

# **Queering Solidarity:**

## **South Asian Diasporic Activism and Solidarity in US and UK Racial Justice Struggles**

Maya Bhardwaj, University of Pretoria, South Africa

### **Abstract**

This article explores the linkages between queerness, racialisation, activism, and community care in the South Asian diaspora. It examines activism, organizing, and social movement work practiced by queer diasporic South Asians in the UK and the US. By understanding South Asian activist relationship to, and solidarity and partnership with, Black liberation activism, this article conceptualises a framing of queer South Asian diasporic solidarity. This solidarity is framed through contrasting articulations of joint struggle, allyship, and kinship in queer communities. To articulate this struggle, the article contrasts histories of South Asian racialisation, politicisation, and queerness in the UK and the US, and synthesises first-person activist accounts of modern-day queer South Asian activists in the diaspora. Finally, it argues that queer feminist South Asian activists in both countries are employing a model of queered solidarity with Black activists and Black liberation, though in differing forms in each country, that centres queer intimacies and anti-patriarchal modes of organising for liberation across queer communities of colour.

### **Introduction**

1 South Asian activism in the US and UK diaspora has been growing in visibility and prominence in the past decade. Asian diasporic activists are participating in movements for economic and racial justice alongside a burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement and the expansion of mutual aid networks during the COVID-19 pandemic (Arora et al np). Many of those leading South Asian diasporic activism and solidarity are queer women, trans\*<sup>1</sup> people, and non-binary people, from caste<sup>2</sup>-oppressed, working-class, and/or other marginalized backgrounds (Soundararajan np).

2 As these queer Asian diasporic movements grow, activists are exploring differing modes of solidarity with Black communities and other communities of colour. Some revisit the model of joint struggle, echoing Britain's 1970s-1990s "Political Blackness" movement (Sivanandan 137), where British-Asians and Black-British communities organised together against racialized state violence. Some employ allyship to interrogate the model minority myth's construction of South-Asian-Americans as handmaidens to white supremacist empire. And others integrate queer models

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<sup>1</sup> Transgender people across the gender spectrum. See glossary, Butler (2011), and Pearce et al (2020).

<sup>2</sup> A system of hierarchy and oppression in India; see Zwick-Maitreyi et al (2018).

of kinship, healing, and care to sustain activists of colour in the face of constant threats to health and survival. In formations like #SouthAsiansforBlackLives, in working-class Asian organising groups, and alongside Black activists in multiracial coalitions and issue-organisations, South Asian activists' queer solidarity (Gopinath 11, Bhardwaj np) through transnational activist and kinship praxis. Activists link casteism and anti-Blackness; connect neoliberalism, Hindu fascism, and white supremacy; combat racialized capitalism and hetero-patriarchy; target Asian capitalists and fascists; organise transnationally online; and build new forms of queer family and community.

3 To understand queer South Asian diasporic solidarity, this paper explores the following major questions. First, how does solidarity between diasporic South Asians and Black communities in the US and UK communities manifest? How is queerness a central part of this solidarity? How does it interact with each country's history of racialisation and politicisation? In responding, this paper argues that a uniquely queer – and particularly queer femme – model of South Asian diasporic solidarity does exist. However, this solidarity has emerged and developed in differing ways in the US and the UK, linked to divergent histories of migration, racialisation, and politicisation in their South Asian communities. In both spaces, however, I argue that queer South Asian solidarities combine elements of Kelley's (155) conceptualisation of solidarity as joint struggle or comradeship, and contrasting modes of solidarity through allyship for Black liberation (Bae and Tseng-Putterman np, Erskine and Bilimoria 319). This rise in racial justice organising and solidarity practices reflects increased leadership by queer, feminist, caste-oppressed, working-class, and otherwise marginalised diasporic SA, and shows an adoption of Cohen's (439) radical queer of colour politics and Muñoz's (12) queer of colour disidentification and resistance by diasporic Asian trans, non-binary, and women activists.

4 This argument is drawn in five major sections. The first section draws an understanding of queer, gender, racial, and political identity in the South Asian diaspora in the UK and US. Next is a theoretical framework of solidarity, particularly through a queer lens. The third section, History, Identity, Solidarity, explores how diverging histories of Asian racialisation and racial identity formation, like the UK's Political Blackness movement and the US's model minority myth, have impacted modern solidarity practices by queer, lesbian, and feminist South Asians in the diaspora. The fourth section, Hybrid Solidarity, examines how solidarity practices incorporate both allyship and joint struggle. The final section, Queer Solidarity, explores how this mode of solidarity is queered through intimacy, kinship, and family relationships, particularly between queer and

lesbian femmes and trans and nonbinary queer Asians. The conclusion connects these themes across queer diasporic South Asian activism, and assesses the potential for future South Asian and Black collaborative activism and solidarity.

## **Methodology**

5 This article draws on a combination of secondary and primary research. The secondary research centres analysis of activist and scholarly writing by queer activists of colour and South Asian activists in the diaspora. The primary research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 14 queer South Asians in the US and the UK who were involved in activism that also included or partnered with Black activists and/or activists of African descent. Most of those interviewed identified as women, and many identified as lesbian in addition to all identifying as queer. Interviews were arranged based on personal relationships and snowballing. I also conducted participant research in meetings, events, direct actions, and other queer and South Asian diasporic activist spaces. This research took place from September 2019 to September 2020, during the course of my Masters research, and included in-person components as well as video-call components, particularly during lockdowns that ensued after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

6 This research draws deeply on many years of my positionality as an insider-outsider in queer and South Asian diasporic activist spaces. As an organiser and activist myself, I engage in co-production of knowledge with my activists through ethnographic interviews, growing our queer kinship bonds to build intimacies, discussions of organising strategy, and shared visions for liberation (Minai and Shroff np, Shah 48). Each of the interlocutors have been pseudonymised to protect their identities and safety, though some organisational details have been retained when requested by participants. Throughout this research, I actively centred diverse queer diasporic women, non-binary, and trans\* voices in order to displace the het-cis<sup>3</sup> male gaze from diaspora studies and prioritise marginalized voices (Gopinath 192). I have particularly attempted to centre the voices of caste-oppressed, Muslim, working-class, and other marginalised queer diasporic Asian in order to reject casteist and colonial violence often perpetuated in Savarna explorations of subaltern activism (Soundararajan & Varatharajah np). Through doing this, I aim to hold space for these queer and feminist activists and writers to speak for themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> Heterosexual and cissexual; see glossary, Butler 2011, and Pierce et al 2020.

## Conceptualising Queer South Asian Diaspora Politics

7 Studying queer South Asian diasporic activism requires an understanding of diaspora itself, and its politicisation. Raman (np) defines diaspora as the movement of peoples from the homeland to a new land, centring the movement of communities of colour from countries of origin to the Global North. Many Asian and other racialised communities migrated from South to North<sup>4</sup> in response to demand for cheap labour after their countries were pillaged by empire (Silver & Arrighi 55). Their experiences of racialised capitalism grew identities that developed in resistance to enforced subjugation, commodification, and empire (Robinson 5, James 23). Early Asian diasporic communities were no exception to these identity formations in resistance (Gopinath 10).

8 I posit that this identity of resistance hinged on racialisation created in the North, or what Mishra calls “the attribution of meanings and values to different groups, based on physical appearance, skin colour, and other factors, both by formal institutional as well as social processes” (73-74). Kelley (161) emphasises that these processes of racial grouping derive from systems of social inequality. Hall (223) describes that racialised diasporas develop hybrid identities, both in longing for and exile from the homeland, and in creating new cultures through processes of “creolisation” (223). Diasporic Asians navigate multiple identities in ways that both diverge from and parallel Black diasporic experience, recalling DuBois’s (15) double consciousness in Black versus white spaces, and Fanon’s (23) “white mask” in Black diaspora. In the US and the UK, Gilroy (16) writes that the colonial, indigenous, formerly enslaved, and diasporic meet to form new cultures. Through these meetings, Asian and other racialised diasporas create what Brah calls “diaspora space” (81) that manoeuvres these complexities of identity and racialisation. By drawing on conceptualisations of Black and Asian diasporic racialisation together, I recognise the particularity of Black diasporic experience (Wilderson 32) and the connections and divergences between Black and Asian diaspora (Gilroy 27).

9 South Asia’s own bordering by British Raj papered over vast internal differences that replicate in diaspora (Behera 129). Colonial continuity and casteist hegemonies in diaspora can create normative identities that centre and solidify Indian upper-caste Hindu dominance (Bose & Jalal 3). These dynamics are critical to recognise when looking at kinship and organising structures in the diaspora. While I use the term South Asian to recognize varied heritages across Afghanistan

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<sup>4</sup> See Mohanty 2003:505 for more on the terminology of North and South.

Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (SOARC np), and migration patterns or forced indenture through Africa, East/Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean (Raman np), my interlocutors explore these contestations in this term and their usage of “Desi” as an identifier across borders (Maira 13).

10 I argue that queerness fundamentally shifts the racialisation and politicisation of diaspora space. In her work on queer Asian diasporas in the US and the UK, *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath writes: “‘Suturing’ ‘queer’ to ‘diaspora’ . . . becomes a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora” (11). Queerness can function as a tool in Asian diaspora to reject nationalism, particularly Hindu fascist nationalism, and to reject attempts to assimilate Asian into the white nation. Gopinath adds a gendered lens where queer diasporic femininity, and lesbianness, disrupts “heteronormative and patriarchal structures of kinship” (11) alongside nationalism through feminist practices. This echoes Wilson’s (133) and Brah’s (43) explorations of gendered diasporic British-Asian activism where Asian womanhood gave rise to politicization and power, not subjugation.

11 Similarly, Muñoz (8) and Anzaldúa (32) argue that queerness, and particularly lesbianism and queer femininity, open a liminal space across bordered cultural worlds. By disidentifying, as Muñoz says, with dominant Asian diaspora, and by operating in Anzaldúa’s *nepantla* (a Nahuatl word for in-betweenness), queer South Asian activists subvert dominant cultural norms, encode new meaning and identity through performance, and find home in the in-between of borders and cultures through *mestizaje*. Gopinath (194) and Patel (422) articulate that queer diasporic Asian mobilize culture and activism to build new homes. This echoes Hall’s hybrid diasporic identities and sees racialisation and politicisation as interlinked for queer diasporic SA.

12 The modern activists I interview echo this lens of gender and queerness in performance and activism. They reject binary gender and eschew trans-exclusive radical feminism (Pearce et al 888). Instead, they grow queer and gendered Asian diasporic spaces that hold the spectrum of gender and femininity in political activism, and adopt Ahmed’s (15) idea of queer as phenomenology, or an anti-normative, destabilising, and hopeful way of seeing the world.

13 Destabilising the world through queerness also draws from radical queer-of-colour and queer Black feminist politics. As Cohen argues, this is “a politics where nonnormative and marginal position[s] . . . [are] the basis for progressive transformative coalition work” (438). This

confronts Puar's (72) homonationalism, where queers conform to be accepted in the nation-state, and Dasgupta (68) and Rao's (14) indictment of classist homonormativity as homocapitalism. Instead, queer and gendered diasporic Asian activism mobilizes the "radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics," (Cohen 440) sparking racial solidarity.

14 Modern diasporic Asian activists also see struggles as interlinked. Echoing the Black feminist Combahee River Collective, activists "struggl[e] against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (272). For modern queer Asian activists, liberation is unattainable without racial, gender, class-based, and queer justice, meaning they must organise intersectionally across diverse identities (Crenshaw 1241).

15 Finally, I examine queer South Asian activism through a lens of queer erotics, or the pleasure in activist work, queer love, and sexuality that Lorde (59) describes as fundamental to Black-American lesbian resistance. These ideas also figure heavily in Brown's *Pleasure Activism* (4), which many of my interlocutors referenced. Queerness in diasporic Asian resistance is both a sexuality, identity, and politics, shifting world-view, and organising practices to embrace rage, joy, relationship, and healing together. Through building these relationships with other diasporic queers of colour in the UK and US, queer diasporic Asian grow new politics through a solidarity of queer-of-colour kinship that recognises that gender, sexuality, race, and diasporic home go hand in hand.

### **Varied Racial Solidarities and Identities**

16 Analysing South Asian diasporic solidarity with Black liberation requires a conceptualisation of Blackness and Black liberation itself. I echo Gilroy's (3) conceptualisation of British Blackness, as well as frameworks for American Blackness as an identity influenced by resistance to internal colonization and slavery (Kelley 72, Robinson 5), to define Black communities as members of the African diaspora present in the Global North through migration and/or the transatlantic slave trade. Debates range around what constitutes Blackness, as evidenced in the ADOS (#AmericanDescendantsofSlavery) movement (Adjei-Kontoh np) and modern examinations of Political Blackness (Mehri np). In this paper, I examine South Asians as separate from Blackness (I do not use the Politically Black sense of the word), but I recognize that Blackness is varied, diverse, and contested. As the Black Panthers and BLM argue, Black

liberation encompasses wide issue-oriented and systems-oriented struggles, including education, food, health, housing, prison and police abolition, gender justice, queer justice, and more that affect Black peoples' ability to live with dignity and thrive (Umoja 154, Clark et al np). As the Panthers' Shakur (62) and BLM's Garza (np) emphasise, Black liberation does not focus only on criminal justice: it requires systems transformation.

17 Next, to conceptualise solidarity with Black liberation struggles, I examine several different formations of solidarity that have shifted widely from the French Revolution's *solidarité* to multiple present senses (Gaztambide-Fernandez 65). I first examine Robin D.G. Kelley's framing of solidarity as transformation and world-making, broadly termed "joint struggle" (Kelley 583). Solidarity is not just shared principles that inspire action: it is action itself, where groups' liberations are "bound up with one another," as Lila Watson (np), an Indigenous/Aboriginal elder, articulates. Groups may struggle with one another, but they are linked through ideology, dialectics, and praxis (Kelley 90). This also draws on notions of class solidarity in the Marxist sense, Weber's political solidarity through shared interest, and collaborations between workers in unions and social movements through social movement unionism (Waterman 278). Gramsci's (342) united and popular fronts also invoke this joint struggle, where varied groups have diverse identities and employ diverse tactics, yet collaborate through shared identity in struggle as "comrades" (Robinson 54). In the Asian context, in the UK's Political Blackness movement, British-Asians identified with Afro-Caribbean communities and organised together, with success and challenges explored further later (Sivanandan 150). Kelley calls this solidarity "worldmaking" (73) – groups converge across identity due to shared struggle that breeds a greater identity of resistance. Here, solidarity is not a market exchange that requires equal repayment for tactical support: it is collaboration in shared liberation.

18 A contrasting framing is solidarity as allyship, where one group supports the liberation of another but also works to dismantle their own privilege (Leonard & Misumi 61, Erskine & Bilimoria 338). White anti-racist organising heavily draws on this interpretation (Berg & Carbin 135, Bae & Tseng-Putterman np). Dismantling hierarchical structures and privileges, like McIntosh's (188) invisible knapsack, becomes key to solidarity work. Allyship draws on morality (Scholz 2), mobilizing white guilt (Steele 4) and white fragility (DiAngelo 7) into being allied with the directly-impacted, who is the other (Kluttz et al 65). This also echoes Afro-Pessimism's notions of anti-Blackness's inevitability (Wilderson 346), meaning that non-white groups are never similar

comrades but always allies in the fight against Black people's global subjugation. As Asian diasporic groups – particularly those with caste and class privilege – wrestle with Asian anti-Blackness (Iyer np) and complicity in white supremacy (Prashad 16), some employ an allyship model that sees Asian as privileged allies rather than comrades in shared struggle.

19 Many of the queer diasporic Asian movements I examine employ a feminist lens on solidarity. Feminist solidarity argues that that Kelley's shared struggle and Marxist and Gramscian class analysis require a gendered lens and an analysis of gender oppression and heteropatriarchy (Hooks 1981). Black feminists like Davis (5) and the Combahee River Collective (np) racialise feminism by seeing race, gender, and class as inseparable in oppression. Instead, they form a triple jeopardy of intersecting experiences (Crenshaw 1241) that can yield solidarity through shared gendered experiences. Mohanty (21) and Hooks (15) posit transnational feminist solidarity where this shared experience resonates globally, uniting women's local struggles into international fights against racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy. Cornwall (168) argues this gendered solidarity can be a myth or construction, and feminists of colour like Swaby (25), Cohen (144), and Anthias and Yuval-Davis (7) reveal where feminist solidarity has silenced women of colour's experiences. However, Mohanty's (22) feminist solidarity, identifying racism, imperialism, and heteropatriarchy as co-constitutive, still resonates with many queer and lesbian Asian activists.

20 Finally, I articulate a uniquely queered model of activism that queer South Asian groups employ, particularly when organising in queer-of-colour space. This queer activism also builds off of Black feminist and Black lesbian thought: drawing from Cohen (440), the Combahee River Collective (np), and Lorde (59), queer feminist Asian groups in the diaspora echo that excluding queerness and lesbians "occlude[s] forms of heteropatriarchy [that] den[ies] people identifications and freedoms" (Kelley 587). Particularly, Lorde's (92) queer solidarity offers an embodied struggle that mobilizes shared anger and shared passions at shared targets, echoed in Spira's (140) examinations of queer intimacies in solidarity between queer Chilean and Black-American feminists in the 1970s. These ideas of queer solidarity have been echoed by Garza, Cullors-Khan, and other queer Black leaders of BLM, provoking similar conceptualizations in Asian solidarity (Kelley 587). This queer solidarity thus subverts borders (Muñoz 12), makes diasporic Asians unruly rather than aspirationally white (Das Gupta 537), and build a solidarity that establishes care and kinship between the non-normative (Cohen 465).



## **Histories of Solidarity: Political Blackness and the Model Minority Myth**

21 Effectively applying these varying modes of solidarity to modern queer Asian and Black movements in UK and US diaspora requires an examination of the histories of solidarity in these countries. These histories vary greatly. In the UK, Political Blackness emerged in the 1970s as an early experiment in solidarity as shared struggle. It emphasised state violence and similar negative racialisations of Asian and Afro-Caribbean migrants (Sivanandan 137). In *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Brah (1996) describes how her Gujarati-Indo-Ugandan identity shifted towards a militant Black political identity in response to both ghettoization and demonisation, nurtured by a movement of united diasporic Black and Asian communities who supported each other and resisted white fascist violence. Through Political Blackness, second-generation Asian and Black youth waged varied campaigns and built diverse grassroots organisations challenging racialised policing, immigration, and labour systems from the 1970s-1990s, as Ramamurthy (2013) explores in *Black Star*. Feminist Political Blackness groups like AWAZ, Southall Black Sisters, and OWAAD articulated gendered theories of systems-change (Swaby 22). Political Blackness movements embraced socialism and organised with decolonial Marxist movements globally (Ramamurthy 2013).

22 However, Political Blackness's unity also rested on tensions. Many Asians felt Blackness did not adequately describe their cultural experience: instead, it was "a political colour that could only exist in a white world" (Mehmood 5), and an enforcement of a negative racial identity that was centred on whiteness (Modood 876). Communities formed ties through segregated worksites, and racially-specific organisations like the Asian Youth Movements often claimed Political Blackness but worked with little relationship to Black communities (Ramamurthy 2013). This allowed instances of anti-Blackness by Asians to go unchecked, leading to fragmentation under state pressure (Mehri np, Sivanandan 137). Swaby (19) documents the rupturing of racial solidarity in feminist Politically Black spaces in ways that contest Asian identity. Some Afro-Caribbeans called including Asian women within OWAAD a "mistake" (Swaby 22), and Asian women called conversations around who was Black a "broken record" (Swaby 23) that inhibited organising and political discussion. Lesbianism created further fractures: queerness was relegated to the private, and heterosexual Politically Black feminists argued that women could organise around queerness "autonomously" (OWAAD Draft Constitution, np). These fault-lines inhibited Cohen's (465) queer solidarity and heightened divisions within Political Blackness, contributing to the

movement's ultimate fracturing by the state as multiculturalism overtook shared identity and shattered the broad Black political identity (Sivanandan 138).

23 In interviews, modern queer British-Asian organisers recalled Political Blackness negatively. Samia called it “minefield, a mess” and Trisha said it was “something that comes up to cause problems.” When discussing OWAAD, Samia said, “OWAAD fell apart . . . It was a super homophobic coalition . . . these [Politically Black concepts] are not concepts that anyone is trying to revive in my organising today.” Amar said Asians had had “weaponized anti-Blackness” to be “closer to whiteness,” facilitating “wealth creation” by choosing “Apne (ours)” over “wider solidarity.” Nik said “Political Blackness had its time and place” and argued that Asian activists became “complacent”, echoing Sivanandan (137) that Asians exchanged radicalism – and Blackness – for material gain. In Samia, Nik, and Trisha’s assessments, while histories of racial solidarity between Asian and Black communities existed, its fragmentation along identity lines, and rising depoliticization and class mobility for Asian communities, meant that modern solidarity had to take radically different forms.

24 Conversely, in the US, the model minority myth’s construction of Asians as hard-working, palatable, and closer to whiteness than Blackness (Espiritu 2) inhibited solidarity between Asian and Black communities. This has caused modern queer South-Asian-American organisers to parse history for examples of South-Asian-American activism and racial justice collaborations in order to dismantle the model minority myth (Prashad 142). Thara, a queer Indian-American organiser, stated that “the model minority myth kept us safe in exchange for our dignity” where white American rhetoric and desires stripped Asian of history and culture. S, a queer Indian-American advocacy worker, artist, and disability justice organiser argued that the myth was “told BY the model minorities . . . to oppress each other.” In this way, South-Asian-American colluded with a system of racial hierarchy that allowed them to profit off of anti-Blackness. This allowed South-Asian-American to argue their whiteness in order to gain rights, like in Bhagat Singh Thind’s seminal 1923 Supreme Court case for citizenship where he argued that upper-caste status made him Aryan and therefore white (Snow 280).

25 This overshadowed working-class Asian – mostly Muslim and caste-oppressed communities – who found homes in Black-American and Mexican-American communities and practiced solidarity not only through politics but in their personal lives and relationships as well (Bald 2013). Bald uncovers histories of *Bengali Harlem*, and Slate (15) details solidarities between

Quit India organisers like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Ram Lohia, and Black Power and Civil Rights activists like Bayard Rustin and W.E.B. Du Bois. These stories have been popularised in modern Asian popular education curricula like “#SouthAsians4BlackLives (SA4BL)” and the “Black Desi Secret History” archive. Har, a trans-femme Sikh-American youth organiser, noted, “I was taught history that was literally Black and white...[but] I now know the legacy of Asian participation in the racial justice movement.” Haleema, a popular educator with SA4BL, argued that this lack of nuanced history shifted solidarity practices: “We had to shed our complexities to fit into the model minority myth, so [we]...focus on South-Asian-American history first. Then... institutional and interpersonal anti-Blackness, and finally solidarity.” This echoes Leonard & Misumi (61)’s solidarity as allyship and Erskine & Bilimoria’s (338) white anti-racist solidarity, arguing that South-Asian-American must smash the model minority myth’s anti-Blackness (Iyer np) in order to build solidarity.

26 As modern Muslim, Sikh, Dalit Bahujan, working-class, and queer South-Asian-American note, these moments of solidarity have come particularly from South-Asian-Americans at the margins. The model minority myth particularly allowed those with pre-existing class and caste privilege in the subcontinent to consolidate power and wealth, as in the UK: immigration reform in the 1970s privileged the migration of technically-skilled Asian who dominated cultural life and often subjugated working-class South-Asian-Americans in the US. Thus, as in the case of Asian worker-organisers splitting off from upper-caste-led domestic violence support organisation Sakhi (Das Gupta 537), or upper-caste restaurateurs’ abusive labour practices of Dalit and working-class Asian (ASATA np), marginalised Asian often found more solidarity with Black-Americans than with privileged SAA, leading to longstanding and organic alliances. As Sharmin, an organiser with caste abolitionist group Equality Labs, said,

Dalit leaders have always had deep relationships with Black leaders...from the Dalit Panthers, to Ambedkar, to collaborations between Black and Dalit feminists against police and caste violence . . . [these are] authentic relationships that weren’t transactional but were rooted in transformative solidarity...they allowed us to jump into formation to do abolitionist solidarity work with M4BL and BLM when moments of atrocity arose.

While privileged South-Asian-Americans aligned themselves with whiteness and profess the importance of allyship in solidarity today (Iyer np), marginalised South-Asian-American trouble the model minority myth to create authentic spaces for solidarity as joint struggle with Black-

Americans against white and upper-caste supremacy alike. This joint struggle utilises political education as well to acknowledge and dismantle the model minority myth's roots in anti-Blackness, as Haleema noted. It also recognizes, as Sharmin said, that when supporting Black-led struggle, South-Asian-American must also practice "solidarity as goodwill . . . following the leadership of Black organisers" where "ego has to take a step back." This employs a combination of Kelley's (597) joint struggle plus elements of allyship to create a robust hybrid solidarity from the margins against anti-Blackness, casteism, heteropatriarchy, and racial capitalism.

### **Hybrid Solidarity: Combining Joint Struggle and Allyship**

27 In the UK and the US, queer diasporic Asian activists in each country incorporate both elements of allyship and joint struggle into their solidarity practices with Black activists. The ways that these elements are incorporated vary based on each country's history of racialisation and solidarity, and on the makeup of the spaces that Asian activists occupy. In abolitionist organising work in the UK, Samia, a queer Bangladeshi activist, noted that "prison abolition was "led throughout its history by Black women" and hence felt that allyship through "taking a back seat, letting others lead" would be more appropriate. Similarly, Trisha, a queer British-Indo-Guyanese organiser, said calling herself Black "would be offensive," adding that, "abolition... is about white supremacy and specifically anti-Blackness so at the centre of the work is Black people and solidarity." At the same time, both Samia and Laxmi, a lesbian British-Indo-Ugandan, noted their involvement in organising around the Grenfell<sup>5</sup> housing fire in the UK as an example of joint struggle with Black communities and activists, but one that also brought in other communities who were implicated through class. Laxmi said, "In the ends, it's about class...Blacks and Asians work together, but there's Turkish, Algerian, others involved" and said for her anti-racist activism, "I can't meaningfully describe that as a Black-South Asian coalition" as other groups of colour were equally involved as well.

28 Class figured heavily for organisers from both countries as reasons for joint struggle with Black communities. Har, a trans-femme Punjabi-Sikh-American, said class "polarised me around the model minority myth." Nik, a trans-femme British-Indian agreed that "my mom not speaking English, not being integrated, being broke, I saw that as a class thing." Many activists centred Cohen's (465) radical, working-class queer-of-colour coalitional politics in their organising,

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<sup>5</sup> See Bhandar, B., 2018. Organised state abandonment: The meaning of Grenfell. *Sociological Review Blog*.

combining shared struggle along with allyship against anti-Blackness. Nik described being agitated into organising by “falling into a house of QTPOC organisers” who were not Asian, and applying these learnings radical politics to her Desi community work later. Similarly, Sasha, a queer Sri-Lankan-American, described learning both from working-class Black organising as well as from working-class Desi organising in the US, like the Taxi Worker Alliance, and applying it to her solidarity work against prison expansion and in working-class pan-Asian communities. Trisha said intersecting race, class, and queer identities (Crenshaw 1990) moved her from “reformist to abolitionist” in her organising.

29 US groups use Freire-inspired political education to build Kelley’s joint struggle and to act as allies who dismantle anti-Blackness. DRUM-NYC, a working-class, largely Muslim-Asian group, connects South-Asian-American experiences of subcontinental state violence and Islamophobic surveillance to American institutional anti-Blackness. Like the AYM’s, DRUM’s director Fahd described needing “solidarity with our own” to create “solidarity with others” (Ahmed interview, np). Solidarity led DRUM members to reject anti-bullying legislation that would increase policing in schools and thereby harm Black comrades. Sasha, a queer Lankan-American organiser and the director of CAAAV, a pan-Asian base-building group, echoed:

Transformative Solidarity from DRUM distinguishes between showing solidarity, in a transactional way, versus embodying it, versus whole communities making decisions at real material cost to them... at CAAAV, our members won’t take this thing that’s beneficial for us if it’s harmful for others.

Transformative solidarity represents a hybrid solidarity: it includes Kelley’s levels of solidarity from market exchange, to comradeship and world-making, but also includes elements of allyship and sacrifice. CAAAV members supported Akai Gurley, a Black man murdered by an Asian-American policeman (Fuchs np), over communal ties, invoking world-making and Watson’s (np) “liberations as connected”.

30 US activists also drew distinctions between privileged South-Asian-Americans espousing allyship models of solidarity, and Dalit and working-class South-Asian-Americans employing hybrid models that emphasised joint struggle. 2020’s BLM movement politicized many privileged South-Asian-American who were silent during its 2013-2017 uprising, and yielded outpourings of “#SouthAsians4BlackLives” social media posts, artwork, and upper-caste-led trainings on the model minority myth. Upper-caste South-Asian-American leaders exhorted South-Asian-American to dismantle anti-Blackness (Iyer np) but disregarded caste. Thenmozhi Soundararajan

(np), the leader of Equality Labs, and other Dalit and Muslim-SAA issued blistering rebuttals exposing privileged SAA's silence on Hindutva, the Kashmiri occupation, caste-violence, and working-class SAA's experiences (Rathi np). Har explained, "it's easier . . . for South-Asian-American to stand in solidarity with Black Lives, because . . . the blame is on white supremacy," whereas "caste involve[s] challenging family, customs" echoes this point. These rebuttals reveal splits. Instead of allyship, queer, Dalit, Bahujan, Muslim, and working-class South-Asian-Americans practice "solidarity from the margins." This often begins in Asian-specific groups but culminates in Gramscian united front coalitions with Black-led organisations.

31 Other queer Asians join multiracial issue-oriented organisations, melding Kelley's comradeship with Bae & Tseng-Putterman's indictments of Asian-practiced white-allyship. Priyanka, a queer Asian-American, said "it doesn't matter whether I'm in India fighting for my identity...or here doing Black solidarity work organising with renters...colonialism and empire are oppressing my people too." Unlike privileged Asian-American spaces replete with "toxic heteropatriarchy...elitism and Brahminism," she found "transformative justice, queer leadership" in multiracial issue-organising. As queer and lesbian diasporic Asians describe, solidarity deriving from privileged allyship does not transform systems, whereas joint struggle solidarity from the margins does.

32 In the UK, activists described taking up differing spaces in organising based on their positionality in the space. At Sisters Uncut, Samia described "a vocal contingent of people of colour," where she felt "solidarity [through] tackling whiteness in the group," invoking Kelley's joint struggle in attempts to shift Sisters' multiracial space. At CAPE (Campaign Against Prison Expansion), however, Samia and Trisha felt Leonard & Misumi's (61) Asian allyship was more appropriate. In practice, this meant CAPE chose campaigns that centred Black people's experiences in the prison system, and non-Black allies, including both Asians and white activists, contributed labour but took less visibility in press or direct actions. Similarly, at LGSM, Amar said solidarity included "self-interest" and "smashing borders," but in practice, LGSM took on allyship roles like logistics and fundraising to support Black-led organising by groups like African Rainbow Family, a UK-based Black migrant group, and BLM-LDN. Unlike in Political Blackness, while Asians and Black activists work side-by side, Asians, like whites, are sometimes seen as allies against prisons and state violence – not equally-affected comrades. Nik described her South Asianness as "coming out" of her queerness. Echoing Rao's (10) homocapitalism, she said

“cynical” older Asian activists, “normativeness in South Asian culture,” and “queers in suits working for capitalism” disillusioned her from many Asian-specific spaces. All these cause modern queer British-Asian activists to choose multiracial spaces rather than centring Asian racialisation.

33 Many of the British-Asian organizing spaces that do exist are disproportionately queer-led. Nik described Facebook groups like “Desis Organise,” “DesiQ,” and “Asian Solidarity – BLM” which emerged after the murder of George Floyd, being led by queer Asian friends. Nijjor Manush, a British-Bangladeshi group, and Wretched of the Earth, a BIPOC-only climate justice collective, often employ queer and feminist politics and have significant queer British-Asian membership. “South Asians Organise,” convened after the UK’s 2020 BLM protests, is facilitated by queer British-Asians. In organising against PREVENT, a British counter-terrorism system that disproportionately surveils British Muslims (Qureshi 191), Laxmi said “a lot of people involved are queer, of all racial backgrounds.” She said the “visible critique of the state” and “anti-colonial and anti-imperial organising” created a sense of “home,” echoing Gopinath’s (194) articulation that normative Asian spaces lacked this. Instead, queer British-Asians find “home” in multiracial – and often queer – spaces that centre Cohen’s (465) radical queer politics over Asianness.

### **Queer Kinship and Solidarity**

34 In both countries, queer diasporic Asians appeared to be disproportionately present in organising space, and in solidarity work. Har told me, “queer South-Asian-American are overrepresented in organising spaces” and posited that the model minority myth makes QT-South-Asian-Americans “relegated to the sidelines.” S said “my queerness came before my South Asianness” and first led them to organising, and Thara said “being Queer and South Asian [includes] losing a feeling of belonging” that was connected to “carv[ing] my identity as POC on the heels of queer black feminism,” echoing Gopinath’s indictment of heteronormative diasporic South-Asian-American space and Maira’s analysis of South-Asian-American-performed Black culture. Instead, queer Asians grow queer-of-colour solidarity through Cohen’s radical queer politic and Lorde and Anzaldúa’s third world sisterhood. Sharmin noted longstanding Black-Dalit “authentic relationship” and Preet said “queer solidarity...[is] relationship-building.”

35 Queer Asian spaces have developed alongside queer Black groups that have burgeoned during BLM. Many are led by lesbians, non-binary and trans Asians, and Dalit, working-class, Muslim Asians, like South Asian Queer and Trans Collective's leaders. Subtle Queer Curry Traits and South Asian Punx provide queer Asian space online. Arts collectives like YKR and Yoni Ki Baat showcase queer-SAA stories. Queer South-Asian-American artists like Alok Menon and Fatimah Asghar are highly visible. Preet said "queer South-Asian-American people [are] unapologetically be[ing] themselves, occupy[ing] space," and MH said queer South-Asian-Americans being "more bold and visionary . . . comes from the demands of Black folks," echoing BLM's queer Black femme leadership (Kelley 587).

36 Many of these queer-of-colour spaces emphasise community care as solidarity. As Amar said, "We care for each other as a point of principle...that's what we think of as activism." Amar, Trisha, Nik, Har, and others mentioned healing justice, cultural organising, and care work as central to their activism. They described doing this alongside Black comrades and friends through a queer lens that centred care over destruction, invoking Lorde's (60) queer erotics and Brown's (2019) pleasure activism. Amar said, "many of us have lost support networks" and said "the construction of found families" to guard against "dangers [like] homelessness, mental health" was also a way to "reject kinship systems in South Asia . . . modelled on heteronormative structures." Trisha agreed that "queer people have to build our own families," which for her "was POC and usually queer." The bonds that Amar and Trisha described forming with queer Black activists at groups like LGSM and Sisters were, as Fortier (424) and Muñoz (12) describe, examples of building lesbian and queer-of-colour family as political acts and solidarity itself. Nik said she came to Misery, a UK-based QTPOC mental health collective, because her "frontline, black bloc work" work was "triggering and traumatic" and not compatible with "my mental health," but "finding care work" allowed her to be "revolutionary" because "trans survival is a radical act." Practicing care with queer Black comrades is politics and solidarity itself for Asian activists, echoing Brown's (192) treatise on the politics of feeling good in political work. Through these QTPOC care spaces, queer Asians reimagining family and centre health as, as Amar said, the "liberation that we need."

37 These spaces for lesbian and queer-of-colour care happen across activist issue-campaigns. In the US, Sharmin works in caste abolition, Har in anti-school-to-prison-pipeline youth organising, Thara in anti-oppression facilitation, Priyanka in housing, S in disability justice. In the UK, Amar focuses on queer-led anti-deportation work, Trisha on prison abolition, Samia supports



abolition and survivor support work, Nik on arts and culture, care, mental health, and Laxmi on anti-surveillance and racial justice spaces.

38 Speaking to this breadth, Sasha clarified, “being queer in non-queer spaces ...doesn’t feel invisibilising,” but was “strategic” to prevent “utopian bubbles getting crushed.” Priyanka added, “queerness...informed how I practice solidarity . . . to break systems down, vision and dream.” As Gopinath (14) articulates, these queer visions are at the heart of queer Asian solidarity. Har concurred:

Patriarchal organising treats the work like it is war. Queerness shows how organising is also a project of conceiving, creating, birthing a new transformative world...queer people always have had to do that. There is more camaraderie and intimacy to organising brought by queerness, more dreaming and visioning. (Har interview, 2020)

This visioning lends itself to solidarity with a Black liberation movement that is unapologetically queer and femme, and also oriented around activism as pleasure rather than martyrdom. As Thara said, “I exist because my ancestors had the audacity to exist . . . remembering [that is] integral to being a queer Asian because we were queer before we were colonized.” Queerness is the vehicle for solidarity between South-Asian-American and Black activists through a tapping into Asian history, an acknowledgement of shared marginality, and a centring of visions of transformative queer liberation.

## **Conclusion**

39 Racial justice activism and solidarity by diasporic queer Asians differ between the US and the UK. While Political Blackness first yielded joint struggle and then devolved into multiculturalist splits, triggering modern movements that often avoid Asianness as a central identity, the model minority myth centred privileged Asians but is being troubled by modern-day Dalit, Muslim, working-class, and queer Asians. But beyond these differences, there exists a queer diasporic Asian solidarity, centred on kinship, shared struggle, and care.

40 Queer Asians disidentify (Muñoz 12) with the state and with normative diaspora, shifting racialisation. Solidarity with Black activists rejects homonationalism (Puar 2006) and queer classism (Dasgupta et al 2018), mobilising Cohen’s radical queer-of-colour politics by embracing a diasporic South Asian identity that, as Gopinath (194) describes, does not revolve around patriarchy or homeland. Queer diasporic Asian embrace Lorde’s queer erotics, melding activism

with pleasure, creation, and healing. This queer solidarity combines elements of Kelley's (73) joint struggle and comradeship with elements of Erskine & Bilimoria's (338) allyship and Iyer's (np) and Prashad's (2000) indictment of Asian anti-Blackness by renegotiating relationships to nation, culture, race, and home through solidarity practices. Queer Asian solidarity rejects the model minority myth's and Hindutva's upper-caste supremacy (Prashad 182). It embraces Black kinship in an alternate understanding of Asian identity that yields politicisation from the margins (Gopinath 195). And it centres femmeness and transness to embrace a gender-variant mode of feminist care.

41 As in Mohanty's (2003) feminist transnationalism and Cohen's (1997) queer solidarity, queer diasporic Asian see the deep connections between fighting anti-Black and xenophobic violence in the Global North, combatting Hindutva and caste-violence in the subcontinent, and dismantling racial capitalism globally. At the core of these fights is queer relationship. As many interlocutors said, centring anti-patriarchal visioning and systems change displaces nationalistic and patriarchal norms of South Asianness (Gopinath 11) and create new queer intimacies between diasporic queers of colour (Spira 140). Queer diasporic Asian "queer solidarity" through Lorde's (60) politic of queer erotics, creation, and joy, and through building deep relationships with Black comrades. Unlike in Political Blackness, this solidarity is expansive and rejects one sole radicalism; unlike the model minority myth, Asian identity is not founded on anti-Blackness. Instead, this queer solidarity represents a shifting of Asian politicisation and racialisation away from Hindutva, white supremacy, and fascism, towards an emergent queer and feminist Asian politics of anti-normativity, kinship, abolition, and joy.

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