you convey that to a mass audience? Given that you're making a film about India, set in India, British Asian people are going to have a lot more depth and understanding about issues than a lot of the white audience is going to have. So how do you pitch it so that it's understandable by a mass audience, but not patronising to some people, not kind of seen as ridiculous to other people, or some people get lost cause they think, I don't understand that? [...] There's a whole load of subtler issues that a white mainstream audience may not understand and that is difficult when you come to make a documentary, if you're trying to make it for a mainstream audience, because you don't want to patronise

What is interesting in this quote is the commonsense understanding that a 'mass audience' or 'mainstream audience' is a white audience. Demographically-speaking, this may be accurate but what I believe is more important is the assumption that such audiences do not have the experience or knowledge, or even inclination, to be able to comprehend the subtle particulars of, in this case, stories about communal riots in India – or that such narratives will not be able to capture their attention. The question of audience then becomes an important one, as this has a direct effect on how cultural producers frame their stories (and politics). Former head of the APU, Tommy Nagra, elaborates on this point in relation to the BBC's 'British Asian flagship series', *Desi DNA*:

I think that is the role of the public service broadcasting, to introduce the mainstream community to our world if you like. So that was the kind of idea of the programme [*Desi DNA*] [...] And whatever criticism *Desi* might get, it is the only programme of it's kind. There's no other broadcaster – including

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<sup>51</sup> As I shall touch on in chapters four and five, the *perception* of a show as having mainstream appeal is almost more important than the empirical fact of its ratings.

Channel Four – who are doing a dedicated British Asian flagship series and committing themselves to it. So it's quite a big responsibility to get right. And you're never going to keep everyone happy. [...] And that's always a tricky balance where the remit is to service your Asian community, but I think those days are gone, it's not an Asian only channel – we're not Zee TV, we're on BBC 2. There are more non-Asians watching this programme than Asians. So we have a responsibility to make programmes that appeal to them, that can't be insular, but is also outward thinking.

Subsequently, we have seen a shift away from 'minority programming', specifically designed to cater for a British Asian community<sup>52</sup>, to a situation where British Asian programming can no longer be exclusively for British Asian audiences. Tommy frames this in terms of introducing 'the mainstream to our world', that is, educating the mainstream (white) audience about British Asian cultures.

On the reverse side of this, there is the scenario where such narratives are determined by a pressure to appeal to mainstream, white sensibilities. This will inevitably produce particular political ramifications. As the director/producer who wished to remain anonymous said:

...Serious programming about serious issues, it's very hard to get that on across the board [...] there will be less. There will be more dramatic stories that get made, but more subtle issues will not get reflected. And I do think there is a problem in British media increasingly in the last few years, Channel 4 in particular seems to be stuck in this mode of representing British Muslims – so much emphasis on the terrorism question, on fanaticism – that is what they are interested in. And yes it is an important issue but it is by no means the most important issue in the whole ... I think if you were to look at Channel Four [...] a lot of the documentary output related to Asian people, a lot of it is related to terrorism. Which I think is very sad.

Substantiating this point, freelance director/producer Minoo Bhatia described to me two instances when she was approached to make documentaries about the British Asian community, one about caste prejudice, the other about skin lightening – 'sensationalist stories' that she felt 'perpetuated false stereotypes'. (She turned down both of them.) Hence we see how the particular commercial climate of the television industry (which shall be unpacked further in the following chapter) affects the nature

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<sup>52</sup> The obvious example of this kind of programming is *Apna Hi Ghar Samajhiye* (or *Make Yourself at Home*) which was a BBC programme that ran for fourteen years, with the aim of making South Asians more integrated in the UK.

of narratives on race and religion, which are constructed in reductive terms that conceals the complex and subtle circumstances underlying the cultural phenomena being represented. Thus, at the conception stage of production we get an early indication of how commodification acts as a form of racialised governmentality that regulates representations of Asian culture in particular ways so as to sustain a racist nationalist narrative (Asian culture as absolutely different to white European culture). In the following chapter I will explore in greater detail the development process that produces this effect.

Equally posing a problem for British Asian symbol creators is the dialectical reverse of sensationalism: cultural dilution. By cultural dilution I refer to the removal or smoothing of potentially transruptive cultural entities in order to make them more appealing to a so-called mainstream audience. This was made particularly evident in discussions of the popular BBC cookery show, *Indian Food Made Easy* presented by Anjum Anand, often referred to as the ‘Asian Nigella Lawson’. In an interview with Channel Four’s Head of Religion Aaqil Ahmed, he criticises *Desi DNA* for being too niche, but hails *Indian Food Made* for precisely demonstrating how to create ‘British Asian’ narratives for prime-time viewing; as he states ‘it’s mainstream enough for a wide-enough audience and it’s subject matter that everyone is going to be interested in’. Nasfim Haque, who actually helped develop the show but had certain misgivings over the finished product, has a different idea about why the series proved so successful:

[*Indian Food Made Easy*] is kind of hailed as one of those successes in terms of finding talent, and talent that crosses-over. The irony is, I don’t know what your Asian friends think about it but all my Asian friends thought it was one of the most diluted shows on the planet! Who eats chicken tikka wraps? It is curry for middle-class, middle-England. That’s what it is.

Here, Nasfim refers to ‘dilution’, as the sanitisation of aesthetics (or more problematically perhaps, the ‘authentic’) in order to broaden the text’s mainstream appeal. Again her sense of ‘crossing-over’ into the mainstream depends on targeting ‘middle-class, middle-England’, which necessitates the dilution of the content. Nasfim’s disbelief at ‘chicken tikka wraps’ describes how certain – more palatable - forms of hybridity become popular with the centre, but in the process are stripped of

any politics; in this case, her desire to reflect the ‘true’ experience of British Asian culture. The appearance of chicken tikka wraps on prime-time television thus becomes the quintessential *commodified* hybrid moment – a more *palatable* form of Asianness modified especially for bourgeois tastes.

In publishing, we find similar narratives on dilution. A story recounted to me by author Zahid Hussain, about the drafting process behind his novel *The Curry Mile*, was fairly typical of accounts I heard about publishing:

Zahid Hussain: [The novel has] been very heavily influenced by my publisher as well. But it wasn't quite what ... I would have published the first version.

AS: Which was the darker more subversive story

ZH: Oh yeah it was dark.

AS: So do you feel the publishers pushed it more commercially?

ZH: Yes [...] the edginess was gone.

The ethical effects of commercially-driven decisions was a point stressed in an interview with the author Rajeev Balasubramanyam. He explained the issue in terms of the success of the ‘multiculturalist novel’ (specifically referring to novels such as *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali and *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith), and the ideological relations between the market and these particular narratives:

Rajeev Balasubramanyam: I call them ‘multiculturalist’ novels. And I have quite a hostile view of them really, in that I see them as market-orientated, quite degrading to Asian people!

AS: Could you explain ‘market-orientated’ for me?

RB: [Y]ou get these kind of novels which are reductive in terms of identity. And I think that publishers encourage them because they know they can sell them, I think because it appeals to the particular nature of the racist climate today, which is a racism without calling it racism. A government which is extremely right-wing but uses the language of the liberal left. Multiculturalist novels fit that completely - a way of degrading Asian people while pretending to celebrate them. So whatever fits the sort of dominant ideology will be marketable because people feel comfortable with it, it's easy, it's no more challenging than *The Fantastic Four* or *Spiderman* – it's on that sort of level of comfort. And as soon as art becomes that comfortable it becomes junk really, you might as well just put in the bin. There's no subtlety ... even when you do it well! And I don't think you need to do it particularly well, because it's a crude form and a lot of the time the novels are crude but still sell. And that's just one aspect of the power of the market – a very negative power of the market – that it has the effect of erm ... sort of... I always talk about cultural dilution, reducing the aggregate, the sum total of human knowledge

and human culture - to me that's what's happening with this reductive form of fiction.

Rajeev draws an explicit line between the ideology of the market, aesthetics and cultural politics, where only those narratives that fit in with the dominant ideology – in this case a particular diluted, and unchallenging (and ideological) version of multicultural Britain – are invested in. Thus according to Rajeev, 'multiculturalist novels' have a complicit presence in a British nationalist discourse, and it is precisely their reductive representations of Asians that publishers deem marketable. Again, it is the aim of the rest of the thesis is to see how the dilution of narratives actually unfolds in the processes of production.

To conclude this section, I want to present an exchange with Nasfim Haque of BBC Birmingham that introduces the themes to be explored in the following chapter:

AS: How do you tailor specifically Asian ideas to improve their chance of getting commissioned?

NH: To be honest, making sure our talent is obviously diverse in background but not so in-your-face so... for instance, at the moment I have three people and they are all second generation. They look like models, that's the way it is. They don't have anything obviously racial or ethnicity in them other than the colour of their skin, so the way they enunciate, the way that they behave, their interests, you know the way that they are, is very British, it's very much like everybody else. I'd be very weary of giving an idea where somebody is wearing a sari and talking, if I am honest. That would make hilarious television, having someone wearing a sari and talking about gardening in your front garden! That would be hilarious! Of course that would be the kind of thing I would be worried about. I would want to make sure they look, very polished, doesn't look so in-your-face *ethnic*.

In this revealing comment, Nasfim is willing to admit how developing a concept or talent involves dilution, that is, the process of trying to make something less 'niche' and more 'mainstream'. This is made explicit in her attempts to manage the image of her presenters, so they do not 'look so in-your-face ethnic'. This was a tongue-in-cheek comment, but underlying it is a very serious point about 'polishing' – literally wiping away dirty, offensive ethnic signifiers. Furthermore, it is interesting to note how the humour she finds in the image of an Indian woman in a sari presenting a show about gardening, is derived from it being an unexpected, convivial and I would argue more disruptive, form of hybridity – certainly more subversive than chicken

tikka wraps. Yet, in the commercial climate of television, such a concept would be the kind of thing she'd 'be worried about' presenting to commissioners, based on what she understands as their expectations about which programmes they would want to broadcast. This is unpacked in more detail in the following chapter on commissioning, but such a narrative provides a further illustration of how commerciality begins to infringe upon the cultural politics of the new British Asian cultural producers. We see that, at the conception stage of production and during the development of British Asian cultural commodities, symbol creators feel an invisible pressure from 'above' that affects the way in which they want to tell their stories. It is in this way I suggest that commodification and the process of producing cultural work, acts as a form of racialised governance, with reductive effects upon the politics of British Asian cultural production.

## **Conclusion**

The themes of the chapter are encapsulated in the following quote from Rani Moorthy, co-founder and writer behind the Manchester theatre-company Rasa:

What happens when we try and repackage something we inherit? What's the political state of mind when you sanitise your own culture and make it appropriate for the new audience?

The notion of 'repacking' and 'sanitising' our inheritance or ethnic identity in particular were themes that appeared, either implicitly or explicitly, in respondents' reflections on their work. It alludes to how the commercial is an undeniable dimension of cultural and artistic practice; what Rani describes as 'repackaging' can easily be substituted with 'commodifying'. As highlighted in chapter one, critical approaches to culture are frequently framed in terms of a prevailing dichotomy between creativity and commerce that splits the cultural text into its pre-commodified 'pure' artistic form, and its eventual (politically drained) commodity form. The significance of Rani's comment is that it frames the conception of the cultural text, whether based on the pre-industrial/traditional modes of production (as is the case in theatre and publishing), or has a completely industrial form (as is the case in broadcast television), as the act of producing a cultural commodity. From

Rani's comment above, the very form of cultural politics lies in how Asian culture is 'repackaged' for an audience. In chapter one, I drew attention to how John Hutnyk (1997) develops Adorno's point that culture is no longer *also* commodities, but commodities through and through. Michael Keith (2004) makes a similar reference to the 'fact' of cultural commodification. While the authors take this proposition in different theoretical and political directions, what I draw from them is that cultural politics exists within commodification; it cannot be distilled or sucked into a vacuum. Subsequently, rejecting a determinist account of commodification I conceptualise the cultural production of multiculturalism as a process of navigating between aesthetic, ethical, political and economic poles. The transruptive scope of the commodity is dependent upon how cultural producers negotiate commercial forces in particular, which attempt to reduce potentially disruptive hybrid entities into, to paraphrase Paul Gilroy, an absolute sense of absolute difference.

In summary, the aim of this chapter was to demonstrate how narratives on cultural politics, when framed within a notion of postcolonial cultural economy, begin to reveal new knowledges about the complex interplay between the aesthetic, and the economic – a relation that is often neglected in cultural studies accounts of race and representation. While this thesis is primarily concerned with the details of production, the chapter emphasised how it is in the early development stage, before the physical production of the cultural commodity has even begun, that cultural producers can feel commercial forces intruding into their aesthetic vision and cultural politics. Subsequently, the first step in ascertaining the political potential of a cultural commodity, as this chapter attempted to do, is by examining the aesthetic vision and political motivations of cultural producers. However, whilst the narratives presented in this chapter point to the epistemological ramifications in the particular interactions between the economic and aesthetic, it is by paying closer attention to the actual production process that we can actually begin to see how through commodification racialised governmentalities attempt to manage the counter-discourses of difference. While this chapter focused upon more general cultural themes across three very distinct cultural industries, the remainder of the thesis will pay closer attention to the industrial forms of each of the sectors of study. In the following chapter, I will explore the commissioning/content acquisition process, and demonstrate how the practices involved in this initial point in the formal commodity

phase begin to position, and indeed, *racialise* the British Asian cultural commodity in very specific, recurring ways.

## **Chapter Four – Commissioning the British Asian cultural commodity: the beginning of the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital**

In this chapter I will unravel how the issues on aesthetics and wider British Asian cultural politics that emerged in the last chapter begin to materialise in the next stage of cultural production. I have labelled this stage ‘commissioning’, but it can go by other names (and involve different structures and processes) depending on the industry. Such is the variation in the different forms of commissioning that I will save fuller definitions for when I tackle each cultural sector separately later in the chapter. However, what I am broadly referring to is the process of having a concept or text commissioned or bought/acquired by a media/arts organisation – whether a broadcasting company, publishing house or theatre venue. Since the barriers to entry in certain cultural industries can be prohibitive, independent cultural producers, such as the ones who are the subjects of this thesis, are reliant upon established bodies to provide the finance and business expertise to sell their cultural commodity. Of course forms of ‘DIY’ cultural production have always existed, but many cultural producers choose to go through the more orthodox route of commercial production, approaching media companies – whether independent or corporate – to assist in the production, distribution and sale of their work. This is most evident in the television and theatre industries, where producers are dependent upon a television channel or theatre venue, not only for funding, but to provide the very platform from which to broadcast or mount their work. In the literary world, even though self-publication is a growing option for authors, many would rather get signed to a publishing house, with their larger marketing budgets and established distribution networks (in addition to their literary reputation) to ensure that the book can reach the largest potential audience. British Asian cultural producers subsequently find that the production of their narratives is almost entirely dependent on these media ‘gatekeepers’, who effectively decide whether a text gets produced.

An obvious theme in this chapter is the difficulties British Asian cultural producers face in getting their concepts/products commissioned in the first place, but the

chapter's primary concern is to demonstrate how it is at this stage of production that the racialisation of the cultural commodity – by which I mean its branding as absolute racial difference – ‘formally’ begins. In chapter one, I introduced a notion of commodification as a technology of racialised governmentality, and to begin this chapter I describe my approach that focuses on the discursive forms of cultural production. In particular I want to introduce the notion that the way in which the processes of commissioning/content acquisition are rationalised by commissioners and media executives is the means by which the racialisation of the British Asian cultural commodity occurs.

Following this opening section, I apply this approach to an examination of the commissioning/content acquisition processes in each of my three industries of research, and detail more precisely how normative commissioning rationales – the form of which is mediated through an increasingly commercial production climate – constitute a form of racialised governmentality. Since commissioning processes are specific to each industry, I will treat them separately, yet we see similar themes emerge in each case. The three sections will open by highlighting the shift towards marketisation that characterises the political economy of each of these industries (even one as heavily subsidised as theatre), and demonstrate how the subsequent increasing pressure to increase ratings, unit sales, and ‘bums-on-seats’, has fairly predictable effects for the British Asian cultural commodity and its chances for getting commissioned. (As applies to any text that produces an alternative narrative.) However, my bigger concern is to demonstrate how, in each industry, the commissioning/content acquisition stage of production sets in motion certain positioning/branding strategies that have specific racialising effects on the British Asian cultural commodity. Hence, the aim of this chapter is to reveal how the increasingly rationalised commissioning/content acquisition stage leads not only to a conservative range of output, but marks the beginning of a production process that attempts to racialise the text in very specific ways.

### **Introducing the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital**

Before I begin the main analysis, I want to briefly introduce my focus on the

discursive forms of cultural production. To illustrate this approach, I draw from my observations of a Channel 4 event held for up-and-coming black and Asian producers/directors/writers attempting to progress in the industry. The event involved a panel, consisting of Angela Jain (Head of E4 and one of the few Asian executives working in mainstream television), two other Channel 4 executives and a commissioner at the independent television company Maverick Productions. In addition to giving general advice about progressing in the industry, the panel provided specific details about the kind of programmes they were looking to commission for the upcoming season. The purpose was that attendees would get a flavour of what commissioners were looking for, and so would therefore tailor their ideas to the channel's needs, thus improving their chances of getting their ideas commissioned.

What struck me about the event was how the panellists narrated the process of commissioning, without any mention of 'race', despite the constitution of the audience. When discussing what kind of programmes the channel was looking to commission, it effectively came down to 'good ideas'. Typical comments included 'Good ideas energetically presented', 'If it's a good idea it will come through' and 'Ideas have to be really grabby'. There was an emphasis on immediacy, where such 'good ideas' were dependent on being pitched in a succinct, concise manner in order to get commissioned. As the commissioner of documentaries at Maverick Productions stated: 'Being able to get hold of something very fast is very important. And if you can't genuinely summarise your idea in one line it probably isn't ready to be pitched.' As the Channel 4 commissioner of news and current affairs added: 'If you can write it on a t-shirt you probably have a very good idea.'

The notion of the success of a pitch depending on a succinct one-liner<sup>53</sup> was also a theme that appeared in other industries. Ed Higginson, producer of theatre company, Rasa Productions, explained the commercial success of its play *Curry Tales* as due to the title 'doing what it says on the tin'. Similarly, the Editorial Director of a major

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<sup>53</sup> Hesmondhalgh (2002) describes the same trend in Hollywood movie production, through a notion of the 'high concept' film, where its central idea is conveyed in one sentence. Hesmondhalgh argues that while it is not impossible to produce deep, sophisticated, multilayered 'high concept' films, the odds of producing a more complex work are stacked against it.

publishing company I interviewed, echoed the comments made in the Channel 4 event: 'If I was a Bangladeshi writer living in London [...] I'd mention [Monica Ali's] *Brick Lane* in my letter, in my opening letter, in my opening sentence of my letter. To be frank, everything is sold as a cross-between'. Exemplifying this point, television screenwriter Neil Biswas explained how they managed to get their drama *Second Generation* commissioned by Channel 4, through pitching it as the 'Asian King Lear'.

The reason for opening with this is to draw attention to the normative terms in which commissioning gets narrated. Essentially, I will be arguing that describing the process of commissioning in apparently neutral language (for example, the need for a 'good story') hides the underlying capitalist logic that determines what gets commissioned. That is not to imply that there is a conspiracy behind what stories executives decide to commission. But the discourse of 'good ideas' and 'one-liners' has a specific epistemological effect with regard to British Asian texts. It is precisely through such normative language, and the imagined autonomy of commissioning practices (after all, if it is a good idea, it *will* succeed) that the counter-narratives of difference are governed. This is what I call the *rationalisation/racialising logic of capital*, where the way in which certain decisions in cultural production are rationalised is precisely the way in which the reductive, racialising effect of commodification occurs unseen. This will become a recurrent theme in this research. In this chapter, focusing on the actual micro processes of commissioning will shed more light on the complex relation between capitalism and race. In what follows, I will pay particular attention to certain points in the commissioning process of the television, publishing and theatre industries, that I have identified as having particular epistemological effects on the transruptive capabilities of British Asian texts. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the commissioning stage provides the incubating conditions for the neo-colonial ideology that manifest at further stages of production.

## **Commissioning British Asian television: Public service broadcasting and the politics of representation**

Quite simply, British Asian programmes that feature on the main terrestrial channels are almost solely broadcast by the BBC or Channel 4. It is no coincidence that these two broadcasters are the most regulated, operating within public service remits which commit them both to broadcasting ‘minority-interest’ programmes. According to the Royal Charter (2007), in addition to ‘sustaining citizenship and civil society’, the BBC has an obligation to represent ‘The UK, its nations, regions and communities’. Channel 4 is a commercial channel, totally reliant on advertising revenue, but nonetheless it has a similar remit to appeal ‘to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society’ (Communications Act, 2003)<sup>54</sup>. The fact that it is the BBC and Channel 4 that predominantly show Asian programmes immediately suggests that it is due to their particular public service obligations that such shows get commissioned. This is revealing in terms of how such programmes are perceived, which becomes a recurrent theme in my television case studies. Of course, an Asian television programme is not commissioned within a public service remit just for being ‘Asian’; it has to additionally demonstrate that it will be of significant quality and relevance to a broadcaster’s output and identity. This is determined through a range of procedures, and through commissioners who are employed to find the best commissions for their channel. Commissioners will attend in-house meetings that discuss which timeslots are available, and the kind of programmes that are wanted within an overall channel strategy. Subsequently, factors behind commissioning a programme or series include idea suitability, timeslot suitability, and on-screen and production talent (Fanthome, 2006). What ultimately determines a commission however, is whether the programme is believed to be able to bring in enough ratings relative to the timeslot and/or generate substantial press coverage (what broadcasters refer to as ‘noise’).

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<sup>54</sup> The Channel 3 service, and Channel 5 have public service obligations – though not as rigorous as the BBC or Channel 4 - also set out in the 2003 Communications Act, to simply provide ‘a range of high quality and diverse programming’, though this is more in terms of committing them to original programming and commissions from independent production companies (Ofcom, 2005).

In this section I want to demonstrate how these two issues regarding ‘noise’ and ratings – as enacted through the commissioning process – act as a form of governance upon the British Asian television programme. To begin, I will describe how an increasingly commercial climate in broadcasting is producing certain cultures of production that stifles commissioning and programme development. Then I will explore the ways in which such cultures of production affect how British Asian programmes and series get commissioned. While the actual ideological effects of this process become more pronounced at latter stages of production, I want to nonetheless demonstrate how during the commissioning stage we start to see how rationalised practices have intrinsic racialising effects.

### Commercialisation and cultures of production in broadcast television

As highlighted in previous chapters, the distinctiveness of the cultural commodity is that its use value is based on novelty and difference, and therefore success is impossible to predict. Consequently, its production is characterised as high risk (Garnham, 1990; Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Fiske, 1989). While the response has been the increasing rationalisation of cultural production (intensified by the growing shift towards neo-liberal market models (Hesmondhalgh, 2007)), what was immediately apparent in respondents’ reflections on commissioning in television was that it was not a scientific process. Rather, it depended upon the personalities and values of commissioning editors and executive producers and their perception of what programmes best fit the channels’ brand. This is suggested in the following comment from Channel 4’s Head of Religion, Aaqil Ahmed:

The thing is you shouldn’t be in a situation where you want to make things that are not going to work. Does that make sense? You kind of like get a flavour of it, and you kind of understand what’s supposed to work and what’s not supposed to work. And we do talk a lot; you talk to your colleagues to understand.

What is made evident in this quote is the cultural aspect to commissioning. Narratives of getting a ‘flavour’ of what works, through talking to colleagues, stress the socio-cultural dimension to what ultimately are economic decisions (that is, what products are produced and sold). Similarly executive producer Tommy Nagra makes a similar point, emphasising that getting a programme commissioned is a process of

‘second-guessing the commissioner, who in turn is second-guessing the controller, who in turn is second-guessing the audience and the BBC Trust’. Echoing Keith Negus’ (1997) critique of certain determinist accounts of the production of culture, such narratives stress the unpredictability of cultural production and how economic processes occur through the ‘messy, informal world of human actions’ (ibid.: 94).

Yet, there is a risk that the emphasis on individual agency can underplay the influence of larger forces. Rather, the nature of cultural work occurs as a dynamic between the individual’s own vision and values, and certain ‘invisible’ expectations from above. This is made clear in the following comment from Nasfim Haque, who works in development<sup>55</sup> at BBC Birmingham:

It’s funny, people think my job sounds great, but it’s very pragmatic, my job. It’s very much tailoring. I have my creative abilities, which are completely free, blue skies, but now I know the system so well, that I know how to tailor it to make it like what they want. Not what I want or what I think the audience wants [...] but it’s almost like I know how to tailor it to give what they want. So it doesn’t become a creative process, it becomes very much like I am a supplier and this is what I supply. And you have to be very tactical; it becomes a very tactical job.

In this comment, the respondent alludes to how organisational culture stifles her creativity, to the extent she describes her position as a wholesale supplier. While commissioning is an unpredictable, unscientific process, there is nonetheless a trend of standardisation and rationalisation, which attempts to draw maximum efficiency from cultural work. Thus, development work may have an aura of creative freedom and ‘blue skies’ thinking, but from Nasfim’s comment this freedom is precisely suppressed through the particular cultures of production, which is such that she intuitively knows how ideas must be ‘tailored’ in order to appeal to commissioners and controllers (rather than the audience). This suggests larger forces at play than a single messy layer of human mediations. The problem with an approach such as Negus’ is that it suggests that economic actions occur almost randomly, based on the whims of the individual. Yet this account paints a more complex picture, where the autonomy of the complex professional (and in turn, the ability to produce

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<sup>55</sup> These are particular departments within the BBC that develop and pitch ideas for possible commissions, very similar to the way an independent television company would do.

unsettling/enlightening forms of multiculturalism) is mediated through cultures of production, which in turn are determined by an increasingly commercial broadcast landscape. As we shall see, it is the invisible expectations of what Nikolas Rose (1999: 5) calls 'macro-actors', and the political economy of broadcasting, that steers cultural output in particular ways.

Since the Peacock Report in 1987, the British media has moved towards marketisation (Born, 2004; Hesmondhalgh, 2002). This has resulted in intensifying economic pressures for broadcasters. The latest dispute in a long history of contestation between the BBC and government over license fee revenue (see Tracey, 1998) occurred in 2007, where the renewal of the Royal Charter saw borrowing limits for the BBC restricted to between £220m and £230m, 'below the £400m the corporation had hoped for' (Rob Shepherd, 'Licence fee to rise by 3%' in *Broadcast*, 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2007). Similarly, commercial channels have been hit by falling advertising revenues, leading to a debate over whether the BBC should allocate a portion of its license fee money to Channel 4, to help it remain competitive (James Robinson, 'Channel 4 boss sets sights on license fee', *The Guardian*, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2005). This of course has had effects on what programmes get commissioned, where as suggested, the impetus is on ratings and press coverage.

Such a trend was clearly felt by respondents working in television (and as we shall see, in other industries too). For instance Nasfim described to me how an executive explicitly said that he wanted 'ratings, top, top, features, formatted factual programmes, like the spin-off from *The Apprentice* because that is going to bring the majority of the audience'. A freelance director/producer I interviewed gave a similar impression:

The very first thing that people will look at when a film goes out, the very first thing they want to know is what audiences did it get. It's the very first thing that the commissioners, the execs, the company you are working for, everyone wants to know what audience did it get. And the film could be very mediocre, artistically and creatively, but if it gets a good audience all is forgotten, all is forgiven, if it gets a crap audience, well you know. The audience is so important.

Thus, even within public service broadcasting<sup>56</sup> there was a strong sense from respondents that broadcasters are becoming more focused on ratings – to the detriment of artistic and political practice<sup>57</sup>. The issue that subsequently emerged was how cultural diverse broadcasting is not generally perceived as a ‘ratings-generator’. This is an issue I will explore in more detail, but in light of such a perception the commissioning editors I spoke to explained the importance of a programme generating ‘noise’ or press coverage. Earlier I quoted Tommy Nagra’s insistence that a programme on a ‘niche’ issue ‘has to be able to resonate not just to one specific community but have a ripple effect around it, to make some noise’. This view is shared by Aaqil Ahmed; on the subject of commissioning religious programming he said: ‘From my point of view, basically we’re not going to get out and out huge ratings as much as we can try, so we do definitely want the programme to be noticed. We want it to get written about, we want it to win awards. We want it to have some noise, as they say.’ According to this narrative, generating ‘noise’ is not a just a measure of the success of a programme in generating column inches, acting as an advertisement for the channel. Rather there is a cultural-political dimension, where ‘noise’ quantifies whether a ‘niche’ story has been able to resonate beyond the specific community. As will be developed in later chapters, this is based on an assumption that Asian stories only have appeal to Asians themselves.

*Beards, scarves, halal meat, terrorists, forced marriage: Effects of commercialism on British Asian narratives*

In the current climate of broadcast television, in which those channels with a public service remit to produce minority-interest programmes are under increasing commercial pressure, a production culture dominated by the emphasis on ratings and ‘noise’ has particular governing effects on British Asian programming. In the previous chapter I highlighted cultural producers’ concerns at how commercial

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<sup>56</sup> There is an ongoing debate over whether the BBC should be producing the kind of entertainment programmes similarly made by commercial channels. Channels such as ITV argue that it should be sticking to its public service remit, whereas the government argue that public service broadcasting should not be confined to the ‘worthy’. See Chris Tryhorn ‘Entertainment ‘vital’ to BBC’s future, says white paper’, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2006

<sup>57</sup> In her study of television news, Harrison (2000) found a similar pattern where news channels were being increasingly ‘challenged by forces which lead to a focus on the chase for audience and ratings’ (106).

production leads to the reduction of their narratives to simplistic black/white terms, and we see how this manifests itself in commissioning and the focus on ‘grabby ideas’ and one-liners, to quote the executives from the Channel 4 event I described earlier. Aaqil was one respondent who stressed the importance of ‘noise’ and a quick scan of some of the programmes he has commissioned – *Inside the Mind of a Suicide Bomber*, *The Cult of the Suicide Bomber*, *Women Only Jihad*, *The Fundamentalist*, *Putting the ‘Fun’ in Fundamental* – demonstrates how he has attempted to generate press coverage through provocative subject matter. This is not to say that these subjects have been poorly dealt with, but it was notable in several interviews how respondents criticised Channel 4 for its representations of Islam in particular, which they believe reduce Muslim cultures, in the words of the journalist Abdul-Rehman Malik, to ‘beards, scarves, halal meat, terrorists, forced marriage’<sup>58</sup>. Regardless of how sensitively these subjects are investigated, there was a sense that such programmes – and in particular their titles – constitute a discursive formation that perpetuates a particular racist stereotype of Islam as abhorrent in opposition to western normative cultural practices. Such stories may generate a lot of ‘noise’, but it is a noise with unruly feedback in terms of the negative representation of Islam in the UK.

The race for ratings has additionally been felt in real terms for producers working in serious documentary/film. In the Channel 4 event referenced earlier, Angela Jain of E4 stated that she did not want factual programming as ‘it does less well’. Since many of my respondents worked in documentary, this was something they had felt sharply. For instance the producer/director who wanted to remain anonymous lamented how ‘ [In the] whole industry there is much less commitment to doing challenging, thought-provoking [documentary] work which reflects minority concerns’. This was a view expressed by freelance producer/director Minoo Bhatia:

Minoo Bhatia: I just think there are very few really brilliant series or films being commissioned. There are not that many if you think about it. *Last Days of the Raj*, there was a one-off from Channel 4 on partition. We’re talking about maybe, not a huge amount of content for a year. You will go and see some of the independents who built their reputation on making those kinds of quality shows and they say there’s less demand for them now.

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted on *The TV Show*, Channel 4, broadcast 19/7/09

AS: Really?

MB: Absolutely. People are not commissioning those sorts of films. Now they want stuff like *Brat Camp* they want formats. It's all about returnable series.

With her last comment in particular, Minoo argues that serious programming is being left-behind in the search for new formats, which not only generate higher ratings, but can be sold abroad - an increasingly important source of revenue for television channels (see Murray, 2006). The regard for culturally diverse programmes from an executive perspective was highlighted in a particularly revealing account when a respondent told me how a commissioner explicitly stated he did not want stories on 'race':

He actually wrote it in a brief. When he joined BBC3 last year he actually wrote what he was looking for, and he said ideas he's not looking for is race, he did not want subjects on race. I don't know why? I think cultural-clashes, cultural-exchange programmes are actually what young people want more than ever. But he said they didn't want anything about race. They probably do not want to be tarnished with this multicultural or diversity badge. They probably don't like it, it's not cool you know?

The respondent interpreted this decision as being based on such programmes not fitting in with BBC3's brand. BBC3 is the BBC's more youthful, commercial channel, but according to its schedule of conditions, 'Within its defined scope the service shall stimulate, support and reflect the diversity of the UK' ('BBC3 schedule of conditions', *The Guardian*, 17 September, 2002). In light of the respondent's comment, the commissioner's brief becomes quite controversial. Yet in keeping with my particular line of enquiry, this narrative reveals how Asian programming is perceived as having limited commercial appeal. Furthermore it alludes to the segregationary form of commodification as racial governance, where narratives on difference are totally rejected and omitted from discourse. Indeed, the respondent's story illustrates clearly the disconnect between a perceived commercial rationale, represented through the commissioner's demands, and the desire of the British Asian complex professional to produce challenging representations of multiculturalism through cultural entanglements - i.e. programmes on 'cultural clashes, cultural-exchange'.

To develop this point further we can again turn to Nasfim Haque, whose work in development at the BBC has two aspects: developing ideas in ‘mainstream’, and developing ideas with the Asian Programming Unit (APU). The way in which her job is split into these two strands, was something that I felt was potentially quite revealing. I put this notion to her:

AS: It’s interesting because your work is based on a distinction between Asian programming and mainstream programming, as though ‘Asian’ and ‘mainstream’ are mutually exclusive. Do you feel that distinction in your work?

NH: One thing I do find is that [Asian programming is] almost low priority. So even in the whole management order of things, these ideas always come as low priority, yet they are the ones that tend to bring in business which I find ironic - but for some reason it’s always put in low priority for pitches, low priority for everything else. It doesn’t feel like a natural harmonious process. Part of me thinks maybe it’s because it’s labelled, we’ve said that is APU, so we’ve labelled it. But we shouldn’t label it – take that label off. And I think that’s slowly happening because the funding has been cut to the unit, but I don’t know, I think it is so ingrained, especially in Birmingham and its history of programming that people would just say, oh is that an Asian programme? And that’s it...

There is an explicit reference here to how Nasfim feels ‘Asian’ programmes are considered low priority when it comes to pitches to commissioners. Furthermore, echoing the issues explored in chapter three, Nasfim expresses concern at labelling a programme as ‘Asian’ since it is immediately branded as non-mainstream, and is managed as such. Referring to the history of Asian programming at BBC Birmingham, Nasfim hints that such a strand has become stigmatised, echoing Stuart Hall’s outline of the minority arts tradition, which is seen as presenting a parochial version of ethnicity that has little resonance outside of its particular community. From these examples it appears that the increasing commercialism of television has had negative ramifications for the commissioning of culturally diverse programming, even within public service broadcasting which has an obligation to cater for ‘minorities’. It has become a greater obligation for every programme to get substantial ratings relative to its timeslot – no matter how ‘niche’ the subject matter. To repeat the view of one respondent: ‘With a play, you know that you’re only ever going to get five thousand people through the door if it’s a good run, but in television you are talking millions, you are deliberately targeting millions and you’re trying to pull in the biggest audience.’ Thus, when attempting to attract a million viewers from

the populace, then this inevitably has an effect on narratives, something that was picked out in more detail in chapter three.

As will be made more evident in following chapters, the mainstream/niche dichotomy is the tension at the heart of British Asian television production. Aaqil Ahmed in his role in commissioning religion and multicultural programming at Channel 4, described to me his particular strategy as based on precisely avoiding what he calls the 'periphery', and targeting only primetime slots. Yet, this inevitably has an effect on representation; Aaqil admits that when he looks at an idea, 'I look at whether or not it's going to work for me in a primetime setting', and it is precisely this rationale that has led to accusations of sensationalism over the channel's representation of British Muslims in particular<sup>59</sup>. As I shall demonstrate in the next chapter, it is in the process of scheduling that the tension between the perception of Asian programming as 'mainstream' or 'niche' manifests in a more visible sense. Moreover, at the marketing stage of production, we see how the attempts to make British Asian television more appealing to the mainstream, has certain reductive, racialising effects in terms of how it is (re)presented. Hence, the commissioning stage of production reveals the emergence of a neo-colonial ideology that governs the British Asian cultural commodity in particular ways. According to Hesse (2000: 29) 'racialised governmentalities structure and underwrite the social technologies of racialised inclusions (hierarchical forms) and racialised exclusions (segregatory forms)'. It is in this way that the commissioning stage of production in television regulates the counter-narratives of difference. Through a rationalised focus on ratings and/or 'noise' we begin to see how the process of commodification either totally excludes an Asian programme from discourse (by simply not commissioning it), or, according to hierarchical forms of racialised inclusion, transforms the postcolonial commission into Indophilic stereotype through perceptions of what is 'commercial'. As will be made more evident in later chapters, the commissioning stage produces ripples that have wider effects further down the production line. At a

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<sup>59</sup> Most recently Channel 4 has been criticised for its documentary *The Qua'ran* (see Riazat Butt, 'Misleading and defamatory: Channel 4 accused over documentary on Qur'an', 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2008) and courted controversy over its *Dispatches* film *Undercover Mosque* that produced a fruitless police investigation into whether the preachers filmed had made criminal incitements. Following the investigation the police in turn reported the channel to Ofcom for the way the programme was edited and had misrepresented its subject. (Adam Sherwin, 'Muslim outrage at Channel 4 film prompts new inquiry by watchdog', *The Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> August, 2007). Ofcom eventually rejected the complaint.

similar point in publishing however, we see more explicit example of the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital.

### **Acquiring British Asian literature: the logic of niche**

Even though the publishing industry is market-based, the global trend towards neoliberalism has seen an increasing shift towards industrialised production. As outlined in chapter two, historically, publishing was based on a patronage model, but as the cultural industries opened up to marketisation, the book industry has been characterised by increasing integration, conglomeration and corporate growth. The UK industry is dominated by just six publishers – five of which are owned by global companies (only Bloomsbury is independently owned) – which in 2008 accounted for 55% of the market share in consumer sales<sup>60</sup>. With intensifying market competition, publishing houses have seen noticeable changes in their cultures of production, particularly at the commissioning stage (Thompson, 2005). Indeed, this is what an Editorial Director at one of the major UK publishing houses (who requested anonymity, so for the purposes of the research I have called him David) described to me:

When I started 10 years ago the editor was to be king, it was all done on passion and it was almost like a gentleman's club, as it has been for 200 years. The head honcho would say, I love this, I think it has literary merit and people should be reading this, therefore give me the money and I will buy it. That is what happened. Now sales and marketing colleagues have much more say over things.

It is the effect of the increasing influence of sales and marketing rationale in commissioning decisions with regard to British Asian literature that becomes the theme of this section on commissioning in the publishing industry. In particular, I want to examine how the commercial rationale behind these decisions leads to a certain form of positioning, where we get a clearer view of the

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<sup>60</sup> Source: Booksellers Association reports  
[http://www.booksellers.org.uk/industry/display\\_report.asp?id=1916](http://www.booksellers.org.uk/industry/display_report.asp?id=1916)

rationalisation/racialising logic of capital, whereby the rationalisation of cultural production has hidden racialising effects.

### The acquisition process in publishing

There are multiple ways for a writer to publish a novel. There is the traditional route of receiving a commission to write a book, or selling an already completed manuscript to a publishing house which then prints, markets, distributes and sells the text to the public. Also, there is the route of self-publication; in fact, one author I spoke to found success adopting this method, selling two thousand copies of her self-produced debut novel in just one month. However, such stories are rare and most of the authors I spoke to chose to go through the more conventional publishing route. As stated, this can be a commission from a publishing company to write a specific book, though this is more common in non-fiction, or with smaller presses. In my research I found that British Asian novelists are very rarely commissioned, and subsequently this stage of production in publishing is better regarded as content acquisition. This is where an author will either send a manuscript directly to a publisher for consideration, or to a literary agent, who would manage the submission process. Increasingly, this latter route has become the norm, with agents now considered the first layer in the vetting process, with the major publishers unwilling to take a writer on unless they have an agent first.

In the context of this research, one of the initial points in the commissioning/content acquisition process is the discussion between the agent and the writer about which publishers to send the manuscript to. Though it will generally be sent to a range of the major publishing houses (if not all) and larger independents, the preferred publishers are nonetheless identified. For instance, the author Gautam Malkani explained to me the nature of such a discussion during his first meeting with his agent: 'He asked me what publishers I liked. I was like, I don't know. And he said, think about the books on your shelf and who are they mostly published by? I was like well, Penguin and Faber. So he said we'll see. He didn't make any promises or anything'. As I described in the introduction to this chapter, this conversation is described in normative, commonsense terms, and indeed appears fairly innocuous. Yet this process of identifying a house to sign to – even though most authors do not

have the luxury of choosing their publisher – reflects a certain commercial logic that necessitates branding and positioning the cultural commodity in order to give it a competitive edge in an over-crowded market. This is what Callon (2004) refers to as ‘qualification’: the process of strategically emphasising a certain quality of the good in order to differentiate it between other goods. In this section, I want to demonstrate how ethnicity becomes the ‘quality’ that is identified for Asian writers, not explicitly borne out of individual racism, but through commonsense marketing logic (since this quality is the most obvious differentiation from rival commodities, even if it is irrelevant to the actual content of the book). At this opening stage, this is not so obvious, but a further look at the commissioning process reveals how this occurs.

### BookScan and the branding of the novel

Each week a publishing house will have an acquisition meeting, where a profit and loss sheet is produced for every book they are potentially going to buy/commission. An editor will bring in a book he or she wants to sign, with a prediction of the number of copies they think it will sell. Thus the costs and potential sales are tallied and put into a calculation sheet that produces the margin – the greater the margin, the stronger the case for acquiring the book. Where conflict can occur is in the sales prediction. Often an editor and the sales representative, who is also present at the meeting, will disagree over how many copies a book is going to sell. While the editor is working mainly with literary criteria (though will also of course be engaged with the commercial potential of the novel) the salesperson will be working from a purely sales and marketing rationale. As stated, the recurring theme in the respondents’ accounts of commissioning in publishing was the increasing role of salespeople in the commissioning of books. For instance, Rosemary Hudson, founder of Black Amber, an independent publishing company that specialises in black and Asian fiction, stated how sales managers have ‘more than 50% input in the commissioning process’. This was described as a negative development, and David the editorial director conveyed a similar feeling:

What’s interesting is that it’s the salespeople who give us the figures over whether [a new book is] going to work or not. It’s not done anymore on what I feel in my gut instinct, because there’s so much more data around now. And you could say, I feel very passionate about this novel but the salespeople can

come back at you and say, yes but no debut novels sell more than 10,000 copies. In fact most of them sell 5000 or 3000. So how can you justify paying Gautam Malkani £400,000? So what happens is you start weaving a little dream, but what if it could be the new *Brick Lane*?

The last line is something I shall return to, but this comment is useful for its allusion to how quantitative data is being used to manage ‘gut instinct’ and human agency during commissioning. The rationalisation of cultural work in this way, which attempts to bridle the unpredictability of not just the market but the behaviour of the complex professional itself, becomes more apparent when we begin to look more closely at how such data is relayed back into the acquisition process.

Sales figures nowadays are obtained from a major development in publishing: a piece of software called BookScan. BookScan tracks every single sale in the major (and some independent) bookstores, the figures of which are published weekly. In the past, it was difficult to know which books were selling how many copies. Publishers knew how their own books were performing, but would keep these numbers confidential, and as such, it was impossible to tell how competitors were performing. Thus BookScan has had a major impact in publishing, not least in being able to more accurately measure company performance, but more innovatively, in the commissioning process. David narrated the new acquisition procedure in the following account:

The big change that has come in the last 5 years has been something called BookScan, whereby there is a computer program that tracks every single sale of every single book through the tills. So [...] every time I take a new book and say I quite like this, I want to do it, our salesperson would go straight to a computer, look it up, or look up something similar rather, and say, that sold very little, I don't think we should take a risk on this. So it means people get compared and pigeon-holed much more scientifically now

According to this narrative, during an acquisition meeting, a novel's projected sales are calculated based on the sales of a similar book. Indeed this first-hand account of the process of identifying a comparable novel brings into sharp focus the pigeonholing strategies the respondents were critical of in chapter three. Essentially BookScan, and the commonsense logic of pigeonholing and categorisation, is an attempt to rationalise and standardise the commissioning process (and micro

behaviours), where quantitative methods are adopted in order to manage the risk of (human) editorial decisions that do not always lead to the desired results. It is literally a process designed to minimise the high risk that characterises production in the cultural industries. David's comment that 'people get pigeon-holed more scientifically now', produces the most explicit indication yet of how neo-liberal forms of rationalisation eventually leads to the racialisation of the British Asian cultural commodity. That is, the way it is articulated as a *scientific* process uncannily alludes to the commodification of corporeal difference and the biological determination of absolute racial and ethnic types. Moreover, the adoption of new BookScan software further underlines commodification as a 'technology' through which capitalism attempts to manage hierarchies of race. Indeed, in subsequent chapters I want to precisely explore how the *science of pigeonholing* amounts to the segregation and categorisation of how narratives of difference within nationalist discourse according to a Manichean colonial vision of difference.

The recurrent theme in this thesis thus far has been the anxieties of cultural producers about being categorised as 'Asian' through the logic of the market (as Nasfim Haque expresses in the previous section on television). It follows that the commissioning process in publishing provides the clearest illustration of how this actually occurs. As we have seen, BookScan forces commissioners to think in terms of categorisation and positioning. British Asian authors subsequently find that their ethnicity informs the category they are placed in. The author Rajeev Balasubramanyam explains his experience of this process as follows:

AS: So they will take a similar novel to yours and make sales projections based on how well that book will do?

Rajeev Balasubramanyam: Yeah. That's quite a depressing thought.

AS: What book do you think they will compare yours to?

RB: I don't know, Gautam Malkani or Nirpal Singh – if they can get away from the Asian thing, I think that will be smarter...

AS: To think of you in the same way as David Mitchell, Jon McGregor?

RB: Yeah, that's where I would look. But to do that they have to get away from the Asian thing. I think they could sell more books that way. The whole fucking point is they could do both! That's the whole point. But they don't see it like that I feel and perhaps they are right, perhaps the way the country is at the moment you can't do both. I think it's probably about time you started doing both but that requires taking a risk.

David Mitchell and Jon McGregor were two successful authors that Rajeev had earlier expressed an affinity towards. Yet, it is due to a certain mentality of commissioners, which he believes might reflect the attitudes and values of the dominant (white) section of society, that disables them from positioning his book with the likes of Mitchell and McGregor (i.e. young, talented British writers). The potency in pigeonholing on the grounds of race is how these decisions are reached in a way that appears naturally reasonable under the branding logic of cultural production. This is made evident in the following exchange with Preethi Nair:

AS: Have you found it's the industry that puts labels on you?

PN: <pause> I don't know. I just think it's easy in terms of... <pause> I don't know.

AS: Easy for who?

PN: For the publisher it's probably easy to say, yeah, er .... But saying that Harper Collins didn't do that to me because I made a point of not doing it <?> But a lot of publishers do think, yep British Asian, that's current at the moment, let's put her in that category.

Preethi describes a positive relationship with her publisher who she feels have not put her in an 'Asian' writer category, but concedes that it would be an 'easy thing to do'. The quote also highlights the perception of how Asian writers are fashionable and 'current' right now, which becomes another commonsense reason for signing an 'Asian' text. Thus, the normative terms in which such decisions are reached are notable in that it sheds their rationale of its racialist dimensions. As a consequence, such decisions appear at worst, cynical, and at best, commonsense and rational.

### Formulas of Asianness

Earlier I quoted a commissioning editor who admitted that if he was a Bengali writing about London, he would namecheck Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* in the first line of an opening letter to a publisher or agent. As Negus (1999: 32) has demonstrated, producers, faced with the 'uncertainties and anxieties' of cultural production and the unpredictability of knowing what is going to succeed, rely upon formulas that are known to have worked in the past. This logic is unwittingly revealed in a *BookSeller* news story on the signing of a young Bengali novelist: 'Jane Lawson, who took on Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, has bought another tale of cultural collision for

Doubleday/Black Swan by 26 year-old newcomer Tina Biswas' ('Cross-cultural collision at Doubleday', *The BookSeller*, 17 March, 2005). Judging from the tone of this short news article, since 'cross-cultural collision' worked first-time round with *Brick Lane*, trying to repeat this formula with another young Asian novelist makes good business sense. The formula-based rationale that characterises commissioning decisions is exposed in another *BookSeller* article, which listed the books that followed Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty's successful biography (which itself was quickly published in the wake the racism controversy after her appearance on the television Channel 4 show *Big Brother*): *Bollywood: A History*, *Bollywood Crafts*, *The Bollywood Cookbook*, *Bollywood Nights*, *Looking for the Big B: Bollywood*, *Bachchan and Me* and *The Bollywood Reader* ('Bollywood Dreams', *BookSeller*, 16 February, 2007). Once again, the article is written in a matter-of-fact way, as though these commissions were based on sensible, rational criteria, and, to quote Preethi Nair, what was deemed 'current'.

It is important to unpack the context in which this pattern emerges. When discussing this issue, David the editorial director described his experience working on the production of Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things*, and the glut of similar narratives on cross-cultural – or indeed, *hybrid* – experiences that were published in the wake of Roy's hit novel:

For the next two years after that there was so many books that came in from people with mixed upbringings and experiences. So you'd get my fictionalised memoir of growing up Sri Lankan or being Philippino in New York. It's funny because the agents would send you the submission and it would say this could do what *The God of Small Things* did for you. Which is kind of interesting, the subtext there. The thing is it's not just true of race and nation – and nation is important too. Absolutely the same thing happened after *Angela's Ashes* – Frank McCourt – which is a bestselling memoir about growing up poor in Ireland. You got shitloads of Irish books through – *this could be the next*.... People need boxes. [...] What's scary now though is with BookScan, people probably will look up the sales figures through the tills for *Brick Lane* and for *The God of Small Things* and then will decide how much we should spend on a Guatam Malkani. That's pretty scary.

In some ways this narrative encapsulates the commodification of hybridity, where the potentially disruptive narrative of cross-cultural entanglements, is reduced to a literary formula, and in the process, essential difference. It is interesting to note that

the author Gautam Malkani was mentioned several times by David in our interview. For David, Malkani – who caused a furore within the industry over the reportedly six-figure advance for his debut novel *Londonstani* – represents the cynical attempt by publishing houses to repeat past success, in this instance, emulating the ‘multiculturalist’ novels of Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. He explains how, as part of this overarching logic, novels get pitched and bought in this way. David himself described how, ‘you weave a little dream’, in order to convince sales managers as to why a certain book should be acquired, yet such a strategy – which David expresses in a way that stresses the human, emotional dimension to such an appeal – is itself based on an economic rationale that sales personnel can understand. While he stresses that this is not just true of narratives on race, but also nationhood and other themes, after all, ‘people need boxes’, this just further underlines the reductive or ‘scary’ effects of the normative rationale behind decisions that ultimately decide which novels get commissioned.

If we zoom out further, we see how particular commissioning decisions and editorial strategies are inextricably bound up in the political economy of publishing:

David: Publishing is never going to be a good business model, it’s too risky.  
A) There are too many books out there to choose from. It’s not like there are four major brands of tinned beans – there are 200,000 books a year or whatever the crazy stat it is. So what publishers tend to do is they tend to put all of their cash on ten books in a year that they know are going to succeed – Jeffrey Archer’s and co. – authors who have shown time and time again there is no risk because people will always buy them, and you put all your resources behind them.

AS: So this can only mean you are getting a very conservative range of output.

David: That is exactly right. And it’s getting worse. Publishers are taking fewer risks.

This comment illustrates a common theme in political economy and communications research that has highlighted how concentration in the mass media has a tendency towards conservatism, rather than innovation and originality. Compounded by the nature of cultural production and the impossibility of predicting success, what I have attempted to demonstrate in this section is how an increasingly competitive marketplace is producing conditions where, as David explains, ‘publishers are taking fewer risks’. This has obvious ramifications for the British Asian cultural commodity,

which as in the case in television, and theatre, is not usually regarded as a product that will produce bring large returns, or indeed, surplus value. Certain exceptions such as *Brick Lane*, which sold over 400,000 copies, have challenged this view, but this has produced a situation where publishers are looking for the next Monica Ali, rather than taking a risk on another original voice.

To conclude this section, I want to reiterate that the commissioning/content acquisition stage of production is the process in which the positioning and branding of British Asian literature begins. While, as I have outlined, the commercial pressures on publishing houses limits the acquisition of British Asian novels, the issue that I believe is neglected and deserves more attention is how the rationalisation techniques that are designed to manage this uncertainty are underpinned by a neo-colonial ideology that seeks to maintain the essential difference between the Other and the Self. We see this in the way that the acquisition process is based on estimating sales for an unpublished novel based on a comparison with a similar published novel, meaning an Asian novelist tends to be bracketed together with other Asian novelists. As demonstrated, the potency of this ideology is how it is produced through normative rationale; pigeonholing in this way appears perfectly *natural* and good business practice. To reiterate, this is what I refer to as the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital, and commodification as a technology of racialised governmentalities. The British Asian cultural commodity is shaped through the production process – again, commodification as a technology of racial governance – to achieve certain nationalist, racist ends (i.e. the preservation of a pure, racially fixed national identity), which occurs under the cover of rational economic behaviour. Again, this becomes more apparent in subsequent points of production, where the distribution, design and marketing stages each have further racialising effects upon the British Asian novel that presents it as essential difference. As such, I want to underscore those moments where ethnicity is at the forefront of commissioning decisions, as it forms part of the logic that determines how the hybrid British Asian cultural commodity is eventually reified as absolute difference.

## **Commissioning British Asian theatre: The Arts Council and tick-box politics**

Even though it has a very different political economy to the broadcasting and book publishing industries, in this section I want to demonstrate how theatre, nonetheless, has a similar logic of capital running through its commissioning practices. This might appear surprising since theatre does not appear in the business of surplus value accumulation (perhaps because it still has an aura of ‘high art’). In chapter two I argued why, despite being almost entirely dependent on state subsidies, theatre production should also be characterised as the act of commodification. As such, one of the aims of this section on theatre is to demonstrate how the processes of commodification – and its accompanying sites of contestation and ambivalence – are as applicable to British Asian cultural production in the subsidised sector, as it is in market-driven industries. The particular focus is how such tensions manifest in the commissioning and programming<sup>61</sup> of British Asian theatre. Following the broad arc of this chapter, I want to offer a further sense of how different commissioning practices in different political economies of cultural production, lead to similar patterns with regard to British Asian cultural politics and the politics of representation.

### The landscape of British Asian theatre production

During a ten-year period between 1994-2004, British theatre received over £300 million from the Arts Council (Arts Council of England, 2006). This was part of a general trend towards greater investment in the arts in the UK: since the arrival of the National Lottery in 1994, it has awarded £2 billion for the arts, while the Labour government has invested half a billion pounds, with £75 million allocated to the Arts Council England in 2003 (Mirza, 2006). Culturally diverse theatre<sup>62</sup> – which is

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<sup>61</sup> Commissioning and programming are similar but different concepts. As in publishing, commissioning is the act of paying a writer to write a play specifically for a venue to produce, whereas programming refers to putting on plays, whether a venue’s own production, or a production from an independent company. Most of the British Asian cultural producers working in the theatre I spoke to had their own production companies, and subsequently, their narratives relate mostly to the experience of programming.

<sup>62</sup> The term ‘culturally diverse theatre’ emerged in the Arts Council report *The Landscape of Fact* (1997) which defined ‘cultural diversity’ as reflecting ‘an increasing desire by funding bodies to create some form of dialogue with the arts and artists in question and to unpack some of the more overcautious assumptions of multiculturalism’ (ibid.: 35). It relates to the major ethnic minority

almost entirely dependent on money from the Arts Council – has subsequently seen a significant increase in funding, aided by a shift from historical patterns of funding to a more developmental framework (Khan, 2002). After decades of neglect (documented in Naseem Khan’s influential text *The Art Britain Ignores* (1976)), and the demise of the Greater London Council (GLC), 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. From these efforts emerged a number of studies and schemes<sup>63</sup> that have attempted to increase cultural diversity and representation within the theatre, and assist in the development and sustainability of culturally diverse-led organisations. In some ways, Black, Asian and Chinese theatre in the UK has never had it so good, not least in comparison to other nations. As audience development consultant Hardish Virk maintains, ‘we’re very lucky in our relation with Arts Council money because if you go to Europe there’s hardly any regional or national money – arts organisations have to do it off their own back.’

While this paints a fairly healthy picture of culturally diverse theatrical production, the actual realities for British Asian theatre are not as encouraging. As the Sustained Theatre Consultation (2006) found, despite the Arts Council’s achievement in increasing money to organisations categorised as ‘culturally diverse’, it still was not ‘to the extent it could and should have done for theatre practitioners in The Sector<sup>64</sup>’ (5). Compounding the situation further, there have been cuts in Arts Council funding, with a significant portion of its received income being diverted to the 2012 London Olympics. This has inevitably impacted upon British Asian theatre, with two notable examples being Tara Arts (one of the oldest British Asian theatre companies) losing half of its annual funding, and the Watermans Theatre (which has mounted British

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communities in the country, that is, African, Caribbean, Asian and Chinese arts, shorthanded to Black, Asian and Chinese (Khan, 2002).

<sup>63</sup> Notable examples include the *Eclipse Report* (2001) and the *Whose Theatre?* report (2006), and The New Audiences Programme and the Black Regional Initiative in Theatre (BRIT).

<sup>64</sup> ‘The Sector’ is the term of the *Whose Theatre* report in preference to ‘BME’ and ‘culturally diverse’.

Asian productions for over twenty years) finding its funding cut totally<sup>65</sup>. In light of this, Hardish Virk presented me with a revised account of the state of British Asian theatre from the practitioners' point of view:

The Arts Council is far more diverse than it has ever been before [...], and there are some really strong personalities there who are well informed who know what's going on. They are the ones who are making some of the decisions in the Arts Council. [...] But there's been massive cut in funding recently. The lottery has diverted funds from the Arts Council – something like £40 million, and that's going to have a major impact on smaller companies. It's all going to the Olympics. The Olympics is getting into debt so they've had to divert funds from other places. This will have a detrimental effect on the development of independent theatre.

It is the 'detrimental effect' of these developments that I want to unpack in relation to the commissioning and programming of British Asian theatre.

### Programming British Asian theatre

Theatre is a very bureaucratic industry (not least because the venues that mount British Asian plays and the British Asian theatre companies themselves are reliant on Arts Council funding), and subsequently the practice of commissioning/programming in theatre demands an awareness of its structures and processes. Heading the venues will be an Artistic Director who is responsible for commissioning plays and programming the season. Generally speaking, the Artistic Director is employed by and accountable to a board of members, who will discuss artistic policy, in addition to other issues pertaining to the management of the venue. With regard to artistic policy, a venue will have a relative amount of autonomy in its development. The Arts Council is mostly recognised as an 'arms-length' institution, and though a venue will have structures set in place for diversity, access and so on, the Arts Council will rarely intervene in artistic decisions. However, venues might have an expectation over the kind of plays they should be mounting, which can lead to controversy when funding is cut based on not fulfilling these informal remits – as is the case of Watermans theatre (and why it was successfully able to take legal

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<sup>65</sup> Though it eventually received a new funding recommendation from the Arts Council after it took legal action ('Watermans wins in legal action against Arts Council', *Asians in Media*, 22 June, 2008).

action). The actual process of commissioning/programming occurs during a meeting with the Artistic Director and several other personnel who may or may not include an associate director, the general manager, the marketing manager, and a community/education director. Again, the Artistic Director has a relative degree of autonomy though has to work within a framework set by the board, regarding aesthetic criteria, and the proportion of the season that are to be commissions, venue productions, co-productions or touring/external productions.

Despite the political economy of theatre being quite different to broadcasting and book publishing, not least because of the almost complete reliance on subsidies, I still encountered a repeat of the attitude that commissioning was becoming increasingly commercially minded. The particular issues that arise for British Asian theatre lie in the dynamic between the dual tensions that dominate programming/commissioning decisions: 'tick-boxing' and generating box-office income or 'bums-on-seats'. A summary of these tensions, and the general factors that lie behind programming decisions, appears in the following account from Ed Higginson, producer of Rasa Productions:

AS: During the programming process, are theatres thinking in terms of artistic merit alone or acclaim in the press? Or are they thinking in terms of sales, the box office?

Ed Higginson: (Pause) That's a very hard one to tease out cause everyone is going to have a different take on it. I mean, first, let's go down the cynical route, Asian theatre, culturally diverse theatre, black theatre whatever... it's an Arts Council priority, therefore, ticking boxes... *blah blah*. I mean a lot of places want to have their Asian theatre thing on that season and therefore they have ticked that box – if you're going to be totally cynical about it. Some places will actually genuinely believe they do have an audience they are not tapping into and do need to actually seriously reflect the more the breadth and nature of British society and British culture and are quite genuine in their efforts to do that, but some people are just ticking boxes. Whether it becomes bums on seats is a different thing. And that comes down to a whole host of factors: are you known as a company or not? Will your brand say something to the audience? Relying on the 'brown pound' as it were because, often that again - and this is cynical – that's why they want you there because the hope is you do 'brown' things and you'll bring 'brown' people and therefore everything will look rosy in our venue.

There are several issues that are introduced in this comment that will be unpacked over the course of this section and the thesis in general. The issues and tensions that

this narrative raises emerge from an attempt to commodify theatre production, revealed through the language of ‘branding’, ‘bums-on-seats’, ‘the ‘brown pound’’. Even so-called ‘tick-boxing’ – programming culturally diverse theatre (the terminology of which Ed seems quite cynical) for the sake of fulfilling certain Arts Council remits – follows the logic of commodification, though this is in need of further exploration.

Where the issue of commodification is most explicit in theatre is in the question of returns from the box office. Echoing the similar themes of ratings and sales in broadcasting and publishing respectively, the question of box-office income in particular has become increasingly pressing in the theatre. This was made apparent when I asked Chris Honer – Artistic Director of the Library Theatre in Manchester (which has co-produced plays with Rasa) – about the factors that go into programming decisions:

You have to balance it. Well, the thing that you probably look at first is probably the financial situation of the theatre at that moment. So for instance, this time eighteen months ago, we got into quite some financial difficulty. We were heading for what looked like quite a big shortfall, so it was quite important that when we were planning the season [...] we couldn't really risk anything that stood a chance of not getting the required income. So that was actually at the forefront of our thinking, as well as thinking for instance, one of the ways which you can ensure not having to big a loss is by making sure the plays don't cost too much to put on. And the biggest single expense is performers. So for six months we did quite small cast plays. That I think is probably the first thing that colours the way you think.

This quote from an Artistic Director is a fairly clear illustration of how the economic impacts upon aesthetics, where, as in the publishing industry (though in a more informal manner) the venue calculates the margin of mounting a production, based on cost, and whether the play is going to have wide enough appeal to ensure a high box-office return. As is typical of cultural production as a whole, this is based on guesswork and prediction, and is a highly risky business. It is also significant that Chris describes financial factors as the ‘first’ consideration in a programming decision, despite the heavy subsidies theatres receive. Peacock (1999) highlights how independent theatre has been put under great economic strain, and the threat (and

reality) of funding cuts was a recurrent theme that emerged from interviews with respondents.

*Not Asian Enough: Tick boxing and pigeonholing Asian arts*

The increase in commercial pressure affects any theatre producer attempting to produce a play that is considered different or challenging, regardless of ethnicity. But a further site of tension for British Asian theatre is the issue of tick boxing. The focus of this section so far has been the commissioning/programming practices of venues, but the Arts Council also plays a role in this due to its funding of productions – certainly in the case of British Asian theatre. The council’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 ‘tick-boxing’ where Asian plays will get programmed simply because they are Asian. This is dangerous because such programming becomes tokenistic, reflected in the ways that these productions are subsequently (under) resourced, as shall be made evident in chapters five and seven.

One might immediately consider it ironic that respondents spoke about the Arts Council’s emphasis on funding culturally diverse theatre in negative ways. Even though the chances of culturally diverse plays getting programmed are greatly improved, because of economic pressures, venues tend to prefer commissioning the populist/commercial end of Asian theatre – or rather, those plays that have a particular *Asian slant*. For instance in our interview, Lalitha Rajan of Ankur Productions in Scotland criticised a venue for tackling new Arts Council priorities on culturally diverse work by mounting only known commercially successful plays such as *The Trouble with Asian Men* rather than more challenging work – what she calls 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. A similar narrative appears in a scathing *Time Out* review of the ADFED<sup>66</sup>/English National Opera production *Gaddafi: A Living Myth* (provoking an angry response from ADFED in the following issue)<sup>67</sup>. As one extract states:

Promoters are asked in the Arts Council application form, how they might improve 'productivity', 'access' and 'diversity'; how they might entice young, low-income and ethnically diverse crowds. Formal innovation is encouraged, as are projects that blur the boundaries between various genres. And there is a desire to stir controversy and garner column inches. These are all entirely laudable aims, but you can see how *Gaddafi: A Living Myth* would have fulfilled every remit on that checklist long before any aesthetic criteria had been considered. (John Lewis, 'The man from the Arts Council...he says yes!', *Time Out*, Sept 13-20 2006)

While the article was controversial in many ways, this quote draws a relation between the political economy of the subsidised arts sector (and its bureaucracy), and aesthetics. The notion that producers are encouraged to 'stir controversy and garner column inches' additionally mirrors the discourse of 'noise' produced in narratives of commissioning in broadcasting.

Lalitha's suggestion that tick-box culture promotes certain narratives over others, recalls the themes of chapter three, regarding a certain commercial expectation of British Asian cultural production. As playwright and founder of the company, Conspirators Kitchen, Nirjay Mahrindu states, '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'. The same narrative is repeated in the following account from writer Parv Bancil, who describes how this tension exploded during a meeting with a venue for which he was commissioned to write a play:

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<sup>66</sup> ADFED is the community music/education project run by the band Asian Dub Foundation.

<sup>67</sup> This review encapsulates a particular argument regarding the public funding of arts, particularly 'BME' or 'culturally diverse arts'. It's not my intention to provide a critique of arts and cultural policy, (I am more interested in its affects as part of a process of commodification), though as examples of the nature of the debate I recommend Sonya Dyer's (2007) *provocation essay* 'Boxed In: How Cultural Diversity Policies Constrict Black Artists', published by the Manifesto Club, and Mirza (2006) *Culture Vultures: Is UK arts policy damaging the arts?* published by the Policy Exchange

It came to a point where what I had been commissioned to do before now wasn't wanted. They wanted *East is East*, they all wanted *Goodness Gracious Me*. And I was like, you commissioned me to do edgy, dark plays, that's what I do. [...] I was writing a play about honour killings, this is back in 2000 – they wanted a play, they wanted me to write it, but they wanted a comedy like *East is East*. And I was like, but it's about a fucking honour killing! And I think I hit a mental block. I think now in hindsight I had a little nervous breakdown. I just said to them in the meeting, you want *Goodness Gracious Me*. Just say it, you want a pantomime. Don't bullshit me and say you want an honour killing, you don't - you want a comedy. Let's just be straight with each other. And I think they thought, right ok ... I suddenly realised that this is pointless. And because the Bollywood thing had come in and all that, it went crazy for the wrong reasons

Thus, Parv feels a disconnect between his aesthetics and politics and the commercial expectation of the venue's programming, and their understanding of what kind of narratives of Asianness are going to be successful. As has been a theme in this chapter (one that will be unpacked in subsequent chapters), there is a perception that it is Indophilic representations of Asians – Bollywood, saris and samosas, arranged marriages, religious fanatics etc.<sup>68</sup> – that are considered the most recognisable forms of Asian culture and therefore, commercially viable risks. Parv's story of the commissioning meeting echoes a similar experience of Ed at Rasa, who described to me how Rasa was once told it was '*not Asian enough*', or rather, its aesthetics was based on a representation of Asianness that was seen to have little commercial value, certainly in contrast to a Bollywood aesthetic. As Ed expands,

[T]he response I have found in the past when we were struggling to get a piece of work on, is the, you're not doing Bollywood, kind of thing. You can almost feel the venues saying, you're not doing Bollywood stuff – I don't know we can do anything with you or sell you or anything.

Again, these narratives mirror similar stories I have drawn from the other industries, which allude to how the politics of representation is mediated through commercial forces, often to the detriment of the original aesthetic and cultural politics. Indeed, Ed's remark that Rasa was not something they were 'able to sell' brings into sharp focus the notion of theatre production as commodification, and the ideological dimension to this process. Thus we see how racialised governmentalities – that is the

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<sup>68</sup> These days, plays on honour killings – such as the one Parv believed he was commissioned to write – would probably be included in this list though at the time Parv was referring to, the subject was not in the popular imagination.

regulatory, political and representational dimensions of Occidental imaginative geography – underwrite the commissioning or programming stage of theatre production. More precisely, there is an expectation – embedded in the very structures of arts funding and venue provision – over the kinds of plays British Asian companies should be producing. Furthermore, the accounts of respondents working in theatre suggest that particular representations of Asianness (i.e. Indophilic forms) are privileged over more challenging, potentially disruptive narratives. This becomes more evident in the following chapters, where we encounter more tangible examples of how narratives of difference are physically governed through commodification.

## **Conclusion**

Due to its proximity to the structures of the cultural industries, the commissioning/content acquisition stage of cultural production presents the researcher with an exemplary site in which to explore how macro-structural properties selectively attempt to standardise certain micro-level behaviours, how social actors practice their agency in the face of this, and how this in turn effects the production of postcolonial symbols and meaning. Certainly, I found that it was at this point in production that respondents felt most acutely the effects of external, structural forces upon their practice, whether via public service or Arts Council remits, or executive/shareholder expectations. My argument that the process of commissioning/content acquisition represents a stage in the governance of the British Asian cultural commodity emerged from tracing the connections between the political economy, and the behaviours of social actors, and unpicking the cultures of production produced from the dynamic between them. Hence, this chapter provides the base for the analysis that follows in subsequent chapters, not just in terms of outlining the structural context that subsequent empirical data will be set against, but also in terms of fully demonstrating the nature of my analytical approach from the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy.

With regard to the findings in the chapter, even though it was important to expose how an increasingly marketised cultural sector has a tendency towards a narrow and conservative range of output, this is not a particularly new insight, and has indeed,

been the subject of much communications research. Instead, my focus was on highlighting how commissioning/content acquisition is an initial point in the gradual unfolding of a racist commercial logic that attempts to reify hybrid forms into essential difference. This is more evident in some industries than others, but already at this stage of production, we see how the British Asian cultural commodity is governed in particular ways. In the case of television, ‘minority-interest’ programmes (which is how the stories of and by Asians are often regarded) need to demonstrate broader, ‘mainstream’ appeal, which favours a safe and palatable version of Asianness that will not alienate the white mainstream audience. In publishing, under an increasingly rationalised production process, acquisition strategy is based on being able to scientifically pigeonhole the novel/author, whereupon we see the start of the logic in which the Asian author is branded by their ethnic identity. In theatre, a prevailing culture of ‘tick-boxing’, has led to a certain expectation of how an Asian play should be, favouring those in a particularly populist, commercial vein. In each of these examples, though they might manifest in different ways and in very different contexts, I argue that they are launched from the same logic of capital that has very specific racialising effects. Again, this will become more apparent in subsequent stages of production.

What is particularly revealing at the commissioning stage is how this logic manifests through normative, commonsense business language. It is for this reason that I opened the chapter with an emphasis on the discursive quality of commissioning, and how decisions are narrated and rationalised; such a notion underpins what I mean by commodification as a technology of racialised governmentalities and what I call the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital. As I have argued, the commissioning process is the point where the rationalisation process formally begins, and in the following chapters I will demonstrate how the neo-colonial ideology that is bound up in this process unravels further, with real effects on the British Asian cultural commodity. This is the theme of the next chapter on the distribution stage of production.

## **Chapter Five – Distribution and the temporal and spatial ordering of the British Asian cultural commodity**

In this chapter, I demonstrate how the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital that manifests during the commissioning/content acquisition process begins to have real tangible effects for the British Asian cultural commodity in the distribution stage of production. When I use the term ‘distribution’ I am referring to the physical placement of the cultural good in the market. In publishing, I am referring to where the book is sold, in television, when a programme is scheduled for broadcast; and in theatre I am referring to where and how long the play is mounted and performed. According to Ryan (1992), distribution is part of the circulation stage of production that constitutes the final part of the commodity phase. Yet, it is often during the process of commissioning that the scheduling and positioning of the cultural good is determined, and since the logic of one informs the other, I deal with them in this order.

Framed within the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy, I focus on the distribution stage in commodification as a form of racialised governance. Specifically, I am thinking of the way British Asian texts are dispersed, where they literally come to be placed at the centre of discourse, or on the periphery, depending on their narrative. The critical nature of this stage of production – or rather, circulation – is highlighted by Nicholas Garnham (1990: 161-162) when he says, ‘*It is cultural distribution, not cultural production, that is the key locus of power and profit. It is access to distribution which is the key to cultural plurality*’. In light of this, the aim of this chapter is to bring into sharp focus the decisive nature of distribution for British Asian cultural production. It is at this stage that we find the temporal and spatial manifestation of the Manichean colonial vision of difference (Gilroy, 2000a) that underpins the rationalisation process of industrial production.

The rationalisation of the distribution of the British Asian cultural commodity operates on two dualities that have a racialising effect: mainstream versus niche, centre versus periphery. The distribution of British Asian television programmes (i.e.

its scheduling) falls in the former category, and represents the temporal embodiment of the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital. This is revealed in the way that such programmes rarely feature in primetime, and are frequently marginalised to the ‘ethnic graveyard’ slots (Campion, 2005: 51). This is based on an industry perception of British Asian television as niche, with little mainstream appeal. In this section I highlight how, in order to appear on primetime, an Asian programme needs to exhibit crossover potential, usually by producing a particular representation of Asian identity and culture that executives imagine will be something the ‘white mainstream’ audience can understand and relate to. As I shall demonstrate, this has physical effects, where those programmes that provide particular Indophilic representation of Asianness are more likely to be allocated primetime viewing over more complex representations, which are sidelined to non-mainstream timeslots.

If distribution in television represents the temporal governance of the British Asian cultural commodity, the distribution of theatre and publishing is the spatial manifestation of the racialising/rationalising logic of capitalist cultural production. In theatre there are two facets to its distribution that have particular implications upon British Asian cultural politics. Firstly is the issue of the length of the run, and secondly the location of venues. As is the case in television, unless a production is seen to have appeal to mainstream white audiences, Asian plays are very rarely given long runs which is detrimental in terms of getting press and recognition. Additionally they generally only appear at off-West End or regional theatres, often where there is a known local Asian community which venues and the Arts Council are keen to engage (based on an assumption that Asian plays are the best way of engaging them). In the case of publishing, distribution sees a continuation of the branding/positioning logic that appears at the commissioning stage of production. Here we see how Asian authors get grouped together, whether in window displays or specialist sections, based on their shared ethnicity. The racialisation/rationalisation dimension of distribution is revealed again, in the way that more stereotypical representations of Asianness are prioritised over others. Indeed, in this chapter I start establishing the notion that despite the contrasting political economies, we see certain recurring themes, which stem from a process of rationalisation that is becoming standardised throughout the cultural industries.

## ***Indian Food Made Easy or Desi DNA? Scheduling British Asian television***

The fundamental aim of television scheduling is to boost ratings and prevent a viewer from switching over to the competition. As such, scheduling is a structured task (with its own position), constituted by a range of considerations and constraints; as Fanthome (2006; 86) states, ‘Schedulers must be able to analyse audience data, find the right time slots for programmes and programmes for the right slots, locate “new” audiences, and ensure that the viewers are able to navigate the schedule with relative ease’. Since the proliferation of satellite, digital and cable channels, audiences have become more fragmented and the ‘art of scheduling’ has become an even more inexact science (ibid.). Hence, schedulers are assuming an increasingly influential role in the commissioning process. Whereas in the past scheduling was offer-led, and schedulers would construct a schedule out of the programmes handed to them, in more recent times, this has shifted to demand-led scheduling, where the audience needs are anticipated, and the timeslots filled appropriately (ibid.). As such, the scheduler has become, as the BBC’s Nasfim Haque states, the ‘controller’s right-hand man [sic]’. The role of the scheduler is to outline the kinds of programmes that are needed to fill specific slots, based on various sources of statistical information, such as historical and up-to-the-minute ratings data, audience demographics and so on. Much like sales managers in publishing, schedulers represent the growing quantification and rationalisation of editorial decisions – an attempt to bridle the unpredictability of the market.

As I highlighted in the previous chapter, the intensely competitive marketplace that characterises the contemporary television industry means that executives – even those working in public service broadcasting – are pressured to produce ‘mainstream’ output, or, inversely, ensure that niche stories can crossover to the biggest potential audience. This is the particular way Aaqil Ahmed, head of religion at Channel 4, makes sense of his work in relation to scheduling. Speaking in front of the BBC Charter Review Select Committee on the subject of religious programming, Aaqil described how the Channel 4 religion unit has commissioned ‘50 hours of programming of which only 4.4 hours are not broadcast at 7, 8 or 9pm during the week or on a Saturday’ (United Kingdom Parliament, 2005). In light of this, I wanted

to see how Aaqil explained his success in gaining coveted primetime slots. This produced the following account:

Well, the honest truth is you have to deliver. [...] If you go to your bosses and say we've got *Inside the Mind of a Suicide-Bomber*, *Children of Abraham*, *Karbala* – these are the first three commissions you know – *Priest Idol*, *God is Black* with Robert [Beckford] – these are the first five things we commissioned. If you go to them with that then they are going to turn around to you and say, alright, we'll have all of those in primetime! They're not going to want put those on the periphery of the schedule because they are just too bloody good. So all you've got to do is convince them that these things are bloody good [...] look at the cookery show [*Indian Food Made Easy*] – the cookery show is on primetime. All the factors that make that work are, it's mainstream enough for a wide-enough audience and it's subject matter that everyone is going to be interested in. And I think they have got an interesting presenter and it just feels right, so go for it. Sanjeev Bhaskar wants to do something on India, put it on primetime because he's Sanjeev. It's all about what you are selling.

The initial part of this narrative is based on a normative sense of quality; Aaqil matter-of-factly attributes his success in acquiring primetime positions to simply making programmes that are 'bloody good'. Yet towards the end of this account, the respondent provides more detail about what he believes are the factors that ensure primetime programming: content that is 'mainstream enough for a wide-enough audience', preferably fronted by a celebrity. (Furthermore, Aaqil's final comment about 'what you are selling' emphasises again the status of a television programme as a commodity that is bought and sold.) It is interesting that he uses BBC cookery show *Indian Food Made Easy* – produced by the Asian Programming Unit (APU) – as an example of 'mainstream' Asian programming, especially since, as we shall see, he is critical of the BBC's 'flagship' Asian programming *Desi DNA* (also produced by the APU) for not having the same crossover appeal. Indeed, a Pact<sup>69</sup> report (Pollard et al, 2004) on 'minority ethnic-led' independent television companies noted how the industry was 'moving towards mainstreaming cultural diversity' (ibid.: 18), following a rationale 'that mainstream and minority tastes are no longer divided' (ibid.:30). It is precisely this *mainstreaming* of British Asian programming that acts as a form of racialised governance, where cultural practices are shaped in a way that

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<sup>69</sup> A UK trade association that represents and promotes the commercial interests of independent feature film, television, children's and animation media companies.

transforms the hybrid entity into predictable, reified difference. Once again this is enacted through a normative commercial rationale that follows a neo-liberal trend in the cultural industries that states that the free market and free trade is the most efficient means of producing and distributing cultural works (Hesmondhalgh, 2008). This *mainstreaming* issue will be explored in more detail in the following chapter on design and packaging. However, the focus here is how the politics of British Asian cultural production are affected by the supposed convergence of mainstream and niche (or rather the subsumption of the latter by the former) as it manifests in the process of scheduling.

### 'Mainstream' vs. 'niche'

Implicit in Aaqil Ahmed's recipe for securing primetime slots is an assumption about what is perceived to be 'mainstream' and 'niche': as he states, primetime is ensured by producing content that is 'mainstream enough for a wide-enough audience and [has] subject matter that everyone is going to be interested in'. Further implied is that 'mainstream' is equated to the white majority, with 'niche' associated with ethnically defined communities; according to Nasfim Haque's definition, '[niche] is anything that is of a different culture'. Thus, a recurring theme in the research was how British Asian cultural works are by default regarded as niche, or put another way, how its success is measured by its ability to crossover into the white, mainstream market. When put in these terms, the ideological dimension to the 'mainstream' and 'niche' binary becomes evident. Two BBC programmes – *Indian Food Made Easy* and *Lost World Of The Raj* – were cited by several respondents as examples of how Asian programming *can* obtain primetime scheduling, but these programmes seem to present a more recognisable – or indeed Indophilic – representation of Asianness deemed suitable for mainstream, white tastes. Vijay Prashad (2000) in his historical overview of Indophilia, refers to the West's long held fascination with the 'ghastly and beautiful mystery' (32) of the Indian sub-continent, and suggests that it is only those versions of Asianness judged 'beautiful' (e.g. Indian cuisine or ancient history) or 'ghastly' (e.g. Muslim suicide bombers) that are able to secure mainstream, primetime coverage. It is the normative terms in which this is rationalised during the scheduling process – via the notions of 'mainstream' and 'niche' – that dictate how

the counter-narratives of difference are governed, foregrounding the more complicit narratives, and sidelining the potentially disruptive ones.

Thus, scheduling is a critical area for British Asian programming, providing another example of how the logic of capital, through cultural commodification, attempts to govern the narratives of difference within racialised hierarchies of inclusion. As highlighted in the previous chapter, one recent industry development that has affected the narratives of British Asian symbol creators is how channels are placing less priority on one-off films/documentaries. An increasingly competitive environment means that broadcasters are looking for format-based series, which have proved a lucrative market since they cost less to make, and can be sold abroad. Since British Asians wanting to explore British Asian issues are unlikely to receive a commission for a whole series (with a few notable exceptions), producers and directors are confined to making one-off films. In terms of scheduling, such films very rarely get primetime slots, despite receiving relatively large budgets. This issue unravels in an exchange with Minoo Bhatia who reflected on her award-winning BBC2 documentary *Who do you think you're talking to?*<sup>70</sup> in which call-centre workers in Bangalore and Norwich swapped jobs:

AS: Were you happy with the way your films went out?

MB: No. I feel with the call centre film it went out on a really late slot.

11:20pm. Which is a real shame because it was a really well resourced film – it's not as if it was on a tiny budget – I do feel the BBC should have put on that film earlier...

AS: Do they tell you in advance when they plan on showing the film?

MB: Sometimes.

AS: What did they tell you with this one?

MB: <pause> It was all scheduled to do with the end of the financial year ...it's so complex how they make scheduling decisions. So one single film is not a big priority for them. They are going to be worrying about scheduling big series and stuff. Yeah, I was disappointed

The reference to how the decision to schedule the film at that particular time was informed by the 'end of the financial year' (whether or not this was the real reason for the late timeslot) pulls into sharp focus the complex, rationalised processes that underpins the scheduling stage of production. Moreover, Minoo's comment stresses

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<sup>70</sup> The film won best documentary at the CRE's Race in Media Awards.

how under such a rationale, single films (particularly ones on cross-cultural entanglements) are not a 'big priority' for the major channels. Nasfim Haque, describes a similar experience with her film *Don't Panic, I'm Islamic!* – part of a new director's strand on BBC3 – which was a humorous look at representations of Islam, through the premise of setting up a fake Muslim PR company called *Jihad Media*<sup>71</sup>. Despite being well received by the senior executives the film was nonetheless scheduled for 12:30am:

The whole strand was going on late because it was difficult to bring in audiences for single films. Which I agree with, it is difficult to bring in audiences for single films if they're not advertised. But I think it could have gone on at 11 o'clock and if you can watch the first few minutes just out of curiosity, I'm pretty certain the audience would have stuck with it. Actually it got the biggest audience out of all the films [in the strand]. I had some really nice feedback from the commissioners and the controllers. They all said the film was well produced and very well made but the subject matter was so difficult... I think that if I made a programme about fat people having sex they probably would have put it on earlier!

What is striking about these stories is how, despite being 'well resourced' as Minoo states (Nasfim told me later that her film also received a decent budget), the BBC still scheduled the films for late at night. Such a narrative is intended to imply that the commissioning of these films appears tokenistic; the BBC's public service remit says it needs to commission programmes that appeal to all the communities of Britain, but there is no regulation over what time they should be shown<sup>72</sup>. What is made apparent is a sense that executives are unwilling to take a risk on subject matter they find 'difficult'. Commercial pressures mean that audiences need to be maximised, and even in the case of public service broadcaster, the BBC, scheduling has become demand-led rather than offer-led (Fanthome, 2006). The commercial circumstances of such scheduling decisions is stated in quite unequivocal terms in the following comment from a commissioning editor, speaking in the context of Channel 4:

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<sup>71</sup> The film has many notable moments, including interviews with Bernard Manning and Max Clifford, and an opening spoof of the Bjork track 'It's All So Quiet'.

<sup>72</sup> Ofcom are responsible for schedules but these are in terms of enforcing standards of impartiality, and the avoidance of offence and harm (and the 'watershed'). Additionally, they make sure that certain quotas are met, regarding the number of hours of certain genres are too be shown. However, since the 2003 Communication Act, channels have taken responsibility over their own schedules and assess their own performances in relation to Ofcom guidelines (Fanthome, 2006)

If you say, alright, instead of *Jamie's Kitchen* we will put out *Narinder's Kitchen* and it only gets watched by one million then, why are you going to do that if you are a commercial broadcaster? No, you put *Narinder's Kitchen* out at a time when it hasn't got to bring in as many viewers because Channel 4 is a commercial broadcaster. It has to survive on advertising; there is no handout, no licence fee. If you want to see it survive on advertising and you don't think that they are going to make all their money from populist programmes then we will be making programmes for a quarter of the budget because that is what the market will pay.

(Quoted in Campion, 2005: 53)

Such an account perhaps explains why Nasfim believes broadcasters would rather schedule a programme about 'fat people having sex' for 9pm rather than an original, funny and provocative look at representations of Islam in modern day Britain. In the rationalised schema of television production, the former is, somewhat perversely, deemed more commercial than the latter.

#### *Desi DNA* and the racialisation of niche

Again, the experiences of Minoo and Nasfim relate to a normative institutional understanding of what is 'mainstream' and what is 'niche'. Despite appearing as commonsense knowledge, such a discourse is not so decisive, exemplified by the debate over the scheduling of *Desi DNA*. *Desi DNA* is a BBC2 series produced by the APU, covering British Asian art, culture and entertainment. Wanting to break away from the old *Network East* strand, which he found staid and boring, Tommy Nagra created *Desi DNA* 'as something with a really strong British Asian identity, that was confident and brash [...] comfortable in its own skin'. Waheed Khan, one of the original directors on *Desi DNA*, stressed how the show's aesthetic was purposefully designed to obliterate prevailing images of Asian youth as 'uncool' and conformist, making it appear 'slick', 'pushing the limit and putting the money on screen, and having great talent and good stories and good journalism and making it better than, or as good as MTV.' However, five series later, despite critical acclaim<sup>73</sup> for its fresh and vibrant representation of British Asian youth cultures, the programme is still shown relatively late at night, at 11:20pm. The most cited reason

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<sup>73</sup> The series won 'Best Lifestyle Programme' at the 2004 Royal Television Society Awards.

given by my respondents was because it has been unable to break away from the perception that it is only of interest to Asians. As Aaqil Ahmed said, ‘the mere fact that it goes out at 11:20pm to me would suggest that everybody who has watched that at the BBC thinks this is a show just for Asians. That’s why we can’t put it out at 8 o’ clock because it’s just not wide enough’.

However, this was a perception that was also challenged by many of my respondents. Waheed stated unequivocally that *Desi DNA* would have been a success if it had been shown earlier, but it was hampered not only by the late timeslot but the lack of publicity the BBC afforded it; as he said, ‘You can make the best thing in the world, but if people don’t know about it they’re not going to watch it. So you’re kind of dead in the water’. Echoing the issue of tokenism discussed earlier, freelancer Varsha Chohan makes a similar point regarding the lack of faith executives and schedulers have in the show, to the extent that its commissioned just so the BBC can tick a certain box: ‘Do they think they are not going to get the audiences, so “let’s stick it on a late schedule, because let’s be seen to be doing our bit”? So they’ll put it on and, “oh well the viewing figures are shit, we’ve done our best”?’ Yet *Desi DNA*’s creator, Tommy Nagra is forced to agree with Aaqil and concedes that ‘*Desi DNA* is seen as a specialist kind of programme which probably doesn’t have mainstream appeal’. He also acknowledges that this is not a problem for all APU-productions, since the BBC has recently broadcast *Indian Food Made Easy*, and a series of films relating to the sixty year anniversary of the partition of India, at primetime. But even though he believes that *Desi DNA* ‘could work at 7:30pm, or 10pm’, Tommy makes a revealing point when he gives one last reason for why it might not get scheduled earlier: ‘maybe it’s the title?’

The question of titling and packaging is an issue that will be tackled in much more detail in the following chapter; for now, I want to hint at the possibility – as Tommy does – that the appearance of the word ‘Desi’<sup>74</sup> inadvertently compounds the programme’s perceived difference and Otherness – and therefore its status as ‘niche’ – which is why executives are unwilling to take a risk on scheduling it at primetime.

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<sup>74</sup> ‘Desi’ is originally a Sanskrit word but is nowadays used colloquially referring to anyone belonging to the South Asian diaspora.

The recurring theme from respondents' narratives is that schedulers are generally conservative, and do not trust Asian programmes – or rather certain kinds of Asian programmes – to attract big ratings. Screenwriter and director Neil Biswas, experienced this first hand, when his two part Channel 4 drama, *Second Generation* – one of the first British television dramas to centre solely on British Asian characters – got bumped from its scheduled 9pm broadcast, to 10pm. This was even though the film – and its original 9pm timeslot – had already been publicised in a significant marketing push, including newspaper adverts, television trailers and a billboard campaign. The reason for this switch, according to Neil, was because Channel 4 ultimately decided that *Second Generation* would fail in the ratings battle against its competitors for the 9pm slot: 'they lost their bottle right at the end and put it out at 10 which I think screwed with the people who watched it. I was always heavily critical of that. Because the schedulers, they spent all this money but then decided to put it out at 10'. Despite the publicity and excellent reviews, the drama managed to generate a relatively disappointing one million viewers for the first episode, which dropped to 900,000 for the final episode. Thus, in some ways the last minute rescheduling of *Second Generation* represents the literal repositioning of the narrative from the centre, out to the periphery; the temporal governance of difference in real-time.

The innate cautiousness of television scheduling is suggested in another story from Nasfim Haque, who described how she wrote an email to the scheduler behind the broadcast of her film *Don't Panic, I'm Islamic!* during the 'graveyard slot' –  
12:30am:

Nasfim Haque: He emailed me back, really sweet actually, saying, really liked your film, it very well made and very funny, but it's very difficult to bring an audience for this kind of film. I think it's really difficult to bring an audience in if it's half past midnight!

AS: What did he mean by 'difficult to bring in an audience'?

NH: I think in terms of subject area. And I met him subsequently at a commissioning meeting and I introduced myself and he put two and two together and realised who I was. And he said, I bet you're pissed off with me because I scheduled your programme on late. And I said I bloody well am! But he was very sweet. Again he said [...] the subject is very difficult. Even though I used humour; there's Bernard Manning and Max Clifford in it! I don't know how niche it is? Again, the wider picture is, I do feel as though, it's always kind of, managers, commissioners, execs, anything that is of a

different culture is niche. The word 'niche' comes up. And unless you wrap it up in middle-class Marks & Spencer's, like [presenter of *Indian Food Made Easy*] Anjum Anand, you're not really going to get it out on air. I love Anjum Anand, but who eats chicken paneer wraps or whatever it is? Nobody eats that! But it has to be wrapped in that façade.

This comment is a further illustration of how certain kinds of Asianness are perceived to have mainstream appeal: those narratives that appeal to a certain class sensibility (the tastes of whom are symbolised by middle-class shopping institution Marks & Spencer) with regard to the consumption of South Asian cultures. Unless its 'wrapped in a façade' that appeals to bourgeois tastes, it is regarded as 'niche' and 'difficult to bring in audience'. There is a clear racial dimension to this; returning to Nasfim's definition, what is considered as 'niche' is simply 'anything that is of a different culture'.

What I find particularly striking about Nasfim's quote however, and why I choose it to conclude this section, is how it stresses the human dimension to scheduling decisions, through the character of the scheduler, who was empathic and in fact, 'really sweet actually', and who guessed correctly that Nasfim would be 'pissed off' over his decision to schedule her film at 12:30am. However, while the quote alludes to individual agency and self-reflexivity, it is set against the hierarchy of production and the networks of 'managers, commissioners, execs' who in turn are identified as having tastes that belong to a particular social class ('middle-class Marks & Spencers'). In this way, niche is identified as anything different from their own culture, and is scheduled as such – on the margins of terrestrial broadcasting, and public discourse. It follows that 'difficult' films about cultural entanglements, such as Mino Bhatia's award winning *Who do you think you're talking to?* and Nasfim Haque's *Don't Panic I'm Islamic!* get pushed out to the 'graveyard *efnik* slots', whereas more palatable and recognisable forms of difference such as *Indian Food Made Easy* and *Lost Days of the Raj* are scheduled for primetime. Thus, the process of scheduling in television provides another example of the inextricable relation between the politics of representation and capitalism. It is at this point of production where we see the physical manifestation of a neo-colonial ideology, dressed up as normative commercial rationale, that foregrounds simpatico representations of Asianness (the beautiful and/or the ghastly) at primetime, and pushes more

challenging or ‘niche’ narratives to the margins, broadcast at – literally – anti-*social* timeslots. This provides another example of the racialised governmentalities that underwrite rationalised processes of cultural commodification; scheduling as the temporal management of difference in discourse. As I shall demonstrate, a similar pattern occurs in the publishing and theatre industries.

### **The South Asian Touring Theatre Consortium and the mounting of British Asian theatre**

In theatre, the commissioning process and what I have defined as the practice of ‘distribution’, or scheduling/placement, are closely intertwined. In fact distribution should be seen as overlapping with the commissioning/programming process, since the latter is where details regarding length of run, and potential touring venues are decided. As most of the material I am drawing from in this particular case study comes from respondents who run their own independent theatre companies, the issue of where their plays are mounted, and crucially, for how long for, is a decisive moment in production that ultimately determines the cultural impact of the play (in terms of its commercial and critical recognition). In fact, when I asked respondents about the biggest challenges facing British Asian theatre, the most common response was not, to my original surprise, the difficulty in getting commissioned or funded (as I have shown in the previous chapter, the Arts Council has indirectly made it an obligation for venues to mount more culturally diverse work), but receiving a sustained, and significant run at a theatre venue. Similarly, there was a frustration that only regional venues are expected to produce culturally diverse theatre, with the larger, more central venues unwilling to take a risk on these productions<sup>75</sup>. Since this thesis is interested in the transruptive potential of the postcolonial cultural commodity (constituting forms of multiculturalism capable of disrupting racist, nationalist discourse), I want to focus on these two particular issues and the way they relate to British Asian cultural politics. This section will argue that the ‘distribution’

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<sup>75</sup> Though the production of *Rafta Rafta* at the National Theatre, and the musical *Bombay Dreams* at the Apollo Victoria, are notable exceptions.

of theatre production is yet another social technology in the governance of British Asian cultural production and its potentially disruptive narratives.

### Production runs and critical/commercial recognition

As I have stated, the next critical factor for an independent theatre company after a production is commissioned/programmed is determining the length of the play's run; that is, how many performances will be played. The decision is determined during negotiations between the visiting company and the promoter, informed by a number of factors, primarily by a prediction of likely attendance figures (and size of the potential revenue earned), factored against the cost of putting on the production. Even though the theatre industry is heavily subsidised, a venue will still want to avoid making a loss. Subsequently, in deciding the length of a run, we see the same forms of rationalisation that occur in the television and publishing industries. Estimates will be based on the success of previous productions (whether by the same company, or of *similar* plays), the reputation of the company and the play (if it is not a new script), and whether there are any 'stars' performing. Additionally, there is the issue of availability – the length of a run can be arbitrarily decided by the gaps in the venue's programme for the season. It is the process of predicting a play's attendance figures that leads to similar patterns and issues to broadcast television.

In the chapter on commissioning, we saw the ways in which venues play a critical role in the production of British Asian theatre (and therefore its transruptive potential), and this becomes evident when we look more closely at the actual management of the production during the distribution process. 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. This inevitably has an impact on the transruptive potential of the British Asian text; as playwright and actor Rani Moorthy said to me, 'a building dictates the politics of the work', since theatre venues effectively decide what narratives get produced. One of the responses to the Eclipse report was the creation of the South Asian Touring Theatre Consortium (SATTC), where three venues – the artsdepot in North Finchley, the Watermans in Hounslow, and the Croydon Clocktower – would form 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 these areas. The rationale behind the consortium was explained to me by audience development consultant Hardish Virk:

The objective 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, so the venues are working hand-in-hand with us. So [there was] the artsdepot in the north, The Croydon Clocktower in the south, the Watermans in the west and I can't remember who it was but the east based venue dropped out. They were all brought on board to develop policy. Through that, all of the RFO<sup>76</sup> or project funded South Asian touring companies from around the country came onboard – about twenty. So for the last 2-3 years there has been a sustainable programming of this work.

There are issues regarding the politics and actual effects of such a project, to which I shall return shortly. What I first want to highlight in this account is how it defines the large problem Asian companies face in being booked by promoters for only short runs consisting of one or two nights. However, the problem of short runs is not just symbolic of how little faith established venues have in culturally diverse arts – or perhaps, more accurately, how little faith they have in their own ability to attract audiences to this work. Rather, the length of the run has real implications with regard to press and publicity: the press will generally not review plays that are to run for anything less than three weeks. This became apparent for me in the lead-up to the Rasa production *Too Close To Home* at the Lyric Theatre, where it emerged that the producers were not going to get the number of preview pieces or reviews they were hoping for. The reason for this was explained by the Press and Communications Officer at the Lyric:

In terms of previewing, it is only a two-week show, so it's unlikely ... if it's a four week run – and this is the difference with *Brixton Stories* [a previous Lyric production] which went on for four weeks – it makes a massive difference. You're obviously... you're not going to get a preview feature in *Time Out* because it was only on for two weeks so it's unlikely... it has more of a chance of getting coverage if it goes on for longer.

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<sup>76</sup> Regular Funded Organisations, that is, organisations who receive annual funding from the Arts Council, over a set amount of years.

Subsequently, from this comment, short runs pose a problem in that they prevent a play from generating publicity, which will inevitably affect audience attendance and the potential impact of the production in the wider cultural sphere (the effects of which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters on marketing and design). This issue is articulated further in an exchange with Nirjay Mahindru, founder of Conspirator's Kitchen, when I asked him about his expectations for press just before the revival of his play *The Hot Zone*, a story about rendition and three British Asian terrorist suspects:

AS: Were you expecting more press in the nationals? Or were your expectations quite low?

Nirjay Mahindru: My expectations were low because – and this is the critical point – these days the press are not going to come along to review a show if it's run is less than three weeks, because as far as they are concerned what is the point? By the time the review has come out the show is practically finished so it needs a longer run. So if you're doing shows which are two weeks, half these press aren't going to turn up. So it goes back to the whole attitude of venues. Venues have to commit themselves to saying we want this company for 3-4 weeks doing the show here. And if that happens we will get *The Times* and ...

AS: But can these smaller companies sustain that?

NM: It depends what the work is. And it depends where you are. I'm not saying four weeks at a 500-seater venue. I'm saying three weeks at a place like the Lyric Studio, which holds 125 people. Or three weeks at a place like the Bush, which holds 90 people. A good play should be able to sustain that.

Thus, there is a further indication of how small runs severely limit the critical and commercial capacity for Asian theatre productions. Nirjay explains this in terms of a conservative theatre establishment; as he states normatively, a good play should be able to sustain a longer run – and no doubt the artistic director of a venue would agree. However, as is the case in broadcast television, what this overall narrative reveals is that there is a perception that 'Asian' plays lack the potential to crossover into the mainstream (white) audience, which itself infers that the only audiences interested in 'Asian' work are Asian audiences themselves – who constitute a tiny minority of the theatre-going public. It is upon such an assumption that the (racialised) rationalisation of the 'distribution' – and governance – of British Asian theatre occurs.

## Audience and the spatial ordering of British Asian theatre

In the face of the perception that their work is of limited appeal, the response of some Asian theatre companies has been to concentrate their efforts on trying to attract 'new audiences', that is, audiences from Asian communities. The Arts Council have highlighted the need to engage with new audiences as a key priority<sup>77</sup>, and as such venues reliant on Arts Council funding have to demonstrate that they have shown the same commitment, through their programming, employment initiatives and marketing strategies. Hence, the South Asian theatre companies that have received good runs at reputable venues have been those that have consolidated their Asian audience, most often a result of sustained audience development strategies (something I shall unpack in chapter seven, which looks at marketing). One such example is Rifco Arts, a regularly funded, mid-scale, national touring company, based in Slough. When I asked its Artistic Director Pravesh Kumar about the issue of short runs, he responded that this was a problem they no longer experienced:

AS: Another complaint I have encountered is that Asian shows don't get given long enough runs.

Pravesh Kumar: Yeah we don't have that problem.

AS: Is that because you have shown that you are commercially successful and can sustain a longer run?

PK: Because we sell, we've got a bit more muscle power. But it was hard for us. It was exactly the same way. And we tend to go... we always open with a three month-run before we go on tour. Be it in Stratford, be it wherever. We never open for less than three weeks and tour it. So a show is normally on for three to four months at a time. Because if you don't stay in one venue for more than two weeks you're not going to get reviews.

Hardish Virk, who has worked very closely with Rifco, articulated its strategy further:

It's about personal relationships you build with [venues]. Like Stratford East has personal relationships with a number of different companies, the Riverside has personal relationships with a number of different companies, as does the Lyric Hammersmith. But at the end of the day it's economics. If you sweat it out there then you build relationships with the organisations and they

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<sup>77</sup> In 1998 The Arts Council launched the New Audiences Programme, a £20 million initiative to reach 'the significant numbers of people who did not engage with arts institutions and their activities. (Khan, 2002: 13)

see the benefits at the box-office, then they are probably more likely to bring you back on board. But Rifco is a good example, I did some strategic audience development work with them some years ago on *Bollywood - Yet Another Love Story* and *Deranged Marriage* at Riverside Studios and Stratford East, and through work I did, nights there were selling out. But over a number of years they got the clout to go to any venue in the country, and now venues are going to them and they are turning venues away! It's very hard to reach that position.

According to this narrative 'at the end of the day, it's economics' and the reason why Rifco has been able to overcome the problem of short runs – which Pravesh admitted was the company's previous experience – is because it has demonstrated to venues that it can produce good returns at the box office. This has subsequently given the company 'muscle power' in negotiations with venues over run length (and box-office splits etc.). Audience development work has no doubt played a significant role, and as we shall find in chapter seven, Rifco, more than any other company I spoke to, has invested large amounts of its time and resources into attracting Asian communities. However, some may argue that Rifco has an advantage since its work is deliberately populist, aimed at a specifically working-class Punjabi Asian audience (though Pravesh admits this is their core audience, he believes Rifco has much broader appeal). Another mid-scale Asian touring company that has achieved a similar level of success is Tamasha, and it is perhaps no coincidence that it employs a similar aesthetic.

While I would rather not re-enter the debate on the politics of populism, this strategy of audience development in relation to the notion of *Asian plays for Asian people* must be examined. I have previously highlighted how the SATTC circuit was purposefully built around venues in areas with a culturally diverse (essentially Asian) local community, in order to provide spaces for Asian work to be shown, but additionally with the aim of engaging with local audiences who have traditionally been marginalised from the theatre. At the heart of the SATTC is a sustained audience development programme (Brahmachari, 2006) which suggests that audience engagement is a greater priority than creative development, indeed, a consequence of the Arts Council of England's emphasis on 'new audiences'. Of course, there is an ethics and politics to wanting to engage audiences that have been traditionally marginalised from the arts, and this is precisely how Pravesh Kumar

makes sense of his work. Yet, for some respondents, the SATTC represents the physical manifestation of the marginalisation and ghettoisation of British Asian theatre. As Nirjay Mahindru 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, whereas I would say why aren't we at the Lyric? Why aren't we at the Soho Theatre, why aren't we at Hampstead? 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, but the proper white stuff that's.... And that's where there is a bit of naiveté, a little bit of a class thing.

Indeed, a report (Brahmachari, 2006) commissioned by Tamasha and the Arts Council England presented voices that support this comment. The report highlighted the view of some black and Asian cultural practitioners that the SATTC further reflects the ghettoisation of culturally diverse work; as though the only place South Asian plays can work is just inside the edge of the M25. Nirjay's final remark on how such a strategy is informed by 'a little bit of a class thing' followed a narrative thread in our interviews and informal conversations: his belief that the theatre establishment judges British Asian theatre through a bourgeois neo-Orientalist perception of Asian plays. Thus, according to this discourse the SATTC and the distribution of British Asian theatre as a stage in cultural commodification is the means by which racialised governmentalities – operating through the lens of Occidental imaginative geography – fix and position the narratives of the Other deliberately and purposefully within the spatial hierarchies of inclusion.

In light of this, the ethics behind the SATTC are complex and not easily resolved (and it is not my aim to try and resolve them in this thesis). To conclude this section, I believe it is important to stress how – regardless of the question of ethics – the SATTC still supposes a natural connection between Asian work and Asian people: it assumes that the only way to engage with Asian audiences is to present to them Asian-themed work, and conversely, that Asian theatre can only succeed commercially if sustained by a core Asian audience. This is examined further in chapter seven and unpacks the perception of audience in relation to British Asian cultural production. But what I have aimed to demonstrate in this section is how, in the process of distributing British Asian theatre (that is, where touring companies get booked and for how long), we see a spatial manifestation of the

rationalisation/racialising logic of capital that begins at commissioning. It is based on a strategy of niche, practiced as commonsense commercial logic but underpinned by an ideology of ethnic absolutism and essential difference that is embedded in the very political economy of arts funding and venue provision (as Gilroy highlights). Thus, despite being a heavily subsidised industry, commerciality – or rather, a commercial rationale – nonetheless plays a significant role in the positioning of British Asian theatre, which inevitably relegates the counter-narratives of the postcolonial Other to the margins. Therefore the programming 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<sup>78</sup>. As I shall demonstrate in the following section, similar patterns emerge in the market-based economy of publishing and the ‘positioning’ of British Asian novels.

### ***Books for All: Publishing and the ‘fear factor’***

Despite contrasting political economies, the physical placement of British Asian writing in the bookstore mirrors the placement of South Asian theatre on the map of Britain, informed as they are by a similar logic of capital and organised in terms of their marked difference. The problems of positioning non-white fiction in the publishing industry were highlighted by the recent *decibel*-sponsored scheme *Books For All* that was designed specifically to address this issue (providing an interesting instance of Arts Council intervention in this market). *Books For All* was a scheme that followed *decibel/The Bookseller’s* ‘Cultural Diversity in Book Publishing Today’ report which described the industry’s ‘fear factor’ with regard to marketing to Britain’s black and minority ethnic population (‘Books For All’, *The Bookseller*, May 2006). Subsequently, the initiative was an attempt to ‘address this lack of confidence and [...] make bookshops an appealing option for consumers from every background’. Thus, much like the SATTC, the scheme had two (supposedly) connected aims: to encourage bookstores to promote black and Asian fiction, and to

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<sup>78</sup> Perhaps no surprise that productions that produce a more Indophilic representation of Asianness – for instance *Bombay Dreams* and *Rafta Rafta* – are the only ‘Asian’ plays of note to have played in the big UK mainstream venues

attract consumers from ‘BME’ communities. Even though participating bookstores were free to do what they wished, a typical promotion would involve designating key shelf space (whether a promotional table at the front of the shop, or a window display) to books written by non-white writers, coupled with in-store readings, book-signings and local publicity, augmenting a national advertising campaign. In this section, I consider the way in which *Books For All* represents a particular approach to the distribution of British Asian literature, opening a discussion on the spatial management of such commodities and the political implications of such approaches. I will highlight how this stage of production in publishing (as is the case in the television and theatre sectors) represents a form of racialised governmentality, where the reification of difference occurs through the rationalised logic of niche strategy.

### Distribution and the politics of recognition

There was some ambiguity in my mind behind the actual focus of the *Books For All* scheme. Was it to convince publishers that there was a sizable market for black and Asian fiction, or was it attempting to convince retailers that they could sell more copies of these books? This was a question I put to Kate Gunning, product manager of Foyles – one of only two independent stores involved with the scheme<sup>79</sup>:

I think it was actually to raise awareness amongst customers that there are books out there published in that area, and for the bookshops to capture that market because you know... it is very difficult for bookshops because a while back a lot of bookshops had a black writers section or an Asian writers section and to an extent – it’s a moot point about whether people think that it is a good thing or a bad thing, because opinions do vary – to a great extent those areas have been incorporated into the main part of the shop. [...]  
However, I think the intention of the promotion was to explicitly say to black and ethnic minority shoppers, look we’re doing this, here are some interesting books, come in and shop. And to shake up retailers and publishers in the process I guess.

While my focus was the economic reasoning behind the scheme, it is interesting that the emphasis of this narrative from a bookstore buyer was on appealing to ‘black and ethnic minority shoppers’ (and the issue of specialist areas, which I shall shortly

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<sup>79</sup> The rest of the participating bookstores consisted of the majors: WHSmith, Books etc., Borders, and Waterstones.

return to). This has an obvious commercial advantage to it, but the tone of the account stresses the political and ethical dimension to the initiative. The same theme emerged in an exchange with author and community activist Rabina Khan, who also runs her own independent publishing company, Monsoon Press. At the time of the interview Rabina was in dialogue with Pearson (which owns Penguin Books) over a potential partnership, where she would assist them in tailoring an educational product for to schools in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Our discussions subsequently focused on the intersection of community politics and corporate investment:

Rabina Khan: [Pearson] really need to have a reality check that the diversity in Britain exceeds far than what they can imagine. And there is a market out there they just need to realise it.

AS: So this is about recognition then?

RK: Yes recognition. A great deal about recognition. If they recognise there's a market they benefit, so I can't understand why they wouldn't look at that from a business viewpoint. I don't expect them to be martyrs and I don't expect them to have the same attitude that I have, although they do say they are committed to diversity – I'm sure they are – but as business people they would still want to make money. And why not make money?

In this account, the respondent identifies corporate intervention to the politics of recognition. These narratives suggest that targeting niche groups as markets is an important process of granting recognition to formerly marginalised and invisible communities; a harmony between commerce and politics – hence the respondents' urgency in 'shaking up' the publishing industry and giving it a much need 'reality check' over what it is missing. These are compelling points, though I would argue that there are deeper ethical issues at stake in the recognition of marginalised communities as niche markets to exploit (according to capitalist rhetoric). Through a closer examination of the distribution of Asian texts as a process of this rationale, we see where uncertainties emerge.

While the *Books for All* scheme stressed the need for bookstores to cater for 'BME' communities, it gave the participating retailers a certain autonomy in how they ran their promotions. Interestingly, discussing the scheme with Kate Gunning at Foyles focused on how books were selected for the promotion, and the balance between economic and aesthetic/ethical factors in the selection process. Kate particularly

stressed the ethical angle, wanting to avoid picking only well-known books (which had already received plenty of exposure) and how this had to be balanced with business considerations:

We are running a business and we obviously didn't want to choose wilfully obscure people, because again the idea was to have a kind of alluring list of people, list of books. I felt also that it was slightly pointless choosing Zadie Smith and Hari Kunzru, who have been included in stacks and stacks of promotions before and are already established [...] so we wanted some reasonably well-known names, and you're right, we did want to put in some less slightly less well-known names, or some of the smaller publishers.

We knew that some of the bigger chains - I knew this because we had a meeting at the Arts Council where various retailers got together - we knew they were going to concentrate on the larger publishers - the more, if you like, the mainstream stuff. So we felt that, as a smaller chain or as a smaller company we could maybe ... Foyles prides itself on having a fantastically interesting range of books anyway, so we felt, let's go for some of the slightly well known things. [...] So we didn't want to be too obscure but we did try to have a mix of reasonably well-known stuff and some slightly less well-known things.

In this account, the ethical approach of Foyles as an independent bookstore is stressed in contrast to the major sellers who the respondent suggests are more commercially driven and therefore would predominantly select the 'mainstream stuff' that would be guaranteed to sell. The extract additionally reveals the practice of choosing books for this promotion as based upon the negotiation of a dynamic between an economic rationale ('we are running a business') and creative/altruistic motivations ('Foyles prides itself on having a fantastically interesting range of books' and picking 'slightly less well-known things'). Thus, far from a neat and convenient correlation between the politics of recognition and niche marketing as described above, this narrative reinforces the notion of commercialism and the ethical as opposing poles.

The fundamental question was, what are the actual ethics of positioning books together based on ethnicity? This question was brought into sharp relief during a visit to a major London bookstore, and seeing a promotional table with a 'jumble' of books written by South Asian authors. Thus, literary-fiction such as Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*, and V.S. Naipaul's

*A House for Mr Biswas*, was mixed up with more populist fiction such as *Gypsy Massala* by Preethi Nair and *Bitter Sweets* by Roopa Farook, and even children's books such as *Bollywood Babes* by Narinder Dhani. The purpose here is not to suggest that populist fiction has no right to share the same table as highbrow literature. However, rather than stressing the diversity of writing from the South Asian diaspora (which may indeed have been the intention of this particular promotion), the various book jackets laid next together, and the visual cacophony of clashing colours, and discordant styles merely underlined the randomness of the selection.

### Specialist sections and the qualification of ethnicity

The politics of positioning British Asian texts in publishing is accentuated by the issue of separate areas in bookstores for black and/or Asian fiction. In recent times, such specialist sections have become less common; as the special *Bookseller* issue on *Books for All* (May, 2006) discovered, only 17% of bookstores have a section dedicated to 'black and minority ethnic writing'. This is seen as a mostly positive development, certainly from writers: all the authors I spoke to stated that they would rather feature in the mainstream A-Z fiction section than a specialist section, for the fear of ghettoisation. It is for this reason that the role of booksellers and the process of positioning becomes a critical issue for British Asian writers; as one respondent in a *Bookseller* article states, 'it's about recognising the talents of British Asian authors and helping them succeed in the mainstream market. It's about recognition and displaying a diverse range of books as opposed to having a section specifically for Asian people' (Caroline Sanderson, 'Tearing down the Ghetto', *The Bookseller*, 16 March, 2001). Yet, there is still a prevailing view that specialist areas do serve a purpose. Often these narratives are constructed from the perspective of the consumer. For instance, according to the London marketing manager of Ottakar, such spaces can work 'spectacularly': 'In Walthamstow, they experimented with taking the section away and integrating the stock, but they were asked to reinstate it with a children's section' (Suresh Ariaratnam, 'View from the shop front', *The Bookseller*, May 2006). Similar research from Penguin reached the same conclusion that consumers would prefer 'a dedicated area within bookshops' (Danuta Kean, 'A year in diversity', *The Bookseller*, 11 March, 2005). As Penguin's marketing and

publicity director said, 'We had a lot of assumptions about that being a ghetto in store, but actually it seems that if it is really well stocked and is not in the grimmest corner of a bookshop, then it is a great magnet for black and Asian readers to browse in' (ibid.).

Again, my purpose is not to weigh the pros and cons of this debate. More apposite to my argument is the nature of the discourse. For instance, the marketing manager of Ottakar's description of 'integrating stock' and the Penguin representative's notion of a 'dedicated area' for black or Asian fiction, again marks the spatial management of 'mainstream' and the 'Other' (even though they might stress that bookstores should avoid positioning the latter sections in the 'grimmest corner of the bookshop'). In this sense the politics of the distribution of British Asian novels suddenly comes sharply into focus. Much as multicultural formations of race in modern western societies are structured as part of the complex legacy of colonialism (Hesse, 2000; Keith, 2005), the circulation of British Asian narratives operates under the same Manichean colonial vision of difference. Indeed, the language of *dedicated areas*, *ghettos*, and *integrated stock* uncannily alludes to distribution as the spatial ordering of marginalised voices through racialised governmentalities that practice segregationary and hierarchical forms of racism. This is a notion I shall return to shortly.

What I find particularly interesting is how this debate unintentionally raises the growing influence of bookstores in the publishing industry. Publishing houses are often regarded as the gatekeepers of the industry, as they decide which books initially get produced, but this is called into question when it is recognised how the booksellers effectively decide what consumers can buy. As Kate Gunning admits:

It is the buyers – they have the power ultimately. If it is an organisation where the buyers really are responsible for buying up the books – I mean in Foyles it is not centralised in some sort of remote head office. A lot of the buying is done by the people who work on the shop floor so in a sense they choose the stock that gives the shop its profile, so that is a quite a lot of power. So in that sense you are right, it is in their hands.

According to this quote, the role of buyers is deciding what products enter the marketplace, and in effect, what narratives are allowed into public discourse (and

where they are located within discourse). A common theme emerging in interviews and articles is how publishers 'are dancing to the booksellers' as Rosemary Hudson of Black Amber publishing expresses. Rosemary articulates the power dynamic between publishers and bookstores in terms of the management of stock:

As you know books are returned as fast as they can. I've had in fact, after a launch party in a bookshop, the store manager said "Ok, can you take your books back now?" They're so cheeky! So they either want to sell or return the books – sale or return [...] as a publisher you obviously want your books out and sold and not returned, because if you have your books in the warehouse you're paying for that anyway. And you are only allotted a certain amount of space in the warehouse before you have to start paying for extra space. So I can't remember how long a bookshop keeps a book in store – maybe six weeks – before they want to return it, if it's not selling.

Therefore, according to Rosemary there is a pressure on publishers for their books to see immediate sales: otherwise bookstores will return the stock that is not shifting. Hence, if bookstores are the spaces where the final monetary transactions occur, the power of the bookstore to which these narratives allude, underscores the dominance of capital in the production of culture.

In light of this, the bookstore (and therefore distribution) is, to paraphrase Nicholas Garnham, the locus of power and profit, and consequently, it is access to such spaces that effectively determines cultural plurality. Indeed, Rosemary's account further emphasises the increasingly competitive marketplace of book publishing and the narrowing of channels of access. In previous chapters I stressed how this leads to a conservative range of output, and the (negative) positioning of British Asian texts in the spaces of retail provides a physical example of this. This is discussed in the following quote from a *BookSeller* article that describes the detrimental effects of increasing concentration and conglomeration in the book industry: 'Certain chains have gobbled up others, specialists have tried to become more mainstream, mass market stores have stocked specialist titles, and supermarkets seem prepared to sell anything at all. This has created a homogeneous marketplace and, I suspect, both publishers and retailers are getting a bit fidgety' (Scott Pack, 'Different Strokes', *The Bookseller*, 23 February, 2007). In the same article, the author describes how the major publishers' monopoly on promotional space in bookstores (which retailers 'rent' to publishing houses) further compounds the homogeneity that characterises

the marketplace: 'For one week in January, more than 900 bookshops around the country had exactly the same two books at exactly the same price in exactly the same place. Customers may have been offered a great deal, but they have been given zero choice' (ibid.)

Against this backdrop, retailers are looking to differentiate their products in order to attract new customers and improve sales, so despite its political impetus, the *Books for All* scheme inadvertently fulfilled this aim. *Books for All* was effectively a glorified specialist section (though rather than being stuck in a 'grim corner', it was allocated prime real estate). Despite recent trends in 'integrating' Asian writers into the main fiction sections, it becomes increasingly apparent that such a shift was at odds with the rationalised economic practices of retailers, and the market logic of niche. The adoption of the *Books for All* scheme by all the major retailers demonstrates the ease with which such a promotion supported their commercial ethos. The actual ethical intentions of participating retailers was called into question by the author Zahid Hussain, who himself was involved in the scheme. In our interview he said, '*Books For All* is about how they think this is a billion-pound market – the only reason they did it was for money, they did not do it for ethics. It's economic.' As I touched on earlier, recognising previously marginalised ethnic communities as niche markets might appear as a perfect marriage between politics and commerce, but the ethics of such practice will always be called into question when profit is a prime motivation.

Therefore, we can see how the positioning of British Asian texts as a process of commodification – which in the publishing industry takes place in the spaces of retail – has particular effects with regard to the transruptive potential of the postcolonial subject. In particular, the *Books for All* scheme (itself launched from an art/cultural policy rationale) provides an explicit example of how, in a competitive marketplace, the ethnicity of authors becomes the quality to differentiate the cultural commodity from other goods – i.e. the USP. Yet I argue that rather than introduce authors of colour to a wider audience, the *Books For All* scheme merely accentuated their cultural difference, reifying the distinction between the Self and Other in the process. Again, it is the way in which the scheme was rationalised – both attracting new readers (consumers) and more sales for the author (and publisher and bookstore) –

that hides the racialising effects of such strategy. This has real implications, containing the author in an ethnic niche, and inadvertently preventing them from crossing over into a broader audience. Thus, the distribution of Asian novels in this way actually limits the political capacity of counter-hegemonic narratives of difference to reach a wider public. As the author Diran Adebayo says, 'Because black people can't save the financial ass of any black book out there, you've got to think about selling black books to a wider audience, [but these categories] prevent readers seeing the alliances between "that black author" and other white authors. It's commercially damaging because it reduces the appeal of individual writers to a larger audience' (Katherine Ruhson, 'Adebayo slams black sections', *The Bookseller*, 16 March 2007).

The politics of marketing Asianness will be examined in more detail in the following two chapters. The aim of this section was to demonstrate how the floors and shelves of the bookstore, and the political economy of retail itself, become contested spaces in which the magnitude of the transruptive potential of the postcolonial text is determined. In this way the distribution of British Asian books represents the carefully managed spatial organisation of British Asian narratives in discourse. *Books For All* may have temporarily moved them into the centre (we can assume that after the scheme the promoted novels were tucked back into their original peripheral spots) but this was within a particular space that, according to Stuart Hall is 'carefully policed and regulated [...] what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility' (Hall, 1996c: 468). Again, this has real implications for the politics of British Asian cultural production. As the manager of an independent book store in Bath comments, 'The "cash and carry" aspirations of chain bookselling show contempt for writers and publishers, particularly marginal voices, the experimental and the challenging [...] Real bookshops respect, alongside good business practice, the moral and aesthetic considerations inherent in the traffic of ideas' (James Reich-Levbag, 'Independent Line', *The Bookseller*, 16 December 2005). Thus bookstores are the conduits to the 'traffic of ideas', upon which any challenging new narratives rely, though I argue that the British Asian cultural commodity experiences specific Orientalist effects as a consequence. In this quote, the author attempts to inject a sense of ethics, or 'moral and aesthetic considerations' into the economic exchange of books. Yet increasingly, this seems at odds with

intensifying competition that characterises the publishing industry.

## Conclusion

Even though the process of distribution may not initially appear as a *critical* moment in British Asian cultural production, I have attempted to demonstrate otherwise. Distribution, as a stage in the process of commodification signifies the spatial and temporal manifestation of the neo-colonial ideology of essential difference that is inextricably intertwined with the logic of capital. Even though there are exceptions (and the strength of a cultural industries approach is that it is open to these contradictions), in each of these case studies, we have seen how rationalised cultural production attempts to organise the British Asian cultural commodity in the market in specific ways, depending on its particular representation of Asianness. Those commodities that produce a narrative that is complicit with a particular bourgeois Eurocentric worldview tend to receive favourable treatment, and will be given a premium position in discourse. Those commodities that produce an oppositional narrative that potentially disrupts the nation's imagined sense of Self will be marginalised to the periphery, whether a graveyard slot in a TV schedule, a few nights at a regional theatre, or hidden in an obscure corner of a bookstore.

That is not to say these marginalised goods are totally ineffective in these positions, but their capacity for transruption is nevertheless regulated. One observation in need of further development is the idea that British Asian cultural commodities are deliberately dispersed to the extent that they cannot form any sort of coherent discursive formation that could constitute a significant cultural movement. Such a notion demands a sustained cultural theoretical analysis that I cannot afford now. To return to the argument of this chapter, it is precisely the normative terms in which decisions over distribution are rationalised that hide its ideological function and ensure further reproduction. This is the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital. In the cases of television broadcasting, theatre and publishing, the scheduling and positioning of British Asian cultural products is literally the means through which products are physically regulated under the process of capitalistic cultural production (with causal effects on their transruptive potential). Consequently, through the

postcolonial cultural economy framework, we see how distribution represents a further stage of commodification that acts as a technology of Occidental imagined geography and racialised governance.

In the introduction to this chapter I referred to Nicholas Garnham's (1990) argument that defines circulation as a decisive moment in cultural production. Garnham is particularly writing against a particular policy tradition that problematically opposes culture to the market, and places the creative artist at the centre of its analysis. He argues instead that the distribution of cultural goods, and the reaching of audience should be the central focus: creating an audience or public for the work, rather than producing cultural artefacts or performances. It follows that marketing is an additional critical stage in cultural politics. This forms the subject of the following two chapters, on the packaging/design and marketing of the British Asian cultural commodity. Even though cultural production should not be regarded as a linear process, in the strict sequence of production, marketing should come before distribution. Yet, having arranged the dissertation in this order, we will see how the process of positioning and its epistemological effects, as discussed in this chapter, becomes much more pronounced in the practices of marketing and design. If the positioning/scheduling stage of production sees a temporal and spatial manifestation of the neo-colonial character of commercialism, it is in marketing that we see an aesthetic and symbolic materialisation of the same ideology, again with negative effects upon the transruptive politics of British Asian cultural production. According to Garnham, distribution and marketing constitute the oft-neglected 'editorial' function of cultural production, and this effectively forms the object of the remainder of this thesis, as the arena through which racialised knowledge is produced and determined.

## **Chapter Six – Designing *Asianness*: New Orientalisms and the packaging of the British Asian cultural commodity**

This chapter examines the design stage of cultural production. It explores the way in which the British Asian cultural product is represented in the marketplace through its design and packaging, whether in the form of a book jacket, TV trailer, or publicity flyer. The chapter argues that it is at this stage of production that the racialisation of the cultural commodity is perhaps most pronounced, representing the symbolic manifestation of the neo-colonial logic that underpins rationalised cultural production. Specifically, we see an explicit manifestation of Orientalism in the way that British Asian cultural commodities are aestheticised. Thus, the focus of this chapter is to examine why British Asian cultural commodities often appear in predictable and stereotypical forms. As such, in contrast to the previous two chapters, an exploration of the design stage necessitates a closer examination of the textual and the actual production of symbolic meaning. Through applying the postcolonial cultural economy framework to this aspect of commodification, the aim is to see how particular cultures of production determine the aesthetic form of the cultural commodity. Once again, unpacking the underlying shifting dynamic between structure and agency will reveal the ways in which the British Asian cultural good is racialised at this stage of production.

This chapter will focus on two aspects of the design stage and consider the ways in which the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital manifests at each of these points. In the opening section I examine the titling of the British Asian cultural commodity. As I shall demonstrate, the increasing industrialisation of cultural production has meant that even creating a title for a cultural work has become a rationalised process, framed within sales and marketing criteria. In particular, we see a further example of the double bind, where pitching a particular level and representation of Asianness in the title has serious political and ethical ramifications. To unpack this dilemma, I focus on the process behind titling, and consider how symbol creators rationalise the decision behind choosing a title for a particular product.

Developing these themes further, in the second part of the chapter I look at the actual design stage, and consider the ways in which complex professionals narrate the process of designing the packaging/publicity material for their commodity. In the first half of this section I examine the use of publicity materials in television and theatre, and look at various approaches to representing Asianness, with a focus on how such representations are produced through commodification. More specifically, I consider the tendency for such materials to fall into Orientalist depictions of South Asian cultures, split into the Indophilic binaries of the beautiful or the ghastly. In particular, I expose how British Asian cultural producers themselves are enticed into using exotic markers, which they rationalise against a backdrop of an increasingly competitive market climate. In the second half of this section, I examine the production of symbolic meaning further through a case study of book jacket design. The example of publishing shows how creative work is becoming increasingly rationalised, which leads to a certain recurring pattern in the appearance of British Asian novels. In a similar way to the theatre and television industries, I argue that British Asian novels are configured into reductive representations of Asianness, particularly ‘multiculturalist’, or feminised styles. Indeed, the process behind designing a book jacket provides the most explicit illustration of the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital as it occurs in cultural production.

What I particularly want to draw attention to in this chapter is that despite the perceived autonomy of creative workers such as designers, individuals in these professions still feel a pressure from ‘above’ which attempts to steer their work in certain ways. As outlined in chapter one, the postcolonial cultural economy framework is writing against a particular determinist reading of cultural commodification. In light of this, my analysis of the design of British Asian cultural commodities involves a closer examination of cultures of production through which the production of postcolonial meaning occurs. As such, in contrast to the commodification of race thesis outlined in the opening chapter, this chapter attempts a more nuanced interpretation of how structure can determine cultural output, in order to explain why British Asian cultural commodities often appear in predictable, stereotypical ways. To reiterate, if distribution is where a Manichean neo-colonial logic materialises on the temporal and spatial plane, then the design stage is where such logic manifests in the symbolic realm.

## Titling difference

The titling of the cultural commodity might not appear an obvious part of the design stage – or even commodification itself; the title is usually assumed to belong to the artistic process, and devised at the original point of conception. However, it is included here because the titling of the cultural good is increasingly regarded as part of the marketing process, specifically during the design stage of the product. The process of titling is more formalised in some sectors than others (and can then vary greatly between individual cases within the same sector), but against the backdrop of intensifying market competition, the title is recognised as crucial to a production's commercial success, the responsibility of which sometimes falls under the jurisdiction of sales and marketing departments. The subsumption of the practice of titling into commercial rationale is made clear in an entry in a regular *Bookseller* column by marketing consultant Damian Horner:

Selecting the title of a book is one of the most important marketing decisions in the whole marketing process. The title is like a brand name.

Some titles are superb pieces of marketing communication. Take *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. In a stroke, this title communicated the central theme of the book, captured the humorous tone of voice, defined its target audience, and built a brand property that could be exploited in later books. [...] So, next time you judge a title, ask yourself whether it gives the reader a head start in engaging with the content of the book, or if it needs a shout-line to be understood

(Damian Horner, 'The Name Game', *The Bookseller*, 9<sup>th</sup> March, 2007)

The author's opening statement sets out quite unequivocally that titling is seen as part of the marketing process, and is effectively the process of branding the cultural commodity. Subsequently, titling – within the logic of branding – is a process of simultaneously defining the product and identifying the target market. According to Horner, this is the distinction that makes good titles 'superb pieces of marketing communication'. Such a discourse resonates throughout the cultural industries. In the Channel 4 event I described in chapter four for instance, one of the commissioning editors in the panel made a point of stressing how 'title really matters', in terms of attracting the target audience, but additionally for the way in which it feeds into, and

reinforces the channel's own brand identity. In this sense, within the commercial logic of cultural production, the title of the commodity is expected to achieve much more than simply reflect the content contained inside.

The rationalisation of titling becomes another scenario of how postcolonial epistemes are governed through commodification. In particular, the process of creating a title for the cultural commodity provides a further instance of the 'double bind' British Asian cultural producers can encounter. Exemplifying this is the case of the BBC series *Desi DNA*. In the previous chapter I described former producer Tommy Nagra's ambivalence over its title, which, in hindsight, he suggested might be responsible for the perception of the show as of 'niche' interest only. When I asked Tommy about how the title was conceived, the story he gave highlighted the intersection of the different rationales that were behind the process of creating a title for the series, specifically with regard to use of the word 'desi':

We had a huge debate about the title, about using the word *desi*. What does it mean? So I remember that was bounced around for a long time. But I just felt we need to give a core identity and the challenge was, we don't want to lose the core audience, we have got to bring a mainstream audience to it. In hindsight, maybe it was the wrong title because *desi* ... my argument for it at the time was it was the word that most Asians understand across all communities and it's the kind of word that might actually reach the Oxford English Dictionary one day. And now *desi* is actually used – there is MTV Desi, *desi* is now used loosely as a term. And I think that is the role of the public service broadcasting to introduce the mainstream community to our world if you like.

In this quote the process of devising a title is narrated as the act of trying to reconcile the binaries of mainstream and niche, framed in terms of introducing 'the mainstream community to our world'. According to the account the priority was the 'core audience', the first challenge being to appeal to the diverse range of communities and cultures that constitute the South Asian diaspora in Britain. Crucially, this had to be done in a way that would not alienate the white viewer. Subsequently, Tommy's advocacy for the word 'desi' – a Sanskrit word that has entered Indian and British vernacular – was because it would be meaningful to most British Asian youths, but also because, it had the potential of crossing over into the mainstream, perhaps even the Oxford English Dictionary. However, in the interview

Tommy conceded that it might have been ‘the wrong title’ and the reason that the programme has failed to convince executives of its crossover potential, who persist in scheduling the programme for the late night 11:20pm timeslot. What is suggested is that the title has a reifying quality that determines the product’s ability to translate into mainstream, commercial success. This is an issue to be explored further.

### Two contrasting approaches to titling British Asian arts

Tommy Nagra is specifically relating an experience within the context of public service broadcasting, which has a particular remit to cater for minority tastes (Tommy was obligated to prioritise the ‘core’ Asian audience) even though it is increasingly mediated through a commercial pressure to win ratings. In contrast, it is interesting to consider the rationale behind titling in those industries that are not regulated in the same way. I am specifically referring to those instances where South Asian signifiers are incorporated into titles according to the kind of commercial rationale outlined by Damian Horner in his *BookSeller* column. One such example is the case of the theatre company Rifco Arts. Rifco has taken the approach of using ethnicity as a brand to the extreme, with very successful results. Nearly all of Rifco’s productions contain quirky hybrid titles, particularly Asian-themed puns that play on Hollywood/Bollywood references. Titles include *Deranged Marriage*, *Meri Christmas*, *There is Something About Simmy* and *Bollywood: Another Love Story*. The impact from these titles emerges from their ironic (mis)translation, evoking the recent Indian immigrant trying to make sense of their new home in Britain (as I suggested in chapter three, this is what Parv Bancil is essentially referring to when he speaks of ‘Benny Hill Theatre’). When I interviewed the company’s producer, Pravesh Kumar, I found that such titles were not the result of frivolous in-jokes, but part of a serious, thought-out marketing strategy. As he explained to me, ‘They are deliberate. Because we are trying to access... we are trying to bring in that audience. We are very careful with our titles, and we’re very careful with our marketing’. As I have stressed, Rifco has spent a lot of its resources on a sustained audience development programme, and consequently Pravesh has a strong idea of who his core audience is. As such, the titles of its plays are purposefully designed to appeal to a particular British Asian working-class community who have traditionally felt marginalised from theatre. As Pravesh admits, Rifco’s brand is populist theatre that

deals with serious British Asian issues in an entertaining and accessible way, and the titles of their plays reflect this<sup>80</sup>. Certainly, the strategy seems to have worked, and Rifco more than any other mid-scale touring Asian company, has consistently attracted ‘new audiences’, constituting over 50 per cent of people who come and see a Rifco production.

I am ambivalent about the politics of Rifco’s approach – and the examination of the overall visual presentation of its products in the following section will unpack these uncertainties in more detail. For now I want to describe a contrasting approach to naming the British Asian text that begins to reveal the ethical and political dimension to titling. This occurs in the case of Daljit Nagra’s critically and (relatively) commercially acclaimed collection of poetry, entitled *Look We Have Coming To Dover!* The title actually belongs to a poem contained within the collection (about the journey of illegal immigrants into the UK) – and is one of the few poems that doesn’t feature ‘Punlish’ – his hybrid mix of English and Punjabi – in the title. The fact that this title was chosen was a pleasant surprise to Daljit, as he explains:

Daljit Nagra: I couldn’t land a title for the book. I couldn’t think of a title for it. I toyed around with loads of stuff. And Paul Keegan the editor said you must have [*Look We Have Coming To Dover!*] as your title. And I was quite surprised.

AS: Because you were expecting them to have a Punlish title?

DN: Yeah. And I guess the grammar is not good. And I wanted something... the title had to have either a Punjabi word or bad English. [...] If I’m going to have a Faber book it’s going to have to have [a title with] bad English! But also more interestingly, the title [...] well that is the most difficult poem in the book. It’s hardly an accessible poem [...] And the fact they’ve gone with that... which shows to me that they could have exploited ... why not ‘*Singh Song!*’ for a title, or something more accessible? Instead we went for the most highbrow poem in the book by a long way. So I was quite impressed with them that they didn’t really push for that market in a way that I thought they would. Because when I was working with the poetry editors, they are not interested in the commercial market. [...] So in that sense the marketing drive wasn’t there, which is quite amazing. It’s not what I was expecting at all. I thought someone would come in for a different department and go, hold on, we can exploit this market for this book. We can get all the comical poems upfront and keep the difficult poems tucked away. Instead we foregrounded the most difficult poem I guess.

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<sup>80</sup> Though Pravesh wanted to stress how, he wants to move from a more playful aesthetic to something slightly more challenging for the audience.

As Daljit recognises, the political economy of poetry publishing is quite different to other cultural industries, in that it is not commercially driven, replicating the patronage model that used to characterise the publishing industry before its shift towards the market (Hesmondhalgh, 2002: 50-51). In fact, poetry presses are rarely self-sustained, and often subsidised by a parent company or a grants body like the Arts Council. Furthermore, because of the smaller print runs, poetry does not employ the same mass production and marketing techniques employed in the production of popular fiction. Indeed, poetry is still revered as a ‘high art’ form and distinct from popular fiction and non-fiction – perhaps explaining why Daljit’s editors insisted on basing the title on the most ‘difficult poem in the book’. Yet, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* is an interesting case in that it did make a relative commercial splash, and consequently, the production of the paperback version was handed over to Faber & Faber’s fiction department, in order to broaden its appeal. It was unlikely that they would change the title at that point, but what I find interesting about Daljit’s account is when he suggests that someone from another department (that is, with a more commercial point of view) could have entered the production process and insisted upon ‘exploiting’ the book, by foregrounding the ‘comical’ versions of Asianness contained within. Additionally, the narrative highlights how a more commercial approach would probably have led to the naming of the collection after another, more accessible, and obviously ‘ethnic’ poem called ‘Singh’s Song’ – a Rifco-esque pun that more accurately reflects Daljit’s style of poetry (certainly more so than *Look We Have Coming To Dover!*). I draw upon this account because it highlights the contrast between an approach to titling that is ‘less interested in the commercial market’, and what Daljit imagines would be a more explicit market-driven strategy that would exploit his ethnic identity. I argue that it is precisely the dynamic between aesthetic/creative and economic poles that Daljit’s narrative highlights, through which postcolonial epistemes are mediated.

### *Too Close To Home or Curry Tales?*

A further overview of issues regarding the titling of the British Asian cultural production comes from the theatre company Rasa Productions, in particular the different experiences of their two consecutive plays *Curry Tales* and *Too Close To*

*Home*. Both dealt with themes from the South Asian diaspora. *Curry Tales* consisted of six female monologues based around cooking curry (literally, live on stage – small bowls of food would then be given out to the audience as part of the performance), which is used as a vehicle in which characters explore notions of identity, nationalism and femininity. *Too Close To Home*, in contrast, was a more conventional ensemble piece, set over the course of a day, centring on a Sufi family breaking fast during Ramadan, when the youngest son is discovered to have a bomb hidden in his bag. While *Curry Tales* was a commercial and critical success, *Too Close To Home* struggled to garner the same attention. There were clear differences in the design strategies employed for each production which I shall explore shortly, but at first, in light of *Curry Tales*' striking title – which Ed had proudly recalled 'did what it said on the tin' – I asked Ed and Rani and Rasa whether the ambiguity of the title *Too Close To Home* was the reason they thought it fared less well. The question produced the following response:

Ed Higginson: *Curry Tales* obviously had an ethnic element, whereas *Too Close To Home* could have been about Northern Ireland, it could be a Spanish play...

Rani Moorthy: We always wanted to go beyond an idea of what ... I always tell people that actually ... you know I don't have a constituency, I have never had it in all my life.

According to these respondents, the reasoning behind the title was to stress the universality of the play's themes, and transcend the (ethnic) 'constituency' Rani finds her work forced into. This was a constant theme in my interviews with Rani, who was frustrated by attempts to place her within a particular ethnic pigeonhole<sup>81</sup>. Thus, the title *Too Close To Home* was an attempt to *transcend* the double bind, to leave behind the 'Asian theatre' niche and appeal to a *universal* audience through omitting any signifiers of Asianness (an early version of the play was entitled 'Song of Sufi'). This was a contrast to the rationale behind the title *Curry Tales*, which in turn was a reaction to the response accorded to the title of Rasa's first play *Pooja*; as Rani described:

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<sup>81</sup> Rani's family is Hindu Tamil though she was born and raised in Malaysia and educated in Singapore, moving to the UK in 1996.

It was trying to be clever, the title *Curry Tales* as opposed to calling it *Pooja* ... I remember walking down Edinburgh and flyer-ing [for *Pooja*] at the time because we couldn't afford a PR person, and somebody said [referring to the flyer] *That's not for me*. And Ed and I both encountered this, *It's not for me*, *It's not for me*. What do you mean it's not for you? *Is it even in English?*

With *Curry Tales* you felt that people did have expectations and we were fulfilling them in some ways; by saying it's about cooking, come and see the show. And we had masses of people who had never gone to any show in their lives, coming in to see the show.

What is interesting about this quote is how it alludes to how certain representations of Asianness fulfil the expectations of white audiences. From their experience of promoting their first play *Pooja*, Ed and Rani discovered that for 'Asian' signifiers to work on white audiences they need to operate on an immediately accessible level (e.g. 'curry'); references that need translation would inversely detract the individual<sup>82</sup>. I would suggest that it is the hybrid, anglicised etymology of the word 'curry' that makes it more appealing to a white audience, rather than the Sanskrit word 'pooja'. Thus the implicit logic to the marketing of *Curry Tales* was to present difference in a *predigested* form, or at least in a way that the white mainstream audience would recognise and more readily consume – and the title achieved this. It is for this reason that I believe *Desi DNA* remains marginalised to the periphery: the word 'desi' signifies *too much* difference for the 'mainstream white' audience (and 'DNA' unwittingly suggests how this difference is biologically determined), whereas a more recognisable Indian word would have been more palatable for mainstream tastes. Indeed, one could imagine publishing marketing consultant Damian Horner, giving *Curry Tales* full marks for its title, and less so to *Desi DNA*. To explore this theme further we can look to the actual design of the British Asian cultural commodity. This will provide a more explicit illustration of how Indophilic representations of Asianness are produced through commodification and the imposition of rationalised industrial techniques on creative practice.

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<sup>82</sup> Ironically, with regard to Rani's description of someone asking if *Pooja* was in English, one of the most powerful scenes in *Curry Tales* featured a ten minute monologue spoken in Tamil.

## **Designing Asianness**

The political and ethical issues of representing Asianness in particular ways become more pronounced when we reach the design of British Asian cultural commodities. Since this stage of the marketing process is more formalised than the process of titling (which can take a variety of different forms at different points in production even within the same industry or organisation), we are presented with a prime example of when aesthetics and the market intersect during the production process. It is this complex relation that the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy framework was conceived to unravel. In this section I will look at the process behind the re-representation of the cultural good through packaging (i.e. book jackets) and advertising material (posters, flyers, JPEGs). Unpacking this particular stage of production will produce further knowledges regarding how postcolonial narratives are governed through commodification.

### Publicising the British Asian cultural commodity

Within theatre in particular, posters, flyers and publicity photos are the predominant means of attracting audiences. It is through these materials that the aestheticisation of the cultural commodity occurs, that is, the flattening of the commodity to the status of a symbol. Considering how such materials are spread even further than they used to be, via online technologies (my research found that venues and companies are increasingly use email and websites as the means of distributing promotional material), in some ways, publicity images become the commodities that are consumed, rather than the actual product they are advertising (see Lash & Urry, 1994). This gives them a decisive role in the transruptive potential of the hybrid translation (through its ability to unsettle racist nationalist discourse), and why I have devoted a chapter to the process behind their production. More specifically, in this section I want to examine the degree to which ‘Asianness’ is emphasised in the publicity of the British Asian cultural commodity, in what form, and the implications this has for racial cultural politics.

The theatre company Rifco Arts once again becomes a useful anchor in this debate, providing an example of when the product's brand or identity is absolutely based on its ethnic identity. I have previously highlighted how the titles of Rifco's plays are deliberately hybrid and humorous, based on ironic puns of Hollywood and Bollywood movies; this reflects Rifco's aesthetic/brand – a particular, postmodern filmic style (its latest production, *It Ain't All Bollywood* is a phantasmical comedy drama based on a lost character who blurs the lines between Bollywood and 'real life'). The title *There's Something About Simmy* is the literal manifestation of when Hollywood meets Bollywood, punning on the title of the hit movie, *There's Something About Mary*. This filmic aesthetic is how the play is represented in its publicity poster.

The image features a beautiful, young woman in an ornate red sari, standing with her back to the viewer. Behind her back she is holding an airmail letter (in place of the address is written 'From the makers of *Deranged Marriage*'), with a jumbo jet taking off in the distance; the plane, coupled with the airmail letter signifying a recently arrived immigrant. Though you cannot see her face fully, it is turned to the side revealing a playful smile, and this coupled with the slight tilt of her hip, producing a sexualised pose. In the background is a gaggle of aunty-jis<sup>83</sup>, looking disapprovingly at the main female figure (who we now read as Simmy), possibly because of her assertive sexuality. The style of the title is in bright pink, with a heart in place of the superscript dot of the 'i' and in a soft font that emulates a rom-com<sup>84</sup> aesthetic. Indeed, the image purposefully resembles a movie poster, even including a film reference in the *Evening Standard* quote that appears in the bottom left-hand corner: 'Think *Bend It Like Beckham* but with stronger metatarsals'. The image is colourful, erotic and feminine.

The publicity shot of *There's Something About Simmy* is typical of Rifco's aesthetic (the poster for the production *Deranged Marriage* is a similar exotic play with South

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<sup>83</sup> 'Aunty-ji' is a caricature of an interfering middle-aged aunty – a character who frequently appears in 'desi' vernacular culture.

<sup>84</sup> A short-hand for romantic comedy films

Asian femininity). What is undeniable about such images is how they indubitably present an Indophilic version of Asianness – in particular, the sexualised South Asian female. I asked Pravesh what he thought about the ethics of using such representations:

AS: Do you feel you sometimes worry that you are just perpetuating a certain exoticism?

Pravesh Kumar: Exactly. I think to a certain extent we may have. But recognising that, we evaluate everything we do. We are constantly evaluating in the theatres with the audiences. And maybe with something like Bollywood we may have but we've started to do deliberately is turn that around.

According to this quote, Pravesh is very aware of Rifco's play on the exotic. But it is justified in terms of appealing to the audiences' needs, through constant self-evaluation and reflexivity. It is worth stressing again, how this is a consequence of a sustained audience development programme. Rifco succeeds because it has been able to appeal to a particular Bollywood audience, who traditionally have not gone to the theatre. Rifco is perhaps the most successful mid-scale Asian theatre company because it has attained a synergy between its aesthetic (a populist, hybrid, Bollywood-esque approach to particular British Asian – mostly British Punjabi – issues), its brand (which is fun and accessible and foregrounds the Bollywood influence) and its niche (working class – mostly Punjabi – Asian folk, who consume Bollywood films). In the interview Pravesh actually stressed how Rifco aims to educate its audience in the theatre genre, allowing them to eventually shift away from a purely populist style and produce more challenging work. However, an ambivalence remains that Rifco still produces an exoticised form of Asianness that appeals to a racialised, (i.e. western) perception of South Asian cultures<sup>85</sup>. Regardless of the content of the plays, the accompanying publicity material is based on Indophilic representations of South Asian cultures. In light of this, is the success of Rifco (in particular its ability to attain regular funding and sustained runs at venues) because it produces an exaggerated representation of Asianness that

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<sup>85</sup> Indeed, at the time of writing, Rifco has just finished touring its latest production, *Where's My Desi Soulmate?* Even though this researcher has not seen it, the title suggests that Rifco has not yet moved onto the more serious aesthetic Pravesh was describing.

reinforce the narration of nation that is dependent on an absolute sense of racial difference?

Rifco is not the only example of a British Asian theatre company that employs this style. The poster to Tamasha's *Strictly Dandia* does not have obvious ethnic signifiers, apart from the title and the shout-line, 'Hot Moves and Gujarati Grooves'; yet with the shocking pink and red colour palette, and disco-style font, the overall effect is of kitsch and Bollywood glamour<sup>86</sup>. This style can be contrasted however, to two examples from television. Publicity campaigns in television are usually reserved for the big, mainstream productions, and subsequently only a few programmes that deal with British Asian stories have received this kind of exposure. Two recent programmes that have been given billboard advertising are *Britz* and *Bradford Riots*, both broadcast by Channel 4. *Britz* was a controversial two-part drama directed by Peter Kosminsky, which focuses on two British Muslim siblings: the brother who works for MI5, in the terrorism unit, and the sister who, following 9/11, finds herself involved in a terrorist plot. There were two billboard adverts for the drama based around the same image, with each advert having either the sister or the brother in the foreground (with the other sibling, just behind them, looking away) against a backdrop of a burning Union Flag. The brother is dressed in a suit with a clearly visible ID card pinned to his breast pocket, to signify his official role. Though it is not particularly obvious, the sister is wearing a salwar kameez. In each advert, the character at the front is gazing directly at the viewer, their facial expressions reflecting the tension and drama of the piece; the brother looks alert but anxious, whereas the sister's expression conveys a similar fear but with a resignation, or calmness about what is to come. The shout-line reads, 'Whose Side Are You On?'

A similar aesthetic is employed in the advert for *Bradford Riots*. The image is a frontal shot of a gang of rioting young Asian men, though it is cropped in a way to suggest vast numbers behind them. The youths are directly meeting the gaze of the viewer, as though we are adopting the view of the police who are confronting them. The central focus is on the young man in the middle, the main character who finds himself caught up in the riot and eventually convicted for his participation. He is

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<sup>86</sup> Andrew Lloyd Webber's hit musical *Bombay Dreams* employed exactly the same aesthetic.

wearing a red tracksuit top and is defiantly stretching out his arms, to provoke the police, his facial expression conveying pure rage. Surrounding him are other Asian youths, in hoods, baseball caps or with scarves covering their faces. They are similarly shouting and gesturing at the police, though the main character stands out in the most provocative pose. The character to his right is wearing a keffiyeh, connoting that these are Muslim youth.

In contrast to the Bollywood-style aesthetic employed in the Rifco and Tamasha examples, these billboards deploy a far grittier and serious style. However, what might appear as the opposing pole to the exoticism of South Asian cultures, is merely the underside of the same coin, playing on the dual archetypes of Asian as victim or the Asian gang as new folk devil (see Alexander, 2000). The actual content of the dramas attempted to produce a nuanced and complex examination of the issue of British Muslims and their relation to the state, though this is not necessarily conveyed by the billboard ads. (The main character in *Bradford Riots* in particular, is actually a complex, sensitive, thoughtful young man, a severe contrast to his portrayal in the publicity poster.) Instead, the posters reduce the British Muslim experience to burning flags and burning cars – Muslims as a threat from within. When the title *Britz* – which connotes the language of the urban (i.e. racialised) youth and their rejection of traditional versions of British national identity – is juxtaposed next to a burning Union Flag, with a line that says ‘Whose Side Are You On?’ (echoing George W Bush’s famous shout-line to the war on terror – ‘You are either with us, or against us’), it reinforces nationalist discourses of the impossibility of ‘integration’, underlining racial difference and the intrinsic whiteness of British national identity. From the examples cited thus far, we see how aestheticisation of the British Asian cultural commodity gets configured again into either the beautiful (Bollywood babes) or the ghastly (Muslim fanatical terrorists).

### *Rasa and the ambivalence of exotica*

For a sense of how this effect is produced through commodification, we can again look at the case of Rasa Productions. Earlier I examined how the titles of two of their plays – *Curry Tales* and *Too Close To Home* – were conceived from two different approaches to the ‘double bind’ that British Asian cultural producers often encounter,

and these approaches informed the process behind the design of the publicity material. Therefore, in the particular instance of *Curry Tales*, the further design of the production was based on an explicit toying with South Asian exotica. The strategy was rationalised in the following exchange with Ed:

EH: And another thing about *Curry Tales* [...] we had this strange image of Rani as this goddess of food with four arms and a big curry pot in front of her and vegetables everywhere, so it's quite a comic, colourful image which I don't know how many times it got reproduced in the press but it was one of those images that people saw it, they wanted to publish it! And that can do a lot of work in your favour, how people perceive the image and being a thing to be in their paper or whatever, to appear to be comic or colourful or fulfilling a cliché which in some ways that image was doing, fulfilling clichés and stereotypes.

AS: But then when you go and see the play they are challenged?

EH: They get subverted and challenged but you have sort of wooed them in with it!

According to this narrative, Rasa felt it could utilise 'colourful' exotic signifiers, and indeed 'fulfil clichés' since the narratives of postcolonial feminisms contained within the play would transgress any Orientalist assumptions that brought people to the show. Ed stressed that the image proved to be very popular with the press and was reproduced countless times. However, for this aesthetic to work politically, it relies on the individual attending the production so that they can have the fetishist instincts that might have enticed them there, 'subverted and challenged'. Otherwise, the admittedly striking image of Rani dressed as the Goddess of Curry reduces the play's expression of postcolonial, subaltern hybrid identities<sup>87</sup> to an Indophilic 'cliché' or 'stereotype' – to use Ed's words. Crucially, it is the sign, in the shape of the publicity image that is 'reproduced' (stressing the mechanical processes to cultural production – commodification as an assemblage of *technologies*) and circulated throughout the global cultural economy, travelling much further over space and time than the play itself.

*Too Close To Home* took a very different tack. In the interview, Ed stated that despite the play tackling issues of fundamentalism and terrorism and urban youth,

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<sup>87</sup> Epitomised by the character Mrs Wong – an Indian living in Malaysia, who prepares a multinational curry laksa against the backdrop of the 1969 race-riots.

'the path that it does not go down, is *it's about da urban asian yoof and dey are feeling repressed and dey are going to da Islam and bomb everybody* – it's not following a path that would be very easy, that is, very urban and soap opera kind of thing'. Ed is caricaturing a particular form of 'BME' theatre that he argues operates on stressing the difference and the particularity of black and Asian communities. Such narratives, he believes, alienate the mainstream white audience and reinforce a certain stereotype: a narrative that reduces the social phenomena of terrorism in the UK to how '*it's about da urban Asian yoof*' –the young British Muslim working-class male as new folk devil. The publicity image was designed to challenge this narrative: the image is a photo of Saleem (the youngest son who is caught with a bomb) in a hoodie and carrying a rucksack, set against a night street scene, with traffic speeding behind him. However, rather than a sensationalist image (in contrast to the *Britz* billboard ad), the mood is much more sombre and restrained. My feeling is that Rasa succeeded in not producing a stereotypical Muslim-as-terrorist narrative. Based on the image alone, the viewer would not even guess the story is about terrorism.

However, despite the desire to avoid sensationalism, the press shots of *Too Close To Home* produced precisely this narrative. Indeed, the actual context of the press call (from which the shots were taken) provides an example of how symbol creators are enticed by, or coaxed into producing the nation's *desired* representations of difference. The press call is when freelance photographers are called in to a production to take pictures of specific scenes that are then bought by newspaper editors to accompany reviews and preview pieces. During the press call the actors act out scenes for the photographers who take pictures of the unfolding action. On this occasion the photographers came in on the day of the preview night and shot three scenes picked by Ed and director Iqbal Khan. These scenes are usually chosen because they contain interesting compositions or feature heightened moments of drama, managing in a single shot to convey certain themes of the play. On the broader terrain of popular culture these photos gain extra significance, effectively becoming the symbols that ground the play in a certain narrative within the social imagination. While the producers might not add such weighty significance to the press call, it was nonetheless clear that they had thought very carefully about what scenes would best represent the play and bring in the largest audience.

One of the chosen scenes featured a fairly innocuous setting of two of the female characters – the mother and her niece – secretly sharing a cigarette together. I was later told this scene was chosen because of the idea that the image of the mother in a salwar kameez with a cigarette in her hand would produce a quirky image of Muslim women who are typically represented as passive and repressed<sup>88</sup>. In stark contrast, another image conveyed a more violent mood. This was a shot of the climax of a scene where the older conservative brother Sayeed (in traditional Muslim dress) and his younger brother Saleem are having a heated argument, which culminates with Sayeed slamming his younger brother's head on the dining table after Saleem makes an insulting comment about Sayeed's wife. The context against which this photo was taken illustrates how such images come to frame the narratives of the play in inadvertent ways. Originally, when this scene was performed, the photographers, not knowing how the scene would end, had stopped taking pictures before the final moment of Sayeed attacking his brother. Realising immediately afterwards that this crucial bit of action would make the most exciting image for the press shots, the actors repeated the scene but on this second take, held final pose so that the photographers could get a clearer shot of the actual assault. What struck me was the particular aural accompaniment to this event. As each of the previous scenes was acted out the actors' lines competed against the constant din of camera shutters and flashes as the photographers took pictures. However, on the repeat of this particular extract, the actors' words were met with silence as the photographers held off taking pictures until the climax of the scene. Then, in the final moment when Sayeed slammed Saleem's head on the table the pose was held and there was a riot of camera clicks and flashes, reifying this moment of violence and rendering the story that preceded it incidental and insignificant. In the context of the play, we know that in this scene Sayeed is actually trying to warn his younger brother about the dangerous militant Islamic group he has been spotted with. But out of context this picture produces the opposite narrative, reinforcing the stereotype of a violent Muslim fanatic (since it is Sayeed who is dressed in traditional religious garb).

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<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, Rifco's *Deranged Marriage* had a similar press shot with the main female protagonist in full bridal dress secretly smoking a cigarette. The image from *Too Close To Home* wasn't as exotic or sexualised, and was much more *ordinary*.

Unsurprisingly this image – rather than the perhaps more subversive image of the two women smoking - was chosen to go with a critical *Times* review<sup>89</sup>.

In a way, this scene is a visual representation of the commodification of race – involving an assemblage of competing labour (the photographers vying for the best shots, which they will sell to newspaper editors), technology (through the cameras that capture and fix the symbol), and the symbol itself (the choice of scene as the act of repackaging the product in a particular way for mass consumption). As part of the process of commodification then, the press shot reified the Muslim-fanatic narrative, even though the play is less about terrorism and more about family and the dark secrets hidden within. I believe that Rasa was caught between wanting to prevent a sensationalist representation of Islam and terrorism, but also knowing that accentuating the topicality of the narrative's setting would get them more exposure. I asked Ed and Rani if they were conscious of the implications of choosing the scene with Sayeed and Saleem for the press call which was in danger of fulfilling certain (racialist) representations of British Asian identity. As they explained:

RM: We're not naïve. We play it sometimes, not this time but we do play it sometimes. We have to. I know when I am doing it, even when...

EH: When we did a similar press call for *Curry Tales* in Edinburgh, we did a similar thing with three or four photographers and just one scene. I think we only did one. We did Rosemary who is very sensual, very sexual, wears a big headdress of feathers – it's quite an extreme image really, and very colourful, very in your face, lively. And it did get used a lot, I think in *The Observer* ...

RM: It was huge ...

What I find interesting in this passage is how it highlights the seductiveness of using certain markers of Asian exotica, which the producers believe will prove popular with the 'mainstream' audience and press. Certainly, demonstrating how Ed and Rani are not 'naïve' and do 'play it sometimes', their language, through the use of adjectives such as 'sensual', 'sexual' and 'colourful', reflects a knowingness about the particular Orientalist aesthetic they are reproducing. Yet despite the individual agency in reaching these decisions, they are determined within a climate of increasing commercialisation of cultural production. In order to attract attention from

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<sup>89</sup> This review gave *Too Close To Home* a negative two stars out of five review, accusing Rani of producing an incomplete picture of how suicide bombers are created. It is worth noting that this image took a predominate position in the review, filling the top third of the page.

the press and from audiences, the temptation is to represent Asianness in a way that is acquiescent with the dominant nationalist discourse on identity and difference. Again, this is a consequence of the rationalising/racialising logic of capital intrinsic to commodification, an issue that becomes more apparent in the case of the publishing industry.

### Book jackets and the packaging of British Asian literature

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that similar patterns recur in the case of book publishing, since it employs an even more formalised process of aestheticisation, specifically in the design of book jackets. This is a much more managed process than is the case in theatre, which, in line with the general trend in publishing as a whole, is becoming more scientific and rationalised. Again, the production of culture needs to be understood as the end product of *human actions* as mediated through economic structures and relations. Thus, the design stage of the publishing process provides a further example of the complex, contested and unpredictable nature of cultural production, which nevertheless leads to similar epistemological outcomes. While economics cannot solely explain the tendency towards certain representations of South Asians on book jackets, the intention of the postcolonial cultural economy intervention is to unpack how the economic intersects with the socio-cultural to create cultures of production through which Orientalist representations of the postcolonial subject occur.

### *The science of book design*

As with the previous section, my focus is how Asianness becomes a feature in the branding of the novel through its cover. The basic principles of designing a book jacket are laid out in an exchange with Rosemary Hudson of Black Amber press:

Rosemary Hudson: You want something that the buyer will go, this looks good, just by looking at the cover – I'm a great believer that people pick up a book because the cover looks good.

AS: So choosing a cover, writing the blurb, choosing the quotes that's a process of branding the book, positioning it.

RH: Yes, but you also have to give the reader an idea about what the book is all about. The person who designs the cover, just does the cover, but as the

publishing house you have to design the blurb, all that information, pricing, the bar-code and stuff, the spine.

This narrative is interesting, beyond its example of commonsense marketing speak through normative references to ‘covers that look good’, in its revelation of the dynamic between representing the book in the way that is true to the text, but also trying to present it in a way that is attractive to the consumer. As we shall see, these two objectives do not necessarily correspond. In fact it is in their interplay– and how symbol creators attempt to negotiate this dynamic – that either leads to contestatory cultural interventions, or more typically Orientalist representations of South Asians.

Even though I describe the production process in publishing as increasingly rationalised, that is not to underestimate the role of individual agency and autonomy, a condition that Lash & Urry (1994: 5-6) believe characterises the new forms of cultural work. With regard to the cover design process, such a theme is underlined in a further exchange with Rosemary Hudson:

RH: You have a designer, who you will brief.

AS: I assume in your case that’s a freelance designer.

RH: Yes, only the very big houses have in-house designers. So you have these wonderful creative people who are book designers. And you brief them, and my attitude – is I think everybody is good at their own thing so I never say, make suggestions about what I think the jacket ought to be. I say, here’s the manuscript of the first few chapters, have a look at it and interpret it the way you see.

AS: So you give your designers a lot of autonomy?

RH: Yes, because they are book jacket designers, they know the trends as well. Don’t forget they are in the book business themselves. So as a publisher you might have an idea, you might suggest that look, I see this character as doing this, and what do you think? So you have a meeting where you discuss this and you come to a point and the designer might go away and do something completely different, and he’ll come back and you might think, this is fantastic! Or you might say, well I don’t quite like the font you’ve used, I don’t quite like the colours. But between the two of you, you come up with something you both like. And hopefully the sales team too. More often than not the sales team like it. But they’ll always have something to say.

Rosemary paints the designing a book jacket as a process of collaboration and at times contestation, but mediated through self-reflexive and self-aware individuals, who bring their own values and aesthetic vision to their work. However, Rosemary alludes to the commercial dimension of individual agency: as she says of designers,

‘don’t forget they are in the book business themselves’, and she additionally makes a (slightly disparaging) reference to the interventions of the sales team. This narrative demonstrates how cultural workers involved in the aestheticisation stage of production are autonomous, but work within certain rationalised processes – and within certain cultures of production, and wider market ‘trends’ – as part of the design stage of cultural production, even though we may regard designing a book cover as individualistic creative practice. In other words, we can think of the autonomy of the designer as enmeshed in an elaborate network of complex professionals, organisational cultures, market trends, and the wider political economy of the publishing industry. Thus, a closer examination of design practices as it occurs through this elaborate setting reveals how certain Orientalist representations of South Asian cultures become mass-produced.

In the chapter on commissioning practices I described the increasingly scientific rationale behind the purchase/commissioning of novels, and this logic persists in the design process. This is particularly true in the corporate sector, where designers are given detailed briefs regarding how the publisher wants the jacket to look. As David, the editorial director at a major publishing house, explains:

Some places have very detailed cover briefing forms where you say, I’m aiming this 35-55 year old women, or you’ll say, this is for people who would have loved reading *Brick Lane* or... you will actually state that. So you’re already steering someone towards how you want it to look. One of the major publishers I used to work for used to have marketing categories. You’d say the people I want to buy this, or the people I think will buy this are, ABC1 people, they buy their groceries at Waitrose... You’d actually say that.

The account introduces some themes that I shall explore in more detail in the following chapter on marketing, but the way in which David narrates the design of the book jacket is how it is based upon identification of the target audience, defined by gender, age, social class (in terms of NRS social grades, e.g. ‘ABC1’) and their lifestyles and spending patterns (people who ‘buy their groceries at Waitrose’, or ‘loved reading *Brick Lane*’). This reinforces the idea of book jacket design as a way of branding the product that of course is expected to reflect the content of the novel, but is ultimately designed to target and attract a particular marketing niche.

Such a practice forms part of the dominant trend in publishing industry, which has seen the increasing role of sales personnel in the creative stages of production, and this is particularly the case in the design and packaging of the cultural commodity. As demonstrated in previous chapters Rosemary Hudson would describe the interventions of sales reps in creative/editorial work as a contest between two opposing rationales, as the following account illustrates:

So you go to a sales conference, or sales meeting with your new titles, which is usually about six to eight months before the book is published, and you fill them in and tell them all about this book. And they take one look at the cover and they say we can't sell that. They can look at it and say, that won't sell, or they'll say the price is too high. And so the publisher has to follow these things because the publisher is not actually going out to sell the book, the rep is going to have to sell it. So you have to listen to them. I have changed covers in the past, or made adjustment to the covers because the sales-rep feels they can't sell it.

David produces a similar account of the tension between editors and marketing/sales:

Then there is a battle of wills where marketing and salespeople say, well if it did look like that book then we'd sell more copies. Because salespeople will go into shops everyday and will try to sell 20 copies to the bookshop when there are 200,000 books published a year, salespeople would say, that doesn't stand out enough, doesn't tell me what it is. I want to know it's a book about a young Sri Lankan woman...

Such a narrative would describe the interventions of retailers as well, as David outlines: 'Sometimes you'll go to Waterstones and bring a cover nine months in advance and ask them what they think and if they hate it and say they want it to look like *Brick Lane*, can you can go back and change it. So retailers can play a role too.'

There are two points in particular that emerge from these particular comments. Firstly, the accounts describe how the design of the book cover is mediated through a sales/marketing rationale – whether through the input of a sales rep, or from an earlier quote, the sense a designer has of external market trends and fashions. Throughout this thesis I have not wanted to underplay the role of individual agency in cultural production, but stress instead the commercial structures through which such agency is mediated, producing cultures of production that, to paraphrase David, attempt to 'steer' complex professionals towards certain creative outcomes.

Crucially, the common theme in these narratives is that it is a sales rationale that ultimately has the final say. Indeed, all of the above quotes describe how salespersons and retailers can withhold a novel from entering the market based on its cover (which is then redesigned to meet the salesperson's demands). Interestingly, this is narrated in a slightly defeatist tone – as though the respondents are not necessarily happy about this trend, but are resigned to it. This leads onto the second significant point with regard to British Asian novels, where cultures of production that categorise books through the logic of niche and genre conventions are founded on a cultural essentialism. This is a theme that has run throughout the research: if distribution is where a Manichean colonial vision materialises on the temporal and spatial plane, then the design stage is where such logic manifests at the symbolic level. As David says, salespeople or retailers can tell an editor, 'I want to know it's a book about a young Sri Lankan woman' or 'make it look like *Brick Lane*', which are spoken in normative terms but are underpinned by commonsense assumptions about racial difference, and how they expect such difference to be represented. This is exemplified in the following comment from Rosemary, when she describes the process of creating design briefs:

For instance if it's teenage fiction, you have a certain kind of image on the cover. You and the designer would have read the book so you know who you should be targeting. Like, you know, if it's the teenager, or a children's book it's going to be something else. You know you're targeting say, male readers – it's a man's book, or a girly book. So you have all of these factors.

While Rosemary is not talking about race, her reference to if 'it's a man's book, or girly book' suggests the ways in which gender, and cultural essentialisms are produced in book jackets. Again we see the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital, where difference is reified through rationalised processes and normative language and informed by broader social and cultural values underscored within the process of commodification. Providing another example of how autonomous symbol creators are coerced into using stereotypical representations of race, despite stressing how she tries to avoid exoticised covers for her Asian authors, the cover to one of

Rosemary's books, *Mistress* by Indian author Anita Nair, plays on precisely an Orientalist aesthetic<sup>90</sup>.

### *Formulas of Asianness*

Uncovering the structural context of jacket design can help us understand how British Asian novels are represented in particular ways. Again, we find that the climate of cultural production in the UK has a disposition towards homogeneity. As Negus (1997) highlights, cultural production can be re-conceptualised as the management of unpredictability – what is going to prove successful can never be guaranteed – and subsequently, media companies frequently rely on formula when packaging a cultural commodity (Ryan, 1992), while trying to differentiate it from rival products in the marketplace. The issue of formula is introduced in the following account from David the editorial director:

Of course if something else has worked you'll package it similarly – sometimes pretty blatantly. You can't control the whole process of publishing. You can produce a book, you can try to persuade book sellers to put in on the shelves but it's up to them if they do that or not – they can say, we'll just take one copy, or they can say we'll take 40 copies. Everyone all the way down the line knows that *Brick Lane* sold a shed-load last year and you're saying I've got a fantastic new Bangladeshi writer, she lives in London. I could decide I would put a really futuristic silver cover on it with modernist type on it. And you can bet your bottom dollar you'd only get ten copies out there. Or I could make it look almost exactly the same as *Brick Lane*. People like shorthand. People like putting things into boxes, people like knowing what's worked before, because it will work again.

Again, this quote continues the themes from previous chapters, and it is worth underlining the normative terms in which the logic of formula is justified, which David frames as appealing to the needs and wants of booksellers who ultimately decide whether a novel goes on the shelves or not. The issue of formula was explored in the chapter on commissioning where editors have a tendency towards purchasing novels based on schemas known to have worked in the past, and such rationale re-

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<sup>90</sup> The cover is in tones of reds and oranges, with the title in an ornate font with symmetric patterns reminiscent of Islamic art. This is set against the background of a blurry image (that looks like a photo but could be a painting) of the lower half of a South Asian lady in a red sari, seemingly running along the marble floors of a palace, where her feet are exposed showing a toe ring and ankle bracelet. Coupled with its title, the cover is a sexualised, erotic and indeed, Orientalist image.

manifests in aestheticisation – as David says, ‘if something else has worked, you’ll package it similarly’. I see two formulas in particular that often characterise the covers of British Asian novels.

The first is what the author Rajeev Balasubramanyam labelled in a previous chapter as ‘multiculturalist novels’. Rajeev defines such novels as big works of literary fiction that are complicit with a certain white, liberal, middle-class attitude towards multiculturalism – not too subversive, but featuring enough of what Stuart Hall would describe as *a bit of the other*. With the cases of *Brick Lane*, *White Teeth* and *Londonstani* (though its author Gautam Malkani, in our interview, objected to being categorised with these books), a lot of money was spent on publishing these novels, and for David, this affected the way their jackets appeared:

David: Why [the cover to] *White Teeth* worked was it was so confident. It basically said, we spent a fuck-load of money on this, because it was a very famous acquisition process for *White Teeth* – she was given quarter of a million pounds when she was 19 I think, just started university. And it was almost saying to the trade, remember this, we paid shit loads of money for year, boomf <pretends to slam a heavy book on table> *White Teeth*.

AS: So a bold announcement....

David: Yeah. And it’s the same in the design for *Brick Lane* and *Londonstani* as well. There was never going to be anything quiet about that. People had to remember that ... because we have a trade press where every week you get a magazine that says what is happening in publishing, and these were the big stories, these acquisitions.

In this exchange David explains the particular style adopted for *White Teeth*, *Brick Lane* and *Londonstani* in terms of needing to make a bold statement because of the large advances each of the authors supposedly received. Such a narrative suggests again the looming commercial context to creative work. Certainly, all three of these books have similar designs – the title in large bold letters against a contrasting background, either white or brightly coloured. Additionally, the covers are notable for containing just a slight ethnic tone. In *Brick Lane*, the cover looks quite simple with the title against a white background, but up close we see that the letters of the title are made up of colourful saris, peacock feathers, chillies, Indian sweets and other South Asian textiles. The hardback cover of *Londonstani* is similarly simple, and carries a stencil of a tiger against flock wallpaper. *White Teeth*, which appears as a visible influence on *Brick Lane*, adopts a similarly large font for its title, which

subsequently dominates the cover. In the background is an image of the Rastafarian symbol, the lion of Judah, and what appears to be the gold trimming of a sari. Apart from the tiger in *Londonstani*, the ethnic signifiers in *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane* are only visible on closer inspection<sup>91</sup>. In some ways the subtle use of exotica in the covers provides a visual representation of the liberal *multiculturalist* ideology that Rajeev believes these books to represent. Furthermore, it epitomises the commodification of race, as the potentially unsettling and convivial narratives of cultural entanglements contained within each novel are transformed through their book jackets into palatable, slightly exotic forms of hybridity.

According to David's account the jackets of *Brick Lane* and *Londonstani* were based on a formula and aesthetic seen to have worked in the case of *White Teeth*. And it is in this way that the publisher of the novel *The Curry Mile* by Zahid Hussain rationalises the design of its particular cover. *The Curry Mile* is set in Parkholme, the Indian restaurant district of Manchester, and features a cover that very much – if not blatantly – resembles the cover of *Brick Lane* (this time the letters of the bold title are in a somewhat Arabic font, made up of neon restaurant signs rather than saris). When I asked the book's publisher, Peter Kalu of Suitcase Press, about the reason for doing this, he replied, 'We were trying to ride a wave, it was very commercial [...] the cover is designed along *Brick Lane* lines anyway. So *Brick Lane* was you know, Bangladeshi community, London. *Curry Mile* is Pakistani community, Manchester <laughs> If you like this, you'll like that.' In this quote Peter is quite unequivocal about 'riding a wave' and producing something very commercial that tapped into the success of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Subsequently, the respondent clearly admits to how the cover to *The Curry Mile* was designed to copy *Brick Lane*'s successful brand. While this might appear as a cynical or crass marketing ploy (Peter himself has to laugh when explaining the strategy in such blatant terms), Peter justified this decision as due to Suitcase Press' small operation, without the marketing clout to create an entirely new brand for its book. Nonetheless, there are obvious ethical

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<sup>91</sup> In the case of *Londonstani* the particular stencil style in which the tiger is drawn (or indeed, air-brushed) does not immediately signify Asianness, certainly not in comparison to some of the images I have described in this chapter. But when coupled with the title it is clear what it is supposed to signify. The publishing company later told me that it was actually based on a tattoo worn by one of the characters in the book.

ramifications to such an approach that are complex and contradictory, but still present.

The second formula that characterises British Asian novels is a ‘chick-lit’ style. This is a very popular genre (throughout my time researching the publishing industry I was told that 70% of the book-buying public are female though no-one could tell me where this statistic actually came from), and subsequently publishers often try to shoehorn novels into this category. The covers of chick-lit novels follow a strict formula, featuring bright colours or pastel tones, with a drawing of a young woman and the title in a fun font, all stressing the accessible tone of the novel. This style is encapsulated in the cover of *Colour of Love*, the third novel by Preethi Nair – the jacket is in pastel blue, featuring an illustration of flowers and a woman on the front. Interestingly, unlike her previous two novels, the ethnic element of the novel was removed from the cover. Indeed, the branding of her book in this way displeased her:

Preethi Nair: The first two books were an amazing experience, but not so with the third book. The third one they put a girly chick-lit cover on. And I hated it. I hated it. But at that time what was really big was girly chick-lit covers of a specific type, and what they care about is if it’s selling a huge volume. And some marketing person who probably hasn’t even read it ...it was a new marketing team so it was bit of a weird situation for a new marketing company to come in and they were like let’s just stick this cover on. And there was nothing I could do about it because they were adamant that that was going to sell volume. Which it didn’t.

AS: It didn’t?

PN: No because it alienated my readership. My readers are of a certain age and they know what I write about, but put if you put that kind of cover on it, which is so distinct from the other two they’re not going to find it.

In this quote, the respondent complains that the publishers disregarded the content of the book and attempted to tap into the fad for chick-lit for the sake of more sales, even though it would alienate her core readership. This suggests yet again the disengagement between aesthetic and marketing/sales rationales (she accuses the marketing company who produced the cover of not even reading the book). Rajeev Balasubramanyam described a similar experience regarding his novel *In Beautiful Disguises*. The story is set in India, featuring a young girl obsessed with Audrey Hepburn, who runs away from home to be a movie star. Even though this one-line description reduces the storyline to something akin to a Bollywood film, the book is

actually more literary and complex, exploring the themes of alienation, hidden lives and female identity against the backdrop of the postcolonial city. (Many of the reviews actually drew comparisons with *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy.) Rajeev himself came up with the concept behind the cover, which was a frame taken from an Amar Chitra Katha comic<sup>92</sup> of the *Mahabharata* – something that he believed would look ‘cool and young and youthful’<sup>93</sup>. Even though the cover did not fit into strict ‘chick-lit’ genre conventions, the publishers managed to brand the book as such through the use of quotes and the blurb. As Rajeev explains:

So it had [a quote from] Emily Perkins who’s a sort of ... I hadn’t read her work but it’s kind of chick-lit-y. Which is the way they were seeing it – the publishers. Because *Vogue* and *Marie Claire* and all these people were reviewing it. They were seeing it more as chick-lit-y I think. Which I thought was excessively trashy. And I think basically our dispute was I didn’t see it as chick-lit-y. I saw it as more literary. I was happy with cool, funky literary – but still literary. I think they saw it as – in terms of marketing – as kitsch, chick-lit-y kind of thing, which I associate with morons!

Consequently, Rajeev had misgivings about the way the book was branded, which he later described as ‘dumbed-down’. And the other authors in the examples I use share a similar attitude. For instance, Preethi Nair believed that the branding of *Colour of Love*, with its chick-lit cover and quotes from *Glamour* and *Company* magazines, alienated the core readership who were expecting something light but still literary. Similarly, Zahid Hussain who wrote the *Curry Mile*, felt the cover led to unfair comparisons to *Brick Lane*, which he believed undermined the originality of his narrative on a particular Pakistani, north west English experience. Interestingly, the cover to Rajeev’s book *In Beautiful Disguises* proved very successful with female readers, subsequently vindicating the branding strategy of the publisher. Regardless, each of the author’s reflections I draw from narrate the intervention of a sales rationale in a negative way, with regard to how the book jackets ultimately misrepresent their work. Despite how the ethics of these strategies are less clear-cut

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<sup>92</sup> These are Indian comics produced in the 1970s and 1980s based on Hindu epics and moments in Indian history.

<sup>93</sup> The slide is taken from Arjuna’s story when he disguises himself as a eunuch during the final year of the Pandava’s hiding, which is a subtext to the novel. Originally the publisher suggested that the cover featured the image of an Indian girl looking at her reflection and seeing Audrey Hepburn – something that Rajeev strongly objected to for he felt it insinuated that the Indian girl wanted to be white.

than we may believe, it nevertheless shows the disconnect that can occur between the commercial, market-driven logic that underpins the process of design and packaging, and the cultural politics and accompanying aesthetic vision of the novelist.

## Conclusion

This chapter presented a further example of how a different stage of commodification sees a particular manifestation of what I have identified as the rationalised/racialising logic of capital. However, I should stress that my argument is not that all representations of Asianness in a cultural commodity's packaging amount to the reification of race. Rather, the challenge for the cultural producer is in intervening in a certain commercial (neo-colonial) logic that attempts to reconfigure representations of postcolonial South Asia into stereotypical depictions of the beautiful or ghastly (in the conclusion I shall address some examples that I believe evade the reductive representation of Asianness, without totally denying its ethnic biography). The aim of this chapter was to demonstrate how the design stage of production represents another point in production where capitalism attempts to regulate the British Asian cultural commodity in particular ways. As suggested in the introduction, what I believe is most unique about this stage of production is how it appears to give the cultural worker a large degree autonomy but in fact, provides an instance of where structure acts on the individual in very concrete, yet complex ways. Thus, this chapter has shown how macro-structural forces attempt to 'steer' the symbol creator in producing output in certain ways, which explains why Asian cultural commodities appear as very specific, formulaic representations. Consequently, the way in which I analysed this process, framed within the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy, represents a shift from the kind of lethargic, determinist analysis of approaches critiqued in chapter one, and produces a more nuanced reading of industrialised cultural production.

The hybrid text is valorised within postcolonial discourses for challenging the disavowal of the Other, but as the authors of *Dis-Orienting Rhythms...* stress, it is through commodification that hybridity is reconstructed as exotic difference. The new British Asian aesthetic often plays on a fusion of Eastern images with western

graphic design styles, but through the neo-colonial logic of ethnic absolutism that is hidden within commonsense marketing practice, such images paradoxically come to stress absolute racial difference, or at least drain the hybrid entity of its transruptive potential. What is so troubling about these outcomes is that while the actual content of the text might provide a counter-hegemonic challenge to racialised representations of British Asian cultures, it is as a symbol through publicity material – whether flyers, book jackets, posters and billboard advertisements, national and local press, TV trailers or a JPEG floating in the worldwide web – it potentially travels much further than the commodity itself. And it is during the design/packaging process, produced through a particular commercial rationale, that these images can paradoxically undermine the cultural politics of the actual text, since the design of the cultural commodity is based on stressing difference – that is the ethnic biography of the text. Re-representing Asianness does not always have to equate to cultural essentialism, but when it is configured through marketing logic and the discourse of Orientalism into either the beautiful or the ghastly – or an exotic form of hybridity – then the ethics of cultural production come sharply into focus. The following chapter on marketing will flesh out the wider postcolonial cultural economy setting to this stage of cultural production, demonstrating the ways in which this ideological process is rationalised as standardised commercial practice.

## **Chapter Seven – Marketing the British Asian cultural commodity: USPs and the politics of niche**

In the previous chapter I framed design and packaging as the initial stage in the marketing process, introducing themes that will be developed further in this chapter on marketing and press. As I have demonstrated in this empirical section of the thesis, a marketing logic emerges at the very beginning of the commodity phase, through the actions of marketing/sales personnel who are playing an increasingly influential role in the commissioning/editorial process. More discreetly, it occurs through cultures of production that are feeling the pressure of intensifying market competition – even in those industries protected by state regulation or buoyed by government subsidies – forcing a greater focus on producing goods that have immediate marketable qualities in order to improve their chances in the marketplace. Consequently, the marketing stage of production becomes the final realisation of positioning and branding strategies that already figured at the start of the commodity phase. This chapter will demonstrate how the marketing process is the most explicit manifestation of the neo-colonial ideology of ethnic absolutism that underpins the capitalistic production of culture, as revealed in the practices of product qualification (that is, identifying a commodity's unique selling point) and niche marketing strategies.

The marketing stage of British Asian cultural commodities once again takes slightly different forms in each of the industries I am studying, but they all rely on shared principles, regarding establishing the product's unique selling point (USP) and identifying the target audience. The television and publishing industries have the most in common since they are dealing with mass-produced products on a national level. These mainly centre around offline advertising campaigns including billboards, newspaper/magazine adverts and television trailers (there are naturally more instances of the latter in the broadcast industry). Since the theatre deals with smaller audiences –and has smaller marketing budgets – marketing campaigns occur

on a relatively small scale and are more locally focused<sup>94</sup>. Marketing strategies generally entail publicity through the venue's season brochure, plus posters and flyers handed out or left in shops, cafes and community centres (as well as the theatre venues themselves) and direct mail campaigns, which post flyers and brochures to segmented audiences. From my research, I found a relatively new utilisation of online marketing strategies, through websites (particularly social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook), email campaigns (using the same principles as direct marketing) and viral marketing, that take advantage of the Internet's relatively low costs and wider reach. Marketing in all sectors will additionally encompass press campaigns, where press officers (either working in-house or as outside agencies) attempt to generate preview and review pieces in local and national press, with the aim of creating a profile for the product and generating sales. With specific regard to the marketing of British Asian cultural commodities, since they are usually not big-budget productions, marketing campaigns tend to be small to mid-scale.

The main focus of this chapter is the underlying principles behind such practices. As was the case in previous chapters, while I will at times refer to the technical details of specific practices, my interest is in unpacking how the logic behind the marketing of British Asian cultural commodities is informed by commonsense assumptions about race and difference that have reductive effects. As such, this chapter will focus on two issues in particular that emerge from such an approach. The first relates to product qualification and how the text's identity or brand comes to be reduced to its author's ethnicity (that is, absolute difference) via positioning and branding strategies based on establishing the commodity's USP. The second theme focuses on the question of audience, and the ethical issues surrounding targeting specifically Asian audiences for Asian work – an issue I have found to be particularly troubling for British Asian cultural producers. To conclude, I will suggest that the foregrounding of a commodity's Asianness in a marketing campaign, and the targeting of Asian audiences in particular, is paradoxically at odds with the profit-maximising character of capitalism, which would benefit from stressing the universal

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<sup>94</sup> Though this is not always the case; as Burston (1999) argues 'megamusicals' use increasingly industrialised techniques, reflected in big-budget national marketing strategies. Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Bombay Dreams* operated on such scale, though this is the one example from something that can be considered 'British-Asian'.

aspect of such commodities in order to improve the scope for ‘crossing-over’ into the mainstream. As such, this final empirical chapter reiterates the neo-colonial dimension of commodification, whose primary role with regard to cultural production, I argue, is sustaining the regulatory practices of racialised governmentalities, rather than accumulating surplus value.

### **Pitching Asianness**

I have suggested in previous chapters that a central feature of commodification in British Asian cultural production is the reduction of the product to its perceived ethnic identity, regardless of its content. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the reification of difference is consummated at the marketing stage of production, in the process of establishing a product’s USP. However, this is not always launched from a cynical corporate strategy. On the contrary, the foregrounding of an ethnic identity in the marketing of the cultural commodity can occur on the insistence of the cultural producer in question, who might be acting on political compulsion. This is the case of the poet Daljit Nagra. As we saw in chapter three, the defiant representation of British Asian identity is central to Daljit’s work, but the way in which he narrated the creative process behind choosing a title and designing the cover suggests that the editors at Faber & Faber were almost oblivious to the marketable potential of exploiting the book’s Asianness. The branding of the book in this way was so off-radar for the editors, that Daljit found himself almost willing them to represent Asianness more brazenly. This desire, however, was not for commercial purposes, but emerged from a particular political urge, as articulated in a passage I originally quoted in chapter three, which is worth repeating again:

It almost feels like a neat revenge because when I grew up I was in a white area and it was almost shameful to be Asian, to have an Asian name, because it’s quite a hostile racist area. And now I can use that same identity [...] and exploit that; where I was kind of exploited or abused for my very existence I can turn that existence round now, and you know, turn the gaze round as it were, and say, yeah I am Indian, I know you need some Indian poets, so here, look I am Indian, and I am going to be as Indian as possible - Make what you can of it. That’s the way I still see myself heading [...] Whether that will backfire is a different issue, let’s see. I think there’s a fine line, because if you become too Indian maybe people won’t want to know, and it’s finding the

right level of Indian-ness. Which the first book has got – and I wasn't sure if it had or not. I didn't really care if it did because I was happy with the poems, but I think it's for the right balance because the book has been successful.

In this quote Daljit is speaking more generally about his choice of subject matter, but the politics he articulates are also applicable to how he imagined the book would be marketed: as 'Indian as possible'. His attitude is reminiscent of the 'Asian Underground' scene of the mid-1990s, and what Sharma et al (1996) called *the politics of the new Asian dance music*. This was perhaps the defining cultural moment that forged the space in which second generation Asians could express a particular British Asian identity that transcended the prevailing stereotypes of the Asian immigrant (and its children) as victim, submissive and unable to integrate into British society, let alone contribute to its cultural life. Thus the marketing and branding of the scene, utilising the same aesthetic as the music that fused eastern aural references into cutting edge dance breaks, was defiantly based on repackaging (and profiting from) symbols that in the past had been used to caricature and ridicule Asian cultures, stressing their absolute difference from (white) British national identity.

This style has subsequently been co-opted and commodified (Kalra and Hutnyk, 1998) but it is perhaps because Daljit Nagra performs his craft in the non-commercial haven of poetry, within a publishing house which is known for its independent literary spirit, that he is buffered from a certain marketing mentality that, in all probability, would have amplified the author's ethnic identity in its branding. Daljit in the above quote spoke of 'finding the right level of Indian-ness', and somewhat ironically, the case of *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* provides the only instance in my research where the author has asked for ethnicity to be *turned up*. However, in more commercially driven industries, where the first stage in marketing is identifying the product's USP, the extent to which Asianness is at times over-determined becomes the major issue at stake.

### Ethnicity as a USP

Advertising pioneer Rosser Reeves (1961) is credited for developing the idea of the USP, which formed the basis for the innovation of advertising jingles and slogans

that characterise modern marketing techniques. The process entails the identification of the attribute (or attributes) that differentiates the product from others in the marketplace, and feeds into an existing or cultivated demand on the part of the consumers. As suggested, in the case of British Asian cultural commodities, it is the producer's ethnicity that often becomes the product's USP, as this is the most visible difference – though problematically of course – between it and other products. As such, it is the process through which television drama *Second Generation* was marketed as 'the Asian King Lear', and how the presenter of TV series *Indian Food Made Easy*, Anjum Anand, was represented as 'the Asian Nigella'. To quote again the editorial director of a major publishing house: 'everybody loves shorthand'.

It is not always clear whether such shout-lines are attributable to marketing officers/executives, or members of the press who are looking to find a hook or angle from which to create a story around the product in question. It is the latter that Rupa Huq (1996) believes is responsible for reducing Asian musical groups to Asian versions of the mainstream originals (for instance, Cornershop as 'the Asian Jesus and Mary Chain', or Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental as 'the Asian Public Enemy'). Huq suggests that such journalistic shorthand is lazy and convenient, and effectively undermines Asian cultural expression, which is reduced to an (inferior) copy of the (white or black) established masters. I suggest that the commonality of such abbreviations is not simply a reflection of the particular outlook of the journalist, or indeed, of bourgeois society, but constitutes the logic of commodification itself. The reductive branding of the British Asian text occurs as part of its marketing strategy, emerging within a particular commercial rationale, through a relation between marketing personnel and journalists, with the former attempting to influence the latter. As Josephine Rodrigues, press officer at the Lyric Theatre (who worked on the Rasa production *Too Close To Home*), described her approach: '[I] look at angles – that's the first thing I do. Look at what stories, at what possible stories are in that play, and then pitch relevant ideas to arts editors in terms of previews [...] [The angles] will depend on the show.' As such, the marketing of British Asian products and the representation of such products in the press can be conflated as following the same commercial logic, though mediated through individual agents who bring to their work their own values, ethics, and judgements.

As we have seen, the success of a cultural product is reliant on marketing and press that in turn are dependent on the establishment of a strong USP. Yet, how is this standard industrial practice underwritten by racialised governmentalities? The Rasa production *Curry Tales* once again provides a useful illustration of this issue. In the previous chapter I described the particular aestheticisation of the play that was a deliberate flirtation with South Asian exotica, and such a strategy informed the marketing of the production as a whole. Producer Ed Higginson described it as ‘the marketing person’s dream! [...] Everybody knows about curry and of course the white audience, the mainstream audience know what curry is and you suddenly have got something you can sell’. Thus from the outset the expectation was that the concept of *Curry Tales* would give a marketing person a wealth of material to play with; material that would be particularly effective at enticing a ‘white audience, the mainstream audience’. Thus, when it came to the play’s premier at the Edinburgh Festival, Rasa was able to utilise several USPs, based on the motif of curry. As Ed explained,

So we had this double, treble USP. So we had ‘*Curry Tales*’ – so instantly you can grab onto the title, does what it says on the packet kind of thing. Then there’s cooking in the show, so people are going to get fed. And then it’s being done in a room above an Indian restaurant, in association with one of the big theatres in Edinburgh – the Traverse – but was done as a site performance. So therefore again that was another thing, this isn’t happening in your normal converted church hall or university lecture room or whatever spaces in Edinburgh actually really are outside of the festival, it was happening above an Indian restaurant. Therefore all these things become quite significant.

The ‘treble USP’ paid off for Rasa as the site performance of *Curry Tales* garnered the company a *Guardian* review (which awarded four stars out of five) – an impressive feat for a small-scale theatre company in the notoriously competitive climate of the Edinburgh Festival. Indeed, the play was to win many plaudits in the following years, touring in over eighty venues.

Yet, as I queried in the previous chapter, at what cost did the marketing of *Curry Tales* succeed? I suggested that Rasa might have been seduced by the novelty of using exotica in its marketing material. Certainly, by the time I interviewed its writer

and performer Rani Moorthy, two years after the Edinburgh premier, she appeared somewhat ambivalent about its success:

AS: So again calling it *Curry Tales* and having that image was a very purposeful way of playing with people's perceptions about Asian identity?

Rani Moorthy: And people still didn't get that joke! They still thought that was what they were going to get. Two years on they still think ... and it made me wonder how do people get it? What are they really getting?

Certainly, this flirtation with exotic imagery (referred to by Rani in this instance as a 'joke') was a risky strategy that ultimately undermined the politics of the play – demonstrated in Rani's ambivalence. As I described earlier, *Curry Tales* consisted of six monologues each performed by a different female character (all played by Rani). Perhaps the most powerful scene came from the character Kali, a slum dweller in what one assumes to be a city in South India. In this monologue Kali speaks entirely in Tamil, begging the audience for ingredients for her curry pot. Despite most of, if not the entire audience not knowing what she was actually saying there was still an implicit understanding of the story being told. In my view, to get an overwhelmingly white audience to sit through approximately ten minutes of an Indian language without any translation is a significant moment for British Asian theatre. Though surprisingly this was hardly mentioned in any of the reviews – neither the *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Sunday Times* nor *Independent* referred to it (they chose to mostly speak about Rosemary Kempadoo, the most sexualised exotic character). It was as though the visual representations of the *Curry Tales* encouraged an exotic reading of the play, and framed the reviews/responses that followed. I want to suggest that the USP(s) chosen for the show undermined the political potential of *Curry Tales*, where certain characters (such as highly sensual Rosemary) gain prominence whereas others (such as Kali the subaltern) become incidental. As a result, the marketing strategies employed to promote *Curry Tales* had negative epistemological effects on the play. Or put another way, its success came from an exoticised version of Asianness that appealed to a certain bourgeois Orientalist mentality, and its fetish for *a bit of the Other*.

## The cost/benefits of stereotype

When I questioned those Asian cultural producers who I felt had used fairly (stereo)typical representations of Asianness in their marketing, they would rationalise the use of such a strategy in terms of the lack of resources afforded their work. As they would contend, since they were working within small budgets, they felt coerced into using certain reductive, pre-digested archetypes of Asianness in their marketing in order to entice a ‘mainstream’ audience (as exemplified by *Curry Tales*), since this is the most cost effective way of drawing attention to their work. Such a strategy emulates the logic of formula discussed in previous chapters, since it is based on employing symbols that already exist in the collective social imagination. Creating a brand new symbol not only demands more resources, but its success – in terms of the length or duration of its span – cannot be guaranteed, particularly if it runs counter to the dominant nationalist discourse. When British Asian cultural producers acknowledge employing Orientalist representations of Asianness, it is often justified on the grounds that the content of the product will immediately foreclose any Orientalist readings. For instance, when I asked Peter Kalu of Suitcase Press about the potentially detrimental effects of basing the entire branding of Zahid Hussain’s novel *The Curry Mile*, upon Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, he replied, ‘with a commercial hat on the duty of the marketing person is to get the thing noticed. Once it gets noticed the quality will speak for itself’. However, setting aside the potentially slippery ethical ramifications of such an approach, I want to explore in more detail the structural context through which such strategies are adopted.

In the case of those cultural producers working within corporations (whether public service or commercial), the challenge lies in not simply creating a marketable good that will successfully entice an audience, but also in convincing executives to allocate resources to build a campaign in the first place. Furthermore, within this sector, the marketing of the good will often be taken out of the producer’s hands to become the responsibility of either an in-house marketing department or external agency. The scale of the marketing campaign (or even its very allocation) will be determined by how the product is prioritised against other cultural goods in the company’s repertoire. This is particularly the case in television. When I spoke to British Asian producers working in broadcasting, the common grievance was that

even though they might receive a commission, the programme in question would be considered a low priority, denoting little-if-any-publicity. Compounded by the allocation of a slot outside primetime severely limits the size of the potential audience (and therefore the potential transruption). To quote television director Waheed Khan, 'You can make the best thing in the world, but if people don't know about it they're not going to watch it. So you're kind of dead in the water'. The BBC actually employs a colour-coding system that ranks television programmes/series in terms of whether they are high, mid or low priority, which determines the scale of the marketing drive. The higher the ranking the greater the marketing push (usually reserved for big-budget, high profile, prime-time series – such as *The Apprentice* or *Eastenders* – that the BBC needs to rank over its competitors). It should be noted that the executive producer (that is, the person responsible for the actual production of the programme) will not have any input in the ranking process; the task falls under the jurisdiction of the schedulers, the controller, commissioners and the head of marketing (which at the BBC is a centralised department). As such, there is great competition for what gets publicity.

Inevitably, this has particular ramifications for British Asian programmes. As the following account from Nasfim Haque at BBC Birmingham suggests:

The impression I get is you hand [the programme] over and the channel – according to their needs and who they want to attract, and what's big for the audiences – will decide whether they are likely to promote a one hour show on multiculturalism versus a ten-part series with Alan Sugar. What goes first is fairly obvious. And don't forget it costs a lot of money making trailers and so on. So there's no point spending a lot of your budget on a one-off documentary that might get only one and a half million people at 9pm when you can attract 10 million people for *The Apprentice*

Nasfim narrates the process of choosing what to market as following a logic where it is only the bigger programmes that can potentially get the largest audiences (relative to the channel) that will have a marketing campaign built around it. According to this narrative, those programmes that are expected to garner less ratings – such as a 'one-off documentary on multicultural issues' – will not get publicity, certainly not in any of the mainstream outlets. Again, this is described in normative terms, as though it is 'obvious' commonsense (though Nasfim in this quote was mimicking the attitudes of

the executives). It is also interesting to note that Nasfim provides her opinion based on 'the impression' she gets; it was a recurrent theme that those respondents who actually work on the shows have little grasp of the decision-making process behind what gets marketed and how. For instance, Nasfim recounted a scene with the production team of *Indian Food Made Easy*, including the head of the Asian Programming Unit, speculating on whether it would get trailed or not. The series did get a basic trailer (consisting of a montage of short clips taken from the series, with a voice-over providing details about the show), which went out at 5pm (following shows such as *Masterchef* and *The Weakest Link*), but not at primetime.

Interestingly, Nasfim claimed that in her time working with the APU, *Indian Food Made Easy* was the only programme to get an exclusive trailer. Yet, there was a trailer created for the whole BBC India/Pakistan season (which included productions commissioned not just by the APU but other BBC regional centres, such as *India with Sanjeev Bhaskar* produced by BBC Bristol, and *Michael Wood: The Story of India* produced by the independent Maya Vision). The trailer consisted of a montage of scenes from the programmes constituting the season, though mostly taken from the bigger 'mainstream' productions, interspersed with animations, and new scenes with four Asian actors and actresses who introduce the season. Their lines are almost poetic. I quote them here in order to convey the mood of the trailer:

*How do you tell a story  
That stretches from Kolkata to Karachi?  
That tells of ancient cultures and modern societies  
Of two ever changing societies?*

Indeed, a textual reading of this trailer is tempting, producing as it does the usual, timeless representations of India (amongst the images of modern India, we still see Bengal tigers, old Hindu sages, ancient palaces, and clouds of vermillion and turmeric hanging over crowded streets).

However, the reason I dwell on this briefly is to highlight the recurrent theme that in the corporate production of culture, it is certain narratives of difference that get prioritised or foregrounded over others. In the marketing stage of production in

broadcasting, this manifests as which programmes are deemed high priority and therefore worthy of attention from the marketing department. Of course, the decision behind what gets marketing can be explained normatively – as Nasfim does in the quote above – in terms of spending more money on the marketing campaigns for bigger-budget programmes or series, in order to generate the ratings that justify the money spent on production. As such, considering the amount of money the BBC spent on the India/Pakistan season, it was *naturally* going to receive a fairly significant marketing push, aided by a strong press hook – that is, the sixty year anniversary of the partition of India – and the participation of major BBC talent such as Sanjeev Bhaskar and Michael Wood. Yet, as I have argued, such a normative rationale conceals an ideological dimension, where what gets commissioned, scheduled at prime-time, and significant marketing attention, are those representations of difference that neatly slot into the topographies of the imagined geographies of the dominant nationalist ideology.

It is in this way that the rationalised processes and mechanics of marketing act as a form of racial governance that regulate postcolonial epistemes. With the case of the BBC's Indian/Pakistan season we once more see a particular narrative of Indianness, framed through the lens of the British Raj, that lends itself to a tried and tested Orientalist formula and allows for certain nationalist fantasies to be played out, regardless of the actual content of the season<sup>95</sup>. As one British Asian woman who works at the BBC told me, 'If it's got that colonial veneer it will get attention. It's about showing these stories through that prism'. In chapter four, I highlighted how those narratives that do not fit into the particular worldview of the social class of executives who dominate the upper echelons of the cultural industries which struggle to get produced, and such a logic continues into the marketing of British Asian television. In effect, it is the reason that *Indian Food Made Easy* featuring the 'Asian Nigella' gets a relatively substantive marketing drive behind it, rather than the BBC2 documentary *Don't Panic I'm Islamic!* which had an equally strong USP (particularly a catchy title that successfully captures the documentary's irreverent take on representations of Muslims in Britain), and topical subject matter, but was

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<sup>95</sup> For instance, the team behind *Desi DNA* produced the three-part series *Mumbai, Karachi, Calcutta... Uncovered* for the season, which produced a very original representation of Indian urban life and culture that was notable for its lack of the usual Indophilic narratives.

nonetheless considered 'too difficult' for a mainstream audience to digest. Consequently, those narratives of difference that help ease the nation's postcolonial melancholia, get foregrounded in discourse thanks to a sustained marketing drive which crystallises rather than explodes existing perceptions of difference.

### **Asian audiences and the logic of niche**

When I asked the Lyric in-house press officer about which sections of the press she was targeting for the Rasa Production *Too Close To Home*, I received the reply, 'Well, for that you'd be obviously targeting Asian press, because it's an Asian-based theatre production'. The matter-of-fact way in which this was expressed was such that it went unnoticed at first. After speaking to respondents, it became clear that such a discourse constituted what they saw as the biggest challenge to culturally diverse arts: the assumption that Asian work is only for Asian people. This is not unique to Asian cultural production. As Hardt & Negri (2000: 151-152) discuss, the new hybrid forms of difference that characterise the new global order benefit postmodern forms of marketing that thrive on differentiated 'target markets' that can each be addressed by specific marketing strategies. Effectively, in the global cultural economy such differentiated communities are reduced to little more than market niches.

Niche marketing and niche markets, as Dalgic and Leeuw (2005) highlight, have actually received little academic attention; those literatures that have explored the concept in more detail have often been written from a practitioner's point of view. Following Dalgic and Leeuw, when I refer to niche marketing, I am alluding to the tailoring of goods and products to 'a small market of customers with similar characteristics or needs' (ibid, : 5). It should be stressed that in my examples, niche marketing is not actually formally applied; rather its principles loosely structure the marketing of British Asian products. As such, rather than provide a fuller engagement of niche marketing techniques (see Dalgic and Leeuw's text for precisely this task), my focus is in highlighting how, while such a logic appears neutral and commonsense to cultural workers – exemplified by the response of the press officer above – it, in fact, disguises the neo-colonial ideology of ethnic

absolutism. As Gilroy argues (1993b: 110-111), this ideology is incorporated into the very political economy of funding bodies, and I would add, the commercial sector of the cultural industries. It is interesting to note that the etymology of the word ‘niche’ is in biology, which uncannily hints at the racialising effects of niche marketing that I wish to expose. In effect, it is the practice of audience segmentation in the culturally diverse arts as a further manifestation of racialised governmentalities in the commercial production of culture, that is the focus in this section of the chapter.

### Asian audiences for Asian work?

In the following account, Rasa Productions’ Ed Higginson unpacks the implications of the assumption that *Asian plays are for Asian audiences*:

I think that is the thing that people have had to try and accept with us – that we’re looking for an audience in everybody. As I was saying before, that whole kind of thing of *ok this is brown, we can get the brown people in* or all of that kind of marketing cynicism ... the amount of times I have had a phone conversation with a marketing manager or press person saying, *right ok this is a piece about Asians...* But it will work with your core drama audience, it will work with your people who like this kind of show, it’ll work with your black audience; you need to be telling everybody about it and focusing on everybody. It’s no good just thinking ‘oh good we can get the Asian people into this and that will satisfy that’ because the way it is written, the way it is it will satisfy everybody – everybody can have a stake in this. It’s amazing the amount of Black women who like Rani’s work but you try getting that across to some marketing departments and they don’t quite comprehend that, that *well she’s Asian – black women?* But whenever there have been black women in any show that Rani has done the response, you can feel a bond across the auditorium, it’s bizarre!

In this quote, Ed describes the struggle in convincing venues and their marketing staff that Rasa’s productions can work with its ‘core drama audience’, that is the mainstream audience, rather than just Asians who are assumed to be the central audience for Rasa’s plays. This narrative exposes marketing strategy as a form of racial governance, and the corporeal management of the Other, where the supposed core Asian audience is reduced to ‘brown’ bodies to be counted; that is, ‘*ok this is brown, we can get the brown people in*’. According to this narrative, marketing practice is constructed as working in opposition to wider ‘multicultural’ politics, demonstrated in Ed’s lament that black women enjoy Rasa’s work but marketing

departments are incapable of *comprehending* this and will only target ‘brown people’. From this account, we see that under niche logic, ethnicity becomes the USP, which not only provides the material upon which marketing campaigns are built, but concomitantly defines the target audience. I suggest that for this reason the Lyric press officer quoted earlier describes *Too Close To Home* as an ‘Asian play’ – rather than for instance, ‘a dark drama’ or ‘narrative theatre’ (as co-producer Rani Moorthy describes it) – since it immediately defines the media outlets *and* the audience segment to be targeted. The appeal of the ‘Asian’ tag to marketers is that it is not merely a marketing hook, but also the name of a community, or indeed, a niche.

This has problematic implications for cultural producers. For instance, Rani, who complains that ‘people do not know how to market my work’, particularly takes issue with niche techniques that segment audiences based on the perceived ethnicity of Rasa. As she says,

So even in the literature it will be like, ‘if you have seen this’ ... like Tamasha or Rifco ... ‘then you will enjoy this’. Which is as corrosive as you can get in terms of how the work is going to be seen, how that work is going to get critical attention and how it’s going to have audience attention.

As highlighted in previous chapters, Rani resents attempts to pigeonhole her work along with other South Asian theatre companies as she sees few aesthetic similarities between them. However, this is precisely how *Too Close To Home* was marketed, where flyers for the play were sent to a mailing list consisting of names and addresses extracted from the audience of a Tara Arts production shown at the Lyric a few years earlier. Again, the normative way through which such a strategy was described to me by the marketing staff at the Lyric – narrated as commonsense marketing strategy – hides the problematic assumptions behind such practice; as Rani argues, classifying theatre companies based on ethnicity determines how the work is framed, ‘how it is going to get critical attention and how it’s going to have audience attention’. Yet I argue that this is not a consequence of individual whim, but the very standardised, rationalised practices of marketing.

Returning to the quote from Ed Higginson that opened this section, he narrates the practice of niche marketing based upon ethnicity as founded on ‘marketing cynicism’, by which he is describing the lack of faith accorded to British Asian productions in terms of their ability to resonate with the ‘outside’, that is the wider ‘white, mainstream’ (or even a black female) audience. This implicitly suggests that the causal factor is personal prejudice or at least, individual attitudes, and that change can be enacted at the micro level, through modifying the behaviour and values (and perhaps even the diversity) of cultural workers. However, such a view fails to acknowledge the structural context against which social actions occur. The notion of ‘marketing cynicism’ accords perhaps *too much* agency to marketing personnel, and fails to acknowledge the cultures of production through which marketing practice is mediated. If we are to take a wider view of the context of niche marketing practice in British Asian cultural production, we begin to see the way such practice is rationalised.

The logic of niche marketing is founded on concentrating marketing resources on a particular group, or indeed a sub-set of this group, that is believed to have the greatest propensity to buy the product in question. Thus, the logic of niche marketing often underpins the marketing of British Asian cultural commodities because it is regarded as the most sensible, cost-effective – or indeed, *rational* – way of spending limited financial resources. Such a notion emerges from the following account from Peter Kalu of Suitcase Press:

What we do with marketing is we have concentric circles: we have a target market where in our analysis, for the least effort we’ll get the greatest rewards financially, so that’s the bulls-eye. And then you move out to an audience where you have to spend a little bit more money getting them to pick up the book and buy it. And then move you out again to a further audience that you have got to spend more time ... and as you go outwards and outwards in that concentric circle targeting system, it becomes prohibitive the cost of marketing to the most outer ring. You should think of it as a cross-section on a tree trunk, you’re going out and out ... So the key is target your core audience fiercely and then work outwards and then after a point hope that word-of-mouth and general reviews carries it to everyone else.

Operations such as Suitcase Press do not actually have the spending power to concentrate money on, to use Peter’s analogy, the outside concentric circles, which is

why he is dependent on word-of-mouth and reviews to engage those people. What is made evident in this account, however, is how the logic of niche is a product of an economic rationale. Off-West End theatre venues and small independent presses in particular do not have the financial or organisational clout to target mass audiences, and instead have to focus their attention on specified niches. It is through this structural context that the discourse of ‘Asian audiences for Asian work’ occurs.

As I alluded earlier, this nevertheless has ramifications for British Asian cultural producers, and leads to particular epistemological outcomes. In a discussion of the way his novel *The Curry Mile* was marketed, particularly the way it purposefully attempted to replicate *Brick Lane*’s successful brand, Zahid Hussain reflects,

I come from a marketing background myself and it’s clever and cunning marketing but it’s lazy marketing as well, because it’s the obvious. And I think what the problem with all of this is, and this is why I disagree with it and would have done it differently, is because, if you copy, you’re not innovating, you’re not really leading, you’re following [...] *Curry Mile* is different [to *Brick Lane*] and should stand by itself. But because of the way things are marketed you can’t and I think that’s sad. So what can I do to combat that? I don’t know if I can do very much.

During our interview, Zahid expressed how he felt *The Curry Mile* had the potential to resonate with a broader audience but was not given the chance to do so – as though the way it was marketed foreclosed its access to the centre of discourse and popular imagination. Rani Moorthy also spoke of ‘lazy marketing’, referring in particular to an instance (which I myself observed) during the production of *Too Close To Home* when a marketing agency employed to take care of the ‘ethnic press’ invited Pakistani network channel GEO TV to interview Rani and the cast. However, the TV crew had assumed that, since this was a play about a Muslim family, Rani was Muslim and could speak Urdu, in which the interview was going to be conducted. This led to a particularly awkward moment where Rani had to explain that she was not Muslim nor could she speak Urdu, and so the interview was clumsily conducted in English, occasionally entailing questions that were specific to being Muslim, much to the bemusement of the non-Muslim cast. For Rani, this was a frustrating moment, and was illustrative of the kind of outcome of reductive marketing that attempts to pigeonhole British Asian cultural production on the basis

of ethnicity. The following account from Rani taken after this incident, alludes to the ideological dimension of such practice:

It's do with what you're allowed to be. Are you above your station?  
Sometimes I have got that. I have got that from Asian publicity people who only will address the Asian press and feel that I... because that is my audience. [But] my potential audience [are] people who are Radio 4, who read more, who have travelled more, who understand Malaysia and Trinidad and know all these things, know all these references I have made and are not frightened by literariness.

So in the marketing process, Rani and her plays are reduced to the status of what is perceived as 'Asian', with all the racialised pathologies that such signification holds. Setting aside the reproduction of bourgeois distinctions implicit in this narrative, the key point is how Rani believes the particular marketing strategies adopted for Rasa's productions immediately foreclose her work from addressing a wider audience outside of her supposed (ethnic) constituency. It is interesting to note that Rani highlights how 'Asian publicity people' are also 'guilty' of only addressing the Asian press. Without wanting to suggest that fellow Asians *should know better*, this observation is further evidence of how standard practice (rationalised through a notion of niche) comes to have racialised effects, regardless of the culture and values of the social actors involved. It is in this way that the political economy, or indeed, the *postcolonial cultural economy* context, of commodification creates cultures of production through which marketing practices (re)produce the reification of difference. As such, standardised marketing processes act as a technology of racialised governance that structure the social hierarchical forms of racialised inclusions, where Rani is not 'allowed' to be what she wants to be.

#### Audience development as ethical marketing practice?

That is not to say social actors cannot intervene in this process. Theatre, and the subsidised arts sector in particular, has seen the gradual establishment of 'audience development' as part of the Art Council England's (ACE) 'new audience initiative' (ACE, 2001), a deliberate attempt away from traditional marketing models that are believed to have failed Asian audiences. I have touched on this in previous chapters, particularly in relation to the work of the theatre company Rifco Arts, but to reiterate,

audience development attempts to forge a deeper relationship between the company and/or the venue, with the audience, particularly those groups that have been ignored or marginalised from the arts (for instance non-white communities) – which the Arts Council has labelled ‘new audiences’<sup>96</sup>. 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. As I have noted elsewhere, such an ethos is launched from the neoliberal shift in cultural policy towards the notion that the cultural industries can contribute to the economy in terms of job creation, tourism promotion, invisible earnings, urban regeneration, and combating social exclusion (see Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 556). In chapter four, I considered the author Rabina Khan’s comment that the identification of previously invisible groups by businesses as potential markets is an important moment in terms of the politics of recognition, and in some ways, audience development work is an extension of this. Yet, once again, situating this practice in the wider context of the postcolonial cultural economy paints a more ambivalent picture, where the market setting unsettles any sense of progressive practice that audience development work may bring. It is the aim of this section to demonstrate how this particular form of rationalised cultural policy disguises an ideological agenda.

Audience development work is generally distinguished from more conventional/traditional forms of marketing. The nature of this distinction is described in a passage from Pravesh Kumar, artistic director of Rifco Arts:

Marketing is just getting leaflets and posters out and giving a visual representation to what you’re doing. Audience development is really sitting down and making a plan. And you can’t just go and put leaflets and posters up, you’ve got to sit down and work out what those posters are, who are they for? You need to have a strategy. It can’t just be for one show as well. For example, we’re an audience development company, so each show has to develop that audience. So it’s a larger plan you have to make. And you have to have partners. It can’t just be Rifco Arts and Hardish Virk going out and, we make sure as part of our contract with each theatre that we’re going to, that we have an audience development plan with that theatre. We always in

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<sup>96</sup> See Khan (2002)

our office have a full-time communications officer. That's their job, because that's so important to us they filter all of the work we do with the communities, we have a database of our own, we have an emailing list and we bring all of that together and we create a strategy every year, which is evaluated per production. And our business plan has an overall strategy as well. But it's really about, it's much more than marketing. It's not just leaflets and posters, it's about how to place them and how to get that target audience. 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 accessing really communicating.

In this quote Pravesh stresses how audience development is built into Rifco's structure, informing every aspect of its operation. The quote additionally introduces the three key facets of audience development work that distinguish it from traditional marketing. The first aspect of this practice, as touched on already, is concerned with building relationships, where marketing a product is no longer the sole responsibility of a marketing department, but produced out of a dialogue and an engagement between the theatre company, the venue, and community advocates. Secondly, 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, and 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, which results in repeat visits, and gives the audience a sense of ownership over the space and work. Similarly to commercially-driven niche marketing strategy, audience development is the process of creating a market, but one in which a deeper relationship is forged, and engages more deeply with the audience's/community's needs.

Hardish Virk, who runs an audience development consultancy, particularly wanted to stress the ethical dimensions to audience development work – outlining two interventions it makes in the marketing of culturally diverse arts. The first is to do with the outreach aspect of his work:

[I am] involved with community engagement, [...] looking at alternative ways of going out in the community, Muslim communities, Afro-Caribbean communities, Punjabi communities, young people, and gay communities, whatever, going out there and actually learning more about their diversity and more about how they live their lives as individuals, as families, as communities and how that information could be translated into marketing material, how that translates into the work we produce, the work that we programme and how we can start to challenge stereotypes in the writers we employ, in the characters that we create, in the way in which we send out a message back out to the communities.

The emphasis in this quote is on audience development's deep engagement with various (marginalised) groups, which attempts to gain an understanding of their needs and experiences (and *translate* this into marketing material) – but in a more community-focused way than conventional marketing research strategies. The second part of the quote introduces a second intervention, where the material collated feeds the overall aestheticisation of the production. This was further elaborated by Hardish in the following account:

So for example I've worked with major institutions in Birmingham and London, who when they would produce, or invite international musicians over they tend to use terms like exotic, Oriental, magical blah blah. All these sort of quite ... institutionalised ways of, colonised terminologies, the ways in which wording may have been used in the British Empire – it reinforces stereotypes. If you have a dancer from China suddenly the terminology in the marketing becomes exoticised. 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 blah blah.

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 Asian arts. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Asian cultural productions in particular, suffer 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.

On a broad level these narratives on audience development, which underline its ethical dimensions in terms of community outreach, describe it as a critical intervention. Hardish's accounts in particular attempt to address what I have identified as the epistemological hazards facing British Asian cultural production with regard to the way its cultural commodities are aestheticised and marketed. Yet, in a similar manner to the processes of commodification undermining the transruptive potential of the postcolonial text, the market logic of capitalism can also subsume the progressive qualities of audience development work. For instance, Hardish later complained how the commitment to audience development from the 'corporate or bigger institutions' is at times 'tokenistic', in the way that they will only invest relatively 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 (see Khan, 2002: 13) 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' (Arts Council England, 2004). Subsequently there is a pressure on venues and companies to demonstrate that they have a commitment to attracting and encouraging participation from new audiences. Hardish's complaint is that certain institutions are only concerned with how audience development produces 'bums-on-seats' (particularly brown ones) with only a little 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 accounts of the creative industries, constructed in terms of regeneration, employment creation and entrepreneurialism.

I believe that the political motivations of individuals such as Hardish are absolutely genuine. Yet, at times, in the context of corporate production, audience development merely resembles a more ethnic form of market research: as Hardish himself describes, his job entails 'translating' the needs and experiences of marginalised communities into marketing material. There is also a fine line between encouraging real participation from 'new audiences', and simply transforming marginalised communities into better consumers – not integrating them into the centre, but into the

market. This is an admittedly cynical reading, and the route audience development takes is ultimately determined by the mediations of individuals such as Hardish. A more real concern is that, despite the progress audience development work can make in terms of incorporating peripheral groups into the centre of cultural activity, 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 Kumar himself, from the earlier quote describes targeting 'aunty-jis' in a more sustained way than conventional marketing practices would allow, but despite the caricature, this is a genuine target demographic for Rifco, there is still the logic of niche that implicitly assumes this is the 'core' audience. Rifco is perhaps not the best example, since 'aunty-jis' *are* Rifco's constituency, and the company's success has been precisely predicated in attracting a particular working-class Punjabi community. Yet the ethical problems of this are more pronounced in those cases where the company does not have an obvious synergy with a specific audience. Thus, the default strategy adopted for a company like Rasa or Conspirator's Kitchen, whether through conventional marketing or audience development, is to target a vaguely defined 'Asian' audience, even though the company aspires to reach a wider multicultural crowd, or indeed, to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, a wider humanity.

It should be stressed that the troubling issues I have associated with audience development work are not necessarily an inherent flaw within such practice, but rather a consequence of the role it assumes in the wider context of the postcolonial cultural economy. However, in terms of the potential for British Asian texts to unsettle and disrupt negative representations of Asianness in popular discourse, audience development work becomes an unwitting tool in racial governance (like traditional marketing strategies) that regulates the counter-narratives of difference to the margins, where any transruptive power can be safely contained. Audience development programmes have proved valuable in reaching out to audiences that have been traditionally marginalised from the arts, but I question the degree to which they represent a challenge to the neo-liberal, neo-colonial ideology of commodification through which the reification of difference occurs.

## The paradox of marketing Asianness

According to a 2003 report published by The Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, Asian communities in Britain have a spending power worth £32 billion. The report argued that advertising agencies should be doing more to target the 'brown pound', including improving representation within adverts, and diversity amongst their employees (IPA, 2003). However, Pedro Carvalho, CEO of the PR firm F-NIK PR (which represents British Asian musician Rishi Rich amongst others) argues that Asians prefer not to be targeted as an ethnic community, and would rather be regarded as having the same consumer aspirations as their 'white', 'mainstream' counterparts (Pedro Carvalho, 'Minorities Look To The Mainstream', *The Guardian*, 16<sup>th</sup> January, 2004). Even though this is framed within a discourse of consumerism, it nonetheless evokes a particular transruptive politic that questions the separation of non-whites from a mainstream, British national identity. Carvalho highlights that those brands that have attempted 'ethnically-based marketing strategies' have nearly always failed, unless supported by a 'mainstream' campaign. Furthermore, Carvalho calls into question the evidence that supports the urgency of ethnically-focused campaigns since 'official statistics backing up claims of reach are often not even available to present a viable case' (ibid.).

The question of reach is what informs this concluding section on what I consider to be the paradox of marketing Asianness. Despite attempts to attract Asian audiences to 'Asian work', it is disputable whether the Asian audience is large enough to sustain an Asian production by itself. This is particularly the case with mass produced goods. Indeed, a marketing memo I saw for a novel written by a British Asian author stressed how the 'Asian subgroup is an important but relatively small subsection'. In light of this, one would expect that media companies involved in the production of British Asian cultural commodities would be targeting the largest, mainstream audience. Yet in the postmodern global economy (Hall, 2000; Hardt & Negri, 2000) standard marketing practice dictates carving up the audience into segments and targeting specific niches.

As has been suggested throughout this thesis, the current trend in the cultural industries is towards employing increasingly rationalised methods for predicting success. This is true of the marketing stage of production in both the commercial *and* subsidised sector. For instance, marketing consultant and *Bookseller* columnist Damian Horner argues that the adoption of quantitative and qualitative research methods to inform marketing strategy is central to publishers gaining ‘a distinct competitive advantage in a crowded market place’, ominously suggesting that ‘it won’t be long before every publisher employs a strategic research planner as a key member of the editorial team’ (Damian Horner, ‘Research Methods’, *The Bookseller*, 4<sup>th</sup> November, 2005: 22). Despite the contrasting political economies, a handbook on marketing in the theatre echoes Horner’s sentiment, emphasising the centrality of box office data to successful marketing campaigns, arguing that ‘Strategic marketing management is nothing if not about segmentation and positioning’ (Fraser, 2004: 48). This is indicative of the forms of rationalisation that have spread throughout the cultural industries informed by a neoliberal shift towards the market. It is through this context that the discourse of ‘Asian audiences for Asian work’ is normalised and practiced, despite at times contradicting the cultural industries focus on audience maximisation (Garnham, 1990).

Hence, highlighting the paradox of marketing Asianness exposes the ideological dimension to the commodification of British Asian cultural production. My focus on the relation between the political/cultural economy and the postcolonial/epistemological – particularly during the marketing stage of production – brings to the forefront of this research the issue of niche-focused marketing as the economic manifestation of cultural essentialism and ethnic absolutist ideology. In the first section of this chapter I demonstrated how through standardised marketing practice the author’s ethnic status often becomes the product’s USP. Of course, this is not just true of Asian cultural products – cultural essentialisms in general become a convenient way of distinguishing between similar products in a crowded marketplace. This was reiterated by my conversation with David, the editorial director:

AS: So this is commonsense marketing. Obviously there are ethical issues but in the end it’s about finding marketable features.

David: Absolutely. But it's important to remember that this goes for every kind of writer. There is no writer who is referred to as just a writer. Colm Tóibín is a gay Irish writer, that is how you will hear him referred to. Alan Hollinghurst is a gay writer. Doris Lessing at the weekend, wasn't called one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, she was called one of the greatest female writers of the 20th century, which is taking the piss really. I mean she's a great writer full stop. Frank McCourt's memoir is a great Irish memoir, why is it not a great memoir? So it's true for some many different types of books. You'll hardly ever hear – unless it's a white, middle-class, 50 year old writer - John Updike, Philip Roth, Martin Amis – they are allowed to be called just writers. Almost everybody else has to...

From this narrative we see in standardised marketing/positioning practice a materialisation of Eurocentric identity construction, where the white, European, middle-class, heterosexual male is neutral and unmarked, and all other identities are differentiated and classified accordingly. Crucially, the categorisation of difference is rationalised as standard product differentiation practice. Perfectly encapsulating the process of rationalisation – and its inherent ambivalence – is an exchange with Rosemary Hudson of Black Amber Press:

AS: Who do you see as your audience? I guess it differs between book to book, correct?

Rosemary Hudson: I think, from the time I set up, the only difference between Black Amber and say, Penguin and Bloomsbury and any of those big houses, is that most of the writers I published are non-white. I see the reader as anybody who wants to have a good read, so I'm not targeting any ... I'm targeting a book-buyer. And the whole point of publishing that book is because I feel it's good enough book for everybody to read. You can't segregate yourself, not in this industry or any industry. You shouldn't do that.

AS: So you've never segmented your market in terms of ethnicity. For instance, this is a Chinese writer so I'll target Chinese people...

RH: No you don't do that. But if you do have a Chinese writer, when you are promoting the book you would go for those Chinese magazines, you do promote it that way. If there's any kind of Chinese event happening you make sure you are in there, making that community aware. And that's the same for an Indian writer, you make sure you have the book launch at the Nehru Centre or you have a book launch somewhere in Southall. You don't ignore the community the writer is from – it's like a white writer who comes from Liverpool, and the book is published in London. That publisher would go to Liverpool to tell everybody you have a local writer who has done something wonderful. You cannot ignore the community the writer has come from. That's just the promotion. But the buyers are going to be anybody you can get.

This is what I regard the paradox of marketing Asianness. In the first half of the quote Rosemary stresses how even though Black Amber books are mostly written by non-white authors, she is not targeting a specific audience – instead, she is targeting ‘anybody who wants to have a good read’. This no doubt emerges from a genuine belief that Black Amber novels can be appreciated by anyone, but there is also an economic rationale that dictates that targeting a relatively small niche (and one that is not regarded as the traditional book-buying audience) is not sustainable. Yet when asked if she would hypothetically target a Chinese audience for a book written by a Chinese author, she immediately replied in the negative, but then somewhat contradicts this by outlining the various techniques she would employ that target the Chinese community, through what are perceived as ‘its’ media and institutions. Her justification that ‘you cannot ignore the community the writer has come from’ (and her example of a Liverpudlian author is presumably designed to quash the racial dimension of this response) is not particularly controversial, and Rosemary would no doubt stress that such community-focused strategies would be coupled with efforts to entice the mainstream book-buying audience as well. Yet there is still nonetheless a persistent ideology of Asian audiences for Asian work at play. There is nothing wrong in targeting these audiences per se, but in precisely defining a brand identity based upon difference reifies it in the process. According to this logic, Asians will forever be trapped in Southall or the Nehru Centre in W1 (depending on what social class they belong to), where attempts to transplant them outside of their ethnic enclaves will be met with confusion at best, or at worst, derision. According to Homi Bhabha (1994) (post)colonial discourse is dependent on the concept of fixity in the ideological construction of Otherness that maintains that the Other must not pollute the Self; as I have argued throughout this thesis, it is through commodification, in this case under the guise of commonsense marketing practice, that such an ideology persists.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the practices that typify the marketing of British Asian cultural products result in two related outcomes. The first produces a discourse of Asian audiences for Asian work, whereby a combination of a niche logic and a perception

of Asian cultural production as having little appeal outside of its Asian constituency, determines a marketing strategy that is locally-focused, and adjusts the aestheticisation of the product so it appeals to a particular Asian audience but also conforms to the values of the white bourgeoisie who run the institutions that fund and mount this work. This is particularly the case with theatre. The second outcome is produced in a more industrialised setting, where the cultural commodity is mass-produced. In this scenario, 'Asianness' still remains the product's USP, but is marketed in a way that is believed to appeal to the largest (white) mainstream audience, as is typical in television and publishing. In both instances, the Asianness of the cultural commodity is overdetermined, and reduced to an Indophilic stereotype. Asian cultures are stressed as absolutely different to British national identity, and their difference reified. Subsequently, the unsettling potential of the British Asian text as a 'cultural translation' (Bhabha, 1997), that is, as an agnostic, anxious, ambivalent counter-discourse, is subsumed by commodification, and reduced to a more stable state that can be safely contained. It is precisely through the racialised governmentalities of commodification that standardised normative practice produces this ideological effect.

This has been the theme of all the empirical chapters, though it is the marketing stage of production (including design) when the ideological effect of commodification is particularly explicit. This is precisely because it occurs paradoxically: if capitalism was only concerned with profit, then it would be in the best interests of business to stress the universal qualities of the British Asian cultural good, rather than foregrounding its ethnic particularity. Yet through niche strategies, USPs, market research, audience segmentation and subsequent aestheticisation techniques, the cultural commodity is racialised in a deeply problematic manner, framed as it is through the Orientalist gaze of the status quo (commodification acting as the technology of Occidental imaginative geography). The perverse effect is that the accentuation of Asianness in this case actually limits the appeal of these particular cultural commodities, which, when not fetishised, are considered repulsive, or at least alien; as shown in the '*it's not for me*' response given by white punters to Rani Moorthy when handing out flyers for her play *Pooja*. Thus, the paradox is that stressing the essential difference of the British Asian cultural commodity through various marketing strategies, is actually at odds with the cultural

industries focus on audience maximisation and capitalism's profit-motive, since its ability to crossover is immediately foreclosed, resulting in less unit sales, ratings or bums-on-seats. Marxian accounts argue that a critique of commodification needs to be based upon exposing commodity fetishism, and the oppression of the worker (see Mosco, 1996), yet I argue this underplays the neo-colonial dimension to cultural commodification. As I have attempted to demonstrate in this, and previous chapters, commodification in the context of British Asian cultural production is the means by which racialised difference is governed in very specific ways, designed to maintain a pure, national identity, and the necessary hierarchies of race. It is in this sense that I claim that the marketing forms of the British Asian cultural commodity suggest that commodification's key role is sustaining the regulatory practices of racialised governmentalities, rather than accumulating surplus value.

## **Conclusion – Cultural transruptions in the postcolonial cultural economy**

The concept of the postcolonial cultural economy was conceived as a way to gain a better understanding of the complex, entangled relation between capitalism and race. As I described in chapter one, it emerges in response to a particular discourse on the commodification of race, which, while correctly foregrounding the industrial context of the production of postcolonial vernacular culture, is undermined by a determinist reading of cultural production and the cultural industries. Such a discourse is impeded by the lack of necessary empirical and theoretical detail in order to convincingly sustain its argument that commodification subsumes the counter-hegemonic potential of the hybrid entity. Furthermore, the particular determinist version of the cultural industries upon which it rests immediately forecloses the disruptive potential of the British Asian text, since, as the argument goes, cultural commodities are produced by the market, and therefore cannot have any disruptive effects upon it – a position that I feel is too fatalistic. Ultimately, its account of commodification is simplistic, and becomes an all-too convenient shorthand for capitalism's supposed co-option of the counter-narratives of racialised difference, and the production of its own form of corporate multiculturalism – a process that is much more complex than such a narrative allows.

In contrast, the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy produces what I believe is a fuller, more detailed interpretation of capitalism's attempts to manage and regulate the counter-narratives of difference through commodification. It avoids simplistic, lethargic explanations, and as I shall demonstrate, allows for the contradictions and sites of contestation that better characterise cultural production. As I set out in chapter two, the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy is operationalised through the development of an analytical and methodological framework designed to disentangle the elaborate networks of production through which potentially transruptive cultural entities are governed. The term can additionally be used to describe the very arena through which the production of postcolonial meaning occurs. In this sense, the concept of the postcolonial cultural

economy foregrounds the way in which the production and governance of racialised knowledge occurs via a complex interplay between the symbol, the symbol creator and other cultural intermediaries, the cultures of production, the political economy of the cultural industries, and the wider global cultural economy context. Rather than the determinist reading of cultural production influenced by Adorno's version of the culture industry, the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy stresses that commodification is an ambivalent process as elucidated throughout this thesis. Indeed, one aim of this concluding chapter is to demonstrate how commodification, through its attempts to totalise actually leaves spaces of contestation, where social actors can stage transgressive cultural-political interventions, allowing for the possibility of what Barnor Hesse (2000: 2) calls cultural entanglements and transruptions.

The main purpose of the conclusion is to reflect upon the overall contribution made by the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy that has underpinned this research on the politics of British Asian cultural production. It will address three specific interventions made by the postcolonial cultural economy approach to scholarship on the relation between capitalism and race. The first is theoretical, in the way it reconceptualises commodification as the technology through which capitalism attempts to govern the counter-narratives of difference. Its second contribution is methodological, with its ethnographic approach to postcolonial cultural production producing a more acute sense of the relation between agency and structure through which the production of racial knowledge is mediated. The third is political, in the way it does not deny the possibility for spaces from which hybrid transruptions can be held in the cultural sphere. While much attention in this research has concentrated on exposing the governing properties of commodification, here I will explore in more detail two case studies that I consider successful transruptions, then use these cases to consider potential routes for future cultural political interventions. If the research and the case studies I have drawn upon in this thesis have painted a rather a bleak picture for Asian symbol creators, stressing that commodification is a contested process provides some optimism for the political potential of British Asian cultural production.

## Three postcolonial cultural economy interventions

### 1. Theoretical

The concept of the postcolonial cultural economy makes two theoretical contributions to scholarship on capitalism and race, both dealing with the role of commodification. Firstly is the notion that commodification acts a technology of Occidental imaginative geography. This was outlined in chapter two, but to repeat, it draws directly from Edward Said's (1991) work on Orientalism and the notion of 'imaginative geography' as the way in which the Occident frames representations and knowledge of the Orient and the Oriental. Drawing from Gramsci and Foucault, the relationship between the Occident and the Orient according to Said is defined by power and domination. Orientalism produces a network of knowledges – sustained by 'varying degrees of complex hegemony' (ibid.: 5) – whereby the Orient is constructed and governed 'politically, sociologically, ideologically, militarily and imaginatively' (ibid. 3), and represented as absolutely different to the west. In the European postcolonial nation, Occidental imaginative geography has been forced to turn in on itself as the former colonial subject enters the imperial heartland. The very presence of former colonised bodies inside the former imperial metropolis, as Bhabha (1997) states, produces multivocal, multivalent, and ambivalent networks that project the periphery internally onto the centre. This has a destabilising effect upon the core of national identity, that is dependent on the concept of fixity in the ideological construction of Otherness, as the Other must not pollute the Self (Gilroy, 2004). Thus the task of Occidental imaginative geography in the postcolonial nation is to suppress the unruly presence of the postcolonial hybrid subject, maintaining the purity of national identity, through political, sociological, ideological, military and imaginative means.

It is the nation's imagined sense of itself that I argue is governed through commodification. With regard to the subject of this research, commodification is the *technology* – by which I mean the processes, apparatus and machinery of cultural production – through which the counter-narratives of the postcolonial hybrid subject are regulated, and transformed into new essential identities in the form of cultural commodities. As this thesis has demonstrated, this occurs in two ways. Firstly, the

counter-narratives of difference are governed spatially and temporally, through their management as commodities positioned carefully in relation to the centre. As demonstrated in chapters four and five, those narratives that are complicit with a certain nationalist discourse are allowed near the centre. Those that are perceived as more disruptive are contained within the periphery, or omitted altogether. The commissioning and scheduling of British Asian television programmes provides a particularly neat illustration of this, where we saw how more reified forms of difference (for instance documentaries about the Raj), or more palatable forms of hybridity (*Indian Food Made Easy*) obtain primetime slots, whereas a show such as *Desi DNA*, which presents a more complex and varied representation of British Asian cultures gets scheduled outside of primetime. A similar pattern emerges in both book publishing and theatre, where ‘multiculturalist’ novels that are complicit with a particular liberal, bourgeois worldview are more likely to receive the attention of the major publishing houses, while plays that offer a more predictable representation of Asian cultures will get longer runs in mainstream venues.

Secondly, commodification governs the symbolic form in which the cultural commodity appears in the nation’s social imagination. As was the theme in chapters six and seven, within the commodity phase, the fluid hybrid identity is transformed into fixed absolute difference, re-represented as Orientalist images of the *beautiful* or the *ghastly* or inoffensive exotic hybridity (e.g. chicken tikka wraps). The case studies drawn from theatre and publishing perhaps produce the clearest examples of this. For instance in *Curry Tales*, I demonstrated how, despite the play’s politics, the producers were seduced into using exotic markers in its publicity material which they knew would attract a particular audience. When they adopted the opposite approach for their following play *Too Close To Home*, it fared less well commercially. This point is also illustrated in the cases of those ‘multiculturalist’ novels referred to earlier, through book jackets which feature subtly Orientalist representations of difference and hybridity (most evident in *Brick Lane* and *White Teeth*) produced through a particularly liberal bourgeois gaze. Whereas these examples are based on producing exotic, colourful images of Asianness, the publicity material from two of my case studies in television – *Bradford Riots* and *Britz* – played on more negative, sensationalist representations of Asians, even though the actual content of those programmes was attempting something more nuanced. Therefore in the

aestheticisation of the British Asian cultural commodity we see that difference is either exaggerated or muted, but transformed through Orientalist discourse. Hence the commodification of Otherness, framed within Occidental imaginative geography, perpetuates the marginalisation of Asian cultures, which are reified as absolutely different to (white) British national identity. Thus, the unsettling potential of the British Asian cultural entity is subsumed and reduced to a more stable state, or safely contained in the margins; and it is precisely through commodification that this effect is produced. It is in this way that I argue that commodification acts as a technology of Occidental imaginative geography.

This leads onto the second theoretical contribution made by the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy: that commodification is a technology of racialised governmentalities. As referenced in chapter one, this notion of ‘racialised governmentalities’ is adapted from Barnor Hesse (2000). Hesse, in a similar way to Edward Said (1991: 3), adopts Foucault’s concept of governmentality to describe the political, regulatory and representational dimensions of European/white racism in the West and the relation between power and knowledge that is used to sustain and govern the racialised distinction between European and non-white. As Hesse (2000: 23) states, ‘racialised governmentalities structure and underwrite the social technologies of racialised inclusions (hierarchical forms) and racialised exclusions (segregationary forms)’. It is in this sense that commodification provides the technological means through which a racialised governmentality attempts to steer, direct and shape the production of racial meaning, and sustain the purity of white national identity.

Though similar to the notion of commodification as a technology of Occidental imaginative geography outlined above, it differs in its focus on how the production of racial knowledge actually occurs. Nikolas Rose (1999: 3) describes governmentality as the ‘invention, contestation, operationalisation and transformation of more or less rationalised schemes, programmes, techniques and devices which seek to shape conduct so as to achieve certain ends’, and it is in these terms that I frame my analysis of British Asian cultural production. Specifically, it turns the researcher’s attention to the ways in which the processes and machinery of commodification are rationalised and narrated by the individuals that operate them,

which in effect is how the postcolonial is governed. It is for this reason that the postcolonial cultural economy approach places symbol creators at its centre of analysis, as they are precisely the mediators between symbols and the structures of the cultural industries (and beyond that, the wider political economy, in turn embedded in the global cultural economy). Through studying ‘everyday human agency, and the production of cultural meaning’ (Negus, 1997: 69) the aim is to ascertain how social actors are constituted by *and* constitute themselves through economic relationships within the structures of the cultural industries.

Thus, the intention of the postcolonial cultural economy intervention is to focus more directly on the industrial production and distribution of postcolonial cultural meaning. In this way we begin to see how certain standard industry practices become governing processes through which the British Asian cultural commodity is racialised. For instance, in chapter four we saw how major publishing houses use a piece of technology called BookScan to rationalise the acquisition of a new manuscript, estimating sales based upon the sales figures of a similar pre-existing book. In my research, Asian authors complained that during the acquisition process publishers would use another Asian novel as the benchmark in calculating the potential sales margin for their manuscript, even though the actual style and content might be very different. This is clearly problematic, not least in the reduction of the novel to the author’s ethnic identity, but also because if the said author does not present Asianness in an obviously recognisable – indeed, Indophilic – way then this will produce a lower margin in the projected sales sheet, lessening their chances of getting signed. This is what is meant by the notion of the *rationalisation/racialising logic of capital* that became a recurrent theme in my research; that is, the way in which economic decisions are rationalised during the editorial stage have particular ideological effects for the British Asian cultural commodity. It is in this sense that this thesis presents the idea of commodification as a technology of racialised governmentalities.

The drawing together of these two theoretical threads through the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy produces two further important insights. Firstly, it argues for a shift from the notion of the commodification of race to a notion of the *racialisation of the cultural commodity*. By this I mean the ways in which the British

Asian cultural commodity comes to be racialised in specific, reductive ways during the commodity phase. From the commodification of race thesis we get the sense that capitalism's regulation of race appears as a determinate, functionalist co-option. Yet the postcolonial cultural economy thesis draws attention to how it is a fluid process, whereby certain points in the production chain – through the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital – attempt to transform the hybrid entity into absolute difference. This is most evident in the design and marketing stages, and the particular ways the *Asianness* of the British Asian cultural commodity is re-represented for the market. For instance, in the case of the novel *The Curry Mile*, the author wanted to narrate a story about generational and gender relations within a Pakistani family, set in the Indian restaurant scene in Manchester. However, through the design and marketing of the novel, the 'exotic' geographical location got foregrounded over the actual storyline, as the publisher tried to tie its branding to Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, since the house did not have the resources to create a new brand. Indeed, a particular strength of the postcolonial cultural economy approach is that it can explain the way in which British Asian cultural producers themselves are enticed into presenting their cultural products in particular forms; that is, coaxed into unwittingly participating in the production of racialist knowledge. It additionally allows for the possibility of disrupting this process, a point I shall develop shortly, when I consider the postcolonial cultural economy as a political intervention.

The second theoretical insight brought by the postcolonial cultural economy approach is its emphasis on the messy contingent nature of causation within the cultural economy/cultural industries. Unlike the economic determinist versions of cultural production that tend to characterise the commodification of race thesis, the postcolonial cultural economy approach offers a more sensitive analysis of the complex interplay between the structures of the cultural industries and individual agency. It consequently produces what I regard as a more nuanced account of the ideological manifestations of racialised commodification. It is precisely the fluid, interdisciplinary nature of the postcolonial cultural economy's theoretical framework – incorporating textual, empirical, and structural analysis – that allows new and different types of knowledges to emerge, constituting a multilayered account of how the neo-colonial Manichean logic of difference is enacted discursively through cultures of production. By constructing a more elaborate picture of British Asian

cultural production based upon sliding between micro and macro analytical perspectives, we can see more clearly how certain hegemonic representations of race reoccur despite the multi-varied and often, highly differentiated industrial and cultural settings.

The fundamental point brought by the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy is that the postcolonial/hybrid cultural text does not exist in a vacuum, but is produced through commodification. As Adorno (1991: 100) states, ‘cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through’, and following this, I argue that the production of postcolonial meaning is a process of commodification. Thus, in order to ascertain the transruptive potential of the British Asian cultural commodity – and how this potential is often subsumed, transforming the cultural good into an exotic symbol – then we need to examine more closely the processes of commodification, with a focus on how neo-colonial ideological forces manifest during standardised processes (though complexly determined by intersections of cultures of production, and individual agency). It is in these terms that I re-conceptualise commodification as the technology through which capitalism attempts to govern the counter-narratives of difference produced by the postcolonial subject.

## 2. Methodological

Applying the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy to an analysis of the politics of British Asian cultural production necessitated a new methodological approach to researching the production of postcolonial meaning. The development of such a method is what I consider the concept’s second contribution to scholarship on capitalism and race. It describes an interdisciplinary approach that sets ‘groundwork’ on British Asian cultural production against its wider postcolonial epistemological context. Absolutely central to such a method is a focus on the empirical. In contrast, those approaches that have attempted to tackle the ideological dimension of commodification have been impeded by a lack of engagement with how Orientalism actually manifests during the commodity phase of a cultural good. Empirical research – and in particular ethnography – is specifically intended to address this failing, as I believe it is the most effective way of producing the necessary detail

about the micro-processes of cultural production. I previously highlighted how the postcolonial cultural economy approach brings symbol creators to the centre of its analysis, and subsequently, the methodological task is fixed on how best to access the meanings they attach to their work. Consequently, as discussed in detail in chapter two, an ethnographic method was adopted, where the main methodological tools were in-depth interviews and participant observation, with a focus on producing narratives that would reveal new knowledges about the nature of creative work in relation to British Asian cultural production. This was not the sole focus of my research method however, as I then elaborated these narratives with additional layers of empirical material to get a richer sense of the sites through which cultural production – and the production of racialised knowledge – occurs. As such, interviews and field notes were expanded with additional material, from trade literatures, newspaper articles, publicity materials and the cultural commodities themselves, to create a sense of the spaces and cultures of production that symbol creators negotiate as part of their role in the manufacture of the British Asian cultural commodity.

This empirical work was then set against more literature-based research on the structures of cultural production, where I analysed policy documents and media history sources, to create an armature onto which I sculpted the empirical material, producing a multidimensional and structured (though elaborate and non-uniform) model of cultural production. As I have suggested elsewhere, the centrality of empirical research to the postcolonial cultural economy is specifically intended to address the form of ‘epochal theorising’ that renders micro-level relationships and contextual details banal and insignificant (du Gay and Pryke, 2002). Yet it was also important to situate the empirical groundwork within its broader context, to ground those messy human mediations (Negus, 1997) within larger structures are produced through political and economic (and postcolonial) relations.

As described in more detail in chapter two, my methodological approach was influenced by Bob Jessop’s (2005: 143) notion of ‘cultural political economy’, which he describes as, ‘an emerging post-disciplinary approach that adopts the “cultural turn” in economic and political inquiry but nonetheless affirms the importance of the interconnected institutional materialities of economics and politics’. Jessop argues

for a method that combines micro and macro approaches from the ‘top-down’, and ‘bottom-up’, appropriately attuned to the contribution of discourse and discursive practices to subject formation and economic processes, it also recognises how technical and economic objects are socially constructed and historically specific, and entangled on broader networks of social relations (ibid.: 144). Jessop’s model underpins the methodological approach of the postcolonial cultural economy in its attempt to correlate micro and macro processes. Furthermore, my method draws from what Hesmondhalgh (2007: 556-557) defines as the sociology of creative labour, exemplified by the work of Ryan (1992), McRobbie (2002) and Negus (1992). Ryan and Negus in particular pay close attention to organisational dynamics, as the postcolonial cultural economy method entails, to see the values and conditions that drive creative work, and mark its uniqueness from other industrial forms of production. However, I distinguish my approach with the concern with the postcolonial. Indeed, if sections of this genre I refer to can still be critiqued for too-heavy a balance on the micro at the expense of broader concerns with power and inequality, then foregrounding the ‘postcolonial’ dimension of the subject of analysis becomes an anchor which tethers this research to precisely those questions. Furthermore it stresses the equal emphasis I give to cultural theory and the empirical. In essence my approach should be regarded as a sociological account of cultural production, framed within postcolonial notions of hybridity, epistemology and power.

When combined with the theoretical framework outlined above, the methodological intervention produced by the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy allows for a fluid approach that can adapt its focus to the mutable industrial sites and cultural settings through which British Asian cultural production occurs. Each of the stages of production I researched consists of its own standardised processes and cultures of production (which in turn vary between organisations and industries and the particular dynamic interface between the market, the state and the audience) that constitute differentiated environments through which racial knowledges are produced. The postcolonial cultural economy approach is able to calibrate itself to these individual scenarios by adjusting its epistemological aperture, and sliding between a macro and micro perspective – often mid-analysis – depending on each particular setting’s depth of field.

For instance, at the commissioning and distribution stage of production, my focus was initially set towards a macro perspective, since I needed a wider view of the particular political economy setting of an organisation (in terms of issues such as ownership, regulation and bureaucracy) which I found was a major determinant upon the cultures of production and the forms of standardised industrial practices that commissioners and schedulers have to work within. However, in order to see how the political economy of an industry actually enacts itself upon social actors and symbol creation I had to pay closer attention to the ‘floor’ of cultural production. Thus, through ethnographic work, I learnt how the constraints felt by social actors of surrounding structures were manifested through their perceptions – sometimes real, sometimes imagined – of the expectations of shareholders, CEOs, or channel controllers. In many cases, I found that commissioners, whether working in television, publishing or theatre, were less focused on the needs of the consumers (let alone the cultural producers), than second-guessing the wants of the upper echelons of corporate or state organisations. As such, in order to ascertain the nature of commodification’s racialising effects at the commissioning/scheduling stages of production, I had to continuously slide my analysis between micro to macro perspectives to see how the particular dynamic between structure and agency, as it occurs in a highly managed/bureaucratic setting, determines the production of racial epistemologies in particular ways.

To use another example, at the design stage of production, I noticed immediately that symbol creators generally felt more autonomy in their work than commissioners. As such my analysis initially adopted a micro-level perspective, focusing more on how the dynamic between individual and their particular relation to the cultures of production defined the nature of the process through which racial epistemologies were mediated. While senior executives and external influences would still intervene, the actual procedures, such as designing a book jacket or theatre flyer, were less mechanised, and symbol creators appeared to experience much more creative freedom. Yet, there would nevertheless be invisible pressures ‘from above’ – again, sometimes real, sometimes imagined – that attempt to steer the output towards a certain eventuality. Consequently, I had to adopt a wider perspective, in order to ascertain the ways in which certain micro-level behaviours were being reinforced or

standardised by macro-structural influences, again, with determining racialising effects.

To illustrate how this methodological approach provides a more nuanced account of the relation between capitalism and race, I again draw from the case of Rasa's theatrical production *Curry Tales*. A more conventional cultural studies approach would focus solely on the content, and would valorise the play's themes based on postcolonial feminisms, and subaltern politics. Writers coming from a commodification of race thesis on the other hand, would critique this position, and would use a similar textual deconstruction of the Indophilia in the play's aestheticisation to argue that commodification has subsumed its counter-hegemonic potential. The postcolonial cultural economy account, however, in attempting to understand how and why such negative representations occur despite the play's content, produces a more complex and multi-layered argument. While it incorporates a similar textual and semiotic analysis of the play, these are part of a broader methodological approach. For instance, once I had watched the play, I used interviews with the writer and producer to get a sense of their artistic and political motivations. Then, using more ethnographic methods, I examined the marketing process in theatre, and considered how the aestheticisation of the production occurs through particular standardised and rationalised processes, based on a perception of the audience and the press. Then, in order to understand the surrounding structural context of the production, I adopted a political economy approach, where I studied policy documents and history in relation to the Arts Council of England's remit regarding culturally diverse arts, which gave me a sense of how Rasa had to present itself in a certain way in order to secure funding and production support. Therefore, based upon the postcolonial cultural economy approach, I found that through the perceived expectations of the Arts Council, the venue and the audience, Rasa was led into using exotic signifiers to present and sell its play, thus producing an Orientalist narrative despite its original political motivations. This seems a more nuanced reading of commodification's attempts to govern the counter-narratives of difference than conventional cultural studies approaches, which are not methodologically equipped to produce these kinds of knowledges.

Thus, it is precisely the fluid, interdisciplinary nature of the postcolonial cultural economy's theoretical and methodological framework that allows new and different types of knowledges to emerge, constituting an appropriately multilayered account of how Orientalism manifests through the rationalisation/racialising logic of capital. By constructing a more elaborate picture of British Asian cultural production based upon sliding micro and macro perspectives, we can see more clearly how certain hegemonic representations of race reoccur despite the multi-varied and often highly differentiated industrial and cultural settings. It is the subsequent interdisciplinary character of the methodology produced by the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy that I believe represents its second contribution to scholarship on race, capitalism and cultural production.

### 3. Political

The theoretical and methodological contributions of the postcolonial cultural economy brings an understanding that, far from being a uniform and standard process, commodification and cultural production is better recognised as unpredictable, and even contradictory. Even though the focus of this thesis has been focused on exposing the governing effects of commodification upon the British Asian text, like Stuart Hall (1978), I nonetheless consider cultural production as a field of ideological struggle that offers moments of resistance. As I argued in chapter one, what I found disturbing about the version of commodification espoused in the edited collection *Dis-Orienting Rhythms...* – which is indicative of the commodification of race thesis that this research writes against – was that it immediately forecloses the political potential of the hybrid cultural commodity. Unless British Asian musicians (as was their example) coupled their musical fusions with an explicit anti-racist, anti-capitalist message, and ideally, an external commitment to activist politics, then their records could prove no opposition to 'the workings of hegemonic cultural industrialism' that reworks and reterritorialises their hybrid forms into new essential identities – a position that I felt over-burdened the symbol creator. In contrast, the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy suggests that there are alternative forms of cultural politics possible, though dependent on intervening in the very commodification process itself. By stressing commodification's unpredictable and ultimately ambivalent nature, and a process

characterised as much by the struggle and contestations over texts and meaning as it is by the compliance by social actors to certain profit-orientated standardised processes, then the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy suggests that there is scope for disruptive hybrid transruptions. This is where I believe the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy can represent a political intervention. Since this is potentially the most important contribution to be made by the concept, and yet has received little attention in this thesis so far, the remainder of the chapter will reflect on this contribution in more detail.

## **The postcolonial cultural economy as cultural transruption**

### The numbers game

In order to think through the potential political intervention made by the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy, I want to begin by relating it to another empirical approach to the ‘problem’ of race and diversity in the cultural industries. I am specifically referring to policy research on race in the labour markets of the cultural industries, which has exposed how little diversity there is in the media workforce, particularly at the senior level, the positions of which are monopolised by individuals from a certain privileged social class (and ethnicity)<sup>97</sup>. Such a discourse appears in all three of the industries in this study. For instance the 2004 report *In Full Colour: Cultural Diversity in Book Publishing Today* (decibel/The Bookseller) showed that while 13% of the publishing industry belongs to an ethnic minority, since the industry is predominantly based in London, these figures are not actually representative of the London population, 30% of whom are ‘black or minority ethnic’ (ibid.). Moreover, it found that diversity tends to occur at the periphery of the workforce, with ‘virtually zero diversity in editorial’, a consequence of the prevailing culture of nepotism that ensures that this layer of the industry remains dominated by individuals from the same networks and social class.

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<sup>97</sup> As the RTS Convention (a panel assembled by former BBC director general Greg Dyke, consisting of business leaders to talk about the organisational issues facing TV) was forced to admit, broadcasters are ‘putting the audience second to their own interests [...] too much TV was made and scheduled with the industry’s “white middle-aged men’ in mind.”’ (Robin Parker, ‘Business leaders slam ‘self-serving’ TV industry’, *Broadcast*, 14 September 2007)

In television, following Greg Dyke's famous assertion that the BBC is 'hideously white', similar statistical studies and their findings have led to the launch of numerous schemes aimed at boosting diversity in the workforce. The most significant of these is the creation of the Cultural Diversity Network (CDN), a joint initiative involving all the major UK broadcasting companies, who together produced an action plan outlining its objectives for achieving 'a fairer representation of Britain's multicultural society' (Jason Deans, 'Connecting with your audience', *The Guardian*, 20 May 2002). A similar discourse appears in theatre, exemplified by Estelle Morris, the former Culture Secretary, who, speaking at the launch of a theatre training scheme for individuals from minority communities, stated, 'At the moment, we are not recruiting enough people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. The statistics are abysmal and that means, quite simply, that the arts is missing out on a whole lot of talent' (Morris quoted in 'Morris warns arts over minority recruitment', *The Stage*, 13 April, 2004). As I have alluded in previous chapters, the Arts Council has made supporting culturally diverse theatre one of its major aims<sup>98</sup> and has made a concerted effort to encourage companies to target cultural diversity – in terms of audiences, and within the organisations itself (John Lewis, 'The man from the Arts Council...he says yes!', in *Time Out*, Sept 13-20 2006). In this respect, the nature of such policy research follows in the race relations tradition (see Back and Solomos, 2000), with a focus on the structural aspect of racism in the labour market. Thus diversity in these discourses tends to be discussed in terms of narratives of 'glass ceilings', quotas and diversity targets, which are geared towards improving the employment opportunities of professionals from 'BME' communities.

Of course, the lack of brown folk in the higher echelons of the cultural industries is an obvious hindrance to British Asian cultural production, the products of which, as I have shown, struggle to reach wider, 'mainstream' audiences. However, even though representation in the labour market is an issue that must be addressed (particularly if black and Asian professionals are unable to further their careers because of their non-white status), I argue that such a discourse's sole focus on the quantitative, not only

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<sup>98</sup> See Khan (2002) for an overview of all Arts Council initiatives part of its cultural diversity action plan

ignores the *quality* of output and the politics of representation, but more crucially, fails to understand the relation between cultures of production and cultural politics through which the counter-narratives of difference are mediated. Exemplifying this point is a quote from television executive producer Tommy Nagra, who describes the reality for anyone who is able to break through the ‘glass ceiling’...

...and I mean really breaking it. I don't mean breaking and peering over the side and taking on the values of the organisation around you, but doing it, maintaining your own values and sense of self, and having a sense of individual autonomy within the bigger beast of the corporation [...] once that happens things can open up more. We're a long way off that because I think to breakthrough that level you have to, in a way, I feel... my fear is you almost have to take on values which may not be in keeping with your own individual values and your own kind of who you are, and I think that is the problem with society, not just broadcasting. You know the whole debate around Britishness and citizenship....

You almost have to suppress your [cultural heritage] in order to get to where you want to go. And I think that is the biggest shame in our industry; we should never have to suppress who we are. I was always proud of my culture, my tradition, my heritage and I have managed to keep onto that, but I also want to be very successful in broadcasting. And whether you can have both... I don't know if you can have that in this current climate

In this quote Tommy identifies the problem as not just the supposed glass ceiling, but the difficulty in maintaining one's identity, and not conforming to the values of the organisation, which might be counter to the values of the Asian or black complex professional. From this comment, I suggest that an effective cultural strategy needs to have less emphasis on the numbers of non-white bodies in the cultural industries, and a greater focus on changing the cultures of production through which diversity is governed – precisely where an approach informed by the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy becomes an intervention. The reference at the end of Tommy's comment, to the ‘climate’ of broadcasting (or indeed, the public sphere itself) suggests change needs to occur within the heart of industrial production, where quota schemes and race-relations legislation have little impact. That is not to say that these particular approaches are misguided or pointless, rather that real change within the cultural industries will only occur once the very cultures of production have been transformed. This research was never intended to be an evaluation of UK cultural policy – a subject that would need its own separate thesis – but nonetheless I want to

highlight how the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy challenges a narrative upon which such policy is based, which claims that improving diversity in the cultural industries is a matter of increasing brown and black faces both on and off the screen, page, or stage. Instead, it suggests that the picture is much more complex and consequently demands a much more nuanced approach.

### Contradictions in the postcolonial cultural economy

In light of this, I will further develop how the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy can contribute to the development of a progressive cultural strategy. In an earlier chapter I described how the process of cultural production is better characterised as a navigation between aesthetic, ethical, political and economic poles, and how the transruptive scope of the commodity is dependent upon how cultural producers negotiate commercial forces in particular. Thus, for Nicholas Garnham (1990: 161-162), rather than the production of the good itself, it is cultural distribution that is the ‘key locus of power and profit [...] and the key to cultural plurality’. It is for this reason that Garnham argues that the focus of cultural industries research has to be the editorial function of production, and indeed, this has been precisely the object of my research into British Asian cultural production. A further key principle of cultural industries research that has informed this work – and one that I have referred to several times – is that cultural production is a contested space, capable of producing both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ art. As I demonstrated in chapter one, Garnham (2000) explains this in terms of the dialectic of the market that both dominates and liberates. Certainly, even though this research has focused solely on the ways in which capitalism attempts to govern and regulate the counter-narratives of difference through commodification, I inevitably encountered cases that at various points ‘contradicted’ the system. I want to reflect on two of these examples now, which will help us think through the ways in which successful cultural transruptions can be staged.

The first case I want to draw from is Neil Biswas’ Channel 4 drama *Bradford Riots*. Based on the real-life events that took place in Bradford in July 2001, it tells the fictional story of a student called Karim who gets caught up in the riot between Asian youth and the police. In chapter six, I critiqued the way in which the

programme was presented, which played on problematic representations of the Asian Gang-as-new-folk-devil (see Alexander, 2000). But this actually belied the content of the drama, which was both well-crafted, and also a significant political moment, exposing with damning effect the latest social injustice to have occurred in the troubled history of British race relations<sup>99</sup>. Gauging the actual transruptive impact of *Bradford Riots* needs further dissection than can be afforded here, but its relative critical *and* commercial success<sup>100</sup> highlights at the very least the mark it made on the British cultural landscape at that moment in time.

Considering its provocative subject matter (which is where its primary disruptive qualities lay), I asked the director and writer Neil Biswas about how *Bradford Riots* came to be commissioned:

Neil Biswas: I think they [Channel4] did *Bradford Riots* because they felt politically it had to be addressed. They genuinely thought that this was something that needed to be seen, that it was actually something that was extraordinary enough ... no one else would do it, and they genuinely felt that in terms of perspective was important ... you remember part of their remit is to do ethnic programming and to do representation – programming that is there for a minority interest, so it couldn't have been more up their street in terms of their remit. But I think in terms of their political positions they all felt this was a really important story to be told that hadn't been told.

AS: So it went beyond tick-box...

NB: It wasn't tick-box, it was really about... I think the fact I was writing about it was really important...

In this quote, Neil alluded to how the programme fitted in with Channel 4's public service remit to produce 'ethnic programming', but when I asked him if this had a 'tick-boxing' element, he stressed that it was the passion behind the story that saw the commission through. While he admits that *Bradford Riots* was 'right up their street in terms' of the channel's remit – and I would add, it's brand too, with its urban themes told from a youth perspective – in our interview Neil was nonetheless keen to stress the ethical motivations of various individuals involved in the

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<sup>99</sup> The number of convictions for riot was unprecedented in English legal history, with 200 jail sentences totalling 604 years handed down, with many believing the length of imprisonments excessive (most of the rioters received 4- 6 year sentences). See Kalra (2002).

<sup>100</sup> *Bradford Riots* received ratings of two million – 10% of the market share for 9pm – which is relatively good for Channel 4. With regard to critical acclaim, while Neil was ambivalent about this, it did get outstanding reviews on BBC2's *Newsnight Review*, and the Radio 4's *Front Row*, and, somewhat ironically, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail*.

production (from co-producers to the channel executives<sup>101</sup>), who felt from a political point of view that the story ‘needed to be seen’.

Whilst it would be naive to suggest that Channel 4 commissioned *Bradford Riots* for political reasons alone, I was nevertheless surprised to hear Neil describe their approach to the production as ‘gung-ho’ and ‘radical’. In one instance Neil was referring to the head of Channel 4 drama’s offer of an additional £1 million to build a street set, following the temporary shutdown of the production as it struggled to get permission from various local authorities to stage the riot scene<sup>102</sup>. It additionally referred to how, despite the channel’s anxiety over Neil’s status as a first-time director, Channel 4 nonetheless gave him ‘incredible support’. Thus, in contrast to some of the case studies I examined in previous chapters where symbol creators felt alienated or pressured by senior executives in various ways, Neil would describe his amazement at how Channel 4 and its co-producers flouted all the standard commercial conventions, and took *risks* over a production that would probably have generated ‘noise’ based on subject-matter alone, but was not guaranteed to be a commercial or critical hit. It transpired that *Bradford Riots* was a relative success, much of which was due to Neil’s skill as a writer and director<sup>103</sup>. But as Neil would probably admit, the film would not have appeared as it did without the freedom and support he was given by the producers and the channel – including a significant marketing push<sup>104</sup>. Thus the political agency of key individuals, and the willingness to take risks (in terms of the original commission, resource and budget allocation, and the priority it was given by Channel 4 in its overall schedule and marketing plan) were all factors that set the foundations from which the transruptive potential of the drama could be realised.

A second case study that provides an example of a successful cultural transruption is Daljit Nagra’s collection of poetry *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, published by independent UK publishing house Faber & Faber. What makes the collection

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<sup>101</sup> Neil name-checks Kate Shriggs of co-producers Dead Meadow productions, in particular, who originally approached Neil with the idea.

<sup>102</sup> See ‘Making of... Bradford Riots’, in *Broadcast* magazine for the full story

<sup>103</sup> *Bradford Riots* actually brought Neil a Bafta nomination.

<sup>104</sup> The marketing campaign for *Bradford Riots* included trailers, a billboard campaign, and a two page advert in all the daily newspapers.

particularly striking is not just its beautifully crafted expression of British Asianness, but for the way in which the book was packaged and marketed, which absolutely refused to reduce the book to the author's ethnic identity when this would have been the most 'obvious' thing for a marketer to do. Indeed, the book's redesign for its incorporation into Faber & Faber's fiction department following the success of the first edition, neatly illustrates how Asianness can be represented in a way that avoids the Orientalist pitfalls highlighted in chapter six.

The original cover of *Look We Have...* was part of a series designed by award-winning design firm Pentagram, marking the relaunch of Faber's poetry list. This particular design recalled the typographic style of classic Faber poetry covers, connecting the backlist and the new titles within a single embracing cover. The covers are very simple, consisting of the title and author's name in a basic font, against a plain background; the only differences between covers being the size of the font, and its particular colour scheme. While Daljit appreciated the serious, austere style of the design, he also felt that it was not in keeping with the tone of his poetry – not least because he would have preferred a more visible Asian presence in the cover – and he subsequently requested that his jacket featured the 'gaudiest' colours possible (settling for a clashing orange and light blue font against a mauve background). However, when the cover was redesigned for the new edition (which was an attempt to introduce the collection to the mass market), rather than amplify Asianness, the collection's ethnic themes were subtly represented solely through the font in which Daljit's name is written. Though the font is recognisably 'Indian', it is very muted and not as clichéd than one would imagine. In fact it reflects the convivial tone of the new cover, which depicts a pound shop (several of the poems are about shops), featuring mops, and buckets and stacks of plastic chairs, a deliberate contrast to the high-brow quality of the original cover. Daljit reflected on the redesign as follows:

Daljit Nagra: [I]t's very bright and colourful, it's yellow. And they got some Asian artist to write my name so it's slightly off-centre script.

AS: Have they accentuated the ethnic aspect?

DN: Just slightly yeah.

AS: But not in a way you feel uncomfortable with?

DN: I wanted it anyway. I like this cover. I want my books to not look as English as possible, I want to move away from that. Same with the writing

there [pointing to the original cover] if they could have made the writing less English I would have been happy. I didn't challenge it at the time.

AS: But would you have been worried if they really exaggerated the collection's Asianness?

DN: Yeah, absolutely. I didn't have really any input in the [original] cover. I just said I wanted it as gaudy as possible whatever happens. I don't want another serious blue or black cover. That's not the spirit of the poems. And they picked this [new] design anyway and showed it to me and I just say yeah it's fine. So there was no kind of conflict there I guess and they've instinctively gone for this kind of design. And I think it's quite tasteful isn't it? I think it works well.

A similar narrative was presented in chapter six, when Daljit explained the process behind choosing a title for his collection, where the editors, rather than pick an obvious, or perhaps more commercial, 'Punglish' title, chose to name the collection after Daljit's most 'difficult poem'. No doubt the particular cultures of production of Faber & Faber aided what I consider the progressive design of *Look We Have...* through its status as a well respected, literary, non-corporate entity with a reputation that values quality over commerce (something that Daljit was keen to stress throughout our interview). Certainly, as I suggested in a previous chapter, poetry does not experience the same kind of economic pressures like the trade publishing industry, as historically, it has not produced massive sales. Which makes even more impressive how *Look We Have...* has, to date, sold over 14,000 copies: several people in the industry told me this was a remarkable feat for a poetry collection, let alone one produced by a brand new author. Yet, what I consider a greater achievement is how, like *Bradford Riots*, *Look We Have...* was a relative critical and commercial 'splash' that crucially, managed to transgress any ethnic niche that, as I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, frequently ensnares similar British Asian cultural commodities. Instead, both of these cultural works, through their production, and the craft that went into them, stand alone as simply good pieces of art.

Looking closely at the production of these two texts (as the postcolonial cultural economy intervention begets), we see that these transruptive effects were not mere random dysfunctions of the system, or spontaneous, unexplainable transgressions. Firstly, what that these two cases have in common is the way that at various points, the complex professionals involved in their production took *risks*. Neither production

had immediate commercial appeal in terms of repeating a known formula, yet at the commissioning level, someone felt that they were 'worth a punt'. Similarly, despite the lack of obvious commercial appeal, schedulers and sales executives both took risks when they allocated *Bradford Riots* a primetime 9pm slot<sup>105</sup>, and decided to push a collection of 'Punglish' poetry into the broader fiction market. While a more conservative approach was taken at the marketing and design stage of production for *Bradford Riots* (though it did receive a national billboard campaign), the marketing team behind *Look We Have...* risked losing a potentially larger 'mainstream' audience by choosing a subtle, ethnically ambiguous book jacket, rather than one based on the kind of Orientalist symbols of South Asia that, for instance, made the likes of *Bombay Dreams* such a massive hit.

The ways in which such risks could be taken, I believe, is explained by the particular 'hybrid' cultures of production through which each production occurred. Channel 4, which broadcast *Bradford Riots*, is a commercial channel, funded by advertising revenue, but it has a public service remit that obliges it to produce minority-interest television, but additionally, gives it the space to produce more challenging work. In a less regulated setting, Faber & Faber, which published *Look We Have...* as I have shown, is an independent company operating in a highly competitive market, but has a reputation for producing literary works of value, and an independent spirit that contrasts to the corporate environs of the larger publishing houses. I argue that it is these particular cultures of production that allow symbol creators more autonomy, increasing the potential for cultural transruptions to be staged. This is not unique to these particular companies or even industries, and is not to say that Faber & Faber and Channel 4 consistently produce works of artistic, cultural and political merit – sometimes, quite the contrary. However, drawing again from the notion that cultural production is better conceived as a navigation between aesthetic, economic, ethical and political poles, both of these organisations were able to provide environments in which cultural workers were at important moments, buffered from the market or state pressures that can, as I have shown in previous chapters, have potentially detrimental effects upon the cultural work. This points us towards ways in which British Asian

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<sup>105</sup> In contrast, as described in chapter five Neil Biswas' first drama *Second Generation*, was at the last minute moved from its original 9pm timeslot, to 10pm; Neil described how the channel 'chickened out'.

cultural producers can avoid and disrupt the neo-colonial process workings of commodification.

### Intervening in the postcolonial cultural economy

In this final section, I want to consider some of the ways we can think about the potential of cultural transruptions in the postcolonial cultural economy. Vindicating the arguments made by cultural industries research, this thesis argues that cultural production is a complex, ambivalent and contested process. As capitalism attempts to totalise culture through the process of commodification, it leaves tears or stretches where its integrity is weakened, and this is where British Asian symbol creators need to stage their interventions. As such, I argue that at certain moments – contingent on the dynamic between a specific time and place – social actors *can* intervene in the commodification process and produce oppositional texts. This is not to say that commodification can be transgressed completely. Rather, the intervention will vary in magnitude, depending on the specific circumstances of that moment.

While this may sound rather abstract, one real implication that immediately emerges is that the transruptive potential of the hybrid translation rests on the ability to suspend economic rationales at key moments in production. As I have suggested, it is no coincidence that these examples have occurred in what I called ‘hybrid’ commercial environments, which have been able to protect symbol creators from market (and state) pressure to varying degrees. However, that is not to say that the production of positive representations of difference cannot happen in a purely profit-orientated corporate setting. On the reverse side of the coin, the subsidised sector does not always produce transruptive work; the increasing liberalisation of the cultural industries in the UK has made it more difficult to totally insulate cultural production from market forces, and in this thesis I have referred to many cases of subsidised work that have been transformed negatively by the ideological effects of commodification. In those instances where an aesthetic or political vision has been compromised it is usually when commercial forces – which, as I argued in chapter three, are always present – begin to dominate. There are many complex issues that

arise from this<sup>106</sup>, but if culturally diverse cultural and artistic practice is to be judged (at the very least) by its ability to resist being subsumed into a racialist nationalist narrative that marks non-whites as absolutely different to a pure national Self, then an awareness of how this ideology manifests through normative, commercial rationale is paramount to formulating effective cultural politics.

In simple terms, the political intervention of the postcolonial cultural economy states that commodification is a contested process, and therefore symbol creators have to focus on the ethics of their industrial practice as much as they do on their craft. That is, symbol creators and collaborating cultural intermediaries need to constantly reflect upon their choices, decisions and strategies throughout the production process. Moreover, symbol creators should maintain a presence at each key stage of production, in order to guide the text appropriately through the commodity phase. Such steps are crucial to ensuring that the British Asian cultural commodity has the best chance of avoiding the neo-colonial forces that attempt to transform the hybrid translation into new essential identities, particularly during the design and marketing stage of production.

Choosing the right organisation with which to work is one important area that needs careful consideration. As stated, successful interventions can be held in different kinds of production settings, dependent on the autonomy experienced by the symbol creator and access to appropriate networks of distribution and marketing. For instance, working with an established independent organisation that prioritises artistic or political endeavour over profit (as the poet Daljit Nagra described his experience at Faber & Faber), I believe, is a particularly productive space in which to produce challenging work. While it may prove more difficult, interventions can additionally be staged in a corporate context, though preferably within an environment where individuals experience a significant amount of autonomy, and have more freedom to act on their ethics/instincts. Public service broadcasting

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<sup>106</sup> Broadly speaking, working with corporations or bigger companies where these 'commercial forces' are most felt, will provide the symbol creator with larger distribution channels, bigger marketing budgets, and greater rewards for labour; certainly more so than working independently. In which case the question becomes the degree to which a cultural producer is willing to compromise their aesthetic and political vision (if a compromise is necessary) in order to receive the benefits of working within a more profit-orientated organisation, whether corporate or independent. As stated, this raises many ethically complex questions which I do not have the space to address here.

provides a particularly unique and potentially productive setting for British Asian cultural production – as Nicholas Garnham (1990: 166) believes, it is the ‘heartland of contemporary cultural practice’ – though it is reliant on having the adequate financial and organisational resources to protect its workers from state and market pressure. Effective cultural work can additionally occur through the alternative networks, modes of production and DIY methods that reject the established forms of media, whereby the symbol creator retains full control over the entire production and distribution process. The author Preethi Nair found success from going down the route of self-publication. As Garnham (ibid.) states in a cultural industries position paper for the GLC, cultural policy can assist this particular mode of production through providing loans that assist small organisations with marketing and distribution in particular.

Neither of these examples represents the ideal production setting (and they each pose different sets of problems and cost/benefits), but I do nonetheless consider them the spaces from which the potential for cultural transruption, or avoidance of racialising forms of commodification, is improved. The crucial thread running throughout each of them is the lesser degree to which they experience the forms of rationalised industrial production techniques that have been imposed throughout the cultural industries, including the subsidised arts sector. As I have shown through this thesis, it is precisely through such rationalising techniques, that the counter-narratives of difference are governed. In essence, it is rationalisation through standardised procedure that restricts the autonomy of the complex professional and prevents them from taking risks on more challenging, less ‘commercial’ products – such as the British Asian cultural commodity. Such is the saturation of neoliberal economic models in the cultural industries, whether in the form of corporate strategy or state cultural policy (see Hesmondhalgh, 2008), that the reality of being able to totally evade rationalised, standardised production is impossible. Regardless, the potential for producing challenging forms of cultural production depends on the ability of symbol creators to negotiate these processes in a way that does not compromise their ethical, political and aesthetic vision. This is what I consider the political intervention made by the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy: exhorting the symbol creator to reflect as much on their industrial practice, as they do on their craft and the stories they want to tell.

## Conclusion: Future interventions

The aim of the thesis was to demonstrate how commodification is the means through which capitalism attempts to manage the counter-narratives of race. As I indicated in the opening chapter, even though this thesis emerged in response to a particular discourse on commodification and race, it actually engages a much larger debate on the governance of difference in the global cultural economy. What is particularly revealing is how the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy reconceptualises commodification, and mirrors Stuart Hall's version of globalisation. This is particularly evident in a quote from Hall that I used in chapter one, which is worth repeating again here:

[Globalisation] is a hegemonizing process, in the proper Gramscian sense. It is 'structured in dominance', but it cannot control or saturate everything within its orbit. Indeed, it produces as one of its unintended effects subaltern formations and emergent tendencies which it cannot control but must try to 'hegemonize' or harness to its wider purposes. It's a system for *con-forming difference*, rather than a convenient synonym for the obliteration of difference. This argument is critical if we are to take account of how and where resistances and counter-strategies are likely successfully to develop. This perspective entails a more discursive model of power in the new global environment than is common among the 'hyper-globalizers' (Hall, 2000.: 215)

This thesis argues that commodification is the technology through which global capital attempts to 'hegemonize' difference in the way that Hall describes. As I have argued in this chapter, capitalism through commodification cannot 'control or saturate everything in its orbit'. In its attempts to standardise culture it leaves stretches and tears where the multivocal, multivalent, and ambivalent hybrid translation can break through. This explains those moments where the system appears to be contradicted, where cultural transruptions paradoxically appear through commercial production. Adorno argues that the cultural entities produced by the culture industries are commodities through and through, but that is not to assume that they are devoid of political agency. While they cannot single-handedly produce total economic or social transformation, they can still produce unsettling effects, and in

Homi Bhabha's terms (1994; 1997), destabilise the core areas of the nation state and reach 'a wider humanity'. This is where the transruptive force of the British Asian cultural commodity can really be felt.

However, in order to fully gauge the disruptive capacity of the British Asian cultural economy, future theoretical and methodological interventions need to extend the postcolonial cultural economy analysis beyond the sphere of production. One issue that needs further enquiry is the nature of the cultural transruption as it occurs in the public sphere. As I have discussed previously, the magnitude of the cultural transruption is contingent on a dynamic between time and place: what might represent a cultural disruption or entanglement at a particular moment, if repeated at a latter point or in another context, might not produce the same effect. For instance, ten years on, the symbols and music of the 'Asian Underground' appear safe and perversely a little exotic (as the editors of *Dis-Orienting Rhythms...* predicted), but at the time, the novel hybrid aesthetic of the scene was both exciting, and unsettling, and I would argue, contributed at that specific point in time to the normalisation of *British* Asian identity.

Furthermore, another issue in need of further elaboration is the consumer's role in the cultural transruption. One issue that this research has not had the space to tackle is the ways in which individuals attach and make meaning out of the objects that they consume. For instance, while I have explained the exoticisation of a British Asian cultural commodity during cultural production as a negative effect, this does not take fully into consideration the ways in which the consumer can negate this effect, in how they use and attach meaning to the commodity. Subcultural and popular culture theory in particular has stressed the active role of the individual in their original, imaginative and at times, subversive appropriation of cultural commodities (Hebdige, 1979; Fiske, 1989). In the opening chapter I adapted Appadurai's (1986) notion of the social life of things to conceptualise the commodity phase as a process in which meanings and knowledges are imparted and extracted at various points of production. Yet, Appadurai's own focus is the way in which the commodity has a social life beyond production, circulating in 'different *regimes of value* in space and time' (ibid.: 4). In essence, while I have explained how commodification has reductive effects upon the British Asian cultural commodity, in order to get a better

sense of how this determines its transruptive value, one needs to look at how it is received, interpreted and appropriated by the consumer.

This very brief discussion is intended to suggest where future research into the politics of the British Asian cultural production needs to occur. Nonetheless, the concept of the postcolonial cultural economy provides the theoretical and methodological framework for broader discussions of capitalism's attempts to govern and regulate difference, whether race, gender, sexuality, or other forms of alterity. Fundamentally, in the global cultural economy, issues pertaining to difference and representation *always* involve a question of commodification. As I have argued, commodification is the technology through which difference is managed, but it is also the process through which the production of postcolonial meaning occurs. Therefore, the transruptive power of the cultural commodity is specifically dependent on the ways in which symbol creators negotiate the process of commodification. Thus, by tackling the commercial production of difference in a sustained way, set against the disjunctions of difference in the global cultural economy, we can begin to gauge more effectively how and where resistances and counter-strategies of difference can most successfully develop.

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