Model minority allies or comrades in solidarity? South Asian American activism in Summer 2020's Black uprisings

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Abstract

This article explores South Asian anti-racist action in the US following the death of George Floyd in May 2020, during a period dubbed by some activists the Black Uprisings or Black Summer. Though there has been limited South Asian American participation in Black Lives Matter since 2014, and in collaboration with Black-led and multiracial organizing prior to these dates, the summer and fall of 2020 represented an unprecedented amount of activism in South Asian American communities in anti-racist social movements. Much of this activism explicitly challenged the notion of the model minority myth, or that South Asians are, in Vijay Prashad's words, a "solution" to what white America terms the "problem" of Black resistance, and these movements attempted to interrogate South Asian diasporic placement in US racial and class hierarchies. This article explores to what extent this discourse, and the resulting on-the-ground and online activism, represents forms of solidarity that emphasize shared history between Black and South Asian communities. It argues that the rise of this organizing stands in contrast to rhetoric around allyship by class and caste-privileged South Asians, who adopt models of antiracist action from white communities and Afro-Pessimist arguments for separate activism from Black activists but through their actions ultimately erase marginalized South Asians and reify notions of racial hierarchy. This article also explores the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns and digital activism on these varying forms of organizing, through research conducted on online forums, events, and in one-on-one ethnographic interviews conducted with key organizers and social movement organizations propelling South Asian anti-racist organizing, and draws from the author's ten years of experience in South Asian and multiracial organizing in the US. Ultimately, the article argues that the movements most powerfully building meaningful solidarity between South Asian Americans and Black Americans employ a form of "queered solidarity from the margins," building off of Shailija Paik's margin-to-margin Dalit-Black solidarities and Robin DG Kelley's joint struggle through world making. It argues that protest movements that embody queered notions of transformative solidarity in multiracial organizing against anti-Blackness offer the most hope for upending US-based institutional racism and white supremacy.

Keywords: South Asian America; solidarity; allyship; queer politics; Black liberation

Introduction

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the summer of 2020 yielded some of the US's largest-ever racial justice mobilizations. Sparked by the police murder of George Floyd, nationwide uprisings indicted both the long history of police brutality and criminal injustice against Black communities as well as the disproportionate impact of Coronavirus and lockdowns on Black communities and communities of color. While these protests built on a long history of Black resistance to American empire and institutionalized racism, participation of non-Black communities of color was vastly expanded in comparison to previous years. The South Asian American (henceforth SAA) community, a diverse grouping of immigrants often erroneously grouped and depoliticized through the model minority myth, participated in activism against anti-Blackness in ways that were vastly more visible than in prior years of Black Lives Matter and wider Black-led organizing. However, the forms of activism by SAA widely differed, with some primarily engaging in interrogations of SAA anti-Blackness through digital activism and community-specific panels and workshops, some participating in militant Black-led direct action coalitions and emphasizing the linkages between South Asian caste oppression and American institutional racism, and some employing combinations of these tactics and more. This article explores what these divergent trends in SAA activism reveal about the politicization and racialization of South Asian Americans, how South Asian Americans (and the varied groups within South Asian America) view their role in multiracial activism against institutional racism, and what fractures or divisions this highlights within SAA conceptualizations of solidarity.

This article argues that fractures in SAA activism, particularly in anti-racist struggles and organizing against anti-Blackness and institutional racism, highlight the divisions in caste[1] privilege, class positionality, faith, and subcontinental politics and migration trends. Largely privileged Hindu Indian-Americans have transplanted white anti-racist allyship politics onto their activism against anti-Blackness. This reifies the constructs of the model minority myth and perpetuates racial politics that place Black Americans at the bottom. Conversely, I argue that marginalized South Asians have leveraged a substantially more generative "transformative solidarity" that I analyze through Robin D.G. Kelley's theoretics of solidarity and worldmaking (Kelley 2019) and Shailija Paik's Dalit and Black women's margin-to-margin solidarity (Paik 2014). By discarding the model minority myth and caste-privileged politics, and instead appealing to shared struggle against racial capitalism, solidarity activism by marginalized SAA show true possibility for upending American institutional racism and ushering in a transformed understanding of SAA activism for racial justice.

[1] A system of hierarchy and oppression stemming from Hindu scripture but extending throughout South Asia and the diaspora; see Zwick-Maitreyi et al (2018) for context in the United States.

This article makes this argument through four core sections. The first section traces the (de)politicization of South Asian Americans, and the formation of a racial identity that separated SAA from Black resistance efforts. This section historicizes the impact of the model minority myth and contextualizes modern efforts towards rupture. The second section assesses SAA anti-racist activism in the summer of 2020 through a lens of allyship, and identifies where the usage of white anti-racist politics reify racial hierarchies and diminish SAA radical resistance. The third section analyzes SAA activism in the summer of 2020 through a lens of transformative solidarity, world-making, and margin-to-margin solidarity. The final section explores a queered model of solidarity that prioritizes kinship and community care within queer of color spaces, and builds on a long history of queer Black feminist scholarship and politics.

The research in this article draws from nine ethnographic interviews that I conducted with SAA activists during the summer of 2020, which were facilitated through personal relationships and snowballing. It also draws from my archiving and analysis of SAA social media forums and online events that related to BLM uprisings, racial justice organizing, and anti-Blackness in the summer of 2020. Interview participants who preferred to remain anonymous have been pseudonymized. However, in accordance with the wishes of some participants, I have retained select names and organizational affiliations in order to protect the visibility of and the credit due to their labor. The analysis also draws on my own 10 years of experience as an Indian-American community organizer and activist myself, and the relationships I have built through these years. Echoing Minai and Shroff's (2019) and Shah's (2017) arguments for co-production of knowledge through positionality as both researcher and co-conspirator, this research leverages my insider-outsider positionality as a SAA activist as well as an archivist and scholar of these movements. I attempt to use these frames to center the analysis driven by my interlocutors and by activists themselves. It is important to note that my own positionality as an academic and activist with caste and class privilege complicates this analysis. However, I have particularly attempted to center the assessments and words of caste-oppressed, working-class, non-Hindu, and otherwise marginalized South Asian Americans. Leaning on these systems of co-production of knowledge with activist comrades was an experiment in creating research, and opening space for interviews, that attempt to facilitate co-strategizing around SAA resistance, multiracial solidarity, and transformative organizing for racial justice.

Tracing and troubling the model minority myth

Reading SAA involvement in anti-racist organizing in summer 2020 within the context of the model minority myth is critical. This myth, as Vijay Prashad explores in his 2000 book *The Karma of Brown Folk*, perpetuates the belief that South Asian migrants in the US – and Asian immigrants more broadly – are uniquely hard-working, quiet, and acceptable to whiteness due to their depoliticization. As Prashad says, this myth made Asians a "solution" to the "problem" of Black American resistance. The myth holds its roots in concocted

history. South Asians in the US were involved in leftist organizing for centuries, from California's anti-colonial Ghadar party (Ramnath 2011) to visits by Quit India organizers like Ram Lohia and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay to the Highlander Center to partner with Black liberation activists (Slate 2010) to historic ties between Dalit activists like Ambedkar and the Dalit Panthers with Black organizers (Soundararajan & Varatharajah 2015). Some of the earliest South Asian immigrants to the US, largely working-class Muslim, Sikh, Dalit, and Bahujan men who made their livelihoods as peddlers, ship-workers, railroad-builders, and agricultural workers, found respite from white supremacist terror by settling alongside and marrying into Black and Afro-Puerto Rican communities in cities like New York, Baltimore, and New Orleans, as Bald (2014) unveils in *Bengali Harlem*. Brah (1996) argues that these spaces of cultural intermingling – particularly between South Asian and Black diasporic communities – can be read as "diaspora space" (81), where diasporic subjects from varied homes meet, intertwine, and create new politics, racial identities, and homes.

But this history was largely erased both through the efforts of white America to assimilate South Asians, as well as from South Asians with caste and class privilege themselves. As an organizer with South Asian Americans Leading Together told me, "the model minority myth is told *by* South Asians…to oppress each other." Bhagat Singh Thind appealed to the US Supreme Court in 1923 for citizenship rights on the basis of being caste-privileged, ergo Aryan, ergo white (Snow 2004). Later, Khan and Mazumdar testified to the US Congress on the merits of immigration reform to admit South Asians due to their status as businesspeople, scholars, scientists, and engineers – workers who would conform to racial capitalism, distance themselves from Black America, and eschew political resistance (Bald 2014). This logic was enshrined in the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act's selective acceptance of only South Asians who had prior advanced technical qualifications, increasing the likelihood that these largely caste-privileged migrants would assimilate into white communities or self-segregate, and stay away from Black-led organizing and racial politics. Iyer (2017) argues that even in later working-class South Asian migrant communities, South Asians distanced themselves from Blackness as a means of protection and capital accrual. Many similarly sought to distinguish themselves from "bad Muslims" through self-policing and internal fragmentation in response to Islamophobic targeting after the 9/11 attacks (Mishra 2016). These acts represent a wielding of the model minority myth that both perpetuated class, caste, nationality, and Hindu fascist dynamics that existed in the subcontinent, and applied them to American racial politics that placed Black Americans at the bottom, thus sacrificing a South Asian political resistance in exchange for material gains (Prashad 2000). As Thara, an Indian-American activist and facilitator said, "the model minority myth kept us safe in exchange for our dignity."

However, particularly following 9/11, many working-class, Muslim, Dalit, non-Indian, and otherwise marginalized South Asians have challenged the model minority myth. As Das Gupta (2006), Gupta (2008), Maira (2002), and Sharma

(2010), trace, these newer immigrants, often coming from histories of political engagement in their home countries, were similarly "unruly" in the US, joining worker unions like the New York Taxi Workers Alliance and enacting hip hop as a language of political resistance in cultural spaces. Others formed political and self-help groups like Sakhi for South Asian Women, SALGA (the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association), and Trikone (a Chicago-based queer SAA organization) (Kukke and Shah 1999). Clashes proliferated between caste- and class-privileged older SAA migrants, and, often, the newer caste-oppressed and working-class SAA migrants who they exploited (Gupta 2008, ASATA 2009). Similar to the first SAA migrants, these newer migrants in the 1990s and 2000s at times formed natural ties with Black Americans in the urban spaces where they settled, though others still relied upon the model minority myth to create community separations.

Though SAA anti-racist activism in summer 2020 existed across class, caste, faith, and national lines, these historical separations – rooted within the model minority myth and American racial hierarchies – provide critical context to understand how different SAA engaged and understand activism and solidarity. The subsequent sections analyze this engagement through exploring my primary research on on SAA participation in the Black-led uprisings against police brutality and institutional racism in the summer of 2020. Below, I contrast varying frames of political solidarity with Black resistance in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic. To bound the activism explored in this article, I look at Black liberation movements as activism that goes beyond police and prison abolition to encompass wide issue-oriented and systems-oriented struggles, drawing on conceptualizations by the Black Panthers and Black Lives Matter (BLM). This includes education, food, health, housing, prison and police abolition, gender justice, queer justice, and other issues that affect Black peoples' ability to live with dignity and thrive (Umoja 1999, Clark et al 2018). As the Panthers' Shakur (1987) and BLM's Garza (2014) emphasize, Black liberation does not focus only on criminal justice: it requires systems transformation. South Asian Americans, in emergent activist spaces, have oriented to and engaged with these struggles in various forms. I explored this engagement through interviews with activist interlocutors listed in the table below, as well as through archiving and analysis of social media, digital forums, online events, and other digital activism spaces. Understanding these diversities sheds light on SAA identity, American racial politics, and the possibility of multiracial anti-racist struggle. The following sections are structured by my assessment of the largest forms of activism against anti-Blackness and institutional racism evinced by SAA, derived through the words of my interlocutors as well as through my analysis of interviews, group participant observation, and digital activism spaces.

US Interlocutors

Name	Pronouns	Age	Identities named	Organizational Affiliations named	Types of Organizing named
Haleema	She/her	20-30	Indian, Muslim	South Asians 4 Black Lives, Malikah, Alliance for Girls	Gender justice, anti-Islamophobia, BLM solidarity, political ed, South Asian
Har	She/her	20-30	Punjabi, Sikh, Indian	South Asian Solidarity Initiative, YKR, trans* & queer spaces	Prison & police abolition, queer & trans justice, South Asian, arts & culture
MH	She/her	20-30	Pakistani, Muslim	SAALT, Justice for Muslims Collective	South Asian, advocacy, anti-Islamophobia
S	They/them	20-30	Tamil, Indian Hindu	SAALT, various queer & arts spaces	South Asian, advocacy, arts & culture, queer & trans
Preet	She/her	20-30	Punjabi, Sikh, Indian	South Asians 4 Black Lives, Bay Area Solidarity Summer	BLM solidarity, political education, South Asian
Priyanka	She/they	20-30	Indian, SE Asia diaspora	Right to the City, Bay Area Solidarity Summer, ASATA	Housing justice, political education, South Asian
Sasha	They/them	30-40	Sri Lankan, Sinhalese	CAAAV, Queer South Asian Network, National Queer API Alliance	Housing justice, police & prison abolition, queer SAA spaces
Sharmin	She/her	20-30	Bangladeshi, Muslim	Equality Labs, Black Brunch, Bangladeshi Feminist Collective, ALP	Anti-caste, anti-Hindutva, South Asian, gender justice, queer & trans, BLM solidarity
Thara	She/her	30-40	Indian, Keralite, Catholic	The Wildfire Project, 18 Million Rising, OSU, YKR	Anti-oppressive facilitation, pan-Asian, arts & culture, BLM solidarity, queer & trans

Allyship: solidarity predicated on privilege

SAA engagement with US-wide Black-led organizing in summer 2020 can be largely separated into two forms of action: some through a framing of transformative solidarity, which I explore later, and others through a political and theoretical framing of allyship. Here, allyship refers to actions where one group supports the liberation of another but also works to dismantle their own privilege (Leonard & Misumi 2016, Erskine & Bilimoria 2019). Specifically, Erskine and Bilimoria define allyship as:

> …Individuals in a position of power who use their privilege to disrupt inequitable systems in order to support groups that their ascribed status—or social position determined solely by demographic characteristics established at birth, such as race, gender, ethnicity, and/or country of origin—gives them power over. In addition, allyship has been described as an expressed sense of responsibility and commitment to using one's racial privilege in ways that promote equity, engage in actions to disrupt racism and the status quo, on micro and macro levels, create learning, lay the groundwork for slow but ongoing organizational and social change…Allyship is best considered not as a noun…but as a verb. (Erskine and Bilimoria 2019:321)

Allyship in these terminologies often draws from white anti-racist movements (*ibid*, Berg & Carbin 2018, Bae & Tseng-Patterman 2020). Allies inherently have privilege, and wield this privilege in support of the other, who lacks it. Allies practice solidarity by attempting to dismantle hierarchical structures and privileges, like in McIntosh's (1988) invisible knapsack. Being an ally, as Erskine and Bilimoria explain above, is a constant process, or for Kluttz et al (2020), it is "not a permanent designation" (52) and is rather in opposition to binary identity frameworks. Allyship within the context of whiteness often draws on morality (Scholz 2008), mobilizing "white guilt" (Steele 2006) and "white fragility" (DiAngelo 2018) into being allied with the directly-impacted, who is the other (Kluttz et al 2020). This also echoes Afro-Pessimism's notions of anti-Blackness's inevitability (Wilderson 2016), meaning that non-white groups are never similar comrades but always allies in the fight against Black people's global subjugation.

In the summer of 2020, many Asian diasporic groups – particularly those with caste and class privilege – wrestled with Asian anti-Blackness (Iyer 2020) and complicity in white supremacy (Prashad 2000). But particularly for South Asians with class and caste privilege, many employed an allyship model that saw Asian as agents who had profited off of anti-Blackness and did not experience shared struggles in institutional racism. Therefore, before – or rather than – joining in struggles against white supremacy and institutional racism, the solution to good allyship was education and acts of support by SAA. South Asians for Black Lives is one group that conducted much of their activism in this way, through conducting multiple workshops, political education sessions, and creating digital resources to educate on anti-Blackness in the SAA community for SAA. As one of their educators said, "we had to shed our complexities to fit into the MMM, so [we]…focus on SAA history first. Then… institutional and interpersonal anti-Blackness, and finally solidarity." Here, she articulates that the process of allyship requires internal focus on SAA community first – and only then is action in solidarity with Black liberation possible. This echoes the concerns that Kluttz et al (2020) and Ghabra and Calafell (2018) raise with allyship, that it can devolve into inward-looking actions rather than finding spaces for solidarity against shared targets, and thereby reifying, rather than challenging, racial hierarchies. It also echoes Afro-Pessimist theories that all non-Black communities inevitably reify anti-Blackness, making true solidarity largely impossible (Wilderson 2016) by approaching anti-Blackness in SAA communities as an incontrovertible barrier to anti-racist activism until fully understood, trained on, and dismantled, thus requiring SAA to focus on internal activity to be allies rather than responding to demands from Black communities leading struggle.

Many groups, in online trainings and political education spaces, referred to SAA activism in support of BLM as "service" in online training workshops on anti-Blackness, and emphasized that SAA – particularly those with caste and class privilege – owed Black communities for the profit SAA had accrued. This idea of debt, rather than political solidarity, was what formed the requirement for discussing anti-Blackness with SAA peers. This rhetoric was echoed in posts on

South Asian social media pages like Little Brown Diary and Subtle Curry Traits. Each of these pages hold multiple thousands of members who posted frequently in support of BLM in summer 2020 but fell on differing sides with regards to looting, police abolition, or more militant solidarity. Rather, these posts emphasized "allyship" with BLM, "South Asians for BLM," South Asians against anti-Blackness, and the importance of standing up for Black Americans due to their role in immigration reform that paved the way for South Asian immigration. Other posts frequently emphasized the importance of peaceful protest, or drew ties between Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Allyship in digital activism was frequently contextualized through rhetoric that emphasized transactional support: Indian-Americans argued to support BLM not merely for reasons of justice or opposition to institutional racism but because anti-Blackness had afforded them the privileges they hold. But fewer rhetoric interrogated the structures of racial violence that allowed Indian-Americans to amass large wealth in the US while Black Americans remained relegated to ghettoized communities.

Alongside workshops and social media posts, a number of largely caste- and class-privileged Indian-Americans compiled over fifteen collaborative Google documents that collated articles and statistics about the relationship between Indian Americans and Black Americans, and shared tools for talking to South Asians about anti-Blackness and BLM. Many of these resources focused on talking with family members and elders, with titles like "*How To Talk to South Asian Parents about Systemic Racism and Our Privilege*," "*Letters to South Asian parents on anti-blackness*," "*Engaging South Asian Immigrants in anti-racist solidarity through Whatsapp content,*" "*South Asian Families for BLM,*" and "*How to speak to your parents about anti-Black racism (resource compilation)*." The focus on family and elders belied (not necessarily accurate) assumptions that young South Asians were more enlightened about racial politics and anti-Blackness while older immigrants were not. This framing often went as far as talking to family members about the history of anti-Blackness and perhaps attending protests with signs, many emphasizing the importance of peaceful protest. Fewer covered logic for police and prison abolition or discussed militant protests tools. Articles like those from South Asian Americans Leading Together's former ED Deepa Iyer (2020) argued that SAA, in order to support BLM, must first turn inward to confront SAA-perpetrated anti-Blackness.

These resources and digital posts made important interventions into otherwise hollow SAA support for BLM, and recognized SAA complicity in anti-Black structures and acts. Their popularity was enhanced during COVID-19 lockdowns, where many SAA with class privilege were house-bound in often majority-white suburbs and were far removed from protests going on in person. Positively, digital engagement through sharing resources and posts provided a way for readers and sharers to feel connected to actions without risking safety or COVID-19 spread. They also opened up engagement methods for disabled and immunocompromised people in ways that traditional actions without disability justice frameworks at the center often overlook. Online tools also provided a

digestible on-ramp of political education and discourse around anti-Blackness that could appeal to less radicalized SAA. Easy-to-share clips, guides, and images were tailored to Whatsapp groups and other intergenerational communication methods in Desi diaspora, and provided rhetoric that was pushed back against the extensive Whatsapp campaigns used by the Hindu right (Chopra 2019).

Unfortunately, many of these resources and online activism also homogenized SAA as unilaterally holding privilege, catering primarily to caste- and class-privileged Hindu Indian-Americans but referring to these groups as indicative of South Asian Americans as a whole. This rhetoric thus erased working-class, caste-oppressed, non-Hindu, and other South Asian American and Indo-Caribbean work alongside Black comrades. This reified internal divisions and further marginalized already marginal SAA while disregarding the linkages and solidarity that do exist between these groups and Black liberation struggles. Moreover, these resources often stressed internal SAA community-based work as a prerequisite before practicing solidarity in the streets, creating a hierarchy of activism that meant newly politicized SAA could share posts without ever engaging with Black activists or Black-led organizing.

These types of actions fall prey to the critiques of allyship that Kluttz et al (2020), Clark (2019), and Ghabra and Calafell (2018) discuss – they focus more on the identity of showing support, rather than the actions of organizing and activism that can meaningfully confront and shift power. Rather than attempting to change situations, these social media posts by SAA showed the viewpoint of those sheltering at home in suburbs during COVID-19 lockdowns, away from the multiracial mutual aid and organizing work conducted by working-class SAA (Gurba 2020). Instead of traveling to protests or engaging deeply in Black-led organizing, the act of posting online or creating a conversation tool could assuage feelings of guilt and allow actions to stop there. Thus, SAA with privilege could feel like allies through actions that ultimately didn't challenge community or societal norms, and thus escaped the difficult work of transformation that Kluttz et al (2020) emphasize. As Dalit, Muslim, and working-class writers and activists like Soundararajan (2020), Hossein (2020), and Malhotra (2020) rebut, this language often reified Savarna[2] Indian-American privilege and emphasized respectability politics and reformism rather than systems change, thereby erasing the actions of radical working-class, Muslim, Dalit, and other marginalized South Asians in longstanding and deep partnership with radical Black liberation organizing.

Transformative solidarity and shared struggle

Conversely, other SAA groups expressed their solidarity with Black-led organizing through a framing of "transformative organizing." Sasha, an organizer with CAAAV, a historically Chinese working-class group in NYC but

[2] Caste-privileged.

now a pan-Asian organizing group with significant working-class Bangladeshi and other South Asian membership, spoke to me about what transformative solidarity meant to them and how it showed up in their organizing as a queer Sri Lankan American organizer. In their description, they reference DRUM (Desis Rising Up and Moving), a working-class South Asian and Indo-Caribbean organizing group based in Queens, New York, whose interpretations of solidarity include their work to make links between the state surveillance of and violence against Muslim South Asians post 9/11 to the history of COINTELPRO and other programs that target Black American organizing (DRUM 2019, Mallapragada 2013). In describing how DRUM and CAAAV see solidarity, Sasha told me,

> 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.

In practice, they described how CAAAV's working-class Asian members made principled and political decisions to stand with the family of Akai Gurley, a Black man who was murdered by a Chinese-American policeman (Fuchs 2016). Instead of siding with tense communal ties, CAAAV members conducted extensive political outreach in Asian communities in New York to highlight the linkages between anti-Black policing and the anti-Asian and white supremacist violence that led to CAAAV's inception. CAAAV members also called out the internalized white supremacy inherent in the logic of Asians supporting the police. Similarly, Fahd Ahmed, the executive director of DRUM, described instances of transformative solidarity in practice in a summer 2020 panel that focused on Asian solidarity against anti-Blackness. Ahmed described how DRUM had participated in campaigns against policing in schools, rejecting the calls from some Asian parents for cops to provide protection against bullying and instead arguing for the importance of abolition to protect against both anti-Black and Islamophobic institutional violence.

Sasha and Fahd's framing of solidarity diverges from Erskine and Bilimoria's allyship. Here, groups do not operate from a place of privileged allies who are standing up for Black communities due to morality, indebtedness, or guilt, as Erskine and Bilimoria (2019) and Kluttz et al (2020) describe. Rather, they articulate how CAAAV and DRUM mobilize Asian working-class politics into solidarity with Black liberation fights because of shared experiences of white supremacy, institutional racism, and racial capitalism. Through this invocation of working-class, Muslim, Dalit, and Bahujan SAA identity, these activists push back against the model minority myth and instead reveal larger shared experienced between marginalized SAA and Black Americans. They also echo Mishra's (2016) analysis that the divisions of class, caste, and nationality between various South Asian migrant groups results in political and cultural fractions often larger internally than between various SAA and other groups – in

this case, the marginalized SAA that Sasha, Fahd, and other speak of find more shared political ground with Black Americans than with SAA with privilege. Finding this solidarity through shared experience echoes Robin D.G. Kelley's framing of solidarity as transformation and world-making where diverse groups share both experiences of marginalization as well as similar political articulations of how to get to a better world, broadly termed "joint struggle" (Kelley 2019: 583).

Kelley particularly explores solidarities between Black Americans and Palestinians in this framing, focusing on how shared experiences of colonization, police violence, and carcerality yielded both declarations of solidarity in principles and statements as well as in sharing of best practices for resisting tear gas attacks and other forms of colonial and white supremacist warfare. But these explorations of solidarity through joint struggle also ring through for marginalized SAA, from experiences of racialization and Islamophobia post-9/11 to histories of oppression in the subcontinent and diaspora through class and caste. In Sasha and Fahd's statements, and in Kelley's political theoretics, solidarity is not just shared principles that inspire action (Arendt 2006); it is action itself, where groups work together due to shared experiences of oppression, in order to create a new world that liberates both communities. As Lila Watson (1984), an Aboriginal elder, organizer, and theorist similarly indicates, in this framing of solidarity, groups' liberations are "bound up with one another." Groups may struggle with one another, but they are linked through ideology, dialectics, and praxis (Kelley 2019). This also draws on notions of class solidarity in the Marxist sense (Marx & Engels 1967), Weber's (1946) political solidarity through shared interest, and collaborations between workers in unions and social movements through social movement unionism (Waterman 1993). Sasha also invoked Gramsci's (2000) united and popular fronts in this exploration of joint or shared struggle, where varied groups have diverse identities and employ diverse tactics, yet collaborate through shared identity in struggle as "comrades" (Robinson 2000).

Many Dalit, Bahujan, and other caste-oppressed SAA also framed their solidarity against anti-Blackness through a lens of shared struggle. Sharmin, who at the time was the political director of Equality Labs, a Dalit-led anti-caste organizing group in the US diaspora, discussed with me both the long parallel histories of oppression from caste and race that Dalit and Black communities share, as well as the rich histories of solidarity. In her analysis, she echoed the arguments from Soundararajan (2020), Malhotra (2020), and others who found caste- and class-privileged SAA solidarity with BLM to be shallow in its disregard of the linkages between casteism and anti-Blackness. As Sharmin said,

> Dalit leaders have always had deep relationships with Black leaders, from the Dalit Panthers and their relationship with the Black Panthers, to Cornel West learning & teaching Ambedkar, to collaborations in Say Her Name protests between Dalit Feminists fighting against caste rape and Black organizers

> protesting the state-sanctioned murders of Black women. Dalit activists have always built authentic relationships with Black leaders that weren't transactional but were rooted in transformative solidarity.

In emphasizing this shared history, Sharmin's words recall Paik's (2014) articulation of the possibility of "margin-to-margin" solidarity between Black and Dalit women due to shared experiences of patriarchy and racism/casteism within a heteropatriarchal and racial capitalist system. Paik, like Kelley, refers to a solidarity of "world-making," where groups converge across varied identities due to shared struggles that breed solidarity through shared resistance. This type of solidarity is not a market exchange (Kelley 2019) that requires equal repayment for tactical support, nor is it an exhortation of guilt or repaying debts: it is collaboration for shared liberation. As Sharmin continued,

> BLM has brought up a lot of guilt for South Asian Americans across the country, where some feel they have to say or do something now, but often without… the reading or the deep studying to be able to talk about these issues in a concrete way. So, for me, solidarity isn't just talking about things…it's your relationship…For Equality Labs, those relationships allowed us to jump into formation with M4BL and BLM's platforms to do abolitionist solidarity work quickly.

As Sharmin describes, Savarna guilt often mirrors the knee-jerk actions of allyship that practiced by white activists that scholars like Steele, Tseng and Putterman, and Kluttz et al critique. Instead, Sharmin frames solidarity not as discrete acts of support, but as processes of building deep relationships that both generate solidarity with external groups and also provoke transformation and change internally within South Asian spaces. This, more than talking, yields solidarity that challenges structures of racial and caste hierarchy and recognizes shared experiences of oppression faced by marginalized SAA and Black Americans – but also recognizes the anti-Blackness within normative SAA communities that make solidarity difficult.

Similarly, Har, an organizer who is active with spaces that include the South Asian Solidarity Initiative in New York, argued that privileged SAA turned out for BLM but not for caste as a way of shirking complications within the community. She said,

> It's easier…for SAA to stand in solidarity with Black Lives, because…the blame is on white supremacy, [whereas] caste involve[s] challenging family, customs…we reproduce anti-Blackness because we are reproducing caste.

Therefore, rather than mobilizing white or Savarna guilt, these interpretations of solidarity from marginalized SAA seek to dismantle SAA anti-Blackness and

leverage shared experience, struggle, and relationship. They recognize shifting positionalities and privilege in different spaces, as Sharmin emphasized the importance of "stepping back" and "following the leadership of Black organizers" but also spoke about the importance of stepping into organizing on the ground alongside Black comrades. This often occurred in specifically SAA organizing spaces like Sharmin's Equality Labs, Har's SASI, and Fahd's DRUM. These groups and others conducted political education in SAA community, both digitally and in-person with long-term members. They also called out South Asian and SAA celebrities who pledged support for BLM but remained silent on Islamophobic and casteist state sanctioned violence through Hindutva, the CAA-NRC, and the Kashmiri occupation (Soundararajan 2020), and demanded a dismantling of the model minority myth. Outside of SAA space, these groups joined in coalition with Black-led groups through formations like the Rising Majority, a national anti-racist BIPOC organizing coalition led by the Movement for Black Lives and with membership from BIPOC-led organizing groups across the country. In these larger multiracial spaces, my interlocutors described how SAA-led groups built solidarity with Black-led and other POC-led organizing groups to articulate shared strategies to defeat racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy, yielding shared strategies like the BREATHE Act that the Rising Majority and the Movement for Black Lives platformed in Congress in response to summer 2020's uprisings.

Organizing by non-normative SAA also occurred in multiracial organizing groups that focused on specific issues that affect both working-class Black Americans and SAA, like housing organizing, migrant justice work, and more. Priyanka, a queer Indian-American who organizes around tenant rights and housing organizing, told me that these multiracial spaces made sense to her because "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." She also noted that her non-traditional migration history, including growing up as part of marginalized South Asian communities in East Asia, and her queer identity, meant normative SAA diaspora spaces in the US felt alien to her and replete with "toxic heteropatriarchy…elitism and Brahminism," whereas organizing alongside other Black and Brown activists allowed her to find a pathway to "transformative justice [and] queer leadership" that fulfilled her desires to "break systems down, vision and dream" in tandem with Black-led abolitionist organizers. Similarly, Har described finding solidarity through working-class Black and Brown spaces in New York City, and said that juxtaposing her experience of homelessness and growing up "in the hood" with wealthy SAA "politicized me around the model minority myth," thus yielding solidarity with other working-class queer and trans youth of colour activists. Sharmin and Thara also described finding political solidarity in multiracial and Black-led organizing spaces that focused on working-class and queer struggle, thus appealing more to their identities than dominant and class-privileged Indian-American diaspora spaces. This in turn yielded solidarity through shared experience.

Some traditionally privileged SAA groups also invoked notions of transformative solidarity. Organizers from SAALT (South Asian Americans Leading Together), a historically caste-privileged-led SAA group, told me that they were attempting to wield and transform their groups historic privilege by "putting solidarity from the margins into organizational structures… supporting Congressional policies that Black-immigrant organizations and Dalit groups support, and rejecting ones they don't." Here, they speak for a mobilization of privilege that diverges from Paik's (2014) margin-to-margin solidarity but lies deeper than Erskine and Bilimoria's allyship by arguing for a transformation of power relations. And while Har, Sharmin, Sasha, and organizers from SAALT recognize the privilege that SAA hold in American institutional racism, their statements argue for a theoretics of solidarity that transcends oppression Olympics and instead mobilizes shared experiences to combat white supremacy and racial capital.

Critically, much of this work predated the summer of 2020, and was built on years and decades of collaboration before moments of crisis. Moreover, mutual aid efforts expanded in response to the harms of COVID-19 in working-class SAA neighborhoods meant SAA activists were in the streets alongside working-class comrades, and likely had been in relationship in years prior (Hossain 2021, Gurba 2020). While some working-class and marginalized SAA were newly politicized in summer 2020, they were led by the efforts of SAA activists who, as Sharmin, Har, Sasha, Fahd, and others describe, had already been organizing within SAA communities and through multiracial vehicles like the Rising Majority for years. Thus, the type of organizing exhibited by these groups showed a divergence from acts of allyship done by privileged actors, to a genuine shaking of structures by distinct groups organizing together. This shows that SAA are claiming a space in fights against racialized and marginalized existence in the US, instead embracing diasporic politics to combat anti-Blackness and institutional racism.

Queering South Asian solidarity

A vocal contingent of SAA organizers and activists practicing solidarity with BLM noted their queerness as an integral factor to their politics and their relationship to wider queer-of-color and specifically Black liberation struggles. Simply, Har said that "queer South Asian Americans are overrepresented in organizing spaces and it's brilliant." Thara, a queer SAA activist, told me that "being Queer and South Asian [includes] losing a feeling of belonging" and she connected this to "carv[ing] my identity as POC on the heels of queer black feminism" in a way that shapes her multiracial activism and solidarity with Black liberation struggles today. Thara continued to articulate how queerness had closed off normative SAA spaces to her, and in many ways forced a separation between her political and cultural identities. Relating to Fortier's (2001) analysis of the formation of queer homes that exist in diaspora but not in the home culture, and arguing that for queer SAA solidarity often forms out of finding home in Black, Latinx, and other queer-of-color spaces, Thara said:

> I feel like my Indian identity and my political identity were really separate for the past 5 years, and that's wild because my political identity is so central to who I am – but I have to constantly remind myself that the way I do things is Indian. I have to remember that I exist because my ancestors have the audacity to exist. Remembering my way forward feels really integral to being a queer South Asian because we were queer before we were colonized. Whereas my siblings, they really just like deny themselves to be safe. And as a queer person, that was never available to me. I was never going to be able to keep up with the Joneses.

Thara's words recall Das Gupta, Maira, and Kukke & Shah's explorations of SALGA's ejection from normative SAA space, in the form of the 1997 India Day Parade. They also recall Adur's (2018) scholarship on queer South Asian activism in the US that reveals the tensions between caste, class, and queerness in dominant – as well as queer – SAA spaces. While activists and scholars like Soundararajan (2020), Maitreyi-Zwick (2018), and Dasgupta et al (2018) have argued that even queer SAA spaces can reify hierarchies of caste and class and silence marginalized SAA, Thara describes how finding political home in multiracial spaces allowed her to traverse the gaps she felt between her Indian and queer identities, thus rejecting normative Desi politics even in queer diaspora spaces. Thara's argument that queerness in SAA diaspora makes normativity unattainable and often forces politicization most clearly parallels Gayatri Gopinath's (2005) explorations of queer South Asian diasporas in the US and the UK in her book *Impossible Desires*. Here, Gopinath theorizes that queerness fundamentally shifts South Asian diaspora space and diasporic culture-making in a way that is inherently political. Gopinath (2005:11) writes:

> Suturing "queer" to "diaspora"…becomes a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora…and [disrupts] heteronormative and patriarchal structures of kinship.

In Gopinath's interpretations, queerness can disrupt the Islamophobia and casteism of Hindutva, thus eschewing the forms of homonationalism or pinkwashing of nationalism practiced by dominant queers that Puar (2006, 2008) indicts. Gopinath's explorations show that queer Desi diasporic identity can also reject expectations of reproduction of culture that ask SAA to stay insular and far away from Black American politics. Patel (2019), too, traces queer South Asian women's navigation of culture in the home and in queer spaces, finding that emphasis on family ties, culture, and honor can push queer South Asian women out of acceptance in home and community, but can also distance them from white-dominant queer and lesbian spaces that treat them as other. Thus, as Thara argues, many queer SAA practiced solidarity with Black liberation struggles both during and far prior to 2020 because those were the spaces where they found kinship and political home. Thara and many other of the activists I spoke with referenced queer Black activists and theorists like

Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Carolyn Cohen, and the Combahee River Collective as key influences in their political thinking, activism, and solidarity. Preet, a queer SAA activist who organizes with a political education collective that builds solidarity between South Asian and Black Americans, described how her political formation and solidarity activism grew out of queer and particularly queer of color spaces in university:

> I took a student-led [class] called fem-sex… about gender and sexuality [and]…taboo topics that we didn't discuss otherwise, within a framework of social justice and solidarity, like I am doing now with SA4BL [a South Asian and Black solidarity political education group], because you can't move to activism and allyship and solidarity without knowing who you are and how those things have developed into politically charged issues. Fem-sex was a really queer space…I taught that class for two years, because a South Asian woman facilitator brought me in and…was a South Asian queer mentor for me, and I did the same thing with another South-Asian-American woman in my class…that was a really sweet mix of South Asian and queer identity.

Preet's quote articulates both how finding queer political space allowed her not only to meld her queer and SAA identity and politics, but also how it led her to solidarity organizing with BLM. Learning about her queerness led her to an analysis of sisterhood or solidarity that Lorde (1981) and hooks (1986) invoke between Black American and women in the Global South, where shared experiences of homophobia and heteropatriarchy can yield political collaborations across borders. Cohen (1997) describes how this solidarity between marginalized queers can emerge in action:

> I'm talking about a politics where the nonnormative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work…[where] radical potential [in] the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics…[is] located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin. (Cohen 1997:438)

Cohen uses the terminology of coalitions, which is later troubled in her (2019) indictment of whether the radical potential of queerness truly exists. Cohen finds that coalitions can yield transactional spaces where marginalized queers are tokenized and overrun by white, cis, able-bodied, and class-privileged gay men and women. But Cohen's logic for mobilizing the "…radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics" (Cohen 1997:440) has more clearly found its outlet in modern Black queer and queer-of-color politics. While Cohen indicted the transactionality of coalitions, Garza and Khan-Cullors, in their status as founders of BLM, have frequently referenced their queerness alongside their identities as working-class Black women as central to their politics. This

radical queer politic has resulted in solidarities built through deep relationships with other queer-of-color groups that Har and Thara referenced. Instead, Kelley's solidarity through joint struggle, Fortier's queer home, and Lorde's and hooks' queer sisterhoods provide spaces for queer SAA to find home alongside other queer-of-color struggles. Spira (2014) similarly traces how queerness yielded solidarities between queer Black-American and Chilean feminists in the 1970s, where the language of solidarity grew out of the language of pleasure, politics, and sisterhood.

As Thara said, queer-of-color space allowed her to unite her queer and SAA identity. Similarly, MH, an organizer with a national SAA advocacy group, said that queer SAA being "more bold and visionary…comes from the demands of Black folks" and referenced the impact of the Black feminist Combahee River Collective's articulation of "…struggl[e] against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression…[with] our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (1983: 272). In practice, this intersectional solidarity and anti-racist activism took many forms in summer 2020. Sasha, with the Queer South Asian National Network, wrote and trained on a 2015 curriculum responding to the police murders of Mike Brown and numerous other Black people, specifically targeted towards South Asian Americans across community and age, which was used frequently by trainers and activists in 2020. Sharmin described her engagement with Black Brunch, a direct action collective that disrupted brunches in gentrifying majority-white restaurants located in Black and Brown neighborhoods by reading out the names of Black people murdered by the police. Sharmin's Equality Labs joined forces with the Movement for Black Lives in several direct actions and led several political education spaces that lifted up the links between casteism and anti-Blackness, and highlighted anti-Blackness and Hindutva in the subcontinent. One of Equality Labs' key organizers collaborated in creating the abolitionist 8 to Abolition platform and political education tool. Thara collaborated and trained in a series of online workshops that trained SAA on how to respond to anti-Blackness and offered in-person suggestions for supporting Black-led abolitionist organizing in-person and remotely, and also participated in efforts to unite SAA organizers across issues in support of abolitionist organizing. Har's SASI and SAA base-building groups like CAAAV and DRUM participated in helping organize direct actions and protests across the US, and took key roles of solidarity like marshalling, de-arresting, and creating flanks to intervene with the police. MH's SAALT and other national advocacy groups directed organizing efforts to Congressional bills like the BREATHE Act, measures to defund police, and legislation for caste-protection alongside dismantling the prison industrial complex. All these examples, largely led by queer and marginalized SAA, represent a hybrid solidarity from the margins that challenged SAA respectability politics and the model minority myth, and put SAA bodies on the line against anti-Blackness and white supremacy.

In explaining these and other forms of activism, many of the activists I spoke to lifted up the importance of finding joy through relationship in queer Black and

Brown spaces, referencing Black queer activist and scholar Adrienne Marie Brown's (2019) more recent work on pleasure activism and its linkages to Lorde's (1981) work on the importance of queer erotics. Har linked this presence of queer pleasure, joy, and visions to her work in multiracial Black and Brown spaces in New York City, echoing Gopinath's (2018) explorations of queer visions. When we discussed her organizing in the summer of 2020, as well as her longstanding organizing against the prison industrial complex in queer-of-color spaces, Har said:

> Patriarchal organizing treats the work like it is war. Queerness shows how organizing 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 organizing brought by queerness, more dreaming and visioning.

In Har's analysis, as well as in Gopinath's, Cohen's, Brown's, and Lorde's, queerness – and the marginalization as well as the intimacies and pleasures formed through queerness – allow for solidarity with Black liberation through the creation of non-normative political homes that dream up a new world. Queer SAA thus engage in solidarity through activating queer radicality (Cohen 2019) and centering pleasure rather than martyrdom at the core of activism (Brown 2019, Lorde 1981). COVID-19, too, enhanced the importance of forming alternate homes and kinship structures to provide structures of mutual aid. The governmental emphasis on creating "pods" during lockdown in many ways normalized the sort of home and alternate kinship-forming that have been widespread in Black, Latinx, and other queer-of-color space in the US, supercharging the queer spaces that SAA and Black activists have sustained for decades. The massive leadership of queer SAA in solidarity organizing with BLM in summer 2020 thus shows that queerness is a critical strand in how SAA form and conceptualize solidarity and activism against anti-Blackness. For queer SAA as for other queer-of-color groups, intimacies become the vehicle for solidarity between South-Asian-American and Black activists through a tapping into shared history, interrogating shared marginality, emphasizing care, healing, family and home, and centering visions of transformative queer liberation.

Charting a path forward: ongoing SAA activism against anti-Blackness and institutional racism

The diverse forms of anti-racist action and activism against anti-Blackness practiced by South Asian Americans in the summer of 2020 reveals multiple important threads, about multiracial solidarity work, politicization and racialization in the South Asian diaspora, and the impact of privilege on activism. Particularly during a time where COVID-19 has heightened the gaps between those with privilege and those without, the various forms of activism that occurred during the Black uprisings of summer 2020 show the widening divisions between those in SAA who hold class, caste, and other privilege and

those who do not. SAA secluded in white-majority suburbs in the US, able to shelter safely at home and continue their work remotely, did in fact express anti-racist action and activism against anti-Blackness in largely unprecedented ways following the police murder of George Floyd.

This activism was strongly impacted by the increase in digital discourse in SAA spaces about anti-Blackness in the SAA community. Much of this discourse also emphasized the large impact of Black liberation struggles on South Asians' ability to migrate to the US. SAA joined panels, posted images, attended workshops on dismantling institutional racism in the US, and engaged in conversation with elders about anti-Blackness over Whatsapp and phone in ways hardly seen following the murders of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown nor prior. Social media and digital spaces provided a fruitful platform for SAA political education. These spaces rejected language around respectability politics and Desi depoliticization, and attempted to challenge SAA anti-Blackness. The preponderance of shareable graphics, tweets, Facebook discussions, and Google Drive-based resource compilations can be in part explained by COVID-19's impact on confining white-collar workers to their computers. Moreover, many of these more privileged SAA lived in (often suburban) spaces where in-person organizing and even relationships in general can be scant, and connections with Black-led organizing were often been slim.

But this activism often stopped with supportive posts or turning out to Black-led protests with protests proclaiming the support of "South Asians for Black Lives." This self-focused rhetoric failed to truly shake the hierarchies of privilege that South Asian Americans – and particularly caste-privileged Hindu Indian-Americans – hold due to the model minority myth and American racial capitalism. For some, the posts provided useful political education, but they often focused internally on SAA knowledge, and failed to provide clear pathways for deeper involvement that challenged structural anti-Blackness and casteism. Thus, while this wave of anti-racist action built both off of constraints due to COVID-19 as well as politicization following prior waves of BLM and abolitionist action, these acts of allyship focused more on the identity of being supportive and woke rather than on ways to fundamentally attack white supremacy.

Conversely, the transformative margin-to-margin solidarity practiced by marginalized SAA illuminates a divergent space of Desi anti-racist action. This activism creates shared struggle building off of shared experiences of marginalization under race, class, faith, and caste, and leveraged the long political and community ties that Muslim, Dalit, Bahujan, working-class, and queer South Asians have held with Black Americans for decades. Most importantly, this transformative solidarity shows the variety of united front formations that SAA are active within. SAA activists – largely with marginalized identities – are present in and leading national coalitional vehicles, grassroots direct action collectives, and mutual aid networks fighting the dual impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and institutional racism on Black, South Asian, and other racialized communities.

These activists, both my interlocutors and others, articulate a solidarity that exhibits Paik's (2014) parallel experiences of marginality, Kelley's (2019) explorations of world-making and visioning better futures, Gopinath's (2014) queer Desi rupture of normativity, and Cohen's (1997) radical queer politics. And this solidarity both recognizes anti-Blackness within SAA communities in the US, the toxicity of the model minority myth, and the linkages between anti-Blackness, caste, and Islamophobia. These activists targeted actors of white supremacy and of Hindutva alike, calling out conservative and liberal Desi politicians and celebrities for their complicity in state violence in the US and India. This hybrid solidarity from the margins shows a strand of political radicalism within South Asian American communities that holds hope for multiracial challenges to the model minority myth, white supremacy, and institutional racism. This activism holds hope for new solidarities practiced through united fronts that unite marginalized communities in the US and attempt to truly challenge structures of violence and oppression, and usher in abolitionist futures. Particularly led by working-class queer-of-color intimacies, anti-normativities, and queer visioning of transformative politics, these South Asian Americans practice solidarity alongside Black comrades to reimagine American futures and birth a new world.

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