30

Placing South Asian Digital Diasporas in Second Life

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> *Who has not known, at this moment, the surge of an overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for "times past?" And yet, this "return to the beginning" is like the imaginary in Lacan – it can neither be fulfilled nor requited, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery – in short, the reservoir of our cinematic narratives.*
>
> (Stuart Hall, 1993, p. 236)

In this essay, I extend existing work that examines how technologically mediated diasporas occur at online/offline intersections specifically in relation to "South Asian," "digital" and "diasporic." This is done through a personal, affective engagement within these spaces. My narrations privilege personal routes, drawing first from my experience as a "nomad" in predigital times (offline) to illustrate what I mean by "communicative spaces of diaspora" and second, from a cultural route through Second Life that follows Indian looking clothing stores, dance clubs linked with South Asian remix, Bollywood music, and related symbolism to examine "digital diaspora" in virtual worlds. In doing so, I also explore and discuss how the ways in which mediated spaces of diaspora have made a subtle shift from post 1960s "imagined community" to "digital diasporic networks."

Stuart Hall (1993) has noted how nostalgia and affect form the foundation for building narratives of identity and belonging. In the quote above, he refers to "cinematic narratives." In this present article I look at how we build "reservoirs" of mediated narratives in communicative spaces of diaspora. This is illustrated through the examples. The first describes offline predigital communicative spaces of diaspora based in post-1960s flow of professional, mostly upper caste and upper caste, western educated labor away from South Asia towards modernity, internationalization,

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and development. The second takes us through some scenarios on Second Life with built environments appealing to South Asian affect.

Identities produced within digital contexts enabled by computer software and hardware, are made possible through the coproduction of sociocultural digital place and global networks involving time-space compression. These sociocultural contexts are coproduced by inhabitants who access these contexts. The sociocultural literacies of these inhabitants determines the kinds of free labor (Terranova, 2004) they contribute towards the building of these spaces. The continued inhabiting of these spaces leads to a reorganization of social space and everyday practice similar to that experience by call center workers from India who are tuned-in to time-zones and cultural practices in the Western worlds as described by Ananda Mitra in his work on outsource call center workers (Mitra, 2008). Therefore they experience a social, affective transformation that orients them towards life in global multicultural communities similar to those encountered by those in diaspora. Further these online residents also experience displacement and disorientation similar to that produced in social encounters within diaspora. However this is still not the same as that encountered by traveling bodies. Thus, while the digital diasporas produced through online encounters of global environments can affectively simulate diasporic life and even actually change the everyday praxis of offline bodies the experience is not fully that of those in diaspora. Simultaneously, the digital spaces are also inhabited by younger generations from various diasporas the world over. Contact zones of geographical dispersed diaspora from South Asia are produced in the encounter between these differently located digital subjects. Thus, these spaces can be considered transitional places orienting digital subjects towards a particular kind of multicultural globalization. They provide the entry point for new and emerging digital forces connecting from nonglobal geographical areas of South Asia that are not quite fully rural but neither are they fully urban and global in the way in which scholars such as Sassen (1996) have described global cities.

These present generations of global workers thus live in a:

> dynamic moment in history [when] the First and Third Worlds are involved in a major confrontation of cultures, while the Third World and its myriad diasporas in the West are engaged in an attempt to reframe their cultural identities to stave off the threat of "cultural genocide," through the effects of a rampant globalization (Rajgopal, 2003).

There are several entry points into online South Asian digital formations. Some privilege the cultural and social practices, some privilege the economic routes. The several "routes" crisscross in layers. Neither the cultural nor the economic routes are mutually exclusive. The cultural entry point tends to precede the economic layer sometimes and the economic quest for jobs tends to precede cultural transformations. These digital places and global networks become potential transitional places (Naficy, 2001) and contact zones for the formation of transnational subjects able to work within the increasing digital global economy through sociocultural processes facilitating the further intellectualization of labor (Bratich, 2008).

Post-1960s imagining of community, for instance, materialized through communicative spaces of diaspora, where "home" was a romanticized, frozen place remembered through nostalgic storytelling and through radio, LP records, slides, photographs, home movies and occasionally televised and screened movies from the subcontinent. Diasporic affect based in nostalgia for a geographical location of home fostered connections between diasporic groups that identified as originating from the South Asian sub-continent with sub-groups formed along nation, religion, language, and sometimes even caste. Post-1960s migration from the South Asian subcontinent was also a response to international modernization. The United Nations (and related global nongovernmental organizations) and the IMF came to be seen as global facilitators of development and upliftment of "underdeveloped" nations, while the United States rose to the status of superpower. It is well known that the 1965 immigration act was a result of US labor needs as well as the political need to be perceived as more open than before.

In the post-1960s waves of migrations, "South Asian" group identities were more strongly forged than in previous generations as a response to the professional and social expectations of that time. In cosmopolitan international social gatherings, such as those attended by a growing number of UN officials from the subcontintent, exclusive identification along national, religious or caste identities (as in "Pakistani", "Indian", "Hindu", "Muslim", "Brahmin" and so on) were discouraged through social cues pointing to the nonmodern nature of such ways of identifying. Rather, religious and linguistic diversity was celebrated as part of world cultures. Further, this Modern space was urban-centric. The rural could be romanticized when spoken of, but South Asian "third-world" rural practices in everyday living were considered unhygienic, backward, and primitive – the opposite of Modern. The professional class and their families therefore learned to police themselves into the appropriate cosmopolitan, modern socio-cultural behaviors expected of them in such public international spaces. Religious, regional, and rural based everyday practices, if they persisted, were contained in the private space of the home, where the woman became the keeper of culture.

Digital Diaspora

"Digital diasporas" occur at the intersection of local/global, national/international, private/public, offline/online, and embodied/disembodied. In digital diasporas, a multiplicity of representations, mass media broadcasts, textual and visual performances, and interpersonal interactions across geographical locations occur. The material and discursive shapings of community through such digital encounters indicate nuanced and layered continuities, discontinuities, conjunctures and disjunctures between colonial pasts and a supposedly postcolonial present. Thus, digital diasporas occur within racially, geographically, culturally, ecologically, and socioeconomically marked configurations of the local which in turn exist within a power structure that conflates a certain specific sociocultural, urbanized way of

living as "global." Various transnational traveling subjects as they travel through cyberspace – through mouse-clicks and keyboard taps, multitasking between various online and offline activities, conversations and "windows" – negotiate an online existence within such technological environments in different ways.

The digital encounters of interactive meaning-making in these digital diasporic spaces produce not only social and digital spaces of cultural representation but also contact zones of cultural contestation. Mary Louise Pratt defines her contact zone as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (1992, p. 4) These contact zones are "the space[s] of colonial encounters, the space[s] in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (p. 6). This notion of a contact zone is predicated on the unequal power structures of colonial encounter that usually involves (white) Westerners and nonWestern cultures in the era of colonization. The asymmetrical relations between the West and the East, United States and India, NRI (nonresident Indian) and RI (resident Indian) and so on are also lived via digital diasporas in the age of digitization, circulation and globalization of specific kinds of cultural and material capital embedded in sociocultural processes of meaning making shaped through the social and economic logics driving the proliferation of digital technologies and labor.

Digital Diaspora as Transitional Place

In post-1990s globalization, digital diasporic space functions as a transitional *place* (Naficy, 2001, p. 5)[1] and a cybernetic place (Mitra, 2006) where transnational corporate workforces are produced through an interplay of identity, sociocultural practice and layered literacies. Note that when I speak of digital diaspora – I am not limiting myself to talking only of South Asians in diaspora who are online. Drawing on Ananda Mitra's work on call centers and outsourced labor from India, where he looks specifically at the process of outsourcing call center work to India and finds that although workers in globalized call centers do not physically "travel" to a new "real" place, their job description makes it imperative that they adapt themselves to a new culture when they are in their workspace – that is, they have to "talk the talk" and "walk the walk" of their clients. Call center employees are exposed to similar struggles (of race, oppression, Otherness, etc.) that diasporas traditionally face, despite the absence of movement from one place to another (Mitra, 2008). Therefore, the South Asian digital diaspora that I describe includes all those who connect to online space from South Asia.

I am not claiming that the experience of the digital diasporic subject replicates literally the offline embodied experience of diasporic populations as they negotiate offline placed relations. The experience of the veiled South Asian Muslim body traveling with body through transitional places such as airports and through global

cities such as New York is certainly a far different experience than that of the veiled Muslim woman who sits in Hyderabad, India and connects to digital space via her avatar in Second Life (whether or not the avatar is in fact veiled or dressed in non-western attire). So I once again emphasize that the two – digital diaspora and offline embodied diaspora – must not be considered as one and the same. However, neither should digital diaspora be considered as not real or not embodied – life online is real and we do not "leave behind" the body when we use computers to immerse ourselves online. An aching back, carpal tunnel, dry eyes, and other bodily reactions attest to our different experiences of embodiment at and in the computer interface as we inhabit virtual worlds.

In the business sector, the concept of digital diaspora has been taken up – since the late-1990s – to mobilize digital labor. In 2000, there was a digital diaspora initiative sponsored by the United Nations that focused on trying to mobilize Nonresident Indians of the educated and professional classes to help bridge technology gaps. These diasporic Indians were drawn into the service of connecting India to globalization processes by training and educating labor in addition to investing capital into mostly information technology related businesses in India (DeHart, 2004). Monica DeHart notes that:

> The Digital Diaspora projects were modeled after the IndUS Entrepreneurs (TiE) network, a partnership of South Asian technology-industry professionals who organized a non-profit organization in 1994 to foster entrepreneurship and development throughout the Indian diaspora (DeHart, 2004, p. 253).

Thus at this time what was emerging as an online presence of "South Asians" in diaspora that began to be referred to by some as "South Asian digital diasporas" became more of an "Indian Digital Diaspora."

This Indian digital diaspora became a site – a space – of transition for work forces to get trained socially, culturally, and technically to be part of the digital global economy. The present article extends existing literature on Indian digital diasporas through a critical lens, by looking at particular South Asian and Indian presences in the three-dimensional virtual world[2] known as Second Life (see www.SecondLife.com). A central continuing concern that shapes the article is the question of how South Asian Diaspora as well as people from the geographical sub-continent of South Asia connect with and use digital technologies, digital media, digital networks, digital space, and digital place.

Thus, while both kinds of diasporas that I refer to in this article are based in economic migration and founded on economic quests for upward mobility or survival, each of these groups is socialized into the work and social environment as ideal worker, native informant and model immigrant through different sociocultural processes, requiring different kinds of sociocultural literacies and different types of laboring.

In this essay, therefore, I extend existing work that examines how technologically mediated diasporas occur at online/offline intersections specifically in relation

to "South Asian", "digital" and "diasporic" by examining how South Asian/Indian presences are manifested in the virtual world known as Second Life. These are topics that have been studied by scholars who examine South Asians socio-cultural formations online since the early-1990s have included issues of nation, gender, class, caste, and sexuality in relation to technological environments and globalization (Rai 1995, Lal 1999). Much of my research for this essay comes through ongoing immersive ethnographies at online/offline intersections, through rural and urban travel, and through cyberethnographies. In doing my offline ethnographies, I follow traditions based in feminist postcolonial anthropology (Visweswaran, Narayan, Abu-Lughod) and critical ethnography (Madson). In doing cyberethnographies I draw upon mostly cultural studies based research traditions developed through the past 10 years of online research.

Online Ethnography

Early researchers of cyberculture (especially in early 1990s) faced the internet with a certain amount of bewilderment in terms of method for studying what was happening online. Several were caught up in the sheer fascination of being online and mere descriptive writing about the Internet and euphoric claims about the potential of hypertext were the theme in much of that writing. However that was also the time that several researchers began to pose questions about the nature of the communication enabled and social spaces produced within this human-machine continuum. Researchers such as Lucy Suchman, Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway are already been writing about the human technology encounter in ways that seem suitable for what the researchers of Internet based communication were seeing when they approached the Internet as culture. Thus scholars such as Don Slater, Nancy Baym, Annette Markham, Lisa Nakamura, and Lori Kendall, reached for ethnography as a way to study these online cultures by living in both online and related offline environments. Thus critical questions raised were as basic as:

> How do ethnographic practices and the ethnographer evolve in an online context? How are they revolutionized? What constitutes the field and how do we define the boundaries of the field? Further, can we transpose concerns that arise out of RL (real-life) anthropology or face-to-face ethnography onto the study of virtual communities without seriously considering the very important differences in the nature of face-to-face interaction and virtual interaction and thus confuse the issues? When can RL anthropological and critical issues be considered relevant to online ethnography? (Gajjala, 2004, p. 29).

Ethnography as a way to research online environments in present times is an established and authorized method and continues plays a key role in communication and cultural studies scholarship (Bell, 2001). Christine Hine (2000), for instance, uses the label of "Virtual Ethnography" to describe her approach to the study of

cyberculture and examines cyberspace both as a culture, social space, and as a cultural artifact. Thus, the Internet as cyberspace is simultaneously a product of culture and is produced by people with contextually situated goals and priorities. Thinking about the Internet as culture, thus allows us to approach the human-machine continuum through everyday practice. Further ethnography, to use Susan Leigh Star's (1999) characterization, is "tempting" (p. 383) for those of us interested in studying online interactions as communicative environments. Ethnography allows us to examine contradictions and diverse meaning-making practices by connecting speech, action within socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts. Currently, multiple examples of studying the Internet through ethnography exist (e.g., Hine, 2000; Markham, 1998; Miller and Slater, 2000; Turkle, 2005).

In order to examine digitally mediated sociocultural activity, it is necessary to "obtain" both online and offline data. This is an important point to note as, later, I discuss digital diaspora and attempt to differentiate between *digital* diasporas and *offline* embodied, place-based diasporas.[3] In addition, the researcher struggles to stay focused on trying to articulate everyday practices of weaving in and out of online and offline states of being, on a continuum based in everyday life in order to point to the nuanced relational nature at online/offline intersections.

Therefore, in order to gain fuller understandings of situations at online/offline and global/local intersections, the researcher is compelled to continually *live* both online and offline – viewing online/offline and global/local as continuums and not as binaries. Researchers such as Boellstorff (2008) have made the argument that Second Life is a place for residents of Second Life, that is those who own avatars that live and participate in the various activities in Second Life. This argument can be understood through a living within and affective engagement with various communities within Second Life which engenders an affective sense of belonging and placement as the human using the online avatar gets drawn into the ownership of real estate, building of homes, and participation within neighborhoods.

My preferred methodology, as a consequence, is what we might call a deep "hanging out" in various places simultaneously online and offline[4] as well as fully offline, in order to understand how practices of daily life in these environments shape meaning making practices in our world today. Thus, the research in this current article is also based in cyber(auto)ethnographies, offline ethnographies and especially in epistemologies of doing (Gajjala, Rybas and Altman 2007). The economic, cultural and social always intersect with the personal in some way and as a critical feminist scholar, my stated point of entry into any project is through a revealed personal location.

Communicative Spaces of Diaspora

My journey into communicative spaces of diaspora has always been initiated through a search for community. My physical journeys away from my country of origin began at age three, and, although I have always had a home address in India

that I returned to there, and although most of my schooling happened in that geographic location, "community" for me has always been built - never taken for granted – put together from those around me and from memories, things, media and communication tools. As far back as I can remember I have always had to work at being a community member or at gaining community support for myself. So I have never thought of community as existing without my participation in it in some form. Much of my early knowledge of a "home" in India came to me through letters from my siblings – read out loud (before I could read) by my father. It was the active reading of these letters and the enacting of emotion through his narration that brought my siblings' worlds into mine. They existed because of the letters and because the content of the letters were communicated to me by parents who were invested in my connecting with my siblings and their community. Likewise, through stories about my parents experience with the Gandhian way of life, their investment in a nation free from British Rule was conveyed to me. But their investment in remaining connected to that nation was visible to me in everyday life through observing their media consumption patterns and through consuming the same media as they did (since there were no i-pods in those days, I had no choice but to share in these acts of consumption unless I was outdoors climbing trees).

Thus my envisioning (which to this day remains mostly an envisioning) of Bombay (I say Bombay rather than Mumbai because that is the place in my memory) came from black and white photos, stories narrated by my parents, and from the letters written by my siblings. My affective understanding of "home," at that time, came from my mother's singing, my father's reading and chanting of Sanskrit and Telugu texts, from the nostalgic stories they narrated, the long-playing records of varieties of music from India, and from radio broadcasts on a shortwave radio from "All-India Radio." In the 1960s and 1970s, the television, radio, news reports, letters, telegrams, and the telephone were some of the ways in which we would connect to some sort of "community" from "home." Yet, for a child who had spent more time outside of this home-nation than within it during her first 16 years of life – home and community were always clearly mobile and always in the affective space of imagination constructed through other peoples' memories.

In embodied form, this "community" came together in Indian/South Asian potluck parties with their aromas, incense, and multiple tongues spoken while some form of music from that continent played in the background. Very early in life, then, I learned community must be built – through choice and circumstance. Circumstance determined where I was physically placed. Choice allowed me to choose or be chosen to engage in specific social, educational, and economic activities that made me part of a community.

So when the Internet and the notion of emailing messages became a possibility in my adult life, it was but logical that I looked actively for "community" through that screen as well. Since the teleology of events had always been disjointed and nonlinear in a sense, community was always to be put together in the day-to-day through active participation, production and redefinition of self through consumption and communication. Therefore, constructing community in Internet space, as

scattered bytes that came together to form messages, seemed a logical way of seeing the world. Thus in 1992, the first thing I sought to do through this communication medium was to build community through encounters and collaborative meaning-making with the people I came in touch with.

My past and continuing research quests come from this urge to build and connect to "community" through multiple locations. Therefore my work has involved building, joining, and participating in online communities while also engaging in extended periods of offline ethnographies in different "locals" (Northwest Ohio and South India). I continue to examine online formations that are referred to as virtual communities and digital diasporas through the lenses enabled by what I learn in these online and offline journeys.

Looking for "India" on Second Life: 2003 to 2008

Prior to encountering "Second Life", my experience with three-dimensional communicative environments came from having tried out what was known as "Alphaworld" in 1997, and from watching my son play computer games in the late-1990s and early-2000s. My experience with text-based MOOs and MUDs allowed me to understand the logic of building selves and worlds within online multiuser environments. In 2003, I got an account on Second Life mostly because I needed something that functioned like a MOO but also had a graphical user interface for use in my class assignments. In my classes on performing digitally mediated identities I had been using MOOs (specifically Linguamoo and PMC moo) to make my students understand the notion of constructing identity and community in online settings. The use of MOOs pedagogically allowed me to make them see how identity and context functioned together and how existing hierarchies shape such identities and contexts. In addition MOOs provide a way to map the social codes, practices, and cues inherited by web 2.0 social networking systems and instant messaging practices.

Once I entered Second Life the best way for me to learn more about this environment was to explore by looking for anything that seemed Asia-like, while trying to make my avatar look more ethnic. Apart from a place called Sone Ki Lanka with a Buddhist stupa like structure and pillars with textures made of images that looked very much like the Sculptures from the temples at Belur and Halebid in Karnataka, I found very little non-European looking environments there. Nor was I able to modify my avatar to look properly raced or ethnic.

In those initial months, however, Second Life was comparatively slow and had very little social life for me to explore. Later, in 2004, I reinvented myself and got another avatar and gained some more insight into the communicative environment. It was not until 2006 when I reinvented myself yet again as "rad Zabibha" and went looking for Bollywood, that I actually found "India" on Second Life. India on Second Life took various forms – appeared in various symbols, clothes, avatars and places in Second Life. This time I decided I was going

to live there for a longer time and even set up my own business in selling "handloom." In what follows I draw on rad Zabibha's explorations, experiences and observations on Second Life. In order to maintain confidentiality and adhere to the Second Life codes I will not use any real names – neither the first life real names nor the Second Life real names. I will also try not to use the names of actual Second Life locations when the mention of such might reveal either the Second Life identity or first life identity (or both) of any of the Second Life avatars I refer to here. However, some locations and Second Life characters are Second Life celebrities – public figures – and it is likely that I will use actual Second Life names.

Second Life as Transitional Place

If Second Life is viewed as a transitional place – then the work and play activities within this virtual world become infused with more meaning than when it is viewed as a world unconnected to the real where horny adolescents play out sexual fantasies. The social, cultural, and technical activities come under the categories of skills development and free labor. Bollywood becomes an ambassador of digital worlds rather than a mere multicultural identity marker or a signifier of difference within an otherwise "white" cyberspace. In order to lay out some context for my Second Life based narrative, I need to show the reader a few quick discursive snapshots of "desi" living on Second Life. Contrary to popular belief, Second Life is not a white male space. Nor is it just a North American or even a Western space even the software and hardware based three-dimensional environment is an initial product of western cultures and the company – Linden Labs – is located in the United States. For instance, a news article from the Indian Express states that:

> About 90 per cent of the accounts registered from Delhi are engaged in some serious financial investments … One of the more common ways of investing in Second Life is to buy virtual real estate. Then, like in the real world, the user can wait for property prices to escalate, before selling at a profit. The entire transaction is carried out in Linden Dollars, which can be converted into real world currencies on the exchange.[5]

Second Life Bollywood: A New World Beckons

In 2007, Indusgeeks produced a machinima called India in Second Life – shot on location on Bollywood Island.[6] "A new world beckons" is the very first line that appears on the screen, while young men and women from all vocations are shown rising up in a trance and running towards what turns out to be Bollywood Island

in Second Life. While the exoticization of the Indian is a very obvious point to note and may not carry much significance in itself in a place like Second Life that is fashioned around the production of exoticized selves, what was striking to me was that there was potter dressed in village garb who was one of the entranced group of people running to Second Life.

This notion of new world resonates with a discourse that is emerging regarding "Bollystan" as "India's diasporic democracy" (Khanna, 2005) with the likes of Aishwarya Rai (who's profile on myspace emerged around the time that Rupert Murdoch bought the social networking site) and Sharukh Khan being proclaimed as ambassadors of Bollystan. In this mediated environment, where Bollywood becomes representative of "India" for much of the second and later generations of diasporic Indians.

While it is true that mobile generations of south Asian youth hang out in social network systems and blogs such as LiveJournal, Facebook, Orkut and hi5 (masked in semi-anonymity) and even remix videos posted on YouTube blur notions of transnational sexuality and notions of "Indianness," as they hide behind and digitally manipulate Bollywood and other pop icons and music, this particular video with its characterization of a "new world" beckoning in Second Life in fact recodes these transgressions through the heteronormative perfection of three-dimensional imagery. In other Web 2.0 venues there is a continuing play on gender and identity as the Bollywood icons produced in such communities are subjected to a gaze that blurs the boundary between heteronormative idolization of Bollywood stars and queer pleasure, while also producing uncertainty about geographic location as they appear to multitask between work, fun, and offline/online formations of friends.

However, the characterization of a Bollywoodized 3d new world, evident in the machinima described above, re-instates hierarchies and binaries while also reproducing a very specific euphoric vision of development. It is not within the scope of the current article to discuss and elaborate on how youtube and other web 2.0 social networking tools are used in South Asian digital diasporas. There is work being done on how fan communities and remix Bollywood music performs South Asian digital diasporas (see for instance Zuberi, 2008), but my focus in this section of the article is on Second Life and south Asian digital diasporas. Even as, in actuality, there is much gender-bending and "cross-dressing" of avatars with great ease, the actual avatars produced – whether or not their owners sitting at the computer are of the same sex/gender – are made to look, dress, and behave in a highly heteronormative way following a post-1995 Bollywood notion female and male embodiment. So who is this vision of Bollystan-Second Life being presented to? And who is presenting it? Where are these future visions emerging from in relation to Second Life? As these kinds of re-presentations attempt to showcase status quo heteronormativity and westernized development in this "new world," how, if at all, are these codings and reinstating of norms being negotiated?

Second Life Desi Dancing Clubs – Re-mixing Digital Diasporas

In her article on "Henna and Hip Hop", Sunaina Maira writes:

> The youth subculture created by South Asian American youth in New York City is based on remix music that was first created by British-born Asian youth in the 1980s and that layers the beats of bhangra … It mixes a particular reconstruction of South Asian music with American youth popular culture, allowing ideologies of cultural nostalgia to be expressed through the rituals of clubbing and dance music. … This remix subculture includes participants whose families originate from other countries of the sub-continent, such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, yet these events are often coded by insiders as the "Indian party scene" or "desi scene," where the word "desi" signifies a pan-South Asian rubric that is increasingly emphasized in the second generation, and which literally means "of South Asia," especially in the context of the diaspora (Maira, 2000, p. 240).

On Second Life, several such dance clubs exist, where young men and women of South Asian descent and their non-South Asian friends "hang out". At least so it appears to the Second Life avatars who visit these clubs.

Here I draw my analysis from visits to dancing environments and the observations are based on my experience of them. I must make clear that my understanding of these comes from a "deep hanging out" in various dancing clubs on Second Life in order to understand some apparently sociotechnically scripted codes for behavior in such environments. Thus, I have visited dancing clubs that self-describe as Hispanic clubs, as Middle-Eastern, as Reggae, as Jazz, as "desi", as Bollywood focused and so on.

I describe these environments based on specific visits that I made to a few Indian and South Asian themed dance clubs. In Second Life – no "place" stays static for long. Groups and individuals are continually rebuilding and relocating – therefore the dance club experiences I discuss here can only be located in my affective experience and memory of the events and on snapshots and various YouTube videos taken by various Second Life residents as they visit these clubs.[7] Thus, my own reading of performative cues are what I rely on as I describe these clusters of activities.

All these dancing clubs have basic scripted objects[8] – a dancing ball, or a floor with dance scripts – to animate the avatars. They all have streaming media set up – where the songs are streamed from a server (such as shoutcast or something else) onto the Second Life location. Most of them have tip balls or some form of money collecting scripted objected and some also have exploding objects that are scripted to allow visitors to enter into a competition to win the jackpot by making a money contribution. Some clubs have themed dances and competitions for dancers to enter (this is also done through scripted object), where fellow dancers get to vote for the "best dressed female in pink" or something such theme decided by the club owners.

In dance clubs focused on Indian interests, there is often a stock set of Bollywood remix music (and sometimes even video) streaming in. The Second Life avatars in these clubs are dressed in a variety of clothes but more and more of them (since 2007)

are dressing in ethnic seeming garb modeled mostly after Bollywood characters' dresses. Since 2007 Second Life residents and business owners have noticed more and more sari designers, for instance.

Since the practice of designing of a sari using photoshop requires a certain amount of dedicated patience and continued effort in trying to get the detail and shape just right so as to make it look like a sari that an Indian from India would recognize as a sari – this increased production of saris, to me, indicates at least an increased interest in the consumption of such attire by Second Life avatars.

While the Goreans, a role-playing group that inhabits Second Life (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gorean for a quick description of the Goreans), are interested in saris, they have not been as particular about how "Indian" sari-like it should be. The Second Life avatar of Indian origin tends to be more knowledgable of a particular set of practices around sari wearing and this seems to influence what they consider to be apparel worthy of the name "sari." This is reflected in their consumption and production of saris and comments about saris when their avatars are wearing them. Interestingly, then this female attire becomes a certain symbol of "authenticity" of Indianness at the same time as it is still exotic and sexualized through its use by the Goreans on Second Life.

There are of course instances where both the Gor market and the Indian market are targeted by a sari producer. Second Life avatar LP, for instance, has at least one store in a Gorean focused Mall and a store in at least one India focused dance club and shopping center. She also sells her creations at the now famous House of Style owned by the clothes designer OT. In 2006, O, L and one or two others were the only sari and Indian apparel designers easily found on Second Life. Now there are several – both well known and not so well known. However, the perception of authenticity of saris on Second Life has more to do with the offline practice of making the sari through digital imaging and textures from the original textile based sari material than it does with the authentic Indianness of the Second Life avatar wearing the sari or the person behind the avatar. However, I digress – the investigation of the authenticity of saris and Indianness on Second Life in relation to sari wearing is a topic to be explored more in depth in other writing.

As far as the dancing clubs with Bollywood music is concerned – Indianness is established mainly through familiarity with the music being played and a basic minimum knowledge of Hindi which is demonstrated in conversation among avatars in the club as they dance on. "Where are you from?" seems to be a question often asked of newcomers in an attempt to connect to some kind of South Asian origin story. Bollywood is invoked as representative of India in such mediated environments but also serves as an apolitical and safe common language.

Is She "More" Real Because I "Know" Her On Orkut?

In 2007, I met a young lady (or so the avatar said she was) who told me she was on Second Life because she had heard of the jobs you could get on Second Life and had seen an advertisement in a regional vernacular news essay in India. She started

to type to me in a roman script version my mother tongue saying she felt more "at home" on Second Life now that she had found someone who understood the same vernacular Indian language as the one she spoke in her everyday offline. When she told me where she was logging on from I was more than mildly surprised. Not that the region she was logging on from was remote or rural but it was not one of the Hi-tech cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad or the more elite cosmopolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkatta, or Chennai. She had found a job on Second Life that would pay her about the equivalent of a dollar a week. She was annoyed at all the male type avatars that kept asking her for sex, she said. She thought all that was silly and ridiculous. She wanted to learn all there was to learn about scripting and building in Second Life. Along the way she was certainly making some interesting friends. She has visited many India centric places and has confessed to not feeling too comfortable in the dance clubs. She did not say clearly why.

Certainly – if we are to believe the avatar's story – here is a person behind the avatar who is clearly in diasporic space through Second Life and not because she has physically traveled outside her home region. She was encountering versions of "America", "China", "Netherlands" and even "Australia" as she interviewed for jobs. Some of these interviews were done through the voice feature on Second Life and the accents of the people behind the avatars came through to her and that was her way of identifying where they were from based on her knowledge of the geographic location of such an accent (gleaned from exposure to other media such as television and film).

Do I believe the "truth" of the story about this young lady I met on Second Life? What are the truths I believe about her and why? Does the fact that she linked to my profile on Orkut where she has several friends from the region she claims to hail from and that they all seem to think she is a young woman mean that she is "real"?

What is real in this instance? My experience and her experience are certainly real. That I chatted with someone who understands my mother-tongue is real. That there was an advertisement in the regional essay the avatar mentioned is real (I found a copy of the news essay on the Internet – so it must be real). The fact that she is working for Linden dollars in Second Life and building a shop and designing saris and jewelry is real … So why should her stories about her offline life not be real? But that in itself does not matter to the present essay and our understanding of digital diasporas in this framework. That the avatar has certain specialized knowledge of a specific geographic context and has language skills specific to a region attest to a certain kind of authenticity. S/he is a real Indian. Does it matter if she may be a he or that she may be someone who has recently traveled physically away from the region she claims to be from? Not for the understanding of digital diasporas in the framework I write from. But certainly it is of great importance that she is authentic in terms of Indian origin and that she is looking to make Linden dollar money on Second Life. Certainly it is important information that she has given me when she tells me that Second Life is being advertised in various media in India. Further, it is important and relevant since this information can be verified.

What all these truths about this Indian woman's presence on Second Life point to is the Economic pull of Second Life for young IT interested people living in India. This makes sense in relation to all the talk about crowd sourcing and outsourcing via Second Life. Businesses such as Wipro and IBM India have moved into Second Life to recruit and train. A visit to these areas reveals that they are fairly deserted at the moment, but the very fact that these big companies have announced their presence in Second Life draws more young job seeking Indians and other Asians into Second Life, thus changing the cultural, visual, and interactive climate within this three-dimensional reality. As digital diasporas from these regions increase in size the demographics and practices in Second Life will shift. In future work, I will be exploring these issues along with an examination of globalization and multiculturalism in Second Life.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show a shift in conceptualization of diaspora from "imagined community" and "digital diaspora" through a examination of social life in Second Life. Through stories based in personal experience of travel through embodied diaspora and through online ethnographies in digital diaspora, I have tried to show this difference. While the socio-cultural environments and communicative spaces in post-1960 South Asian diaspora were conducive to the kinds of labor needed for the modern internationalization of the world, the sociocultural environments in digital diaspora serve as transitional places that shape and discipline digital workforces for an emerging digital transnational economy. Implicitly, this contribution urges us to continue to ask how the issues from past generations of travel based in global economic structural mobilization of labor, play into the production of digitally diasporic identities in the virtual worlds such as Second Life. It is important therefore that we do not examine the digital space and place as outside of or opposed to real place and space.

Notes

1 Hamid Naficy gives the example of borders, airports, tunnels, seaports and so on – I view online places produced within Second Life as one such transitional place.

2 For a working definition of "virtual world" see Sarah (Intellagirl) Robbins' definition of virtual worlds at www.slideshare.net/intellagirl/aoir-robbins-presentation (accessed May 27, 2010).

3 Digital diasporas are embodied through human computer interaction and practice at the interface therefore I use phrases such as offline embodiment and offline place to make distinctions as needed rather than resort to the binary that positions embodiment as offline and disembodiment as online.

4 Based on the understanding that we are never just "online" for our bodies have not yet been drawn completely into cyberspace – contrary to popular ways of storying online existence, we have not left the body behind.

5 The full article is available at www.indianexpress.com/news/Investing-virtually:-New-Delhi-is-India%92s-First-City-on-Second-Life-%09%09%09%09—/220104/ (accessed May 27, 2010).
6 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIg4XMhh14Y&feature=related] (accessed May 27, 2010).
7 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2w2p3v7WSE&feature=related (accessed May 27, 2010) for a quick idea of how this scene looks. However, it should be noted that merely viewing the video or images does not give us a sense of how it actually feels when immersed in the environment.
8 Kelly's world blog (www.kgadams.net/2006/06/11/my-second-life-deflowering) (accessed May 27, 2010) describes scripted objects as follows "Objects a user creates can have scripted behaviors – a table could have a fold out extension, or those ears I mentioned could wiggle. Even more intriguing, an objects behavior could be based on something outside the game: virtual weather in an area could be based on real-world weather reports, for example- or a soccer ball could move based on telemetry from a real-world soccer ball."

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