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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

"Aesthetics of Power: A Digital Ethnography of Imagination and Imperialism"

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies with a Specialization in Critical Gender Studies

by

Naaila Mohammed

Committee in charge:

      Professor Curtis Marez, Chair
      Professor Patrick Anderson
      Professor Erin Hill
      Professor Christen Sasaki

2024

The Dissertation of Naaila Mohammed is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2024

DEDICATION

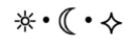For Sabir, Nanima, Mom & Dad.

My sun, my moon, and my North stars.

☀ · ☾ · ✧

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VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

"Aesthetics of Power: A Digital Ethnography of Imagination and Imperialism"

by

Naaila Mohammed

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies with a Specialization in Critical Gender Studies

University of California San Diego, 2024

Professor Curtis Marez, Chair

This feminist digital ethnography surveys the contemporary aesthetics and markets of imperialism. By engaging with social media as a critical realm of technocultural performances, I consider how imperialism, race, gender, and capitalism are rearticulated within digital cultures using case studies in influencer economies, boho interior aesthetics, and politics of fashion. To situate my work within existing Ethnic Studies scholarship, I consider historical materialist analysis, Orientalism, and semiotic myth-making.

INTRODUCTION

Image 0.1
Ad for Mariah Carey's Glitter on September 11 2001 in NYC.

This opening photo was sourced by Dylan Avery from photojournalist Luigi Cazzaniga's video footage of 9/11 collected by the National Institute of Standards and Technology archives. In the 3 second clip the camera pans from the advertisement poster of Mariah Carey's film *Glitter* to the Twin Towers crashing down. Avery is the director of *Loose Change,* an infamous film series uploaded to Google Video and YouTube between 2005-2009 which popularized the speculations that September 11 and Pentagon terrorist attacks were an inside job. The virality of *Loose Change*, one of the first conspiracy theory

films uploaded to the Internet, has earned it the title of the first Internet blockbuster, according to a 2006 *Vanity Fair* article. I remember watching *Loose Change* on my family's Dell desktop in our 'computer room' after a friend from my school-bus messaged me ten separate links over AOL Instant Messenger. My relationship to the Internet as a desi, Muslim kid coming to age in a post-911 world is one shared by many people my age who went from low-tech to all-tech over the span of two decades-- as opposed to those before us who went from no-tech to all-tech, or those after us who were born into a high-tech world that grew into all-tech.

My father lived in Manhattan his entire adult life, and my family immigrated to join him a few years after 9/11. The story of my father evading the 9/11 attacks is one of sheer luck; a combination of snoozed alarm clocks, missed trains, and delayed flights had kept him, and many of my other relatives, out of the World Trade Center that morning. I open with this photo not only because I'm forever amused by its bizarre visuals, but because it speaks to the critical themes I'm charting about culture, technology, glittery advertising, and nationalism across this dissertation. Self-documented archives, uploading images to the Internet, advertising's stronghold in public spaces, and the absurd juxtaposition of pop culture frivolity with national tragedies that beget cultural conflicts and xenophobia, are quite literally set against a backdrop of the Twin Towers. Similarly, this project exists along the intersections of pop-culture, cybernetics, and Orientalism.

In this dissertation, I offer a feminist digital ethnography of the changing and enduring aesthetics of imperialism and Orientalism by situating the Internet within

gendered and racialized global markets, while being attentive to social media as a critical realm of technocultural performances. To situate my work within existing Ethnic Studies scholarship, I ground my work in the linkages between visuality and aesthetics of power, feminist and historical materialist analysis of biolabour, and the semiotic relationship between Orientalism and myth-making. Thinking collaboratively with my advisor, friends, and peers, my project has evolved to consider how imperialism, race, gender, and capitalism emerge in visual arenas and digital cultures- with case studies in interior decoration, fashion, and boho aesthetics. Cultural trends shape and are shaped by the US and India's historical and socio-economic investments in Islamophobia, casteism, and heteropatriarchy. How do beautiful objects make their way into our homes, onto our bodies, and in front of our eyes via our screens?

Fashion, beauty, glitter, and ornamentation emerge as tools to repackage structures of misogyny and racism into visually captivating offerings. Aesthetics are concerned with beauty, and how tasteful objects produce affectual meaning in the form of desires; these desires are structured by appealing to our libidinal economy where we determine how to spend our money. Beauty and ornamentation, particularly in advertising, signal what we should purchase and what will align us to our aesthetic ideals. The glittery appeal of trendy clothes, beautiful decor items, and their brand campaigns sell the affectual meaning embedded within the tangible items- often by using shiny distorting copy like 'diversity' or 'sustainability'.

My project begins here by asking you to contend with glitter– made from dull plastic and aluminum crushed into a sparkly and fun object that refracts light and

provides beauty and pleasure–as a metaphor. Michele White theorizes the semiotics of glitter as a *flickering signifier* that refracts light by "diffusing the 'edge' of the body and opening up and extending the form" and the meaning of visual signifiers in technocultural contexts (White, 172). She builds on the *flickering* nature by drawing from Katherine Hayles who specifies that floating signifiers are the "generative coupling of linguistics and sexuality, [but] flickering signification is the progeny of the fascinating and troubling coupling of language and machine" (Hayles, 35). Thus, glitter in real life and online becomes "a technology for cultural opposition" (White, 160) in that it can also disrupt structures of race, gender, class. Glitter "is physically unmanageable [and] does not remain in the right place" (White, 166), lending itself to a speculative shape-shifting potentiality for the relationship between humans and machines. Within the hyper-real arena of social media, I conceptualize glitter not only as a glitzy, decorative object, but as a metaphor for distortion- a flickering signifier that opens up new myths and epistemologies. There are critical social movements and intentional discourse happening across social media that indicate its radical potential. Namely, my theoretical inquiries have evolved to include the ongoing genocide in Palestine and how a majority of the advocacy and organizing found on social media was subject to grotesque online censorship and real-life consequences.

The interfacing between humans and technology is structured by flickering signifiers that offer a range of new meanings in technocultural realms like social media. To treat playful platforms for socializing and leisure — like Instagram or TikTok — as critical platforms of epistemological potential, it's necessary to first tease out the legacies of colonialism, classed misogyny, and state-sanctioned casteism and Islamophobia that

are distorted behind attractive content feeds and glamorous aesthetics. Engaging closely with both the fashion influencer economy and interior decoration branding, I consider how the glittery aesthetics of advertising displace from view both the material conditions of labor, and the imperial legacies embedded within contemporary labor practices.

Across all three chapters, I argue that aestheticization produces a complex of visuality grounded in nation-making statecraft as delineated in *The Right to Look* by Nicholas Mirzoeff. Visuality is "a set of relations combining information, imagination, and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic space" (Mirzoeff, 476) that can be understood through a formula of first classifying, then separating, and finally, aestheticizing to produce a complex of visuality. This fortifies my inspection of aesthetic trends, digital cultures, biocapitalistic e-commerce economies, and how their visuality produces national ideological projects. Popular cultural semiotics are predominantly constructed in digital visual arenas, and those meanings are tethered to off-screen social institutions of power. I employ this formula to explore the aesthetics of power between various visual sources and racialized and gendered laboring figures of the fashion and interior decor industries.

My case studies offer variations on how commodity fetishism obfuscates from view the material conditions that produced the commodity. My arguments are evidenced by images from distinct visual arenas in which the allure of the final product either disappears material conditions, distorts it into something inviting, or distracts from its true form. In particular, fashion and interiors are in conversation because of their reliance on both South Asian aesthetics and labor.

My project centers the nexus of visuality and labor by first, engaging with social media and the influencer economy as a powerful formation of meaning-making, then delineating the networks between South Asian garment workers, brands, and their Instagram influencers, and lastly, by historically situating the boho chic interior decor trend with Cost Plus World Market branding strategy. The throughline between my case studies is legacies of imperialism, state sanctioned Islamophobia and casteism, and gendered labor. My research provides insights about visual technocultures that extend into South Asians studies and critical Muslim studies by centering the unique historical and contemporary ways that South Asian and Muslim aesthetics make their way into our homes, onto our bodies, and onto our screens.

ETHNIC STUDIES APPROACH

My contribution to the existing Ethnic Studies scholarship is how imperial legacies are structured into the interiors and exteriors of our lives by what we like to see on social media platforms. I ask what imperial and racial and misogynistic projects are served by contemporary iterations of these legacies? I thus pursue ethnic studies inquiries about the legacies of colonialism and manifestations of racialized and gendered capitalism that exists within the perfectly curated grids of individuals and corporate entities. I argue that we give form to our online selves the more we post, like, and interact on digital platform. My project engages with social media as a visual arena rife with embodied performances and strategic branding efforts connected to gendered, racial-capitalism. My project conducts a critical cultural and ethnographic analysis of how these

digital performances produce a visual vocabulary that speaks to contemporary and historical phenomena that impact the lives of South Asian and Muslim communities.

BIOCAPITALISM, LABOUR, AND PERFORMANCE WITHIN DIGITAL CULTURES

Nicholas Mirzoeff's *The Right to Look* invites us to think of visuality as "a set of relations combining information, imagination, and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic space" (Mirzoeff, 476) that can be understood through a formula of first classifying, then separating, and finally, aestheticizing to produce a complex of visuality. Ultimately, his complex of visuality shapes how I understand culture's role in producing nations. Throughout my project, I employ this formula to explore the aesthetics of power between various visual sources and racialized and gendered laboring figures of the fashion and interior decor industries. Mirzoeff frames an aestheticization of power as the third step in his complex of visuality through Frantz Fanon's words "an 'aesthetic of respect for the status quo,' the aesthetics of the proper, of duty, of what is felt to be right and hence pleasing, ultimately even beautiful" (Mirzoeff, 476). I read this definition as the result of classifying certain images—or even recognizable fractions of images like motifs, photo editing styles, fashion trends— as beautiful, powerful, and worth being seen. This aestheticization of what is considered important and worth being seen is connected to the way visuality has been deployed to structure nations and stratify their inhabitants as those who do work and those who benefit from those workers. Visuality is embedded in the nation-building and caste-making apparatuses of society and can be found in every industrial complex from schools, fashion, food, or prisons. How can we read for the visual voids all around us that invisibilized networks of information that are intentionally redacted and glossed over with pretty packaging, interior décor, and high-

fashion price tags? How does the visual disconnect between the performance of labor and the product of labor conduct the separating that Mirzoeff positions as the second step of the complex of visuality.

My project aims to understand digital cultures, and in particular the way that humans interface with one another and other non-human entities such as applications and algorithms. I consider how those interactions create new meanings about the ever developing and blurred lines between humans and technologies. I argue that user insights as both a specific form of biopower, and bring up complicated explorations of surveillance and targeted advertising. Ultimately, I draw from these explorations of cybernetics to study the critical visual vocabularies emerging from this human-posthuman interfacing, such as branding and advertisements informed by user insights.

CONSTRUCTING NATIONS AND IDENTITIES VIA NEW EPISTEMOLOGIES

Edward Said emphasizes the semiotics of mythical visualization to show how these manufactured representations became regarded as truths about entire nations, and especially for marginalized populations within nations. Said employs a semiotic undertaking of the mythology of Orientalism through an engagement with Roland Barthes. He remarks that "Barthes has said, a myth (and its perpetuators) can invent itself (themselves) ceaselessly… No dialectic is either desired or allowed. There is a source of information (the Oriental) and a source of knowledge (the Orientalist), in short, a writer and a subject matter otherwise inert. The relationship between the two is radically a matter of power, for which there are numerous images" (Said, 308). Although Said's work doesn't entirely address the gendered logics of Orientalism, I still use his discourse

around visual representations to explore the way gender impacts renderings of India through Orientalist logics of feminization, misogyny, and heteronormativity. I also employ Neferti Tadiar's work here to explore how gender and imagination are constitutive elements of nation-building. I offer an understanding of Islamophobia and caste as twin organizing principles in the United States, India, and the influencer economy.

The relationship between influencers, garment workers, and corporations is informed by broader political histories. Scholarship from Bakirathi Mani and Hortense Spillers fortifies my work on the grammar of nationalism and libidinal desires. My work attempts historicization as an interconnected set of relations instead of moments in a vacuum across a temporal timeline. Lisa Lowe theorizes the historical emergence of cross border, multilingual, and syncretic communities to collapse the imperial core and periphery polarities to instead open up transnational structures of feelings. Contemporary cultural productions of globalization such as "literature, music, art, mass and popular cultures" and "cultural practices (like) the organization of cities and public spaces, schooling, religion" structures the United States within "a global entirety, increasingly yet unevenly mediated through electronic information technologies" (Lowe, Globalization, 119). Engaging with nationalist grammar, histories, and globalization, I frame Instagram branding as a producer of information that is structured through affect and labour.

A MATERIALIST VIEW ON AFFECT

To frame the inclusion of South Asian women in Western visual fields of social media as a form of labor, I engage with Kalindi Vora's *Life Support*. Vital energy, defined as a "substance of activity that produces life and moves from areas of life depletion to life enrichment" (Vora, 3), helps me explore in my own work how South Asian women are situated as the aesthetic representations and the physical labor in the biopolitical exchanges of contemporary transnational capitalism. Contemporary Instagram branding trends illuminate how the exploitation of South Asian labor has simply evolved with the times. Biocapitalism has a seedy history in colonial labor via racialized and gendered methods of extracting the life-giving agency of colonized subjects.

I argue that objects have an active life of their own and can produce an affectual response in people who engage with them. In particular, I consider interior decor items that carry meanings and produce meanings for the owners. Arjun Appadurai and Anne Cheng help me in considering the genealogies of how beautiful objects have carried and produced meanings over various countries, generations, and trade networks. I also consider the way those objects are part of a historical and global system of trade and exchanges that are shaped through gendered and racialized logics, and ultimately contribute to capitalistic dynamics between people and nations. Jose Esteban Muñoz and Sarah Ahmed all help me think through affect and emotion as intangible phenomena that can be capitalized upon and made tangible once linked to material objects. Parasocial relationships between consumers, content creators, and faceless accounts of their favorite brands are forged through empathetic interactions - follows, likes, comments,

tags - and social media allows brands to convey ideas and images of not only trends, but also national ideals and futures.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

My dissertation's theoretical frameworks and methodologies are informed by scholarship within ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, visual studies, feminist materialist analysis, South Asian studies, and critical Muslim studies. My work is in conversation with existing scholarship and literature on visuality and aesthetics of power, feminist and historical materialist analysis, and the semiotic relationship between Orientalism and myth-making. I consider historical and the feminist materialist frameworks and how they elucidate the impact of Orientalist aesthetics in a commodified digital arena. When I consider the optics of power on social media, I consider how affect produced via branding tactics is similar to the affect produced via desire in imaginative geographies.

ORIENTALISM AND IMPERIALISM

I engage Orientalism as a framework in my project by exploring the role of aesthetics and desire in imaginative geographies. Imagery and representations produce social meaning, and colonial historiographers used myths that were canonized as fact to manufacture the entire continents of Asia and Africa. I conceptualize imaginative geographies to consider how spaces convey affect that enables meaning. Orientalist and feminist analysis together unpack how feminized descriptions of land and people

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informed colonial fantasies and created knowledge about countries. In my exploration of Instagram, subjectivity, and technology, I consider how women portray themselves on social media and how that places an altered subjectivity on display. In relation to corporate branding choices, I also explore how the use of South Asian and Muslim influencers obscures the exploitation of South Asian and Muslim workers behind flimsy appeals to diversity and inclusivity. While looking at corporate labor choices, my work examines exploitative labor schemes across South Asia that are set up in an Orientalist way and reproduce and continue similar harm.

Another way I illustrate Orientalist structures in visuality is through the aesthetic choices made by brands that blur various design motifs into the word boho. I also trace the genealogy of the word boho and how it came to name the popular home decor style, boho chic. The language used to this day is reminiscent of colonial fantasies about the feminized lands to travel to and scour for goods. I specifically focus on the word's relationship to the Romani peoples and how their xenophobic ostracization in Europe ushered a particular visual legibility that was co-opted and rebranded by European artists. Decor objects have historically been conduits of colonial desires. This legacy of decorating your home with items that evoke a colonial, museum-like sophistication and a cosmopolitan taste continues into contemporary branding.

VISUAL AND DIGITAL CULTURES

Social media is grounded and sustained upon a fabric of visuality that structures both our understanding of popular culture and a transnational network of exchanges. I also tether this to a cultural studies framework that aims to understand the significance

of culture by connecting visuality to material realities instead of divorcing culture from material contexts. Understanding visual cultures and material realities together allows me to deepen my examination of my sources so it's not simply commentary on aesthetic choices, but instead revealing historical and contemporary models of imperialism and racial capitalism. One way I am engaging this further is considering how user insights generate a sort of biopower for companies. Users are not getting paid or are informed clearly on how much value their usage data has for brands.

The relationship between visual culture and material matters to locate our role in this entanglement among us, corporations, and technology. A visual cultural framework is important to help me consider how branding choices are shaped by the everyday user and how our quotidian choices matter on an inconceivable larger scale. To locate aesthetics of power in a digital era, I study social media as a realm of information, images, and ideas that informs the perceptual in order to visualize the historical and the contemporary. To consider how communities are visually imagined means to discern how power dynamics of race, gender, and class dictate which visuals will register as meaning-making.

RACIAL AND GENDERED CAPITALISM

In order to understand the global networks of labor that produce aesthetically pleasing and powerful formations, it's necessary to discuss race and gender in relation to labor processes. To this end, I employ a framework of queered xenophobia to explore how worker exploitation, mass production, and predatory employment of vulnerable communities create aesthetics of power via luxury and fast fashion. This formation

displaces from view the precarious and exploited laborers in my fashion case study: South Asian garment workers who are generally poor and lower caste women and Muslim men. Brands that create the products employ tactful marketing and branding to appeal to sales-boosting strategies of diversity and inclusivity. Whereas those who create the products are absented and rendered fungible, and exist outside of a visuality that would grant their bodies the subjectivity of an important social class; ergo, the violence that they endure is not made legible.

I attend to a racial and gendered capitalist framework by considering the way that the aesthetics produced on Instagram are directly connected to labor practices that employ bodies subalternized by violence as workers to bring things of beauty into production. My case studies explore the political, racial, and economic logics across various historical and geographical points in the influencer economy. I read across social media posts and branding as archives to trace how people become racialized laboring figures and how those narratives were absented, distorted, or co-opted. A revisionist method, historical materialism doesn't neatly delineate history and labor as events, but vast and interconnected discursive formations that are fortified through a global exchange of capital and worker exploitation.

NOTE ON METHODS AND EVIDENCE

METHODS

Semiotics, Visual Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Feminist/ Historical Materialist Analysis, Digital Ethnography

Within my case studies, I employ interdisciplinary methodologies including semiotics, discourse analysis, and digital ethnography so that my work is informed, and may grow into, potential interdisciplinary nexuses. I use methods of semiotics and discourse analysis to unpack the way that meanings are constructed in a visual field, and how those meanings are tethered to social institutions of power. I also use materialist analysis methods to argue that global labor networks are rooted in misogyny, and historical materialist analysis of interior decor trends rooted in colonialism.

I have narrowed my focus on semiotics towards the visual field of social media posts and advertising, and how the frameworks of what is visually represented constructs meaning for how power is produced and relegated. My examples lend themselves to a deeper understanding of how cyberspace also connects people and countries through intricate webs of racialized and gendered power dynamics. I employ semiotic analysis towards visual representations on digital platforms that resonate with contemporary versions of Orientalist juxtapositions. Stuart Hall's methods of discourse analysis immensely aided me to use Instagram as a site brimming with affectual and commercialized exchange of discourse that is informed by racial capitalism. In my interiors section, I use discourse analysis and historical methods to take a closer look at Cost Plus World Market and how the import store emerged. What is the active life of an object beyond its utility, and how does it enter an affectual realm with national desires and epistemology? What sets the visual apart in its relationship with materialist analysis? How do the circulations of images function to racialize and gender laboring figures?

I employ feminist and queer methods of materialist analysis to explore fast fashion's relationship to social media and online branding as an industrial complex to show how lower caste Indian women and Muslim men are exploited to clothe, protect, and beautify the bodies of others. When that labor is racialized, feminized, and queered it forges property relations between global power dynamics between consumers and garment workers, and I note how this relation is mediated by digital networks.

EVIDENCE

The primary visual sources that my topic requires me to engage with are social media accounts of interior decorators, home decor companies, especially Cost Plus World Market's account, various South Asian and Muslim beauty influencers, and visuals obtained from high fashion branding materials. Through an examination of these various images, media campaigns, social media posts, video clips, interviews, reports on labor violations, and reports on gender / caste based violence and Islamophobia in India, I showcase the legacies of colonial labor extraction, state sanctioned anti-Muslim violence, caste, and Orientalism that work to maintain an image of South Asian and Muslim peoples. Gender, caste, and class analysis also inform the logics of these violences.

In future works, it would be generative to conduct interviews and surveys to fortify my digital ethnographic method. Specifically, for my fashion section, an interview with a female, South Asian stylist and influencer to add perspective on the complexities of South Asian visuality in the fashion industry. Conversations like this would provide insight on how culture is infused into visuals in a way that ethical production is not. I also

considered interviewing a branding strategist to learn more about user insights and trace the way data is converted into a design choice, and generally what this process costs and the results it yields. Lastly, I would set out a survey to South Asian and Muslim influencers to collect perspectives on their relationship to online visibility and the types of unique threats they have received for simply performing and being visible on social media; the data gathered from this survey will hopefully diversify the anecdotes I've gained from conversation with South Asian and Muslim influencers on the perils of subjectivity. These methods forge connections between these different fields, allowing me to expand my work in an interdisciplinary way.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWNS

My chapters focus on the various capitalist and imperialist structures sutured to the aesthetic appeal of Instagram, fashion, and interior decor. Thinking with interdisciplinary frameworks informs my analysis of aesthetics and situates my work within the Ethnic Studies field. My work creates more insights about commodity fetishism and visual technocultures that extend into South Asians studies and critical Muslim studies by centering the unique historical and contemporary ways that South Asian and Muslim aesthetics make their way into our homes, onto our bodies, and onto our screens. I've come to choose my chapters and subsequent studies by thinking of historical and contemporary investments of neocolonialism in the affect of commodities and the labor of their production.

An overarching theme across all three chapters and their respective case studies is how the social media and the Internet are generative mediums where we can see various

rearticulations of racial projects like digital biolabour, imperial legacies, and racial-capitalist exploitation schemes. We also contend with the exciting potential for social media and the Internet to provide new epistemologies, formations of networked resistance, and speculative feminist futures. Social media applications need to be seriously considered as epistemological sites where knowledge is being produced by the language of visual legibility. I argue that digital globalization allowed for new articulations where cultural productions online can both emerge from powerful aesthetic formations of community and diaspora, while also giving rise to neo-imperialist systems of labour extraction and epistemology. This allows me to look at Instagram branding as a producer of information that is structured through similar logics of caste-making systems in nation states that make some aspects of society visually legible in service of nation-building. While pushing against nationalist ideals by leaning into diverse spaces online, social media users continue to remain tethered to the racial-capitalistic formations of the influencer economy, particularly in the interior decor and beauty and fashion realms.

In Chapter 1, I am proposing that digital biolabour is a way to understand user-generated insights, content creation, social media branding, and networked resistance within the biopolitical technocultural arena of Instagram. To do this, I introduce a triangulated assemblage between the human, post-human, and capitalism in order to explore the human body producing user-generated insights, the post-human automation of targeted advertising on social media, and the capitalist use of biolabour via users, influencers, and factory workers. A guiding theory in Chapter 1 is the image theory of value and how it becomes complicated in biocapitalist extraction of everything from

knowledge, image, and affect as opposed to simply physical labour. A second guiding theory is the aesthetics of power and how aesthetic cultures and productions become dominant modes of imagining colonial centers; how visuality on social media and the biolabour conducted by unpaid users and monetized content creators alike ultimately serve as tools of nation building. Finally, the chapter closes out with an exploration of the non-scenes of Palestinian activism on social media and how resistance is possible when we rework the same algorithms and surveillance measures via networked efforts. Social media offers a new formation of activism and connectivity across colonial peripheries for solidarity to become visual and powerful and ultimately yield new articulations of global movements. The main case studies of Chapter 1 are a critical unpacking of Instagram and TikTok's in-app marketplaces and the influencer economy's role in ushering new priorities in advertising especially in a post-pandemic world; and the second case study brings to light the various ways that Palestinians and pro-Palestinian activists have retooled the Internet for new epistemologies of digital resistance.

In Chapter 2, I closely examine the concept of *boho* and how this aesthetic trend is rooted in imperial legacies of Orientalist epistemologies and colonial formations of racial-capitalism. To do this, I introduce interior decoration as a viable arena to understand both subjective interiority and nationalistic ideals; I argue that the grammar of decoration has been articulated in response to changing historical and material conditions that are reflective of nationalist logics, and how the prevalence of the boho trend speaks to this adaptive grammar. A guiding theory in Chapter 2 is a queered engagement with orientation and Orientalism, and how spaces and the objects that comprise them create an affectual skin that is structured by gendered and Orientalist

investments. A second guiding theory is how ornamentation functions as a tool of empire and how ethnic decor items are semiotically coded with meanings of patriotism and belonging, and how closely considering boho decor elements over the decades provides insight on the enduring legacies of imperialism inside our homes and around the world. The main case study of Chapter 2 is the history and various advertising campaigns of popular interior decor retailer Cost Plus World Market. I trace the rise of the import store, its branding strategies, partnership with the *Eat, Pray, Love* novel and movie, and its consistent reliance on Oriental tropes and appeals to imperial libidinal economies.

In Chapter 3, I am proposing that through the visual legibility of fashion advertising within the influencer economy, users, influencers, and garment workers are creating national libidinal economies and epistemologies of different nations. To do this, I introduce a continuum between the hyper-visible influencer, and the out-of-sight garment worker; both are vital and generative biolabourers delivering different products but benefiting the same systems of gendered racial-capitalism. South Asian fashion and beauty influencers and garment workers exist along a continuum that is fortified by nationalist projects-- in India, Hindu Nationalism and its double-helix of the caste system and Islamophobia, and in the US, with white supremacy and legacies of imperialism and Orientalism. In this section, I revisit notions of biolabour introduced in Chapter 1, and revisit the continued importance of boho aesthetic from Chapter 2. A guiding theory in Chapter 3 is the grammar of aesthetics in digital cultures and how visuality on social media can both reaffirm or refuse national ideals. Another guiding theory is how caste oppression and Islamophobia are the double-helix organizing principles, and when coupled with hetero-patriarchal structures of Hindu Nationalism, we see labour

exploitation schemes follow similar models of imperialism in India's history. The case studies of Chapter 3 are two separate labour schemes called the Sumangali scheme and the Utthan pact, and how lower caste women and Muslim men are embroiled in this Hindu Nationalistic and imperialist framework.

NOTE ON "DESI"

At times, I catch the slippages in my own work when I use words like desi, Indian, South Asian, Muslim knowing that all these 'identities' are comprised of various sub-groups that have markedly different experiences when accounting for religion, skin complexion, languages, economic status, and caste. Furthermore, within Islam exist many different sects that create further complexities which can't be captured by the word 'Muslim.' I try to think as I'm framing the "average Indian Muslim" what that average means, and what it excludes. How do Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Nepalis, and other South Asian communities weave into the conversations I'm having in my dissertation when I talk about South Asia but mostly focus on India. It's important to note that at times, in the Western and Orientalist gaze, those various ethnic identities are collapsed as one. At other times, the distinctions around who is safe and who is a threat are complicated by logics of Islamophobia. Junaid Rana notes in *Terrifying Muslims,* "India is Bollywood and technology; Pakistan is terror and trouble." Because of Islam, Pakistan and other predominantly Muslim South Asian countries like Afghanistan and Bangladesh are not welcomed with the same interest and understanding that India is in American popular culture. Though Oriental aesthetics may be appreciated, people hailing from said aestheticized countries may be at the receiving end of a 'travel ban.' And

where does this leave Indian Muslims who aren't afforded the welcome of Bollywood-y visual legibility and instead are folded into the racialized category of Muslim threat? Of course, caste oppressed, darker skinned, and lower class Indians and Indian Muslims are not afforded that welcome either so it's important to note how all these matrices are intertwined in Hindu Nationalism and a global Islamophobic system. While I write predominantly about South Asian and Muslim women broadly, I am aware of these nuances which are equally as complicated in real life as well as in writing.

CHAPTER 1
"Posts and Post-Humans on Social Media"

Themes: Algorithms, Online Selves, Social Media Economies,
Digital And Visual Cultures
Case Study: User Generated Aesthetics, Social Media Ecommerce, Palestine Online

> *"Instagram is the archive and the repertoire.*
> *The place where we write our surfaces into existence."*
> *- Jillian Hernandez*

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will critically examine how social media platforms, specifically Instagram and TikTok, link the visual and material, and how the user's engagement with the app frames the powerful relationship between the human, posthuman, and capitalism. I begin by framing the themes that will lead into my case studies with a conversation on Instagram, the influencer economy, user data insights, and our entanglement with hyper-real spaces. I am choosing to center the glittery signifiers of Instagram and thinking affectually about the role of beauty to facilitate a contemporary form of commodity fetishism and biopower. Instagram offers an abundance of visual appeal which distracts users from the fact that it utilizes a targeted algorithm powered by our own usage and empathy. Instagram links the visual and material, and the way users engage with the application shapes a powerful relationship between the human, posthuman, and capitalism. While brands employ influencers as advertising labor and employ garment workers as manual labor, it is the user's (consumer's) empathy that generates the information needed by the algorithm to predict trends, fine-tune

marketing campaigns, determine diversity metrics, and ultimately enrich the brand's value. This chapter explores the way user insights function as biolabour, and how users, influencers, and laborers are all uniquely cultural producers within the biopolitical technoculture of Instagram.

Instagram functions as a virtual public square in your pocket; a space to socialize, shop, and stay up to date on current events. When viewing an Instagram post adorned with a distorting sheen of edits and filters, we can fail to consider the memory of colonial legacies and manifestations of racial capitalism that exist behind the image. Instagram, a social media application intended for photo-sharing and editing, is now a booming marketplace for brands using their human billboards, or *influencers*. Instagram has given rise to influencer cultures that emerged across different platforms such as Twitter and TikTok as well. The commercialization of Instagram changes the meaning of the site, and many users often yearn for the authenticity of its previous purpose. The app's fate was supposedly sealed in its 2020 update when the centermost button - the most prime real estate in an application's user interface - was no longer the 'plus sign' button for posting new photos, but instead replaced with the 'shopping bag' button that redirects to the in-app shopping marketplace (Image 1.2). This decision was not simply one about visuals or interface, but rather signaled the new direction the app was going in and crystalized what was to become of the entire user experience. With the change of the most important button on the app, the user journey is remapped to the most literal embodiment of *what you see is what you get*. The user's journey doesn't stop at seeing a product on a brand page, or more likely on an influencer's page, and double-tapping to like it— but with just a few more taps, the 'click to shop' feature is activated and the user is instantly redirected to the

marketplace tab where they can purchase exactly what they just saw and 'liked'. Michele White theorizes further that glitter blurs and "renders a much less centered and comfortable viewing position" and therefore diffuses the intended meaning of "photographs, films, and related camera technologies," even those posted on Instagram (White, 179). In *The Image and The Void,* Trinh Minh-Ha notes "in a consumerist context where the eye is a dominant organ, to create is to give form to the seen" (Minh-Ha, 131); whereas in *Camera Lucida,* Roland Barthes posits that the "photographer's organ is not his eye, but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens" (Barthes, 15). What a hyper-real arena like Instagram does, then, where the user is both somewhat a photographer and a consumer, is forge a split-second link between what is seen by the eye and what is accessible to the finger to disrupt any chance of a pause before purchasing. The eyes and fingers of 2.4 billion users build various networks of affective exchanges that are mediated through this hyper-real realm of visuality and performance.

I place a critical eye on the biopolitics of data-mining, social media communications, online engagement, and creative laboring bodies in order to contend with capitalism's transformation via digital cultures as I see it in my work. I apply an ethnic studies and cultural studies lens by fusing the scholarly work of Edward Said, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Lisa Lowe, and others to analyze the power of aesthetics, feminist materialism, and legacies of colonialism. Because my case studies focus predominantly on fashion, beauty, and interior decor — which are typically gendered cultural areas — it is important that I employ critical feminist thought on race, class, and labour together in my examples of branding and targeted advertising. Gendered arenas of beauty and decor collapse femininity and girlhood into a universal experience without considering the way

race and class are also enmeshed into online cultures, which is where Kalindi Vora's work informs my understanding of gender dynamics in creative digital labour.

While various companies on Instagram are using influencers as labor, as collaborators or partners, and using factory workers as labor, to produce their products, it is the consumer's usage that is generating the insights that data-mining technology needs to capitalize on aesthetic trends, create branding campaigns, determine audience metrics to ultimately boost revenue. I explore the way user insights function as biolabour, and how users, influencers, and labourers are all techno-cultural producers. While exploring the triangulation between human, posthuman, and capitalism, I engage deeply with Katherine Hayles, Jasbir Puar, Donna Haraway, and Alexander Weheliye. I am also in conversation with Cristina Morini and Andrea Fumagalli as gender and economics scholars who are exploring the development of digital labour and online branding. I build off digital culturists and ethnic studies scholars Ruha Benjamin and Safiya Noble's cutting-edge analysis on the relationship between race and machine learning technology like algorithms and search engines in order to explore how technology reinforces perceptual and material segregation in the production of social media cultures. This gels with my exploration of Nicholas Mirzoeff's framework of complex of visuality in which dominant powers use visual culture to categorize and stratify groups in ways that engender certain people to life-giving models of labour exploitation.

If, as Minh-Ha says, "to create is to give form to the seen," then we must contend with the way we create and give form to our online selves the more we post, like, and interact on the app. We are hyper-seen on a hyper-visual app like Instagram, and our

usage generates further insight about us, and gives more vitality to our online form. This can be generously applied to a simple understanding of targeted advertising via algorithms on Instagram that form a connection between users and intelligent technology by articulating a language of patterns. To illustrate, if I posted a picture announcing my engagement, by the end of the day I can anticipate all my in-app advertisements - that appear as posts or stories embedded into your feed indiscernible from your friends and followers posts - to be for diamond rings or wedding venues. Katherine Hayles contends that when communicating with machines, the language of information technologies foregrounds pattern/ randomness; whereas, within human communication it is presence/ absence that is traditionally foregrounded in semiotics and linguistics. Our usage patterns tend to override our mere online presence, and those patterns are carefully mediated through information- which on the internet, is endless- to send messages to the application. Targeted ads are an example of how "subjectivities who operate within cyberspace also become patterns rather than physical entities" (Hayles, 36). Another example, I tend to watch YouTube videos on Korean skincare products, and almost all my targeted ads on Instagram are of various cosmetics companies and stores. Randomness emerges, similar to absence, to introduce variables or surprises that simply make patterns all the more accurate and sustainable. If I see a skincare ad, I might pause on it for 10 seconds or maybe even click it, generating further insights about myself. More information, more patterns, more me- the Instagram me. Whereas, if I see a random ad about oat-milk and scroll without even stopping, the message is sent that I'm not interested in alternative milks and that most likely I am not vegan. My response to the randomness generates even more of a pattern of what kind of user I am, and brands that pay for advertisements won't bother trying to convince me to

keep looking at their product if I'm clearly not the targeted audience and wasting their money and digital real estate. Hayles remarks that "flickering signification brings together language with a psychodynamics based on the symbolic moment when the human confronts the posthuman," and an intelligent app like Instagram is fueled by the motivations and desires of its users and how it can flicker whatever meaning into pictures and advertisements that can generate revenue.

If "every photograph is a certificate of presence" (Barthes, 87) then every Instagram post or ad is a certificate of a pattern that structures these mysterious algorithms. An affectual and semiotic study of Instagram, as extrapolated from White, Hayles, Minh-Ha, and Barthes, allows me to situate my work within the field of visuality, performance, and materialism and to consider the emergent language of technoculture as one rife with glittery, flickering signifiers. My contribution to the existing scholarship of commodity fetishism and imperialistic networks is how colonial legacies are structured into the interiors and exteriors of our lives by what we like to see on Instagram. I aim to explore what imperial and racial and misogynistic projects are served by contemporary US and Indian iterations of these legacies.

TRIANGULATION OF HUMAN, POSTHUMAN, & CAPITALISM

I want to begin by introducing how I have come to use the word posthuman in my work. Hayles, Puar, Harraway, and Weheliye guide me to think about the human and posthuman as interconnected types of existence; the human and posthuman, 'man' and machine, do not necessarily exist in opposition but in a continuum where they both

fortify each other's existence. Moreso, my project attempts at framing an assemblage to visualize the continuum of our corporeal and online selves, and all the networks in between that connect us to others whether virtually or IRL (in real life).

Specifically, I'm engaging with assemblage theory to give form to a triangulation between human, posthuman, and capitalism. I argue that the three exist in an assemblage that relies on all three concepts to fortify one another and create a plane of existence that offers a rich understanding of the contemporary human relationship with technology like social media. The particular foci of my triangulation are the <u>human</u> body's contribution to powering user-generated insights, the <u>posthuman</u> automation of targeted advertising and mechanisms of in-app social media marketplaces, and the <u>capitalistic</u> use of the laboring bodies of users, influencers, and workers that major brands rely on for profits. (I can best simplify this triangulation with the attached (Image1.1). With the way scholars Puar and Haraway consider the goddess-cyborg dynamic using assemblage theory, I introduce materialist analysis into my work in relation to how humans and social media are in a mutually constitutive relationship dynamic similar to the cyborg-goddess. (I explore this dynamic in detail in the epilogue in regards to garment workers and fashion influencers). Puar remarks how Haraway says the human body does not end at our skin and that we are "enmeshed in forces, affects, energies, we are composites of information" (Puar, 4). To this end, I consider the way we don't end at the space between our fingers and keyboards, but instead how our input is used to create data that generates a digital dossier of ourselves. These insights are used both by social media engineers and advertising data scientists in order to generate revenue for the companies that employ their services to display in-app ads or to fine-tune content that's

already existing on the app. There are life-giving patterns of relations through which affective intensification occurs between those assemblages of "technology, bodies, matter, molecular movements, and energetic transfers" (Puar, 6). Social media platforms such as Instagram have provided a space for users to engage with digital cultures, further linking the material and visual, to create these life-giving patterns.

We can begin by looking at how our online selves build our real selves, and vice versa: how our corporeal bodies contribute to the amalgamation of data that exists about the body's use and interaction of a specific technological feature. This cybernetic dynamic with the posthuman points at how targeted advertising is an example of how "subjectivities who operate within cyberspace also become patterns rather than physical entities" (Hayles, 36). Our usage generates further insight about us and gives more vitality to our online form. Pausing or clicking on an advertisement of interest to you generates further insights about your online self. More information, more patterns, more you- the online you. User experience researchers map "user journeys" in their studies to discern which advertisements actually resulted in purchases or pinpoint at what point a user lost interest in a product. It is tricky to consider patterns and randomness for users on Instagram because applications have multiple uses like socializing and seeing what's happening around the world. Unlike typical e-commerce websites, the users journeys on Instagram reflect their socialization or content creation more strongly than predicting shopping trends or an items popularity, as Amazon.com could for example. Patterns are more easily discernible when users follow accounts that put out similar content or Googling an object or company before opening up Instagram. There is also data about which ad types, like stories, posts, or sponsored content put out by paid users like

influencers are more effective, so choosing not to engage with one ad form also generates random information about its efficacy. Users are also more likely to purchase from content creators that they have a pattern of engaging than random influencers. Therefore, your lack of engagement, or non-information, also generates even more of a pattern of what kind of user you are to brands that pay for advertisements.

The pattern/randomness dialectic derives efficacy from the material world. In her analysis, Hayles articulates the relationship between these two discursive realms and "enable[s] abstract form and material particularity" (Hayles, 23) in order to show how the material world and digital world are not separate entities. Similarly, I am using this formation to apply an ethnic studies lens on how social media trends, dynamics, and cybernetics cultivate a productive site for critical conversations about culture, history, race, gender, and class. Narrative texts, much like social media trends, reveal more complex webs of social, cultural, representational issues in regards to technology and innovation. I value considering these user-generated insights as one's "online self" as opposed to simply an amalgamation of data, because it builds upon the tradition of theorizing the posthuman with personifying traits and how its fueled by sentient energies and affects despite not having a sentient body. If we consider human beings an assemblage of the corporeal body, a set of informational processes, and various forces, affects, and energies, we can also consider the posthuman online versions of ourselves as entities comprised of information, data from affective exchanges, and a mechanic or 'cloud' materiality.

When accounting for race in the context of Instagram, social media, and influencer culture, it's important to note the role of race in the ontology of the human and posthuman, and how those differences convey meanings in a digital realm that are similar to the meanings conveyed in human bodies interacting with the material world at large. In *Feenin': PostHuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music,* Alexander G. Weheliye takes up criticism regarding Hayles's formation of human and posthuman in relation to Blackness and ontology. He contends that her view of posthuman is limited because it assumes a vague and undifferentiated notion of 'man/ machine' that doesn't account for race. Weheliye encourages more critical analysis on how whiteness has come to mean humanness, and to expand ideas of the posthuman from being reduced to a type of 'race' that is considered non or sub human that inevitably imply social hierarchies and exclusions. In his exploration of Black popular music, he considers the ontological qualities of recording and reproducing technologies, and how Black voices that are mechanically mediated through musical technology are in tension with the posthuman as an embodied virtuality; Black musicians's use of technologically-mediated human voices affirms that Black subjectivity is equally included in the technological futurity of posthumanity, and not left out of the folds of humanity as white mainstream culture often implies. Weheliye's work encourages me to think critically about who is defined within the race of humans and how Black subjectivity is held in opposition to humanity from an ontological perspective, and how that disrupts the posthuman as well. Though Hayles's concepts of the communication patterns between 'man and machine' is useful towards my understanding of data aggregation, considering Black scholarly work on ontology critically sharpens the 'man' part of that formation, and in turn disrupting potentially the 'machine' part as well - since I hold the two in a continuum. To this end, I

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am less interested in describing the human/ posthuman continuum between users and social platforms, and more invested in articulating how the posthuman - in the form of our social media insights - is an assemblage of various things that include race, gender, and class. I consider social media usage data as a cyber-self that can never be neutral despite popular assumptions of technology and machinery as race-blind. The data and what emerges from it is politicized the second it becomes of beneficial use to any industry earning a profit from it, and also beneficial to the application itself making adjustments to encourage increased use. Furthermore, there is heavy censorship involved in user communications, which continues to use algorithmic technologies to detect and police certain words and images, usually in relation to racial and social movements. Hayles discusses how machines can function like humans, which is why in my analysis of machine learning and artificial intelligence I apply the same level of scrutiny that I would to human behavior in regards to social, cultural, economic, and political matters.

Contending with this critique, race is very important to the interplay between humans and information technologies that I am exploring with influencer culture and social media platforms. Specifically, I study the way advertisements, partnerships, and sponsorships made on these platforms are fully embroiled in race. For a very literal example, with the rise of AI generated art and technology, many fashion and beauty companies began experimenting with AI generated avatar models to advertise their products. This opened up a discussion about how absurd it was that fashion brands would rather use artificially generated avatars of people of color instead of hiring influencers and models of color and pay them accordingly. There is also a sinister aspect of generating an avatar in the likeness of people of color that evokes an eerie resemblance

to the ownership over something that is devoid of autonomy, and is programmed to obedience in order to represent a brand's value. This example speaks to Weheliye's concern in noting that an undifferentiated view of posthuman is limited because it doesn't account for race, which is why he and other Black scholars are encouraging more critical thought to expand ideas of the posthuman from a race that was considered non or sub human, or a race that existed in opposition to humanity from an ontological perspective. Hiring models of color, different body types, or with disabilities is not simply to answer the call of diversity in visual campaigns, but also to create opportunities for minoritized communities whose models may not receive the same opportunities. Furthermore, using AI models in place of models from minority communities who have not always traditionally occupied the visual space of ad campaigns, allows a company to appear diverse, edgy, and futuristic without actually having to engage with minority communities, pay smaller artists, and grants them full autonomy over the image of an artificial person of color. In regards to material analysis, the money remains out of the hands of artists and models, and is instead funneled back into paying AI companies and their engineers for creating a solution to non-existent problems as minoritized models are right there. I use assemblages to consider an engagement with posthuman that is not race-blind to technology. Therefore, the AI model example is not simply a conflict between human models and AI generated avatars, but instead also considers the impetus to own and control the likeness of minorities, and how the labor and material aspects continue to prioritize profit outside of artists and towards informational technologies.

Moreover, search results on TikTok overwhelmingly display content from white content-creators, even if users engage with women of color creators more. For example,

if I was to search "Hourglass Cosmetics Concealer Review," my search results will typically populate reviews from white creators unless I type in Hourglass Cosmetics Concealer Review Dark Skin or Black Girl or South Asian or other similar prompts. (The closest metaphor I can give is if you were to walk down the hair-dye aisle at any store and every single face will be white with different colored hair- it is extremely rare to find women of color as the face models for hair care products unless they are Black owned brands that get tucked away in an "Ethnic Haircare" subsection). Many TikTok creators have responded to this by posting videos interrogating why they must add "Black" or "desi" or other identity key terms to display content from creators that look more similar to them, and why whiteness continues to be the default result. Aside from beauty content, TikTok has displayed across various niche genres that the content typically pushed forward is by white content creators unless you have been using the app for a long time and engaging with it actively (liking, commenting, or even clicking 'not interested' on suggested content) to give the algorithm enough information about your ethnic identity or skin color or hair type in order for it to start suggesting content aligned to your preferences. In my experience of being on TikTok for four years and interacting almost exclusively with South Asian, Muslim, and Black creators, I am continuously surprised when I type in "updo hairstyle tutorial" and the first 10 results are still white women with blonde hair. Ruha Benjamin defines the "New Jim Code" as the way new technologies continue to reflect and reproduce existing equities, and their novel or advanced nature is perceived as neutrality despite being just as discriminatory as existing systems. It comes as no surprise then that multiple influencers of color come forward with video after video of discovering how they are being paid less than white influencers in terms of partnerships or sponsored content. The articulation of the influencer economy has an

American Dream air in that it pushes the belief that *you* generate *your content,* and its success depends on the merit and quality of *your work*. But ultimately, your content goes through discriminatory algorithmic design and the New Jim Code, which begs mine and Benjamin's questions of how technology's supposed colorblind, scientific, neutrality sustains discriminatory stratification within posthuman dynamics. Benjamin notes that "This lens of default Whiteness is assumed to be neutral, unraced, and ungendered, and therefore "scientifically" sound. But Whiteness is anything but" (101).

Benjamin calls upon us to tackle "the many discriminatory designs that codify the value gap between Black and White by automating racial habits in digital systems" (106). I am interested in how the automation of these racial habits in digital systems apply to not only content creators but also users whose usage is being codified as valuable information for advertising. When I argue that aggregated data generates our likeness in an online self, I don't necessarily mean the version of you that you portray online, since many users consume content but don't put out any of their own. Some people have an online persona, aesthetic, mannerisms, and opinions that don't necessarily match up with who they are in the corporeal world, and I am less interested in these stylistic choices of self-presentation that are related to personality and human choices. For my notion of online selves, I am considering the information an algorithm has about us based on our usage and how that creates a digital dossier about us. Following Puar and Haraway, I argue the human body does not stop at our corporeal body, so the data about our usage is a posthuman assemblage where "two forces and their constituent components must enter into mutually coconstitutive machinic becomings that coalesce at certain points while seceding at others" (Weheliye, 85, Habeas Viscus). Composite elements of an

assemblage, like race, gender, and power, articulate more holistic meanings when considered together. Looking at an Instagram post gains a new meaning when we apply racial and gendered logics to understand the expression of the stylistic elements coming together to produce meaning. Posthuman cyber-self assemblages allow for "polyvalent becomings to produce and give expression to previously nonexistent realities, thoughts, bodies, affects, spaces, actions, ideas, and so on" (Weheliye, 86, Habeas Viscus), and Instagram and TikTok are both sites where those polyvalent becomings are intertwined with the material conditions of their in-app e-tail shops. Our social media data patterns create a posthuman cyber-self version of our humanity that is entangled with the categories of identity-based differentiations and the social meanings and hierarchies attached to those differentiations. The same factors we consider with our corporeal bodies in physical spaces are emerging in the way companies interface our online selves in regards to the suggested ads or curated content that encourages mass consumption. Instagram and TikTok are the predominant digital influencer marketplaces of this interfacing.

INSTAGRAM SHOP DEMISE & TIKTOK SHOP RISE

Though TikTok is new, to not only my work but the social media scene at large, it is a continuation of larger legacies that link the visual and the material including catalogues, advertisements, propaganda posters, anthropological photography, and other visual mediums invested in capitalism. I began seriously focusing on social media in relation to my ethnic studies courses in 2018, starting with Instagram and Twitter at first. At the time, tumblr had ceased to exist so Twitter had secured its place as the primary application for textual interactions, while Instagram was the primary visual

application. Once 2020 arrived with a novel Coronavirus, we were met with novel ways of interfacing with one another in virtual realities. I've researched extensively about seriously considering our online use such as likes and comments as hyper-real affective exchanges that embody a haptic spirit despite being virtual. 2020 was the year where society began imagining the new horizons for these hyper-real haptic exchanges that were aimed at fortifying intimacy in a time when physical touch was forbidden. Everyone was in a long-distance relationship at this point, and the human need for touch, connectivity, and intimacy was brought to the forefront while people were dying alone in hospital rooms with their loved ones on Facetime. Countless physicians and nurses in my life relayed stories of breaking protocol to hold a patient's hands as they passed away alone since their families couldn't enter the rooms. The grief and isolation of these conditions were felt around the world, and more than ever people were leaning into the hyper-real haptic touchings from their loved ones, and hoping to build new relationships with strangers. Thinking back on Weheliye's note of technologically mediated voices, people who lived alone or were severely immunocompromised did not have an in-person conversation unmediated by technology with other human beings, and were fully reliant on microphones and audio mediums to 'speak' to others.

It comes as no surprise then that technology was a powerful tool in inciting feelings and touchings when people could no longer interact. Since 2020, we've entered a new relationship with our devices as well and budding technology like Zoom and Instagram Live. Instagram even developed the option of 'liking' someone's Instagram Story on Valentines Day as a new way to engage in pre-existing technology; the new 'story like' would deliver a red heart to their inbox. Like the average Instagram user, if I post a

picture of my face on my Instagram stories and my friend double-taps and 'hearts' the picture, I feel seen. Though I can have hundreds of people viewing the post, the like is what communicates to me that a friend saw it and wanted to send a signal to me. A virtual pat on the back, hand squeeze, or compliment that says "hey, it's nice to see you," "I've missed you," "you look good," or "reply to my texts instead of posting your face online while ignoring me." As intended with its release on Valentines day, the introduction of being able to heart someone's Instagram stories caused a sharp increase in flirting among followers who didn't feel confident enough to send a private direct message, but could end up in the inbox with a simple double-tap — low risk with a potential high reward. This is a simple and fun example of how the technology of social media apps is constantly fine-tuning itself in response to the human condition and the patterns that users follow. Since more users would feel comfortable sending an unassuming heart instead of typing out a response, the intentional Valentines Day roll-out of the story hearts undoubtedly led to more people using the app's pre-existing direct messaging feature and now piqued more interest in using Instagram because of this novel addition. Beyond voices, affect is also overwhelmingly technologically mediated in our current social landscape.

My study of social media and how our human interactions shape every pixel of a virtual platform has brought me to deeply consider user experience (UX) and user interface (UI), and the methods that designers use to mimic human exchanges. To deepen my understanding, I took UX courses offered through Google to fully explore how the gestures and non-verbal cues that humans use to communicate with one another are transformed into digital gestures in the form of feedback from icons or buttons. For example, if you are using a mouse cursor arrow to click on a tab, it will usually darken or

become highlighted to let you know your cursor is on the tab of choice, and when you click something, it has a response such as a clicking sound or a color change. 'Responsiveness' was a feature created by UX designers after noticing people did not know whether they made a selection since the application did not respond back with some form of confirmation, the way a nod or thumbs up would. Similar to you repeating yourself because you're not sure if the person you're speaking to heard you, users need applications to respond to their usage like clicks or selections. This is why if you heart something on Instagram the empty heart button turns red to let you know that your double-tap was acknowledged and received, and responds back to you saying, 'you liked this post' while also signaling to the poster that 'they like your post'. The need for UX to be responsive to the user is based on our human interactions like smiling at a stranger as you cross paths to signal a recognition of their existence within the limits of social currencies like politeness and courtesy. From here, we can consider how meaningful affective exchanges such as likes and comments create bonds between users who have never met in real life. Like many people of my generation, I have made extensive friendships with strangers online who I wouldn't recognize on the street or have never even heard the sound of their voice. So many online communities even before social media, like AOL chatrooms or forums for special interest groups, ushered this way to expand our social circles. The people I engage with on Twitter were people I used to follow on tumblr. Many of my Instagram followers are people I was 'friends' with on my long-deleted Facebook. As I mentioned, social media is situated in a longer legacy of visual accompaniants of capitalism, and how popular visuals are inextricably linked consumer trends and material conditions. If we think about the earliest iterations of print advertisements, department store catalogues, anthropological work based around

photography, TV commercials, product placement, and sponsorships, we can find congruent histories of visual advertising located in Instagram and TikTok's in-app marketplaces.

During the pandemic, many people were deprived of touch and connection resulting in TikTok's boom and a record 315 million downloads by the end of March 2020 alone. Without parsing the entire study of TikTok's rise in popularity, I will choose to focus on how and why it became as popular as it did, as rapidly as it did because of the pandemic, and how that ushered in a novel era for online cultures and in-app shopping in a way Instagram and YouTube weren't able to do. TikTok is as if Youtube, Twitter, and Instagram had a child that had the best features of each parent. It had the visual interface of Instagram, so people didn't have to be reading; it has the video content of YouTube but without the long form and unskippable ads so content is easily digestible; and it has the vast, stimulating discourse of Twitter with its comment section being fluidly embedded throughout creating threads of replies while simultaneously enabling users to enjoy the visual content without disturbance. TikTok's vertical video format also takes up your entire screen, similar to Apple's video calling application FaceTime. FaceTime became the popular mode of casual or intimate connection in 2020 because people who usually sat face to face couldn't see each other and FaceTime was the next best thing, without the professionalized exhaustion that Zoom carried. The way FaceTime takes up your entire screen makes it feel palpably authentic, like the person is right in front of you, and TikTok did something very similar in that it mimicked that mimicking of face to face connection.

The internet culture of blogs, YouTubers, influencers, and celebrity endorsements, all collapsed the gap between social media content sharing and product promotion. The internet, before anything, was an open-ended place with search engine capabilities for people to obtain information and new knowledge, socialize with both strangers and real friends, and discover communities for niche interests. People began seeking entertainment in the form of games, streaming music and watching videos on mediums aside from television and radio, or reading news and articles aside from print media. When applications geared around socializing and content creation were developed, they were typically ad-free spaces at first. [Anyone older than 25 can fondly remember the days you didn't have to sit through TWO ads to watch a YouTube video of a cat.] Eventually, advertisements were placed on blogs, YouTube, and other platforms and began offering paid subscriptions to mitigate ads or to access new content. But for the non-paying user, ads became a commonplace nuisance integrated into the fabric of almost every online space. Even with pop-up and ad blockers, if the ad is paying to be embedded into the website or application itself, there's really no way the average, free experience is ad-free. I started off this chapter with an example of how the center button in Instagram had become the shopping tab that routed you to an in-app Marketplace, and as of November 2022 the same has happened for TikTok's in-app marketplace called TikTokShop. Similar to the interface of Instagram's marketplace being front and center, and deprioritizing posting and non-commodified engagement, TikTokShop was placed between your "For You" page which was accounts you don't follow and are algorithmically aligned to your interest, and the "Following" page with was accounts you follow- pretty much, you cannot swipe between the two pages without confronting TikTokShop (Image 1.3). From a design standpoint, it's annoying but effective— which

signals the connection of this trend of placing the in-app marketplace in the center, just like Instagram had once done. This shift signals to me a larger ideological project of the social e-commerce space in the surge of hyper-consumerism in a "post" Covid 19 world.

I argue that the hyper-consumerist culture of Instagram's shop tab and TikTokShop is strongly linked to the national sentiments born out of the pandemic in a way that resembles the consumer patriotism we saw after the September 11 terrorist attacks. In *The Right to Fashion in the Age of Terrorism,* Minh-Ha Pham unpacks the distinct character of the post-911 consumer patriotism by way of "fashion's neoliberal democratic possibilities" and the way "racial and class distinctions are concealed by the universalist language of sartorial democracy" (Pham, 390). She locates sentiments of 'Shop for America' as a forceful narrative in the distinct post-911 formation of consumer patriotism. She discusses how Bush-era advertising campaigns were linking consumerism to projects of statecraft via articulations of terrorism versus freedom. Post-September 11 consumerism campaigns functioned as a "technology of governmentality that produced consumer patriots who 'are controlled… through their freedom.' The fear of terrorism (in all its racialized, sexualized, gendered, and Islamophobic forms) and its perceived threat to the American way of life" (Pham, 394).

I want to pay close attention here to her term 'consumer patriots' who were armed with credit cards to shop for America and "and persuaded to live and die as patriotic subjects" (Lowe, *Globalization,* 120) regardless of class and political spectrums. The 'shop for America' campaigns aligned with the national ideals of women in marketplaces serving political functions- a juxtaposition which was often conducted, Pham notes,

through the national mythology of burqa-clad Muslim women in Iraq and Afghanistan being unable to leave their homes and "engage in circuits of global capitalism. Public displays of consumerism simultaneously enact both physical and political liberation" (Pham, 392). The Taliban wasn't letting Muslim women shop, so they were simultaneously oppressed and terrorists, therefore, the least American women could do was shop for our own freedom and democracy to place ourselves as diametrically opposite to the enemy, one Payless sandal at a time.

It's noted historically that natural catastrophes are met with burgeoning national sentimentality ranging from altruism to xenophobia. I argue that a unique post-pandemic consumer patriotism emerged in the form of a heavy push to "support small businesses" as many retailers, restaurants, and other brick-and-mortar establishments were going out of business and resulting in a growing precariat class. Though people were being encouraged to shelter at home, buying masks from someone selling them on their Etsy shop or ordering take-out from a small business restaurant in your neighborhood was framed as a humanitarian contribution to keep a family afloat. There was a strong connotation with supporting the 'small' that speaks to moral and ethical registers, especially 'sustainability' or 'shopping locally' that align ideologically with late-stage capitalist environmentalism. The call to support small businesses may have also assuaged people's guilt of relying on others to cook or deliver their meals, which may have been live-saving for at-risk people, or out of convenience for others. Sure enough, the 'support small business' slogan began leaking onto chain franchises and larger corporations as well because the phrase 'essential worker' entered our lexicon in 2020. The essential worker dovetailed with supporting small businesses because of its

flickering subjectivity. The definition of "essential workers" kept morphing to include occupations outside of hospital workers and included anyone who worked in service at any capacity from grocery store workers, restaurant staff, gas station attendants, critical trades, custodians, child-care, transportation, and agriculture. Time Magazine honored both front line hospital workers and essential workers - namely cafeteria workers in Dallas - as their Readers' Choice Person of the Year with an image captioned "Heroes of the Front Lines" (Image 1.4). The term is a gilded honor in the sense that it purports the title of the most valuable worker in society, while also presupposing their increased risk to Covid transmission as an occupational hazard. Though essential workers were the people who kept our world spinning when everything was damned to stand still, I couldn't help but notice an air of humanitarianism in every purchase advertised during 2020 - even if it was from a Target staffed by 'essential workers' - because it meant you were either stimulating the economy by keeping 'small' businesses afloat or by keeping essential workers employed. There was also a rise in the language of 'mutual aid' and communities were organizing funds and resources to meet common needs. Though there were many sincere efforts to provide direct aid and relief to marginalized communities, the term 'mutual aid' also began unravelling at the seams to include any sort of community work, even amongst affluent neighborhoods. Aside from the nebulous 'economy' or 'small businesses' that our purchases were keeping alive, I argue that there was an ideological commitment to the hyper-consumerism of 2020 in that it adhered to a blinding effort to keeping things in our country as 'normal' as possible during one of the most unprecedented and abnormal time of our lives.

In the light of horrific supply chain issues and coupled with remote work opening up time for media consumption and hobbies outside of shopping, economic recovery became an important priority in the face of these threats to consumerism while also being framed as 'resilience' and 'perseverance'. There was a suffocating social narrative to keep things 'normal' and not disrupt the equilibrium of normal economic activity levels, normal exercise routines, normal schooling, and normal-as-possible capitalism. Pham remarks that in post-911 advertising, shopping had an "emancipatory potential" and could "inaugurate a process of political visibility that rescues women of cover from an unmodern and oppressive invisibility" (392). Though the Covid-19 consumer patriotism had different investments and methods of employing those via different narratives, the foundational statecraft is still present. By framing shopping to support small businesses and essential workers, we could display the indomitable American spirit of neoliberal patriotic possibilities with every Amazon or Uber Eats order. Like with most new and rapidly developing technology, it takes some time to notice the ideological projects but this consumer patriotism social landscape matters immensely when looking at the context of Instagram and TikTok's battle for social e-commerce popularity between the years of 2020-2023.

I want to briefly highlight the differences between Instagram shop and TikTok Shop in order to understand why the rise of TikTok and fall of Instagram shop tab per my inferences, and what this can tell us about the influencer economy. In the remainder of this chapter and the chapters to follow, it's crucial to understand how the influencer model triangulates consumers (users), advertisements (influencer or traditional ads), and companies (brands) and what that triangulation tells us about visuality and nationhood.

As I framed earlier, Instagram, before anything else, was a social networking photo-sharing platform for users to connect with friends, family, and make new online communities. TikTok on the other hand, entered the social media scene untethered to Facebook and was more content-oriented than social; the focus was to rapidly drive new and interesting content with a sharp algorithm that was constantly calibrating to your interests. Instagram on the other hand, was more affinity-oriented, who you followed or what types of account you interacted with most weren't necessarily sharpening any algorithm to push more new content for you, rather keeping you connected. TikTok's algorithm works better from a marketing perspective in that it focuses on showing content to people who it calculates will like it regardless of if they follow you or have mutuals with you- thus making it easier to reach an audience who has never engaged with you before but has overlapping interests.

When I began this chapter in 2018, I referenced the 2020 update to Instagram where the center button was no longer the 'plus sign' button for posting new photos, but instead replaced with the shop tab (Image 1.2). A lot has obviously changed in the world since 2020, and one major change to Instagram was that this update failed horribly amongst users, and received an overwhelmingly negative response from users. By January 2023, Instagram pulled the shop tab from its navigation bar (and replaced it with Reels- Instagram's competition to TikTok's vertical video feed) and began slowly phasing out the in-app marketplace altogether. From my observations, I can offer a few insights as to why the shop tab failed completely and what that says about user needs versus the application's goals. Firstly, what is powerful about advertising on both Instagram and

TikTok is that the ads would no longer be ugly or disruptive, nor would they lead you to a separate landing page of a company's website; instead, ads on Instagram often redirect you to the company's online storefront and offer seemingly secure transactions to purchase the product you just saw almost instantly; it took a few extra clicks and verifications, but it was still within the app itself. With TikTokShop, purchase links swipe up within the video and allow you to tap to purchase instantly without even disrupting your video playing in the background. The seamlessness in purchasing is made even more disparate when you consider the amount of security breaches, hacking bots, and conspiracies about the Meta-verse that Instagram was grappling with— especially since the early iterations of the shop tab were clunky and disreputable looking. Established luxury brands also couldn't safely mitigate the unsecure and overall 'cheap' look of the shop tab interface, especially after putting in so much effort to polish glamorous advertisements that reflected their brand image. The shop tab platform was simply not sophisticated enough to sell high-end, luxury items, and for this reason, users would rather shop from the brand's website directly since popular brands were not using the e-commerce feature thoroughly. (Though the shop tab may have worked well for certain small businesses that put out small batches of made-to-demand items and did all their advertising through content creation on the app.) Oddly enough, this unsophistication worked for TikTok because again it didn't have to prove a reputable standing, and also has a population of very young users. TikTok purports to deliver more 'authentic' (but still curated) content where things aren't beautifully over-filtered and instead rough-and-ready. This placed TikTok Shop in a pool where its competitive peers were notoriously shady 'drop-shipping' e-commerce websites like Wish, Temu, or AliBaba, not the online storefronts of luxury brands themselves.[1]

Secondly, the timing. Common complaints were that users hopped on Instagram to socialize and see content from their friends. So how did the shop tab fare in a timeframe where people wanted to be connected to their IRL friends and family more than ever? Not well, since the history of Instagram's social networking roots along with its ownership under Facebook (Meta) had rendered it a social space first. The over-commercialization also complicated the app making the interface exceptionally noisy; it wasn't as simple as post a pic, swipe on a filter, and let the likes and comments stream in, a format that even grandparents were accustomed to by 2020. Again, oddly enough, this same logic ironically worked in favor of the TikTok shop. In the pandemic landscape where loneliness was a major issue, people used applications to feel connected to new people, and TikTok offered a comfortable vantage point to see new worlds and connect with new strangers; ultimately, this became a comfortable space to shop as well because there was more to do than seeing your friends. The commercialization of the app peaked two years into the pandemic, and this timing meshed fluidly with the consumer patriotism ideological push of support small businesses— a narrative that could market extremely effectively on TikTok due to TikToks's higher probability of virality. Industry experts have been trying to demystify the magic of virality since the early 2000s YouTube era, but ultimately virality is usually an organic fluke signaling shared human nature and experience by way of popularity metrics. Data scientists can potentially go back and try to reconfigure how a popular video got a surge of engagement- was it really early on a to-be trend? Or perhaps it was on the topic of something that was already viral or a contemporary cultural happening? Ultimately, unless the content is seeded with a financial backing, there is always an element of randomness. Touching back to my

formulation of randomness and patterns as the dominant language of cybernetics- we see how the non-information of 'randomness' in a viral trend inevitably lays forth a 'pattern' of predictable brand responses to that random virality; viral trends result in companies or drop-shippers hastily formulating 'dupes' of a product that went viral, or pushing similar products from pre-existing inventory to quickly monetize on the popularity of that viral product. Despite not favoring virality, Instagram does have far better capacity for scheduled and intelligent advertising because it has multiple content formats (such as stories, posts, and videos) for ads and different price points for paid ads; and although trends may not go viral on Instagram, the app does boast a diverse age group of consumers, not just young people, so its relevance remains in other ways.

These disparate courses between the two e-commerce platforms are useful in locating the ideological projects that inform and are informed by national sentiment and market trends. Later in this chapter, I propose how online trends and accessibility to products   has given consumers the ability to purchase the aesthetics of a lifestyle that they may not necessarily live. In a time of global inflation where many people are overwhelmingly struggling with precarity, ornamentational products grant a sense of access or inclusion (at least visually speaking) to an aesthetic lifestyle signaling consumer values of an undisturbed, normal, pre-pandemic life. Narratives around making purchases on TikTokShop are always framed with the language of "supporting" businesses or prioritizing "self-care" as means for surviving in the capitalistic 9-5 grind. Even frivolous, "girly", purchases have become symbolic of feminism as consumerism and framed as rewards. Furthermore, the entanglement with the influencer marketing model ties well into the meritocracy narrative I mentioned earlier. The American Dream

bootstraps-esque nature of influencing posits that anyone can make it (because of how TikTok has made virality achievable for anyone) so long as they're genuinely engaged with their online audience- what genuine engagement means in a for-profit model still puzzles me. Therefore, we see how narratives of 'support small businesses' that rose after Covid-19 are sutured into the modulations of Instagram and TikTok's e-commerce platforms and in service of amplifying a national sentiment of community and 'mutual aid.'

Social media and online platforms in general are very fast moving, but I ground my analysis of TikTok in the same way I have theorized with Instagram and Twitter. By considering the junction between the historical, economic, and visual I am able to stabilize my analysis of new technologies. The TikTokShop, now almost two years old, has shown signs of following the same trajectory that Instagram did where many comments and videos have responded saying that the original lure of the app was that it was raw and disconnected from performative aesthetics the way Instagram was- and shopping was just a fun addition. Though the in-app shop was not the intention of TikTok, it is now vital to the application's addictive-nature after generating constant use and increased revenue through influencer culture. Since it achieved its original goal of fostering raw human connections free from the restrictions of geography and time-zones, and an opportunity to engage with strangers with shared, niche interests, hyper-specific online communities developed, and it was only a matter of time before companies began seeing a prime opportunity for targeted advertising due its strongly differentiated audience base. With the rise of influencers and sponsored posts being integrated into the feed, it has now become next to impossible to escape advertising. Opening up TikTok

after the integration of the TikTok Shop feels like opening up your phone to a barrage of billboards that lure you in with the exact product you've had your eyes on. What ended up happening with Instagram and TikTok feeds is that it became increasingly (and annoyingly) difficult to visually differentiate your friends posts from 'user-generated content' form ads— a specific ad aesthetic format that mimics non-monetized posts. Any sort of advertisement or sponsored post is required to be tagged or has an additional caption that says its paid promotion so people are not falsely advertised to. This brings up the challenges of user-generated content that is exceptionally successful because it doesn't immediately read as ad. Many users now lament that opening TikTok's For You feed— which was supposed to be new content based on your algorithm, not shopping patterns— now feels like one giant, continuous ad because the Shoppable Video feature swipes up from any sponsored or linked post (Image 1.5). Unsurprisingly, the friend feed which is people you are friends with as opposed to random creators, was never front and center, reifying that this is a profit oriented app not a new content and connections platform.

TikTok's ascent in the 2020 pandemic was fruitful to bridge cyber-worlds but the qualities of its addictive algorithm are unexcelled, and way too lucrative to go unsullied. Algorithmically, TikTok's goal is to keep you on it for long periods of time or to keep revisiting the app in search of something new. The addictive nature of Instagram, Facebook, or more affinity-oriented social networking apps is premised on sociality, like who is commenting or liking your posts. TikTok has one of the most, if not *the* most, advanced algorithm across social applications because the machine is constantly learning about you and recalibrating for dead-on accuracy. TikTok's feed is always

referred to as frighteningly accurate in regards to how it presents content that is near perfectly matched to your interests. In December 2021, a segment of TikTok's machine learning algorithmic code was leaked, and many data scientists flooded to understand it. Most interestingly, it was reported that TikTok's algorithm was trained to push content that is only 80% closely aligned to your interests so that you would keep scrolling to dig deeper and find the 100% match. The reason being, if they readily presented content that you were 100% interested in up front, you'd know what to expect and wouldn't be craving something just a little closer and keep scrolling to nab it. Think of it as a recipe that has a missing secret ingredient and how you would keep trying to replicate that recipe with different ingredients to uncover the secret one; but once you know how to make it perfectly you may move on to try different recipes because it's all figured out. There is brimming speculation about how the near-perfect algorithm contributes to the addictive nature of the app, how it contributes to decreasing attention spans, and how the format causes doom-scrolling— scrolling endlessly without the inclination to stop or curb, and watching almost everything you come across in an effort to emotionally disassociate. It's interesting to note how the pushback against social media is typically framed with issues of addictiveness and disconnect from reality, without considering how it's a continuation of our desire to feel a sense of community or exploring the reasons why millions of people may want to disconnect from their lives. Job precarity, loneliness, grief, and other addictions all flicker across the common complaints of social media overuse. In regards to the post-pandemic popularity and appeal of social media platforms, there has been a lot of discourse on Twitter and TikTok predominantly that the internet is our generation's "third space" so to speak. Virtual spaces offer an in between home and school or work, as humans have fewer places to gather and socialize in large suburbs or urban sprawls,

resulting in a reliance on social media as a space to meet friends, old and new. I think this metaphor of the internet as our generation's third space is fairly accurate, albeit with limitations like access to internet and smartphones or expendable time; it captures the essence of social media as a reconfiguration of broader social histories of humans gathering in town squares, plazas, parks, coffeeshops and other communal spaces known almost exclusively for fostering human connection. And it bears mentioning that even IRL places of gathering have always had their limits of inclusion and are highly politicized sites to observe racial or gender policing, and how public spaces aren't neutral for everyone in this romanticized definition of third spaces. There will always be politics of exclusion in all public places, and social media is included in that.

In the following section, I focus particularly on how this complicates the relationship between influencers, their followers, and the brands that sponsor them. The influencer model is enmeshed in the age old Mad-Men-esque triangulation between the consumer, the advertiser, and the company. Similarly, race, gender, class, and all other power relations inform which influencers receive partnerships, where diversity metrics fall into place, which products are built and marketed for audiences of color or not, and even payment and contract discrepancies amongst creators and their brand partnerships. The influencer model capitalizes on the idea of trust and parasocial relationships. Influencers become north stars for what to buy versus what not to buy. Without much critical engagement and existing within a hyperconsumerist foundation, users are easily influenced to buy a product from someone who feels like a friend. When it comes to parasocial relationships between brands and consumers, an overt ad does not have the same appeal as user-generated content (influencer advertising) because people would

rather trust a friend's recommendation over the company itself telling you how wonderful their product is. With almost any art form there is discourse about authenticity and how it is something that creators should prioritize. Building authentic engagement and a following community as opposed to paying for a thousands of 'ghost' followers (followers that increase your numbers but don't interact with your posts and may be bots) is what gives influencers a gilded sense of community behind the screen. The formation of influencer advertising is rooted in robust networks of biopower and it compels me to expand my engagement of labour and capitalism to one of biolabour and biocapitalism.

BIOLABOUR, IMAGE THEORY OF VALUE, COMPLEX OF VISUALITY

In my exploration of biopower, I am using the words biolabour and biocapital drawn from various genealogies of the terms. I draw my definition via Michel Foucault's argument about biopower as the administration and regulation of human life at the level of the individual subject's body, specifically in relation to the use of state violence towards certain populations; simply put, the nation-state's sometimes violent control of populations at the level of the human body. For my engagement with biolabour and biocapitalism, particularly as I find it on social media platforms and their gathering of user-generated insights as data mining for targeted advertising, I engage heavily with economic scientists Andrea Fumagalli and Cristina Morini's explorations of *biolabour and biocapitalism* and their *image theory of value*. Morini and Fumagalli are both invested in the politics of labouring with Fumagalli focusing on the transformations of capitalism, and Morini researching women's labour markets and conditions in Italy. Traditionally, the labour theory of value has most simply been defined as how the value of a commodity

or product is typically measured by the amount of wage labour - quantified as hours as opposed to skill - required to produce that commodity. Ethnic studies and feminist interventions of the labour theory of value ask if the unpaid domestic labour of women or domestic help that enables the worker to produce the commodity without being interrupted by child-care or chores, can be measured as well to fortify the value of the commodity beyond just the time it took. A very basic illustration can be the value of a dress that took 7 hours to sew versus the value of a dress that took 7 hours to sew magnified by the 7 hours of child-care that facilitated the worker's productivity.

Feminist interventions in the labor theory of value assert how labour in the domestic realm (such as housework, care-giving, and child-care) is crucial to the flow of capitalism in that it optimizes the ability of workers to focus on labour outside the 'home' to earn money and further economic growth. Kalindi Vora offers a Marxist feminist intervention of caregiving and affective labour analysis to contend with waged caregiving alongside unwaged domestic work, and the role that gendered caregiving work has in larger conversations of biopolitics. Whether it is unwaged domestic work or waged caregiving work, it is important to consider globalization's inextricable link to biopolitical frameworks of labour that shape ethical and political determinants of life and death. Labor, whether biopolitical, biocapitalistic, or affective, continues to operate in a colonial model fashioned by imperialism and Orientalism. Furthermore, when that labor is racialized and feminized, it forges property relations between global power dynamics over the subalternized female or queered body. In Chapter 3, I explore these biopolitical property relations in regards to lower-caste and Muslim garment workers in India.

In their 2007 paper *Life Put to Work: Towards a life theory of value*, Morini and Fumagalli propose the definition of biocapitalism as a "process of accumulation that not only is founded on the exploitation of knowledge but of the entirety of human faculties, from relational-linguistic to affective-sensorial. Biocapitalism points to a broader set of meanings than the ones entailed by the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism" (Morini & Fumagalli, 235) which means it doesn't restrict cognitive labour to 'information dissemination' and 'knowledge application' as the only methods of creating value. Biolabour is all labour done within biocapitalism and is an "ensemble of the vital-cerebral-physical faculties of human beings" (Morini & Fumagalli, 240). Biolabour's characteristics refer to:

1- relational labour related to social communications,
2- linguistic and cognitive labour related to knowledge dissemination,
3- symbolic labour related to imagery and sense-making,
4- corporeal-sensorial labour related to physical activities, and
5- affective labour related to caregiving in its various forms.

Morini and Fumagalli assert that a reflection about the modalities through which value is generated from biolabour must also adjust to include the differences of value generation in biocapitalism. (Similar to how the hours a child-care provider works while a garment worker works could add the product's 'value'). Therefore, it would include value generated by the dissemination of knowledge through linguistic-cognitive labour (titled the knowledge theory of value); value generated by affective and reproductive labour (titled the affect theory of value); and value generated by symbolic and imaginary labour, especially in the process of branding (titled the image theory of value). Another defining aspect of vital-cerebral-physical biolabour is that the time spent working is not limited to the structured hours like the "9-5" or even to a specific location like the office,

farm, or factory, with the rise of mobile workplaces like your phone or laptop which allow people to continue working on the go or remotely from home. All of these factors contribute to biolabour as an assemblage of knowledge, image, corporeality, relationality, and affect that generate value beyond quantifiable measures like time within a biocapitalist framework of digital cultures on social media.

In *Eating as a Transgression*, Korean media and communications scholar Yeran Kim takes up Morini and Fumagalli's description of biolabour as an assemblage of body, affect, sense, symbol, and data. Kim argues that it is life itself that is exploited in the online trend and culture of the *Mukbang*- a performance where YouTubers and other content creators digitally mediate the natural act of eating and turn it into a consumption of not just food but also monetized body, culture, data, and meaning. Kim analyzes mukbangs and says "the psychic and physical faculties of human beings are entirely and inexorably motivated, exploited, and monetized in the process of biolabour... It may be a logical, and yet tragic consequence that in the practice of biolabour, life is reduced to an object of economic management and investment. At the same time, human beings are reduced to 'human resources' that serve to effectively maximize corporate profits" (117). Kim gives a wonderful analysis applying an assemblage framework of how mukbang culture exploits content-creators as biolabourers. Furthermore, it provides a great example of how digital cultures texturize the way we engage with the vital-cerebral-physical characteristics of biolabour. Online content-creation is different from clocking in 9-5 at the office, factory, or farm and the worksite is blurred and expansive, as even mommy-blogging has turned home kitchens or family outings into content-ripe spaces. This formation of biolabour asserts how everything in between traditional labour (essentially

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everything beyond your brain and body doing functions to make a profit) such as inciting affect like desire or fear in others, personal relations amongst workers, certain signs/ symbols within popular cultures, and physical faculties, are adding value in the form of social popularity and digital virality- both of which cement relevance in the online zeitgeist. Kim asserts that how mukbangs capitalize on the carnal nature, use sensorial affect, and indicate how "vital activities such as eating are converted to varied novel forms of biolabour and digital commodification" and how "human life is, in the very form of exercising freedom and spontaneous capability, exploited and monetized" (Kim, 118).

The crux of my work here aims to make an Ethnic Studies intervention in Morini and Fumagalli's framework of biocapitalism, and how consumerism depends on forms of digital labour conducted by both content creators and consumers. It's critical to note that the extraction of vital-cerebral-physical biolabour means something different for historically racialized communities that have long histories of imperialist labour extraction. Consuming can be the simultaneous participation in popular national sentiments, an act of communication, and an attempt at self-marketing. "Nowadays, consumption is participation of the public opinion because it is dominated by increasingly dynamic and specific conventions. I argue that with the influencer economy model, we witness a development of community-oriented conventions of consumption and labour. Therefore, the drive to consume or create content is not based on a necessity to satisfy needs, but rather on "the necessity to show a belonging to the common sense" (Morini & Fumagalli, 241). This triangulation of consumption as participation in popular national sentiments by branding yourself with a specific aesthetic that communicates your positionality and identity— and trying to best score a profit if you're within the

influencer economy. Furthermore, as I think about the role of influencer and in-app marketplaces, I consider their active adjustment of the idea of consumption in relation to advertising, the emblematic act of biocapitalist communication. Consumption turns into an act of communication, advertising, and branding that is not only the purchase of commodities but rather "induces individuals to valorize themselves. It is a marketing of oneself, not a given commodity… the non-separation between production and consumption becomes total. The Worker and the Consumers, once differentiated although embodied in the same person, are today melted in the vital acts of individuals. Once again, what appears to be an everyday act motivated by self-preservation (as the act of consuming) is valorized through the biocapitalist process of accumulation (Fumagalli, 2007). This research was published in the late aughts, but I think the total eclipsing of the worker and consumer Fumagalli speaks of is fully actualized in the rise of the influencer model formation. But when it comes to influencers from racialized or minoritized communities, there are more complicated elements of self-valorization in that influencers from those communities are also driven by moralistic notions of representation, self-documentation, and potentially writing new epistemologies. To market oneself in 2010, may have referred to advertisements selling feelings, identities, and personalities instead of marketing objects. Think of a perfume commercial in print magazine or television and how neither medium can convey the sensorial affect of smelling the fragrance, so instead they use a celebrity's image, sex appeal, persona, and stylize it with various backgrounds, either urban or natural, and motifs, like flowers or motorcycles, to convey the scent. Similarly with the influencer, if you want to look, smell, dress, or eat just like that person, you have access to all their products linked on their page that will allow you to purchase them within a few clicks and further signal a "belonging

to the common sense." That sense of popularity and belonging is always negotiated and prickly however for a minority-representation orientated influencer who may be partnered with a company that has profits from war crimes, child labour, or sweatshops. The same image may advertise a brand of ethnic-skin friendly cosmetics that are sentimental for communities who haven't always had access to those products, but also signals an incongruent positionality in a larger racial-capitalistic network or historic legacies of labour exploitation.

In the realm of digital visual cultures, semiotics and discourse analysis is important to locate that power and what messages it is trying to convey about the nation-state and identities in relation to the global network of biocapitalism. Ergo, I build upon the definition of image theory of value to emphasize the value generated by symbolic and imaginary labour, especially in the process of digital branding. I use the image theory of value and apply it towards diversity-driven social media engagement, and how the symbolic and imaginary labour increases the value of the aesthetics, trends, products, and cultural producers which are all then used by companies in hopes of enriching their brand's value. I draw a connection between their image theory of value and Mirzoeff's complex of visuality which allows me to harmonize my visual analysis with both economics and cultural studies. I largely employ Mirzoeff's description of nations as a spatialized hierarchy of cultures through complexes of classifying, separating, and granting aesthetic power that work ideologically and three-dimensionally as they span images, labor practices, workers hands, Instagram posts, and commodities. By applying his analysis of semiotics to this visualization of culture, I locate the complexes of visuality produced by the national and global networks of social media. Semiotics informs this

symbolic and sense-making labour, which allows me to map the relations between both Morini and Fumagalli's image theory of value and Mirzoeff's complex of visuality. Mirzoeff's complex relies on three steps of first classifying, second, separating, and finally, aestheticizing in order to produce aesthetics of power. Over the next two chapters, I explore the different arenas of fashion, beauty, and decor to locate that classifying and separating happening to aestheticize what gets ultimately posted throughout social media. Furthermore, in *Algorithms of Oppression,* Safiya Noble defines *technological redlining* as the way digital media begets new models of informationalized capitalism wherein "algorithms are serving up deleterious information about people, creating and normalizing structural and systemic isolation, or practicing digital redlining, all of which reinforce oppressive social and economic relations (10). I consider her exploration of technological redlining as emblematic of the second step of 'separating' in Mirzoeff's complex of visuality. Digitally mediated biolabour reinforces perceptual and material segregation in the production of social media trends and cultures. This contends with a complex of visuality within which dominant powers use visual culture to categorize and stratify groups in ways that engender certain people to life-giving models of labour exploitation.

AESTHETICS OF POWER & DATA COLONIALISM

Aesthetics of power refers to the way aesthetic cultures and visual productions became the dominant mode of imagining colonial centers and peripheries. Aesthetics of power serve as tools of nation building, in specific the control of a labouring class. Following the image theory of value, which posits that value is generated by the labour of symbolic and imaginary sense-making amongst human interactions, either digitally or

corporeally, I inspect the biocapitalist dimension of aesthetics of power as an extension of that control of a labouring class and expression of biopower. Moving away from influencers — who will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3 — I want to look closer at the labour that social media users provide through data insights.

I argue that immaterial biolabour is an "ensemble of the vital-cerebral-physical faculties of human beings" (Morini & Fumagalli, 240) that valorizes the interactions and relations between humans and other humans— or nonhuman platforms— by producing data for the benefit of brands that are reliant on content creators and consumers alike. My most prominent example of this is the valorization of social media engagement as a way for social media platforms to mine the data of its users in order to generate insights, targeted advertising, and application optimization. Most importantly, the targeted advertising is in direct relation to how haptic acts like scrolling, liking, zooming, expanding, clicking are all ways that our physical behaviors imply empathic meanings— what articulation of 'feelings' can be found when certain advertisements generated lots of likes or purchases? Here we see the cerebral-physical faculties fortifying our online assemblage by providing user-generated insights and giving the platform information about how we use our eyes and fingers, what we like to see, and what matters to us. Empathy is at the core of these interactions, and those empathic, haptic movements like zooming or clicking are all valuable information that brands could not advertise without. As we've moved even further into a post-Y2K world that has cautiously embraced digital futurity and embedded technological progress in all facets of life, it's imperative to recognize new models of digital labour and biocapitalism.

Morini and Fumagalli assert the necessity of adjusting how digital labour is valorized by stating that "The production of wealth and value is no longer based solely and exclusively on material production, but is increasingly based on immaterial elements, namely on intangible 'raw materials', which are difficult to measure and quantify since they directly result from the use of the relational, emotional and cognitive faculties of human beings" (Morini & Fumagalli, 235). I also intervene here to ask what that means for users who come from historically colonized communities? I posit that the intangible raw materials of immaterial biolabour is the data collected from the user's cognitive and relational faculties that are difficult to measure and quantify. To illustrate, though a user may click an ad link or zoom into a certain post, that does not communicate if the click or the zoom was because they found it interesting and positive, if it was something random or accidental like a child playing with the phone, or if it was in disgust and dislike of an offensive image used in the ad. Of course, if the click results in a purchase or a follow, then a positive correlation can be discerned, but quantifying is still a challenge. Furthermore, not all engagement is necessarily positive, as users may comment on a post repeatedly to remark that the pictured product was gimmicky and of poor quality. This intangible raw material in that case still continues to increase the value by texturizing the data, and developing an even stronger understanding of the social communications and cognitive connections that provide meaning to data. The affect that is located within those actions is the energy that fuels the assemblage of a posthuman cyber-self reflected by user data. Again, it's important to treat the intangible raw material of data as something situated in a larger history of data and technology's relationship to global and historical dynamics of material extraction.

Data, technology, capitalism, and Orientalism have consistently been entangled as they took new formations from history to modernity. Technological advancement has always been invested in meaning making, usually as a marker of class, progressiveness, the Occident, the civilized, and masculinity. While outsourced labour is laced with legacies of imperialism across industries from garment work to call centers, British media and communications scholars Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias offer the phrase "data colonialism" to think of the "predatory extractive practices of historical colonialism with the abstract quantification methods of computing" (Couldry, Mejias, 1). Within data colonialism, all social interactions across the globe are framed as a resource for extraction that are as available and expansive as historically colonized land and populations. Our online social lives, similar to colonial subjects' lives, are restructured to make that data available. This can be understood as social media apps being free and easily accessible while clouding their privacy and data regulations from the average user. From there, our data on these applications is understood in relation to our social usage and how we interact with others, similar to how a colonial anthropologist would study and compare across various groups or tribes of populations to compare dynamics and forge more information. Couldry and Mejias expand that since the extraction is omnipresent in casual social platforms, that corporations are implicating users into "an expanded process for the generation of surplus value. The extraction of data from bodies, things and systems creates new possibilities for managing everything. This is the new and distinctive role of platforms and other environments of routine data extraction. If successful, this transformation will leave no discernable 'outside' to capitalist production: everyday life will have become directly incorporated into the capitalist process of production" (Couldry, Mejias, 12). I briefly mentioned how a distinction of

biocapitalism is that your biolabour contributions are not confined to the hours of 9-5 or at any specific workplace.

Economic scholars of digital labour theorize *playbour*, the fusion of play and labour, and the *prosumer*, the producer and consumer. Both non-monetized, casual users and monetized, working influencers are imbricated in both portmanteaus. With playbour in the context of social media, the user is offering intangible cognitive material that performs a task for Instagram (and subsequent advertisers) to receive an abstract reward in the form of social connection, engagement, or self-aestheticization. Safiya Noble engages with Alex Galloway's work and remarks that the relationship between technology like algorithms and search engines in "the digital interface is a material reality structuring a discourse, embedded with historical relations, working often under the auspices of ludic capitalism, where a kind of playful engagement of labour is masked in vital digital media platforms such as Google" (148). Galloway states that "the new spirit of capitalism is one in which creative expression is valued as labor" (Galloway, 97) and that we are living through a cybernetic era where the "the principles of liberalism inherent in the modern concept of play have become part and parcel of our era of *'immaterial labor'*" (Galloway, 109). Ludic capitalism refers to the confluence of capitalistic labour and play; this refers to how even channels of 'play' have become profitable and thus turn the player into a type of labourer as well. We also see a rise in the monetization of 'play' with things like YouTube channels dedicated to the lucrative practice of video-game streaming, and also the way workplaces are increasingly gamified with things like ping-pong tables in offices or team sports and exercises to foster group participation. (My favorite iteration of this is mandatory lunch-and-learns where

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meetings are reworked as 'fun' workshops where some food will be provided to gloss over the fact that a mandatory work session is being held during the lunch hour reserved for 'play' in the form of rest, eating, socializing, or any other off-the-clock activities). In regards to content creators and consumers on applications like Instagram, it's beneficial to begin with the wide contributions a playbouring user offers the platform in the form of data-mining analytics, libidinal economies, and empathic feedback.

I do want to pause here to offer a brief primer for how targeted advertising and data collection works on Instagram for readers not entirely acquainted with the process. With full disclosure, Instagram technically does not sell any user data directly to advertisers or third parties. It relies instead on a model where it leverages user data to allow advertisers to target specific audiences and advertise effectively within the platform. Instagram can collect extensive data based on user-provided information such as age and gender (which you can select when making an account) and also location from geotagging or your device's settings. Furthermore, it can gather your activity such as likes, comments, follows, search history, and hashtags. If you are a Facebook user, it can use whatever user-provided information you have given to that platform as well which is far more expansive. From there, advertisers pay to partner with Instagram's in-app ad platform and outline their target audience based on demographics like age, gender, location but can also draw vectors for what interaction behaviors, cultural interests, social groups, they want to advertise to. This is where the boogeyman of the algorithm steps in to infer highly sophisticated assumptions about your race or cultural background. If you attend a specific cultural event or browse for specific ethnic retailers, these advanced machine learning models can predict with competent accuracy without

you ever explicitly posting hey, I'm Indian and Muslim and like shopping from POC-friendly brands. From there, Instagram delivers them ad space across user profiles that best match those demographics and interests. Advertisers never receive personal data directly, Instagram retains ownership of the data, and instead the data is aggregated and anonymized and automated. Advertisers then receive metrics on how the ads performed calculated from engagement like clicks, impressions, zooms, but cannot access the personal data of the specific users- they are only receiving aggregated insights to determine if this demographic responded favorably to this ad or not. From there, they are able to fine tune the demographics to advertise to which in return sharpens Instagram's ability to infer target criteria. But what about information about yourself that cannot be obtained from Instagram alone? Instagram also engages in purchases from data brokers who mine information from a vast constellation of sources such as internet browsing history, any websites your email address is linked to, online shopping behaviors, and sometimes even things like household income or educational level. This data allows Instagram to create comprehensive profiles that are far more granular than what is possible on Instagram alone. With these acute details, Instagram can invite advertisers more precise targeting— if they have your income level and online shopping trends, a luxury brand can anticipate higher engagement rates than someone who is Googling student-debt forgiveness or browsing Facebook Marketplace for used electronics. Because of this model, Instagram is comfortably safeguarded from accusations of selling personal information because they technically comply with legal standards of privacy. None of this is to say what they're doing is ethical, it's just that they can't be accused of selling your data. They may not be doing *that* but they're definitely doing much more.

It's important to note here that this creates the narrative for an undifferentiated user in the sense that the 'average' non-monetized social media user is the same when it comes to data-mining within Couldry and Mejias's framework of data colonialism creating a 'data-colonized self.' They argue that "the expansion of data colonialism is a problem for all human subjects… [as] a continuously trackable life is a dispossessed life" (Couldry & Mejias, 16). They also vaguely gesture that dispossession through data is distributed unevenly especially in regards to surveillance, and though data colonialism does turn all users into data subjects this will hold different meanings across individual identities. I want to interrogate this further since there isn't an average, undifferentiated 'user' in regards to social media users. It's important for me to pay attention to how users from marginalized communities have a different relationship to (other-than-data) colonialism than a white or wealthy user. Thinking about how Weheliye stressed the importance of expanding for race in regards to the posthuman, I want to explore what that means in the context of all users being dispossessed and surveilled data subjects. Though data extraction and collection renders all users into colonialist data relations with companies, I don't necessarily agree with Couldry and Mejias's argument that data colonialism complicates an articulation of the colonized East (since by their logic, data epicenters exist in both the West and East, like the US and China). If anything, though it may introduce a complicated relationship to colonial extraction towards otherwise white, Western, or wealthy social media users, it is not introducing anything new to users from historically racialized, gendered, or colonized communities. The process of being continuously tracked or dispossessed of privacy or agency is something many formerly-colonized and currently-marginalized peoples are used to in ways that are far more sinister and life-depleting than data accumulation. Critical Geography scholar David

Harvey describes "accumulation by dispossession" as the way capitalism continuously evolves by accumulating resources and labor from others. With the inclusion of data, 'accumulation by dispossession' can refer to how users are unwittingly contributing to valuable assets of data without transparent consent or compensation— especially considering it's a form of playbour.

The collection and commodification of personal data then means something different for peoples whose land, labour, likeness, resources, privacy, and much more have been colonized, or those who have been in historical and modern iterations of imperialism by way of exploitative labour relations. Not having ownership of your 'data' assets or doing labour without fair or any compensation is a dispossession that is now being carried out by way of social media- an equalizing platform of sorts where anyone with access to the internet and a device can use at will. The 'new imperialism' relationship of a user that is becoming a subject of data colonialism is a continuation of political and historical structures that are maintained by accumulation of surplus value globally— and by that formation, the universal, undifferentiated, average user cannot exist. If our post-human cyber-selves are a reflection of us, it makes sense that our data is also employed differently and for different purposes. For example, by aggregating data from college-aged Black women, advertisers are able to avoid engaging with a demographic and interviewing them or learning the needs of their community directly; instead, they are able to employ algorithms to sift through copious amounts of (essentially donated) surplus data to form inferences about what this demographic's interests and needs are, and optimize their products and advertising. 'Listening and learning' has an entirely different meaning in regards to accumulation via data colonialism. This troubling

relationship between data-mining and users (who are accustomed to racial or gender based subjectivity IRL) reflects a continuation of biocapitalism where bodies are mobilized without direct coercion, and perhaps even playfulness in the way social media apps offer fun and connectivity. I am also in no way saying that it's excusable for the data of white, Western, or wealthy users to be mined as all people can be subject to biopower and state-control; I am instead more invested in what this means for historically marginalized and exploited communities because my focus is on how many branding campaigns are attempting to appeal to neoliberal ideals of diversity, equity, sustainability, transparency, and other such DEI values that assume a post-racial reality. In the following chapters, I explore how influencers from minority communities are lucrative for emphasizing a company's 'diversity' superficially, but there is no internal recognition of the exploitative labour and unethical practices of that same company in regards to 'outsourced' labour forces.

When something on the internet goes viral, it can have a fleeting spike in popularity or become immortalized in Internet histories. Either way, virality is reflective of both niche, social interests, and broader, national investments contributing to aesthetics of power. Since virality and subsequent trends display 'randomness', we can inevitably predict a 'pattern' forthcoming trend among content creators and consumers alike. This is also a result of how data-driven insights can quickly signal to advertising and market research teams that something is about to become popular, and it's up for strategists to determine why, for how long, and what can be done to produce profit. Data-driven insights have been a tool of advertising and marketing agencies since the 50s, and have adapted tremendously within the digital advertising world. Those insights are no

longer simply the personal musings of Don Draper but rather robust strategy and data research teams dedicated to studying current events, consumer trends, politics, social opinions, and incorporating assumptions from machine learning data to make more informed— lucrative— decisions. Technology has long reinforced national ideals of gender. Technological advancements that were designed for the domestic or feminine realm, like dishwashers or sewing machines, were largely to optimize domestic tasks like cooking or laundering; or, advancements were aesthetic oriented, like curling irons or epilators, to optimize beauty practices. These were usually advertised as time saving new technologies that would give women more time outside of homemaking (chores, physical labour) for more homemaking (reproduction, child-rearing, affective labour). But in this contemporary moment, technology reinforces nationalist gender ideals by producing visual cultures, aesthetics, and an image that can be monetized. Moving past how technology reinforces gender-affirming practices, I posit that highly commodified social media platforms use advanced technology to gather user insights as intangible raw materials to create more intangible products like trends, culture, and aesthetics, and attach to them tangible products like specific clothing, make-up, or various accessories. There are endless aesthetic trends that indicate how data driven insights are allowing us to produce more than just a Betty Draper likeness and instead endless opportunities of self-aestheticization by way of consumerism.

Branding strategy research and market analysis data informs everything from fonts, colorways, music, language, artwork, celebrity endorsements, down to every last detail of a product's formulation, packaging, and advertising. User generated insights create a whole new set of data that can provide information about how an ad within an

app captures the user's attention, if they just hover on it, or click on it and follow the link, or if that results in a purchase or a 'follow'. Those intangible raw materials constellate the relationship between visuality and technology, and how that relationship results in tangible changes in the way people fashion their bodies or homes. The visual is typically something we can see but cannot experience via other senses, as I mentioned previously with the perfume ad. Similar to technology, we can interface with a screen (something touchable) but we don't usually see the networks of software or hardware beyond that-something that is out of the visual field. In both realms, there is something absent. But the combination of both results in a tangible product that we can actually touch or wear or apply to our faces or smell or eat. In the following chapters, I build on the semiotics of non-scenes and the absenting of the labor conducted in the invisible peripheries of social media branding. For now, I am interested in tracing how these intangible raw materials produce a tangible visuality: aesthetic trends. Aesthetic trends are digitally mediated visual performances that manifest a material product (commodities for consumption) that continue to produce an ideological reality (cultural and aesthetic groups of belonging). In the first portion of this chapter, I considered how user-generated insights manifest as targeted digital advertisements on TikTok and how that data is used by engineers to develop the most lucrative form of machine learning and user experience and interface choices. For this portion, I am considering the way that data informs trends that are converted into design decisions for tangible visual choices such as colorways, patterns, and motifs.

In *Theory of the Gimmick,* Sianne Ngai describes the self-contradictory attributes and function of the 'gimmick' in the context of capitalism, advertisements, and

aesthetics. She explains that the gimmick functions as an aesthetic and economic tool that does the most without doing much at all— namely that a gimmick typically offers to save time and labour, but ultimately does neither. She argues that aesthetic experiences are always linked to labour and commodity value. It's important for me to consider gimmicky-ness because design choices predicated by virality and trendiness contribute to overall aesthetics of predictable material trends. The digital manifests as the visual, as the material. The objects created in response to the trendiness of certain online aesthetics further fuels more sales and brand engagement, which continues the supply-and-demand loop. Ngai says that gimmicks draw criticism because "they are job related: bits of business for performing aesthetic operations that we somehow become distracted into regarding as aesthetic objects in their own right" (466). Because gimmicks are objects or techniques to achieve a certain result or a labor/time saving purpose, they often become standalone aesthetic objects in and of themselves, further driving consumers to purchase the gimmick itself. The focus becomes less on the 'problem' they are solving, and more on their attractive or fun appeal. The criticism then comes in the form of the gimmick resulting in more time consuming steps or superficial results that don't add any aesthetic value to the overall result of the task. I can offer a multitude of examples here of gimmicky cosmetics products that have become their own aesthetic trend or aesthetic object. For example, the cosmetics brand Youthforia created a color-changing blush is a product that is bright green, but upon contact with your skin it purports to change color in response to your skin's natural pH levels— it offers that your unique pH level determines the shade of pink that the green transforms into. The blush ultimately produces the same bubble-gum pink tone on everyone, which looks different on everyone the same way any blush tone looks different on everyone. A blush that works to match

your unique skin pH symbolizes that you like custom-formulated or scientific cosmetics even though it requires you to be the one to blend it out more. Furthermore, sales are driven by the appeal of the gimmicky green alien goo which is only green in the bottle and for a few seconds on your face. Another popular cosmetics brand, Rhode, released an iPhone case that is molded to fit their most popular lip gloss. The case only comes in one color (the brands 'signature' concrete gray) and only fits their lip-balm, not any other brands. The gimmicky appeal is that it's supposed to save you the hassle of carrying multiple products and all you really need on a run or on a night out besides your phone is their gloss- but only working for one product makes it defunct without the additional purchase of the gloss, and also that it becomes its own aesthetic object where owning the gray case and attaching the gloss to it is a symbol in and of itself. Of course, both of these products have numerous dupes on Amazon and AliBaba because the gimmick is now the object itself. Dupes of the phone case are available in virtually every color now, rendering the gimmick the product in its own right. The dual nature of the gimmick is that it is charming and irritating at once, and probably irritating moreso because it charms us. Therefore, a gimmick is both an idea and also its thingly materialization…. more precisely, the transformation of idea into a thing (Ngai, 478).

Gimmicky beauty and fashion aesthetics on TikTok are part of never-ending trends that have very specific vibes, symbols, and unsurprisingly, products. What's notable about aesthetic trends on TikTok/ Instagram is how the ownership or use of certain products is what makes you achieve that look. The gimmicky nature of these aesthetic trends is that you are not achieving the lifestyle but able to fashion the illusion of one via consumption of very specific looking products or dupes of those products- a

double gimmick of sorts. These trends are incredibly rapid, and their popularity immediately surges into a trickle of new products or re-marketing of preexisting products. The trends will float around on TikTok and Instagram as a "core" or "aesthetic" for days to months, and ultimately end up as discourse in comments sections or Twitter threads or YouTube video-essays expressing criticism of the trend's gimmicky-ness. A part of the nature of these aesthetic trends is the ability to create 'mood boards' or collages that capture the feeling or vibe of the trend through picture-perfect outfits, objects, scenery, quotes, that work together to help visualize the idea through thingly materialization. (This is similar to the perfume ad conveying something intangible into something sensorial through sight and sound and affect). There is everything from Coastal Grandmother (stylized with Nancy Meyers-esque mature wardrobe and sea-side themes), Coquette (stylized by pink ribbon bows, plaid school-girl uniforms, and lots of lace), Dark Academia (stylized by Oxford student staples like sweater vests and hardcopy books, and perhaps oversized wire-frame glasses), and even Cottagecore (stylized by flowy dresses, fresh-baked goods, and a farm-to-table motif). An aesthetic that has lasted for years now and become an adjectival description in its own right, with a lot of resounding discourse, has been the Clean Girl aesthetic (Image 1.6). If we look closely at the Clean Girl aesthetic, it relies on the styling of undetectable skincare focused make-up, outfits without bright colors or noisy prints, and minimalist gold jewelry. However, the gimmick emerges in that in order to achieve this look you have to own gold hoops from popular gold retailers like Mejuri or CatBird in order to be part of that aesthetic and invest in skin treatments from specific Korean spas to be able to get away with as little makeup as possible. Of course you can achieve the aesthetic on a budget with gold hoops and sheet-masks from Target, but the (usually white, thin, blonde) poster girl of this look is

going to be your aesthetic north star for what to purchase to achieve the look. Gimmicky aesthetic trends are a confluence of ornamental performance, consumerism, and online trend culture— and of course, those trends and the products that follow are all understood by data analytics and market research based on user-generated insights.

As a trend becomes more popular, consumers are encouraged to purchase specific products to curate this look into their lifestyle, and therefore fortify the trend even more. The product purchases based on clicking an ad then generate data insights that the trend is still popular and resulting in revenue increases, and therefore is something that should not only continue to be advertised but also something that needs to have more material manifestations for purchase. Guides on how you can "achieve the look" will continue to plug products of all price ranges because you are only achieving the LOOK but not necessarily the essence or lifestyle. The idea is to look like other *it girls*, not necessarily to be one yourself because it's easier and cheaper to look one then actually embody the lifestyle, whatever that lifestyle entails. Again, the goal is to not become a celebrity or an influencer, but to LOOK like one with the strategic use of purchases that will help you achieve the visual language of an it girl without the lifestyle. Sometimes the mood boards or look guides will offer dreamy taxonomic descriptions like "the Clean Girl is the girl who wakes up at 5AM to go to Pilates in a matching pink set from Alo, stop by Erewhon to pick up a $17 smoothie recommended by Bella Hadid, before working her nondescript but cool job, and returning home to toss an antioxidant rich salad, and journal before bed." The Off Duty Model aesthetic is another good example of this as the whole idea is to look like a model who is 'off duty' and not currently walking a runway, but still adjacent to high fashion aesthetics during a casual grocery run. "She's stepping out, tired from

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Fashion Week, and on her way to buy cigarettes in a plain tank paired with $1200 Maison Marginal tabi loafers and unwashed hair." Again, dressing this way does not mean you look exactly like a model, but rather that you are embodying the edgy, cool, captivation of passing a girl in the street and thinking wow she must be a model; the thingly materialization to achieve the gimmick of looking like an off duty model will be the pairing of luxury branded basics with something you'd find in a high-schooler's closet, like a $500 white tee from Burberry paired with dirty Crocs.

Another aesthetic— that I truly feel warrants an entire research essay on by itself— is Quiet Luxury which is fashioned around the adage of "money talks but wealth whispers." It speaks to how old money blue-bloods don't dress with flashy brand logos and dress like vintage Tommy Hilfiger catalogues. Of course, the mood boards for this aesthetic are steeped in age-old notions of how true wealth looks the total opposite of caricatures of young, new-money, Black hip-hop artists wearing flashy gold chains and dripping in brand logos and driving shiny cars. (An unexpected icon of this is Steve Jobs, who apparently owned 200 of the same black turtleneck that he wore daily for decades to reduce decision fatigue, only for people to find out that this was a custom Issey Miyake turtleneck that retailed for close to $200 at that time). As you can imagine, the racist, classist, and gendered dynamics of these 'aesthetics' burn up just as big and bright as the trends themselves. It's no surprise that more often than not, the poster girl for all of the aesthetics are skinny, white, cisgendered women. Usually, content creators of various minoritized communities will push against the aesthetics roots as racist or classist or appropriative of other cultures, and many will do their own spin on the look like South Asian Academia, Clean Girl with Acne, or Black Cottagecore. This dual participation in

and refusal of the trend creates a new aesthetic subgenre that is defying the racist or classist overtones, but still reproducing the gimmick of the aesthetic and subsequent products. The 'inclusive' aesthetic subgenres are supposed to disrupt the white, skinny, blonde ownership of a certain aesthetic category and expand it- but I wonder if these resistive responses actually expand the definition itself, or just expand the vectors so that it may fit Brown and Black girls? Linguistically it can look like the difference between 'brown is beautiful' versus 'beautiful can be brown also' or 'brown acne-ridden skin is Clean girl' versus 'Clean girl can also be brown, acne skin.' I don't think the performances of the inclusive aesthetic subgenres are necessarily busting open the contradictions and upturning the definition. (In Chapter 3/ epilogue I explore this in more detail). I argue this especially because earlier I discussed how the TikTok search always pushes white creators and content first; so when I search for Clean Girl aesthetic, all the top results are going to be white unless I type in Clean Girl Latina or Clean Girl Filipina. Thinking back on Michele White's exploration of how glitter is a "feature of and produces femininity, threatens femininity, is managed, is produced by women, and is a technology for cultural opposition. These seemingly contrary and yet irrevocably intermeshed functions of glitter, and numerous other features of femininity function because women reference and try to manage similar discordances, suggest some interesting discrepancies within femininity that have political and theoretical potential" (White, 160). The glittery discordance of trying to disrupt and participate in an aesthetic trend or an ever-changing (but ever the same) beauty standard is something women face both online and offline. The confluence of online performance and consumerism and trends lends itself to many questions about reactionary resistance, and how these disruptions end up reproducing the same aesthetic projects they aim to disrupt.

These aesthetics result in countless Pinterest boards, Instagram accounts dedicated to achieving the look, TikTok comments guiding on what to purchase, and trickle into the marketing lexicon across advertising beyond social media. Going back to my assemblage of the triangulation between human, posthuman, and capitalism, there is a gimmicky nature to how these aesthetics (ideas) can only be achieved through product consumption (thingly materialization). And even when a person of color who is disabled, or plus-size, or dark skinned, or simply out of the bounds of the aesthetic's poster girl, it is usually their fellow community people who are hyping their posts and boosting sales of the 'inclusive' products. However, all of this counter-creation is still producing a profit for brands selling the product that will give you the look and online retailers selling the dupes that will give you the look of the look for cheaper. (In a later chapter, I explore how similar to beauty and fashion, when someone chooses to adorn their home, there are aesthetic choices that can bring you closer to the boho-chic look, but truly nothing about your lifestyle as to authentically have an engagement with other countries, the craftsmen, the religion, or even the lifestyle of immigrants.) Ultimately, products are being created, advertised and sold, and user-insights are being mined, studied, and sold, and content creators and users alike are imbricated in this process.

Aesthetics, ornamentation, and beauty have always been a tool of empire. All of the aesthetics taxonomies I mentioned earlier are often reduced to being frivolous, girly trends distracting from more serious issues. But as the racial contentions and subsequent backlash have proven, there is nothing unserious about aesthetics. Considering the way that digital aesthetic formations continue to make new meanings of beauty, gender, and race, it's important to notice ornamentation's glittering capacity to visually "reorder

cultural assumptions and stable categories related to the ongoing instabilities of new technologies" (White, 160). Ornamentation has functioned as a form of meaning-making and also distraction during various historical moments. The idea for this dissertation came into view when I began thinking intently about the distinct grandeur of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris's 2021 inauguration ceremony. *Vanity Fair* and other prominent fashion news outlets focused on the aesthetics and regality of the ceremony akin to the Met Gala or a royal wedding. It is more enjoyable, in a sense, to focus on the intentionality behind the 'bipartisan purple' color donned by Kamala Harris, Michelle Obama, and Hilary Clinton than to consider the violence sublimated by the regalia. The focus on the inauguration fashion compelled me to think of national desires; the inauguration signaled respite from Donald Trump's presidency and as such, was treated as a collective celebration for both Blue and Red states. When I consider aesthetics as modes of distraction, I'm not simply assuming that people won't think critically about the inauguration because they are so taken by the couture of the moment; rather, this emphasis on visuals serves as a powerful tool of distortion from the violence and militarization that is being subliminalized. The grandiose performance is not only obscuring but also revealing those national desires, while strategically inviting you to take part in the legacy of the United States and making you a part of the pleasure and appeal as you participate in rating the looks or comparing design choices. Though not the focus of this project, the fashion reporting on the 2021 inauguration's regalia brought out many of the questions that I ask here. Moving from aesthetics to antagonisms, I began wondering how the glitter of aesthetics eventually distills into violent and damaging complexes of visuality. And what do those complexes disappear, distort, or distract from?

My case studies aim to unpack the way that US society is grounded in and sustained by a fabric of visuality that structures our understanding of popular culture within a transnational network of exchanges with the rest of the world. The imaginary realm of information, images, and ideas informs the perceptual in order to visualize the historical and the contemporary. To consider how that history is visually imagined means to discern how power dynamics of race, gender, and class dictate which visuals will register as meaningful renditions of a given event. Iconic photographs have become the epitome of certain historical moments like Will Counts's image of the Little Rock Nine students walking into school with a mob of white supremacists yelling, or Dorothea Lange's photograph 'Migrant Mother' that stood in to epitomize the plight of farmworkers during the Great Depression. So much so, that Thomas E. Franklin's photograph of firefighters raising the flag at Ground Zero is considered a nod to Joe Rosenthal's photograph of soldiers raising the flag at Iwo Jima during World War II, thus creating a meta visual continuum between two iconic photographs. The instantly recognizable contexts of these photographs are embedded in the education and portrayal of history itself and become authenticated as symbols of entire eras. Unpacking complexes of visuality begins at forging a connection between how visibility and surveillance both service nation-building and militarization. This relies on the three steps of first classifying, then separating, and ultimately producing an aesthetic of power. In this paper, I walk through different arenas where I see that classifying and separating happening in social media to consider how aesthetics of power are produced in the realm of digital visual culture. This process informs my use of semiotics and discourse analysis to consider the meaning of images and situate them in a global network of labor.

NON-SCENES OF PALESTINIAN NETWORKED RESISTANCE

Aestheticization of power is the third step in Mirzoeff's complex of visuality, which he draws from Frantz Fanon's words, "an 'aesthetic of respect for the status quo,' the aesthetics of the proper, of duty, of what is felt to be right and hence pleasing, ultimately even beautiful" (Mirzoeff, 476). I read this definition as the result of classifying certain images— or even recognizable fractions of images like motifs, icons, editing styles— as beautiful, powerful, and worth being seen. This aestheticization of what is considered important and worth being seen is connected to the way visuality has been deployed to structure nations and stratify their inhabitants as those who do work and those who benefit from those workers. Visuality is embedded into the nation-building and caste-making apparatuses of society and can be found in every industrial complex from schools, fashion, food, or prisons. Consider Trinh Minh-Ha's compelling example of censored newspapers in Chinese prisons, and how articles that had positive content about Tibet were redacted or clipped out of the paper. These voids were meant to offset unlawful looking, that is favorable looking towards Tibet, but were subverted when Tibetan prisoners viewed the gaping holes as emblems of victory. The pieces that were redacted were connected to a set of relations of information about the state, ideas of life outside the prison, and imaginations of liberation. Essentially, within voids are intentions and meanings, despite the right to view them being censored. The dynamic between nation-making and visuality poses questions for me to think about the way that labor is invisibilized in our nation's relationship with food service, municipality, housekeeping, and clothing. In the United States, we have little to no imagery - and thus, humanization - of the farm workers, custodial staff, and sweatshop workers that put food on our table, clothes on our back, and clean up our messes. In Jay Lynn Gomez's guerrilla

art installations, she created life-size cutouts of custodial workers and placed them across the manicured lawns of Bel-Air and Beverly Hills (Image 1.7). Gomez said the inspiration came to her when perusing *Architectural Digest* magazines in the homes of wealthy families she nannied for, and noticing how all the homes looked like the ones she worked in, but none of them depicted nannies, housekeepers, landscapers, or any workers who curated the artistry being applauded in the magazines. Gomez's art dovetails with Minh-Ha's writing about visibility and voids as we aestheticize a gorgeous lawn but not the person hunched over the lawnmower, or a shining mall of luxury fashion but not who is cleaning and stocking the shelves. Simply seeing labor being done and who is doing it isn't the panacea of humanizing labourers, as image-based empathy has its own problems and pitfalls, but the intentional invisibilization is largely connected to racial and gendered subordination in a way that negates existence when it negates visuality. So how do we consciously interrogate why we aren't shown, or don't want to see, the labor behind certain pristine presentations? How can we read for the visual voids all around us that invisibilized networks of information that are intentionally redacted and glossed over with pretty packaging, interior décor, and high-fashion price tags? If, as Minh-Ha regards, the eye as the dominant organ of consumerism, I wonder how what we see continues to trump the ethical registers of our souls? How does the visual disconnect between the performance of labor and the product of labor conduct the separating second step of the complex of visuality?

Mirzoeff defines the 'right to look' as not simply a matter of assembled visual images but the grounds on which such assemblages can register as meaningful renditions of a given event. As I'm writing this dissertation, Palestine has been suffering brutal genocide

at the hands of the Zionist entity, Israeli 'Defense' Forces, aided by the United States. The mainstream media coverage about the ongoing slaughter of Palestinians has been sparse, and extremely slanted to position Hamas and any sort of violent resistance as terrorism, and going leaps and bounds to connect Hamas to ISIS, global jihad, and all other post-911 counterinsurgency boogeymen. Moreover, the blurring of Zionism and anti-Semitism has also restricted any sort of public criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic hate, resulting in a distractive conflict of semantics and virtue signaling. As Gil Scot-Heron aptly said, the revolution will not be televised, but the revolution may be on Instagram Live. In the context of the ongoing Palestinian genocide, the genocide is not being televised, but has been brought to life through the use of Instagram, very similar to the way that that Twitter was at the core of the Arab Spring uprisings. Palestinians are subjected to document their own extermination and convince the world to look. LOOK. Video after video showed Palestinians begging the world to watch the horrors and take action in any way, but mostly, don't stop looking and showing others. In past contexts, this much content of mass death was chided for being 'trauma porn' or objectifying Palestinians even more, and reducing them to nothing but their suffering; this time around, Palestinians have been demanding the world to look, see, and show others, and sit with the discomfort of and complicity in the horrors we were witnessing. This moment has compelled people to bear witness to the enormous loss of over 40,000+ Palestinian lives.

Instagram lives and stories of both civilians and journalists on the ground and Gaza were being watched and reposted constantly, resulting in an unending stream of content depicting Israel's crimes against Gazans. This resulted in an innumerable amount of users facing *shadowbans* whenever they reposted anything about Palestine. Censorship

in social media is incredibly common, and only a few years prior many Black Lives Matters posts were also being shadowbanned in similar ways. Mirzoeff talks about countervisuality as a way to retain that aura of authority. Within the complex of visuality of Instagram stories, we did not have the right to look and Palestinians definitely didn't have the right to show us what to look at. Users combatted shadowbanning by posting random pictures of pets, selfies, food, and nature called 'algo breaks' to disrupt the algorithmic censors that were flagging content that even contained the words Palestine, Zionism, Israel, and even the watermelon Emoji that had become a symbol of the Palestinian resistance (Image 1.8). These interruptive posts worked around the shadowban by digitally throwing off the scent of Instagram's content censorship tools, and helped users continue to post about Palestine. The sights and sounds coming out of the civilian coverage were assemblages granting legitimacy to the Palestinian rendition of the genocide and historicizing this event in a visual way as footage we could all experience sensorially. And yet, even as perhaps the most well documented genocide on new media, the Palestinian right to exist and resist still is imaginary in the mainstream complex of visuality. The government of Israel has steadily been paying for billboards in major cities and advertisements on streaming services, and most notably the Super Bowl, that are portraying Palestinians as the wretched of the earth, Israel as both victims and saviours, and Hamas as ISIS-adjacent terrorists. In contrast to Super Bowl commercials, Instagram stories featuring Palestinian content are continuing to be shadowbanned. This vast disparity speaks to the autonomy or right to look as in conflict with the law and capitalistic, racist, governance because of visuality's aura of authority that Palestinians are not supposed to have. Similar to the Arab Spring, if it wasn't for Instagram, we would not have the truth and clarity of what was actually happening in the region as it was not

being televised by any other means. Even mass protests that were occurring all over the country, and the globe, were not covered and receiving much media attention.

Countervisuality aims to offer new modalities of looking that were foreclosed to the viewers by authoritative governance. By interrupting shadowbanning with mundane life posts covertly meant to disrupt the algorithmic censorship, global Instagram users were able to create a rupture where Palestinian narratives were able to rise to the surface. The work of documenting the horrors and genocide happening onto you is being done by Palestinians on the ground, while they face their extermination on a daily basis; this rearrangement of visual authority holds an enormous potential of revolution and rewriting of history. Palestinians were prioritizing charging cell phones so that they could show the world what the IDF was actually doing in comparison to what they said they were doing. Doctors and aid workers held press conferences amongst piles of corpses and mass graves. The grief and suffering put on display for the world was to both document the authenticity of the genocide, and also historicize it as such. It was cell phone video footage that showed the world, placing the authority in the hands of Palestinians themselves. Newly ushered in was the IDF creating a TikTok account broadcasting their soldiers participating in dance choreography challenges and mocking Palestinian deaths. Israel has been losing the war of optics on social media because of the sheer volume of content coming out of Gaza in opposition to the IDF soldiers trying to appeal to younger generations's sensibilities with viral dance videos in vain. Moreover, the IDF's TikTok and other social media accounts such as Twitter began excessively showcasing female soldiers considered conventionally attractive to the white gaze. With blonde hair and big blue eyes with eyelash extensions, manicured nails, filled lips, and

full glam makeup, to contrast their automatic weapons strapped to their costumey form fitting military uniforms. Dozens of accounts with these campily glammed up IDF soldiers began popping up on TikTok to draw visual interest in the form of sexualized mascots of the genocidal regime. Continuing with the pornotropes, IDF soldiers who raided homes will often dig out lingerie from Palestinian women's closets, would wear it or hold it up to take pictures. IDF soldiers are often posting pictures of these lingerie hauls or even their body-count in their Tinder dating profiles as well, further cementing their pornotropic ideologies and necrophiliac fantasies. They have even posted pictures gifting their girlfriends jewelry and cosmetics from raided homes of the women they killed. Twitter users began posting side-by-side images and videos of the raw content coming out of Gazan's cell phones versus the fabricated content the IDF has been so desperately trying to curate because of its losing the battle of optics. When considering the material implications, the state of Israel was able to get a multi-million dollar advertising spot during the 2024 Super Bowl, which begs the question of why Israel wants to appeal to the sensibilities of the United States population so intensively? And how they had the budget to score a 7-million dollar advertising spot during the most highly-televised sporting event of the year?

I discussed earlier the rise of TikTok aesthetic trend cycles and how they shape material realities and how they fluctuate very rapidly. It comes as no surprise to note that the IDF chose TikTok as the medium to post their content most aligned with the aesthetics of power- and fail horribly. TikTok appeals to a politically younger generation, trend-driven user base, and a dance centered platform, so it makes sense that IDF soldiers dancing in front of tanks would have a reach on the application. But the opposite

happened. The popularity of the hashtag #FreePalestine and pro-Palestinian content at large garnered enough attention for dozens of Zionist media executives to accuse TikTok of having an anti-Semitic slant, since it is based out of China and that aligns with scaremongering tactics of TikTok as a communist tool to push leftist agendas. Shou Zi Chew, the CEO of TikTok, in a meeting called by 40 Zionist media executives and cosigned by 90 other Zionist media-adjacent professionals, was questioned regarding allegations of the application being skewed towards pro-Palestine content -- an allegation which interestingly and predictably enough, Instagram did not have to answer for regarding their shadowbanning censorship. The meeting resulted in Chew explaining how hashtag numbers were simply not enough data to measure an artificial algorithmic skew in favor of Palestinian content, since pro-Israel hashtags were trending more, despite the content not trending. Chew and other spokespersons repeatedly explained that the level of discrepancy simply boiled down to the longer history of pro-Palestinian content prior to the October Zionist attacks, and an organic reflection of their user population. Since majority of the users are younger, and data regarding increased pro-Palestine sentiment in younger generations has been trending upwards since 2022 and even more-so since October 2023, it's compelling to note how Zionist media executives would rather blame the application for the skew because it is proving to be the one (and only Chinese) application not censoring pro-Palestinian content. The Vox Article also outlines the number of celebrities who have lost brand deals, jobs, endorsements, and livelihoods because of posting any sympathy towards Palestine, and how posting sympathy towards Israel did not result in a single documented termination or cancellation. In fact, there are so few photos of Israel suffering that Zionist media platforms often employ the use of AI-generated illustrations to visualize fictional monsters as opposed to the scores of

Palestinians uploading raw footage and live-streaming terror. What does it mean when a nation has to use artificial intelligence to conceive an imaginary monster?

In *Non-Scenes of Captivity,* Dylan Rodriguez articulates how acts of violence can become unspectacular, "banal, yet no less gratuitous." (11) He argues that the normalization of carceral punishment and state-sanctioned death aims to put violence on display in a way where torture, as a language and dialect, become "embedded in the lexicon" and "tacitly accepted vernacular" (17) in our grammar of popular visual culture. The *non-scenes* of quotidian mechanisms of coercion and punishment that control Palestinian lives are not a part of the dominant optics of Palestinian content in social media. We are seeing, more than anything, extremely graphic displays of death and loss at an incomprehensible rate. For those new to the Palestinian cause, these graphic videos of babies crushed under rubble and families clinging to corpses of their loved ones are doing the work of changing public opinion with an appeal to humanity and the sanctity of human life. It's easy to understand what the Zionist entity is capable of with these gory displays. To locate the non-scenes of the Zionist entity, we must pay closer attention to the entire Zionist entity beyond the IDF's brutality. One way, I offer, this is done is by highlighting the US-backed surveillance that is rampant on social media. By situating the shadowbans and other similar censorships and punitive actions as the less spectacular acts of violence, we are able to draw attention to the institutionalized methods of state-sanctioned Zionism that structure social media engagement. When this censorship didn't alter the metrics on TikTok the way it did on Instagram, it opened up speculation of TikTok intentionally highlighting pro-Palestinian content, because it sure couldn't have been public opinion. This is how confident the Zionist entity is in regards to the

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seamless non-scenes of censorship and restricting unfavorable content-creation. A few examples beyond shadowbanning include the censorship of the watermelon Emoji. The watermelon was a symbol of Palestinian resistance because it has all the colors of the Palestinian flag, and was used historically whenever the flag and colors were outlawed. Another Emoji under watchful eyes is the upside-down red triangle. The triangle has come to symbolize the armed resistance branch of Hamas, as they often use the triangle to indicate their targets whenever they share videos of their successful attacks on the IDF. These Emojis are enough to get your content flagged as anti-Semitic now. Furthermore, when making aid donations on financial transaction platforms like Venmo, people are encouraged not to use the words Palestine, Gaza, watermelon or upside-down triangle Emojis, or any mention of where the aid is going after reports of the donations being flagged, inspected, or not going through at all. These examples of banal censorship on social media are non-scenes that render a non-reading of violence that ultimately forms entire ideologies that dislocate the US from the Zionist entity it creates and is created from.

Rodriguez's work at large encourages speculative forms of freedom for people under carceral regimes, and how creative methods of resistance can generate abolitionist futures. These non-scenes are indicative of the US involvement in the brutal occupation of Palestine, and how there have been efforts to upend that complicity by the tenacity of individuals and communities alike. In *Networked Refugees,* Palestinian political scientist Nadya Hajj conducts a beautiful and generative study of how transnational digital spaces have fostered "a window into the resilience and reimagined identity" (5) of the Palestinian community in both Palestine and the diaspora, especially through

"identifying immediate needs, delivering resources [and remittance], and facilitating resettlement" (10). Palestinian digital spaces, Hajj offers, are networked through family and community norms of honor, loyalty, resilience, and shame. She illuminates the "radically transformative power of individual decisions" (88) and how individual remittances from everyday people unlinked to a conduit of governmental aide have been essential to the survival of Palestinians seeking refuge. She goes on to share that a dominant insight of mutual-aid theories is that aside from donations, people can assess their individual strengths and offer various services of solidarity that are now made possible by the interconnectedness offered by digital spaces. As we're witnessing with the presently ongoing genocide of Gaza, the radical potential of the internet has given ways to donate beyond aide organizations. One example is Connecting Humanity's eSims for Gaza: an activist collective run by Egyptian journalist Mirna El Helbawi who realized that programmable SIM cards embedded into smartphones could connect to remote telecommunication networks from Egyptian or Israeli networks. The Israeli Ministry of Communications's strict cellular limits, attacks to telecommunications infrastructure, lack of electricity, and continuous dispossession of resources has barred Gazans from internet access in a time where they are relying on the world to see them, connect to them, and help them. Journalists, healthcare workers, and humanitarian aide are all obstructed without any sort of cellular or internet access. Anyone can go online and purchase an eSim, and send Connecting Humanity's email a screenshot of the purchase, which the collective will then disseminate to Gazans on the ground. As of December 2023, 200,000 Gazans have been networked through eSim donations from around the world. We see here an act of solidarity through creative resistance, and how donating for an eSim is a powerful retooling of the limits, silencing, and censorships that are intended to remain

non-scenes of occupation. By using a method of donation that is within the confines of the telecommunications network itself, people are able to help Palestinians stay connected. "Participating in networks of reciprocity and engaging in the transnational digital exchanges" allows us to develop kinship formations with Gazans and enables them to access their GoFundMe crowdfunding campaigns or seek medical assistance as much as possible. It is horrifying to think that their connectivity is largely dependent upon a global force of kinship in the form of eSim donations.

Another example of an individual act of resistance is with former Meta (previously Facebook) engineer, Ferras Hamad. Hamad, a Palestinian-American, has been on Meta's machine learning team since 2021, and is currently suing his former employer for discrimination and unlawful termination. Hamad, like many Meta employees, had noticed a pattern of bias in internal employee communications whenever Palestinian employees mentioned Gaza or used the Palestinian flag Emoji. The internal employee communications were deleted and under 'investigation'- a process that had never happened with Israeli or Ukrainian flag emojis were used. Earlier this year, almost 200 Meta employees had raised concerns regarding Meta's suppression of pro-Palestinian content, as we saw with the shadowbans and increased surveillance of certain Emojis. Hamad was fired after bringing attention to procedural irregularities in the handling of troubleshooting users facing problems whenever they were posting about Palestine. Many videos were being flagged as "pornographic" or "in violation of policies" and Hamad was trying to resolve these issues, as had been done in the past with content related to Ukraine. After becoming the subject of an internal investigation, he filed an internal discrimination complaint and was fired within days; the reason for his

termination was that Hamad was in violation of a policy that restricts employees from working on troubleshooting issues for people who they are personally connected to. In this case, he was trying to handle a post that Palestinian journalist Motaz Azaiza had posted of a bombed building that was misclassified as 'pornographic.' Hamad had no personal connection to the journalist but this was inferred because of his Palestinian identity. When thinking about how users had come up with inventive methods like alternative spellings, Emojis, and 'algo breaks' to circumvent the algorithm that was undoubtedly suppressing Palestinian content within the digital arena, it tracks that employees would also be suppressed in harsher, material ways that rely on the same logics of surveillance and racism. What strikes me most about Hamad's case is the assumption that he had personal relations with Azaiza- a journalist who has garnered a lot of media attention for his extensive coverage of the genocide at just 25 years of age. I'm intrigued (and disturbed) by how a Palestinian (as an employee of the platform) aiding in lifting the suppression of another Palestinian (as a user of the platform) speaks to the transnational digital networks of kinship that Hajj writes about. Palestinian digital networks lend us a radical horizon of how being tethered to the internet and to one another has the potential to create reciprocal activism and relationships during moments of abject suffering; even while having the most advanced forms of telecommunication, feeling helpless and disconnected from Gazans is a pain we all contend with. Activists have compiled spreadsheets filled with GoFundMe campaigns and update them regularly as well, and through this crowdfunding so many families have been able to safely leave Gaza. As gratifying as it feels seeing a cell highlighted green to indicate that the goal has been reached, it still shattering to think that leaving through the aid of digital networks was the only way it was possible for these families who don't even want to leave their

homes. And though these individual remittances or eSim donations pale in comparison to the millions of tax dollars funneled to the IDF by the US government, they are ultimately a way for us to respond to the needs of others by a medium we all know well. The spectacle of the engorged numbers that appear in headlines render these GoFundMe or eSim amounts as non-scenes because of how grotesque it is that families need to use donated access to the internet to launch campaigns for donated access to escape their homeland.

In Arabic, the word *shahid* is translated as 'one who bears witness' and 'one who is martyred' and 'one who testifies in the Oneness of God'. In Islamic doctrine, anyone who dies under circumstances like a plague, painful affliction, by drowning, in childbirth, under a fallen structure, in defense of their family home, or in any plausible resistance for the sake of God is considered a shahid (martyr). Islamic scripture regards martyrdom as an unsurpassable and eternal honor that has been bestowed upon the 40,000+ Palestinians who have been martyred over the past year under all the circumstances listed above and more. The semantic dance between witness and martyr has always fascinated me, and one that has now turned into a maddening choreography of those being gratuitously martyred and those bearing the responsibility to witness it. Palestinians have been imploring us to bear witness to photos and videos, and not shy away from what we're being shown on our screens for the sake of our sensibilities. This modern enmeshment of our social media devices in this divine assemblage of witnessing martyrdom is one that my mind has not been able to properly comprehend. (The platform I use to watch videos of cats or keep up with the Kardashians is now one imbricated with every Muslim's duty to bear witness?) In many ways, the 'right to look' implies that the

looker and the looked at are each inventing the other. The shahid of martyrdom are inventing the shahid of witnessing, and by that parallax, our witnessing is reaffirming their eternal honor of martyrdom— whether we look or not, they are martyred, but when we look, we become witnesses and can testify to it. 'Countervisuality' contends with challenging power systems, and since invisibilizing Palestinian death is an ideological project of the Zionist entity through heavily censored reporting of death tolls or war crimes, bearing witness to Palestinian martyrdom— despite the unbearable horrors of the imagery— repositions shahids and shahids in an empowered arrangement. I don't think I ever imagined a reality where my Instagram app would be the conduit for me to fulfill my faith's commandment of witnessing, yet here we are.
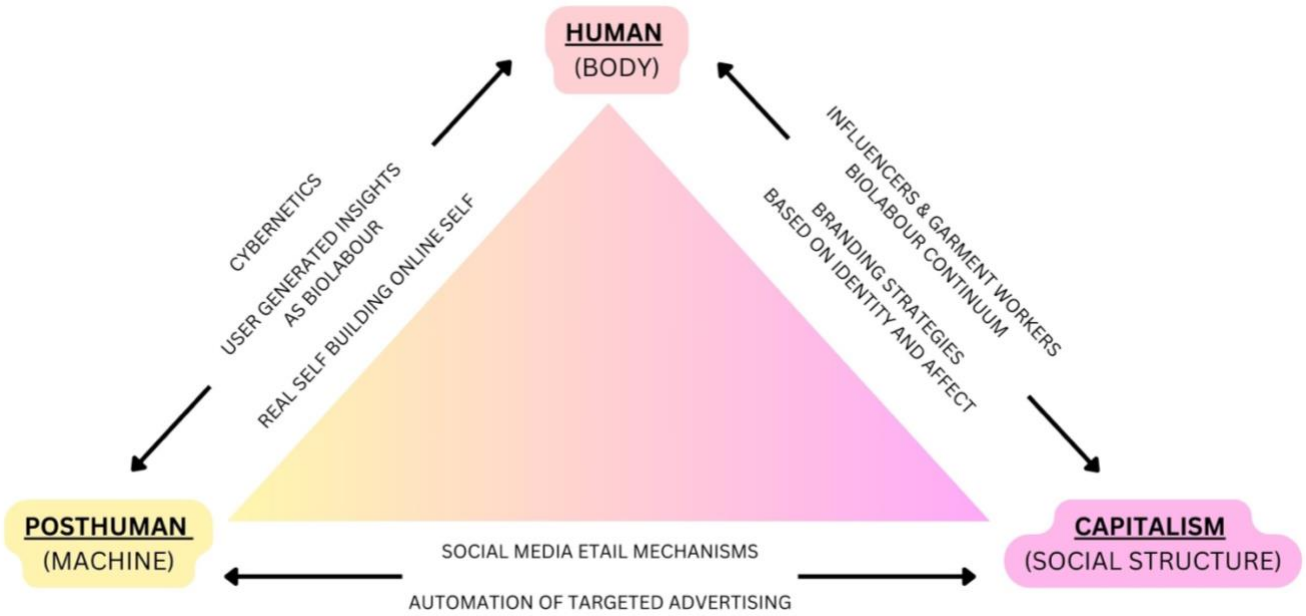
Image 1.1
Triangulation of Human, Posthuman, Capitalism
Source: Drawing by Naaila Mohammed

Image 1.2
Side by side comparison of Instagram layout
Source : https://www.insider.com/instagram-update-new-layout-hate-reels-shop-notifications-james-charles-2020-11
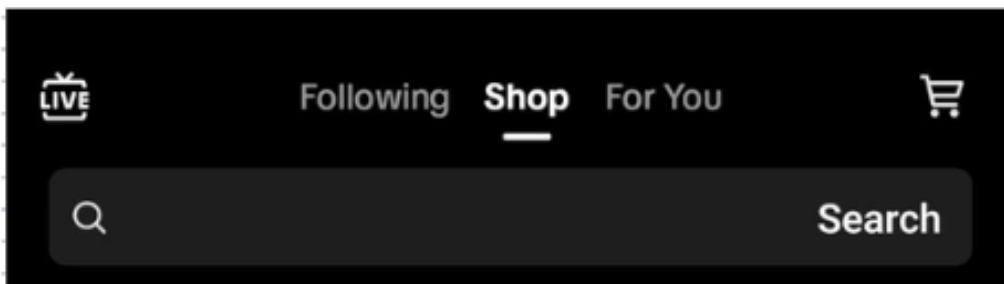
Image 1.3
TikTok new format with Shop in the middle of Following and For You feeds

Image 1.4
Time Magazine cover featured Dallas Cafeteria workers
Source: www.time.com
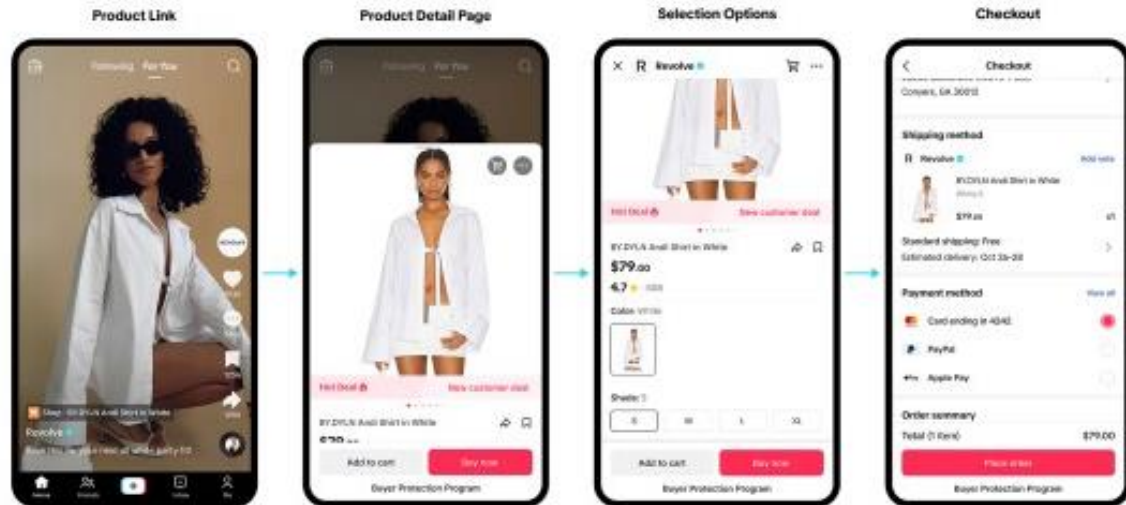
Image 1.5
TikTok's Shoppable Video format
Source: www.apnews.com
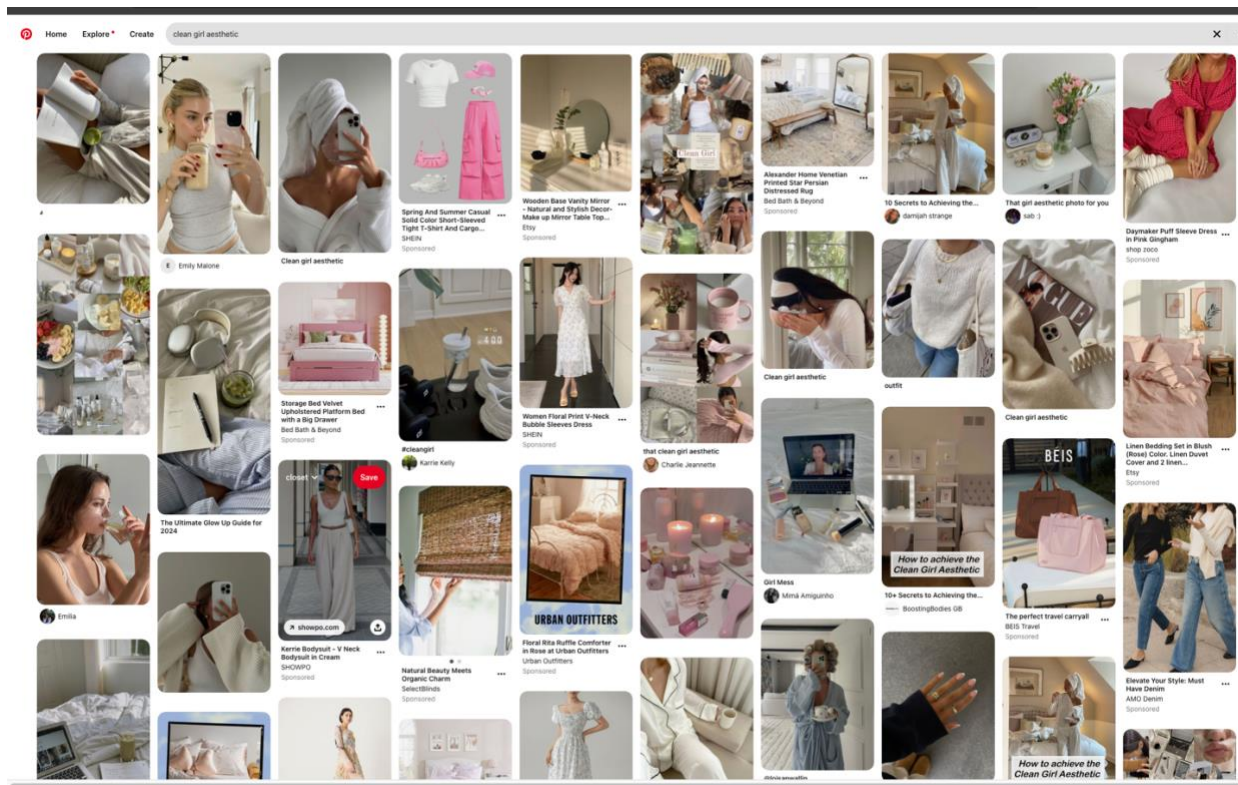
Image 1.6
Screenshot from Pinterest when I search 'Clean Girl Aesthetic'

Image 1.7
Jay Lynn Gomez with one of her cut-out installations
Source : https://hyperallergic.com/99056/the-people-behind-your-images-of-luxury/
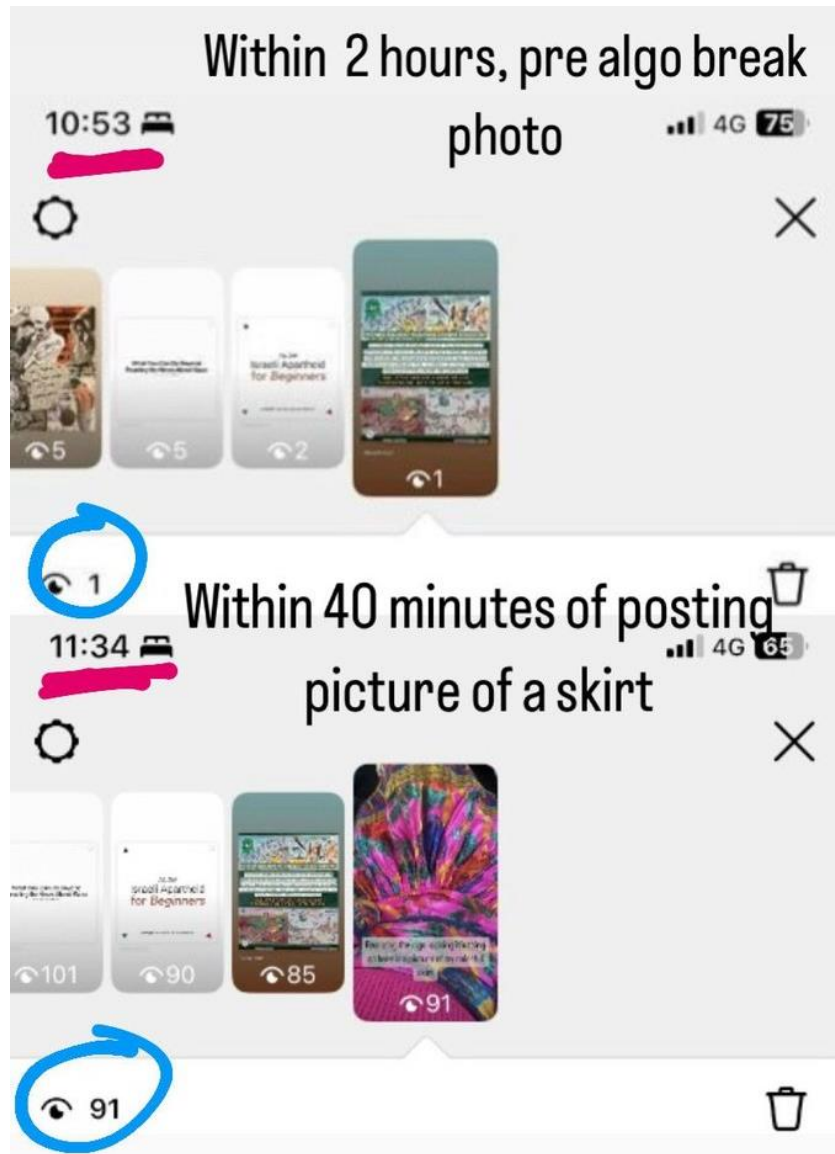
Image 1.8
Screenshot of views before and after an 'algo break' post
Source: https://www.arabnews.com/node/2391676/media

CHAPTER 2
"Active Life of Boho Interiors"

Themes: Imperialism, Boho Rearticulations , Victorian Interior Histories,
Disorienting and Queered Spaces
Case study: World Market's Instagram post, Eat Pray Love ad campaign, and CRAFT line

INTRODUCTION

The *boho* interior decoration trend is an eclectic style that has deep roots in colonial legacies of Orientalism and imperialism epistemologies. Tracing the historical flow of specific material objects like a traditional follow-the-thing ethnography is compelling however for the purposes of my project, I engage with contemporary examinations from social media and advertising to conduct the materialist culture analysis of the boho interior decor trend and how this is related to past Orientalist practices of home museums, curiosities, and collectors. I am interested in what it means, for people in the 21st century, to adorn their homes with styles that are inextricably linked to Orientalist and imperialist traditions of furnishing homes with exotic relics. The interiors of people's lives and homes are now digitized and that gives me a wider lens to locate these contemporary spoils of empire that are proudly displayed on interior decor social media accounts. I chose interior decor specifically because as I think about the visual expression of one's identity beyond the body, I have grown particularly interested in the interior sphere and how it is an extension of the external. To illustrate my case studies, I provide various examples of in-store advertising found in popular home decor and furnishing stores in California, digital advertisements on email marketing and social media, and a close look at advertising campaigns.

The interior sphere is fascinating to me because of how objects are used to adorn a space, and how the active life of those objects curates an extension of the tenant's persona and identity. In Chapter 1, I explored Donna Haraway's idea about the post-human continuation of the corporeal body and how we do not end at our skin but instead exist enmeshed with the energies around us. While taking up my exploration of interior decor, I began heavily leaning into Sara Ahmed's work on orientation, how our bodies exist in any given space, and how we choose to orient ourselves to objects or energies within that space. In *Queer Phenomenology,* Ahmed explores the connection between orientation and Orientalism in relation to the production of whiteness and foreignness as embodied in spaces and objects. She explores how a space can become gendered or racialized based on not only the bodies that inhabit the space but also what objects and tools those bodies can reach towards or orient themselves towards. She remarks that "spaces acquire the ''skin'' of the bodies that inhabit them" (Ahmed, 132) and that those bodies and the objects they choose to include in that space also contribute to the *skin* of that space. This is why small rooms or big institutions can feel 'white' or 'immigrant' or 'queer' based not only on the people who inhabit the space but also on the objects and tools that comprise its parts. She remarks that the white body tends to expand through objects, tools, and instruments, to extend the reach of whiteness. This gets complicated by white bodies and 'exotic' objects or tools existing in the same space. Towards the end of this chapter, I ask how people of color can engage with those 'exotic' objects as well, and if we can physically and ideologically upend 'white' spaces or even boho-chic spaces by reclaiming aesthetics that aren't necessarily appealing when expressed in 'ethnic' spaces.

While thinking of more obviously external forms of visual expression like clothing, jewelry, make-up, uniforms, religious garments, gender-affirming procedures, emblems, tattoos, and other motifs that adorn the human body, I begin by exploring the spaces those bodies extend themselves into. I approach interiority as one's physical expression expanding into the walls of one's home, and how the choices made there may be less public but equally as personal. And with the rise of social media accounts dedicated to interior decor, any user can choose to make it as public as desired. Despite home decor media existing across all forms such as home magazines and the rise of channels like HGTV, there is a personal element of social media that collapses the fourth wall so to speak. Growing up, my favorite interior related shows were MTV's *Cribs* and VH1's *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous;* I was enamored with these shows and the multiple seasons proved that I wasn't alone. Every viewer reaffirms the spectacle of the homes on these shows- that the reason we're watching is because we're not seeing this anywhere else in our lives except through digital mediation. Something about seeing lovely homes on a TV screen or in print created a layer of inaccessibility or voyeurism that reified that this wasn't a common home, but a home to be 'looked at'. To me, these shows and magazines were as foreign as National Geographic magazine or Travel Channel, and displayed wondrous sights as far and away as entire continents. Early home DIY blogs, YouTube room tours, and the non-monetized accounts on Instagram before the full bloom of the influencer economy all led with a sense of relatability. You were able to see pictures of people's homes without the staging and lighting of a show or magazine. Furthermore, because you could access the person who was posting the pictures, as opposed to a celebrity or luxury architect, the 'skin' of the bloggers or YouTubers extended their world onto our screen. The haptic qualities of social media interfacing that

we explored last chapter support the claim that we could readily associate an account with its user, and be able to interact with them through the conduit of an application as opposed to the restrictive fourth wall of a glossy print or TV screen. With the thousands of YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok accounts dedicated to home renovations, DIY projects, and interior decor, many lifestyle and DIY bloggers and influencers have built successful careers with documenting their home decoration and renovation journeys. Even content creators who predominantly posted #OutfitOfTheDay or #GetReadyWithMe content were slowly doing room tours and showcasing ornamentalism beyond their skin. In the past decade, apparel companies like H&M, Zara, and Urban Outfitters added 'home' lines that were congruent with the aesthetic of their fashion. This indicates that in retail, material, and ideological spheres, there is a link between how we choose to adorn our bodies, and by extension, the spaces where those bodies spend most of their time. Where do our bodies retreat at the end of the day? What do our interiors indicate about us?

I am using 'interior' here in a double sense to describe both subjective interiority and its extension within home interiors. This dialectic of interiors, your positionality, and the spaces you occupy is made public by social media allowing you to construct both interiorities of your identity for the world to see. Your home interior aesthetic being aligned with your outward self-fashioning aesthetic is something that is by no means novel, but definitely one that took a noteworthy rearticulation when the Internet encouraged others to share aspects of their life online. For those who weren't into traveling, parenting, cooking, fashion, hair and makeup, or exercising, interior decor and home renovation space emerged for users who didn't want to be incredibly public-facing

with their faces, bodies, or families, but instead expressing their creativity with the spaces they inhabited. This increased exponentially during the Covid-19 pandemic where people who were sheltering at home were now spending more time decorating and renovating different aspects of their homes. It has been documented that in 2020 there was a surge of home remodels and furnishing; websites in the home furnishing categories received record high visitation numbers, with up to 133 million visitors in May of 2020 alone. Either people didn't spend much time at home to invest as much at first, or they had no time in between commutes and family schedules to make any major changes. Also, interiors became exciting channels to express yourself since social engagements - opportunities for creative expression of self-identity like dressing up - were scarce. The case studies I present are primarily contemporary, but I am able to ground them in the colonial legacies of commodity fetishism, extraction of resources, and racial capitalism of ornamentalism. Anne Cheng argues that 'ornamentalism' can function as an epistemology. In the following chapter, I ask how a focus on the boho decoration style can rupture ontology and objectness. How can an exploration of boho as it emerged in the Victorian era, lead into its rearticulations in the 1970s and again in the aughts and beyond? The imperial imaginary of the Victorian era has repeatedly articulated Orientalism by way of a "decorative grammar, a fatasmatic corporeal syntax that is artificial and layered" (Cheng, 416), and I argue that that decorative grammar has been rearticulated in response to changing historical and material conditions found in the 1970s and rise of import stores, and again in the early 2000s in a post 9-11 national sentimentality. The libidinal economy and national sentiments in both those time periods set unique foundations for boho design to reemerge in popularity for distinct — yet connected — reasons related to patriotism and globalization. This chapter is

organized into three thematic explorations around the interior decor classification of "boho chic" across these time periods.

First, I trace a genealogy of the boho design trend, how it emerged during the Victorian Era, and how it connects to free trade, imperialism, museums, and Victorian heteropatriarchal notions of family, gender, and sexuality. Later in Chapter Three, I trace the genealogy of the word *boho* itself and how its semantic history is rooted in the Romani ethnic group and their ostracization; but presently, I explore how the boho style grew in popularity reflecting contemporary themes related to gendered interiority, consumerism, and nationalistic logics of aesthetics. Following that, I take up case studies inspecting the emergence of import stores like Cost Plus World Market, how those Victorian trends made their way into the West Coast of the United States, and how their contemporary advertising campaigns reflect that history to this day. With these case studies, I extrapolate how imagination and mythology were critical in constructing nations along the Oriental-Occidental in a dialectal binary, and how that same nation-making and aestheticization of power can be found in the visuals, symbols, and language for boho chic interior decor advertising. This allows for a critical exploration of how Orientalist tropes have consistently been modified to inform knowledge production, and how something as innocuous as a home decor style can continue to perpetuate centuries of incorrect information about nations that seem only to exist for white fantasies and benefit. How are boho interiors connected to longer histories within the contemporary case studies located in advertising campaigns and style guides?

In the contemporary moment, the branding of boho chic relies on this colonial legacy of decorating your home with items that evoke an academic museum-like sophistication and a cosmopolitan taste that reminds you of *your travels*. I trace how boho-chic aesthetics that originated from a seedy historical legacy of the Victorian era bohemian movement and free trade imperialism took new articulations towards the turn of the century, and again in the 1970s. Design elements ranging from Morocco, China, India, Malaysia, to many other countries that have been figured as *the Orient* are branded as emblematic of the eclectic 1970s 'hippie' era when anti-Vietnam war and Civil Rights movements gave birth to new multicultural fashions and politically aesthetic expressions that symbolized both a problematic and reapproriative engagement with the Third World. In today's engagement with social media accounts of fashion and interior decor, these boho-chic design elements add panache to contrast minimal, modern, or Scandinavian styles. An HGTV article titled "Design Styles Defined" praises the boho style's eccentric touches that soften stark minimalism or ultra-sleek modern styles— like adding a Moroccan tiled backsplash to a white kitchen with modern appliances and countertops. Within this article, we can also see boho reemerging in maximalist and eclectic styles that shun the virtue of minimal consumerism and encourage decorating with everything all at once. HGTV has hundreds of articles dedicated to defining a vast array of interior design styles ranging from traditional, eclectic, mid-century modern, farmhouse, to industrial. Boho is most liberally incorporated into various styles in that you can tack boho- before any of the other styles to show the blending potential of it, like boho-industrial. The ideological principles attached to boho motifs are notions of cultural exchange by way of globalization, decentering stuffy, orthodox aesthetics (and in the process old-fashioned values and cultural ideals), and lastly, aligning yourself with

all things Eastern whether that is wellness measures like acupuncture or psychedelics, or spiritual beliefs like Buddhism or reincarnation. We saw this especially in the 1970s and in a post-911 world where ethnic ornamentation was semiotically coded with various meanings of patriotism or anti-colonial solidarity. Returning to glitter and flickering signifiers, there are many such style guides, Pinterest boards, hashtags, Instagram accounts, and so many more virtual tutorials for achieving the boho chic look which can largely mean many different things while incorporating the styles of dozens of countries. The HGTV guides laud boho chic for "boast[ing] a collected look, with furniture and decor acquired over time from thrift stores, antique shops, and world travels." Furthermore, the Boho Design Style 101 primer linked within the article uses the terms "free-spirited, "carefree", "creative", and "trinkets from your travels" all within the first paragraph. We can see here how the language, even in 2024, is still reminiscent of colonial fantasies about the feminized lands to travel to and scour for goods. I explore the pervasive popularity of boho chic by attending to the longer histories of the trend, while attempting to answer how digital cultures allow a different interfacing with this changing yet enduring Orientalist aesthetic. (Image 2.19, 2.20)

INTERIOR-IENTALISM

To explore the link between consumerism and aesthetics, we begin with a guided exploration of Orientalism with a focus on optics of power and how objects produce affect. Conveying affect - emotions, subtleties, feelings - is a form of labor mediated by an assemblage of visuality. Images, sights, sounds, colors, texture, generate a certain perception - a certain truth - of the Orient, its people, its memories. Anne Cheng remarks that ornamentalism conjoins the Oriental, the feminine, and the decorative (429). Objects

animate our human lives in a complex juncture of ontology and objectness, while set against the backdrop of the Orient-Occident binary. Aesthetics are predominantly mediated through feminized and queered expressions of the Orient; the *skin* of entire nations are clothed, adorned, decorated through flickers of visuality and it is through feminine and queer expressions that the image of the Orient is visualized. The language around land was feminized, and extended to feminize subsequent fantasies and images of the inhabitants, their customs, their food, their colors, their sights and sounds. A certain knowledge was produced about the identities of entire nations, and by extension, the commodities of those nations became objects of knowledge as well. Decorative objects, especially, open up possibilities of reframing identities or aligning yourself with certain politics- or at least presenting like you do. The intentions behind owning a Persian rug or Japanese ceramics can be muddy and expansive depending on the owner, and rupture conversations about personal and political aesthetics. To understand the optics of power, I consider the affect in language and imagery depicting the Orient. In a modern context, that could be anything from the diasporic longing of the country your parents are from, to the online marketability of fashion, food, and wellness trends that claim to hail from ancient civilizations. In Chapter 1, we explored how certain resistive iterations of trends can also reproduce the ideological projects that informed those trends in the first place. Here, I focus less on the burden of 'representation' and constant trendy efforts to 'decolonize' this gaze, and attempt an affectual unpacking of how warmth, depth, color, feelings, and joy are studded in this visuality and how those can be reclaimed from white engagements with boho design. How does looking at the aesthetics of the Orient continue to spark excitement, curiosity, pleasure, beauty among US Americans, and even among members of the diaspora who engage with the textures via nostalgia or yearning?

What is the hold it has on us that we try to name: bohemian, exotic, East meets West, ancient, Ayurvedic, spicy, all signal the pervasiveness of Oriental aesthetics in various industries. Indian spices and traditions in the health and wellness realm, hippie inspiration in retro trends, and various ethnic thread-work and patterns and beading all signal an iconic flair. Ownership of these motifs serves as a nod to colonial era spoils that would adorn the homes of Europeans who eagerly brought back skins, fabrics, talismans, jewels, and handicrafts to beautify themselves and their homes. These performances are mediated by commodities that illuminate the neocolonialism of contemporary global exchanges of merchandise at popular home decor retailers. These colonial legacies also extend into the current topography of the US political climate when we consider the way that South Asian communities don't directly benefit from the pervasiveness of Orientalist taste without a kind of self-Orientalism. Later in Chapter Three, I explore how social media influencing that is contingent on identity-based branding is a way that South Asian content creators may benefit but with negotiation. Self-Orientalist gain may look like being included in online trends, but not receiving the same payment as White content creators. Or perhaps in the way that influencers may allow a fashion brand to gain creative recognition, but does not benefit the craftsman or garment worker. Towards the end of this chapter, we can explore how South Asian or White interior decorators may benefit from the boho decor trend in regards to relevance, but that trend is not to immigrant homes where poverty and brown-ness are visible, even while elements of boho trends are present. Is there an alternative potential to boho when employed by ethnic communities in an attempt to reclaim and redesign it?

Edward Said's framework in *Orientalism* contributes to how I understand the way nations and knowledge are produced through the fantasies and images that construct the Orient-Occident binary, which is an often blurred and dialectical one. I harmonize Said's work with Nicholas Mirzoeff's steps of classifying, separating, and aestheticizing in the complex of visuality to show how semiotics within visual and cultural studies has biopolitcal implications. Most importantly to my work, I analyze how bodies are hierarchized to be in service to others, whether by performing labour or by creating identity and nations. Said emphasizes the semiotics of mythical visualization by saying, "it needs to be made clear about cultural discourse and exchange within a culture that what is commonly circulated by it is not "truth" but representations" (Said, 21). Said looks at various ways that the literature and images that were produced as colonial knowledge about the Orient were essentially myths constructed by the West to produce the East in order to reproduce the West. Said remarks that "British knowledge of Egypt *is Egypt*" (Said, 32) to show how these manufactured representations became regarded as truths about entire nations, and especially for marginalized populations within nations. Said employs a semiotic undertaking of the mythology of Orientalism through an engagement with Roland Barthes. He remarks that "Barthes has said, a myth (and its perpetuators) can invent itself (themselves) ceaselessly... No dialectic is either desired or allowed. There is a source of information (the Oriental) and a source of knowledge (the Orientalist), in short, a writer and a subject matter otherwise inert. The relationship between the two is radically a matter of power, for which there are numerous images" (Said, 308). He unpacks the descriptions and paintings in British colonial literatures, logs, and diaries that were taken back to Europe to depict what 'darker continents' looked like. Dreamy descriptions of "oriental clichés [like] harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing

girls and boys, sherbets, [and] ointments" (Said, 190) acted as the original Photoshop, and were grossly misconstrued to service the West's imagination of what the Orient looked like. To put this in the context of my work, it's imperative to trace how these fantastical images were laced into historical moments and geographical projects in order to create representations of entire continents that would be taught and studied as fact. Those epistemological projects are found in how contemporary advertising and digital media continue to produce social meanings and representations of the word boho.

Colonial historiographers used myths that were canonized as fact to manufacture entire continents of Asia and Africa, could the same happen today with online ads and posts to achieve similar outcomes? I conceptualize Said's imaginative geographies to consider how interior spaces convey affect that enables meaning. Furthermore, the mythicized descriptions of Bohemia (not the actual historical region of the Czech Republic, but the land where the Romani people were incorrectly thought to have immigrated from) display how Bohemia existed not as a physical place, but as a state of mind created for white, male fantasies of transcending conventional social norms and entering non-traditional, artistic lifestyles. The definition of Bohemian becoming synonymous with 'unorthodox' or 'creative' or 'free-spirited' follows the same trajectory of how imaginative geographies came to exist, and reappears as the ad-copy found in HGTV and similar style guides. The distance from the United States to the Asian subcontinent leaves a vast and mysterious void that acts as a fertile ground for the West to construct meaning and imagery of a mythologized, Bohemian lifestyle.

What is only briefly mentioned in Said's work is how depictions of women served patriarchal fantasies and desires of what the exotic Oriental woman could offer. Women, and their portrayal in colonial depictions, upheld colonial fantasies and created countries. Women function as the embodied performance of the poetic process by which the void's distance is converted into knowledge. "Space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here" (Said, 55). Said's work briefly mentions how depictions of women, young boys, feminized men, and queer others served patriarchal fantasies and desires of what the exotic Oriental subject could offer. This engagement with sexuality emerges again as we take a closer look at the aura of eroticism that feminized spaces, parlours and cozy corners in the Victorian home. Gender and sexuality were vital in upholding colonial fantasies, as nation-building was largely conducted upon the colonial depictions of women and Oriental subjects feminized and queered through frameworks of colonial desire. The way Muslim women dressed, their public interactions, and the mystery of their private lives were all themes explored in colonial literature and journals and were made to be seen as knowledge about the Orient, when they were simply the eye-witness perspectives of British colonizers who had a vested intrigue in these women and feminized spaces—and again, after 9/11 as we explored in the 'shop for America' economic revival. When considering how gendered spaces were introduced into Victorian homes by way of home decor and furnishings, I draw connections between the feminization of the Orient to the articulation of queered spaces within homes. Fabrics and decor that carried the visual affect of those colonial desires furnished rooms tapped into that eroticism within the confines of the home. In a contemporary context, the semiotics employed by boho interior decor advertising, both

in store or on social media, continue that articulation. And the advent of online social sites dedicated to displaying those boho spaces dissolves the separation of public and private spheres found in Victorian society to put the interior on display within the social. To narrow my focus on semiotics, I am asking how the visual field of interior decor constructs meanings about nationhood and whiteness, and produces an affect through objects as *vehicles of feeling*. Thinking back to Mirzoeff's complex of visuality in the previous chapter, the second level of 'separating' is the means of categorizing things, in an almost taxonomic sense. Style guides or department stores - both contemporary and Victorian - created valuations of interior decor styles that granted the aesthetics of power via design choices and ornament ownership. Classifying interior decor items as boho is the first step, whereas the second is separating boho from what is not boho— this separation relies on semiotics and mythology to create an affect of imperialistic ownership; in the contemporary moment, adventurously exploring undiscovered lands and people is largely done through digital spaces and consumerism. The process of drawing the parameters of 'boho' entails defining only certain iterations of boho as *chic*. But why is boho only aesthetically important when depicted with whiteness? On their own, boho elements could be classified as low-brow, ethnic, or immigrant, as opposed to a more sophisticated articulation. What stratifies boho and elevates it above its objects is the set of economic and racial relations of power, mythology and meaning-making.

Imagination and mythology are both concepts that beget creativity, and in a glittery manner, can shift beyond their country of origin. "Europe's collective daydream of the Orient" (Said, 52), can extend to the visual representations of Asians in the imagination of American popular culture. The daydream positions the Oriental woman as "the vessel

carrying the Orient" (Said, 184) to show how women's bodies can be turned into a decorative object to be possessed and commodified into a broader set of racial and gendered meanings. Cheng asks us to consider how objects in return can also be turned into people and put on display in homes. We can see this happen in the United States with the way South Asian aesthetics are popularized but emptied of cultural significance or specificity; the aesthetics may be specific to other countries within the subcontinent, like Bangladesh and Pakistan, or even the very distinct ethnic divisions that exist within India itself. In the same way a person of color can become a tokenized representation of undifferentiated diversity. The branding of objects to signify Indian origin, like a turmeric spice bottle for example, is quickly plastered with iconography of elephants or mandalas, and copy that includes claims of 'Ayurvedic knowledge' or 'ancient' origin. Buzzwords like spicy, exotic, or ancient have historically been used to describe a fictive India. What is it about the naming of these ingredients that signals a taste of the Other? How do these exotic sounding words enable the senses to understand them as signs of something rooted in mystery and richness? The human counterpart to these objects would be depictions of sensual women to ascertain both humans and objects of the Orient rife with erotic abandon. Textiles, silks, and dyes are all saturated with the colorful imagery of what India contemporarily represents in terms of products, people, and as a place of sexual self-discovery. I can extrapolate the racial and gendered logics of Orientalist renderings of India to locate similar representations in today's ad-copy or brand styling. By seeking out the ways that Orientalist logics are deeply in conversation with feminization, misogyny, and heteronormativity, it's possible to locate these renderings as they're meant to appeal to Victorian and contemporary women alike via interior decor magazines, ad copy, and in-store signage. By taking the semiotic method

of Orientalism and expanding it into feminist materialism, we can unpack how that collective daydream becomes actualized when it is sutured to advertising copy and visuality in a contemporary context.

In my research, I have found many examples of this imperialistic language specifically being applied towards home decor and furnishings that may have been sourced from different countries, or commercially reproduced. HomeGoods, a popular decor store in Southern California that hails from the larger TJX conglomerate of TJMaxx, Marshalls, and AtHome, occasionally has sections featuring items from a specific, yet vague, ethnic design. On many occasions at various HomeGoods, I've come across signs like the ones pictured in the index (Image 2.1, 2.2, 2.3). One titled "From India and Beyond- Dazzling Wonders!" and "From Africa and Beyond- Global Finds, Fantastic Savings." Another image shows an email marketing ad with similar language. As mentioned, it is unclear if these objects are actually sourced from the countries or continents mentioned in the signs, or if they're mass produced elsewhere. Furthermore, they are specifically curating a look based on defining features of ethnic designs, craftsmanship, and flourishes, but continue to be vague since they do not specify the regions from where these designs originate or represent. Furthermore, the language of "global" and "dazzling" contain strong echoes of allure and adventure, fortifying semiotic signals about the mythology of Oriental countries. It bears mentioning that India is typically used as a catch-all for countries and ethnic groups within the subcontinent, and Africa is used as a catch-all for all the countries and ethnic groups within that continent. The copy of the signage brings about the idea of traveling somewhere and bringing home

fabulous trinkets, because what's found on this display shelf are things not found in the rest of the store, or perhaps other home decor stores as well.

The affect elicited by the term 'beyond' in these signs is not the same beyond conveyed in once-popular retailer *Bed, Bath, and Beyond*. In the latter, the *beyond* is referring to a wide array of housewares not limited to the bedroom or bathroom, and can include things like kitchen gadgets or gardening tools, or even creative hosting knickknacks. The *beyond* in the former ads is referring to the vast expanse of unknown lands and mysterious cultures, suggesting that their collection include artisanally crafted *spoils of war*. The *beyond* also collapses different countries or regions together, because the differentiation is not important. The affect created by Africa or India is enough to signal to the consumer that these items are foreign, unique, and visually distinct with ethnic flair- the ethnicity itself doesn't really matter. To inspect these semiotic signals more closely, I interrogate why this affect is effective and lucrative in interior design and its advertising. Specifically, how is the ethnic collapsing and mythology of the Orient connected to legacies of free trade, Victorian era interior decor literature, and the construction of gender, identity, and sexuality within an Occidental-Oriental fluctuating binary. The objects curated on these shelf displays are not too different from those described in detail in shelter magazines, or the ones that Lisa Lowe explores in her chapter "A Fetishism of Colonial Commodities." The language used to classify these objects is traced back to decorating literature that was primarily marketed towards white Victorian women; as of now, middle to upper middle class women from ages 18-49 continue to serve as the target demographic for advertising at companies like HomeGoods, Target, and Cost Plus World Market.

It is within the 17th and 18th centuries, where we can locate the peak of Chinoiserie, the hollow imitation of Chinese art, ceramics, motifs, fabrics, and furnishings, that dominated home decor through pottery and wallpaper. At the time, Chinese goods were steadily entering Europe due to the British East India Company, and especially after the Opium Wars of 1839 and 1856 and subsequent territorial concession of Hong Kong. The conflicts and treaties shaping England's colonial interference with China set the scene for fascination of Chinese goods and arts by way of the objects being brought back via looting and plundering. Not only objects, the looters even stole a Pekingese dog and gifted it as a curio to Queen Victoria, who named it Lootie. The valuables taken from the Summer Palace in Beijing during the Second Opium War were extensively catalogued, sold, and exhibited across museums and private collector galleries. Furthermore, political conquest and bourgeoisie tastes informed the trends that trickled down into homes. Chinoiserie boomed across Europe largely because it fed the desire to adorn homes with otherness and exoticism, and relied on the average consumer not being able to distinguish between Chinese or other East Asian art forms, nor caring about the authenticity beyond looking the part of a collection-worthy piece.

As we move through this chapter, the term 'collect' reappears often. There's an appeal associated with the ownership of private galleries that is vested in imperialistic fantasies and colonial authoritativeness. If we consider displaying Chinoiserie as a mimicking of collecting and exhibiting pillaged valuables alongside the ad copy of the aforementioned 'From India / Africa and Beyond' HomeGoods shelf displays, we see that repackaged Oriental motifs continue to serve as symbols of colonial bourgeoisie who had various stolen items on display as curios or private galleries with the intention of

sparking conversations of their eliteness. In her chapter "Cultures of Commodities, Cultures of Things", comparative literature scholar Elaine Freedgood talks about the relationship and functional similarity of department storefront displays and museum exhibitions. By the mid-1800's, department stores became destinations themselves due to an uptick in illustrative advertisements, and elaborate storefronts that invited window shoppers. Freedgood remarks "Looking at things behind or under glass is still one kind of activity: whether the object of one's attention is a shop window or museum exhibit, the common denominator is glass…. The shop window becomes a gallery display, a museum exhibit, the illustration of a tale the viewer can spin" (Freedgood, 232). Both museum and storefront displays pose an aura of ownership, empirical and capitalistic. The differentiation between bazaars as an open-ended disarray of items, versus the categorical zoning of home items in department stores create a sense of taxonomic impulses found across empirical epistemological projects like anthropology or eugenics. By creating "kinship groups" and telling us which commodities belonged where, we gained further taxonomic categories for decorative imports that asked if a certain item was functional, ornamental, or both. Freedgood continues, that "The enthusiasm for categorizing people and things suggests both an anxiety and an aspiration; it also becomes a way of understanding the world. Even in the department store, commodities are subject to gendered and racialized hierarchies…" (233). Because my most contemporary examination is of the in-store and online advertising of World Market, I bring this brief exploration of department storefronts to pose inquiries of epistemology and knowledge production. Department stores that featured international imports and zoned them into areas or window displays imaged by their exoticism helps align customers to patriotic ideals of what is domestic or foreign. By this logic, an Indian woven

basket could very well serve a function and be located alongside other regular containers, but its foreignness and potential for ornamentation render it a decorative and exotic collectible and place it in the Indian section of the department store. This phenomenon opens my inquiries regarding the display of ornamental commodities as object of knowledge, and how commerce and advertising are inextricably linked to knowledge production; where can we begin to locate that link in a world where social media is considered a site of education akin to storefront and museum displays. In many ways, the glass of our phone screens also serves as a medium turning the Internet into a fantasmatic site of epistemology and consumerism.

<div align="center">COZY CORNERS AND DISORIENTATION</div>

I begin this exploration by paying attention to the language of styling guides and how epistemologies of nations are produced by interior design and ornaments as objects of knowledge. To explore the trends of interior decor during the Victorian Era, we can begin by looking closely at the language used primarily in Victorian "shelter magazines" which were publications centered on interior design, home furnishing, architecture, and at times, gardening. I began at this era for many reasons related to my theoretical frameworks of Orientalism and gendered spaciality. Within the magazines there is robust discussion, and often praise, of free trade between colonial powers and their (formerly or presently) colonized nations. Free trade was a prominent political conversation that began shaping trade relations as we know them, and eventually trickled into what objects or fabrics you could potentially decorate your home with. Free trade ushered in new design possibilities and even indicated new social meanings like cosmopolitanism and wanderlust. There are strong overtones of Orientalism in shelter magazines in relation to

travel. As more European people had access to traveling to non-European countries for leisure, there was an uptick in foreign objects being used as decorative motifs to indicate one's worldliness, class status, and also to offer contrast between European design and other countries. In her chapter, "Objects in the Parlour", Thad Logan invites us to consider deeply the relationship between gender, imperial logics and the burgeoning popularity of Oriental decor. She noted that in 1880, "a taste for Middle East exotica led to the appearance in many relatively modest homes of the 'cozy corner'" that was decorated with "richly patterned Baghdad hangings and softly colored Persian scarves. 'Cozy corners' were always associated with the private tete-a-tete as they became more lushly, and sensuously, exotic, they took on the aura of eroticism so frequently associated with India and the Middle East." (Logan, 194) Logan provides rich historical specificity on the emergence of a "strong visual linkage was made in advertising between the sensual and the exotic" (198). Cozy corners typically housed lots of indoor plants such as mini palms - colloquially called parlor palms - to mimic the appeal of Oriental countries and their gardens (Image 2.4). In terms of elements, there is an emphasis on organic materials such as clay, stone, wood, cane, and animal hides.

There is overt gendered language in the magazines especially in relation to parlours or cozy corners which were the more private, feminized spaces of leisure and creativity. Victorian women were encouraged to take *risks* in these rooms, and the risk in question being Oriental objects and decoration to serve a strong contrast to the otherwise British home. This recommended use of risqué, Orientalist design motifs was mostly white women writers writing for white women audiences. Lisa Lowe remarks that "the intimacies of desire, sexuality, marriage, and family are inseparable from the imperial

projects of conquest, slavery, labor, and government" (Lowe, 17). The idea of domestic spheres and gendered spaces was still prominent, especially with lower-class women entering the workforce; the onus to maintain femininity via beautification of yourself and the domestic sphere for non-working 'homemakers' was even more prevalent. Yet social and political frustrations in relation to women's role in society outside of the home was being challenged by new modes of thinking. Therefore, visually expressing one's gender identity, not simply through fashion, became reflective of the culture around socio-political rights for white women. Breaking away from stuffy Victorian era confines of polite society began with engagement with Oriental motifs of other countries from a place of creativity and appreciation; still, this contrast was a response to the gender-based confines of polite society within European cultures that was always held in opposition to the Orient.

Therefore, interior decor is a visual arena that best encapsulates the relationship of colonial legacies in commodities as outlined by Lisa Lowe's *Intimacies of Four Continents* where she links how the free trade policies of colonial commodities ushered in new international relations between the continents. My analysis continues Lowe's exploration in the contemporary context by exploring how colonial, imperialistic values show up in the boho chic design style. Furthermore, what social meanings about nation-making and knowledge production are produced about non-European countries and cultures, and what social meanings are reified about white and Western countries and cultures? Thinking about Orientalism and ornamentalism together allows me to juxtapose how the design motifs of ethnic cultures were set as a contrast that wasn't a simply negative or positive binary, but instead a blurred, dialectical relationship that

opened up many simultaneous meanings about ontology as well. Cozy corners, set against the backdrop of a typical Victorian era home that has traditionally British style of decoration, housed ornamental motifs such as a Persian rug, Chinese pottery, or Balinese woodwork, all sitting in contrast as something more expansive than Oriental vs Occidental binary juxtaposition. Returning to Sara Ahmed's connection of orientation and Orientalism, I consider how decor objects that are treated like ethnic artifacts help disrupt lines of whiteness in spaces; their presence offers a contrast while simultaneously reaffirming the whiteness of a space. There is a way that ethnic objects can somewhat queer a space from traditional meanings of whiteness, but still continue to reify that whiteness by serving a new purpose that aids another definition of whiteness, a more cosmopolitan or worldly definition. So even in contemporary boho chic's efforts to look naturally immersed in foreign countries, there's a reliance on a white backdrop to further contrast that foreignness.

Victorian homes had a gendered architecture where the front and most visible, public areas of the home were reserved for men and masculine business such as studies, foyers, and areas that displayed the stateliness of the homes. The more private quarters of the home were for designated feminine affairs like cooking, child rearing, and domestic hobbies. Cozy corners were typically feminine spaces relegated to the more interior quarters of the home, and not the main drawing room that guests were brought into—but they held an erotic potential beyond traditional domesticity. Logan remarks that the way British objects in a home were seen as normal, as the British male was the standard human, resulting in "the ideological mystification that Roland Barthes saw as so central to bourgeois practices; we need also to remember that "othering" the foreign

and "naturalizing" the domestic was a kay component of the imperialist project" (Logan, 195). Logan illustrates a parallel between colonies and objects. She argues that just how British colonies were seen as the property and dominion of the British Empire, but were never fully integrated into British society and culture, goods that came from colonies were similarly rejected as foreign, never accepted as true British culture, but still carried the power and prestige that came from possessing colonies and their products. The home was "an arena in which the [dialectical] relationship to colonial possessions played itself out" (Logan 196). Cozy corners were liminal spaces within the Victorian home that existed in the crosshairs of gender and sexuality, as feminized space but also a place that evokes sexual abandon, the way descriptions of both the Orient and the Bohemian lifestyle did as well. Liminality refers to the state of being ambiguous and disorienting, or existing at an in-betweenness. If we consider Logan's notion of British colonies and apply it to the physical space of cozy corners themselves, we see how the Bohemian decor created a Bohemian colony of sorts within the Victorian home, since the inhabitants were of the bourgeois class and not the artists living among the Romani immigrant neighborhoods. British homes typically placed parlours in the rear of the house away from the entrance, and that seclusion and privacy confers the potential of liminality as well. Liminal spaces are defined as areas in space and time that are disconnected from traditional spaces, forging glittering, fluid, and blurry parameters, not a neat binary.

To unpack the liminality of cozy corners while being attentive to the idea of disorientation, I will walk us through an exploration of Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* and how spaciality is related to ideological and affective realms. Liminality of spaces is the sense of ambiguity and disorientation that a space and the

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objects and bodies in can create. If we consider phenomenology as the way human beings have lived experiences of consciousness, self-awareness, and embodied movement in the lived world, can we consider the objects within those spaces too? How do things appear in space and time from our point of view, using our sensory faculties, affect, and emotion? Our experiences are shaped by how we orient ourselves towards others, objects, images, conversation, sounds, or unseen and unheard things societal roles, energies, empathy, and ideas. Orientation, in phenomenology, is an important structure of consciousness and most of our lived experiences are shaped by what we choose to orient ourselves towards, or what temporal planes we exist in and amongst what other things. With this definition, phenomenology is a wonderful mode for thinking about interior decor and how the human and its others, in this case, space and objects, interact with race, colonialism, gender, and sexuality. Ahmed describes spaces as second skin that are not exterior to the bodies. If orientation is about making "the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when the extension fails... [and] some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others" (Ahmed, 11). For this reason, moving and migrating are disorienting processes that involve entries and exits into spaces that the body will experience differently, spaces where they will not be welcome, or spaces where they could be reduced to an object or a threat.

Frantz Fanon explains psychological and corporal schemas existing in a dialectical relationship where the human body's occupation of space is not limited to just the body, but also the larger world in which it exists as a body. With that interpretation, the body exists with both its corporeal schemas (with its race and gender), and also psychological

schemas (such as social relationships or structures of racism or classism), and both of these schemas inform the experiences that the body will have in any given space. Ahmed invites us to think about disorientation as a phenomenon that is unevenly distributed. Racism, sexism, or any identity-based oppression disrupts the corporeal schema because the body is now being reduced to an aspect of its corporeality, and that is being taken out of the body itself, and put into a larger context of its operation in the world. For example, Blackness on a Black person's skin takes up a new meaning in a predominantly white, racist space, and now the corporeality of that person's body is disrupted in how it exists within or interacts with the other inhabitants of that space. The inhabitants can include objects as well. One way I think of orientation of bodies in spaces and with objects that are disrupted by racism is racially segregated water fountains, where a Black human's body is relegated to a certain object within a space, and barred from another object, and how the social meaning of the interaction with those objects is sustained by a threat of racial violence if the interaction is not properly obeyed. Similarly, if an Indian human's body was seated in a railway car that was segregated for British only, then they are immediately 'out of place' or transgressing in that space, even if they are in their own homeland. Disorientation is when the correct orientation of people and objects within spaces is disrupted, leaving the familiar and correct arrangements in competition with the strange and wrong ones.

Ahmed remarks that "queer moments happen when things fail to cohere. In such moments of failure, when things do not stay in place or cohere as place, disorientation happens" (Ahmed, 170). Following that, disoriented places can happen when objects fail to cohere within a rigidly defined space due to racial or gendered logics. Images of cozy

corners are a dizzying arrangement of foreign objects and white bodies that fail to cohere; somehow, both the ornaments and the bodies seem out of place in the same room. The parlour room exists then as an extension and expansion of the whiteness of its owners. The cozy corner is disoriented because it is a space where foreign objects would not naturally occur or be useful within; the occupancy of the white woman within a house under the ownership of her husband is what disrupts the *skin* of the parlour room. The presence of a lounging Victorian, bourgeois woman amongst an arrangement of foreign rugs, ceramics, and furnishings within the confines of a British home is haunted by the specter of imperialism (Image 2.5). It's a dialectical arrangement also, because the objects are out of place and *strange*, but from a visual standpoint, it is the *familiar* white woman that is out of place within the Oriental cozy corner as well. The uncanny emerges when that which is familiar has disorienting affect of familiarity, rendering it strange and discomforting- familiar and strange at the same time. Pots or baskets or fans are common objects in British society, but their foreignness and strangeness collide with their attempt of belonging in this space with a sense of authority and familiarity, which comes across insincere and uncanny. What adds to the uncanniness is knowing the centuries of colonial violence, racial capitalism, and imperialist extraction that resulted in those objects making their way into that space. The echoes of colonial violence are embedded in the unseen and unheard schema of the room, while the corporeal bodies and inanimate objects are existing within those echoes.

Ahmed says that disorientations can be understood as failed orientations. In regards to the cozy corner, "bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach. At this moment of failure, such objects ''point''

somewhere else or they make what is "here" become strange" (Ahmed,160). In this failed spaces, whiteness of the bodies are extending and the foreignness of the objects are extending, and they're both spilling over each other, making and reifying meanings about the other in a dialectical manner. The Occident needs the Orient in this space to tease out new meanings of intimacy, desire, and privacy from the public sphere. The contemporary boho chic decor trend emerged from these cozy corners, and still carries the same disorienting familiarity because they are filled with hollow replicas of objects that only migrated to that space due to centuries of oppression. To think back to Chinoiserie, there's an uncanny affect that comes from it because its hollow, inauthenticity is viewed by an intense effort to create familiarity via flourishes and motifs that are found in Chinese pottery and fabrics. This same uncanny affect is found as I mentioned on the HomeGoods store shelves of objects marketed to be from India or Africa and *beyond* without paying any attention to the details that breathe life into the object and tether it to a people and a history. How do brands continue to promote the authenticity of "ethnic objects" with "ethnic origins" in "ethnic spaces" but not marketed towards "ethnic people"? Later in this chapter, I ask why boho spaces may feel unsettling due to their uncanny hollowness.

OLD WORLD, NEW MARKET

"For a dominant global power the world becomes a bazaar.
The acquisition of goods in such a market can never be innocent."
- Thad Logan

In this section, I continue the conversation of boho decor by focusing on the rise of the retailer Cost Plus World Market in relation to the rise of import stores and

advertisement campaigns[1]. I argue that social media has enabled new formations, spatial proximities, and adjacent connections that tease out political, racial, and economic logics across various geographical points. I argue that social media advertising is robust with the connections that can produce knowledge about objects. Lisa Lowe calls for historical materialism to decenter imperial knowledge production as the "the imperial drive of the colonial archive would appear to regulate the meanings of the documents it contains" (Lowe, 71), and I posit that the meanings of objects can be regulated as well. A revisionist method, historical materialism doesn't neatly delineate historical trends as documented events, but vast and interconnected discursive formations that are fortified through a global exchange of capital. To locate intentional untruths or resistive narratives that aren't found in canonical archives, I search for the trends and patterns that are laced in non-traditional sources, such as interior decor trends and social media branding to "break with customary modes for identifying and organizing history" (Lowe, 137). Many private collections and museums originated in homes of wealthy Europeans collecting 'curiosities' and 'trinkets' of their travels, or even buying valuable spoils of empire. I am interested in what it means, for people in the 21st century, to adorn their homes with styles that are inextricably linked to Orientalist and imperialist traditions of furnishing homes with exotic relics. The interiors of people's lives and homes are now digitized on Instagram, Pinterest, and most recently, TikTok, and that gives me a wider lens to locate these contemporary spoils of empire that are proudly displayed on social media in a similar museum collection-like manner.

The histories of our everyday objects are rebranded or forgotten once they have a new purpose as ornaments; contemporary home decor items like rugs, woodwork, or

pottery all contain legacies of global trade routes, laboring subjects, and colonial desires. In her chapter "A Fetishism of Colonial Commodities", Lowe traces the descriptions of Oriental commodities in Victorian homes found in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* alongside British East India Company documents. She connects the descriptions as signifiers that constellate historical attitudes and free trade practices that were "linked to the production of value through the circulation of goods and people" (Lowe, 74). In describing various fabrics and textiles that became popular in Victorian home decor and fashion, Lowe paints a portrait of the way worldwide trade routes twisted into new formations of "colonial commodification," and how the "intimacies of the four continents" such as slavery, colonialism, and fetishism were still present in these new formations. For my work, I take a closer look at how the import store Cost Plus World Market emerged out of these new formations. I connect the branding efforts and advertising efforts of Cost Plus World Market, from its ideation, expansion, and contemporary online presence, to the affective and ideological projects of boho interiors.

Arjun Appadurai maintains that "commodities, like persons, have social lives," and I argue that boho chic home decor commodities are "always haunted by the specter of colonial labor and the productive bodies of colonial workers" (Lowe, 83). I am interested in that active life that is beyond the object's utility, and enters into an affectual realm with our desires, histories, fears, and attractions. Commodities "become autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race" (Marx, 165). When it comes to objects like home decor or fast fashion, the object becomes far removed from the labor of its production; its active life gives us the rush of adorning our home and body with something trendy, affordable, convenient,

and overall gorgeous. With sustainable fashion and artisanal home decor goods, the labor of its production becomes illuminated as the *ethical* alternative to the unethical consumer culture that obfuscates the labor of producing those goods and clothes. But even in the framework of ethical and sustainable labor production, the active life of these products is one that carries the feel-goodness of doing the right thing, paying for a good cause, and ultimately a unique and beautiful item that also makes you feel like you're overturning fast fashion one sustainable blouse at a time. At times, knowing a romanticized version of the source of the object's production signaled by words like "artisanal" or "hand-crafted" increases an object's precious value and makes it all the more desirable, perhaps even more than its physical form. So, a plain looking ceramic vase or white shirt appears more beautiful and enticing due to the labor of their production. In either case, the object's active life and the affect it produces on the consumer and those who interact with it continues to make meaning beyond its utility.

Home decor trends that are labeled boho, exotic, or artisanal invoke a sense of exoticism and craft in their active life. There's a notion that these pieces are hand-made, unique, one-of-a-kind, in that every item may have some sort of individuality (because mass-produced by machines lowers the rarity and worth of the product.) The boho decor trend draws on pieces that have a persona that enfolds the owner into that persona; the piece now invites the owner to participate in its intrigue, and allows its artisanal origins to speak for the owner's accomplished taste. Similar to entering a bakery that has a plexiglass wall behind which a skilled baker kneads layered dough and rolls it into fanciful crescents, certain brands invite you in to participate in the process by way of viewing and admiring. By facilitating access through these curated glimpses placed

intentionally in your view, you're invited to consider the artisanal labor that provides you with a beloved product as a testament to your cosmopolitanism or luxury. When you witness the craft that goes into making your croissant, you may feel - however temporarily - a part of the chain of labor that went into it. That after being rolled by the baker and being baked by the oven, it was your participatory viewing and admiring that completed its journey into production. There's an allure to feeling like you were invited to view; after this participation, you seek out this pleasure in knowing the origins of production of commodities- not to understand the labor conditions or to evaluate the materials, but instead take from the active life of the commodity to mean something about yourself. Lowe remarks that "not only are objects shown to be a language for articulating style, taste, and social status, but the impulse to consume, emulate, and display bears out extravagant manners for performing fluency in cultural signs of social class and identity" (Lowe, 81). I recently hung up an abstract clock in my living room that looks more like fascinating geometric art than it does serve its actual purpose, and the first few compliments I received on it were 'that's a conversation piece for sure!' (Most of those conversations were largely that many visitors didn't register it as a clock and I often had to explain the hands and numbers, see Image 2.6). The idea of something sparking a conversation - instead of the utility it's designed for - speaks to the affectual life of objects: the way we orient ourselves to these objects, and what type of utterances and feelings are created as a result of interaction with the object. Perhaps you're prompted to tell the story behind a unique object, or maybe detail the exotic origins of the production, or even the interesting means of you acquiring it. The power that an object holds, through its beauty and design, is what 'import stores' like World Market use to incite affectual exchanges of conversation, compliments, and delight. For centuries prior, Europeans and British

aristocracy with access to the Orient would return home with vessels, carpets, or artwork that they would put on display in their parlors, drawing rooms, libraries, or menageries. The idea of a home becoming a sort of museum to display one's worldliness, wealth, and connection to faraway lands proved to be an enticing way to impress your social circle.

The late 1800s showed an uptick in interest in the commercialization of interior decor and home furnishings by way of department stores and import stores. More books, pamphlets, and magazine articles were being written encouraging people to take up the 'art of home', resulting in an increased accessibility to these objects. The nineteenth century ushered in 'free trade' practices that "innovated combinations of… older style colonial territorial rule with the circulation and mobility of goods and people" (Lowe, 80). In *The Cosmopolitan Interior,* Judy Neiswander discusses the influx of Oriental wares to adorn parlors, and how these trends have links to new trade practices while retaining Orientalist values of exotification and blurring diverse cultures together. She traces how furnishings and decorative items from India, China, Japan, and other Eastern regions rose in popularity as people returned from travels and wanted to put their cosmopolitanism on display. An Indian sandalwood box, a Persian rug, or a Chinese vase became signifiers of one's worldliness and had the ability to draw mystique, ancient charm into one's home—and were now easier to purchase in section of a department store. Neiswander takes a closer look at the writings of M. E. James and Mary Eliza Haweis who wrote for a popular domestics pamphlet in the late 1800s called "Beautiful Houses." Haweis remarked that aesthetically pleasing objects were "vehicles of feeling" and focused on the affectual power of objects instead of thinking of their origin or significance or the "ethics of removing them from their original contexts" (Neiwswander, 54). For these Victorian

interior decorators, everything produced in the Orient was for their pleasure: vehicles that existed not within a rich culture but came to life only when put on display in a parlor alongside several other knick-knacks to emulate the sultry warmth of desert sands or tropical breezes, or as said by M. E. James, "a [Moorish] room… amid the glare of London would be very refreshing and delicious" (Neiswander, 49).

Import stores becoming available for the average consumer in the late 1800s signals the commodification of objects. As we move along, it's important to keep in mind Freedgood's comparison of department stores and museums, to understand how these marketplaces further invested in imperialistic epistemologies via ornamentation and ownership. Neiswander noted the pattern of import stores emerging in Britain first aimed to emulate bazaars with everyday access to the Oriental market. "The luxury trade with the Far East had existed for centuries but had previously been limited to the extremely wealthy… In 1869, the opening of the Suez Canal allowed goods to be shipped from the East even more easily and cheaply. With no restrictive tariffs, Asian goods began to pour into Britain and several oriental warehouses sprang up in London," and many department stores began opening up Oriental departments (Neiswander, 48). This signals a shift in how the products are elevated when included in visual display, but the countries of their cultural origin are not. The value of foreign objects and motifs was in their novelty, beauty, and how they could become a signifier for the taste of the displayer. The history and context of before they were imported - and therefore, before they were *important* - was ignored. James, Haweis, and other writers of the time were generally unaware or uninterested in the exact countries and contexts of the products and used floating signifiers like 'the Far East' or 'the Orient' as satisfactory descriptions.

Neiswander remarks how decorative writers like Haweis all acknowledged one thing alongside their praise of foreign motifs: the access to these foreign wares at affordable prices at department and import stores was a direct result of free trade, a "cornerstone of the Liberal Party's economic policy" to limit barriers to international commerce. What does it mean for a Victorian era home decor writer to acknowledge the way imperialist economic policies are to be credited for the ability to achieve the highest level of panache in your drawing room? The notion that this trade exchange between Oriental nations and the West will spur better relations or increase the open-minded and artistic horizons of the British middle-class signals how home decor can be articulated into a signifier of empirical conquest. Free trade imperialism lifted mercantilist barriers and delivered more access to Far East home furnishings, however it did not by any means dissolve the East India Company's monopoly for the sake of better relations or cultural appreciation. Instead, free trade imperialism transformed the Company's monopoly in a colonial stronghold by innovating circulations of goods and labor to birth new fantasies and desires of faraway lands. For readers and consumers who simply wanted to add a "refreshing and delicious" touch to their parlors, the general idea was that these decor motifs in combination with their preexisting furniture and architecture articulated a sense of taste and worldliness. And with the emergence of markets and department stores for these Oriental motifs, the person who isn't able to travel, or is limited from those cultures, now had access to perform that taste and worldliness. So long as the *vehicle of feeling* was unobstructed, the origins and histories of the object did not do anything besides add intrigue.

Moving out of England and towards the US, it bears mentioning that with the decline of British control over China and the rise immigration because of the Gold Rush in California, many Chinese import stores were popping up in San Francisco catering to the growing community- and also those interested in the Oriental goods that were arriving at the docks and making their way to the Chinese hubs close to the seaport. At the same time, the San Francisco port was emerging as a strong foothold for the US Navy, particularly in relation to imperialistic operations in the Pacific and Caribbean regions. As we consider the rise of World Market in the 1950s in the next section, its telling how the particular affect of sea-side docks caries a romanticized nostalgia of these trade hubs and seaports. Behind the romanticization of seaport bazaars and mercantilism, the dockside location nods towards the imperial hold of gunboat diplomacy. The free trade imperialism that Haweis was praising was often accompanied by strategically overt display of naval power to assure forced cooperation and concessions. Although the San Francisco port may not have been a traditional scene of gunboat diplomacy per se, the US was significantly developing its Naval operations, particularly with the colonization of the Philippines and several other Pacific and Caribbean territories at the turn of the century. By the time Cost Plus World Market was established in the 1950s, Philippines had gained independence, Alaska and Hawaii became official US states, and the Vietnam war was ongoing. This historical previewing is critical to understand the way contemporary import stores served as a symbol of the success of free trade imperialism, while distancing the US from its colonial operations. This new articulation innovates colonial strongholds into circulations of goods - like ornamental objects - to supply new fantasies of colonial possessiveness and pose new questions about identity or

positionality. These desires of faraway lands were tucked into these objects which served as both objects and ideas.

#GLOBALFINDS

We can now explore when Cost Plus World Market emerged, and how it sustained its original essence via branding and advertising efforts. In an earlier section, I discussed the uncanniness of Chinoiserie and the *beyond* display shelves at HomeGoods that carried nondescript, ethnic items. As we think through Appadurai's assertion that objects have social lives and are haunted by their histories and the journey they made to arrive in homes, I want us to think about what it means when an object is hollow in that it does not necessarily come from an involved history, unless a mass production factory can be considered a starting point, and how the objects exist as shell-like signifiers that are meant to signal that imperialist worldly taste and life of adventure, while muffling the specter of colonial labor and legacies of extraction.

We can begin by closely examining a post from World Market's official Instagram page that quintessentially encapsulates this active life. On February 18th 2022, World Market's Instagram posted a picture of a sleek white shelf styled with textural ceramic plates from India, a teakwood bowl from Indonesia, and assorted vessels and frames (Image 2.7). The caption reads, "Collected, not decorated! We have so many great finds from around the globe to make your space feel cozy and collected. #GlobalFinds," and it linked users to the specific products featured. Social media copywriting is a very essential part of a brand's marketing efforts to create the voice of the brand in relation to the persona they are trying to put forth to consumers. Intentionally framing an antagonism

between 'collected' not simply 'decorated' evokes a superiority of collecting objects for beautifying your home and an intentionality behind adorning your shelf with found objects. The consumer feels more aligned to an explorer or a treasure hunter who returns with one-of-a-kind spoils that are valuable because of the adventure linked to their capture. Moreover, the trend of 'found' objects - that is, objects that are not intended for decor but can be displayed as such when *diverted* into art - results in many trinkets that are now extracted from their actual use and are purely ornamental. Appadurai discusses "commoditization by diversion" in reference to domestic displays and collections in the West. 'Found' home decor, by his formation of diversion, would be the way an "aesthetics of decontextualization" increases the value of an object as it is displayed in a home divorced of its ethnic origins and not even being used for its purpose. By the same logic of 'found' art, the everyday object is *diverted* into a decorative display. The authenticity and novelty of the object are enhanced by its decontextualization, and this in turn signals that the displayer is a highbrow creator; the object's purpose now is a signifier of its new owner. Its utility is reimagined through its affect, as its purpose now is to speak to visitors about its intentional acquisition, what its job was before it was 'found,' and how all of its praise is diverted back to its owner's aesthetic taste. World Market invites the consumer to play collector by bringing the treasure hunt to them via an online storefront of their #GlobalFinds inventory of items. Upon reading the caption, the consumer feels that simply 'decorating' is not authentic or intentional enough and instills the idea that a home should feel thoughtfully and globally curated.

In a similar vein, Walter Benjamin, in his essay "Paris, Capital of the 19th Century," regarded the "glorification of things" as the concern of anyone decorating their interior

spaces. For the "collector" of ornaments, they are tasked with "stripping things of their commodity character by means of his possession of them," rendering the ornament as something that holds connoisseur value, not use value (Benjamin, 169). Vacating the use value of an object is the process by which it becomes an ornament, and I'm interested in how racialization functions in this transition. For a person of color shopping at World Market, these objects may be uncanny in that they seem familiar- it might be a disorienting purchase because it may look like an object you remember seeing at your grandparent's home in Indonesia, but is being purchased with US dollars and not carried over in a suitcase. There may be a sense of memory and an affect of diasporic longing that compels you to put it up in your living room, to create the aura of both a nostalgia and a futurity, as it carries a Western and contemporary context now. But it is vacated of the use value that it held in a grandparent's house, and becomes akin to an ornament with decorative value, alongside symbolic value of representing a cultural or personal memory. What may be reminiscent of a museum display or souvenir shelf in a contemporary boho chic home or a Victorian parlor, may be speaking to a different familiarity for a consumer from the same background as the object's original model. I don't aim to stray into a conversation about authenticity or sustainable sourcing, but rather I am inviting you to consider how the same object can create a different type of orientation when placed in a home that is inviting it as familiar, instead of a home that is labeling it as boho chic or Oriental. When thinking of what is being created in World Market, it is important to consider the rise of department stores and import stores that catered to a very specific type of home decorator, the same way World Market does today.

Vehicle of feeling is precisely the type of connection you create with a whimsical object at a thrift store, or an import merchandise store like Cost Plus World Market. There emerges an exchange between you and the object and it feeds into subliminal wants and experiences. Cost Plus World Market is grounded in the legacy of seaside bazaars and Oriental departments in stores, as it came into existence at the beginning of the 20th century in the United States after the owner established foreign supply connections upon returning from his many world travels. The history of the retail store's origins offers an intriguing insight to its contemporary branding strategies and online presence. The owner, William Amthor, and his family had operated a furniture store in San Francisco called Amthor Imports since the 1920s. Amthor Imports mainly sold home products and rattan furniture from Amthor's "Far East" business relationships that he established on his trips to various countries as he sourced merchandise. In the 1950s, Amthor and his partner, Lincoln Bartlett, received an accidental surplus of rattan furniture, and decided to rent out an open-air warehouse at Fisherman's Wharf to have a flash sale where they sold the furniture at *cost plus* 10 percent. This warehouse flash sale performed so successfully that they began to routinely hold the sales with various surplus stock from local import stores. Various articles about the origins of Cost Plus World Market credit the success of the warehouse flash sales to the "atmosphere of serendipity and adventure" that was "designed to evoke the sense of being at a dockside warehouse" (Niloufer H, 45). Customers flocked to the warehouse with the hopes of scoring exotic finds, and rotating selections of merchandise evoked a treasure-hunting sense of adventure. The strategy of flash sales speaks to the desire to score one-of-a-kind steals that can ultimately speak to the consumer's fortuity or wit in acquiring something irreplicable. The affect of the imperial mercantilism and sea-port aesthetic undoubtedly contributed to the

warehouse's success, as import stores were steadily climbing in popularity throughout the 1980s and onwards as well. As I mentioned towards the end of the last section in regard to the US's colonial and territorial Naval operations, Amthor's home decor imports were articulated into signifiers of a continuing legacy of treasure-hunting and discovery, without having to get on a boat.

The popularity of the open-air bazaar style emerged as the beginning concept of World Market's brand identity and continued to be a persisting design theme when the stores underwent expansion in the 1980s by making sure to incorporate higher industrial ceilings. One of the main priorities in the expansion was to retain the affect and optics of the seaport bazaar by ensuring that "the floors were cement, ceilings were high, beams were exposed, and fixtures were plain, creating a Spartan environment for what the company described as an "upscale, organized version of the Third World central market-place" (IDHC, 1999). World Market prioritized the imagination and fantasies of its consumers - which reads as the colonial desires of excursions and mercantilism - and offered a way to sample the Third-World bazaar and attain commodities without having to actually travel there or attend to local histories and customs. Because Amthor originally forged various market relations across his travels, he was able to source directly from his connections which cemented an air of 'authenticity' and 'reliability' to the brand that has continued to benefit their brand image for decades.

World Market continues the legacy of import stores in the nineteenth century that provided a way for the domestic space to become a site of fantasy production of an upscale and organized Third World. Neferti Tadiar notes that "imagination… is an intrinsic

constitutive part of political economy" (Tadiar, 4) and how fantasies and dreams are forces in the creation of social and economic practices. Imagination is not only symptomatic of imperialism, but also a constitutive element of empire. Walter Benjamin speaks of how the "phantasmagorias of the interior" (Benjamin, 169) made living-spaces the representation of the inhabitant. Ornamentation was as personal a touch as an artist flourishing a signature on a finished painting. We saw this with how 'cozy corners' served as an arena for Victorian women to play with desires of escape and delight within the constraints of the domestic sphere. As their sexuality and chastity was aggressively controlled in society, these foreign embellishments of their parlors were set to whisk them away to a play with the "aura of eroticisim" associated with the Orient. The junction of the ornament, the foreign, and the erotic creates those "phantasmagorias of the interior" and is further informed by the pleasures and anxieties of race and gender dynamics vis a vis imagined site of the Orient. That same triangulation speaks to the role of gender and sexuality as organizing principles of imagination and material relations. Tadiar maintains that the logics of gender are intrinsic to material relations and emerge as codes of signification when it comes to dreams and desires (Tadiar, 11). As 'cozy corners' offered a space for the "aura of eroticism" to emerge through the placement and stylization of Oriental decorative items, we can trace how logics of gender and sexuality create and are created by imperialism through the pervasiveness of import stores and a new rearticulation of boho-chic.

The decoration magazines of the past praised free trade because it enables the fantasies of imperialism to be displayed in the home due to an unrestricted flow of material goods without much state interference. But since those formal colonies were

waning and gunboat diplomacy was increasingly supported, I pose some inquiries about this rearticulation of the early 2000s in the form of World Market's branding and marketing strategies. It bears mentioning that the average customer for World Market is an educated woman 25-40 years old, and the intended audience for the decoration magazines was married, Victorian women. White women are centered as the audience not simply because of affluence or accessibility, but largely because of logics of gender and who is allowed to be a domestic woman. If bohemian culture was birthed by artistic men and women who did not want to partake in white, Anglo, bourgeois, Victorian culture even if it meant feigning poverty, then what does that mean for boho chic decor's intended audience of white women who also want to go *against the grain* and decorate a la World Market, or Anthropologie, or Zara Home, or Urban Outfitters as opposed to Target or HomeGoods and other traditional interior decor trends? Because boho chic is not, despite trying hard to be, a deep cultural appreciation of the Romani people and other South Asian or Oriental communities, contemporary iterations of the trend continues to defer to the bohemian artistic movement as its origins. We've already seen whiteness co-opt the optics of boho-adjacent wellness trends; yoga, for example, is represented by thin, white women wearing Lululemon tights and NAMASLAY tank tops. Visuality is often co-opted from its origins, and repackaged as white, and we see that with boho chic interior decor as it is branded by World Market and similar companies.

The interior is always connected to empire, both decorating and being decorated by it. In a post 9-11 world, boho chic is a rearticulated arena for White people to play into self-otherizing fantasies, particularly through the lens of 'wellness'. There is no absence of imperialism, and its gendered and racialized logics, in the way World Market, and

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similar entities continue to benefit from a contemporary version of free trade imperialism and neoliberalism in relation to wellness, patriotism, and the Internet. While the Victorian revival of boho interiors was a direct result of economic and militarized imperialism in former colonies like India and China, I argue that a corollary set of contexts more specific to the 1990s/2000s revival of boho-chic is informed by the combination of exoticized wellness and internet trends set against the backdrop of the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001.

In Chapter 1, I detailed how post 9/11 national sentiments ushered 'shop for America' similar to post Covid 19 notions pushing for supporting small businesses. Accompanying that push for materialist consumption, we saw a boom for wellness, self-care, and attention to mental health. Similarly, after 9/11 there was a boom of self-help books (like *Eat, Pray, Love*) that contained stories of seeking wellness, self-improvement, and personal resilience as cultural touchstones for a post-911 zeitgeist. In the turn of the millennium, we saw a multivocal Orientalism that muddied the notions of American Dream-ing via achieving your fullest spiritual potential, and somehow imbricating wellness with dreamy, progressive narratives of personal resilience and hero stories. Narratives of spiritual growth after personal tragedies like a divorce or losing a job during a thrashed economy became interlinked with patriotic sentimentality of overcoming mass death and grief as a result of a national tragedy.

A revival of the new age spirituality that materialized as an aesthetic possession of Asian cultures in a post-Vietnam War era and African cultures in a post-Civil Rights movement era. In "Belly Dancing: Arab-Face, Orientalist Feminism, and U.S. Empire"

Sunaina Maira remarks that one of the determining characteristics of the New Age post-war and post-civil rights era was an "emerging ideology of cultural pluralism that fostered the display of ethnic symbols by immigrant groups" (326). Popular culture began taking a new, adventurous, and global American aesthetic— think of how the Black Power movement for example frequently embraced African cultural fashions, or how anti-war aesthetics reappropriating military jackets or camouflage as sartorial protest. These fashion articulations were a "set of symbols" that generated a palatable internationality that we can locate in boho-chic aesthetics of the early 2000s.

After 9/11, a revival of wellness, self-help, and 'safe' spirituality was an optimal conduit for that personal and national resilience. While the East was 'spiritual', and the West was 'material', it's ironic that this Eastern spirituality enters US life via material objects like elephant pants, incense sticks, and Buddha statues. Boho multiculturalism, at a time where we were still afraid of overt Islamic imagery, was a safe and *glittery* site with flickering signifiers that indicated foreignness, but the acceptable, good kind. Boho-chic aesthetics became a site for the reinvention of the spiritual self via fantasies of other cultures— and done so through ambiguous cultural possessions and ornamentation. Maira frames this liberal multicultural framework post-911 as how "rejecting racism involves "respect" for cultural differences, often proven through symbolic performances and the consumption of cultural commodities" (Maira, 327). For those afraid of getting on a plane now, dipping into cultures remotely via food, fashion, and ornamentation satisfied many intentions. The multivocality of this Orientalism signified various, flickering possibilities. Either that you're a blanket anti-racist, and down with all the Browns. Or that you have a newfound curiosity about global cultures while 'our troops'

were sent to 'fight for our freedom', signaling that you can possess and appreciate the culture of a community while hating their terrorists. Or you are a person of color in the United States who is now ethnically outed to White America and may be seeking ways to reclaim your culture, or display the 'safe' and interesting beauty of your culture via a bindi or sari or anything Bollywood-adjacent. Maira further contends that cultural performances in a post-911 United States were entangled with the imperial engagements linking the US and the Middle East via imperial feelings: "the complex of psychological and political belonging to empire that are often unspoken, sometimes subconscious, but always present, the "habits of heart and mind" that infuse and accompany structures of difference and domination" (319). Imperial feelings with 9/11 were articulations of a 'new' kind of empire based on foreign policies and military interests because the US doesn't associate with the same imperialism of the British empire, despite its 'informal colonies' of Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii. The aesthetic exploration of other cultures via boho-chic imaginaries reified US American culture; possession and ornamentation performed those imperial feelings via consumerism which I argue can be found in interior decor.

Returning to the interior as both personal and political, Sara Ahmed remarks that "the Orient is not only imagined as ''being'' distant, as another side of the globe, but also is ''brought home'' or domesticated as ''something'' that extends the reach of the West" (Ahmed, 121). The interior is where dreams, fantasies, and imaginations come alive. It is in bedchambers and parlors where various discourse on the human and its relation to others is held. The trend of furnishing your 'cozy corners' interior with gendered signifiers to engage with desires of the feminization of Oriental lands can still be found

today. The affect of the bohemian cultural movement emerging simultaneously in the landscape of post-911 patriotism crystalizes the interior as the place for colonial and imperial erotics rearticulated for modern popular cultures. What is being conveyed by the boho chic trends in relation to gender and femininity? What stories are being told and what is being mythologized? What questions of escape or desire are opened up by boho chic interior decor that isn't being done in say farmhouse or mid-century modern? This relationship between materialism, visuality, gender and sexuality create and are created through imperial logics and frameworks of safe and palatable global exchanges that create a "white woman mythology" that grants authority "about who defines, markets, and profits from a particular telling of [belly dance] and how economic and racial relations of power are expressed or obscured by [these] mythologies…" (332).

Because Oriental commodities have strong, interconnected importance on a global scale, their placement in a domestic setting contains significant colonial legacies as well that must include the weaponization of white femininity in this arena. While I briefly surveyed the way erotics and sexuality were critical in producing 'cozy corners' in the homes of Victorian women, it's important for me to consider the libidinal desires at play into collecting and decorating with Oriental commodities, and how "imperial feelings" were embedded in the boho chic trend in relation to import stores like World Market. Young white women were the key demographic for both World Market's expansion, and also the Victorian interior decor magazines. I'm interested in how objects that symbolized the Orient mediated sexuality via spaciality, and how World Market's brand identity is structured by this mediation. The most prominent finding that I've made in regards to this is Cost Plus World Market's collaboration with Sony Pictures to

market the film *Eat, Pray, Love*. *Eat, Pray, Love* is a memoir by Elizabeth Gilbert chronicling her journey of self-discovery through Italy, India, and Indonesia after making the decision to uproot the monotony of her daily life, work, and divorce. The premise is that she learns to eat with joy in Italy, prays at a spiritual retreat in an ashram in India, and discovers love with another man in Indonesia. The book became a bestseller following its publication in 2006 and gained a spot in Oprah's book club with an episode dedicated entirely to an interview with Gilbert. In 2010, it was adapted into a film by Columbia Pictures, a division of Sony Pictures Entertainment, and starred Julia Roberts, portraying Gilbert's quest for spiritual enlightenment and adventure that could not be found within the continental United States. The film release resulted in multiple brand partnerships, and numerous articles have been written about the *Eat, Pray, Love* merchandise empire (estimated then at $350 million US dollars) that was built around offering women self-fulfillment via things, as many fans of the book could not afford the experience of traveling across multiple countries to do so. Culture writer Joshunda Sanders encapsulated the book as a "perfect example of the genre of priv-lit: literature or media whose expressed goal is one of spiritual, existential, or philosophical enlightenment contingent upon women's hard work, commitment, and patience, but whose actual barriers to entry are primarily financial." It bears mentioning that in the *Eat, Pray, Love* book, Gilbert's character begins her journey after 9/11 signaled the end of her marriage; in the novel, after 9/11 while others were rushing to reconcile, make amends, or make intrapersonal decisions emboldened by the tragic reminder that death is inevitable, she simply called to check in (and nothing else) on her ex-husband whom she divorced two days prior to the attacks. The movie was released nearly a decade after the 9/11 attacks, which was a peak era for exoticized wellness trends; the jargon of investing in your body

and mind together was steadily becoming integrated into fashion, like yoga pants, food, like Ayurvedic supplements and even fun, like spiritual retreats.

Leading up to the movie's release, Cost Plus World Market collaborated with Sony Pictures to establish a themed line with new merchandise that adhered to the film and its promotional materials with everything including pillow cases with the words EAT, PRAY, or LOVE embroidered on them, and teabags inspired by "Elizabeth Gilbert's life changing journey of discovery" (Images 2.8-2.13). The store also curated previously stocked items deemed suitable for the movie promotion such as tunics, prayer beads, and yoga bags. This initiative, that ran from July 17 to August 28, offered participants a sweepstakes as well, with prizes like a private movie screening, gift baskets, World Market gift cards, and ultimately the grand prize: the opportunity to win a trip for two to Italy, India, or Bali through Intrepid Travel. In an interview with "The Santa Barbara Independent" newspaper, Marissa Durazzo, then Senior Marketing Manager at Cost Plus World Market, identified as an enthusiast of the book and expressed excitement with the alignment of the World Market's brand identity with the movie's thematic essence. Similarly, Sony perceived the collaboration as synergistic with the film's narrative, citing World Market's focus on exotic and adventure-themed merchandise.

Sony's strategic alignment with the specialty store was largely due to their shared demographic appeal, as both cater predominantly to women aged 18 to 55, aligning with the target audience for the film. "Our core demographic—ages 18 to 55—is also the target market for the movie. Basically, it's a chick flick," said Durazzo, "and as 85 percent of our customers are women . . . We are getting great buzz." Henry Alvidres, the designated "Eat

Pray Love" in-store expert at Cost Plus, emphasized in the interview that the partnership was rooted in mutual thematic resonance and demographic relevance. Alvidres underscores the congruence between the travels Gilbert with the sourcing practices of Cost Plus buyers, who curate exotic products from around the world, including the countries visited in the film. "I know that Cost Plus would not just jump at any opportunity [for movie promotion]—it would have to be a fit," Alvidres said "... buyers can now watch the film and then take a part of it home with them."

This movie has become symbolic of a white woman who is determined to find herself by traversing exotic countries and extracting culture and wisdom in ways that are meant to fill the void in herself created by the materialistic western world. *Eat Pray Love* has becoming a verb in pop culture slang (like the verb to 'Google') referring to the actions of white women who live the wanderlust life, dress and decorate with the boho aesthetic, do yoga with goats, and wear elephant pants- all while racistly treating foreign customs as mystic lands for enlightenment and self-care following the same extractive logics of Orientalist thought. Eat pray love describes a very specific type of white woman who, like the bohemian lifestyle of the Victorian era, is supposed to be seen as a free spirited, anti-traditionalist, sexually liberated, woman who draws from various different cultures - Indian yoga, Brazilian dance, Ghanaian drumming - to counteract her whiteness in the world If we're thinking of cinematic examples, Jennifer Aniston's role of Polly in *Along Came Polly* is a perfect example.

It is important to note that the representatives of both Sony and World Market identified the intended audience of the movie and line simply as 18-55 year old chick-

lit/chick-flick female fans, while omitting the most important descriptive: whiteness. Thinking back to the uncanniness of World Market for the diasporic consumer, it may be equally as odd to see your country of origin, in this case India and Indonesia, as an ideological backdrop for self-care, spirituality, and exoticism-- especially if that's not something you associate with your culture or community. It also does help to consider that members of the South Asian diaspora who were living through a post-911 US were perhaps also relating to the societal themes of overcoming adversities-- except their adversities include a national tragedy and also the racialized hostility, policing, and warfare as a result of that event. For those affected in more ways than one, liberal ideals of feminism or resilience in books like *Eat, Pray, Love* and other similar genres may have offered both a sense of escapism or simply annoyance at the ease with which white women navigate the world, metaphorically and geographically. In any case, despite self-discovery narratives cohering with post-911 sentiments for more than one community, the advertising campaign for *Eat, Pray, Love* only had one community in mind. A community that was only dealing with personal metaphors of loss and grief for a world that 'once was' as opposed to a daily onslaught of xenophobic surveillance, incarceration, and international pogroms that have lasted for decades onwards.

It's unclear if "white" was intentionally omitted to be race blind and often an undifferentiated chick-it reader, or if it seamlessly went undetected since white women are considered the norm when it comes to demographics; either way, this movie and subsequent collaboration is for white women who seek excitement in their lives, not women of color. Does Bali seem more romantically alluring to any American women? For some women of color, Bali could simply be reminiscent of the countries their families

immigrated from. For Black women, Bali may come with the same warnings of anti-Blackness that many travelers are advised to be cautious of. The same can be said for India, where female travelers are rarely safe from sexual assault, and where Muslim or lower caste women will undoubtedly not have the ashram experience that Gilbert did. Movie and brand partnerships, especially for a media company as reputable as Sony, are extremely strategic decisions that are not made on whims but rather on an alignment of brand values and visions. The similarities between the premise of the film and the values of World Market are the extraction of ethnic motifs and cultural markers, without any recognition of the colonial violence that undergirds this relationship. It is not without any political implications that a white woman can find complete contentment in life only via extraction, the same way that the customers at World Market - and similarly marketed stores - can gain the image of that lifestyle without actual engagement with ethnic communities, especially women from those communities.

In *Wretched of the Earth,* Frantz Fanon explores the concept of a colonial national unconscious. He is referring primarily to the mind of colonized people being psychologically dispossessed along with their national and political colonization. By that process, we can explore how the national unconscious of white, Western people continues to operate similarly to the colonizer, the police officer, or the plantation overseer. How do white women who participate in the boho chic trend in today's world, and the Victorian era, follow these logics, but under the veil of innocence, victimhood, and sensuality that diffuses superiority and possessive desires? We can locate these inquiries in yet another World Market advertising campaign. In 2014 World Market launched a line called CRAFT; a type of demand-based flash sale model where a product

is previewed but only produced if enough shoppers pre-order it, otherwise it will not reach production[2]. The marketing strongly signaled the virtue of how technology is being used in a way to connect and empower consumers and artisans, as it is the consumer's onus to bring the product *to life*. The products would be featured with "stories" of their origins and brief information about the craftsperson or artisan community who made it per the demand. The program employed an auction-like feel, while boasting its small batch exclusivity as less wasteful, while also carrying the allure of owning something limited edition. In Images 2.14-2.16, we see two notable captions from the CRAFT campaign. "Few will travel to Bangladesh. Even fewer will own this rickshaw" and "A bench once made for royalty, now made just for you" are the two slogans I want to focus on to locate this desire for psychological dispossession and ownership. The campaign exalts the consumer (presumably white) to a status higher than royalty or even the most well-travelled explorer. With the bench, you are able to feel superior as you sit upon what could have once been a throne— Indian royalty or British Raj is unclear. You are invited to dip into a colonial fantasy by way of owning this $3000 wooden bench and relish in the imaginary of having subordinates. The similarly priced rickshaw on the other hand, continues the superiority because though someone may have travelled to Bangladesh, you will be the one who returned with a rickshaw, a possession so rare that ownership of it surpasses any valor of traveling alone, let alone returning with any other subpar item. What's amusing to me is the implication that Bangladesh is somewhere so rarely travelled to— but by who exactly? Framing Bangladesh as a rare destination for an unnamed undifferentiated population of travelers, coupled with the title of royalty, teases white supremacist overtones in this campaign. Particularly interesting about the rickshaw was that it was not to be used, and only for display- speaking to the eradication

of use-value that Walter Benjamin noted. (I found a blog post from 2014 where an unidentified travel blogger provided information on how producing a custom rickshaw, that can be driven, cost $250 in 2014 and provided the details of how to order it in response to the World Market decorative rickshaw.) And lastly, it's particularly interesting to me how Cost Plus World Market emerged from port-side flash sales, and how the CRAFT program employs a very similar model of a limited quantity and time frame adding to the appeal of each of them. It's crucial to focus on ad copy language of *royalty, limited edition,* and *ownership* and how they understand their audience as consumers invested in a particular historicity.

The colonizer's psyche is fundamentally shaped by power dynamics, a sense of superiority, and a right to extraction. Fanon's idea of the national unconscious reveals the colonial libidinal desires that shape perceptions, aesthetics, and behaviors, and continue the dialectical cycles between the colonized and the colonizer. The psyche is a site of fantasy which Fanon argues is a tool for colonialism, white supremacy, and racial capitalism to thrive, which is why it needs to be dominated as well. In the national unconscious, the colonizer displays a complex interplay of repressed desires, fears, and aspirations stemming from a distorted self-image of superiority which is validated by systems of oppression that work in favor of whiteness. The same notions that may lead to feelings of inferiority and displacement in the national unconscious of people of color, are the same notions leading to superiority and belonging for white people in the same space. Fanon refers to imperialism as *germs of rot* that ought to be removed from our psyche and not just our lands, to which I would add our homes as well. Decolonization of both the external political structures and the internalized mental constructs imposed by

colonialism also necessitates decolonizing aesthetics from compulsively imitating Western beauty ideals in everything from physical features to interior furnishings. For all newly independent nations, and diasporic communities, there is an emphasis on reclaiming one's cultural identity and values as a means of transcending the psychological effects of colonialism and developing a decolonized psyche. This often looks like embracing languages, recipes, religions, or social customs. Visually, this is usually done through apparel, religious and cultural wear, jewelry, body art and manipulation; in the home, it can look like artwork, fabrics, ornamentation, geomantic architecture, and archiving family genealogies and oral traditions. What then for those who did not see imperialism as germs of rot, but as valor a la royalty and rare ownership? I argue that we can find this psychological attachment to colonial commodities to be reflective of deep-seated libidinal phobias in the national unconscious of white, Western women even today as reflected in the intended audience for CRAFT by World Market's advertising campaigns. Though Fanon's work primarily focuses on how the colonized mind can develop the highest levels of decolonization by working towards psychological reclamation, we also learn that the colonizer's psyche is in a perpetual pendulum between defining itself through what the colonized is and what they are not. This constant oscillation between phobia, disgust, superiority, and philia, desire, and dependency drives the fascination towards the Oriental and boho chic design, while at the same time feeling a disdain towards actual immigrants from the same countries as the objects on World Market's shelves. Unless there is an aspect of personal gain such as spiritual enlightenment or self-beautification that can only be achieved through the sageness of a person of color, tapping back into the colonial psyche as one that is founded upon an entitlement to extraction.

If we retroactively connect this campaign to the post-911 popularity of the *Eat, Pray, Love* empire, which according to the both Sony and World Market is ideologically and thematically aligned with World Market's brand values, we see the complex interplay that thrives on the perpetual pendulum of phobia-philia. For these phobias, there is a psychological dependency on the identity of the colonized to be inferior, uncivilized, and of service. This superior sense of identity is not self-standing and is absolutely dependent on the colonized to remain in a posture of servitude with arms extended and bent knees. There is an incessant anxiety rooted in the perceived threat of the colonized rebelling against this posture and shifting to standing upright and arms ready to strike any minute now. This fear manifests in various structures of society to maintain the repression and control that was once colonial oppression and order. Rebellions and uprisings in colonies often triggered fears in other ones who knew they would be next. The colonizer's psyche is always waiting with bated breath and stormy disposition for any threat of being shaken from its lofty status. In a world without formal colonies per se, popular culture and interior aesthetics emerge as a way to symbolically regain control over and domesticate other cultures by bringing them home. The imagined pleasured of spoils of war are replaced with a type of ideological and material ownership of culture. Furthermore, we see a rebranding of colonial projects as benevolence. By justifying exploitation or violence through the guise of religion or morality, past wrongs can be rewritten as necessary evils for maintaining colonial authority for the sake of social order or the colonized's betterment. This includes things like rebranding slavery into an economic system of indentured servitude that was necessary for the success of global trade, or undermining land theft and genocide of Indigenous communities as fair treaties akin to real estate purchases. World Market, and similar stores like HomeGoods, often brandish

a relationship with local artisans or craftsmen to gesture towards sustainability and other moral values that extend onto the conscious consumer.

It bears mentioning then, that the CRAFT program purported a nexus where the consumer's energy (by the demand and pre-order) generated the craftsperson's energy (in the form of artisanal labour), resulting in ideals of exclusivity and sustainability— all made possible via technology and the cooperative benevolence of conscious consumers and World Market. This example of the CRAFT line illuminates how racial-capitalistic economic formations like auctioning can be retooled towards desires of limited editions or sustainability, while production is likely continuing anyway regardless of the consumer's pre-order generated demand. I am not invested in implying that World Market is alone or unique in this type of retooling, but that it is important to inspect the benevolent and morally charged language of the advertising campaigns and copy like that of the CRAFT line. It is compelling how there is a futurity being suggested by the use of technology like (pre-ordering online) that is held in tandem with primitivity (like slow craftsmanship) that offer a deeper set of historical and contemporary inquiries about how the relationship between materialism, aesthetics, and the colonial psyche of possession and superiority. The imperial psyche is dependent upon colonial servitude and extraction, the fear of disrupted privilege and social standing, and the justification of harm and oppression; these facets offer a bedrock that sustains imperialistic ideological projects that we can locate in a contemporary context with *Eat, Pray, Love's* partnership with World Market and similar cultural-economic campaigns.

ROOM FOR REFUSAL

While thinking of how objects mediate sexuality through queer phenomenology, and how the national unconscious mediates a desire economy, I want to muse if there is potential for refusal and a kind of libidinal liberation for South Asian women in relationship to boho style. The same fantasies that Elizabeth Gilbert was chasing through the Orient were the same erotic, mysterious, dangerous, forbidden, deviant lines that extended from the white woman's psyche into the four walls of the cozy corner. Ahmed's analysis of lines of Orientation cohering towards meanings of gender and whiteness gels with notions of the Orient as sexually deviant, and how queered potentiality that can only be found in places like Bali and India. Disorientation and deviance, commonly interpreted as queerness, create a rupture in compulsory heteropatriarchy. This perversion within the spaciality of the cozy corner signals a departure from the polite society gendered confines, while reifying ideas of nationhood, Britishness, and all that is not perverse. The West isn't just a geographic marker, but also a notion of progress and futurity. The departure from other feminized rooms such as the kitchen or bedroom, also signals the cozy corner's refusal of heteronormative gender roles, child bearing and rearing, and domestic labour-- for the white woman that is. Despite the women in non-Western countries being oppressed with the aforementioned heteronormative roles and labour, the cozy corner's association with queerness indicates a connection to a state of existence outside of white heterosexuality; it conjures the fantasy of an arena of difference and sexual liberation, even if nothing experimentative is actually happening. It offers a limited glimpse into how the unconscious fantasy structures social realities about Eastern cultures without an actual understanding of unique patriarchal cultures in other countries. The West owns the codes and control of imaginary productions of how

the aesthetics of a space can create meanings about the nationstate. Boho interior decor styles rupture "a field of orientation, an imaginary determining the categories and operations with which individuals as well as nation-states act out their histories. Among these categories is sexuality— in this fantasy, the economies and political relations of nations are libidinally configured, that is, they are grasped and effected in normative terms of sexuality" (Tadiar, 38).

If this decor style intended to maintain white nationality while disrupting the heteropatriarchy of a home, can boho be used to disrupt the whiteness of the style and also the reductive feminism it proffers? When thinking back on the notion of queered spaces, and how cozy corners functioned as disorienting spaces within a white Victorian home and how boho style performs similar functions today, I want to ask what it means for diasporic communities to offer new iterations of interior styling that draws on both the craftsmanship and beauty of cultural ornaments, while disrupting the idea that it is only boho-chic in a white, non-ethnic, home. Through my research of boho decor, I have come to find accounts of interior decorators, Pinterest boards, and even a few design companies that are centered around this blend. A way to incorporate South Asian elements for example into design styles like mid-century modern to speak to a new elegance, while being attentive to the process of cultural transfership for the decor items or styles. A stylist may incorporate a Jharkhand (Indian woodwork) wall art and a Chandigarh chair, while not attributing these items to a window into another culture, but rather a way to enjoy and appreciate the nostalgia or dreaminess of countries we may have left or never even been to, but are culturally tethered to. In the Index you will find photographs from House Beautiful Magazine, Nov/Dec 2023 issue that feature a home

styled by interior decorator Hema Prasad, who often incorporates cultural motifs and meaning in her styling. (Image 2.17, 2.18)

I've always been drawn to the fascination of boho interior decor because when boiled down to the elements, it's so similar to the immigrant homes I grew up in and around. There's always a sense of disorientation when I see storefronts or boho decor Instagram posts stylized with things that are in a way more 'naturally occurring' in immigrant homes. If I recall the way my childhood home was stylized when my family first moved to Toronto, Canada, I wouldn't jump to call it eclectic or boho, but rather its styling was indicative of the geographies, memories, and transitions that led to our arrival. This project helps me ask if that home was categorically boho by the parameters of HGTV's style guide because it had the elements but without the claims of free-spiritedness or unorthodoxy? Can boho offer formations outside spiritual self-discovery vis-a-vis other cultures and countries? Earlier in this chapter, I asked why boho is only boho with and against the backdrop of whiteness? Boho is elevated to a more sophisticated articulation than immigrant formations of ethnic decor due to the set of economic and racial relations of power, mythology and meaning-making. Can interior decor that attends to the informed histories of immigrant communities and the unique needs of immigrant homes serve as an alternative to boho's current expression? I offer this critique of boho's current formation in order to sever it from a hollow, white-feminist formation in the US context, and instead offer potential for diasporic communities and their relationship to the interior.

Unlike Oriental artwork or furnishings disturbing the whiteness and creating a disorientation within the British home, ethnic immigrant homes have objects that speak

to the migration, the staying, and the choices that led to the diasporic experience. For immigrants to decorate their homes with objects of their home countries, there is purpose beyond ornamentation. Ethnic decor, in an immigrant home, speaks to a sense of memory, belonging and history where there is a queer engagement with migration and diaspora. This reclamation speaks to origins, but also establishes a firm and solid sense of staying put. Being able to create a space where the schema is oriented towards objects that signal both past and future, homeland and new country, open up a different disruption: a disorientation that allows a queer potentiality and futurity not limited by geography. Ahmed says "Within homes, objects gather: such objects arrive and they have their own horizons, which "point" toward different worlds—even if this "point" does not make such worlds within reach. The point of the intersection between queer and diaspora might precisely be to show how the "where" of queer is shaped by other worldly horizons—by histories of capital, empire, and nation—which give queer bodies different points of access to such worlds, and which make different objects reachable, whether at home or away" (Ahmed, 176). For people of color in the West to adorn their homes with objects that are either from home or remind them of home, they can assert that their corporeal selves have arrived in a new space that forecloses certain futures, such as growing in your grandparents home or speaking only your native tongue, and opens up other futures.

A challenge that is presented in this alterity is that many women and queer people from ethnic backgrounds may carry different meanings in regards to their culture. At times for people who have immigrated out of countries with ideals or values that are not congruent with their dreams, and perhaps that nostalgia doesn't exist? Something that

unsettles me about how white women used cozy corners as their expression of desire and sensuality in an otherwise restrained society, is that it leads me to consider how many immigrant women do not have the same relationship to icons or objects of their culture. A Persian rug may be an emblem of deviance and excitement, but in a South Asian home it's just a rug in a context where you are still not allowed to express your sexuality. What troubles me about ethnic ornaments having historically served as conduits for sexual exploration or liberation from patriarchy is that that ornamentation does not hold the same context for immigrant women, and in my project's focus, South Asian women. I have no political or theoretical investment in using this analysis to draw attention towards the oppressive world of restrained Betty Draper-esque wives and stuffy, high society, respectability politics found in both the Victorian era or in the 1950s US[3].Instead it has me doubly concerned with how South Asian women grew up with or are still within those same gendered confines within the societal expectations of their culture. And how trinkets and pottery don't offer any sort of release and refusal. Refusal that could be fought for, but may result in societal isolation or punishment as deviance in South Asian heteropatriarchal communities usually does. In this strange nexus of feminism and misogyny, boho interior decor serves as a shallow rendition of the aesthetics of immigrant, diasporic homes without the erotics or deviance from domestic oppression. Considering sexuality in domestic spaces allows for a potential departure from the confines of domestic gender roles, child rearing, propriety that South Asian women are constantly negotiating for themselves to create new renditions of *home*. These actions will not automatically 'liberate' women from cultural, compulsory heteropatriarchal constraints but instead offer methods of refusal and survival that have very little to do with ornamentation of homes.

Image 2.1

Display at a HomeGoods store in Henderson, Nevada.
January 5th, 2023

Image 2.2

Display at a HomeGoods store in West L.A., California.
July 26, 2023.

Image 2.3

Promotional email I received on titled "BOLD savings from Asia & afar."

Image 2.4

Photograph of Agnes Bergström, 1920, Sweden surrounded by parlour palms.
Source: Unknown

Image 2.5

Elsie de Wolfe in her Turkish Corner, 1886,
Source: Wolfe's biography by Jane S. Smith

Image 2.6

Stock photo of my 'conversation starter' wall clock
Source : www.umbra.com
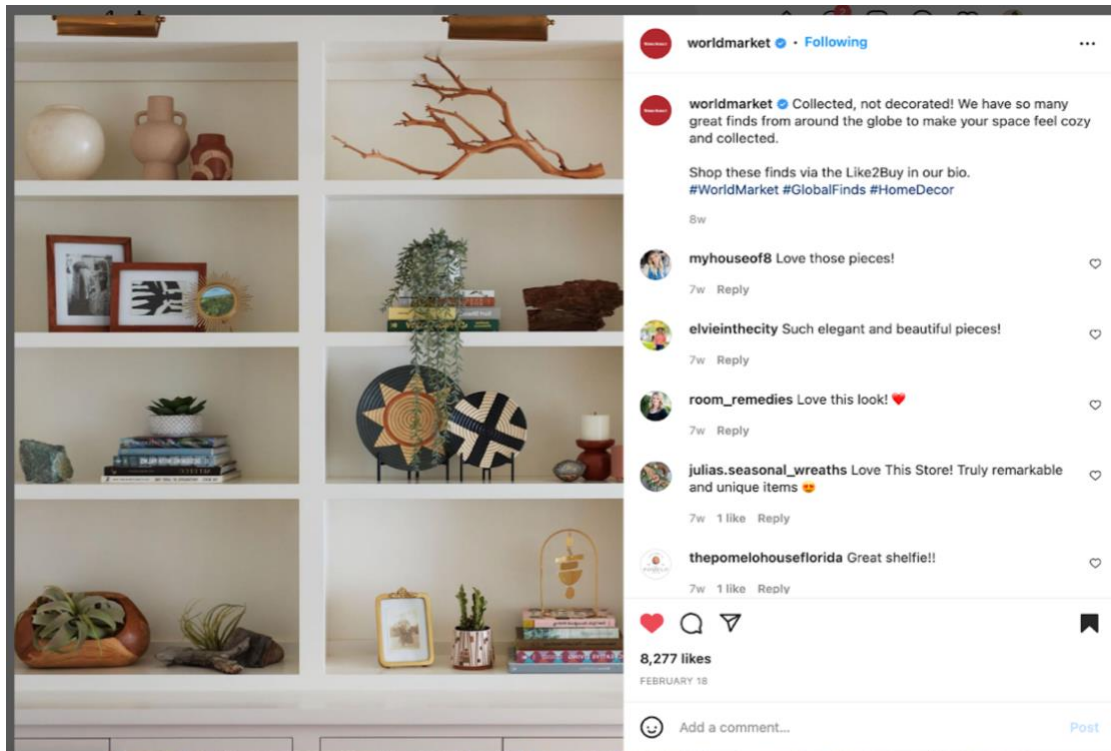
Image 2.7

Cost Plus World Market's Instagram post

Source : www.instagram.com/worldmarket

Image 2.8

Eat Pray Love Sweepstakes Entry Form

Image 2.9
Eat Pray Love Collection Lip Gloss

Images 2.10

Image 2.11
Eat Pray Love Collection Tea and Furniture

Image 2.12

Image 2.13
Eat Pray Love Sweepstakes Prize Trips to Bali and India
Source for 2.8 – 2.13 https://www.thedailybeast.com/eat-pray-love-merchandise

Images 2.14
Advertising Campaign for World Market's CRAFT Program

Images 2.15
Advertising Campaign for World Market's CRAFT Program

Images 2.16
Advertising Campaign for World Market's CRAFT Program
Source for 2.14-2.16: https://jessicabognar.com/craft-by-world-market

Image 2.17
Hema Prasad's work in House Beautiful Magazine, Nov/Dec 2023 issue
featuring Aadil Aabedi's mural artwork

Image 2.18
Hema Prasad's work in House Beautiful Magazine, Nov/Dec 2023 issue
Source for 2.17 & 2.18: https://www.sagradastudio.com/projects/house-beautiful
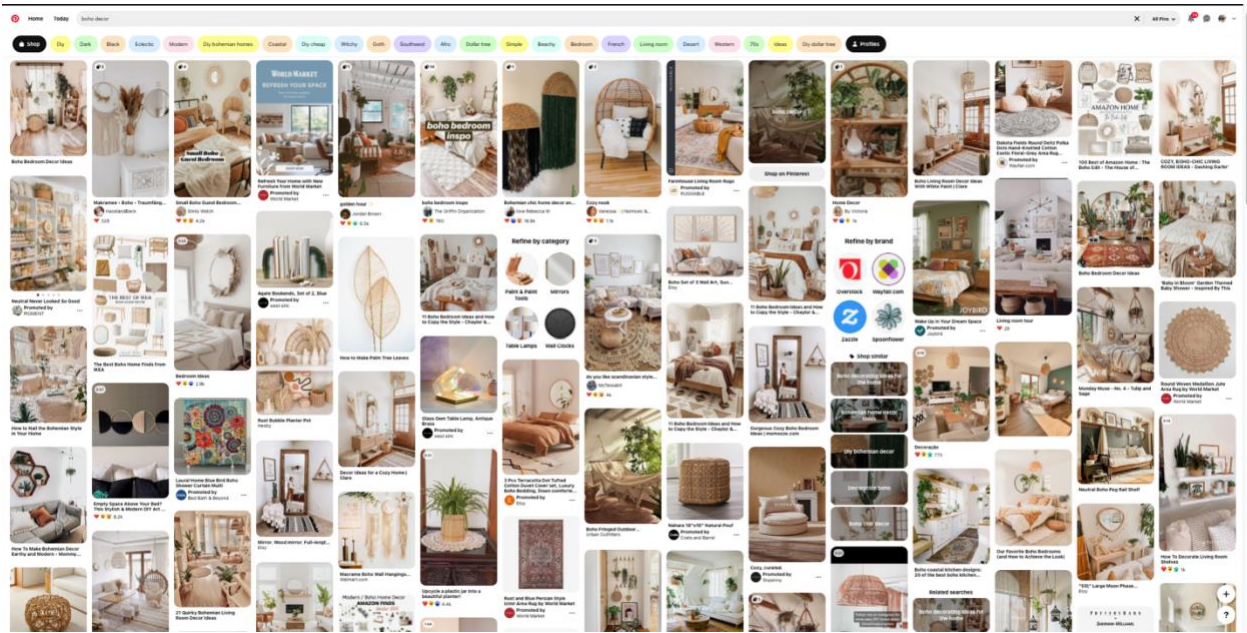
Image 2.19
Pinterest search results for Boho Decor
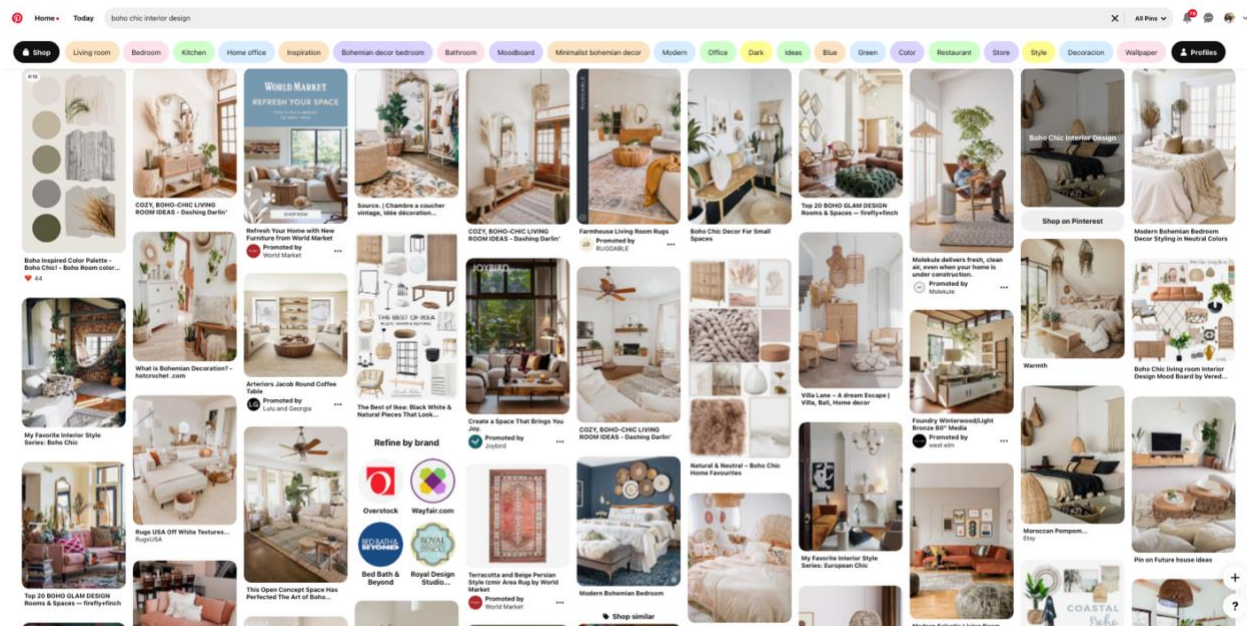
Image 2.20
Pinterest search results for Boho Chic Interior Design

CHAPTER 3
"Insta-Worthy Imagi-Nations"

Themes: Visual Legibility, Epistemologies, Labour Schemes, Imperial Legacies,
Islamophobia, Caste Oppression, Influencer Economy
Case Study: Garment Bonded Labour Schemes In India

Image 3.1
DVF by Jay Lynn Gomez (2015)

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I offer a formulation that contends with the influencer, the garment worker, brand advertising, and larger nationalistic projects under conditions of globalization. Being attentive to digital media and the culture of aesthetic trends, I argue that visual legibility has power that within dominant modes of legibility - such as

advertising or social media - is a rearticulation of imperialistic racial projects. I begin by introducing a continuum between the hyper-visible influencer, and the out-of-sight garment worker-- both under systems of biolabour, delivering very different products, but benefiting larger systems of gendered racial-capitalism. Caught between a dance of shadow and light, South Asian influencers and garment workers exist along a continuum that is fortified by nationalistic projects-- in India, Hindu Nationalism and its double-helix of the caste system and Islamophobia, and in the US, with white supremacy and legacies of imperialism and Orientalism. I argue that South Asian influencers can be shiny and refractive when strategically used to push a brand narrative of 'diversity' or 'representation' or 'feminism', while obfuscating their occupational peers: garment workers in India who are being exploited by the diverse, feminist brand itself. Though the harm of the wage theft, labor violations, and unethical physical and psychological conditions of fast fashion workshops are on a different plane than the type of deprioritization or exploitation an online influencer may face, occupationally they are both serving a use that is fortified by the labour of the other. Within this dialectic, South Asian women are giving life symbolically and materially-- the same product via different forms.

Considering garment workers and influencers together teases out the convergence of racial-capitalism, imperialism, misogyny, and queerphobia that produce a 'outsourced' feminized labour source for the fashion industry. The use and subordination of women is a core component of how the US produces nationalism via neoliberal diversity and representation visual campaigns while still maintaining whiteness), while India produces nationalism via caste and religion based occupational

schemes (while still maintaining homohindunationalism (Upadhyay). However, the influencer and garment worker relationship is a continuum because of the play of shadow and light within the same spectrum of visibility; visible light and shadows are not always stark as upon closer inspection there is always a softer gradient from where the light gradually dims out of view and where a shadow comes into the light. I offer this metaphor to say that light anything on a spectrum, it is critical to my work to not further subalternize or represent either side by positioning them as diametrical opposites. Rather, my articulation of the relationship between the influencer and garment worker is to locate their contributions and potentials as participants in the global fashion economy and its visual and material forms.

Globalization and nationalism exist in a tension throughout this my work by how the growth and new forms of information technologies like social media have created various interconnected networks globally. Nadya Hajj, writes about how technological globalization allows Palestinian communities to overcome the fractures of dislocation by employing networked community strategies "and practices of belonging across transnational social fields" (Hajj, 7). Globalization sits in tension with nationalism due to the struggle of dominant narratives to stay relevant in an online world where people quite literally have the world at their fingertips; diasporic and refugee communities connected to their cultures more than is figured as a threat to dominant aesthetics and attitudes because it allows for intimate relations across borders without the need of physical calling cards or letters.

The role of digital globalization in my work is to articulate how via the Internet, people were able to create new cultural relations, economies, social movements, and solidarities against dominant, nationalistic ideals. Paying close attention to social media in my formation of globalization, I argue that the rise of social media was strongly tied to how people were trying to find spaces online where they felt like the could belong, implying the isolation or misalignment felt by many women, queer folk, and communities of color in the United States. Tensions with nationalism arise because people are able to push against dominant narratives in a safe space online that they may not have been able to do so out loud amongst their peers or neighbors. And of course, the same happens inversely where racist and nationalistic online spaces are also a haven for white supremacists who are hesitant to voice these opinions explicitly due to a usually unfounded - fear of consequences of 'diversity efforts' and 'cancel culture. These online spaces of global solidarities emerge towards the end of this chapter and in my epilogue when I explore the power of social media in forging networks of care and resistance in the face of militarized oppressive forces and global white supremacy. Despite the hyperconsumerist and racialized nature of the influencer economy, there are ways that social media users and content creators have forged new methods of boycotting racist brands, educating one another about community issues, and holding digital space during difficult political moments.

INSTA-WORTHY IMAGI-NATIONS

In Chapter 2, I explored the way objects have an active life of their own and can produce an affectual response in people who engage with them. In the chapter prior, we looked at interior decor items that produce meanings for their owners. I will be shifting

the conversation from interior decor towards fashion in regards to garment workers and social media branding. Anne Cheng's work on *Ornamentalism* especially aided me in considering the genealogies of how beautiful objects, including garments, have carried and produced meanings over various countries, generations, and trade networks. I trace the way those objects and garments are part of a historical and global system of trade and exchanges that are shaped through gendered and racialized logics, and ultimately contribute to capitalistic dynamics between knowledge production and nation-making. Affect and emotion are intangible phenomena that can be capitalized upon and made tangible once linked to material objects. Instagram is a giant in the contemporary retail industry, and it serves as a platform for consumers to connect with their favorite brands. Parasocial relationships between consumers and the faceless accounts of their favorite brands are forged through empathetic interactions - follows, likes, comments, tags - and social media allows brands to convey ideas and images of trends that are popularly produced and distributed in retail and high fashion. But beyond boosting revenue and increasing the profit and popularity of brands, I argue that through social media consumer cultures, we are also creating national libidinal economies and epistemologies of different nations. I'm engaging with the definition of libidinal economy to refer to the unconscious as a site of fantasy in relation to Franz Fanon's concept of the national unconscious as a tool for capitalism, and how the psyche needs to be colonized first in order for social dynamics of domination to play out.

In continuation of the exploration of Instagram as labour, and the use of visuality to stratify society, I will begin this chapter by unpacking visual legibility as concept where images or videos on social media contribute to a longer legacy of epistemological

meanings that continue to be fortified through an arrangement of design choices and, occasionally, accompanying descriptions. Any text found in the captions of Instagram or TikTok posts are usually pithy so as to not distract from the visuals, and tend to be followed up with a trail of hashtags to contextualize the post and make it more visible across the app's search feature. There is a focus for posts to be "aesthetic" - used as an adjective to describe visually appealing editing, angling, or arrangement of the subject photographed. The aesthetics themselves are becoming even more niche as certain posts can appeal to certain aesthetics such as cyberpunk or Y2K or cottage-core, and so on. What these aesthetic genres do is create frameworks for how a picture should look or be edited to look in order to fit within the umbrella of that sub-genre, and appeal to people who are specifically seeking out that content. With interior decor, as I discussed earlier, boho or boho-chic accounts use saturated, bright colors, and tend to play up the earthy green or terracotta colors to speak to connection with natural elements. When it comes to quiet luxury or the clean girl aesthetic which broadly refers to both fashion and interior decor, and occasionally make up or accessories as well, we primarily see shades of white, cream, or beige with pops of neutral adjacent colors like light gray, navy blue, chocolate brown, and occasionally gold (Image 3.2). The visual legibility of aesthetic trends is so perceptible to the user that even if you don't have the name or full understanding of the trend, you are still able to categorize it. Because of this, I argue that social media applications need to be seriously considered as epistemological sites where knowledge is being produced by the language of visual legibility.

As a child of the 90's and the now seemingly prehistoric dot-com internet era, a familiar adage taught to us in the stuffy computer rooms of elementary school libraries

was 'don't believe everything you see online.' This continued with even more fervor with the rise of social media, and became generationally reversed with younger generations having to plead with their parents to not believe everything they receive as a phishing email or WhatsApp forward. Following the scholarship of Safiya Noble and Jillian Hernandez who have argued about how since the internet broadly is a robust site for knowledge and research with search engines, learning tools, digital archives, publications, and journalism, I argue that the same legitimacy is granted to social media as experts of various fields from medicine to fashion history can all interface with one another outside of websites or forums specifically dedicated to special interest communities. Noble, in *Algorithms of Oppression* engages deeply with Google search engine result rankings. She argues that our search for knowledge for an initial query is usually delegated to Google, a commercial search engine that is "subject to the whims of the majority and other commercial influences such as advertising" (Noble, 16) instead of public knowledge resources like libraries, teachers, or researchers. She metaphorizes our dependence on Google to digitize cultural knowledge similar to how deep historical knowledge is stored in inaccessible library stacks which require the expertise of librarians to wade through, but with the added element of an implicit bias founded upon advertising profits (Noble, 116). This encourages me to think of how knowledge is produced and stratified in Google search results rankings as a relationship with algorithms and targeted advertising similar to what is found on social media algorithms. TikTok and Instagram use algorithms that display content that they think you will be interested in based on data of your usage patterns, and on top of that, they curate everything from suggested accounts, ads, and even the top comments on any given post to be what they match to your data patterns. Noble asks us to think about what it means

for Black people in the United States to search for content about their identities, histories, and cultural legacies as wholly shaped by the search engine rankings that are sutured to the implicit racial bias that shapes our nation?

When Hortense Spillers refers to a grammar as a dominant symbolic order that is dictated by a "ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation" (Spillers, 68), it compels me to think how along with the metaphor of grammar which dictates linguistically how words are written and understood, the algorithms that Noble speaks of are structured by a similar grammar shaping how marginalized communities are displayed and understood digitally and visually in the arena of social media. But there is a strong capacity for agency and reclamation within the digital grammar of social media algorithms, as I mentioned in chapter one in regards to the creative ways Instagram users pushed back against Zionist surveillance during the 2024 Palestinian genocide. Beyond social movements, the search engine within social media offers a space where users can seek out the visual representations of identities and histories that Noble refers to-notwithstanding the commercialized algorithm of Instagram, a positive caveat of targeted advertising is that is allows people to curate a niche space in their digital media world which does lead to important discoveries about identity, memory, and community. Though it is possible to become very niche online and exist within an echo chamber of curated accounts and spaces, it is still easier for a user to seek out content that may not be ranked at the top of a traditional Google search. Reddit, YouTube, and now TikTok, have become popular search engines in their own right because of how experts or digital historians can interface with audiences interested in niche topics or complex problems. Even now, I have found myself using YouTube as my default search engine for a

complicated recipe, Reddit as my most trusted search engine for unbiased product reviews, and TikTok as my most handy search engine for hair and makeup tutorials[1].

Jillian Hernandez in *Beauty Marks* writes that "Instagram is the archive and the repertoire. [Taylor 2003] The place where we write our surfaces into existence." Hernandez explores fragments of non-traditional ethnography that exists along the quotidian performances of femininity and girlhood on Instagram. She explores how structures of gendered racialization exist across the visual field of these self-representative expressions in poetical explorations of photos from her family archives and Instagram posts about Latinx beauty rituals and aesthetic practices. She refers to these shared aesthetic histories as surface practices that offer forms of healing, empowerment, and refusal against dominant narratives while championing community histories and culturally significant expressions of identity. Thinking together with this scholarship, it's evident that social media- much like the corporeal literary and art world- is a site rife with contentions but also an arena to push back and refuse low ranking on a search engine by disrupting that ranking with self-aestheticization- and all the brilliance and murkiness that comes with that disruption.

Although we know people also get on the internet just to goof off, bluff for self-entertainment, or lie to create chaos without severe consequences, social media has been pivotal in exposing users to art, science, media, and even life skills that may not have been accessible otherwise. Social media also gave rise to prominent global solidarities as we witnessed with Palestinian activists Tweeting to Ferguson protestors during the 2020 BLM movements with tips on how to protect against tear gas. Since October 2023, we have seen social media nearly more than ever be the most accurate source of knowledge

about the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Depictions of the genocide on Instagram and Twitter is situated in a longer history of Twitter as the popular method of engagement during the

Arab Spring uprisings. With the ongoing encampments and social movements building on college campuses, it was social media that connected student organizers to surrounding communities as they made calls for supplies or pleas for support in the face of administrative and police brutality. The student movements garnered so much attention on social media, that Gazans who were in refugee encampments in Rafah created videos thanking the university student groups for their beautiful acts of solidarity. This is a type of global engagement that many activists of the past have never received in their lifetime. This type of Instagram post call-and-answer fueled university student groups even more as they got visually legible acknowledgment that their actions were not only not in vain, but were witnessed and bestowed with the highest honor: Palestinian children in encampments saying their names and acknowledging them with the most powerful display of global solidarity that would have been unthinkable just a decade ago. Students who were brutalized by police and Zionists alike with bullets, mace, batons, rats, fireworks, and snipers, and went on to face arrests or suspensions, were able to see children painting their names on tattered tents in Rafah in a way to say we see what you are doing. The dystopian beauty of social media here is that my feed may prioritize these videos and narratives that embody refusal and resilience, but the person next to me could see absolutely nothing if they're not actively engaging with pro-Palestine content. On my Instagram stories, within minutes I am able to view an Instagram story of a UC student being brutalized, a post sharing a link for UC faculty to sign to condemn the administration's behavior, a jail support organization's account asking for drivers to offer rides out of local jails where students were being held, GoFundMe accounts for families

escaping Rafah, and a video in Arabic of Gazans letting us know they see us too. Community organizing and the deep love that it is born out of exists within the interstices of these social media posts. (Studded between those posts will inevitably be cat videos or aesthetic food reviews.) If this is the type of profound global interfacing happening on social media, suffice it to say that we turn to Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, as epistemological sites that are arguably as credible as canonical educational resources like textbooks, press releases, or journal articles.

Where I wouldn't see any of the aforementioned content, especially without a negative slant, would be traditional, reputable news channels on television. (Of course, if I am to search Palestine or Israel on Google, my search engine is optimized to show me content aligned with my vocal support of Palestine, so on both Google or Instagram I would have to go to great lengths to find Zionist content at the same volume.) As any exploration of epistemology will eventually proffer, the things that are unwritten in textbooks or unsaid in classrooms are just as informational as the things that are present. Thinking along the social media exploration, I would frame this as a negative space of visual legibility. In Chapter 1, I referenced Jay Lynn Gomez's guerrilla art installations of life-size cutouts of custodial workers in front of *Architectural Digest* worthy homes in West Los Angeles and how it speaks to this negative space of visual legibility in regards to workers and labour. In my analysis of social media, it's important to explore the way labour is made invisible in order to understand the dynamic between visuality and our nation's relationship with farmwork, food service, municipality, housekeeping, and factory work for all industries from apparel to technology. Visuality is both a tool for and entangled with the nation-building and caste-making apparatuses of society that can be

found in every industrial complex across technology, fashion, and education. This negative space of visual legibility is akin to which search results are optimized to be on the latter pages of Google, or which posts are getting shadow banned or flagged for violating ethics on Instagram. This grammar of what is considered worthy of visuality speaks to the structured and systemic ways in which national identities are formed, regulated, and constrained by digital cultures. In alignment with Gomez's art, the example of voids in Trinh Minh-Ha's example of censored newspapers in Chinese prisons gives way to my exploration of the role of visuality and aestheticization in the nation-building and caste-making apparatuses of society. National identities, and the stratification of the inhabitants of those nations as those who conduct labour and those who benefit from that labour, is heavily reliant on dominant visual arenas and libidinal economies.

To explore oppressive frameworks like heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism, and Islamophobia, I consider caste-making systems in nationstates as made visually legible in favor of nation-building. In India, caste and Islamophobia are two (gendered) violences that are twin organizing principles of society. Similarly, in the US, I think of race and caste making through incarceration and settler colonialism. Understanding the unique violences of settler colonialism and incarceration allows me to situate my work in relation to America's national desires and consider the pendulum between phobias/philias that structure the nation's libidinal economy. Gender and labor emerge as matrices for me to explore the parasitic relationship between race, gender, and class in the US and how those in power are dependent upon the subjugation of weaker gender, class, and race groups to affirm their own existence- the dominator becomes dependent

on the dominated to exist as the dominant, and without the dominated, they are non-existent- a logic which underpins our relationship with garment workers exploitation and also lucrative partnerships with diverse influencers. I think of how systems of colonialism, patriarchy, and whiteness, are dependent on incarceration, land theft, and gendered and classed violence and at the risk of dissolving if that ontology is disturbed via refusals and alterity, as Hernandez offers, is possible via intentional surface practices.

Moreover, to continue the arguments presented in Chapter 1 and 2 in regards to the post-human and our relationship with objects, the very category of the human has become meaningful, not only in opposition to nature or non-sentient beings, but rather through the exclusion of groups of human beings who are denied access to the category of human. Thinking here about visual legibility, of race, gender, class, and in the context of both the US and Palestine, questions of indigeneity, we see how the grammar of aesthetics in digital cultures both offers potential to reaffirm or refuse identities within the national unconscious. A closer look reveals how our post-human online selves are structured in media, policies, healthcare, and knowledge production with the same logics of heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism, incarceration, and settler colonialism in a way that is also invested in extracting not only labor and land, but also vital ontological frameworks birthed through national desires that keep white male supremacy free from ontological disturbance. Indigenous scholars, like Audra Simpson in *Mohawk Interruptus,* take indigenous epistemology seriously, not only as informants, but as creators: people who can imagine a different world outside of settler law. The alterity that disrupts the indigenous position as the ontological other to the white, Western empire via logics of refusal. This radical praxis of rejection of citizenship offers, taxes, elections, and other

patriotic motifs are recognized as ontological threats to indigenous sovereignty. With Simpson's framework, I am able to posit how interrupting the colonial fantasy from being realized by the idea of a nestled sovereignty not only disrupts the political composition but also disrupts the libidinal and psychological economy of the Western notion of borders and nationstates. If social media then can be studied seriously as an epistemological site, we can also locate the surface practices and refusals that disrupt the strict grammar of visual legibility invested in upholding heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism, and national identity, and move towards one that offers the radical potential of sharing authentic narratives from places like Palestine, and open channels for community care and activism in ways that the platforms never intended and are wired to censor.

In this chapter, I will be attending to a racial and gendered capitalist framework of visuality to unpack the way that the aesthetics produced on Instagram are directly connected to labor practices that employ bodies subalternized by violence. To this end, I consider garment workers who bring things of beauty into production— never for their own pleasure, but always in service to beautify consumers with power. On the same continuum, I consider Instagram accounts of brands and their influencers as the most visually legible performers in Instagram's complex of visuality. Their extensively curated aesthetics generate revenue for their image and popularity that creates an affect of parasocial trust with the consumers. But garment workers are not classified as deserving the same visuality. Both influencers and garment workers provide a separate type of labor that services the brands and reaches the consumer in different ways. Neferti Tadiar, in the context of global Filipina labour, posits that Filipina domestic workers contribute to

"global capital from both techno-corporate workers in knowledge and information industries in advanced economies and factory workers in commodity-production in peripheral economies" (Tadiar, 125) by way of contributing to various labor systems that benefit technological economies and manual production- but the idea of a domestic help is imaged as a cleaning lady or nanny, not necessarily someone who aids in extending the productivity and wages of their employers and the companies, industries, and nations they help develop.

Globalization via digital cultures produces aesthetically pleasing formations and networks that exist in tension with nationalistic and gendered racial-capitalism in both digital and material contexts. Worker exploitation, mass production, and predatory employment of vulnerable communities are all conditions that create racialized and gendered laboring bodies that ultimately grant power and status to consumers of aesthetics of power via luxury and fast fashion. This formation displaces from view the precarious and exploited laborers in two garment worker case studies that I explore: South Asian garment workers who are generally poor and lower caste women and Muslim men. Brands that create the products employ tactful marketing and branding to appeal to sales-boosting strategies of diversity and inclusivity. Consumers who purchase the products have the power to use fashion as a signifier of self-aestheticization and wear their garments as embodied performances of their cultural expression. Whereas those who create the products are absented and rendered fungible, and exist outside of a visuality that would grant their bodies the subjectivity of an important social class; ergo, the violence that they endure is not made legible. Lisa Lowe's work invites me to attend to history as an interconnected set of relations instead of moments in a vacuum across a

temporal timeline. I employ methods of looking at the historical emergence of cross border, multilingual, and syncretic communities to collapse the core and periphery polarities, allowing me to explore the continuum between garment worker, brand, and influencer and instead open up the structures of feelings that result in a visual vocabulary. Contemporary cultural productions of globalization such as popular culture, digital media, art, music, and social media emerge from and shape the United States's national grammar. Lisa Lowe and Manuel Castell argue that "state, military, and economic processes are now entirely coordinated, in real time across distances, through... information technologies, such as the Internet, as sites of both production and critique. (Lowe, *Globalization*, 121). I argue that digital globalization allowed for new articulations where cultural productions online can both emerge from powerful aesthetic formations of community and diaspora, while also giving rise to neo-imperialistic systems of labour extraction and epistemology. This allows me to look at Instagram branding as a producer of information that is structured through similar logics of caste-making systems in nation states that make some aspects of society visually legible in service of nation-building. While pushing against nationalistic ideals by leaning into diverse spaces online, social media users continue to remain tethered to the racial-capitalistic formations of the influencer economy.

In her chapter "Exhibiting Immigrants: Visuality, Visuality, Visibility, and Representation at Beyond Bollywood", Bakirathi Mani explores the haunting of the imperial gaze in photographs of diasporic representation. She contends that in studying postcolonial South Asian art, it is imperative for her to center the "intimacy of feeling to... [understand] how visual histories of empire map onto our present experience of

racialization" (21). She explores the challenges of giving visual legibility to the imperial genealogies within objects that are refashioned as aesthetically meaningful representations of the South Asian diaspora. When it comes to this legibility, she argues that visibility is simply the ability of being seen whereas visualization refers to a more complex process of mediating visual fields and producing who and what is visually a legible object or person, and how historically, ethnographic media has taken up the project of doing that for colonized or minoritized communities. Representation, which is reductively visibility not visualization, becomes contentious when art, objects, performances, or even people are burdened with carrying that ethnographic meaning; even an aesthetic object, image, or performance becomes subject to the experience of racialization and questions of authenticity and legibility begin destabilizing that representative authority. In her exploration of South Asian themed exhibitions at the Smithsonian, she argues that museums are "charged with telling an American story" (125). Thinking back to Spillers's "ruling episteme," I harmonize with Mani's exploration of the grammar of such exhibitions that reproduce hegemonic visual narratives of representation that restrict diasporic communities to their moments of arrival and assimilation, and how they create uniquely hyphenated identities that ultimately foreground how a community became ___-American.

It's important for me to consider what Mani is saying in relation to hollow representation and engaging with "imperial modes of seeing as a means of seeing ourselves" (125) and how they serve neoliberal discourses of melting pots and the making of national identities. I offer a similar exploration of the social experience of diasporic communities to see themselves, and how the structures of feelings can forge a visual

vocabulary outside of the grammar of museums and other dominant modes of seeing ourselves. This allows me to situate social media and the archiving happening there; quotidian performances and intentional content-creation are all referred to as 'sharing' on these electronic platforms, and the process of screenshotting, saving, liking, commenting, reposting, are the affective exchanges that structure feelings into meaningful legibility. Mani locates these within the exchanges between the exhibition viewers, and how there was a palpable longing in the room to relate to the aesthetic objects and photographs on display in hope to ground one's identity into a collective history, memory, and struggle. Everyone wants to see themselves on social media, and the echoey calls for representation don't necessarily generate subjectivity.

South Asian content creators keep repeating a tired narrative of "representation matters" but I am unsure if I fundamentally agree that representation creates or authenticates subjectivity. If being seen repeatedly or authentically was enough to humanize a population, then wouldn't archives and museums full of colonial historical artifacts indicate that those objects also played a role in representation? For example, ethnographic documentation photographs that are taken with no forewarning or doctored posing placed an authoritative, anthropological eye onto the setting. Those can technically be authentic representation because they are purely capturing a moment for what it is; but what the photographer chooses to shoot, who and what he centers, the title of the image, and other stylistic choices are what impedes the authenticity and loads a photograph with bias towards whatever the photographer's gaze - or the colonial gaze - deems important. Then does representation only mean the subject representing themselves only? And if so, can you speak for anyone but yourself? Mani remarks that regardless of how far from their own personal experience the gallery's narrative was,

viewers longed for a mirroring to implicate themselves with the 'American story' being told in the exhibition. In Chapter 2, I argued that social media ecommerce and ads, as the new formations of department store window displays, are sites of knowledge similar to the museum. By positioning the museum and the social media feed as parallel sites of feeling, we can see how the feelings of racialized subjectivity and community that align with narratives of collective memory can also be sites for feelings of disorientation, estrangement, and failure. When what we see ourselves represented as falls short, it is not necessarily a failure but perhaps an invitation of us to look for ourselves elsewhere- maybe not in the aesthetic object at the Smithsonian, but within the auditory musings of the viewers and their collective desire to see themselves. In the context of Instagram, perhaps you don't see yourself in the beautiful influencer, but find yourself as the dissenter in the comments? Or perhaps you're reacquainted with an angle of yourself when you share the post with a friend who echoes your sentiments? Or perhaps you find a different estrangement in disliking a photo despite it having millions of 'likes'. It is possible that both the museum and social media are epistemological arenas that invite the participant to be rapt in the sensorium of aesthetics to form new intimacies and sharings. Though both are social spaces for sharing art, history, identity, science, Instagram and its peers give way to seeing as a means of seeing yourself.

BOHO WHO?

In Chapter 2, I undertook a close exploration of boho-chic interior decor styles and the influence of Orientalism and how the word boho came to refer to Romani people who were incorrectly thought to be from Bohemia. The definition in relation to mythicized

Orientalist conceptions of the East allowed Bohemia to become a euphemism for a 'mental fairyland' country where white, male, fantasies transcended Victorian polite society and gave way to non-traditional, artistic lifestyles mimicking the Romani people's culture. To this end, I want to continue that conversation while tending to visual legibility in aid of nation-making and knowledge production. We can begin by specifically focusing on the semantic origins of the word *boho* itself in reference to the Romani peoples, and their mistaken identity of Bohemian.

The term bohemian, shortened to boho, is the French word used broadly throughout Europe for the Romani ethnic group. Roma people are an Indo-Aryan nomadic group that originally hailed from regions across North India and later migrated to Europe around the 2nd to 4th centuries BCE by either forced expulsion, slavery, or to seek refuge from oppressive conditions. Though the Romani followed various migration routes, they were named Bohemian in France as they were thought to have migrated via the Czech Republic region of Bohemia. Although the Romani are of various ethnic subgroups and religions, they were subalternized because of racial and cultural misalignment in Europe. Earlier records from the Byzantine Era refer to the Romani in Greek as *atzinganoi*; this word went on to serve as the root word for the French word *tzigane*, and Spanish word *gitano*, the Italian word *zingaro*, and the German word *zigeuner*. In English, they were pejoratively referred to as gypsies, incorrectly associating them with Egypt. It bears mentioning that *atzinganoi* translates to 'untouchables' as the Roma people were considered heretics and outcasted as such. The use of the word 'untouchables' becomes deeply complex and important when we apply the xenophobic implications of that sort of caste-making language when considering the grammar of

national identity. If a country is invested in defining themselves through opposition to what they are not, and opening up that dialect that is dependent upon those who exist in that opposition, we see the way everything from public policies, housing, art, and culture become influenced by those investments.

In a 2012 study led by Indian and Estonian genetics scholars, the Roma people were traced back to the Dalit caste of Hindu Indians. Using a data set of 10,000 global blood and oral samples, the scientists found that the "the closest connection of Romani haplotypes [was] with the traditional scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population groups of northwestern India" (Kivilsed) which refers to the Dalit caste[2]. The significance of the term 'untouchable' emerges again here as this is the same organizing principle and slur used towards Dalit and lower-caste Hindus. This is predicated upon the belief that coming into contact with a Dalit person or their belongings will mar you and you would have to practice cleansing rituals, and in cases of befriending or developing any relationship, you risk your own descent into a lower caste or in extreme cases, total social ostracization. Because of this untouchability, which now has extensive legislation outlawing it notwithstanding its covert usage in rural areas or covertly in urban communities, Dalit caste people are restricted to indentured servitude, debt-bonded labour, or waste work such as manual scavenging of human or animal feces, animal carcass handling, butchery, leather-crafting, or brick working to keep them contained with exploitative and demeaning labour systems. What does it mean that a people who were either expelled from their own country or fled to escape the caste system face the same fate in the place they sought refuge in? The semantic and genetic roots of the Romani both signal the social untouchability that emerged as xenophobic and caste-

making task forces and pogroms. Across Europe, the Roma people were associated with poverty, criminality, mysticism, were at the receiving end of harsh discrimination like enslavement, ethnic cleansing, and even internment and torture during the Holocaust. Stereotypes of their magical and criminal inclinations led them to be visualized as fortune tellers, thieves, and heretics, and their lifestyle to be seen as ungovernable and unserious. This created an Orientalist oscillation between fascination and fear of the Romani people and their lifestyle; as such, the aesthetics of their Indo-Aryan clothing and customs became associated with alternative cultures in Europe and fashioned a "gypsy" fashion aesthetic typically classified as Indo-Aryan linen tunics, harem pants, patchwork fabric, flowy skirts, loose fitting clothes shunning the corset, free and wild long hair[3].

Bohemian or *boho* soon became a stand-in adjective for fashions associated with literary and artistic counter-culture circles. The bohemian lifestyle appealed to many younger and wealthier members of France and England's elite who oscillated between the bourgeois and bohemian lifestyles, and either forfeited material wealth for artistic pursuit or just feigned poverty to cosplay as starving artists. Many artists lived together in shared homes and communes on the fringes of society- literally meaning they encroached upon lower class neighborhoods which were largely populated by Romani and nonwhite or refugee families who were relegated to live in ghettos social outskirts. The application of the word underwent a rebrand from its original use but not in an attempt to uplift a people on the fringes of society. It no longer colloquially referred to its original ethnic minority group, and instead became a Western identifier offering a respite for alterity and queerness. The slippage occurs here when we take a look at how the word is contemporarily still used in reference to various alternative countercultures, not the

Roma people. What is especially lost in this slippage is how the Indo-Aryan roots of their cultural aesthetics and fashions were appropriated by the Bohemian movement in typical neocolonial and Orientalist ways. These aesthetics granted white, Western Bohemians a meaningful visual legibility that was never afforded to the Roma. It is poignant that their South Asian heritage and lower-caste identities were the reason they were never granted visual legibility in either India or Europe, as it begs the question of why the optics of their culture were aesthetically legitimized only after being coopted for flimsy imitation. This history illuminates how new meanings of nationhood are constructed whenever white communities steal the aesthetics of a people without a land. This is more a more expansive conversation than cultural appropriation alone because it is attending to Michel Foucault's conception of biopower as the administration and regulation of human life at the level of the individual subject's body, specifically in relation to the use of state violence towards the Romani populations.

In this particular context, Foucault's framework of "make live and let die" is crucial for understanding the management of Romani life as a refugee, enslaved, and socially "untouchable" community which was grappling with sovereignty both while leaving the Indian Subcontinent and again upon arrival in Europe. Biopower is concerned with seizing power over that sovereignty of life and death, and employs state sanctioned mechanisms to relegate groups to making 'live' via housing, healthcare, education, and other public programs. In opposition, letting 'die' in this context can refer to the pogroms enacted throughout Europe to vilify Romani communities and deny them from jobs and housing, and applying fictive racist stereotypes to the occupations that they pursued and the ways they remained tethered to their culture through clothing or performance. This

type of social ostracization and oppression is indicative of the lesser valuation placed on one of the largest ethnic minority groups in all of Europe, and how they were not afforded access to life-making. In a striking parallel to the Dalit caste in India, restricting entire groups from public welfare and social spaces, and vilifying their entire existence, makes them susceptible to violence outside of state sanctioned programs as it trickles down to xenophobic and casteist hostility amongst neighbors, employees, and all other social relations. Furthermore, being unemployed could sentence any Roma person over sixteen years of age to a 2 year stint at "workhouses" away from their families. Upon the nascent of the Third Reich in 1933, Bavarian authorities had created an anti-Roma framework for Nazi pogroms that seamlessly transitioned the biopolitical determinant of 'let die' into an active 'make die'. At the same time that these 'task-forces' were taking place, the Bohemian counterculture was also taking rise among those craving freedom from the repressive conformity of polite society etiquette in both Europe and the US. Writers often referred to a fictive, not geographical, space of Bohemia that represented a "mental fairyland" (Burgess, 129) that wasn't bound by national borders but instead a state of mind that mimicked a mythicized unconventional and anti-materialist 'gypsy' culture[4]. Claiming allegiance to a mental fairyland while co-opting the fashions of people who don't have a land to return to or were ousted from their own speaks to the colonization of not just land but also psychic spaces.

What's compelling here is how a group of European artists had created a utopian respite for themselves absconding from surveillance and prejudice, despite not being the community that faced xenophobic ostracization and criminalization. Not to mention, there was no engagement with that community to understand the struggles that led to

the seemingly attractive ideals of their 'roving' or 'free-spirited' lifestyle. It takes a depraved culture of entitlement to disregard a community that was untouchable across two societies through a denial of proper employment or housing, and perform a complete rebranding of their injustice to instead create a fictive mystical aesthetic, and laud your self-imposed departure from polite society as avant-garde. How progressive and free thinking is that? To consider yourself anti-materialistic and above the consumer culture of excessive luxury while mimicking the aesthetics of a community that was impoverished, restricted from education, and forcibly sent to workhouses is a grotesque entitlement that goes beyond cultural appropriation of today. The same aesthetics that existed as edgy trends for Bohemian artists were the same aesthetics that rendered Romani people as precariat, and this legacy is found in the words boho and boho-chic today. In the present moment, the cultural bastardization of Bohemian aesthetics can be located in not only boho-chic trends, but also the duplicitous ideals of interior decor or fashion brands that claim to have progressive and sustainable values despite being as problematic as the materialist and oppressive industrial complexes they claim to reject. Where can we locate the grammar in the legibility of one group being visualized as dangerous and deviant, and another being visualized as creative and free-thinking? Furthermore, how does that grammar structure the meanings in today's boho-chic trends, particularly in fashion and ornamentalism as practiced by contemporary brands across their social media platforms?

The underpinnings of Orientalism in the semantics of this word, and the aesthetic genealogy of boho-chic trends, bring us back to how boho continues to be used in a United States context of the American Bohemianism which ushered the hippie era of the 70s that

shared similar internationally inspired and anti-conformist motifs. In interior decor trends, we see that boho chic has a stronghold on almost any decor style that seems global, whimsical, and with 'Eastern' elements. In Chapter 2, I explored how there's a blurring happening in the design motifs with the word 'boho' in that it can apply to both rattan work from Bali or tile work from Marrakesh, or even nondescript psychedelic artwork. In most conceptions of boho interior decor trends, the 70s peace and love anti-war aesthetics are often meshed with groovy artwork and both Buddhist and Hindu symbolism. But tracing the word back to its roots of a South Asian ethnic group riddled with Orientalist stereotyping, untouchability status, and discrimination across Europe, instead of the conventionalized bohemian as European artistic pariahs, allows us to engage more thoughtfully with the historical grounding of the trend and what South Asian motifs continue to offer contemporary brands.

Beyond the aesthetics, it's important for me to locate how notions of being art-focused, non-materialist, and community-driven are also ideals and values that companies put forth in an attempt to appease corporate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) metrics. When we link the boho chic appeal of World Market with the caption's hashtag #GlobalFinds and emphasis on a *collected* inventory of items we can see that the underpinning of Bohemian counter-culture is repackaged here for not only the consumer, but also the brand identity itself. The consumer is invited to join legacies of Bohemian artists, as the brand itself is putting out an image that you can achieve through purchasing their products. Don Draper, played by Jon Hamm, in *Mad Men* has been famously quoted on many aspiring ad-men's LinkedIn posts saying, "What you call love was invented by guys like me...to sell nylons." Every advertising or branding professional

will tell you that they are not selling products, but instead are selling a lifestyle, a call to action, a solution, or a 'mental fairyland' that can be achieved. Since advertising, and subsequently branding and marketing, are persuasion business, not information businesses, it's important to locate where they are trying to persuade a customer to believe that purchasing a product from them will result in you also sharing that same value. Buy a nose-ring from Hot Topic, and poof you're an anarchist goth. Buy sheets from Brooklyn Linen and poof you are an environmentalist urbanite. Buy makeup from Glossier and poof you are a trendsetting model. It's okay if your actual values and circumstances don't align with the product's offerings. But what happens when a brand's ethical persona doesn't necessarily align with their actions? From here, we can take it further then to explore how there are signifiers of particular social ideals like mindful consumption that are studded throughout a brand's image, and how those ideals don't necessarily line up with the ethics of the company's production, sourcing, or labour. Furthermore, with new trends and aesthetics burgeoning from social media like TikTok, what does boho capture in a contemporary US context that is contending with capitalism and nationalism via trendy aesthetics? When we see fashion trends popping up online around the 'nepotism baby' trend, or 'quiet-luxury' trend, how can we hold that in a not-so-direct opposition to the ideals offered by boho? And furthermore, how can boho, a mimic of anti-materialism, be fashioned into a gimmicky luxury aesthetic in and of itself, changing the meaning of luxury altogether?

MATERIAL GIRLS

Thinking back to the template of Mirzoeff's complex of visuality, aesthetics of power grants respect and the right to be seen to certain objects, bodies, and nations-

essentially, how culture authorizes empire (Mirzoeff, 146). Semiotics is the first step in naming and classifying signs, for example: taking a company's social media performance and locating its composite elements, information and images. Mirzoeff's second step of separating and stratifying asks us to explore the set of relations that give meaning to the physical and psychic realms of visuality, such as what superior values the brand is trying to signal to its audience. The final step, as Mirzoeff notes, is aestheticizing what is correct and proper into pleasing and beautiful; this can look like the content and information a company posits for the consumer through their social media branding or influencers, and what aspects of the company are not plastered across our feeds. This hierarchization is sutured into the way we consume images of things, people, and places, and ultimately determines how we choose to spend our money to bring us in proximity with the aesthetically pleasing formations at the top of this hierarchical culture-making complexes like influencer economy on social media.

The influencer economy is informed by global networks of the labor that create lucrative and powerful aesthetic worlds behind a smokescreen of diversity initiative and inclusive branding that occlude invisible labor processes. Worker exploitation, mass production, and predatorial employment of vulnerable communities are all conditions that create racialized and gendered laboring bodies that ultimately grant power and respect to consumers of aesthetics of power via luxury and fast fashion. This formation depletes the life of the most precarious and exploited people in fashion who will always be occluded from the complex of visuality: garment workers. Brands that create the products employ tactful marketing and branding to appeal to sales-boosting strategies of diversity and inclusivity. Consumers who purchase the products have the power to use

fashion as a signifier of self-aestheticization and wear their garments as embodied performances of their social status. Whereas those who create the products are absented and rendered fungible, and exist outside of a visuality that would grant their bodies the subjectivity of an important social class; ergo, the violence that they endure is not made legible. Similar to the legacy of the Romani people's restricted employment opportunities and their expulsion to workhouses, along with the subjection of Dalit caste-oppressed people to India's most dehumanizing 'dirty work', even in the most beautiful and enterprising industries, there is always labour that will be obfuscated from the view of consumers.

It's important to note the role that global trafficking of labor plays in relation to this invisibilized violence. In a Keywords entry for "Globalization," Lowe offers structures of feelings as a way to think of contemporary cultural productions of globalization such as literature, music, art, and popular cultures. "Cultural practices (like) the organization of cities and public spaces, schooling, religion" are structures in the United States that are "increasingly yet unevenly mediated through electronic information technologies" (Lowe, Globalization, 119). How does the production of American popular culture create influence over beauty, fashion, and objects of aesthetic power? How do the visuals and texts produce meaning about what is important, powerful, and worth being seen all round the world? Lowe's method of engaging with globalization as the way feelings are structured through logics of labor allows me to look at Instagram branding as a producer of information that is structured through similar logics. My method of material analysis contends with these social media platforms as "new mediums of global production"

through which "cultures of globalization will include information technologies, such as the Internet, as sites of both production and critique" (Lowe, Globalization 120).

With cultures of globalization, I consider the way that the aesthetics produced on Instagram are directly connected to labor practices that employ bodies subalternized by violence as workers to bring things of beauty into production— not for their own pleasure, but always in service to beautify consumers with power. Influencers are the most legible performers in Instagram's complex of visuality as it is their aesthetics that generate revenue for brands and their popularity that creates an affect of trust with the consumers. But garment workers are not classified as deserving the same visuality. In fact, their negative visual legibility feeds into distrust with the consumers as most of them may not know or care what conditions their clothes are being made in because the assumption is that if it was ethical it would be visible. Both groups provide a separate type of labor that services the brands and reaches the consumer in different ways. In the tradition of feminist materialist scholarship, I conduct a biopolitical and materialist analysis of fast fashion's relationship to social media and online branding as an industrial complex to show how South Asian women's bodies are exploited to clothe, protect, and beautify the bodies of others- and sometimes even other South Asian women of different class and social rankings. Engaging with Kalindi Vora's method of including reproductive labor and feminist Marxism to contemporary Indian labor analysis offers me a biopolitical framework of understanding globalization's inextricable link to ethical and political determinants of life and death. Labor, whether biopolitical, capitalistic, whether physical or affective, continues to operate in a colonial model fashioned by Orientalism. Furthermore, when that labor is racialized, feminized, and queered it forges

property relations between global power dynamics over the laboring body. Vora theorizes *vital energy* as the commodification of human vitality that funnels an essential life force to some groups by extracting it from others. Her exploration of care work and emotional labour encapsulates how labour is increasingly collapsing physical and emotional labour, and how vital energy is expansive and exploitable, particularly in regards to a labourer's cognitive resources. What a certain type of worker represents for a brand can determine how visible they are and how aligned their image is to the image of the brand. I expand this discussion by surveying the use of Hindu Nationalist structures to undergird the matrices of oppression in labor exploitation related to biopower.

My work here frames the inclusion of South Asian women in Western visual fields of social media as a form of exploitable physical, mental, and cognitive labour. In Chapter 1, I engaged with Morini and Fumagalli's exploration of biocapitalism as one that extracts vital energy from the entirety of human faculties like physical, linguistic, affective, and cognitive. It is this ensemble of vital-cerebral-physical faculties that opens up every aspect of a worker's body and mind to extraction. In an era where social media allows us to interact with formerly inaccessible companies, this ensemble of faculties is more valuable than ever. After branding strategy teams have created a scientifically exact method of engagement, the onus is placed on those who manage the social media accounts or influencers who forge paid partnerships to do the public-facing social interactions via cognitive and affective labour. Instagram is a giant in the contemporary beauty and fashion industry, and it serves as a platform for consumers to connect with their favorite brands in the same way that they connect with friends and family; by

positioning themselves in a digital space where people are coming with the intention to socialize and get 'human' interaction, companies can profit more by coming off as personable and real. Parasocial relationships between consumers and the faceless accounts of their favorite brands are forged through empathetic interactions - follows, likes, comments, tags - and social media allows brands to convey ideas and images of trends that are popularly produced and distributed in retail and high fashion. A large part of this has given way to the rise of the influencer economy where an influencer is allocated with the job to influence the purchasing decision of their audience (known as followers, but often referred to as community) by creating and sharing content, and engaging with comments and questions from the audience. An influencer is slightly different from a celebrity or an industry expert in that they are typically ordinary people who have fashioned an entire career out of monetizing a digital niche where they have an authoritative presence. The influencer economy on social media and their e-commerce marketplaces revolves around an influencer's metrics and proven success in reaching their target audience positioning them as thought leaders in a key demographic. Influencers monetize their content through a wide range of strategies such as sponsored posts, affiliate link marketing, collaborations, partnerships, and even often are managed by agencies that assist in optimizing their partnerships and getting new gigs- as it is technically a freelance role.

Vital energy as "substance of activity that produces life and moves from areas of life depletion to life enrichment" (Vora, 3), helps me ask where South Asian and Muslim influencers and garment workers are situated as the aesthetic representations and the physical labor in the biopolitical exchanges of contemporary transnational capitalism.

The vital energy provided through call centers and surrogacy clinics places a lens on the history of biological and reproductive labor, which I open into a conversation of contemporary labor practices of fast fashion and the influencer economy. In this case study, I incorporate this method of placing biopolitical labor alongside materialist analysis to consider garment workers as a representation of the colonial legacy of exploiting colonized nations to beautify and fashion the West. It is an imperialist and Orientalist formation to have a current that runs life-giving energy from subjugated suppliers to privileged recipients. Chapter 1 explored extensively how social media and their in-app marketplaces have ushered a novel mode of digital marketing dynamics, and this chapter lends a deeper understanding of globalization in cyberspace, and how people and countries are connected through intricate webs of racialized and gendered labor. In order to explore the roles that Hindu Nationalism and colonial history play in this contemporary moment, it is pertinent to place a critical eye on understanding gendered violence along the lines of imperialism, caste, and Islamophobia in a South Asian context.

India has a long history with the labor of garments, textiles, prints, and embroidery during British colonial rule, as we explored in Chapter 2 in relation to interior decor. This relationship is one that is as strong today in regards to garment production labour, and also has evolved to include contemporary Instagram branding trends that use South Asian motifs and labor in a digital realm. Fashion's relationship to social media and online branding is a complex of visuality where certain bodies are exploited to clothe, protect, and beautify the bodies of others. Apparel companies often employ aesthetics and designs of South Asian textiles like floral embroidery, tassels, or patterned sequins; this cultural commodification capitalizes off of culturally specific forms of hand-work

and embroidery by turning distinct South Asian designs into a Western luxury aesthetic. These objects increase in economic value by aligning with the boho look that largely blurs South Asian, Arab, South American, and African motifs. But the fingers that run sewing machines, and often injured in the process, are human parts that grant life as clothing to privileged bodies. Biocapital has a seedy history in colonial labor extraction via racialized and gendered methods of extracting the life-giving agency of specific body parts from laboring, colonized subjects. Global markets and technology are then constructed around the extractible capacity of these bodies allowing a steady flow of life enrichment via calculated life depletion practices. As such, the flow of biocapital is not simply biomaterial such as organs or reproductive surrogacy, but more so the overall market of energies and services that support the lives of the elite by extracting from the lives of the oppressed. Vital energy is situated in the contemporary technology-fueled global relations of capital, which are rooted in the colonial legacy of indentured servitude, care-work, and manual labour. As we unpacked with the history of the bio political management over the Roma people and Dalit caste people, being relegated to 'dirty work' is one of the ways that life-giving energy is extracted from bodies considered replaceable and converted into services that nourish or service bodies considered valuable. What is happening in the influencer world is as this dire, but it is important to explore this end of the spectrum in order to understand how it obfuscates garment workers on the other end who are absolutely subject to life-threatening and deadly biopolitical violence.

The apparel and beauty industry is heavily saturated, now more than ever, with discourse and metrics of diversity, inclusion, and representation. Apparel and beauty corporations rely on homogenized South Asian aesthetics to up their palatability, and

largely do so by capitalizing on social media to curate an informed image of the brand in relation to these new metrics. Esteemed companies ranging from Estee Lauder to Nike are actively reaching out to South Asian women who have spurred their popularity through social media marketing. Content creators, like Simran Randhawa, launched their careers by building an online following by showcasing fusion fashion looks and encouraging young Indian girls to embrace their ethnic features and cultural motifs. The image of beautiful Indian women in saris and bindis has now become "fashion" by styling a sari with a crop top, gold payal (anklets) with Nikes, or defiantly wearing the bindi over Western clothes (Image 3.3, 3.4). Randhawa, and similar South Asian influencers, frequently engaged in dialogue surrounding shadism, racism in the fashion industry, body positivity, and how assimilation doesn't necessitate a rejection of culture. Social media marketing thrives on Instagram as influencers, content-creators, and hobbyists use the platform as a full-time occupation and partner with brands who sponsor them to advertise products. Branding campaigns can range from sponsored posts, gifted merchandise to review, exclusive travel or events, modeling, account takeovers where the influencer logs in and posts content for a brand, and most prestigiously, developing a collaborative line of products. Photographs and videos, as signifiers of larger ideas or actions, can claim ruptures through their virtual, hyper-real space. As one of the most influential social media platforms, Instagram— grandfathered through Tumblr's aesthetic culture, more interactive than quiet Pinterest, and supplementary to Twitter's textual emphasis— serves as the perfect platform for brands to articulate their inclusivity by using prominent South Asian influencers as virtual billboards. In 2018, Randhawa was the muse and creative director for Estee Lauder's cross-brand editorial featuring global influencers (Image 3.5). That same year, Terre des Hommes, a Swiss NGO, released a

report on the human trafficking and labor violations of mica mines in India. The report found that around 22,000 children mine for mica in the states of Jharkhand and Bihar, where 60% of the world's mica is extracted from. Estee Lauder was one of the cosmetics brands that source from India, as mica is the mineral that adds glitter to makeup. Using ethnic influencers becomes a flickering signifier, because not only is the brand displaying a commitment to diversifying their brand persona, it can also signify that it's products are not only for white people, or that with the use of diverse features, they are challenging Eurocentric beauty norms, or to make amends for historical exclusion of ethnic faces from their brand's original marketing- the options are endless. By centering representation, other violations towards people of color can be sublated- same matter, different form. And while many of these content creators are scouted intentionally to appeal to representation and diversity metrics, their marketing ends up ascribing to colonial and Oriental legacies of gaining legibility through white or Western modes of visuality. It's not that brands only reach out to skinny or rich or upper-caste or light-skinned women for influencer relationships - as once was the case in the nascent stages of influencer culture - but rather that the employment of women for whatever message the brand is trying to put out helps the brand's persona and revenue in a way that cannot be compensated for. Yes, influencers are paid per sponsorship post or receive hundreds to thousands of dollars in free merchandise, but there really isn't a price on the flickering signifier of the image of an influencer of color used to successfully advance diversity metrics, disappear violent labor practices, or rebrand as #inclusive.

Another creative and former influencer, Sanam Sindhi, rose to popularity after musician Rihanna discovered her Instagram and was drawn to Sindhi's fusion of Indian

cultural motifs like traditional jewelry and henna with bad girl aesthetics of bold make-up looks and body positivity. What's notable about Sindhi's discovery is Rihanna's original direct message to her by way of Instagram where she said "I think you're so fucking rare" which led Sindhi to think her account must have been hacked (Image 3.6). Sindhi's aesthetic tapped into a visual realm of desire and erotics that read as refreshing to Rihanna. Here we see the meanings of Indian cultural representations of Oriental luxury and exoticism tied to American popular cultural representations of sex positivity and streetwear in ways that conjure liberal dreams of women breaking traditions and liberating themselves through self-representation. After being featured in Rihanna's infamous music video for *Bitch Better Have My Money,* Sindhi went on to secure major collaboration deals with fashion giants like Nike Air, consulting work, and features in Vogue and Elle. This sentiment speaks to the way the semiotics of South Asian fusion fashion are read as exciting or exotic, and doing something different than what's expected. This illuminates questions of what exactly makes Sindhi's fusion aesthetic so rare, and what does that language mean for the way South Asian women are generally described in the visual realm. What is Sindhi's employment of her culture doing something exciting for beauty and fashion companies? By coupling traditional motifs with contemporary beauty and fashion aesthetics, signifiers like henna and traditional jewelry are emptied of their cultural significance and ruptured for different meanings to come to life. If we consider Sindhi a racialized and gendered laboring figure, her traditional jewelry and henna tattoos provide something unique and life-giving to companies using her image for their branding; this turns Sindhi's act of self-expression into a platform for companies to capitalize off of the creative labor of South Asian women and use it to suture meanings of sexiness and a free-spirited -lifestyle to masses of white

consumers who take the hollowed signifiers as accessories to their fashion goals. After Sindhi and similar influencers rose in 2015, thousands of influencers creating similar edgy South Asian content can be found now and are less rare than what was once very groundbreaking and novel.

In 2024, with the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions movement boomed and set ablaze the influencer industry. By this year, tens of thousands of influencers had risen to popularity on TikTok in a way that entangled them with brand partnerships like never before. With the rise of TikTokShop's affiliate link marketing (getting paid when a user successfully accesses a purchase link from your account due to your content), many influencers were no longer simply complicit but actively benefiting from users making purchases for thousands of cosmetics brands. Many influencers were unable to share pro-Palestine content as their brand deals were targeted or the companies they were working with were BDS targets. The tiers to a brand's relationship to Israel ranging from active investments in Israel to companies that have storefronts in Israel. For example, Estee Lauder Company's billionaire heir Ronald Lauder is president of the staunchly Zionist World Jewish Congress. Lauder has been working with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee to advance the IDF, withheld donations to University of Pennsylvania for its pro-Palestine student movements, and has released many videos and articles saying anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism, even amongst Jews. Some apparel companies like H&M and Zara have storefronts in Israel that they profit from and refuse to close down. Other brands are on the BDS list because they are owned by Zionists celebrities, like Rare Beauty owned by Selena Gomez. Some brands have dropped celebrity partnerships for expressing pro-Palestine views, such as Charlotte

Tilbury ending Palestinian supermodel Bella Hadid's contract because of her vocal support of Palestine. It was nearly impossible in 2023 to find an influencer makeup routine video that didn't use Rare Beauty's blush, Charlotte Tilbury's skin primer, or products from the dozens of companies under the Estee Lauder umbrella like Bobbi Brown, Clinique, and MAC. The BDS movement making its way into the influencer economy shook up a lot of Arab, Muslim, and South Asian influencers who had built their entire audience from championing inclusive shade ranges or hijab-friendly attire and were now compelled to come face to face with hundreds of thousands of comments asking them to break contracts with BDS targeted brands. Many Arab, Muslim, and South Asian influencers went so far as to post videos of them damaging or trashing their make-up, or even posting transparently about their process of ending brand deals. Others stayed quiet claiming activism didn't have space on their feed- despite building entire careers from championing diversity in cosmetics. This duality of at once applying ethics and activism to safe, sales-boosting, DEI-friendly artifice of identity politics and representation matters while ignoring calls to boycott certain brands aligns with the same double standard that many influencers display towards fast fashion and sweatshop labour. It is no surprise that H&M and Zara, while being on the BDS list this year, have been routinely under scrutiny for their use of sweatshop labour. H&M and Zara carry many modest, hijab-friendly staples like long dresses or tunics, and influencers get paid for styling those dresses with their hijabs and signaling to their audience that these companies have created space for *us*.

The duality of a South Asian representation eclipses itself when we consider the glamorization of South Asian women on social media in ways considered revolutionary

or feminist inclusive, while absenting the plight of garment workers in India who are also employed by those brands strategically- but using different rationale. Life is taken from South Asian women both ideologically and materially to give life and social meaning to privileged recipients by way of companies that market themselves using South Asian bodies while also producing textiles exploiting South Asian women from lower class and lower caste communities. Both luxury and fast fashion companies brand themselves with social justice trends to stay on beat with inclusivity trends, like shirts branded with the word FEMINIST, without paying their female workers who toil away in textile mills in India, and across the subcontinent and SouthEast Asia. The buzzword 'performative activism' is thrown around to describe the calculated and futile social media posts or PR campaigns that brands often put out after scandals or call-outs. Diana Taylor conceptualizes performance as epistemology that "function[s] as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowl-edge, memory, and a sense of identity" (Taylor, 2). The relationship between influencers, brand accounts, and social media content becomes a public theater for many such performances. If you didn't know anything about a brand and only knew what was displayed on their neatly arranged squares of content, what information would you gather? Taylor's interplay of the archive and the repertoire lends me the ability to analyze Instagram as online public theater. She contends that the archive is mediated by a process of careful selection, classification, and presentation, despite the myth of the archive's objectivity. In the repertoire, information is kept but also transformed as "people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by "being there," being a part of the transmission" (Taylor, 20). In the theater of social media, brand marketing is a very strictly rehearsed performance; linking Instagram to frameworks of performance and epistemology allows me to analyze social media for both

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the archive and repertoire, and consider posts as sites of knowledge. As a scholar of Ethnic Studies, conducting research using interdisciplinary frameworks and methods has allowed me ways to seriously consider how visual culture is mediated through labor movements, fashion trends, aesthetic practices, and other quotidian acts- and not be limited to canonical sites of knowledge. Social media like Twitter and Instagram and TikTok are rich platforms for this analysis because "expressive behavior (performance) transmit[s] cultural memory and identity" (Taylor, XVI). These digital performances produce a visual vocabulary that speaks to contemporary and historical phenomena that impact the lives of South Asian and Muslim communities.

<div align="center">CASTE SHADOWS</div>

To understand how the exploitation of garment workers can occur so successfully in India, we need to move beyond colonial legacies and rather trace the points of contention that are found in Indian culture autonomous of colonialism. It is imperative to understand that heteropatriarchy and acts of homophobic or misogynistic violence throughout India did not materialize only after British colonialism. The Hindu caste system is built upon Brahminical endogamic structures that plagued India long before the British Raj, and are heteropatriarchal, Islamophobic, and xenophobic independently of colonial influence. Patriarchal constructs of Hinduism and Indian culture fortify the caste system and dowry system as two inextricable methods of misogyny that compel young women and their families to desperately resort to trafficking schemes that claim to aid their financial burdens. The Sumangali scheme in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu serves as an excellent case study to exemplify this complex network of biocapital exchange (Image 3.7). Sumangali, which loosely translates to a happily married woman,

is a bonded employment scheme which lures desperate families into pushing their young daughters into human trafficking. The women are hired under the guise that after three to five years of bonded labor in the garment and textile mills, they will be awarded a lump sum of their stipend. If you fail to complete the number of years wholly, you get nothing and are not compensated for the months or years you worked. When recruiting agents visit villages to recruit for the scheme, they sell the stipend as promising to fulfill dowry requirements- a large amount of money that the groom's family demands from the bride's family within Hindu marriage rites. The scheme targets lower caste Dalit women specifically knowing that they are restricted from marrying outside their caste and are born into generational abject poverty. With 90% of the workers as female, and 70% younger than 18 years old as of 2016, it's evident that the target audience is successfully preyed upon on a large scale. While the women are drawn by the promise of safe housing, meals, and ethical hours, the realities are far from this illusion. The women are kept in squalid quarters with up to twenty girls in one room. Meals are small and malnutritious, and oftentimes denied as punishment. Shifts can run upwards 12 hours, the promise of breaks in between shifts is often broken, and girls are frequently woken up from sleep to run another shift. The health hazards are simultaneously physical, sexual, and emotional. The dangerous working conditions have resulted in a tremendous amount of workplace injuries, respiratory conditions, and extreme fatigue. The women are frequently sexually assaulted and raped by both male coworkers and management. The horrifying conditions give rise to a large number of suicides by women who cannot continue working and won't be accepted back from their families. The Sumangali scheme continues to operate under various monikers, and is largely sustained by the cultural demands of dowry and inability of poor, lower caste women to get married without it[5].

Much of the existing scholarship and advocacy about garment sweatshop workers considers the wage theft, labor violations, and physical and psychological harm of fast fashion's material conditions and aims to hold large apparel corporations accountable for unethical labor transgressions. I would like to place a lens particularly on the Sumangali scheme's affectual tactics, and how its bait is the lure of a lump sum dowry. I want to trace the important relationship between the violence of this bait, and the clothes that are eventually advertised on Instagram. I focus specifically on the affectual strength of the sinister Sumangali scheme and how the logics of the caste system usher the flawless design of its framework. The scheme targets lower caste, poor, Indian women who are seen as burdens of their families and communities. Daughters are framed as a social and financial burden that need to be married off and made someone else's problem once her parents foot a dowry payment to seal the marriage contract. The potential groom only has to gain a subservient and subhuman figure who will provide domestic care for him and his family, and produce a male child. There are many contemporary Indian civil and criminal laws that criminalize dowry, but since caste continues to be cemented in the structures of traditional marriage frameworks, dowry isn't going anywhere. Themes of dowry or child marriage are heavily portrayed cinematically and televisually, but the caste logic that undergirds it is usually ignored. As often can be found in neoliberal progress, dowry can look very different nowadays and isn't a fixed number per se, but still exists covertly in the form of exorbitant gifts ranging from apartments, cars, furniture, and other expensive items. Despite being a Hindu custom, it is practiced across other religious communities in India as well because of how strongly bound Indian culture is with Hinduism.

Caste, similar to race, functions as an organizing principle of Indian society. It is a violent and dehumanizing system of Hinduism that predates colonialism in India, but has embedded itself within every social structure from pop culture, socioeconomics, and legislation in extricable ways. An important distinction is that despite India's claim to be a secular country, caste is a religiously codified exclusion that's not racially based, nor buffered by class ascension- so it continues to be fortified through Islamophobia and racial capitalism. India has a very unique matrix of misogynistic violence towards Muslims and lower-caste women that is steeped in anti-Muslim, casteist, and religious doctrines. The violence of the Sumangali scheme tunes into India's misogynistic matrix that includes most prominently, *sati* (widows self-immolating with their husband's funeral pyres), enforced widowhood (shaved bald, ostracized to widow homes, and forbidden from remarrying), and child marriage; offshoots of these three include female infanticide, acid attacks, honor killings, and every iteration of sexual assault. Dowry goes hand in hand with these, coupled with run of the mill domestic and in-law abuse which are prominent features of Indian, Muslim, and Hindu family cultures. The current of vital energy coming from exploited women, to the people who wear the products of their labor, is one birthed by global networks of exploitative neo-colonialism; but it is fortified by the hatred of daughters at every stage of life.

In *Castes in India*, B.R. Ambedkar delineates how unmarried and widowed lower caste women are seen as surplus bodies- excess members of society can potentially disrupt the caste system's strict creed, so they either need to be disposed of or can be exploited (since their existence is not 'beneficial to society'). "*Sati, enforced widowhood*

and *girl marriage* are customs that were primarily intended to solve the problem of the *surplus man* and *surplus woman* in a caste and to maintain its endogamy. Strict endogamy could not be preserved without these customs, while caste without endogamy is a fake." A *surplus* woman's tribulations begin at birth with the fear of dowry and widowhood spurring female foeticide and infanticide. In The State of World Population 2020 by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the UN's sexual and reproductive health agency, "between 2013 and 2017, about 460,000 girls in India were 'missing' at birth each year…. Via gender-biased (prenatal) sex selection, and 33,000 girls under age 18 will be forced into marriages, usually to much older men." Compared to other countries, India accounted for 45.8 million 'missing females' out of the world total of 142.6 million 'missing females' which refers to female foeticide and infanticide. Another article mentions a 1980s advertisement for ultrasound tests stating, "Pay 5,000 now, save 50,000 later," as a way to encourage women to determine the baby's gender now, lest they pay the price of dowry later. I do want to make very clear that female foeticide and infanticide are not unique to lower-caste and poor communities. Though lower caste communities may have more of an assumed incentive considering the casteist and classist ramifications of dowry, upper-caste and wealthy Indian parents participate equally in terminating female fetuses- especially because they have more access to ultrasounds and technology that can identify the sex sooner, and safer access to abortion options. If a baby girl makes it through an abortion or female infanticide her parents can effectively find a new method via human trafficking style employment schemes that promise dowry: if you cannot kill your daughter at birth, you will do so by marriage, a window to escape the lifelong burden of a daughter by paying the price of dowry. 5,000 now to save 50,000 later.

So why is an unmarried, especially lower-caste, woman considered surplus and a threat to the caste system? "Caste structures are maintained through heteropatriarchal endogamy, the practice of marrying within the same caste, to control women's sexuality" (Uphadhyay, 467). Heteropatriarchal marriage and gender hierarchies are an organizing principle of the casteist, Brahminical social order. When a woman is unmarried, or widowed, she poses a risk of marrying outside of her caste either out of desperation, choice, or forbidden love and sexual awakening. Child marriage prevents both dishonor on families from the latter and maintains endogamy as swiftly as possible. The options for widows on the other hand are either to either be set on fire when her husband dies, or ostracized to a widow home and "degraded to a condition in which she is no longer a source of allurement" to prevent remarriage, even within the caste. The desperation to not be a *surplus* woman within your caste and community, pushes poor, lower-caste families to seek out the means for a dowry and make them eligible for marriage as quickly as possible. It's especially sinister for the labor scheme to be framed as a dowry respite because Indian culture's hatred towards women is perhaps the most marketable facilitation for Western countries and companies that have a historical vested interest in exploiting the most vulnerable members of a population. Neocolonialism in conjunction with capitalism will fully optimize on the tender points of India's misogynistic violences - both intrapersonally and systemically - by syncing the language of this employment scheme with pre-existing systems of oppression. Despite all the intrapersonal, communal, and casteist differences, nothing unites all religions and castes of India - aside from perhaps cricket and film - than the subordination of women. It is for these reasons

that the Sumangali scheme, and similar labor schemes, continue to flourish using misogynistic and casteist logics.

Ethnic Studies scholar Nishant Upadhyay looks closely at caste-based gendered violence and how it is intertwined with Hindu Nationalism and its matrices of oppression. In his article, "Hindu Nation and its Queers," Upadhyay explores the 2018 Indian Supreme Court judgment that decriminalized homosexuality and how it was lauded as a decolonizing success as it was a law codified during the British Raj and maintained till 2018. Upadhyay argues that any claims of Hinduism as inherently queer friendly prior to colonialism needs to confront the Hindu Nationalist structures of caste oppression and Islamophobia. Building upon Jasbir Puar's work on homonationalism, Upadhyay proposes homohindunationalism as the way Hindu Nationalists deploy queer progress to propagate casteist and Islamophobic state agendas. Thus, a true decolonizing success would not stop at decriminalizing homosexuality, but also pay close attention to ending casteism and Islamophobia in India. In the same way that white queers, typically cisgendered men, are seen as the beacons of American progress and liberalism, "other queer bodies have been excluded through the logics of white supremacy, colonialism, Islamophobia, neoliberalism, and imperialism. Similarly, the Zionist Israeli state uses homonationalism as a tool to project itself as queer-friendly and Palestine as queerphobic, and to erase its own illegal occupation of Palestine (Puar and Mikdashi 2012)" (Upadhyay, 469). For Hindu Nationalists to be claiming the progressiveness of India as a decolonial success only through the metrics of decriminalizing homosexuality without taking into account the ways caste-oppressed and Muslim people in India are brutalized, is a gross method of pink-washing agendas that don't even systematically benefit queer communities. To claim homophobia and homophobic legislation as a

British creation fails to bear witness to the heteropatriarchal endogamic structure of Hindu marriage, and the queered pathologization of Muslims within India as perpetually others of the nation. Bearing in mind, the decriminalization only occurred in 2018, many decades after the British Raj. Therefore, it is more accurate to assume that while there was colonial influence, it is not independent of preexisting systems that the British Raj located as points of entry to assert imperialistic dominance. After all, the caste system's horrifically violent treatment of unmarried women, child brides, and widows already laid a strong foundation for the British to fortify with new models of violence that benefited their political and economic endeavors. How much work would they really have had to do to hierarchize a population that already strictly did so themselves?

<p align="center">ORIENTAL OTHERS</p>

My framework of how caste and Islamophobia are twin organizing principles is rooted in a scholarly tradition of exploring the logics of Hindu Nationalism in relation to gender and queerness, and how homonationalism evolves to adapt to social norms and cultural trends. My work here builds upon the research of Jasbir Puar, Kalindi Vora, Nishant Upadhyay and Paola Bacchetta in the fields of gender and queer studies, particularly in relation to fashioning queered identities within national imaginaries rooted in the United States and India. Historically, feminized South Asian labor has been embedded in the global economy, especially considering how it maintains Orientalist legacies and imagination of the Indian subcontinent as a life-giving surplus body. These manufactured desires become cultural explanations for entire nations and dictate the labor that is expected of them. These scholars have detailed the colonial exploitation of Indian labor across everything physical to affective from sepoys, organ markets, call

centers to "affective commodities and capacities through a gendering of labor" (Vora, 13) like surrogacy, nannying, and domestic care-work. Garment workers and the influencer economy bring about a powerful convergence of capitalistic conditions and misogynistic and queerphobic exploitation that enable a colonial legacy of 'outsourcing' feminized labor. While a visual framework of the economy of Orientalism urged me to explore *what* is shown as important in the national imaginary and aesthetic field, the work of the aforementioned scholars helped me connect *how* those representations manufacture realities when it comes to labor and nation-building in my case studies of South Asian labour in the fashion industry.

Following their analysis of the feminization of male labour forces who are gendered, queered, and *othered* by national logics, I trace back to Upadhyay and Bacchetta's formation of the Muslim as the queered other within the socio-symbolic logics of homohindunationalism in relation to the Muslim *karigar* (hand-work artisanal workers). The national dreamwork of ideals like urbanization, security, world market, industrial development and sovereignty are easily discernible Orientalist and historical fantasies of a masculine, imperialistic power exploring - exploiting - a feminized, colonized land. Within the grammar of imperialism imaginary, colonial forces are heroic and masculine and colonized countries and territories are devalued and feminine. Neferti Tadiar names *fantasy-productions* as the "interconnected processes of neoliberal capitalist development and heteropatriarchal state and corporate desires and erotics" (Fajardo, 11). Labor can be figuratively feminized in order to achieve certain goals, and subsequently male laborers are also feminized while performing that labor with terms like "houseboys" or "women's work". Tadiar offers that the "libidinal character of national economies [is] grounded in

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the bodies of people... Those who occupy the mobile, masculine ranks of global management are free to move and accumulate profit like capital but those who remain in the sluggish, feminized terrain of labour must bodily bear the burden of their nations (Tadiar, 64). All of the affairs of such economic or urban development is organized by race, gender, and sexuality, and are conducted through the feminized and surplus manual labour force. Understood in tandem, Muslim men *karigars* are feminized in a way that not only follows the ideological hyper-feminization of the formerly colonized, but also aligns with Puar's homonationalism in regards to how sexuality structures the imaginary dimension of the exchanges of national identity, international relations, and the global economic market. Taking this into account along with the Sumangali labour scheme and its predation upon lower-caste women, I am compelled to think of the Muslim *karigar*s exploited by the capitalist and heteropatriarchal desires of the United States luxury fashion complex within the 'Utthan Pact'. The Utthan Pact is a compliance pact managed by a UK consultancy firm called Impactt that partners luxury fashion houses like Gucci, Dior, Fendi, Burberry, and others with ateliers and factories that provide the skilled labor of *zari* (meticulous beading and embroidery) for a fraction of the price of its worth. Unsurprisingly, utthan means *upliftment*, and the formal language of the Pact's contract states its goals are to "empower karigars... to gain recognition for their skills... as per the Constitution of India" and to "preserve and strengthen the craft heritage of India." An articulation of the historical emergence of *zari* is relevant to proceed with how it's employed in the Utthan pact scheme (Image 3.8).

Luxury fashion houses like Christian Dior, Louis Vuitton, Hermes, and Yves Saint Laurent have been outsourcing zari embroidery to various artisan factories since the mid-

1940s, and by the 1980s, major fashion houses almost exclusively relied on Indian artisans to hand-sew designs with a craftsmanship that cannot be replicated by machine or artists of other countries. Between 2000-2019, India's embroidered textile exports exceeded $230-million indicated a 500% jump across the two decades. Zari embroidery, which involves the detailed precision of silver and gold threads, beads, gemstones, pearls, and spangles. Other embroidery forms include block printing, zardozi (a type of braided threadwork similar to zari), gotta patti work (a thick silver or gold ribbon arranged as a flower), chikankari (a type of threadwork that creates a shadow-y effect), and sheesha-kaam (zari where pieces of mirror are used in place of beads). Notably, the delicacy of the flourishes matched with the thickness of fabrics like velvet or heavy silk make it so that the work is not able to be done with machinery, resulting in a physically labor intensive process on everything from the karigar's eyes, fingers, and back and also cognitively intensive in regards to patterns, skill, and accuracy. Zari is said to have roots in ancient Persia and Turkey, and boomed in India during the Mughal Period. Governmental arts and cultural preservation efforts consider zari a heritage craft of India's composite culture. Under the Indian constitution, citizens of India are asked to "value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture" and many governmental arts and cultural preservation efforts consider zari a heritage craft that reflects India's Indo-Islamic history. Composite culture refers to how India's art is composed of ethnically distinct regional styles, relations with neighboring countries, and various religious influencers from Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Buddhism.

It's important here for me to segue into a brief primer of Mughal era art, in order to fully comprehend the legacy of this historical period (1500-1800s) in relation to

communal tensions that exist today and ultimately inform the discriminatory treatment of the karigars I aim to discuss. It should be noted that in Indian history, despite the Islamic nature of the Mughal empire, the Mughal Period is favorably lauded as the consolidation of aforementioned composite culture in India in regard to arts. The wealthy Mughal emperors provided opulent patronage to writers, musicians, poets, fine artists, architects, jewelers, craftworkers, and karigars. Mughal art is iconically Indo-Islamic due to its syncretic blend of religions (and neighboring regions) that reflected the accompanying liberal religious movements by Sufi Muslims and Bakhti Hindus; both movements rose to popularity before the Mughal rule, were reformist in nature, glorified unification over sects and castes, and are credited with the Mughal era's iconically syncretic artistic influence. I must note that I am not a scholar of South Asian histories in the sense that there are far more nuanced and theoretical studies on both of these movements (along with Sikhism and Christianity at the same time) and how they led to the Mughal era's distinct Indo-Islamic nature. For my work, I am more invested in the Indo-Islamic artistic boom of the Mughal era, and how the iconic aesthetics and craftsmanships inform the way that "Mughal" is referenced as a catchall term to gloss over its strong Islamic roots. Despite the syncretism in its art and complexity in inter-religious dynamics, the Mughal era was categorically Islamic rule. While there was significant variance in how every emperor practiced Islam, the pendulum traditionally swings between Akbar the Great (1556-1605) and Aurangzeb (1658-1707). Akbar is lauded as the most religiously tolerant as he abolished the jizya (mandatory tax paid by non-Muslims) and married Hindu princesses and appointed Hindu advisors, while Aurangzeb reinstated the tax, converted some mandirs into masjids. This binary does not exist in a vacuum however, as Akbar's religious tolerance was also offset by his over-

indulgent use of the Empire's wealth, and the fact that his vocal religious tolerance didn't necessarily result in less communal tension, and even framed his marital alliances as done simply for show. Aurangzeb's orthodoxy was also offset by his legal, diplomatic, and military contributions such as codifying Islamic law, establishing strong foreign relations and policies, and successfully expanding the empire into its farthest-reaching territory due to his conservative use of the Empire's wealth. He is also considered in many ways the last Mughal emperor as it was after Aurangzeb's death that the British East India Company was able to assert control in a transitioning and destabilized India. I offer this oversimplified primer in order to frame the culturally heralded opposing sentiments between Hindus and Muslims when it comes to the memory and legacy of Akbar, Aurangzeb, and the Mughals in general. Though the period is commonly praised for its artistic patronage and birth of unparalleled craftsmanship and art, it is also held in tension with its syncretic policies and Islamic heritage.

The reason I bring up the Mughal era's history in relation to zari beyond just its artistic roots, is because in the contemporary moment of India's vehement Islamophobic hostility, the term Mughal is used with much contention. Crediting anything as "Mughal" has become increasingly disparaging as Hindu Nationalist sentiment is invested in the erasure of Islamic contribution to culture and arts. Claims to art forms, like zari, from the Mughal era are communally divisive as there is an ideologically supremacy to protect- a supremacy that doesn't align with the art form's historical genealogy. "Mughal" art is at the risk of sounding too Muslim, and evoking too strong of an association with Islamic history and legacy. Even when zari is described as Mughal, it's done so as to appeal to liberal sensibilities of a homogeneous, syncretic Mughal era, not an Islamic era.

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Furthermore, the craft of karigari is one that has been passed down generationally through Muslim families and communities that have almost exclusively worked as karigar since the Mughal era. The Muslimness of the karigar's identity is at risk of erasure when we attempt to secularize the word Mughal from its Indo-Islamic history into one homogenous Indian history. (Especially considering some speculation that karigari initially remained within Muslim families since despite the work being low-paying and labor-intensive, caste restrictions would not allow lower caste people to be in direct contact with items that would eventually touch someone's body as per their caste-restricted occupations as per our exploration of 'dirty work' earlier). Unsurprisingly, despite the noted contributions of the Mughal era, some Hindu Nationalists view it as a sweeping loss of purely Hindu and Indic art forms that were untainted by Islamic influence. My aim is not to answer the long-debated questions "is Mughal more Muslim than it is Hindu?" or "are art forms like zari considered Mughal or Indian?" but rather to establish that Mughal art is distinctly Indian and Islamic. Though it is unique from Persian or Turkish Islamic art in that it has Indic as opposed to purely Arabic influence, it is Islamic in essence due to its creation and patronage as an Islamic art within an Islamic empire- and the fact that it exists within the composite geography and history of India does not make it any less Indian or less Islamic. The intricate ruptures of the Mughal empire's influence in both Indic and Islamic history is just as richly patterned as the art that emerged from it, and that complexity renders it vulnerable to Islamophobia in moments of communal dissent and Hindu Nationalism. In the context of the contemporary karigar laborer creating textiles for luxury fashion houses like Christian Dior, the vulnerability of the karigar's Muslimness is teased out and reflected in the exploitation and erasure of the entire industry.

When we discussed the Sumangali Scheme, we saw how caste and its extensions of misogyny and dowry were the threads that held the scheme together. In regards to zari and its relationship to luxury fashion, we see how Islamophobia and its extension of "queerphobic xenophobia" is what upholds a similar labour scheme called the Utthan pact. I mentioned earlier how the feminization of male labour forces who are gendered, queered, and *othered* by national logics frames Muslim men as the ideological queered other within the socio-symbolic logics of homohindunationalism. The Muslim karigar is a quintessential example of this queered other. Upadhyay explores Paola Bachetta's "critiques to demonstrate the emergent queer paradoxes within the Hindutva project and the role of Brahminical supremacy and Islamophobia" (Upadhyay, 468) and argues that the intersecting logics of queerphobia and xenophobia are essential to the Hindutva ideology. Bacchetta's main interrelated argument is that "queerphobic xenophobia" is a framework where queerphobia is employed as a pillar of Hindu Nationalism and that constructions of queered gender and sexuality are assigned to all "Others'' of India. Within this framework, "queer gender and sexuality are constructed as already outside the Hindu nation; when queerdom reenters, it must be immediately exiled… The primary Othered queer is the non-Hindu nationalist Hindu but, by extension, Hindu nationalists assign queer gender and sexuality to all the (queer and unqueer) Others of the Hindu nation, especially Indian Muslims (Bacchetta, 143). Therefore, internal antagonists of the nation are metaphorically queered Others and Muslim men specifically are the "primary object of Hindu Nationalist, queerphobic-xenophobic operations" regardless of their sexual identity (143). The Muslim man is simultaneously a hyper-masculine sexual threat ready to rape or perform Love Jihad[6] and a queer national threat as the emasculated

Muslim men do not possess the "virile, militaristic masculinity" (143) of Hindu Nationalists who are unanimously (metaphorically) heterosexual in adherence to the endogamic structure of casteism and marriage. Upadhyay echoes my notion that caste and Islamophobia as twins by remarking that the "intersections of caste and sexuality also allow us to understand the Hindutva attack on desires, intimacies, and love in India – not just queer intimacies but intercaste and interreligious "heterosexual love" as well. Within the Indian context, decolonizing erotics requires challenging homohindunationalist tactics, along with dismantling all colonial, Brahminical, and Islamophobic structures (Upadhyay, 471).

This queerphobic xenophobia renders Muslim karigars as always non-Indian and always outside of the historical memory and legacy of the nation. The dreamwork of Hindu Nationalist's casteist and Islamophobic fantasy-productions is elucidated in the erasure of Muslim karigars as the artisanal life-force behind India's textile export market valued at $250-billion. Taking it a step further, the erasure of zari as a Mughal art form or the tainting of the Mughal era as a nationalist failure makes clear that beyond debating the lineage of zari, the intent of such erasures is to Hindu-wash the heritage of a Muslim, multigenerational identity-based art form in order to negate the identities, social recognition, and livelihood of Muslim karigars. The claims of preserving the heritage craft in the constitution and the demands of international recognition from luxury fashion houses all seem duplicitous when the same karigars are subject to queerphobic xenophobia, othering, and general dishonoring. Karigars have been made invisible through a sweeping feminization of their labor, and by the logic of devaluation of feminized labor, receive very little pay, awful conditions, and no social recognition. It is

within this preexistent system that the Utthan pact emerges as a lucrative opportunity for Western fashion houses. Like the Sumangali scheme, the Utthan pact is viably facilitated for Western countries and companies that have a historical legacy in exploiting vulnerable members of the Indian population. Here, neocolonialism in conjunction with capitalism and Islamophobia optimizes on India's precedent of exploitative garment work. The language of the Utthan pact's scheme upholds the trope of Europe and the United States as an industrial and benevolent career-providing country instead of an imperialistic and exploitative country where corporations rely on vulnerable and lower class Muslim men from rural areas. Upadhyay remarks that the "intersections of caste and colonialism continue to shape the postcolonial state... [and] destabilize the temporal and connect the postcolonial/modern/secular formation of the Indian state and Brahminical supremacy as interwoven and not solely as a consequence of colonialism (470); it is no surprise that we see the tendrils of caste and Islamophobia suffocating the visual legibility of the Muslim karigar.

In May 2019, the Twitter account of Harpers Bazaar UK posted a video clip detailing the design and production of Christian Dior's 30 Montaigne purse to signal the launch of the fashion house's new capsule collection (Image 3.9). The video features a pristine marble work surface and where a worker in a white lab coat—a white woman with blonde hair and delicate, manicured hands—is gently stitching, hammering, and sewing the purse into existence. She handles the artisanal tools with a deftness and precision that speaks to the quality of production. The conversation being had here is one about the value of the product as one that is amplified by the belabored economy of care and craft that went into the purse. The hand stitching and embossing of the words Christian Dior

in golden thread is done with such touching accuracy that one sees the production of the bag as a labor of love that is quantified by the price tag. The signifiers in this video are telling viewers and consumers that this is the process, the labor of love, and the justification of the quality that you are paying for. Including consumers into the visual fold of the production process is an effective strategy of increasing value by displaying, not concealing, the labor. But what is distorted in this video? In 2020, journalists from the New York Times uncovered that Christian Dior and other "luxury" brands were engaged in the clandestine Utthan pact with embroidery factories in Mumbai where workers were unsafe and mistreated while producing various high fashion pieces. "Unknown to most consumers, the expensive, glittering brands of runways in Paris and Milan also indirectly employ thousands of workers in the developing world. In Mumbai, scores of ateliers and export houses act as middlemen between the brands and highly skilled artisans, while also providing services like design, sampling and garment production." And perhaps that particular purse is not constructed in these ateliers? That does not change what was classified as worthy in Dior's complex of visuality, and what was not: the mass production of the materials in factories, the exploitative conditions of the workplace, and degraded status and treatment of garment workers. This video, clipped for dissemination of social media platforms, is intentionally putting forth an idealized image of high fashion that is obscuring the actual conditions of workers in the global South that are servicing elite consumers. But beyond consumers, what is the manipulation of information that is being done by posting a video that mimics an ethnographic film form of a product being assembled as the truth? The laboratory setting, white coat, and precision instruments indicate almost a scientific articulation. By thinking of visual culture as embedded in that framework, I think of this video putting

out an idea that can be safely historicized as a truth of high fashion and how social media, as an arena for discursive power, ushers the invisibilization of racialized laboring figures under exploitative conditions from behind a glossy depiction of craftwork done by a white artisan to earn golden Made in Italy letters.

The *New York Times* article stated that the karigars "are largely Muslim men who migrated from rural villages of India to Mumbai, where they are paid meager sums to work up to 17 hours a day, many in overcrowded slums." The article recognizes that hand-work embroidery dates back to the Mughal empire and is a skill generally passed down through Muslim families. Thinking relationally between racial and gender formations, the United States is understood masculinely - empire, power, strength - through the feminization of countries that are seen as weaker, while Hindu Nationalism renders Muslim men as queered, treasonable threats both hyper-masculine and emasculated at once. Similarly, garment work is feminized through notions of gender roles, and further feminized in relation to the beneficent being Western industries by way of both racial formations. The karigars then are queered as Others to the Indian nation-state in this formation, despite being citizens within the nation-state, due to their religion. Companies who signed the Pact promise to show skill improvement from the workers in order to honor the constitutional duty of heritage preservation, and also promise 11-hour work days 6 days a week, proper housing, safety standards compliance in workspaces, and benefits and salary equivalent to $225 a month. The pact however, is not legally binding nor are there any verifiable reports or punitive measures to be proven or upheld by the companies who sign with the pact. The karigars spoke of being mistreated, forbidden from unionizing, and kept in the dark about the actual value of

their work- many don't know that the garments they spend hours laboring over are sold at an exorbitant markup that doesn't benefit them (Image 3.10). Many independent luxury designers have even opted out of the pact knowing that $225 is far from an equitable wage, especially considering some months are more demanding than others in the fashion world. Some have also noted that the pact is essentially a facade that signals to ethical consumers and labor watchdogs that this luxury brand pays their workers, keeps them safe, and is worth the luxury tag. It's important to think about how the craft of hand-work embroidery, which is touted as a heritage craft of India, is being done by Muslim laborers who are configured out of the image of Indian heritage. Orientalism has always depended on depictions of feminized men that serve patriarchal fantasies of what the exotic subject could offer. If we think of these karigars as queered laboring subjects, we see how using them under the guise of strengthening their craft but not paying them properly or concealing the value of their craft upholds colonial legacies of creating countries through frameworks of saviorism. The true nature of this Utthan pact along with the muddying of the word Mughal are in a dizzying dance with Dior's promotional video on *Harper's Bazaar*. As a method of historical revisionism by intentionally altering the racialized and gendered portrayal of the hand-work craft, the video serves both Hindu Nationalist fantasy-productions of the non-Indian Muslim man, and also the Western fantasy-productions of equitable and benevolent free-trade for Western culture and luxury.

<u>MYTH OF MUTUAL BENEFITS</u>

As we've seen with both Sumangali and Utthan, the colonial tradition is to latch onto the weakest points of a country and continue to exaggerate those oppressive

traditions through acute racialized and gendered violence that is easily incorporated in that country's unique social framework. The birth of the Sumangali scheme is a quintessential example of the way that colonial logics will exploit the most vulnerable joints of a casteist society in order to blend their violence so seamlessly that from a distance it looks as if these companies aren't really adding much more harm than what already exists. By making it seem that the capitalist forces that created Sumangali result entirely from a long-established patriarchal and casteist practice, brands in Europe and the United States are framed as second-hand beneficiaries rather than the primary initiators of this practice. And with Utthan, it serves both Indian and Western frameworks of Islamophobia in one go by continuing the feminization, othering, and exploitation of Muslim men, while framing it as an upliftment program and giving fashion houses the luxury clout behind a veneer of a fake compliance gold-star sticker. It is only convenient that dowry, caste, Islamophobia, and xenophobia underpin Indian culture because it easily scapegoats the blame from the West's hyper-exploitative demand for labor. After all, if you have a community where female children are being married off or public advertisements that encourage foeticide, it's quite easy to blame-shift and absolve the companies benefiting from the scheme with a playground-esque "hey, they started it!"

The colonial model resurfaces again here because it relies on gendered violence against women to sustain its cloaked trajectory. We also see the narrative constructed around the surplus availability of these women through discussion of their biomaterial reproductive capacity as "the discourse of race and India, and particularly of Indian workers as numerous, easily replaceable, and best suited for reproduction, becomes

transformed in different settings of labor" (Vora, 9). Since the victims are poor and lower caste Indian women, and the immediate perpetrators are Indian men - the recruiters, the sexual predators who manage the mills, and the participants in dowry funded marriages - this displaces the blame again onto Indian men and their patriarchal and casteist values as the main actors of this violence. This assuages the culpability of the US corporations that are undergirding this violence in their unethical labor practices. This redirection is only a thin veil however because the ultimate benefit of this violence goes, not to working class Indian men, but to the fashion corporations who reap mass productivity from this violence. This makes the women into laboring figures that are subjugated via colonial legacies of gendered exploitations through sexual violence, mental torture, and fatal conditions; the methods of domination employed by these corporations, including the scapegoating of Indian men and patriarchy, is therefore not reminiscent but rather identical to colonial praxis of slave-like subjugation of their subjects. To further employ mutual beneficialism, these conditions are disguised under names of outsourcing, economic opportunities for women, or financial independence. Coding the gendered violence as an unfortunate byproduct of this system invisibilizes the fact that gendered violence is in fact the lifeblood of this system, fortified by "queerphobic xenophobia" like Islamophobia and queerphobia. Vital energy describes the extraction of energy from a marginalized group to sustain another, and we see here how the garments that shield the bodies of human life in America are stitched from the life depletion of these garment workers. By toiling to procure the funds to make themselves marketable in the violently dehumanizing dowry system, these women are simultaneously hyper-exploited and tortured by another dehumanizing system that turns them into biocapitalistic participants of vital-cerebral-physical labor.

A lot of the focus on the Sumangali scheme is directed towards exposing and holding accountable the Western apparel corporations that benefit from the scheme. Many NGOs and relief organizations work towards reintegrating these women into society or making them financially independent in occupations that are less exploitative or hazardous. When considering the effect of outsourcing in relation to the visual field, the labor is placed outside of view and access thus making accountability for the conditions of the workplace nearly impossible. The exploitative conditions and physical assault is fore-fronted as the reason to eradicate this practice, but I want to cast an equally important light onto the affectual framework of the scheme instead. The misogynistic and casteist shadows of this system are also disappeared in this process of outsourcing. I chose to focus on the seedy allure of dowry in the Sumangali scheme to unpack the assemblages of harm within the disappearing process that are not readily associated with the commodity fetishism of fast fashion: at times the advocacy of garment workers fails to recognize the matrices of oppression beyond the exploitative conditions of dangerous sweatshops that produce our coveted products. Cynthia Stephen posits that "Dalit woman as the OTHER is generated by ingrained patriarchal and Brahminical values at all levels in society, which in turn causes the high level of exclusion, invisibility and structural and domestic violence" (Upadhyay, 67). The desperation of the families who buy into this scheme is quietly understood, especially from their daughters who know they cannot even return home if they wanted to. The levels of abandonment that begin at a familial level, extend into the dangerous workplaces, and are disappeared across the global channels of outsourced labor under distortion of female empowerment or fabricated safety compliances. Like invisible seams on the fabrics produced in these

factories, you know they're there and upholding the structure of the garment while upholding the global structures of commodity fetishism. How is that abandonment justified? Where do companies sweep away the severe ideological harm of employing through the Sumangali scheme? Or is it that when this complex of harm and its victims are disappeared, our attention is directed to the Instagram pages of brands collaborating with Indian women to meet their diversity metrics? How can we explore those invisible seams between "those who dream and those who unpack the meanings and consequences of their dreaming?" (Tadiar, 3).

Tadiar argues that imagination has a role in social life as a form of work, agency, and a culturally organized social practice. Imagination is a central force in the creation of new social possibilities even if those productions come about as "imitative renditions of Western glamour" because performances can serve as resistance and tell new "more complex stor[ies] of global cultural flows and exchanges" (3). Her framework posits that cinema was, prior to the internet, the suturing of peoples dreams into performances and productions that gave way to "more visible 'culturalist' forms of [visualized global solidarities] such as ethnic nationalism and the active construction of new diasporic identities through electronic media" (4). She continues that globalization and technology have given us access to visual and creative dream-worlds beyond our nations, political identities, or material realities, but not necessarily in a novel way and rather a continuation of art and social movements that have always existed as counter-hegemonic cultural resources of "other kinds of dreaming" (22) and "wayward dream-acts of living" to potentialize a "liberative rephrasing of history" (24). Earlier in this chapter, I explored the idea of social media as a similar kind of dreaming, a wayward

remapping of epistemologies, as what is present on Twitter or Instagram will not always be historicized or televised.

Furthermore, it is important to my thinking to not represent the Sumangali scheme women as nothing but subalternized victims of their caste, gender, and nation. Reflecting on how the unconscious mind is site of fantasy - in relation to Fanon's formation of "national unconscious" - as a tool for capitalism, the psyche needs to be colonized first via a process of psychic dispossession- and I do not have the authority to render caste-oppressed women as any more or less psychologically dispossessed then South Asian influencers in the diaspora who are also performing and labouring through matrices of oppression for the dominant white, Western gaze. In relation to visuality, a large part of censorship and invisibility depends on psychic dispossession as a way of blinding the colonial subject's imaginary realm and speculative capacity to distort how they see themselves and the world around them. Countervisuality, then, through education, decolonization, and aesthetics of the body resonates with what bell hooks has to say about looking and the oppositional gaze; a mode of looking that challenges the white, patriarchal dominant gaze and alternative visual media and performances that register authentic and meaningful renditions of culture and history. The speculative performances constructed through technological exchanges need to go beyond inserting South Asian influencers into white, mainstream beauty and fashion realms, and instead need to redraw boundaries of an ethical, feminist fashion framework that allows us to see the entanglement of garment workers who convey vital energy. Their biolabour contributions of clothing ultimately end up popularized on social media pages, so how are garment workers still invisibilized from being seen as technologically savvy

participants in hyper-real global cultural exchange networks? They are equally as involved in the global fashion world as influencers, while being censored from the optics. Furthermore, if a recalibration of the visual field depicting South Asian women looks like a reclamation of beauty and fashion, how do we ensure this isn't placing the onus on South Asian fashion influencers to reproduce the visual palatability of Western companies that treat women who look just like them inhumanely.

Although not necessarily under the same caste logics, dowry conditions, or bodily violence, South Asian Instagram content creators are also pushed into a realm where they are falling into the trope of delivering life enrichment. Even if they are being paid with money and fame, does that not beg the question of where this inclusivity and payment stops? Why do these same brands then continue to employ young women who look like their influencers into bonded labor schemes? How do we consider social media marketing as a discursive formation that produces a counter history alongside what is historicized as American history that is inclusive of subalternized voices? How does treating social media as a site of knowledge production due to its mass popularity and engagement with political discourse? Ethnic studies scholarship call for studying historical accounts and autobiographies alongside colonial archives instead of separating them in order to situate the historicity of global historical events and moments as interconnected. Similar relational historical analysis needs to be conducted to study social media as a discursive formation with epistemological weight within history.
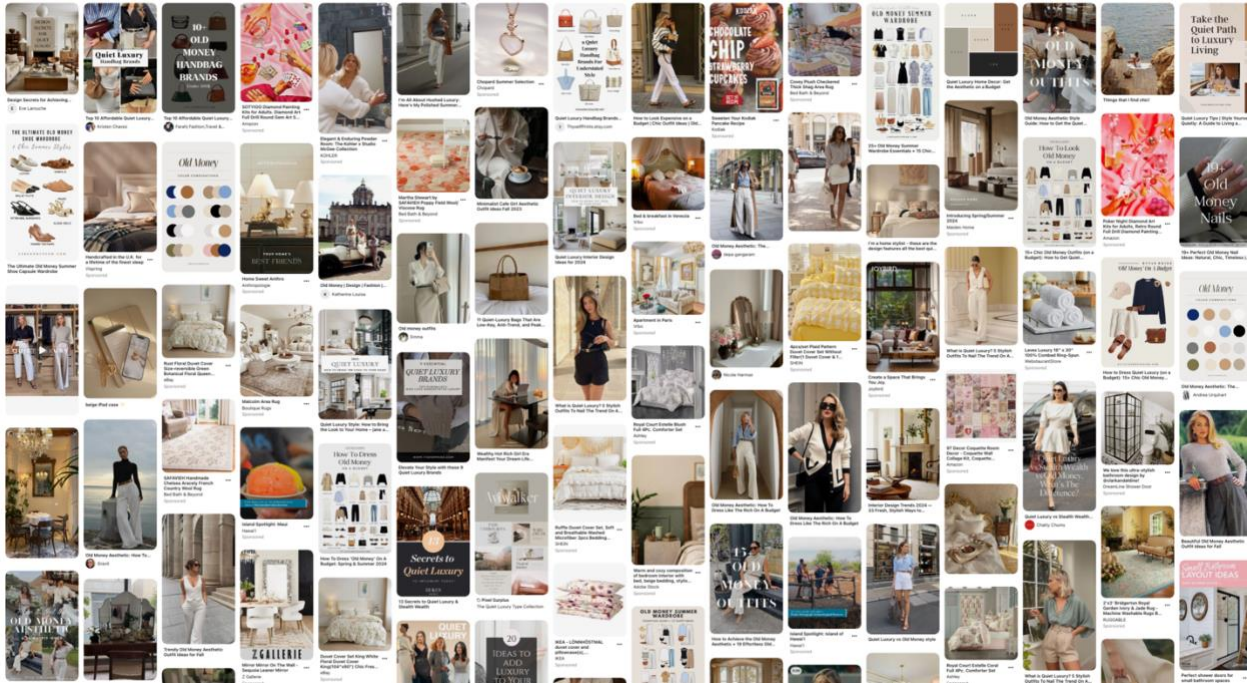
Image 3.2
Pinterest results for Quiet Luxury
Source: www.pinterest.com

Image 3.3

Crop top and Sari Fusion Look by Anjana Rao, one of my favorite fashion bloggers

Source: www.instagram.com/banglebanger/

Image 3.4

Gold payal (anklet) with Nikes by Pakistani American artist Hafsa KhanSource: www.instagram.com/hafnhaf/

Image 3.5
Editorial shoot announcing Randhawa's work with Estee Lauder (now deleted)
Source: www.instagram.com/simisear/

Image 3.6
One of Sanam Sindhi's selfies that caught Rihanna's eye (now deleted from IG)
Source: www.instagram.com/sanam/ (no longer active)

Image 3.7

Sumangali scheme factory worker

Image 3.8
Zari Karigar at work
Source: Noah Seelam, Getty Images
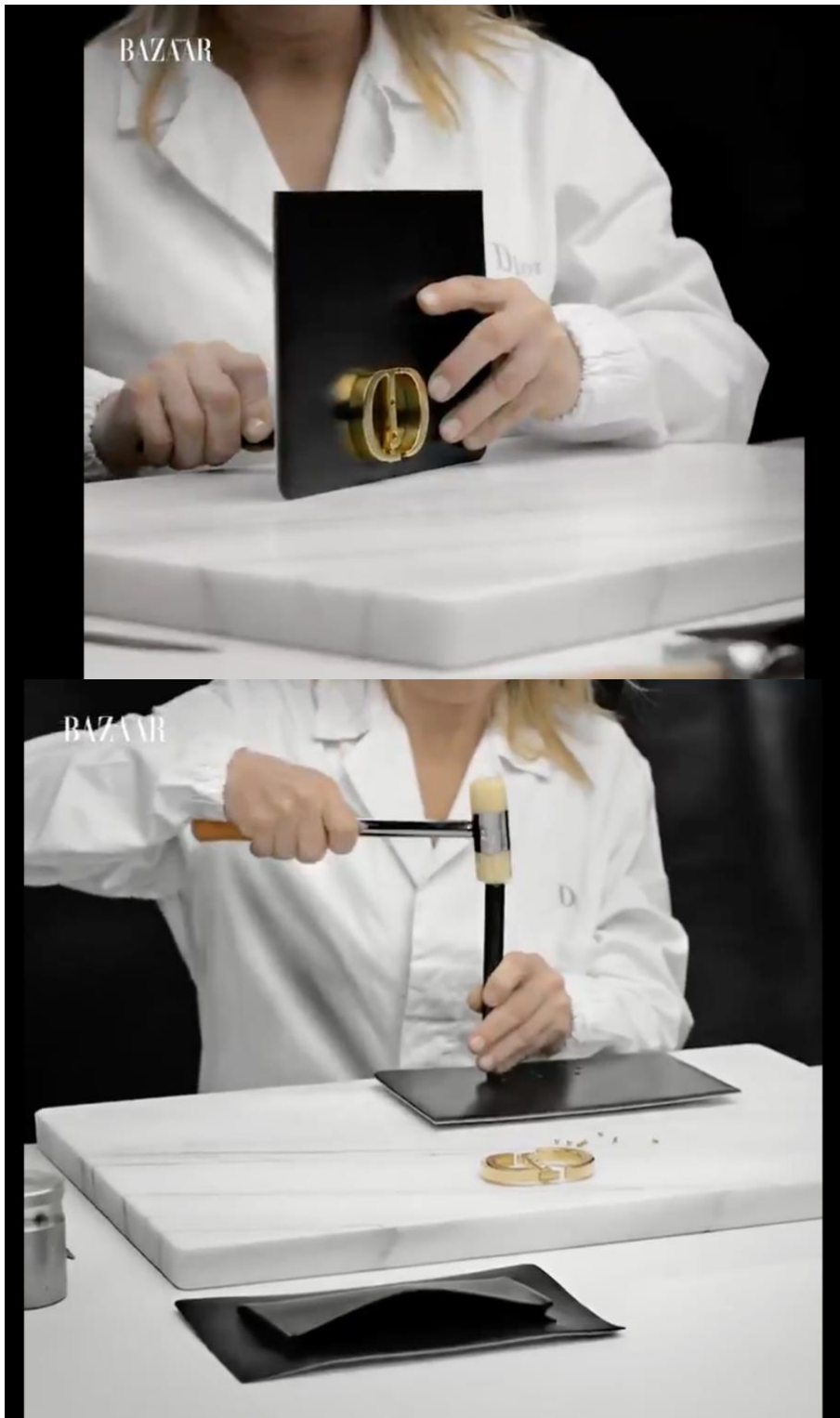
Image 3.9

Stills from @BazaarUK's 2019 video posted on Twitter.com
Source : https://twitter.com/BazaarUK/status/1127852927778000896

Image 3.10

Karigari factory conditions
Source, Atul Loke, The New York Times

EPILOGUE

"Towards a Desi Feminist Future"

"And when the baby girl who was buried alive is asked:
for what sin [were you] sentenced to death?"
The Qur'an 81:8-9

A Lady with Mirror
Miniature
Jaipur, Early 20th century AD.
21.6 x 15.6 cm.
M.No. MSP-326

Image 4.1
Miniature in Salar Jung Museum Hyderabad, India.
I visited in 2016 and did a double take thinking she was taking a selfie.

While writing this epilogue, I struggled with what frameworks or methods would be most productive to convey my sentiments about South Asian and Muslim 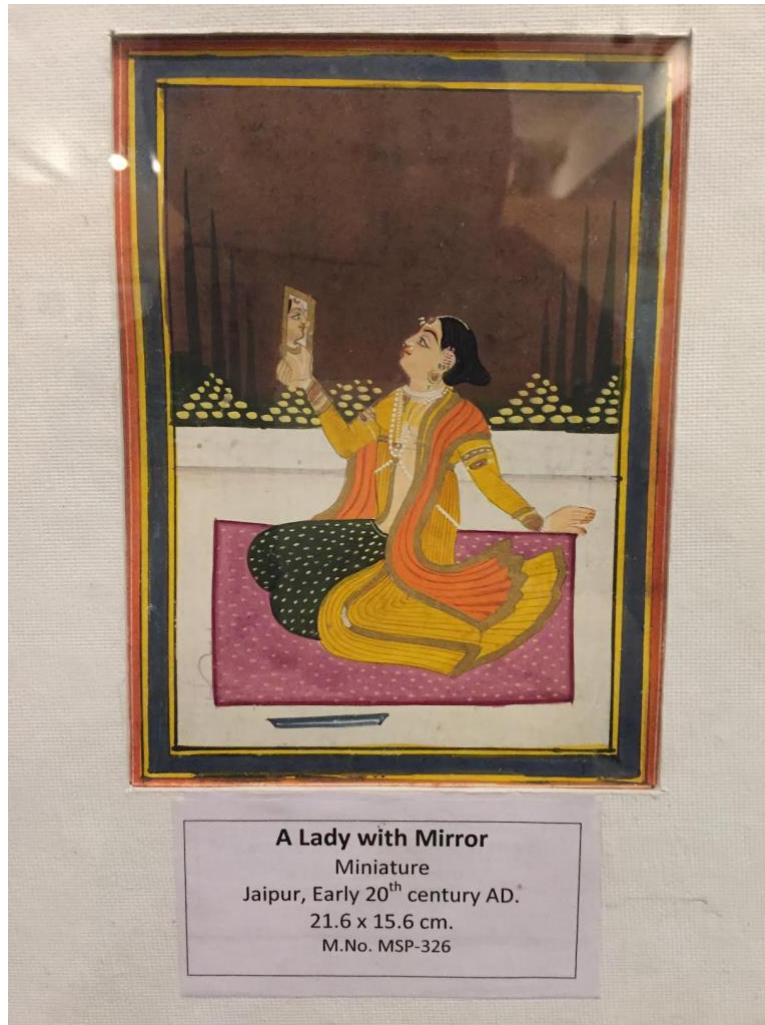women, especially in regards to visual performances on the internet. My research on influencer cultures and the digital fashion and lifestyle scene compels me to think of how South Asian and Muslim women are opening worlds of embodied expression for millions of followers, but their joy and participation is so heavily policed by both people within and outside their communities. This replicates the way the bodies and sexualities of South Asian and Muslim women have been symbols of desire and domination in historical and contemporary conceptions of femininity. I draw attention to three main points. Firstly, the unique matrices of violence for South Asian and Muslim women are due to caste-based misogyny and misuse of Islamic jurisprudence. From there, I argue digital media has created avenues for ruptures and refusals, while also creating repetitions. I conclude this epilogue with a musing on how we are responsible for imagining and creating futures by contributing to new material worlds via digital mediation.

Globally, across all cultures, there is a preoccupation with seeing Muslim women and unveiling the other. Historically, the pendulum of discourse is always swinging between forcibly wearing hijab or forcibly removing hijab, as problematically evidenced in Fanon's *Algeria Unveiled*. Muslim women being seen, or not, carries significant social meaning about the nationstate's relationship with sexuality, femininity, modernity, and patriarchy. The digital mediation of viewing and self-authored performances like Instagram posts and TikTok or YouTube videos intensifies this preoccupation. This surveillance-like viewing of Muslim women results in a very specific type of online hate that is already always intense for Muslim women. Though online hate speech and

cyberbullying are well studied and documented, there is something unique about the type of hate that Muslim women receive from fellow Muslims, or South Asians and Arabs.

The policing is usually valorized as being done in the name of religious and cultural preservation from fellow in-group members- mostly men, but also women. In 2022, user @AlgerianOnCrack posted a video where she said "I would rather be hatecrimed on the internet than stay on the muslim side of tiktok." (Image 4.2) This, since removed, video has been stitched with multiple examples and stories of creators sharing their experiences of simply existing online and receiving a slew of death and rape threats constantly— on a near daily basis for some. In February 2024, Twitter user @HalalFrijole posted a picture of herself pregnant in full abaya, hijab, and her face covered captioned "33 weeks but who's counting :) <3". (Image 4.3) This post received thousands of hateful comments wishing death upon her and her baby from fellow Muslims, coupled with vile accusations by French Islamaphobes that her husband was a pedophile or rapist. While both camps of commenters were awful, the Muslim commenters were justifying their vitriol with Islamic jargon. In 2017, influencer Dina Tokio made a 5-minute-long video where she read out all the Islamophobic comments she would get under her YouTube videos and Instagram posts. In 2018, Tokio stopped wearing her hijab which led to an onslaught of hate from her majority Muslim followers and random Muslim men online. She then posted a 47-minute video reading the hate comments she received from Muslims themselves (Image 4.4). And even after this video, there were Tweets and comments from Muslims - even women - saying she brought this hate upon herself. I bring up these examples to illustrate how there is a double-pronged subjugation by broader global attitudes of Islamophobic misogyny and in-group misogyny based on cultural and religious value preservation. Because of social media's open forum model,

South Asian and Muslim content creators and social media users alike have become so normalized to these comments and threats, but there are broader and historical connections to be made about how online visibility functions differently when coupled with tangible harm. Dylan Rodriguez's framework of *non-scenes of violence* can again be located here to explain how threats and acts of violence can become unspectacular due to their prevalence and the reasoning used to justify them. The everydayness of these comments renders a non-reading of the threats to which South Asian and Muslim influencers, and average users, are subjected. Simply performing on a visual platform should not put one at risk for death or rape threats yet it's so commonplace and seen as a natural consequence. My chapters have considered how online performances and world-making have enriched the lives of women albeit with nuance and complications; but there are added risks in visibility that make women more susceptible to threats that result in tangible acts of harm[1].

While every chapter of my paper is invested in how the internet has offered a digital medium for rearticulations of biolabour, imperialism, casteism, and Islamophobia, I feel compelled to explore how it has also ushered a way for misogyny to create both real and hyperreal consequences. In my analysis of social media, hyperreal denotes a state where reality and a digitally mediated version of reality are mutually co-constitutive. South Asian and Muslim women online get literal death, rape, abuse, or 'eternal damnation' threats for simply existing outside the parameters of what a respectable woman should be and how a woman is meant to uphold entire values for culture and religion. Those parameters are set by misogynistic values that may not be unique in theory but definitely are vividly distinct in practice and reasoning.

Misogynistic violence and femicide that is distinctly found in South Asian and Muslim cultures turns these comments to actual interpersonal and domestic acts of violence and murder. The distinctly South Asian and Muslim cultural code of 'honor killing' is often justified by a self-entitled right to correct fellow Muslims, forcing them to practice better or die trying. What seems like faceless troll comments, I argue, have very strong connections to the actual death and assault Muslim women face under the guise of Islamic and cultural value preservation. In the past five years alone, I can name many domestic violence and honor killing cases that were a result of a woman's online expressions of joy, femininity, or sexuality— and many of these were not limited to the Asian subcontinent or Arab countries. Though Instagram gives women a platform to express themselves and connect with one another, it also ushers in a new mode of repeating the violence already present in the community. It's important to my work, personal life, and community investments, to consider how social media truly does facilitate being seen, but also being killed.

SPECULATIVE FUTURES: CYBORGIAN-GODDESSES

When writing *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments,* Saidiya Hartman interrogates the concept of a 'free life'. Across this epilogue, I pursue the question of what is a free life for South Asian and Muslim women? What is free, joyous expression unbridled by the fear of death or judgment or pain or abandonment? While I firmly believe that a South Asian or Muslim woman can imagine a free life for herself, a part of me is also arguing that so much of free life is not attainable because if it's not their own families or communities restricting them, it's a looming threat of strangers on the internet. My feelings towards self-authored feminist futures are muddied by the murders of women

who chose to simply live their life and were honor killed in this contemporary era, and how social media was a part of that liberated 'being seen' that ultimately led to their deaths. In 2022, a Pakistani woman named Sania Khan began documenting her divorce process on TikTok in the hopes of healing and destigmatizing the issue for fellow South Asian Muslims. In May, after her divorce was finalized, Khan posted about how much better her life was despite her family shunning and threatening her for her videos. In July, a month after her 29th birthday, Khan was shot dead by her ex-husband who drove from Georgia to Illinois with a loaded handgun. One of Khan's last posts was of her getting a tattoo celebrating her growth and happiness welcoming her birthday (Image 4.5) Many news articles cite her TikTok popularity as a factor of her death, and led to horrid discourse about her videos being to blame, shifting the focus from her murder to her visibility. Examples like Khan's undermine liberal ideals that reify visibility as a sign of equity or progress despite restrictive interpersonal relations and misogynistic family cultures that don't bend. Furthermore, working towards a feminist future must encompass intersections beyond gender, race, religion alone and consider class and working conditions as well. Social media platforms have provided a space for South Asian, Muslim, and diasporic youth to engage with cultural motifs and community interactions that go beyond regurgitated, identity-politics conversations of representation or cultural appropriation. I want to imagine a South Asian feminist future that confronts the lack of feminist representation when discussing the garment workers in South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, and the cultural and familial conditions that compel their exploitation. Or a recalibration of a visual field where South Asian women participate in beauty, fashion, decor trends with a critical understanding of histories and decentering of whiteness. My intention is not to present

a simple binary between feminisms in the West and South Asia, but rather to present a critical juxtaposition between the ways that competing South Asian feminist futures can be imagined and created across social media, ad campaigns and educational media.

South Asian and Muslim women are responsible for producing these beautiful, visual possibilities for fashion and beauty brands, yet how often participation in those visual cultures is foreclosed by hate comments, abuse, and threats of death. My intention is not to sound defeated, as social media creators and users across all communities have cultivated spaces and communities that allow for safe self-expression and learning from one another in pursuit of a freer life. Creators and users have engaged in interactions that produced social memories, aesthetic practices, and performances that produced knowledge. Social media has also ushered in life-giving, and often, life-saving, community networks and individual friendships that have formed knowledge to be shared generationally or globally. These affective exchanges and embodied performances also produced visual vocabularies that sometimes over-prioritize symbols of female empowerment without including all women or communities. How can these vast networks of knowledge be expanded and taught as legitimate theoretical frameworks in academic work? What methods can we employ to amplify the visual vocabulary of these aesthetic practices to consider nuances like class and caste.

The advent of social media in the past decade has resulted in people rearticulating technology to speak to their politics, but also rethinking their politics via engagement with technology. Early labor movements relied on reimaging reality by managing visual representations of laboring bodies in photography, television, and film. In *Farm Worker*

Futurism, Curtis Marez weaves a conversation between media and agribusiness centering the way California's farm worker economy shaped North America's position in the global agricultural economy. Marez presents how agricultural fantasies between the United States and Mexico arise in sci-fi film and media lead us towards a critical engagement with speculative transformative practices. The visual field is informed by social and historical power dynamics that map our perception of reality, and new mediums usher new engagements with those power dynamics. A perfect example of this is with the late Pakistani social media and television celebrity, Qandeel Baloch. Rising to popularity after her *Pakistani Idol* audition, Baloch became Pakistan's first social media celebrity and frequently appeared on television network programs, reality shows, and even religious talk shows (Image 4.6). Baloch's rise in 2013-2016 was during an era where television and film were not the only dominant medium and YouTube and other applications were becoming commonplace. For Baloch, social media offered a new world and access to notoriety, but also created an entirely new beast of backlash. These visual constructions of the social expose the dialectical disturbances that arise when competing futures are projected via visual technologies. This foregrounds social antagonisms that we can then attempt to resist through the transformative power of visual speculation. Speculation and futurity offer a horizon of possibilities that aren't simply prescriptive or alternative, fixed schemas; rather, they offer methods to critique the limits of the present through performance, technology, and other tools of worldmaking. Despite the worlds Baloch opened up for Pakistani youth, she was ultimately honour killed by her brothers. Upon her death, a radio show host named Fasi Zaka asserted how homages comparing her to Kim Kardashian were insufficient because they failed to realize how she was extremely poor without any financial safety net and that the society she was up against ideologically

was not like the United States; for Baloch to conceive a future, she had to go through hurdles and threats that don't exist in the United States in the same way, so calling her the Pakistani Kim Kardashian is not only a disservice to her tenacity, but reductive in a global political context. Marez illuminates the tension with futurity by asking us "who can expect a future, who cannot, and why?" (11). Speculation and resistance do the work of foregrounding subaltern views of seeing and knowing the contradictory and gendered social formations that are informed through global economic relations. When thinking about how people use creative, imaginative, and speculative labor in order to assert their humanity - and *save their own lives* - I'm drawn towards the competing feminisms employed by South Asian women in the diaspora and in the region.

I want to imagine a South Asian feminist future that engages with the representations of South Asian women in the online fashion and beauty realm, while conducting the speculative labor to imagine a future that reworks the conditions of South Asian women bonded to garment and textile mills. A guiding question for this section stems from the final musings of Jasbir Puar's I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess piece that asks, "why disaggregate the two when there sure must be a cyborgian-goddess in our midst?" (Puar, 65) When considering biolabour, care workers are participants in both systems of technological economies and domestic labour, but a nanny isn't imagined as a participant in futuristic, technologically-advanced industries despite being the reason that companies, industries, and nations are developed through their 'domestic' help. Similarly, how can we imagine a South Asian feminist future that stems from a negotiation between the ideas of both a cyborg and a goddess in order to redraw the territories of how South Asian feminine cultures and practices can be represented

visually. Would a cyborgian-goddess look like an empowering trope of South Asian fashion influencers collaborating with big brands to push brown women into the fashion world, or would it look like the liberation of garment workers who work mechanically under violent conditions? In terms of karigars, there are many artisan preservation and education institutions, ateliers, and programs that aim to cultivate the craft and provide equitable treatment to the workers- how can we imagine a world where they are honored as well as being fairly compensated?

Social media invites new intricate networks that funnel vital energy through global exchanges of capital and life-giving creative labour. Puar asks us to focus on the life-giving patterns of relations through which affective intensification occurs between "technology, bodies, matter, molecular movements, and energetic transfers." (Puar, 63). How do social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok provide a space for South Asian women in the diaspora to engage with cultural motifs and fashion to redefine the images of themselves? These online performances attempt a feminist South Asian futurity via the speculative formations of fashion or decor; however, when that speculative labor is focused on empowerment via an integration into whiteness through beauty, it absents the majority of women bonded to soft trafficking schemes that exploit them under slave-like conditions. A critical articulation of speculative transformative practices wouldn't only use self-generated social media content to resist reductive inclusivity efforts, but instead expand the transformative power of visual speculation in the influencer economy on all ends of the spectrum including production and advertising. If we expand speculative visual performances on Instagram, how do we expand into conversations about the other end of the fashion spectrum - fast fashion and

garment factory conditions - which were largely brought to light in the same manner as farm worker movements were sensationalized in popular culture? My intention is not to present a simple binary between feminisms in the West and South Asia, but rather to present a critical juxtaposition between the ways that competing South Asian feminist futures need to be imaged across social media campaigns, educational media, brand collaborations, or a reworked refusal of it all.

In the false binary between cyborg and goddess, the cyborg "hails the future in a teleological technological determinism" that exceptionalizes technology and culture. On the other hand, the goddess "is embedded in the racialized matriarchal mythos" that harkens to a nostalgic connection to nature, creation, and sacrifice (Puar, 65). A cyborg is a cybernetic organism that conducts its energies through technological venues in order to reimagine what it means to be a woman in today's hyper-real platforms. The goddess romanticizes a pre-technological past where the woman is rooted on earth to serve as the producer of life which attempts a feminist tone by framing women as transferors of vitality. The cyborg narrative overly attributes technology, via the most cutting edge and popular channels, as the advances that propel us into a feminist future. Similarly, the goddess narrative overly attributes life-giving vitality, via a dedication to nature and not modernization, as a reclamation tactic towards a feminist future. This binary results in an impasse between two feminist narratives that position the two in a competition without realizing that both are spiraling around one another. While the cyborg narrative imagines a future that integrates women into society's technological fabric in order to open up new possibilities, the goddess narrative life-giving vitality falls into life enrichment via exchanges of life through venues different from traditional ideas of

reproduction. The push towards a cyborgian feminist narrative amongst South Asian women largely looks like a performative interruption in Eurocentric beauty standards and the Western fashion scene that relies heavily on Instagram to seek out influencers of color for popular brands. Thus, if we trace the other end of the cyborg to goddess line, we find that the bonded labour garment worker can be imaged under the goddess narrative in a way where her life is depleted to nourish and give life through clothing. Connected to the ideas in Chapter 1, we are all in some way implicated in a relationship with social media, capitalism, and our post-human 'cyborgian' selves comprising our user-generated data and hyper-real affective exchanges. Contending with the idea of influencers and users as labouring bodies - albeit creatively or leisurely - who exist within the material realities and libidinal economies of both information technologies and colonial legacies.

A closer examination of the logics that fuel fashion's dependency on the indentured servitude-like exploitation demands a confrontation with the historical relations birthed by colonial projects that depended on the hyper-exploitation and extraction of life from colonized countries. It's important to note the use of indentured servitude as the chosen description of the conditions that these lower caste women and Muslim men face because it does two things to further our analysis of contemporary global capital. It acknowledges that the relationship between the garment worker and the corporation leaders is impacted by a history of colonial subjugation and violence. The network from how our clothes are made to when they touch our skin is fraught with a seedy historical practice of unpaid labor under slave-like conditions of colonialism. This illumination of the colonial frameworks that birthed this current relationship erases the idea that this is just a modern day form imperialism; rather it is an ongoing continuation

of a practice of hyper-exploitation and indentured servitude labor conditions that are simply invisibilized to fit the contemporary global capital schema. Slavery, indentured servitude, and bonded labour can never be modern or novel when they never ended. Understanding this continuous colonial legacy of unethical labour allows us to move out of reductive frameworks that don't highlight the US's use of slavery and indentured servitude in other countries or time eras outside of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. There are slave-like practices all across the world that serve to benefit the United States without explicitly centering the United States. Ultimately, the production occurring in India is not exclusively benefiting local Indian economies, but rather the Western corporations that have outsourced the labor of Indian bodies for their own growth. Naming this condition of one that is seated in colonial labor practices allows us to make connections across the intimacies of peripheries of empires and locating the US's role across various iterations of labour exploitation. It's imperative to have a conversation about how those relations intersect across the continent to hinder the United States from concealing their continued reliance on slave-like labor. Though it is important to discuss the labor exploitation on United States soil, it's equally as important to focus on these peripheral relations that occur across global currents of exchange in order to understand the US's ongoing imperialist projects.

Colonial capital enterprises relied on frameworks of commercialized surrogacy to the point that even post-colonial infrastructural development sustained labor forces and capitalistic production. India becomes a prime market for biological and affective reproduction by providing a surplus of female bodies that can extend life in the same way that India supplied coolies throughout the British Empire alongside raw materials and

resources for colonial extraction. By isolating and capitalizing on the life-giving capacity of specific body parts, we see how India's history provides a new mode of racialized and gendered labor extraction coded as outsourcing. The goddess trope of matriarchal mythology presents itself in the Sumangali scheme. It becomes necessary for the United States to distance itself from the exploitative practices lest they are outed for their continued reliance on indentured servitude. We also see the narrative constructed around a goddess-like imaging of these women through discussion of their biomaterial reproductive capacity and exclusion from technological advances. To further employ the goddess trope, these conditions are disguised under the promise of financial opportunities for women but only to the extent of serving as their dowry- so they can be subjugated by the casteist marriage system after this economic opportunity.

When thinking about how people use creative, imaginative, and speculative labor in order to save their own lives, I'm struck by the way pushback against fast fashion as we see it on social media is very rarely focused on anything beyond how its bad or wrong; the competing feminisms employed by South Asian women online emerge here when we consider how within the influencer economy, an influencer's engagement with technology to spur creative labor is very much framed as cyborgian- but in a way that overly attributes technology and how being seen on the most cutting edge and popular social media channels is the advancement that may propel us into a feminist future. For example, in 2014 the push to #ReclaimTheBindi took over social media after white women culturally appropriated the bindi while attending music festivals such as Coachella. Another popular social media trend was the rejection of shadism through an Unfair and Ugly campaign - as a disavowal of South Asia's most popular fairness cream

called Fair and Lovely - where dark-skinned desi women shared their pictures and captions. When the conversation around beauty and fashion is capped off at these aesthetic issues, however, it imagines a future where desi feminist visions are remapped over the frameworks of Eurocentric beauty standards. Social media platforms have provided a hyper-real space for South Asian diasporic youth to harmonize their humanity with technology in a way that propels their feminism in the cyborgian narrative of embracing technological affective exchanges. But in accordance with colonial legacies of life extraction, we see how companies co-opt this sort of creative labor in order to push their brands while continuing to subject women to slave-like labor and ignore workers' conditions by glossing over with 'multicultural' or 'diverse' their trendy campaigns boast.

The imaginative labor that needs to be constructed through both technological exchanges needs to go beyond inserting ethnic iconography into white/ mainstream beauty and fashion, and rather to redraw boundaries of an ethical, feminist fashion framework that allows us to see the cyborgian entanglement of garment workers in India or Bangladesh who work mechanically to convey vital energy. Their cyborgian contributions as clothing ultimately end up popularized on social media pages, so how are they still invisibilized and not seen as technologically savvy participants in hyper-real global cultural exchange networks? Furthermore, if a recalibration of the visual field depicting South Asian women looks like a reclamation of beauty and fashion, how do we ensure this isn't placing an onus on South Asian fashion influencers to give life in the mythical mother India[2] goddess narrative by way of contributing their bodies to be imaged for the reproductive palatability of white companies? Does that not push our cyborgian heroines into a realm where they are falling into the trope of delivering life

enrichment? Even if they are being paid with money and an audience, does that not beg the question of where this inclusivity and payment stops? Why do these same brands like Christian Dior or Estes Lauder then continue to employ women who look like Sindhi and Randhawa into bonded labor schemes? Marez discusses "a matrix of domination, resistance, incorporation, and rearticulation" when discussing the label "farm worker;" this constellation can be applied towards garment workers whose feminism and futurity are invisibilized through a lack of visual representation. This matrix of domination and rearticulation draws back to my exploration of biocapital exchanges seated in colonial histories of labor extraction. Coupled with a disruption of the cyborg-goddess binary, the case studies and theoretical explorations presented throughout my chapters signal us towards a South Asian feminist futurity and a constellation of resistance and incorporation that applied to both garment workers producing culture materially within bonded labour schemes and influencers who attempt to reclaim that culture digitally via speculative practices. Resistance can look both like South Asian fashion influencers rejecting partnerships from companies like Nike, or it can look like taking the exposure from such collaborations to speak to larger audiences about our complicity in the garment workers' oppression. Incorporation can look both like collaborations with make-up brands to push them towards make-up for all skin tones, but it can also look like ensuring that make-up isn't made in factories with exploitative practices or in violation of boycott, divest, and sanctions movements.

In 2017, Zara customers in Istanbul found tags tucked into the pockets of jeans and tops sent from the garment workers, informing consumers that they did not receive payment for the clothes that the customer is now wearing (Image 4.7). In July 2016, the

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manufacturer Bravo Tekstil, which is housed under Inditex- the largest global apparel retailer - went bankrupt overnight and shut down their Istanbul factory without informing its 155 workers and without paying them the remaining wages they were contractually owed. The tags explained to customers how they were demanding Inditex and its stores like Zara to fairly compensate them for the three months of back wages and severance, and actions the consumers could take like petitions and contacting the company. In interviews, many of the garment workers expressed how the losses of their jobs and wages resulted in profound precarity and the inability to pay for rent, weddings planned in advance, or their children's tuition. It bears mentioning that in 2016 Inditex had over 7000 stores around the globe that generated $27 billion in revenue and $5.8 billion in overall profits. After a year of negotiation, and the spike in publicity when the petition and media surrounding the tags went viral, the workers were forced to accept partial payments as a 'hardship fund' but Bravo faced no consequences otherwise. Although this is not the best possible outcome, it did create a huge dent in Zara's reputation as it wasn't previously considered as typically fast fashion as Forever 21, for example. This creative and effective mobilization made the wage theft legible and placed it right on the product itself. This affective and radical exchange illuminates a potential model for cyborgian-goddess resistive practices in order to draw a feminist future constellation for South Asian women in both the diaspora and the region.

RUPTURES AND REPETITIONS

My case studies surveying the influencer economy, social media cultures, interior decor, and fashion, have all examined the representation of South Asian aesthetics and women in the visual fields popular culture to illuminate how critical and productive

South Asian women and their affective exchanges can be in generating a South Asian feminist futurity. I began this dissertation with a conversation about the visual legibility in the field of Instagram. My analysis of aesthetics and digital cultures has been informed by my personal engagement with Internet cultures, social media accounts run by South Asian and Muslim artists, influencers, content creators, and all the wonderful South Asian and Muslim women and queer people in my life who have helped me articulate my observations on cultural representations. Guided by Jose Esteban Muñoz's brilliant framework of *disidentifying*, I aim to offer a call for ruptures through a practice of disidentifying vectors of meaning and imagery. I move into a conversation about how this visual field is tacitly intertwined with the imaginative and material labor South Asian women undertake and what meaning that holds globally; social media doesn't have any borders and has served as a crucial example of neoliberal digital globalization and how the visual fields I've surveyed are all entangled with global labor practices, but also broader conversations about speculation, futurity, and resistance. To think of futures that weave South Asian women's quotidian practices into rich archives and epistemologies, I consider the value of speculative labor mediated through digital or corporeal performances in the feminist scholarly tradition of repertoires and refusal as tools for building future worlds for and by South Asian women and queer people. Guided by the narratives around Qandeel Baloch, Jyoti Singh, and Asifa Bano, this epilogue explores a South Asian feminist futurity that serves a horizon of possibilities and does not prescribe fixed solutions, but offers a critique of the limits of the present schema. Speculation and world-making thus become optimisms towards a futurity where limits are dismembered and retooled into epistemic and survival practices.

A South Asian feminist future is not one limited by Eurocentric beauty, hetero-patriarchy, Hindu Nationalism, Islamophobia, or caste. I want us to create more performances, images, and media to offer a visual of a South Asian feminist future that is not illuminated simply by the aesthetic appeal of Bollywood actresses or Instagram models, nor the victims of sensationalized stories of violence. Photographs and videos, as signifiers of larger ideas or actions, can claim ruptures through their virtual, hyper-real space. The internet has historically served as a rich platform to articulate the lifestyles and practices of diverse social groups. And yet, fashion and beauty content creators, while intending to subvert Western and white aesthetics and production, end up furthering colonial and Oriental meanings when they partner with companies without inclusive sizes, shade ranges, investments in Israel, or reliance on casteist, Islamophobic structures. Out of fear of being decentered or spoken for, popular South Asian content creators offer a continuous alternative to the dominant narrative they once sought to rupture.

In the diaspora, South Asian content creators often perpetuate a binary between hyper-sexualization and hyper-victimization— which I argue is a feedback loop— when they display their resistance to white supremacy or patriarchy via Instagram and TikTok. Adorned in lush fabric, intricate jewelry, henna, and other fusion cultural adornments, desi content creators consider their participation in their cultural iconography as resistance to patriarchy and white supremacy. Cultural motifs like saris, bindis, hijabs have now become visible in contemporary fashion by styling a sari with a crop top and combat boots from Anthropologie or wearing a hijab with trendy Adidas streetwear. Though we have seen brands becoming increasingly responsive to calls for diversity, such

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as paying closer attention to undertones and color theory when formulating make-up or having modest ranges suitable for hijabi women, there is still a long way to go. Jillian Hernandez's *Beauty Marks* invites me to engage with Instagram as "archive and repertoire, a place where we write our surfaces into existence" (Hernandez, 3). Like Hernandez, I ruminate on how "how these surfacings generate new repertoires of embodied performance" for South Asian women. Her work legitimizes the political stakes of social media images as embodied performances that reanimate the existence of women like her abuelitas. I connect this reading of Instagram photos to women like Jyoti Singh and Asifa Bano who are written out of narratives about the future of South Asian women, except when coded as perpetually silenced victims. In her endnotes, Hernandez remarks "Instagram can be a healing platform in its affirmative mirrorings of Latinx embodiment.... I am in wonder of how these surfacings generate new repertoires of embodied performance for young Latinx." I admire the creative endeavors of these young desi women, and can place an eye on the brimming epistemological potential that is held in these images, but I am left with the challenge of pushing this work further. These accounts aim to disrupt systems of Eurocentric beauty standards, however many function as a continuous repetition instead of a rupture of patriarchy and white supremacy. This attempt at alterity is limited where there is no analysis or inclusivity in a place where people who don't visually represent the edgy, fusion aesthetic are absented from the social imaginary of what South Asian future or feminism can look like. Similar to how in Chapter 2, we discussed how certain aesthetic aspects of immigrant homes will never be seen as boho-chic by any means despite being rooted in South Asian aesthetics they are not designed for the boho Western gaze. Despite a reclamation of South Asian beauty signifiers, or instilling a sense of pride within young desi kids, many of these young

women hold close proximity to conventional attractiveness which makes a rejection of Eurocentric beauty standards easy. Hernandez's work pushes me to draw from these performances of beauty and think through what knowledge is held in these images, despite where they fall short, and consider how we can begin reading these as embodied performances of survival.

The gaps in between those performances illuminates the conversations the desi community is not having about the people who aren't given the platform to have conversations about themselves. I think about the desi women who are left behind in these performances and images, largely the women in the garment and textile mills for Western fashion corporations. The limits of certain cultural production forms on social media that engage with Indian cultural motifs purported to resist or resent white supremacy and patriarchy are visually wonderful, but fall short of producing an inclusive feminist futurity. I critique the desire to name everything as a rupture or shattering of the status quo when this hyper-real culture of visually stimulated and image oriented online communities of young women on Instagram function as a repetition. Disidentifying provides the theoretical framework to challenge both the narrative that is attempted through rupture and the dominant colonial-based narrative that is quietly repeated. As much as content creators aim to rupture what is considered desi, they are often a repetition of the dominant cultural narrative because these aesthetic ruptures often mold themselves to fit into the dominant matrices of beauty, instead of "a partial disavowal of that cultural form that works to restructure it from within" (Muñoz, 28). Images of cultural representation that are limited to upper middle class, conventionally attractive, able-bodied women exclude members of the subalternized communities of women that

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aren't heavily integrated or aligned with these makings. This exclusion limits how accumulated and embodied memory can supply us with epistemologies to survive when we see ourselves in these images, but cannot see the women who are made invisible by the gendered and state violence that sustains our livelihood.

If every declared rupture is then an undeclared repetition, what weight do these hyper-real meaning (re)making attempts have on a larger cultural scale? Furthermore, who from the subaltern is then strategically left out of this meaning, or unable to control their relationship to this meaning— those who cannot mark themselves within that rupture because their actions or looks cannot be folded into that beauty and fashion narrative? Diasporic desi Instagram creatives find various flickers of adjectival meaning and restructure them to attain some semblance of a desirable or meaningful identity. By attempting to rework an identity into something else, there's an impetus to graft other meanings onto it, and to smooth out that reworking to "represent a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" (Muñoz, 31). I employ this definition in my work by exploring the limits that arise when desi women suture their personal narratives into the folds of the dominant culture. These images offer a sense of acceptance and inclusivity for members of the diaspora who never felt as though they fit in with their white or Western counterparts, but largely absent South Asian women who are not represented in these visual attempts. In the process of rethinking encoded meaning, disidentification must confront "exclusionary machinations and [recircuit] its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications" (Muñoz, 31). I argue that disidentifying—as it is attempted by South Asian content creators— needs to move beyond imitative renditions with slight

difference and instead toward constellating new futures. I posit that dislocating aesthetics and icons aimed at the white gaze will lead to an inclusivity lending us epistemic tools of survival that are found within the affective and generational exchanges between South Asian women. This reconfiguration of knowledge can disrupt thought production in public spaces and realms in order to reorient towards a feminist counterpublic that is sustained by women who are both included and excluded by the embodied Instagram performances. Articulation and portrayal in embodied performances on platforms like Instagram allow for us to see one another as survival. Hernandez asks us to see together to visualize what "knowledge of our racialized gendered Latinx surfaces can look like beyond analyzing representation," (Hernandez, 2) and it is from that knowledge that we can conceptualize counterpublics that include South Asian women subalternized by gendered and state violence, South Asian women who use Instagram as embodied performance and who have yet to be visually represented.

INSTA-EPISTEMOLOGIES: A VISUAL CALL AND ANSWER

The dominant visual representation of South Asian and Muslim women takes place in part through sexualized imaging in Bollywood cinemas, Oriental unveiling fantasies, or social media, and in the sensationalized gendered violence across the region. Within the group of countries that make up South Asia, India is the predominant one that comes to mind considering its size, population, and global, capitalistic reach. Often I use the word desi to mean South Asian diasporic communities, but also to refer to the homogenization that occurs in the diaspora that blurs South Asian countries into a monolithic representation coded as India, similar to the way boho or Mughal were

catchalls as well. The imaging of India is important because it colors the imaginary of what South Asia looks like at large, and problematically contorts countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka into homogenized Indian representatives. By positioning India as the visual representation of South Asia, channels like film, social media, and popular culture envision Indian women as either sexualized, exotic beings, or silenced victims of a patriarchy unique to South Asian culture. This binary finds its roots in the Orientalist depictions in history books of belly dancers in sheer veils or village women holding pots on curvy hips. The quintessential sari, a long garment wrapped into a skirt and over the shoulder worn with cropped blouse, is recognizable in the West and often emulated at theme parties or is the costume of choice in films that have an Indian woman littered in the background to emphasize the diversity of a cinematic neighborhood or a roundtable between global leaders. We see this in contemporary fashion contexts as well. Recently, desi Instagram and Twitter were ablaze discussing popular fashion e-tailer ASOS selling lehngas: a two-piece consisting of a crop top and flowy skirt, the lehnga became the object of discourse as non-South Asian girls have begun wearing them for their high school proms as they're being marketed as two-piece sets that are edgier than a traditional gown. Another fashion TikToker was compelled to delete a video after receiving heated backlash because she called a chiffon scarf and dress combo a "chic, Scandavinain, European summer look" while her example photographs resembled South Asian attire of salwar-kameez and dupatta.

Though most women in South Asia wear saris, salwar-kameezes, and lehngas to differing degrees, the Western eye associates their iconography with India and continues to push India as the visual dominant over smaller South Asian countries. Numerous hair

and make-up tutorials on YouTube are labeled as Bollywood glam, and draw from 1970s actresses like Waheeda Rehman and Hema Malini, to put forth a glitzy and bold look with heavy winged eyeliner, bright lip tones, and eyeshadow that attempts every color found on the outfit. Paired with intricate jewelry like nose rings and headpieces, these Bollywood glam looks are often debated by South Asian make-up artists who argue that this iconography doesn't include hair and make-up after the 70s. So why is this particular look the most pervasive and popular? Because it aligns most closely with the Orientalist imagery that painted historical India, and it continues to feed into the fashion and beauty that the West imagines of the entire South Asian continent by way of Bollywood. India, or more correctly, the India of older Bollywood cinema, is the visual symbol relegated onto an entire region of nations to homogenize women from those various countries into a neat formation of exoticism. Take for example, Western media's fascination with Indian actress Priyanka Chopra; she is always in the news for everything from being an exotic breakthrough star despite a longstanding Bollywood career and her marriage to an all-American Jonas Brother— without any regard to her Islamophobic, Hindu Nationalist and Zionist politics.

Media portrayals on the other end of this representational spectrum often depict South Asian women who face particular violence that stems from the region's history of caste and patriarchal religious traditions. Stories that make the news in the United States are often around incidents of rape, acid attacks, child marriage, honor killings, or attacks on women ranging from widows or young schoolgirls. Stories like this are often accompanied with graphic imagery of acid victims with disfigured faces, or the dead bodies of young girls who were killed for "honor" or dowry. These harrowing examples

of gendered violence highlight popular incidents that occur in India or Pakistan, and make sweeping claims of the religious or traditional motives of the violence. This lifts the blame off of the various patriarchal networks and histories of these countries, and instead reduces this violence to an inherent quality of South Asian culture. While it is true that the nature and roots of certain acts of violence are unique to South Asian culture, the pity and reactions garnered from the West with popularized stories of Malala Yousafzai—a Pakistani schoolgirl shot in the head by the Taliban—or Jyoti Singh—an Indian student gang raped and killed on a moving bus—unfortunately cement the image of South Asian women as perpetual victims of violence. Photos of Singh's mutilated body in her final moments or Yousafzai's bandaged head in the hospital flooded social media. The idea that these women are silenced or unable to organize against their misogynistic conditions plays into the white savior complex of Western journalism when visually documenting and reporting these stories. These stories make the news and are touted as monolithic representations of the conditions of women in South Asia, and continue to embolden white feminists without ever accurately assessing the global, capitalistic, and exploitative entanglement with corporations in the United States that fortify those systems of violence. Furthermore, once Yousafzai gained more notoriety for her public advocacy of issues beyond the Taliban's ban on girls education, she faced criticism from both Muslims and Islamophobes for being neither the perfect hijab-wearing victim nor the perfect representation of Muslim women. Commentary about the terrorism in Pakistan or the poverty in India and Bangladesh rarely take up the United States role in these systems of gendered violence and abject poverty. These South Asian women are subalternized by systems of state violence embedded in historical and political systems of post-colonialism.

The spectrum between the hyper-sexualization and the hyper-victimization that is projected onto South Asian women opens an emptied imaginative geography for American corporations to map meaning onto. The unconscious mind is a site of fantasy, and that site is also colonized; so, we often find that that spectrum is cyclical and loops into itself as both those spectrums are rooted in colonial legacies and vacillate to shape the social meaning of South Asian women. In Orientalist fashion, Western media has represented women like Malala Yousafzai, Jyoti Singh, Qandeel Baloch and Asifa Bano, who I will discuss later, as victims of a misogyny unique to South Asian culture and history of caste or religiously motivated violence. With Baloch's honour killing, Yousafzai's confrontation of the Taliban, Singh's death at the hands of India's rampant rape culture, and Asifa Bano facing Islamophobic persecution in India, these stories unfortunately reify the trope of South Asian women as victims of their own men and conservative traditions. Historically, Orientalist discourse emphasizes the structural patriarchy of societies as endemic to these countries while conveniently absenting the West's role in gender based violence. When these media stories emphasize South Asian women as victims of their conservative traditions, without acknowledging the West's role in enabling Pakistani terrorism or Hindu Nationalism, they continue colonial legacies of scapegoating. A story like Yousafzai's—a bold Pakistani girl confronting the Taliban for her right to an education denied to women—emboldens white feminists in the United States to latch onto this narrative as a quintessential example for why Muslim women need saving. This Orientalist troping of South Asian women as victims in need of the heroic West positions countries like the United States as paternal saviors of women infantilized by state and gendered violence. The media recognition of the late Pakistani model and entertainer Baloch centered around the audacity of her rejection of Islamic

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and Pakistani religious and cultural norms and embrace of her sexuality and feminism. The way Baloch was glamorized is reminiscent of Oriental scholars' fixation with unveiling the Oriental woman and exploring her as a sexual being. Baloch's social media posts were not exceptionally sensual in nature, but were shared and lauded across social media in India, Pakistan, the United States, and England simply because she was a Pakistani woman from a poor, conservative family who was sharing cheeky, sex-positive content. The fame she received stemmed largely from her defiance of what a Pakistani, Muslim woman was coded to look like; instead, her rejection of cultural norms was what continued to exoticize her in an Orientalist way. Again, Western ideals of independence and sexual liberation are what freed Baloch but killed her as well, especially considering how there were documentaries released about her only after her death despite her actions while alive being just as important.

Both vectors of victimization and sexualization loop into one another, as Yousafzai is now a widely admired Nobel Peace Prize winner who has garnered worldwide popularity to a level of what is dubbed inspiration porn[3]. Baloch, on the other hand, was brutally murdered by her misogynistic brother as an honor killing, and her death was more sensationalized than mourned. After Baloch's death, her brother was sentenced to a life-time sentence; shortly after his sentencing, the Pakistani law for honour-killings was amended to mandate life imprisonment for the convict, even if the victim's relatives forgave the murderer- who is usually a relative also. Despite her death being significant enough to procure this amendment, Baloch's murderer was acquitted after only six years upon the plea of their mother. We see how this is not a binary anymore but rather a loop where victims can become celebrities and where liberated women face death by

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misogyny. In Said's analysis of imaginative geographies the West makes the East, coupled with the concept of the woman as the vessel for Orientalist knowledge to take flight, I take this continuous loop between liberation and confinement to expand how what we see about South Asian women becomes South Asia in whatever mode services Western media best in that moment.

SOFT FUTURES AND FEMINISMS

In 2018, my first year of graduate school coincided with a horrific incident: 8-year old Asifa Bano was kidnapped while grazing her father's horses. She was repeatedly drugged, beat, brutally raped, and murdered by 8 Hindu men; four of them were a priest and police officers, and a few other local government official and police officers were also arrested for accepting bribes and covering up the details of her case. Her murder uncovers the racialized and gendered violence inflicted onto Bano's nomadic Muslim tribe via the deep-seated communal tensions in the region of Jammu and Kashmir. The shepherding tribe would travel from Muslim-majority Kashmir valley to Hindu-majority Jammu during winter. Ironically - or not - Bano was held captive and raped inside the Devisthan temple where her main perpetrator, Sanji Ram, was the head priest; devi means goddess, and this temple was used to venerate Hindu goddesses. Naturally, due to the state-sanctioned Islamophobia of India, the Hindu right-wing party and Hindu-majority population of Jammu advocated for the freedom of the 8 rapist-murderers, started rumours that it was Pakistani militants who killed her, and even compelled Bano's father to walk seven miles with her corpse to bury her in a completely different region after being met with a Hindu nationalist mob at the graveyard. The communal issues brought to light by Bano's death were centered around land politics and how nomadic Muslim

tribes were encroaching on public resources like water and forest land for their shepherding. Her death coincided with another minor's gang-rape and self immolation case, and it never garnered the same public attention of Jyoti Singh or Qandeel Baloch, but it's one that I've never been able to shake.

Police reports framed Bano as a "soft target" within this communal rift as a way to describe her murder as going for the weakest link. This wording comes from the police report that described Bano as an "innocent budding flower, a child of only eight years of age, who being a small kid became a soft target." If bodies like Bano's constitute the weakest links, then why are they the prime targets to level heavy threats towards entire populations? The reactions of the Muslim community— who witnessed Bano's rape and murder, internalized it as we can all be victims of the hatred that fueled this, and fled the area for safety— display just how powerful a marginalized female body can be to produce meaning that dictates the movement of an entire tribe. I have discussed how female and feminized bodies shoulder the labor of colonial representations, and how those practices of marginalization are trying to reduce the monumental significance of Bano's death. As collective tragedies are invariably hardened into nationalist sentiments, Bano's death has produced a lot of backlash on what it means to be an Indian Muslim and an Indian woman; again, we see the semiotic and visual meanings being assembled by her murder and the nationalistic ideals it upholds. Bano's death was coded as a threat to the livelihood of her entire nomadic tribe; the death and portrayal of one victim of abject misogyny signified the fate of an entire subalternized population. From this tragedy, I draw valuable insight into the types of horrors that need to be accounted for when imagining a future, as well as into the potential that even an "innocent, budding, small"

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female body holds to draw vectors of a nation and physically and metaphorically relocate tribes of people. The portrayal of Bano's death and many others like it continue to be informed by colonial logics of patriarchy or communal rifts purported to be unique to subalternized populations or backward religions. Ultimately, her death speaks to how the entire nation draws vectors of land politics and communal strife over the tiny body of a soft, small target. Bano's death in many ways inspired this epilogue, and I've never stopped thinking about the nuances of her case with the relationship to shepherding, land politics, Kashmir's communal violence, police involvement, Devi temple, and her being a threat even in death (the graveyard mob). When considering these nuances in the larger context of my dissertation, I am reminded why a South Asian and Muslim feminist future is one worth writing and fighting for.

Diana Taylor argues that performance is a possibility for challenge and a means of intervening with the world. I draw insight from this practice of knowledge production to read performances by South Asian and Muslim women about themselves as the archives that exist all around us. Taylor asks us to contend with traditions of embodied performance and repertoire— practices like "gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing-in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge" as "alternative perspective[s] on historical processes of transnational contact and invites a remapping of the Americas" (Taylor, 20). This teases out my overarching idea about the affective modes of knowledge production that are critical for survival in communities that are otherwise not regarded as sites of knowledge production. Bano's death and its heavy repercussions are within the fold of the epistemological framework that conceptualizes reproduction and innovation in spaces that are bereft of such

potential. The potential of epistemology in the quotidian performance offers a blueprint to conjure worlds of expansion and power instead of subjectivity and essentialization. I apply this to read Bano's tribe's departure as an understanding of the meaning and movement her death produced and how it offers a reservoir of knowledge that helps imagine "futurity as [an] open-ended desire for a world beyond the limits of the present" (Marez, 9).

I offer that we can reread desi women as forces where knowledge is produced and life is sustained through affective tools of survival. When we turn women into objects of analysis as opposed to formidable performers of survival, we fail to imagine a future where women are sustained through the affective exchanges they make with one another to survive and thrive in a white supremacist and patriarchal world. As embodied on social media, speculative accounts and the artistic crafting of women's inner lives, desires, and potentials does not romanticize their struggles or remedy gaps in representation, but enables "a historical musing upon the emotions, ambivalences, and intimacies that might have marked their experiences in the context of overwhelming violence (Haley, 63). Historically and contemporarily, across written letters and Instagram DMs, women and queer folk have created whisper networks and informal archives, like *archisme,* that provide "a way of acknowledging hearsay, murmurs, and silent gestures in Chicano communities as another base of knowledge production" (Vargas, 56). Women and queer folk share thoughts and feelings through chatter, stories, noticings, or gossip in order to collectively celebrate, criticize, or heal from social and cultural moments. They engage with these spaces and forms to center themselves, their conversations, their concerns, and their survival practices because of constantly being decentered and spoken over in

social and political discourse. These methods similar to content-creation on social media are seen, like Bano's death, as soft modes of communication that don't carry as much social weight or empirical legitimacy as public actions or pronouncements. How do these conversations, shaped through sentiments and affect, perform critical historical and political work? How do we come to look at those affective exchanges as methods of survival?

The feminist approaches laid out by Taylor, Haley, and Vargas elevate my speculations to imagine a South Asian feminist futurity and to constellate worlds of alterity and sites of survival through affective and knowledge exchanges amongst women. A feminist conceptualization of futurity isn't only that the main actors are women, but that the inclusion of subalternized women catalyzes quotidian and embodied performances and exchanges as imperative tools for change. The potential of liberation becomes a feminist one that encompasses a vast scope of women who are removed from subject positioning and instead seen as agents of their own futures and humanities. I apply this feminist lens onto the craft of using speculative labor as the "creative and imaginative work of workers" to save their own humanity (Marez, 32). The tools, granted by archisme and creative speculation, authenticate world-making practices and epistemologies that explore how speculation can draw on non-traditional bodies of knowledge. If we start viewing South Asian women and their performances as sites of knowledge production and illumination, we can begin to engage with the social media and South Asians in popular culture as modes of speculative labor. To disidentify speculation from masculinity and from new media technologies would mean to create representations that decenters the colonial eye on South Asian women's subject position,

and instead draw on the ruptures embedded in the theoretical work done in quotidian modes of cultural production. Gossip, daily rituals, and affective accounts of knowledge production give us the rogue and feminist supplements to archives and history that ultimately allow us to imagine a futurity where desi women are not reduced to subjects of study.

To imagine a future structured through feminist practices unravels the capitalism and heteropatriarchy in traditional frameworks of intellectualism and futurism, or "the projection of a particular, determinant future social order" (Marez, 9). These competing, overlapping, and blurred versions of gendered spacio-temporal historiographies allows South Asians to appropriate the knowledge apparatuses of their oppressors to speculate a futurity where they aren't funneled as vital energy or continuously repeating narratives and visuals that code them as soft targets. The practice of disidentifying as world-making subverts dominant narratives, allowing us to imagine counterpublics that sustain the role of South Asian women as "tactically and simultaneously [working] on, with, and against, a cultural form" (Muñoz, 12) dominant in desi communities. Using Muñoz's framework, we can locate disidentification by reclaiming and reworking mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and sisters who refuse white supremacist, heteropatriarchal and capitalistic environments in their feelings, practices, and conversations. If we decenter the visual cues of Eurocentric attractiveness, capitalistic appeal, or abject victimhood, we can emphasize the ways South Asian women always already create networks of protection and education against the misogyny or exploitation that occurs within and outside their communities. Progress, then, is not reduced to an ethnic spin on Western fashion; it can be finding circles of women who speak your language to retain modes of

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communication beyond English. Beauty can be recoded to mean more than just a resentment of Western beauty standards like fair skin or hair removal, and to open up spaces for rituals and bonding over queer-inclusive performances of beauty or anti-Zionist make-up product routines. Education can decenter white feminist or capitalist narratives of success only of being a #GirlBoss and instead disidentify history to include personal narratives of survival, success, and loss that women haven't penned in books or art. Disidentifying busts open the seams of repetition and invites rupture as it retools South Asian female labor – both the labor to serve vital energy to the world, and the labor to repeat desirable images that sexualize or victimize them- and shatters these visual representations from their original services. "Counterpublics are not magically and automatically realized through disidentifications, but they are suggested, rehearsed, and articulated" by imagining practices of everyday life as "a hermeneutic… and a possibility for freedom" (Muñoz, 179). We can contend with the notion of world-making to think about how South Asian women can rewrite the visual fields and epistemologies to detach them from the native informant positionality and to view their exchanges as reservoirs for survival and knowledge production.

In Chapter 1, I talk about how user data generates invaluable insights, and how we are all being used as labour of some form. I do want to emphasize that we are not just oppressed data mines with no agency. In fact, it's important to think of women and queer content creators and users as life generators. The Internet gave space for women and queer people trying to find safe communities, and instead resulted in an entire economy pumping millions of dollars into online websites and platforms. Of course, within the digital age of capitalism, these spaces and applications have become monetized

rendering platforms into magazines and influencers into human billboards. But social media tech giants are ultimately dependent on users and creators who gave life to the internet and its platforms, and created new worlds. We're not simply products or being wholly used because while they may have birthed these platforms, ultimately women and queer users and content creators raised these websites and metaphorically nannied them into their successful potentials. Selfies and get-ready-with-me videos were rendered narcissistic and superficial, but ultimately created an entirely new economic model and a futuristic mode of globalization. The frivolous practices of self-documentation or expression were devalued because outcasted or subalternized content creators and users were typically women and queer people of color, but it was ultimately these practices that were at the forefront of cultural, visual, and global networks of economic interfacing. It's not that burgeoning a capitalistic economy is a success, but instead it's about the new meanings that can be created via social media. Regardless of what the initial intentions were for spaces on the Internet or social media platforms, the trajectory was taken a completely different direction and continues to push towards important epistemological potentials. Social media is increasingly becoming the dominant form of viewership and education dissemination, that it's important to not over attribute it as a new problem and instead as a medium that can reflect and sustain — or challenge — old problems.
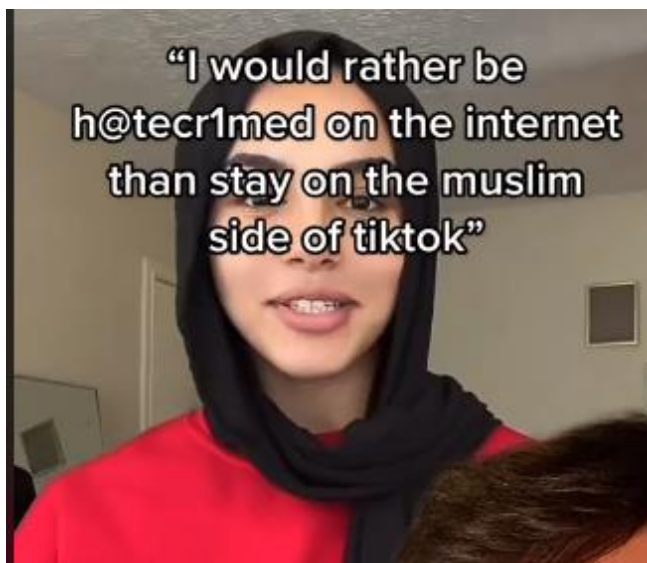
Image 4.2
Still from TikTok Video
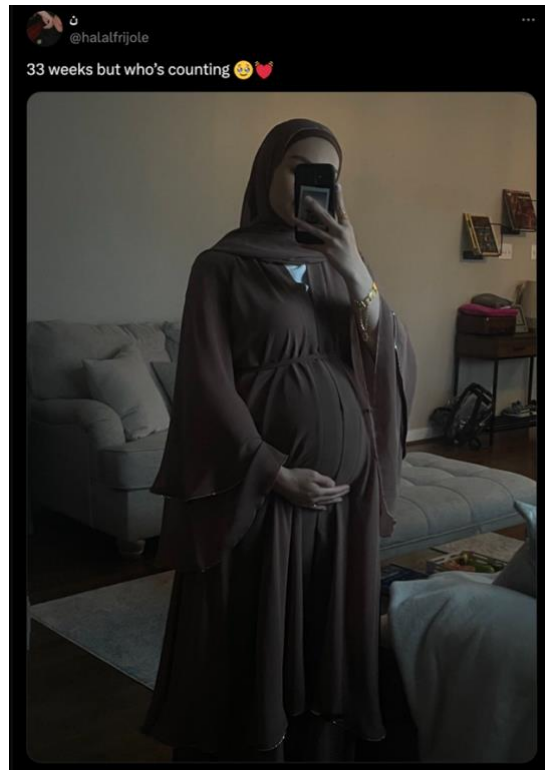Source: @AlgerianOnCrack on TikTok.com

Image 4.3
Twitter Post
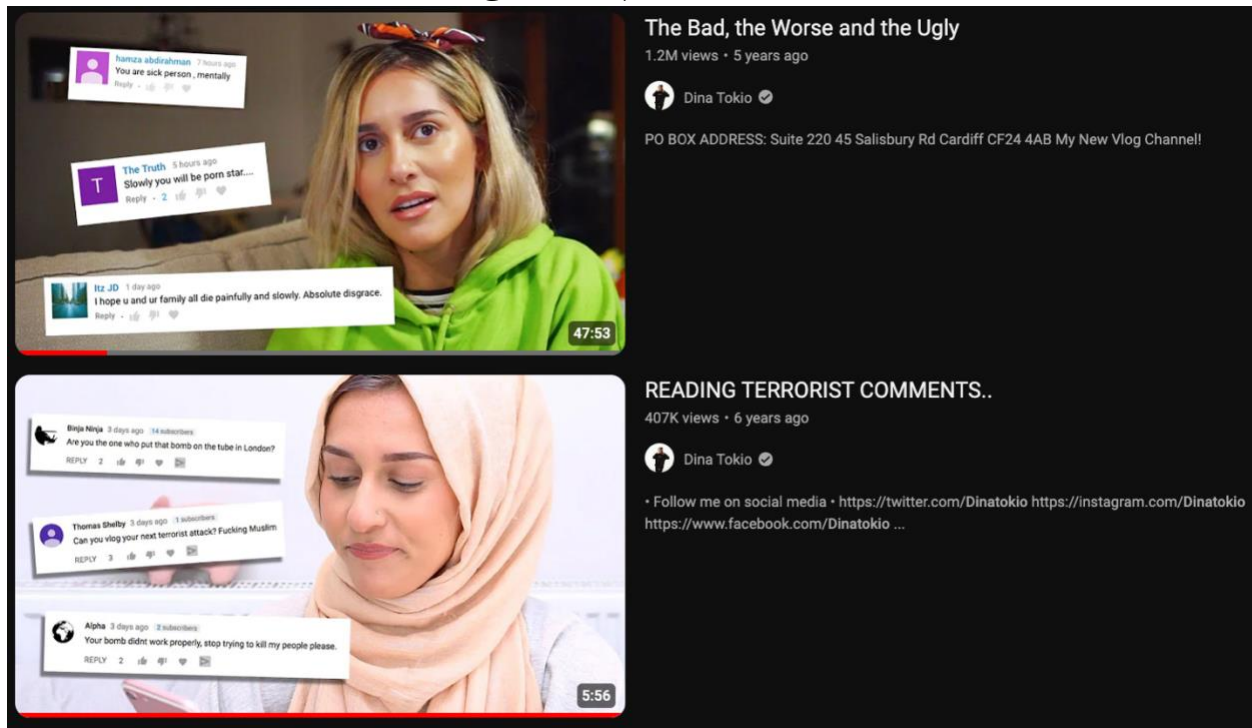Source: @HalalFrijole on Twitter.com

Image 4.4

Stills from Dina Tokio's YouTube Videos
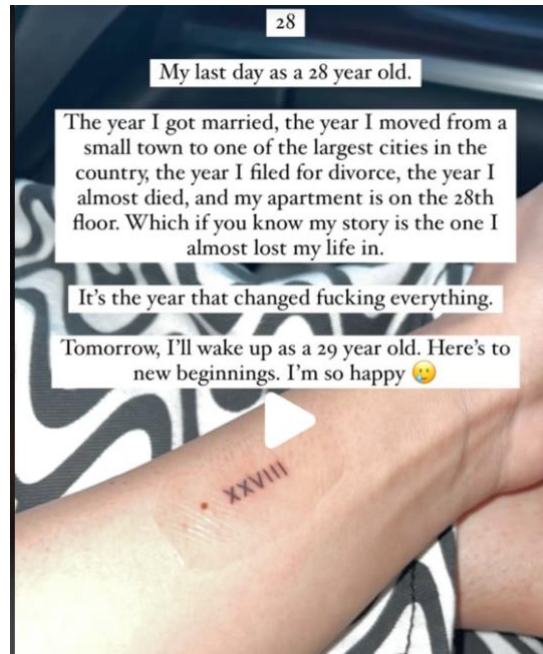Source: @DinaTokio on YouTube.com

Image 4.5
Sania Khan's Tattoo Celebrating her Divorce and Birthday
Source : TikToK

Image 4.6
Image of Qandeel Baloch from her Pakistani Idol Audition
Source: Google Images

Image 4.7

ENDNOTES

Chapter 1

1. Drop-Shipping is a retail fulfillment method where a store doesn't keep the products it sells in stock. Instead of managing inventory, it relies on third-party suppliers to directly ship products to customers, often leading to less control over product quality, authenticity, safety, and timely shipping. This is why sometimes on Amazon you will see the exact same product being sold by multiple retailers at different prices, or why some 'small businesses' undergo criticism when the purport to sell small batch or handmade items but are ultimately relying on drop-shipping.

Chapter 2

1. World Market is not the only brand sustained upon boho interiors, as figured in the displays at HomeGoods, but the one I chose to focus on due to its interesting history and branding approach. Numerous other brands like Urban Outfitters Home or Pier 1 Imports carry predominantly boho chic items as well.
2. In 2019, the CRAFT line was discontinued when Cost Plus World market went through a major management restructuring via their holding company Bed, Bath, and Beyond.
3. I've been watching Mad Men a lot lately and thinking of the uncannily idyllic culture Betty Draper represents with all its many unspoken rules of engagement. She contrasted so clearly with the Helen Bishop and how Helen being divorced and sexually active positions her as a threat to the status. What strikes me most about Betty's cultural values is how many South Asian/ Muslim women are still stuck in this exact same mindset, and how it resonated with me so heavily because the mentality portrayed by Betty and her friends is the absolute norm for South Asian Muslim communities even in the United States in 2024.

Chapter 3

1. As with any social media search engine, the results are dependent upon your previous usage, but it is not difficult to access results that weren't displayed to you via hashtags.
2. I want to acknowledge that my use of this study does not intend to imply that all Romani descendants had Dalit ancestry, and that there are various ethnic sub-groups, and that the various European countries they ultimately relocated to like France and Spain also developed distinct cultures influenced by the process of their migration and assimilation.
3. The word gypsy has been recognized as not only a misnomer but a deeply offensive racial pejorative due to its xenophobic connotations and negative affect on the Romani community.
4. "Where is Bohemia?" poem by Gelett Burgess. This poem is strongly reflective of the imaginative geography of bohemia and is where I sourced the term 'mental fairyland'.

Within Bohemia are many lesser states, and these I have roughly charted on my travels, so that, though I may have left some precincts unexplored, I know at least that these territories lying on my map are veritable provinces of this land of freedom and sincerity.
On the shore of the magic Sea of Dreams, beyond whose horizon dances the Adventurous Main, lies the Pays de la Jeunesse, the country of Youth and Romance, a joyous plaisaunce free from care or caution, whose green, wide fields lie bathed in glamorous sunshine.
To the eastward lie the pleasant groves of Arcady, the dreamland, home of love and poetry.
Here in this Greek paradise of rustic simplicity and joyous innocence and hope, has lived every poet who has ever sung the lyric note, and here have visited, for some brief space, all who have dreamed, all who have longed, all who have loved.
Here is the old joy of life made manifest and abundant; here Mother Nature speaks most clearly to her children. For the most, however, it is but a holiday country, and they who discover it often pass, never to return, forgetting its glories and its mysteries as they forget that lost country of their youth, counting it all illusion. Yet some few come back to the Port of Peace to lose the world again, renewing the immemorial enchantment.
To the south, over the long procession of the hills, lies Vagabondia, home of the gypsy and wanderer, who claims a wilder freedom beneath the stars—outlawed or voluntary exile from all restraint. This country is rocky and precipitate, full of dangers, a land of feverish unrest.

5. A 2024 article conducting the most recent study on the scheme that has updated numbers and policies can be found in my references titled "Mutated Sumangali Scheme" by Valan, Jumde, and Kumar.

6. Love-Jihad refers to an Islamophobic honeypot type of espionage tactic used to presumably wage an intra-personal attack via romantic relations between Muslims and Hindus. Love and friendly relationships are framed as a method of communal violence operations when a Muslim courts a Hindu to cause harm once they've earned the trust. The concept is often a trope in Bollywood movies.

Epilogue

1. Another example here is Malala who is by no means an influencer but a very hypervisible public figure in global media. The comments section of her social media posts is filled with vitriol and threats that can seem like the typical trolling that simply comes with fame but also with the particular type of South Asian/ Muslim misogyny I am framing. Malala is an odd figure for me because she survived an awful act of violence at the hands of the Taliban and has since them been expected to be both a beacon of white, Western feminist tropes of saviorism, but also South Asian/ Muslim tropes of a perfect hijab-wearing Muslim.
2. Mother India is a colloquial term that hails from the title of the 1957 epic drama film directed by Mehboob Khan that depicts the story of a single mother from a poverty-stricken village. She gives her life to raise her sons and sets a Hindu goddess-like example of an ideal and self-sacrificial Indian woman. For example, if my mom refuses to eat till everyone is seated and eating for fear that there won't be enough food, I will tell her to stop being Mother India and come eat.
3. Inspiration porn refers to the pathos-filled portrayal of disabled people as inspirational because they perform everyday tasks while disabled. The term was coined in 2012 by disability rights activist Stella Young in her TedX Talk where she discusses the way people who face disability are insincerely glorified for others to feel good about themselves.

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