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Nocturnal Afterlives:

Transgender South Asian Experiences in Queer Nightlife Spaces

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts in Asian American Studies

by

Ravindu Lashan Ranasingh Ranawaka

2023

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Nocturnal Afterlives:

Transgender South Asian Experiences in Queer Nightlife Spaces

by

Ravindu Lashan Ranasingh Ranawaka

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Kyungwon Hong, Chair

This thesis addresses the complicated and often varied experiences of transgender and nonbinary South Asian Americans and South Asian Canadians in Queer South Asian nightlife spaces. By investigating Queer South Asian nightlife events in Toronto and Los Angeles, I articulate how trans and nonbinary South Asian subjects are simultaneously marginalized and celebrated in spaces that are designed to cater to diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. These vexed experiences illustrate the intimacies between Queer space and the lived experiences of nightlife participants. By analyzing trans community formations and cultural productions, this thesis examines how trans subjects form alternative methods to navigate the dualities and contradictions in Queer South Asian nightlife spaces.

The thesis of Ravindu Lashan Ranasingh Ranawaka is approved.

Jolie Chea

Purnima Mankekar

Thu-Huong Nguyen Vo

Kyungwon Hong, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

*Dedication*

This thesis is dedicated to my radiant, radical, resilient trans siblings.

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## ***Introduction***

I confidently posed in front of my mirror, carefully constructing my nightclub outfit. I adorned my head with a gleaming gold tikka, superglued to what little hairs I had during my buzzcut era.<sup>1</sup> I tightly lined my eyes with jet-black kohl, channeling the provocative gazes of the iconic Bollywood actresses Rekha and Vyjayanthimala. The resplendent gold earrings I had taken from my mother's jewelry box glistened on my lobes. I pinched my nostril with a naath, encrusted with scintillating crystals and hooked behind my ear with a delicate strand of pearls.<sup>2</sup> As my Uber approached minutes closer, I gingerly placed a small, bejeweled bindi between my eyebrows. The cherry on top of this blingy ensemble. This was the look that I had crafted to celebrate my twenty-second birthday. In typical Pisces fashion, I had tailored my outfit to reflect my enthusiasm and zeal to commemorate another rotation around the sun. I would rather perish than not fulfill my unyielding need to *serve*.

At this moment, like many trancestors that had come before and many that will go after, I was divinity.<sup>3</sup> A South Asian goddess ready to impart the blessing of her adorned body on her chosen temple – the dance floor. As a Queer nonbinary trans femme Sri Lankan American, Queer nightlife is the perfect conduit for demonstrating the myriad of ways in which I fabricate culturally informed articulations of gender, sexuality, and race on my body. Sartorially, performatively, and aesthetically, these spaces facilitated ephemeral shadowboxes of heightened trans affect marked by joy, community bonding, and intense gender euphoria. I arrived at the

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<sup>1</sup> A tikka is a South Asian headpiece that typically runs along the hairline and dangles above the forehead.

<sup>2</sup> A naath is a South Asian nose ring. They are often large, bejeweled, and feature a chain that goes over the ear or can be pinned to the hair.

<sup>3</sup> Trancestor is a portmanteau of “transgender” and “ancestor.” It is used to denote transgender siblings who came before you.

party at 10:00 P.M. The sound of “Desi Girl” immediately made my heart race.<sup>4</sup> As I whirled through the fog of the nightclub with my fellow Queer and trans South Asian siblings, the sweat perfused through my vintage cropped Mugler blouse. As I gazed upon the disco ball brilliantly illuminating the space like the moon on Vesak, I felt like I had transcended into a haze of love, warmth, and energy.<sup>5</sup>

However, glancing around the nightclub, I could feel that the presence of my friends and I altered the atmosphere. By the bar, two South Asian gay men were holding drinks and chatting. One wore a simple white tank top and a gold chain around his neck. The other wore a blue button-down shirt, jeans, and loafers. As I hiked to the water station, I noticed the man in the button-down assessing my outfit. His eyes traveled from my tikka, glanced to my exposed waist, and interrogated my six-inch black-heeled boots. The man whispered to his partner, the tank-top gay, who turned towards me only to realize how I witnessed their exchange. He immediately turned back around. The two men promptly moved to the other side of the bar.

As I walked back to my friends, I noticed that there were more and more stares and whispers from the club patrons. I had attended several Queer South Asian nightlife events since I turned twenty-one, but this was the first place where I had felt that my femininity was not to be celebrated. The way that I expressed myself as a trans person was correlated to how cisgender gay patrons treated and discussed my presence in the nightclub space. Queer South Asian nightlife spaces celebrate diverse voices and experiences, serving as affirmation sites. However, complex hierarchies and power systems complicate understanding trans and nonbinary

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<sup>4</sup> “Desi Girl” is a Bollywood song by artist Vishal Shekar. Produced in 2008

<sup>5</sup> Vesak is a Buddhist festival celebrated during the full moon. As Sri Lankan Buddhists, my family celebrates Vesak every month.

individuals within these spaces. The stares and quiet discussions are only one example of the contentious dynamics between cisgender and transgender South Asian bodies in these spaces.

## **Argument**

This thesis examines how transgender and nonbinary South Asians grapple with the possibilities and contradictions of Queer South Asian nightlife spaces, simultaneously sites of subversion and normativity, inclusion and exclusion, and care and violence. Queer South Asian nightlife spaces serve as dynamic arenas where individuals navigate many possibilities and contradictions shaped by their intersecting identities and societal expectations. For transgender and nonbinary South Asians, Queer South Asian nightlife spaces offer platforms for self-expression, resistance, and challenging societal norms and expectations. These spaces allow individuals to forge connections, build communities, and celebrate their identities authentically. However, they also exist within broader societal structures and are therefore not immune to reproducing certain norms and exclusions. Despite their intention to foster inclusivity, these spaces can inadvertently reinforce hierarchical power dynamics, reinforcing cisnormative notions of sexual desirability, binary gender norms, and social hierarchies. The struggle for inclusion can be further compounded for transgender and nonbinary South Asians, who often face heightened forms of discrimination and marginalization both within and outside these spaces. By conducting oral histories of four South Asians involved in Queer nightlife, I give concrete examples of how people utilize cultural productions to interrogate gender normativity in nightclub spaces, provide representations of trans people through nightlife organizing and advertising, and how bodies and spaces reinforce structures of power while simultaneously dismantling them. The interlocutors comprise a diverse sample, representing various roles and perspectives within the nightlife milieu. Including these oral histories allows us to understand the rich and complex experiences

of trans and nonbinary South Asians within Queer nightlife settings and offers critical interventions in Asian American studies.

### **Key Terminology**

I define transgender as individuals whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. This definition of transgender includes but is not limited to binaried transgender people such as trans men and trans women. As Emi Koyama defines in *The Transfeminist Manifesto*, “‘trans woman’ is at times used to refer to those individuals who identify, present, or live more or less as women despite their birth sex assignment to the contrary. ‘Trans men,’ likewise, is used to describe those who identify, present, or live as men despite the fact that they were perceived otherwise at birth” (Koyama 1). Nonbinary refers to individuals whose gender identity does not adhere to a binary notion of gender identity. Jessica Clark explains that some nonbinary people identify as transgender; however, some nonbinary people do not (Clark 2). I differentiate transgender and nonbinary, not to provide a concise bifurcation between these identities but to adhere to the self-identification of the subjects involved in my research. These definitions are meant to compliment Jack Halberstam’s description of “trans\*” as “unfolding categories of being organized around but not confined to forms of gender variance... trans\* can be a name for expansive forms of difference, haptic relations to knowing, uncertain modes of being, and disaggregation of identity politics predicated upon the separating out of many kinds of experience that actually blend together, intersect, and mix.” (Halberstam 5). I acknowledge the state of being trans\*, or *transness*, as an experience that is complimented but not marked by a constantly shifting and metamorphosing social framework and vocabulary. Halberstam articulates that trans\* opposes categorized gender variance. This thesis distances itself from Halberstam’s use of the asterisk to demarcate gender expansiveness due to the self-



identification of the subjects in this project. Most of my research participants and interviewees do not self-identify as trans\* but rather identify as trans, transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, and genderfluid. This usage makes room for decategorization while simultaneously respecting the self-identification of individuals. This follows the epistemological principles of transfeminism, which dictates that individuals have the right to define their own gender identities and to expect that society significantly respects their identities (Koyama 2). Naming and explaining these terms within transgender studies is a complex experience as individuals harbor personal and sometimes conflicting associations with these terms and identities. This thesis uses the words “trans and nonbinary” and “trans” interchangeably but uses “nonbinary” to denote individuals who specifically identify as nonbinary. Those who identify as nonbinary may also identify as transgender, which is why these terms are utilized in this manner in the context of this project. In the same vein as the terms “transgender” and “nonbinary,” the word “Queer” has had a long and complicated history.

This definition of Queer in this thesis relates to sexual identities and gender orientations differing from heterosexual and cisgender. Throughout this thesis, I capitalize the word Queer to refer to the politicized organization of identities under this term. In a conversation about Queer identity at the New School in 2014, bell hooks stated that Queerness is “about the self that is at odds with everything around it, and it has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live” (hooks 1:27:50). The Queer movement is not isolated from the legacies and labor of Queers of color, disability activists, environmental justice activists, transgender activism, and other radical insurgencies (Ferguson 2). Queer spaces are physical and metaphysical geographies facilitated by Queer people to do the speaking, thriving, and living that bell hooks refers to. Queer nightlife spaces are the central Queer spaces that this thesis

investigates. As J. Paul Halferty states, Queer nightlife spaces are “rather complex objects of analysis, as there are innumerable narratives running through and around their construction. They are political and social spaces that have been carved out of the straight world” (Halferty 2).

The experiences of transgender and nonbinary individuals in South Asia exhibit unique cultural and societal dimensions that shape their lived realities. One example of this is the existence of Hijra communities. Hijras, who often identify as transgender or third gender, challenge traditional binary notions of gender and occupy a distinct social role. Within these communities, expansive understandings of gender emerge, recognizing the existence of many genders beyond the binary. As Serena Nanda articulates in *The Hijras of India: Cultural and Institutional Dimensions of an Institutionalized Third Gender Role*, Hijras have been historically recognized as a distinct social category, with specialized positions in rituals, performances, and the distribution of blessings and alms (Nanda 4). The existence of Hijras underscores the cultural acceptance of diverse gender identities in specific contexts while simultaneously facing stigmatization and marginalization in broader society. This example contextualizes transness in South Asian cultures and communities and allows us to recognize a wide range of gender identities beyond the normative gender binary.

### **Queer Nightlife**

Queer, transgender, and nonbinary South Asians have had a robust history of nightlife involvement in the United States and Canada. South Asians have gathered, formed kinship networks, created and experienced cultural productions, and developed intimate interpersonal connections in nightlife spaces. In *Queer Nightlife*, Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani, and Ramón Rivera-Servera define Queer nightlife as a network of “temporary, static, and mobile sites that Queer people congregate in to get relief from the pressures of everyday life” (Adeyemi,

Khubchandani, Rivera-Servera iii). Queer nightlife sites include but are not limited to Nightclubs, ballrooms, bathhouses, house parties, living rooms, restaurants, dance floors, stages, public parks, street corners, and brunch. At the same time, these spaces can be places of joy for Queer. Trans, and nonbinary folks, *Queer Nightlife* argues that nightlife is not necessarily a utopian formation. As Adeyemi, Khubchandani, and Rivera-Servera state in their jointly written introduction, “For LGBTQI+ people whose desires, pleasures, bodies, and existences are invalidated in the propriety of daytime, the night does often offer an alternative set of rules with which we can know ourselves and one another.

Nevertheless, for all the ways that queer nightlife spaces can provide refuge and play, they can also be sites of “alienation that are circumscribed by normative modes of exclusion” (Adeyemi et al. x). As this thesis examines, transgender and nonbinary South Asian Queer nightlife spaces are complicated by the duality of nightlife. The homonormative dominance of cisgender gay South Asian men in South Asian Queer nightlife spaces starkly contrasts the increased presence of transgender and nonbinary performers who also occupy these spaces. This thesis explores how South Asian trans bodies are centered in advertising and promotional materials for Queer South Asian nightlife spaces but are relegated to the margins and corners of nightclubs and bars. The nature of Queer nightlife is elaborated on in Kareem Khubchandani’s text *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife*.

Khubchandani argues that nightlife is the “productive locus for the study of global politics...In the public imagination, nightlife constitutes exceptional space and time: titillating, dangerous, utopic, transcendent, adventurous, risky; it is all these things” (Khubchandani 3). Placing *Ishtyle* in conversation with *Queer Nightlife*, I analyze how South Asian nightlife spaces harbor a range of purposes and experiences. As I explore throughout this project, transgender and

nonbinary people can have positive and negative experiences in Queer nightlife spaces, which underscore the complex relationship between Queer spaces and trans bodies. Khubchandani elaborates that Queer South Asian nightlife grapples with contested dynamics of class, caste, gender, race, and sexuality. For South Asian subjects, culturally based Queer nightlife events utilize cultural references through aesthetics, drag, dance, fashion, and music to illustrate accented spaces of belonging and kinship. However, as Khubchandani describes, indocentric cultural referents, the privileging of sexually desirable cis gay male bodies, and the erasure of trans people complicate the position of South Asian trans and nonbinary people. Khubchandani uses performance to examine how certain bodies are privileged, citing how the prevalence of Bollywood music and Indian cinematic iconography in Queer South Asian nightlife events renders events advertised as South Asian spaces indocentric. In conversation with Khubchandani's text, this thesis uses performance analysis to assess how transgender and nonbinary South Asians use culturally based drag performances and dance to generate expansive narratives of sexuality and gender. By doing so, this thesis reimagines how South Asian trans and nonbinary bodies may address their positions as racialized and gendered subjects within these complex political geographies. Practicing and sustaining Queerness through artistic practice and cultural production is discussed in Freddie Gamboa's *Pedagogies of the Dark: Making Sense of Queer Nightlife*.

Gamboa articulates that the word "nightlife" occupies its unique temporal configuration, as it insinuates that the symbolic and biological ontology of "life" exists in nighttime's enigmatic, arcane, and marginal temporality. The night presents an atmosphere for antinormative, Queer, and taboo sociocultural practices, subcultures, and countercultures to flourish. Gamboa articulates that "night is not merely a time or place in which the opportunity to be queer arises,

but rather a pedagogical method for imagining, practicing, and sustaining queerness itself (Gamboa 2). This thesis explores how transgender and nonbinary South Asians sustain queerness and transness by imagining expansive possibilities of gender in relation to these spaces. The second chapter of this thesis discusses how transgender and nonbinary performers in Queer South Asian nightlife spaces articulate these heterogeneous notions of gender and sexuality. This thesis builds off Gamboa's claim by discussing how cultural production and performance in Queer South Asian nightlife spaces are supported by the subcultural and countercultural nature of nightlife spaces themselves. Viewing queerness as a pedagogy has allowed me to think about how transgender and nonbinary South Asians can teach us about their experiences through artistic practices and performance. Gamboa explores how these nightlife spaces can be imagined as spaces of aberrance. Places where those on the fringes of society gather and invest in cultural practices that depart from the normative and the mundane. Queer subjects utilize the darkness of these spaces as a "refuge, a space and time that provide a reprieve from violent networks and enable opportunities for self-expression, connection, and community formation" (Gamboa 2). While nightlife conjures images of darkness and obscurity, it simultaneously promises a technological utopia where urbanity, flashing lights, and technological marvels provide Queer futurity that equates the subculture with neoliberal progress. The multiplicities within the ontology of nightlife provide implications that the nature of Queer nightlife is in constant flux.

Martin Manalansan's text *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* provides valuable insights into identity, performance, and community in Queer spaces. *Global Divas* discusses gay men and gender-variant individuals from the Philippines working as entertainers in New York City. Manalansan navigates the intersectionality of race, nationality, sexuality, and gender, revealing how these factors shape their navigation of Queer nightlife spaces.

Manalansan's analysis also focuses on how performance can allow trans subjects to claim agency and construct new narratives of gender identity. Manalansan's work illuminates community networks and support and care systems used by his research subjects in these Queer nightlife spaces. The complex identities and experiences of Filipino gay men and gender variant individuals provide a critical framework to understand how South Asian trans and nonbinary folk can harbor similar experiences as diasporic subjects in these Queer nightlife spaces.

While this thesis discusses the nuanced hierarchies and hegemonies facilitated by Queer and trans people within Queer South Asian nightlife spaces, I believe that it is also essential to address the more comprehensive violence faced by Queer, transgender, and nonbinary people in nightlife. During the two years I have researched for this thesis, there has been a meteoric rise in anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation, hate crimes, violence against Transgender individuals, and organized sociopolitical warfare against Queer nightlife economies. On November 19, 2022, the Colorado Springs Nightclub Shooting resulted in the massacre of five Queer and Trans victims and the injury of twenty-five other partygoers. The shooting occurred on the eve of Transgender Day of Remembrance. On June 12, 2016, forty-nine people were murdered at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Most of the victims were Latinx and Black Queer folks. This shooting is the deadliest shooting against LGBTQIA+ people in the United States. Legislative violence, such as Tennessee Senate Bill 3, which bans public drag performance, and numerous other bills designed to police drag, trans bodies, and regulate nightlife economies have been propagated by right-wing political entities. These are just a few instances of the acts of violence faced by Queer, transgender, and nonbinary people in these spaces.

## **South Asian Queer Nightlife Spaces**

South Asians in the United States and Canada have a unique history of Queer nightlife organizing. This thesis refers to South Asians as people whose ancestry can be traced to South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka). South Asian Americans and South Asian Canadians are members of South Asian diasporas based in the United States and Canada. Queer South Asian nightlife spaces are events curated mainly by and for Queer South Asians. They differ from other South Asian events because they emphasize providing Queer, transgender, and nonbinary South Asians places to seek “refuge” from non-Queer people, including cisgender and heterosexual South Asians (Khubchandani 8). Based on my ethnographic accounts, oral histories, interviews, and archival data, South Asian Queer nightlife spaces are created to address two primary needs. The first is to disseminate shared cultural practices and values, and the second is to facilitate the expansion and production of community social networks. The three nightlife events that this thesis engages with, Rangeela, Desh Pardesh, and the events hosted by Satrang, are predicated on notions of South Asian panethnicity and South Asian cultural collectivity. However, codes representing South Asian aesthetics, performances, food, and other cultural knowledge are often associated with “Indianness” rather than South Asia. This is evidenced by the influence of Bollywood music in these Queer South Asian nightlife spaces. Waseem Shayk, the organizer of Rangeela, describes the party’s inclusion of Bollywood visuals and sonics as a cultural and cinematic framework to position partygoers in a curated fantasy as if they were “main characters” in their films. By entering Indian cultural production, Queer South Asian nightlife events might reinforce projects of statehood and Indian nationalist ideologies. However, from a diasporic context, these Indian cultural codes may contribute to the propagation of shared cultural doctrines within a pan-ethnic

space due to the recognizability of these cues. Shared cultural practices within these diasporic Queer South Asian nightlife spaces can be predicated on these generalized and widely relatable insinuations of South Asianess.

Transgender and nonbinary performers in these Queer South Asian nightlife spaces utilize these familiar codes to generate critical conversations around shared experiences and identities. Elements of performance such as nostalgia and camp may be employed to posit critiques of social issues such as casteism and anti-Blackness within South Asian communities, or they can be used to interrogate normative notions of gender, race, class, and sexuality. This way, performers can use South Asian cultural conventions to communicate the complicated social dynamics within South Asian communities and spaces, including Queer nightlife spaces.

### **Methodology Overview**

This thesis is based on autoethnography, participant observation, archival research, and oral history interviews. These are used in tandem to establish a historical precedent for trans and nonbinary South Asian American/Canadian involvement in Queer nightlife spaces, to articulate the connection between Queer South Asian nightlife spaces and transgender and nonbinary experiences, and to document and archive personal and community perspectives. The geographic focus of this project is Toronto, Canada, and Southern California. I selected Southern California as a geographic focal point due to my history with the region. I was born in Sri Lanka and moved to California in 1999. I have lived mainly in Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley, and Simi Valley. This area also has a rich history of South Asian immigration and nightlife involvement. Like Southern California, Toronto has also been a central place for South Asian immigration. As Nayan Shah explains in *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West*, the British occupation of South Asia and Canada at the end of the nineteenth



century and the beginning of the twentieth century resulted in an uptick of immigrant labor from South Asia to Canada (Shah 3). Toronto's contemporary "sanctuary city" position has formed South Asian refugee and immigrant communities. South Asians constitute the second largest pan-ethnic demographic in Toronto, at 14%. According to the 2021 Canadian census, there are around 385 thousand South Asians in Toronto proper; this does not include South Asians living in surrounding neighborhoods like Brampton and Mississauga. My closest cousins live in Toronto, so I visit almost every summer. I knew there was a lot of Queer South Asian nightlife happening in Toronto and a long history of Queer South Asian activism in the area, so I decided to make that a geographic focus of my project. Toronto's history with South Asian immigration has resulted in some of the most well-known and culturally and artistically significant queer South Asian nightlife events.

My accounts as a nonbinary South Asian person passionate about Queer nightlife events serve as a foundation for this work. These Queer nightlife spaces have been integral in forming and recognizing my gender identity. Therefore, my autoethnographic reports allow me to reinforce my argument with personal accounts and insights. Participant observation enabled me to intimately study and understand the perspectives and practices of my research subjects. During this study, I visited Toronto's Rangeela party and multiple events hosted by Satrang. As one of the founders of Rangeela, Waseem Shayk, explained in his interview, the Rangeela party is a nightlife event created to respond to the lack of Queer South Asian nightlife events in Toronto and to raise money for the 2010 floods in Pakistan. I attended Rangeela's October 2022 party titled Kanta. Satrang's Mujra Night in August 2022 is another event I will refer to throughout this thesis. Participating in these nightlife events connected me with community members who

eventually became my interview participants. Additionally, existing in these spaces encouraged me to process the spatial and community-based underpinnings of Queer nightlife firsthand.

My initial data was not collected in the clubs but in the archives. I primarily used three libraries to inform this project. USC's One Archive's 2022 Archival Intimacies exhibit provided access to South Asian American nightlife archives dating back to the 1970s. Most of the documents from this archive pertained to South Asian community gathering/solidarity events and nightlife events in the Los Angeles and greater Southern California areas. Most of my archival data has come from Toronto's Queer archive, The ArQuives. At the ArQuives, I analyzed newspaper and magazine articles, event posters, flyers, advertisements, journal entries, and mixed media. I specifically worked with archival material regarding Desh Pardesh. I have also engaged with materials from the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), specifically records regarding the history of Satrang. For this project, I also conducted oral history interviews with five South Asian nightlife organizers, partygoers, and performers. I use the interviews to document and understand the nuanced histories of trans experiences in these spaces.

My first interviewee is Prahas Rudraraju (they/them). Rudraraju is a nonbinary transmasculine drag king in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. They have been performing the Indian Classical Dance of Bharatanatyam since childhood and incorporating Bharatanatyam dance into their drag routines since 2018. I analyze Rudraraju's drag performance at Satrang Mujra Night to showcase how trans performers use South Asian cultural referents to interrogate normative gender binaries and to articulate corporeal representations of gender expansiveness.

The second interviewee, Dr. Anurima Banerji (she/they), is a scholar, writer, poet, and dancer raised in India and Guelph, Ontario, Canada. They are currently based in Los Angeles. Banerji presented their poetry and performed Odissi dance at Queer nightlife events in Ontario

throughout the 90s. Banerji's oral history interview offers a firsthand account of their experiences at the Desh Pardesh festival in Toronto. Their interview explores the dynamics between cisgender gay men and individuals who challenge normative gender presentations. Banerji also highlights the inherently queered nature of South Asian Odissi dance performances, which embody gender expansiveness and incorporate representations of nonbinary and fluid identities through the embodiment of deities.

Shazad Hai (He/Him) and Waseem Shayk (He/Him), organizers and founders of Toronto's Rangeela party, play a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of Queer South Asian nightlife in the area. Their efforts to promote transgender and nonbinary inclusion through the portrayal of trans and nonbinary individuals in advertising demonstrate a conscious recognition of the importance of representation. However, despite these efforts, the party space does not always reflect a commitment to safety and inclusivity for these bodies. The organizers' recruitment and curation of drag performances contribute to the complex and nuanced nature of South Asian Queer nightlife spaces, which I argue are sites of inclusion and exclusion.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

This chapter investigates how transgender and nonbinary people form community networks within Queer South Asian nightlife spaces. I explore this phenomenon through representations and non-representations of trans bodies within these cultural spaces, the inclusion and exclusion of trans bodies by nightlife organizers, and the interactions between nightlife participants. I examine my ethnographic experiences at Rangeela, focusing on the dynamics between the representation of trans bodies in advertising and the demographics of the nightclub space. I draw correlations between this visual representation and the perceived centrality of trans bodies in Rangeela. *Then, I* address the dissonance in trans representation and how these spaces

support trans and nonbinary folks in real life. This chapter also looks at Desh Pardesh, a South Asian Queer arts festival based in Toronto that ran from 1988 to 2001; this festival's rich history is marked by both the exclusion and inclusion of transgender and nonbinary individuals. Desh Pardesh sought a platform for artistic expressions that challenged traditional South Asian norms and fostered progressive dialogue. However, This chapter addresses the noticeable absence of narratives and accounts centered on transgender and nonbinary individuals in the Desh Pardesh archives. This conspicuous gap in representation perpetuates the erasure of their lived experiences within the broader context of the festival's historical documentation. This chapter engages with archival materials and discusses how these materials allowed me to initiate contact and form a meaningful connection with Banerji, an archival subject. In this way, diasporic subjects can foster a sense of communal belonging and assert agency in shaping the historical narratives that have historically marginalized their identities.

Chapter two centers on cultural productions and performances by transgender and nonbinary participants at Desh Pardesh and Satrang events. This chapter argues that transgender and Nonbinary Queer South Asian nightlife performers use cultural production to present subversive, transgressive, and expansive articulations of gender and nuanced understandings of Queer South Asian possibility while addressing the tensions of race, gender, and cultural identity in these spaces. This chapter analyzes drag performances and Indian Classical Dance in these spaces. It seeks to understand how South Asian cultural codes can be used to elucidate complex orientations of South Asian gender corporeally.

This thesis is an in-depth exploration of the intricate dynamics faced by transgender and nonbinary South Asians within Queer South Asian nightlife spaces, which serve as simultaneous sites of subversion and normativity, inclusion and exclusion, and care and violence. This analysis

has been enriched by using oral histories from partygoers, examining archival data, and my autoethnographic accounts. By incorporating these sources, a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences and struggles of transgender and nonbinary individuals is illustrated. This thesis also highlights the potential of performance by transgender and nonbinary drag artists and Indian Classical dancers as they challenge and redefine conventional notions of gender using South Asian cultural references. Their artistic productions create expansive landscapes of possibility and foster inclusive understandings of gender identity within Queer South Asian nightlife spaces. By critically examining these contradictions, this thesis expands the canon of research on transgender and nonbinary South Asians in Queer South Asian nightlife spaces.

## ***Chapter One: I Think We're in Hell***

This chapter investigates how transgender and nonbinary people form community networks within Queer South Asian nightlife spaces. I explore this phenomenon through the representations and non-representations of trans bodies within these cultural spaces, the inclusion and exclusion of trans bodies by nightlife organizers, and the interactions between nightlife participants. I examine two of the most prominent Queer South Asian nightlife organizations in Toronto. The first is Rangeela, an ongoing Bollywood party founded in 2010. The basis for my analysis of Rangeela is my ethnographic accounts from my attendance in October 2022, my interviews with its founders, and an assessment of advertising and promotional materials featuring trans and nonbinary bodies. The second nightlife space, Desh Pardesh, was a week-long arts festival, conference, and nightlife space held annually from 1988 to 2001 by Khush. Because I could not attend their events in person, I base my analysis of Desh Pardesh on archival research in Toronto, critical archival studies discourse on symbolic annihilation, and interviews with a former attendee and performer.

### **Rangeela**

Rangeela is a major Queer nightlife event based in Toronto, Canada, founded by Waseem Shayk, Shazad Hai, and Imran Nayani. During my interviews with Shayk and Hai, I learned they started Rangeela for two reasons. First, the 2010 monsoon season led to massive flooding in Pakistan and northern India. Urban areas like Karachi suffered much water damage to their city infrastructures. As a result, thousands of people were left without access to food, fresh water, and other critical resources. Shaikh figured out a quick and efficient way for Queer South Asians in the diaspora to amass donations and funds to support flood survivors. By 2010, it had been over a decade since the previous Queer South Asian space, Desh Pardesh, had been dismantled, and

there had not been a consistent South Asian presence in Toronto's Queer Nightlife scene since then. Noting the absence of Queer South Asian Nightlife, the founders of Rangeela decided to organize the party to raise money for monsoon relief and bring Toronto's Queer South Asian community together for a night of revelry and charity. Rangeela became a catalyst for bringing together community organizers and talents within the Queer South Asian community in Toronto, channeling their efforts and energy into a fundraising platform. The event was so successful that its founders decided to host Rangeela multiple times a year. As Shayk explains, "There was so much community that was built that day. So many people came out of the woodwork to support and celebrate that we *had* to have the party again. Moreover, Rangeela just became a recurring thing." Over the last thirteen years, the party has become a staple in the Toronto nightlife scene and one of the most significant extant Queer South Asian nightlife events in North America.

This thesis uses Rangeela as an example of the diverse nature of Queer nightlife spaces and the precarious position of transgender and nonbinary subjects within these spaces. While Rangeela operates as a center for Toronto's Queer South Asian community to gather, the centering of specific cultural iconographies, aesthetics, and productions alongside the privileging of cisgender male and Indian bodies creates a complicated social hierarchy within a space that advertises inclusivity and diversity. However, this case study is not meant to criticize Rangeela *or* dismiss this party's impact on the cultural landscape of Toronto's Queer nightlife scene. Acknowledging my positionality as an outsider to Toronto's South Asian community, I am unable to speak or argue for/against the needs of Queer, trans, and nonbinary folks living in that area, nor am I able to say whether a space like Rangeela can address the needs of those members of the Queer community. Instead, this example is intended to illustrate the ecosystem of the party and the unique experiences and relationships between the party, community members, and

the intentions of its organizers. As Hai articulates, Rangeela is “first and foremost a place for all gays, girls, and theys to come together and celebrate being South Asian and celebrate being Queer.”

Rangeela is known for consistently featuring performers who identify as trans and nonbinary in their lineups and for featuring those bodies in their promotional materials. My interest in the Rangeela party stemmed from an advertisement on Instagram that I came across while workshopping ideas for this thesis. The poster featured the word “Sona” (Hindi for “gold”) in letters that had the glimmering hue of gold foil. At the top of the advertisement was Kirat Cheema, the non-binary cover model for the August 2021 Rangeela party. Cheema was painted with exquisite gold eyeshadow and matching lipstick, which stood out in the pale blue light that washed over them. Cheema’s arms were adorned in aureate bangles, with large bells tugging on each wrist. One hand was gingerly placed on the side of their face, so delicately as if not to smudge their base makeup. The other was lifted at the level of their chin, their wrist slightly limp with the weight of the bells. Cheema wore a mustard yellow *dastār*, and their beard and eyebrows were accentuated with sparkles.<sup>6</sup> The representation of a Sikh model dressed in more feminine attire immediately caught my attention. In our interview, Shayk described the intention behind the styling and direction of the photo and the inclusion of a nonbinary model, explaining that the “stereotypical choice for a Sardar model is always the warrior archetype that has historically been presented to us.”<sup>7</sup> And we thought to ourselves, Well, there is a certain strength in casting someone whose femme presenting, you know. And so those are the little nuances in

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<sup>6</sup> A *dastār* is the traditional head cover or turban worn by people of the Sikh faith.

<sup>7</sup> Sardar is a term used to describe a Sikh male. It has its roots as an honorific to describe Sikh men who had military and leadership roles, but in some contemporary contexts, it has been defined as simply an adult male of the Sikh faith.



which we sort of make this a place of identity formation, a safe space for people of all identities.”

The relationship between the visual representations of trans bodies and the perpetuation of rhetoric around comfort and safety for those bodies in these spaces is evident in Shayk’s statement. Rangeela organizers deliberately utilized visual representations of trans and nonbinary bodies to restrict the area as not only a space for cisgender gay men but also a space that is open to transgender and nonbinary partygoers. The party also uses this medium to communicate that this space is available to individuals who aesthetically present themselves, like Cheema, in ways that express gender diversity. Rangeela’s tradition of utilizing members of the Toronto queer nightlife community as models for their advertising is further evidenced by the depictions of local drag artists, trans women, and nonbinary people peppered throughout their social media pages. Rangeela’s advertising does have its fair share of muscular cis gay men, a common feature in gay nightlife advertising. However, the use of representations of transgender and nonbinary bodies in the advertising to attract people of a wide diversity of gender identities might inadvertently construct an illusion of trans prominence within the Rangeela space that does not necessarily reflect the party's makeup.



Figure 1: This August, we're giving you 24-karat goals. 💛👉 Taken from:  
[www.instagram.com/p/CgFRcAtu0XQ/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA](https://www.instagram.com/p/CgFRcAtu0XQ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA)

One of the first things I noticed when I entered the Rangeela space was an overwhelming lack of femme and transmasculine bodies. This was a stark contrast from many of the Queer South Asian nightlife events that I have attended in New York and Southern California. The hall was filled from wall to wall with bearded men wearing flannel shirts, North Face puffer vests, and Timberland boots. This incarnation of diasporic South Asian masculinity raised questions about the sociopolitical position of brown gay bodies within the Queer Toronto body politic. The swathes of identically dressed South Asian men, the scent of Dior Sauvage and Old Spice permeating through the space, and the almost violent entanglement of limbs and muscle on the dance floor reminded me of the gay male circuit parties held in Los Angeles, albeit with a lot more layers of clothing. The bodies of transfeminine folks and cisgender women were not as present as the gay South Asian male bodies in this space. My group of six was composed entirely of transgender and nonbinary South Asians and two cisgender Sri Lankan lesbian women, one of whom was my cousin. Our group of femmes and queers stood out in the crowd.

When asked about the position of trans and nonbinary folks within the Rangeela space, Shayk responded:

*“It was brought to our attention that trans folks or trans women don’t feel as safe at the party. And, you know, it’s not something we will intuitively understand because we look at and go; what part of it do you not feel safe in? But then again, we recognize that our experiences are not everyone’s experience. And so even if it feels like a safe enough space to us, we kind of partnered with a local nonprofit organization. And we initiated what was an active bystander program at that point. And it was the Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention. So the acronym is ASAAP, and the agreement was that they were to send volunteers to walk the party in designated T-shirts. And if anyone feels unsafe, they just have to get a bystander involved and whatnot.”*

The response to the lack of safety experienced by trans women in the Rangeela space indicated the relationships between the organizers' identity and the party's population. As cisgender gay South Asian men, the organizers of Rangeela are accountable for their unique circumstances, privileges, and world views. When Rangeela was founded, the organizers had access to a primarily gay male social network which later expanded to include members from other parts of the Queer and trans community. However, this initial population created a core audience of cis gay men, most of the Rangeela community. As majoritarian subjects within this Queer space, organizers struggled to identify and address the struggles faced by minorities within the Rangeela space. Implementing ASAAP volunteers to rectify incidents of anti-trans violence simultaneously creates a network of possible community protection yet reinforces a

system of surveillance and policing of Queer spaces. A few volunteers patrolled the room's perimeter, shining flashlights into the eyes of partygoers who might have been getting too rough on the dance floor.

About an hour into the party, I remembered Hai had mentioned that water and snacks would be on the basement floor. My friends and I walked down a long flight of stairs into the basement. The creaky steps and the smell of mildew, sweat, and artificial fog were mildly nauseating. As we descended into the depths of the nightclub, my cousin Githmi whispered, "I think we're in Hell." The social atmosphere below was a complete 180 from the abovementioned chaos. The room was dimly lit by neon signs, bathing the small lounge in a pink and purple glow. Several trans women and nonbinary folk were seated in a circle on the leather couches in the lounge. In the corner, an art station was where someone was getting an intricate henna design painted on their top surgery scars. We noticed that more and more people who were not dressed like the cis gays upstairs trickled into the lounge. Some folks ordered drinks from the small bar and mingled, while others walked to the back of the lounge and entered a small passageway to line up to go to the bathroom. I realized that the only gender-neutral restroom was in the basement of the building, which immediately made me understand why so many femmes, trans folks, and nonbinary people would flock to this hidden area of the massive venue. In the line to the single-stall restroom, trans and nonbinary partygoers commingled and chatted.

Despite the marginalization experienced by transgender and nonbinary South Asians, the necessity of using bathrooms in the basements of queer nightlife spaces paradoxically serves as both a site of exclusion and a stimulus for alternate community formations. In the context of Latina sociality in nightclubs and bars, Cindy García

describes hyper-gendered social sites like nightclub bathroom lines as areas of refuge from the domineering grip of cis male assessment (García 2). Applying this concept to the context of trans and nonbinary South Asian sociality at Rangeela, kinship bonds formed in the line to the gender-neutral bathroom denote the presence of a shelter away from the dominant company of cis men. However, there is a certain trepidation associated with this liminal space. The gender-neutral underground bathroom reflects a more significant issue of trans people being relegated to marginal areas within Queer nightlife. The signage on the door indicates that one's identity becomes nullified in the more critical political operation of the space as trans bodies are removed from the dance floor to the party's shadowy margins. I noticed that the music did not fully reach this little crevice of the club; the muffled rhythm of a Bollywood beat vibrated through the walls, but this space downstairs was quiet enough for conversations. One trans woman asked the bartender to pour shots for her sisters on the couches. In the corner, a nonbinary friend that I had made that night shared a cigarette with one of the friends I came with, blowing the smoke out through a vent in the wall and giggling. The complex social networks formed in the basement also represent how ephemeral encounters between strangers, reconnections with good friends, and budding relationships can be manufactured through relegated spaces.

While transfeminine and nonbinary individuals may not represent most partygoers at Rangeela, they do comprise most performers, highlighting their prominent role in shaping the artistic and creative landscape of the event. Trans women and nonbinary drag artists constitute most of the performers represented at Rangeela. The party's website and social media pages are filled with advertisements depicting these performers. During my

visit, I watched drag performer Manghoe Lassi perform a thrilling lip sync to the song “Maar Dala” from the Bollywood film *Devdas* (2002) while dressed as a demon. At Rangeela, transfeminine and nonbinary drag artists ascend to the forefront. Their prominence as performers in this space reflects a broader inclination within the realm of Queer culture to exalt and celebrate femme performance. Still, it also exemplifies how this inclination has permeated the fabric of mainstream cultural expressions. This calls for exploring the intricate interplay between the realm of performance and the multifaceted nuances of femininity, effectively destabilizing entrenched societal constructs and opening new horizons for exploring gender identities. However, amidst this exploration, one must be aware of the dynamics that unfold within the sphere of Queer South Asian nightlife. While male performers often find themselves subjected to sexual objectification, drag queens are frequently desexualized, even if their performances possess inherent sexual undertones (Khubchandani 7). These nuanced dynamics delve into the intricate politics of desire in queer nightlife spaces. It is also essential to recognize that transgender and nonbinary drag queens are often championed for their contributions to the nightlife economy and entertainment of cisgender gay men. However, their equal treatment and representation in the spaces remain limited. COVID-19 has also impacted how drag queens are hired and showcased at Rangeela.

While the COVID-19 pandemic put considerable strain on Rangeela organizers’ ability to plan and execute nightlife events, including their capacity to host live performances and hire trans and nonbinary artists to perform at their parties, they found ways to address these issues. The meteoric rise to fame of the Indo-Guyanese Canadian drag queen Priyanka following her historic win on the first season of *Canada’s Drag*

*Race* in 2020 increased demand for South Asian drag.<sup>8</sup> In response, Rangeela hosted two digital drag shows which carved out a virtual space for transgender and nonbinary performers to expand their social networks, broadened the scope of Queer South Asian nightlife from physical spaces to virtual ones, and developed new ways for trans and nonbinary people to create community and participate in communal cultural exchange during a time of crisis.

The first of these events, *Akela*, gathered thirty drag performers worldwide to participate in Rangeela's first virtual drag show hosted on Facebook Live. "Akela" is the Hindi word for "lonely." The show was meant to address the isolation and separation felt by community members during pandemic quarantines. Due to the health risks posed by the pandemic, in-person events had to be moved to online platforms such as Facebook Live or Zoom. These digital platforms posed new challenges and changed the accessibility of these Queer nightlife events. By utilizing digital spaces, partygoers experiencing a sense of "loneliness" resulting from their isolation from physical community spaces found a means to revitalize these sites. Hai explained that "Akela" was important because it created a repository of performers from Canada, the United States, India, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and Australia for digital Queer nightlife spaces worldwide to recruit from. It was also significant because it linked these performers together, resulting in queens who had previously not known each other forming friendships and sisterhoods with each other. Hai stated, "It was like reaching across each other's hands and saying, 'Hey, we are here.' And then also what that ('Akela') did is it,

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<sup>8</sup> *Canada's Drag Race* is the Canadian installment of the American drag competition reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The first season of *Canada's Drag Race* was aired in 2020.

you know, it linked up all these other queens together. And they could collaborate and create things together.”

The second virtual event hosted by Rangeela was called *Yass Rani*, and it was advertised as “the biggest Bollywood party in the world” (@rangeelato, *Instagram* 2020). It was held as Rangeela’s Pride event in June 2020. “Yass Rani” featured around sixty drag performers, many trans women and nonbinary individuals. “Yass Rani” was born out of the links established by “Akela.” As shown on Rangeela’s Facebook page, performers reached out to each other, collaborated on joint drag performances, and found a virtual tipping system to raise donations for mutual aid. Virtual trans sibling networks such as the one created and reinforced by *Akela* and *Yass Rani* are examples of how trans subjects can develop community and expand the breadth of Queer nightlife spaces in times of crisis.

### **Desh Pardesh**

Khush (formerly Khush: South Asian Gay Men of Toronto and Khush Kayal) was the impetus for one of the most significant Queer South Asian nightlife and cultural events in Toronto: Desh Pardesh, which operated between 1988 and 2001. While I was unable to attend Desh Pardesh, my analysis of how transgender and nonbinary South Asians formed community networks is rooted in archival research at The ArQuives in Toronto, the South Asian Visual Arts Centre’s (SAVAC) oral history project on Khush, and the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). At the ArQuives, I analyzed newspaper and magazine articles, event posters, flyers, advertisements, journal entries, and mixed media, all either by Khush or about them from external organizations. Khush was established in 1987 by Nelson Carvalho and Philip Solanki as a response to the policing of Queer spaces and bodies during the AIDS epidemic. Community



organizers realized they needed to manufacture a space for South Asian gay men to gather and discuss their shared experiences of being simultaneously brown and HIV positive or assumed to be HIV positive (Carvalho and Solanki 1988). Halberstam references a quote from poet Mark Doty in his memoir of his lover's death from AIDS. He writes: "All my life, I've lived with a future which constantly diminishes but never vanishes" (Halberstam 4). This constantly diminishing future and the foreboding doom of potential death encouraged queer folk to manufacture community in relation to infection, death, and risk.

As a response to the invisibility of South Asians in the Canadian artistic landscape and as a need to bring the Queer South Asian community together in solidarity during the height of the AIDS epidemic, Khush launched the arts festival *Desh Pardesh*, held annually from 1988 to 2001. *Desh Pardesh* would run for approximately one week each year during the Summer. The arts festival format allowed participants to attend and host community showcases, film screenings, poetry workshops, dance shows, and art exhibitions during festival hours and host house parties, mixers, nightclub events, and more outside the festival hours. The multifaceted format of the arts festival facilitated the formation of a vibrant and interconnected community.

For transgender and nonbinary participants, this notion of community is complicated by the hegemonic influences of majoritarian subjects within cultural spaces, as rules are imposed on trans bodies to influence and regulate their movements. This is evidenced in the example of the underground bathroom at the *Rangeela* party and the prevalence of cis gay men on the dance floor. As Khubchandani argues, creating social networks within diasporic South Asian culturally based Queer nightlife spaces requires constant negotiations between notions of expansive Queerness and the cultural dominance of cisgender people within these spaces (Khubchandani 24). Additionally, the failure to record, acknowledge, and invest in trans and nonbinary people

within these spaces complicates these individuals' ability to form a sociopolitical presence and community networks. To examine how these community networks were constructed in Desh Pardesh, I examined archives of extant literature and materials from this nightlife event.

In an annual program guide for Desh Pardesh, Zainub Verjee, a writer and editor for Desh Pardesh's newsletter, pamphlets, and magazines, defines cultural space and posits several critical questions about the position of South Asians within these cultural spaces.

*“Cultural space is the site of social exchanges, spontaneous alliances, contests, and promised democracy. The idea of community within this cultural landscape as a place of identity, shared experience, and collective memory offers the perception of safety and family, a familiar place that feels like home.*

*Often, cultural spaces are the claim of the institution. Protected and controlled. Definitive claims to the community reduce its malleability. In the increasing complexity of lived struggles around issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality, how have artists confronted the shifting terrain of cultural space?*

*A narrow set of parameters in relation to content often accompanies definitive cultural communities, limiting access to those artists whose work does not focus on identity politics. These parameters have been defined by social, political, and historical factors. Is there room in the larger cultural realm beyond these conventions to imagine a diverse and spontaneous cultural practice that transcends current expectations of South Asians?”*

(Questions of Identity Politics, 21 July 1998, South Asia Collection, 13, 2, ArQuives)

Verjee employs the interrogative mode as a methodological approach to create a discursive space that fosters a community-based arts practice. These critical questions enable us

to deviate from understanding culture, community, and identity as static and essentialist, alternatively embracing a flexible conceptualization. Verjee defines Desh Pardesh as a space that advances the idea that cultural spaces are places of possibility for Queer and trans folks and a construction of home and family which extend beyond the normative and biological parameters. The purpose of establishing Desh Pardesh as a cultural space allows me to think about how culturally informed spaces are complicated by their positions as community sites and areas of institutional power.

While conducting my archival research on Desh Pardesh, I realized that present-day vocabulary to describe transgender and nonbinary individuals was virtually absent from the archive. However, it is essential to recognize that this lack of data does not indicate a lack of trans bodies in these Queer nightlife spaces. In her article, *Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation*, critical archival studies theorist and co-founder of the South Asian American Digital Archive, Michelle Caswell, asks, “What does it mean to be omitted from history textbooks? What are the implications of not being able to find any (or very few) traces of the past left by people who look like you, share your cultural background, or speak the same native tongue? What impact do these archival absences have on how you might understand your place in society?” (Caswell 26). Caswell defines these erasures and absences as symbolic annihilation and further explains, “the symbolic annihilation marginalized communities face in the archives has far-reaching consequences for both how communities see themselves and how history is written for decades to come. If archives are to be true and meaningful reflections of the diversity of society instead of distorted funhouse mirrors that magnify privilege, then they must dispense with antiquated notions of whose history counts and make deliberate efforts to collect voices that have been marginalized by the mainstream”

(Caswell 36). Using the concept of symbolic annihilation, I argue that excluding trans people, particularly trans people of color, from the Queer archives is indicative of a much larger project of cisnormativity. If transgender and nonbinary South Asians do not see themselves in Queer South Asian archives, how do they expect to feel represented and form community networks in present and future nightlife spaces? Most of the documents on Desh Pardesh I came across during my archival research at the ArQuives were written and curated by Queer South Asians identifying with their sex assigned at birth. Therefore, it is for these archival absences that I posit Desh Pardesh as a critical reflection of trans and nonbinary consciousness in South Asian American Queer nightlife and endeavor to utilize my identity as a trans nonbinary South Asian to actively “fight against symbolic annihilation” (Caswell 26). It is also important to note that the representation of transgender and nonbinary South Asians in these documents is reflective of the level of “outness” of participants, which could be complicated and influenced by a multitude of different factors, including their relationship with their friends and family, their position as racialized and politicized subjects, and for various other personal and cultural reasons. The notion of “coming out” may fit within paradigms of homonormativity, which dictate that Queerness requires individuals to reveal their sexualities and gender identities to participate in the political project of Queerness (Duggan 6). The symbolic annihilation of trans representation within these documents reveals the exclusionary aspects of Queer South Asian nightlife, even within legendary spaces such as Desh Pardesh, but also invites the potential for trans futurities in archives past, present, and future.

A 1992 event advertisement describes the energy of Desh Pardesh as being “imbued with the consciousness and collectivity of South Asia.” The duality of this event is significant because it gave people a reason to gather and meet other Queer South Asians, and it allowed participants

to utilize artistic media to exercise alternative modes of gender expression and sexual possibility. It also enabled participants to expand the possibilities of Queer nightlife from the festival space into other areas. In an oral history interview for the South Asian Visual Arts Center, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, a Queer nonbinary mixed-race Sri Lankan American, describes Desh Pardesh as “a catastrophe of brownness...in all of the best and most disastrous ways. I remember being there and seeing communist radical femme aunties in beautiful *salwar* and *sarees*, smoking cigarettes and flirting...I remember seeing lots of other young South Asians my age, some of whom, it seemed to me, were trying desperately to be as authentic as possible. And some other folks who were just such weirdos and freaks and people who didn’t fit into other communities and were just trying to find each other” (South Asian Visual Arts Center).

Since Desh Pardesh is no longer in operation, I accessed their Queer nightlife space through the archives. While doing archival research at the ArQuives in Toronto in October 2022, and after feeling a sense of alienation from the symbolic annihilation of transgender and nonbinary South Asians from their collections, I came across an event booklet that featured a list of performers for the June 1996 Desh Pardesh. One of the performers was Dr. Anurima Banerji. Banerji participated in Desh Pardesh from 1992 to 1996 and performed spoken word poetry and Odissi dance at Desh Pardesh. Incidentally, I had taken classes with Professor Anurima Banerji at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the winter and fall quarters of 2022. I felt a sense of connection when I saw her. I relate this experience of seeing someone I have a relationship with to Michelle Caswell’s article, *To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives*. In her article, Caswell states,

*“Seeing oneself reflected in archives has significant epistemological, ontological, and affective consequences. On a basic level, community archives provide an*

*empirical basis of evidence to assert communities' historical presence; they allow communities their presence in the face of silencing, marginalization, and misrepresentation. Yet, their power extends beyond the empirical to the ontological, in the sense that they affirm a perception of being among people who feel that mainstream media and cultural heritage institutions deny their very existence” (Caswell 74).*

After seeing Banerji in the archive, I reached out to them and asked them to interview them for this project. During our interview, we spoke about their rich experiences growing up in India and Canada and how those experiences allowed them to articulate uniquely South Asian rendering of gender. We discussed how performance and art shape our perspectives on life and survival as Queer people. Anurima expressed how their interaction with non-binary students has inspired her to take on she/they pronouns. While I could not attend Desh Pardesh in person, accessing their nightlife space through the familiarity of one of their archival subjects allowed us to create a new layer of a non-cisgender community network with each other. I use “non-cisgender” because while Banerji does not directly identify as nonbinary, they expressed in our interview that they do not fully subscribe to their sex assigned at birth. This form of community building underscores how comprehensive representations of Queer, transgender, and nonbinary South Asian experiences are cultivated within the archival landscape.

By analyzing the representation and non-representations of trans and nonbinary bodies within cultural spaces like Rangeela and Desh Pardesh, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion orchestrated by nightlife organizers, and the interactions among nightlife participants, a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding community building has emerged. Through the analysis of the Rangeela party, it becomes evident that transgender and nonbinary individuals

face challenges, such as the relegation to underground restrooms and the discrepancy between their representation as entertainers and their limited presence as attendees. Moreover, the absence of transgender and nonbinary voices within the archival records of the Desh Pardesh Arts Festival has underscored the need for alternative strategies to combat the invisibility and annihilation of trans and nonbinary experiences. Engaging with archival materials and building connections with party attendees has proven instrumental in forging alternative community formations that challenge erasure and foster inclusivity.

## ***Chapter Two: I Am Not Jasmine, I Am Aladdin.***

Prahas Rudraraju, a nonbinary transmasculine drag king and classically trained Bharatanatyam dancer, showcased their artistic practice at the Southern California-based South Asian Queer advocacy organization Satrang's Mujra Night. Rudraraju's performance was one of many that I had the honor of witnessing throughout my research period. When interviewing Rudraraju, they expressed that performing in drag was a form of aesthetic and performative introspection. Rudraraju employs their drag persona to delineate culturally informed proclamations of race, gender, and sexuality on their body and to their audiences. This chapter argues that transgender and nonbinary Queer South Asian nightlife performers use cultural production to present subversive, transgressive, and expansive articulations of gender and nuanced understandings of Queer South Asian possibility while addressing the tensions of race, gender, and cultural identity in these spaces. I will explore how drag artistry and Indian Classical Dance have been used to communicate these comprehensive depictions of gender and sexuality.

Drag has been an accessible avenue for Queer and trans folks to begin evaluating and experimenting with their gender and gender presentation. The figure of the drag performer ushers patrons into our nocturnal realm, coaxing partygoers into the folds of the club with promises of glamor and fantasy. Formerly relegated to their homes in nightclubs and parties, the emergence of the popular reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race* in the late 2000s through the present time has increased the visibility of drag performers, particularly drag queens, in global media. This is evidenced through the numerous *RuPaul's Drag Race* spinoffs, the prominence of drag queens in significant marketing campaigns, and mainstream media. As drag kings, genderfuck performers, and other disruptors gain increased visibility in Queer nightlife, these performers and their artistic practices create sociopolitical interventions with tremendous cultural ramifications.



Situating drag within the contested atmosphere of Queer South Asian nightlife spaces, this chapter addresses how both the figures of transgender and nonbinary South Asian drag performers and their performances challenge gender binarism and South Asian normative understandings of gender and sexuality while presenting alternative expressions of gender through artistry. Kareem Khubchandani's drag persona, "LaWhore Vagistan," is an example of how South Asian transgender and nonbinary performers use their characters to challenge this normativity.

Khubchandani utilizes Vagistan to address and interrogate the geopolitical and sociocultural tensions between the South Asian diasporic consciousness, racial infrastructure in Queer nightlife spaces, and gender hierarchies in normative Queer discourses. The figure of the performer is constituted by the self-articulated identity of the performer and the identity communicated through their drag persona (Khubchandani xv). In *Ishtyle*, Khubchandani describes their identity as a nonbinary, diasporic Sindhi raised in Ghana "with little attachment to India save for the heavy-handed nationalism of Hindi films" (Khubchandani xv). The name "Vagistan" was carefully selected to counter the global governance of South Asian bodies through Indian nationalism, nostalgia, and normativity. Vagistan utilizes frameworks of camp and satire to present a cheeky reconstitution of South Asian naming by gesturing to the expansiveness of sexual and gender possibilities of the South Asian subcontinent. Vagistan imagines a Queered and gentler South Asian geopolitic and identity than those enforced by South Asian states and hegemonies. The explicit racialization of Vagistan as South Asian or evoking a "South Asian aesthetic" is an instrument of political assertion in arenas like Queer nightlife spaces that privilege whiteness (Khubchandani xvi). Through these methods, Vagistan intercedes in South Asian, Hindu nationalist, and white Queer notions of gender, contributing to the

complication of South Asian trans bodies. Similarly, Rudraraju uses cultural references to address South Asian forms of gender heterogeneity.

Rudraraju's Mujra Night drag dance performance communicated the embodied signification of hybridized gender identity through their depiction of Ardhanarishvara, the avatar of the Hindu goddess Parvati, and the god Shiva amalgamated in a singular form. To convey this story, Rudraraju used Mudras, or hand symbols and gestures in Bharatanatyam dance, to convey emotion, language, and mythology. The mudra symbolizing Parvati was performed first, immediately followed by the mudra for Shiva. Rudraraju explained that the harmonious concatenation of the mudras exemplified the "nonbinary visual representation of the deity." Ardhanarishvara is the physical manifestation of the Vedic philosophies of how the universe was formed by combining Purusha, or "feminine" energy, and Prakriti, or "masculine energy." This figure is used to illustrate how the Ardhanarishvara acts as a conduit for Rudraraju to map out their desired gender presentation, allowing them to imagine possibilities beyond the confines of normative gender binaries and even beyond human lines (by conceiving divine or celestial expressions of the self). When asked why Rudraraju utilized this figure in their piece, they responded:

*"You can be a man and a woman, but you can also be both, right? So, I think in that case, I was showing Shiva in his traditional Nataraja pose, and then also how we show Parvati, which is usually like this (demonstrates mudras). Then I think I did like this to show like merging together and this to show like, can't that be the case? So that's kind of how I did the commentary for gender there. And that's not usually how we perform that piece ...Another thing about Shiva and Parvati is that there's literally Ardhanarishvara, which is, like, the depiction of*

*Shiva and Parvati together as one. So that's another reason why I was just like, why can't they be together? They're already like that. There's so much gender fullness in Hindu mythology.”*

By stating, “Why can’t they (Shiva and Parvati) be together? There’s so much gender fullness in Hindu mythology,” Rudraraju reexamines religious and cultural codes to find examples of gender expansiveness in Hinduism and Indian Classical Dance, simultaneously acknowledging the possibilities of gender within their own culture while interrogating traditional notions of gender binarism. Embodying Ardhanarishvara through Bharatanatyam dance in a Queer South Asian nightlife space, Rudraraju presents a commentary on expansive possibilities of gender in a recognizable format to their audience. The relationship between the audience and the performer in the nightlife space is essential to this analysis because it highlights the unique context in which these questions are being asked. Anjali Arondekar’s *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive* argues that traditional Queer aspects of Indian dance (particularly those practiced by Devadasis, or the courtesan caste) were stifled and considered immoral during the colonial Anti-Nautch movement (Arondekar, 2009, p. 07). British imperial powers and Christianity policed Hindu morality. In contemporary India, this colonial conservatism carries into dance spaces. Gender-expansive representation of deities and cultural/religious figures was seen as deviant in the eyes of the colonial regime, and gender-deviant people were seen as strange and aberrant in the eyes of the Indian public (Arondekar 18). Rudraraju’s practice of performing Bharatanatyam in Queer nightlife settings in Canada constitutes a recognition of pre-colonial articulations of queerness and the conscious resistance against these colonial regimes. Performing to a primarily Queer South Asian audience, Rudraraju

hybridizes Indian Classical Dance and drag artistry and contextualizes their idea of gender fullness in a way that is situated in their audience's cultural and colonial histories.

Rudraraju uses makeup and costuming to support the gender expansiveness represented through their drag. Before the performance, Rudraraju and I got ready together in my apartment in Westwood, Los Angeles. I watched in awe as they gingerly coated the lower half of their face in layers of dark powder. Using a sharp-tipped eyeliner pencil, they filled the shadowed space with small, linear markings to cosmetically manufacture a beard. Strong, arched eyebrows were painted on. Finally, Rudraraju used liquid pigment to adorn their eyelids with sleek, black liner. Upon completing their desired visage, Rudraraju leaned toward the mirror and admired their handiwork. “Ok, this is it, this is the face,” they enthusiastically proclaimed. During our interview, Rudraraju described that as a nonbinary transmasculine person, their relationship with makeup was complicated and often contentious. They described the imposition of makeup on their body by Bharatanatyam gurus, family members, and other figures in their lives as something that brought them immense pain and confusion, as if the validity and stability of their perceived gender were contingent on the addition of cosmetics to represent cis femininity. They stated that they used to wear makeup, particularly eyeliner, consistently to proclaim their “Indianness” and their femininity in the same way that South Asian women would do in the Bollywood films that they grew up watching.

When they began to reckon with their trans identity and experiment with aesthetics that deviated from Western cisnormative notions of femininity, Rudraraju realized tensions existed between their cultural identity and cosmetic presentation. “I loved wearing eyeliner. And I felt like through eyeliner; I could really connect with my Indian identity... But I stopped wearing makeup as much once I moved to DC. And I realized at that point I put makeup on so people

wouldn't treat me badly. I noticed that as I was becoming less and less feminine with my appearance, being in this weird genderqueer, liminal space was like opening me up to discrimination and that treatment again. Kind of similar to how it did in 2016 When I first cut my hair short.” Makeup becomes a nuanced medium of subjugation and empowerment as trans subjects are vilified for their cosmetic choices but are respected and celebrated for their subversive makeup in the context of drag and performance. Their use of makeup in different contexts demonstrates the way that articulations of gender can shift and fluctuate based on the intentions of the artist. When discussing a performance at a Queer South Asian nightlife event hosted by the D.C.-based advocacy organization Kush, D.C., Rudraraju states, “When am I going to get the opportunity to do drag king makeup again? I also knew that most of the folks in the audience were active members of Kush, D.C., at that point. This was a safe space for me to do that. And so, I just like really wanted to have fun with it.” By implementing drag king makeup in Queer South Asian nightlife spaces, Rudraraju finds opportunities where their cosmetic choices are respected and their performances of gender subversion are recognized. Using beards to represent South Asian notions of masculinity and eyeliner to gesture to femininity in their drag makeup, Rudraraju argues that drag performance presents opportunities for nuanced and expansive presentations of gender to exist.

For Rudraraju, conducting Bharatanatyam in drag allowed them to imagine performances where artistic practices related to culture and heritage can be used to subvert normative notions of gender. By doing so, performers like Rudraraju rewrite the unspoken hierarchies within these spaces and exhibit a clear and powerful social presence—Rudraraju’s coalescence of Hindu mythology. South Asian aesthetic practices and drag artistry are interesting because they accomplish many things. Firstly, in the same vein as Vagistan’s employment of South Asian

aesthetics to assert a political presence in Queer nightlife, Rudraraju's use of Bharatanatyam dance and the figure of the Ardhanarishvara is used to communicate their existence as a performer who is simultaneously Indian and transgender. Rudraraju specifically claims their presence as Bharatanatyam, a dancer in Queer South Asian nightclubs, to be integral to their feeling of being represented and establishing a cultural presence within these spaces. Drawing from their experiences, Rudraraju describes the lack of representation of Indian Classical Dance in homonormative Queer nightlife spaces and the simultaneous lack of Queer visibility in Indian Classical dance arenas.

Rudraraju states that "dancing Bharatanatyam is so important because, as nonbinary people, we don't see ourselves in those spaces anymore. Or, like, once we realized that we're queer, we might exit spaces like that and not get the chance to continue our training. So, I knew that most likely the audiences might not have been familiar with Bharatanatyam, or like, classical dance and what my Mudras might have meant, but I was like, let me do it anyway." The weaponizing of two modes of erasure-namely, the erasure of Queer and trans individuals from Indian Classical Dance spaces and the erasure of South Asians from queer spaces perpetuates a harmful dynamic of exclusion and marginalization. The erasure of Queer and trans people from Indian Classical Dance spaces hinders them from expressing and learning about South Asian cultural productions relevant to their lives and heritages. The erasure of South Asian references and bodies from Queer spaces results in the invisibilizing of South Asians in spaces where Queer folk asserts a political presence. This dual erasure contributes Queer, transgender, and nonbinary South Asians trapped in cultural spaces that marginalize and eradicate their identities. Queer South Asian nightlife spaces allow Queer and trans South Asians to utilize cultural references and find community in spaces that honor the cultural intersections of their identities. These

spaces enable transgender and nonbinary South Asians to use cultural production to present provocative and expansive notions of queerness and gender identity.

These subversion tactics can also be demonstrated through lip-syncs, musical choices, and costuming. Transgender Pakistani American drag king Twinka Masala's lip sync performance at a drag showcase for *Send Noodz* in 2023, is a prime example of how trans drag performers can continue to critique and subvert normative gender through cultural referents. *Send Noodz* is an L.A.-based monthly drag show featuring exclusively Asian American, Pasifika and Native Hawaiian drag performers. Since relocating to Los Angeles in 2020, Masala has been gaining traction within Queer South Asian community and social circles as a rising superstar in the drag universe. I had met Masala out of drag several times at various functions and gatherings, yet this was the first time I had seen them perform in person.

Masala strolled onto the stage in a royal blue kurta embellished with delicate filigree gold thread. Their silver loafers glimmered in the light, drawing attention to their steps as they confidently approached the microphone. Masala's face was painted with incredible detail and precision, marked by their signature cosmetic beard, thick eyebrows, and vibrant eyeshadow. A red turban was wrapped around their head. The lights dimmed, the crowd silenced, and a single spotlight focused on the figure on the stage. Even before they began their performance, Masala was a commanding presence.

The lip-synch performance began with the refrain of "A Whole New World" from the 1992 Disney film *Aladdin*. The song is a duet between the titular character, Aladdin, and his love interest, Princess Jasmine. The film and the music are contextualized in Agrabah, fictionalized and orientalized in Western Asia, and borrow heavily from Middle Eastern and South Asian aesthetics and architecture. Aladdin is a young, unhoused man who lives in Agrabah and, with

the help of a magical spirit called The Genie, transforms himself into a sultan to earn the affection of Agrabah's princess, Jasmine. The musical number of "A Whole New World" (sung by Brad Kane and Lea Salonga) features Aladdin and Jasmine on a flying "magic carpet," soaring across the world and professing their love and affection for each other. The conflation of Middle Eastern and South Asian geographies, depiction of brown-skinned characters, and portrayal of racialized heterosexual romance inadvertently resulted in Aladdin being part of the landscape of South Asian representations in Western media. Many South Asian Americans, including myself, grew up watching this film and identified with these characters (Kim 1). While the film's representation of Brown bodies is complicated, *Aladdin's* recognition is integral to Masala's use of cultural referents to communicate a South Asian picture of gender diversity in their lip-synch drag performance.

Noticeably, the only voice featured in the duet was that of the titular character. Princess Jasmine's voice had been removed from the mix. Masala's decision to exclusively use Aladdin's lines asserts a representation of masculinity, which categorizes and constitutes their persona in the moment of the lip-synch (Cheng 13). The recognition of Aladdin and the auto-orientalized aesthetics of the performer allows the relationship between Masala and the audience to be based on shared cultural knowledge through aestheticized nostalgia. As Jih-Fei Cheng describes in lip-synchs, "the lips dislodge sound from oration. What is also produced in the process is an injunction between effect and temporality in the sense that the singer is not present, but the emotions of the imagined singing subject are constituted excessively and conterminously by the staging of the drag performer alongside the recorded music" (Cheng 13) Lip-synching allows Masala to simultaneously illustrate physical and sonic representations of masculinity through the voice of Aladdin and the human characteristics of the drag performer.



As Aladdin belted his final verse, the music's rhythm shifted. My heart started to race in anticipation as I recognized the familiar beat behind this transition. Masala moved to the center of the stage and turned their back to the audience. Masala grabbed the buttons on their Kurta and sensually removed one sleeve, teasing the audience with the promise of a reveal. The audience roared in anticipation; shouts of “yass” and “slay icon” rang throughout the space as an ice-blue satin shoulder strap was exposed. The beat intensified and transitioned away from “A Whole New World’s” sweet melody.” We were not in Disney territory anymore. And then it happened.

Rapper Nicki Minaj’s famous opening line from her 2010 hit “Roman’s Revenge” filled the room, altering the sonic landscape.<sup>9</sup> As Minaj raps, “I am not Jasmine, I am Aladdin.” Masala whipped their kurta off and whirled to face their screaming audience. Masala’s musical transition parallels and complicates Minaj’s choice to assume Aladdin’s masculine role, contesting the idea that she is, by default, Jasmine. Masala’s lip-synch of a Black Indo-Trinidadian artist interrogates the phenomenon of South Asian diasporic subjects embodying gendered Black stereotypes in cultural productions. Sunaina Maira’s text, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*. Maira suggests that South Asian American youth internalize the role of Blackness in constructing femininity and masculinity (Maira 16). For example, Maira suggests that South Asian men attempt to embody Black masculine stereotypes in response to the emasculation of Asian men. In this overcompensation, not only do they perpetuate anti-Blackness, but also toxic male behavior. Similarly, South Asian women are compelled to challenge the gender roles prescribed to them, counterproductively channeling hypersexualized stereotypes of Black femininity (Maira 25). Twinka Masala complicates this because their performance rejects the binary repertoires of femininity and masculinity, detaching

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<sup>9</sup> Nicki Minaj is the stage name of Onika Tanya Miraj, an Indo-Trinidadian rapper. Incidentally, Minaj is my favorite artist.

from the problematic gendered stereotypes of Blackness explained in Maira's text. While embodying the non-Black character of Jasmine using the voice and lyrics of a Black woman, Masala builds upon Minaj's subversion to create alternative racial and gender-expansive paradigms.

Masala stood on the dance floor bathed in golden light, dressed in Princess Jasmine's iconic two-piece blue set. Masala was instantly recognizable as the Disney heroine, yet they still bore the beard and turban from their previous sartorial incarnation. Masala lip-synched to Minaj's fast-paced rap with ease and dexterity, perfectly hitting each word as they danced around the room, kicking and moving in a manic frenzy as the song reached its chorus. "Rah, rah, I'm a dungeon dragon. Rah, rah, I'm a dungeon dragon." I was out of my seat and on my feet, clapping and screaming at the top of my lungs as Masala whipped the turban off their head to reveal the waist-length, flower-encrusted braid hidden underneath. In an interview with *Eater Magazine*, Masala describes this as their "signature gender bendy reveal." Masala's body language became more fluid and feminine. They walked with their hips swaying, flicking their head back and forth so that their braid embraced one shoulder at a time. Naomi Bragin refers to "corporeal drag" as the "mutability of the body to perform many genders" (Bragin 78). Masala's choreography attempts to personify a multitude of genders throughout the performance, enticing their audience to address the capacity for gender and performances of gender to stray from staticity. The dissonance between the Aladdin and Jasmine costumes demonstrated Masala's desire to be perceived as beyond the gender binary and capable of embodying multiple genders at once or simultaneously none. The cultural politics of movement "can be manipulated to affect and corporeally critique gendered politics in dance spaces" (Khubchandani 36). Masala posits this critique of gender through their subversive choreography, use of the nostalgic figures of Aladdin

and Jasmine to communicate cultural relationality, music choices, and their disruptions of normative gender through their cosmetic and sartorial choices. By cleverly integrating familiar icons, symbols, and pop culture references, Masala illustrates how drag performers invite their audiences to question and reimagine the limits of gender identity. Masala's use of pastiche and camp sensibilities allows them to utilize Minaj's work and the exaggerated caricatures of Aladdin and Jasmine to juxtapose and mesh cultural references to design a tapestry of identities that subvert social expectations. Masala's performance demonstrates how cultural production in Queer South Asian nightlife spaces challenges traditional conceptions of gender.

From 1992 to 1998, Odissi dancer, poet, and scholar Dr. Anurima Banerji attended and performed various artistic forms at Desh Pardesh. Banerji shares how cultural production was a stimulus for bringing together people of shared heritages and affinities, nurturing each other through entertainment, and generating new economics of desire and possibility (Gopinath 16). Banerji identifies as a South Asian femme. During my interview with Banerji, they mentioned that "looking historically at the construction of the idea of South Asia, and how it speaks to a certain kind of regional formation and the common cultural foundations of many of the communities who live there today, was really important to me in terms of thinking through what femme-ness means." As a practicing Hindu, Banerji uses Hindu mythology and cultural vocabularies to understand how gender expansiveness operates within a South Asian context. However, Banerji was quick to distinguish the differences between normative and state-enforced Hinduism with Queer Hindu sensibilities, stating that "Normative Hinduism isn't invested in open ideas of sexuality and gender, even though they're very much present in the cultural ethos of the state and within the South Asian diaspora. So, it is like they (Queer and trans folks) are

suppressed or subjugated or marginalized. Even though I remember growing up and seeing Hijras on the streets, and it was nothing particularly unusual.”

Similarly to Rudraraju, Banerji performed Indian Classical Dance in Queer nightlife spaces. Banerji’s first foray into performing in these spaces was performing Odissi dance at an event to raise Queer consciousness in Canada. They mentioned that after their performance, they were asked to explain the connections between Odissi dance and Queerness. As Rudraraju also discussed, Indian Classical Dances and other South Asian dance forms are Queered through the implication that the dancing body is already in a state of spatial and temporal elsewhere (Arondekar 14). Like Rudraraju’s embodiment of Ardhanarishvara, South Asian bodies can interrogate normative and binaried gender through Queered Abhinaya, corporeal aesthetics, and embodied storytelling in Indian dance (Srinivasan 23). Abhinaya allows dancers to inhabit bodies, stories, and realms outside their lived realities. Rudraraju commented that being able to perform male roles was a source of intense gender euphoria for them, stating: “For me, I got so excited when I got to play the male roles. And when I was younger, I was like, ‘Oh, is this because I’m pansexual?’ But I realized there was something different at the time... I’m excited that it’s as if I’m a man, and I couldn’t really realize that at that time, but I just knew there was something about it that I liked about it.”. Rudraraju and Banerji’s Indian Classical Dance practices re-envision these nightlife spaces as sites of worship. By radically occupying these spaces and redefining them spatially and purposively, South Asian trans and nonbinary Classical dancers cultivate nuanced and expansive possibilities of gender.

## *Conclusion*

Peeling back the glittery veils of this nocturnal realm, this project reveals the complex dynamics of Queer South Asian nightlife spaces for transgender and nonbinary individuals. While these spaces serve as sites of empowerment, they can also be sites of struggle that embody many possibilities and contradictions. Despite the intention of Queer South Asian nightlife spaces to foster inclusivity, they can inadvertently reinforce hierarchical power dynamics. Evidently, from my archival research and ethnography, Queer South Asian nightlife reinforces notions of desirability, upholds binaried gender norms, and perpetuates social hierarchies. When I attended the Rangeela party for fieldwork, I ascertained that the glamorous trans and nonbinary bodies gracing their social media advertisements were absent on the dance floor. Instead, we were relegated to subterranean lounges. Amidst this marginalization, transgender and nonbinary South Asians still made community and formed friendships as the footsteps of cis gay men pounded above us. This underground “Hell” became more enriching than the cacophony of Grindr notifications and the sea of gay men above.

I originally began this project with rose-colored glasses. I wanted to discuss sites that have brought me tremendous joy and kinship. As a trans person, the number of spaces that allow me to present authentically and to achieve sensations of joy and liberation are finite. However, throughout this project and these past two years, I have realized that having a “cup half full” mentality about places as nuanced and political as Queer South Asian nightlife spaces contributed to a reductive, positivist mentality. This project showed me that community can be made in the unlikeliest circumstances.

Stumbling upon Dr. Anurima Banerji in the ArQuives after finding minimal data on trans inclusion at Desh Pardesh was one of the highlights of this experience. The symbolic

annihilation of transgender and nonbinary South Asians reflects a larger project of cisnormativity and raises questions about how transgender and nonbinary South Asians can form community networks in present and future nightlife spaces when they do not see themselves reflected in the archives. Visiting the event through the archive and building a relationship with someone I had previously known in a different context underscores the significance of seeing oneself reflected in archives and combating the erasure of non-cisgender existence. I am grateful for the community I have made with Dr. Banerji.

My conversations with Dr. Banerji and the number of outstanding performances I watched throughout the research process clarified how cultural productions offer critical platforms for transgender and nonbinary South Asians to explore the intersections of cultural identity, race, and gender. The performances of Prahaz Rudraraju and Twinka Masala allow us to understand how cultural references such as the deity Ardhanarishvara and the film *Aladdin* can be used to not only reformulate our understanding of gender within the South Asian community but also to understand how transgender and nonbinary performers create complex and multifaceted manifestations of self. These performances challenge the landscape of Queer South Asian nightlife by countering structures of cis-gay male dominance and normativity within these spaces through femme artistry.

This thesis has explored how transgender and nonbinary South Asians tackle the possibilities and contradictions within the vexing atmosphere of Queer nightlife spaces, illustrating how these spaces' elements can complicate cultural productions and community building. Oral history interviews, archival sources, and my autoethnographic accounts show that despite being racial majorities in nightlife, transgender and nonbinary South Asians are minoritized and often invisibilized by their gender identities and gender presentation. As

transgender and nonbinary South Asians continue to navigate these nocturnal realms, we must recognize and respect our position as radical forces of change.

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