Sounds from the Other Side
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Published by University of Minnesota Press

Powell, Elliott H.
Sounds from the Other Side: Afro–South Asian Collaborations in Black Popular Music.
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Recovering Addict(ive)
The Afro—South Asian Sexual Politics of Truth Hurts’s “Addictive”

My back is achin’ from our love makin’.
—Truth Hurts, “Addictive”

On September 13, 2002, African American entertainment attorney Dedra S. Davis issued a press release on behalf of the Indian film and music company Saregama India Ltd. The document announced that Saregama was filing a $500 million copyright infringement lawsuit against hip-hop producer Dr. Dre, his label Aftermath Records, and Aftermath’s parent labels Interscope and Universal Music Group. The lawsuit centered on a spring 2002 hit titled “Addictive” by R&B singer Truth Hurts and featuring rapper Rakim—Rakim and Hurts were at the time of the song’s release Aftermath/Interscope/Universal artists. Davis makes three allegations in her press release: (1) that “Addictive,” which was produced by rapper and producer DJ Quik, samples music and lyrics from the Bollywood film song “Thoda Resham Lagta Hai” from the film Jyoti; (2) that Saregama is the proper copyright holder of “Thoda”; and (3) that Quik / Dr. Dre / Aftermath / Interscope / Universal sampled and released “Addictive” without securing Saregama’s permission. Oddly enough, the main focus of Davis’s allegations was not actually about a violation of her client’s intellectual property, but rather a violation of cultural propriety. Davis claims that “Addictive” contains “obscene and offensive” lyrics that “cause extreme offense . . . to the company’s owners and to the sensibilities of the many Hindu and Muslim people,” a remark that she would later amend to suggest that Hindus were the sole victims in the purported offense.¹ A week later, in an interview with MTV News, Davis
discussed her press release and revealed that the specific obscenities in “Addictive” were Rakim’s use of “fuck” in his featured rap and Truth Hurts’s sung lines “I like it rough” and ‘He makes me scream.’ Such sexual lyrics, for Davis, stood in stark contrast to the sampled Hindi lyrics in “Thoda,” which focused on flowers, love, and romance. As such, Davis argued that the song’s sexually explicit lyrics along with the unauthorized sampling of “Thoda” evidence “the misuse of the company’s copyright [and] threatens its reputation and standing.”

Much has been written about “Addictive” since its 2002 release. It reached the top ten of the Billboard Hot 100 and, using the momentum of Missy Elliott’s “Get Ur Freak On,” played a crucial role in increasing U.S. popular music interest in sampling Bollywood and other forms of South Asian music. Perhaps due to its popularity as well as Davis’s press release announcing the impending lawsuit, the music director of “Thoda,” Bappi Lahiri, later joined Saregama’s lawsuit claim and, together, they won an injunction against the sale of “Addictive” and Truth Hurts’s debut album, Truthfully Speaking. And so, because of all of this, “Addictive” made an apt case study for scholarly theorizations of copyright, capital, and (cultural) appropriation. Joanna Demers, for instance, argues that “Addictive” is indicative of a 2000s trend in U.S. popular music where producers sample non-Western music without permission because of non-Western music’s purported exoticism and because copyright licensing is problematically framed as less strict and/or the non-Western identities of proper copyright holders are seemingly less defined.

Wayne Marshall and Jayson Beaster-Jones also take up the issue of copyright, but do so by examining how the large number of remixes and interpolations of “Addictive” within and outside of South Asia ultimately “unsettle easy charges of appropriation, whether cross-cultural or illegal, as well as notions of ownership, whether national or personal.”

Scholars have also considered how the issues of copyright and capital surrounding “Addictive” intersect with race. Specifically, many scholars have used Orientalism as a productive framework through which to analyze the representations of South Asia on “Addictive.” Orientalism helps contextualize the release and popularity of “Addictive” during the period after 9/11 and at the start of the U.S. invasion in Iraq, and it works as a lens through which to make sense of the complexities of such purported imperialist representations taking place within the Afro-diasporic forms of R&B and rap. For example, Nitasha Sharma points out that while Blackness complicates facile...
and imperialist charges against Truth Hurts and DJ Quik’s appropriations of Bollywood, she reads the music video for “Addictive,” which problematically conflates South Asia and the Middle East into an exotic harem-like other, as representing “a type of Western cultural imperialism over the East, shaping and reflecting national perspectives not limited to Blacks, music, or the present moment.” T. Carlis Roberts, in almost a reverse position of Sharma, argues that while we cannot elide the Orientalist fantasies presented in “Addictive,” we must also remain attuned to and hold in tension moments like Truth Hurts’s performance of “Addictive” at the 2002 Zee Gold Bollywood Awards, which “allowed for the continued evolution of the meanings of the song and the cultural exchange it fostered.”

This chapter builds on such scholarship by paying special attention to, as Dedra Davis’s press release that opened this chapter gestures toward, the place and politics of gender and sexuality in “Addictive.” In particular, I am interested in exploring and centering the intersections of Black and South Asian women’s sexualities in the song. In so doing, I draw on and complicate T. Carlis Roberts’s framework of “Afro Asian critique,” which Roberts proposes as a specific musical approach that allows for “signs of interracial promise such as shared experiences or understanding, joint counterhegemonic gestures, and non-essentialist representations.” For Roberts, such critique lays bare the kinds of Afro-Asian alliances that are “missed in clichéd, and now hegemonic, dominant–subdominant analyses and [is] poised to pinpoint progressive political potential amidst racial faux pas.” To pursue a Roberts-style “Afro Asian critique,” then, is to resist starting from a perspective that interprets the relationship between African Americans and South Asians as adversarial and conditioned by nationalist and imperialist oppositionality. It is to challenge and complicate the conditions that produce such an assumption, to consider the power dynamics shaping the relationality of African and Asian diasporic communities, and to consider the possibilities for Afro-Asian minoritarian alliances. And so I’m interested in expanding Roberts’s critique to take into account how such a framework of race and ethnicity intersects with gender and sexuality, and interrogating how an intersectional approach to such a critique might consider and reveal the overlapping politics of sexuality between “Thoda” and “Addictive.”

It’s instructive to go back to Dedra Davis’s copyright infringement announcement to think through this question. Her assertion that Hurts’s lyrical references to and pleasures in rough sex on “Addictive” are vulgar, and
that they remake “Thoda” in such a way that offends Hindu people, intimates two things. First, it taps into the gender and sexual politics of anticolonial Hindu nationalist thought and cinematic representations that figure the imperial lasciviousness of Western modernity as an affront to the traditions of South Asian female purity. Second, as a Black woman discussing the performance of another Black woman, Davis’s categorical rather than relational reference to Hurts’s lyrics as “obscene”—that the lyrics are intrinsically rather than relatively offensive because they compete with Hindu nationalist discourse—evidences a politics of respectability and silence that, because of the long history of stereotypes of Black women that prop(ped) up sexual violence, discourages explicit representations of Black women’s erotic lives.

It is at this nexus of Black and South Asian female sexual dissidence that this chapter grapples with Truth Hurts’s “Addictive.” Rather than solely reading “Addictive” as sexualizing “Thoda,” I want to pursue the other side of things and argue that the expressions of female sexuality on “Addictive” productively, and at times queerly, entangle African American and South Asian female erotics. Indeed, despite Davis’s intimation that the sexually explicit lyrics of “Addictive” egregiously altered the meaning of “Thoda,” the vocalist on “Thoda,” famed Bollywood playback singer Lata Mangeshkar, claimed that she neither objected to DJ Quik’s sampling of her voice nor felt that he “tampered with” the song. To engage and practice the other side of things is to take seriously Mangeshkar’s remarks and consider the ways “Thoda” complements rather than contrasts the female erotic pleasures and practices in “Addictive.” It is to see, as I explicate below, how “Addictive” brings together the historical and moralistic silencing of Black and South Asian women’s sexuality in U.S. and South Asian popular culture, and how it creates a space from which Black and South Asian female sexual pleasure can be imagined, expressed, and experienced.

Sexually Addictive

The production history of “Addictive” helps elucidate the workings of Afro–South Asian female sexualities. In an often-told story, DJ Quik first encountered “Thoda” at home when Jyoti, the film in which the song is featured, was playing on the Bollywood television channel Zee-TV:
I woke up one morning . . . I turned on the TV and landed on this Hindi channel and I just turned it up real loud. . . . There was a commercial on, and I just got up and went into the bathroom and started brushing my teeth. I’m brushing, and before I knew it I was grooving . . . [the beat] was just in my body. I went back in there and looked at the TV—there was a girl on there bellydancing [sic], just like real fly. So I pushed record on the VCR.14

DJ Quik’s viewing and recording/sampling “Thoda” from his television is important because it not only potentially informs the eroticism of “Addictive” (more on that later), but also because, contrary to the lyrics of “Thoda” as well as Dedra Davis’s contention that “Thoda” was not sexually explicit, the visualized song and dance performance of “Thoda” centers female sex work. The character from Jyoti who DJ Quik (mis)read as a belly dancer was Mallika (played by actress Aruna Irani). Mallika is a courtesan or tawayaf, who is performing a dance known as a mujra in an urban salon called a kotha. As Beaster-Jones and Marshall explain, kothas are “highly erotic spaces within the conventions of Hindi film, the kotha sometimes represented as little more than a brothel, the tawayaf as little more than a prostitute.”15 Wayne Marshall and Jayson Beaster-Jones go on to note that the Orientalist otherness that DJ Quik perceived as belly dancing—the conflation of South Asia (via Bollywood) and the Middle East (via belly dancing) into a homogenous East—is “not so far from eroticized tawayaf representations in Hindi films.”16 Indeed, the song and dance number for “Thoda” opens in a kotha where a landowner’s son, Niranjan (played by Vijayendra Ghatge), intimately whips Mallika (Figure 11a). After playfully struggling with the whip and dodging Niranjan’s attempts to kiss her on the lips, Mallika pushes Niranjan onto a couch and begins to perform the mujra dance for him. The scene consists of Mallika thrusting her breasts forward while crawling on the floor, winking at Niranjan, seductively biting her bottom lip, and playfully dangling grapes between Niranjan’s and her lips (Figure 11b).

Such a scene is indicative of what ethnomusicologist Regula Qureshi describes as the place of kothas as stigmatized spaces of erotic performance, sex work, and nonnormative sexual activities and desires, as “licentious and immoral social space[s] where a woman offers her art and, by implication, herself.”17 Following independence in 1947, Indian elite and middle-class social reformers vilified kothas and tawayafs as threats to women’s respectability.
Figure 11. (a and b) “Thoda Resham Lagta Hai” song and dance sequence, *Jyoti*, 1981. Directed by Pramod Chakravarty.
and Indian nationalism, and sought to curtail representations of *tawayaf* culture in Indian popular music and film. Despite these efforts, Bollywood films continue to depict *tawayaf* culture, but do so in ways that shore up rather than circumvent middle-class notions of femininity and respectability. For example, as Beaster-Jones and Marshall explain, these films often portray *kothas* “within the context of an exoticized historical past,” and therefore as sites of premodern, backwards, and uncivilized cultural practices.\(^{18}\)

Remarkably, DJ Quik’s sampling of “Thoda” as well as Truth Hurts’s lyrics on “Addictive” refuse the relegation of the sexual impropriety of “Thoda” to a historical past; they instead create and imagine an erotic Afro–South Asian present and future elsewhere, an erotic expression of the other side of things. When I interviewed Truth Hurts, she informed me that the recording process for “Addictive” stalled for six months because, “until Static came into the studio,” DJ Quik, Dr. Dre, and Hurts were unable to find and work with a songwriter capable of capturing their vision for the song.\(^ {19}\) Static was the professional name of the late singer-songwriter Stephen Garrett. Known in R&B circles for being a member of “Da Bassment crew” musical collective that included Missy Elliott and Timbaland, Static became famous for writing sexually forward songs like Ginuwine’s 1996 hit “Pony” as well as hit R&B songs that sample non-Western, and especially Middle Eastern, music like Aaliyah’s 2002 “More Than a Woman.” In enlisting Static to take the lead in writing “Addictive,” Hurts, DJ Quik, and Dr. Dre found someone who had the background to fully address and (re)imagine the eroticism (via “Pony”), South Asian (via his association with Elliott and Timbaland who, as described in the previous chapter, ushered in a new iteration of Afro-South Asian music), and Middle Eastern (via “More Than a Woman”) backing of “Thoda.” With Static, as Truth Hurts explained to me, they found someone who could, and did, establish the necessary “pace and sexuality” of “Addictive” that resulted in the “marriage between the beat, the melody, and the lyrics.”\(^{20}\)

Such a marriage on “Addictive” articulates with the sexual and kink aesthetics of the original’s song and dance performance. “Addictive” opens with a sample from “Thoda” in which Lata Mangeshkar sings “kaliyon ka chaman tab banta hai” (translated as “a flower garden is then made”). DJ Quik plays a bass line to underlie the opening sample, and then uses renowned percussionist Bryan Brock to provide added rhythmic textures to the song. Trained in Afro-diasporic and South Asian instruments, Brock informed me that DJ
Quik hired him to play drum patterns on “Addictive” that could bridge and accentuate the musical similarities between other sampled instrumental elements from “Thoda” with the sampled backbeat from “Do It (’Til You’re Satisfied)” by funk band B. T. Express.\(^2\) It is with Brock that we glean the ways in which DJ Quik does not attempt to draw out the exoticism of “Thoda” and South Asia, to highlight its supposed sonic difference from the rest of recording. DJ Quik’s approach is to sonically create Afro-South Asian linkages that illuminate the braided percussive elements and cultural histories of Afro-diasporic and South Asian culture as well as, via the sexually suggestive title and lyrics in “Do It (’Til You’re Satisfied),” set and sustain the sexual spirit of the “Thoda” song and dance sequence and “Addictive.”

Split into three verses with Hurts singing the first two and Rakim delivering a sixteen-bar rap, “Addictive” tells the story of a woman who believes that she’s found the male companion of her dreams, or perhaps better yet, her desires. “Addictive” is not a romantic narrative that sidesteps or euphemistically approaches sex and pleasure. It is a song in which Hurts describes a woman’s general love of sex, particularly sex involving her drug-dealing male partner (Rakim) with whom she finds such activities utterly irresistible, contagious, and otherwise “addictive.” Rakim’s rap articulates a man who cosigns his female lover’s addictive sexual relationship, revealing that although he sells drugs, it is their sex that produces and maintains their addiction to and for each other. Rough sex, as I noted above, sits at the heart of Hurts’s character’s insatiable sexual pleasure. And while listeners are not privy to the specific forms of rough or kinky sex, both Rakim and Hurts allude to erotic asphyxiation—Rakim raps, “[You’re] breathing hard while I’m squeezing your lungs”—and flogging—Hurts sings, “My back is achin’ from our love makin’”—a possible allusion to Niranjana whipping Mallika during the “Thoda” song and dance performance that DJ Quik recorded. The “Addictive” music video opens with a shot of Truth Hurts’s back, which sports a *mehndi* (henna) spelling of her name down her back in red dye as a gesture toward blood, and she is later seen in the bed with her hands positioned as if she were tied up (Figure 12).

In explicitly singing about a Black woman’s sexual practices and desires, and especially those that are rough and kinky and that involve whipping and bondage, Truth Hurts taps into misogynoir representations that pathologize Black women as subservient and excessively sexual and that articulate with Black women’s institutional and interpersonal experiences of sexual violence
during and after U.S. slavery.\textsuperscript{22} It is perhaps these kinds of dehumanizing stereotypes, or “controlling images” as Patricia Hill Collins famously describes them, that informed Dedra Davis’s assessment of “Addictive,” irrespective of its relation to South Asian religious traditions, as “obscene.”\textsuperscript{23} Richard Zumkhawala-Cook makes similar critiques of “Addictive” when he posits that Hurts’s masochistic narrative portrays a “sex-crazed” woman who “reproduces the most retrograde male fantasies,” and that such acquiescence to patriarchy implicates “Thoda” and Lata Mangeshkar by “globally pluralizing the glorified female submission . . . as if it should be understood that Mangeshkar’s aural presence articulates the same position.”\textsuperscript{24} And while T. Carlis Roberts resists such a sex-negative approach to “Addictive,” noting the relation of “Thoda” to kothas and tawayafs, they still locate a particular patriarchal impulse in “Addictive.” In particular, Roberts argues that DJ Quik’s use of Mangeshkar’s vocals for “Addictive” strips her of any agency and determines “what she would say, when, and the tempo and pitch, the source material altered to support the new song’s content.”\textsuperscript{25}
I want to briefly complicate these readings that bind “Addictive,” “Thoda,” and Mangeshkar to heterosexism because I believe that such arguments belie the ways the lyrics and production of “Addictive” refuse to solely express male pleasures and center the male gaze. While Truth Hurts uses “he” throughout much of “Addictive,” such use is always in relation to her own pleasure, sexual or otherwise. “Addictive” is focused on the steps a man makes to materially, romantically, and sexually fulfill the desires and pleasures of his female partner. Remember, it’s Truth Hurts who sings, “I like it rough.” She is the one who directs the narrative of the relationship, and her “addiction” to her male partner is due to her continued (sexual) satisfaction with him: “He makes me scream . . . he hits the spot.” In other words, he works to please her; she does not work to please him. Moreover, Rakim’s verse is one that one might expect an expression of phallocentrism and male sexual prowess. Instead, Rakim spends most of the verse discussing his drug-dealing practices, and makes only one reference to his relationship with his female companion—“Just me and you high off sex and twisted”—a nod to shared sexual desire and pleasure. The only implication of female submission in “Addictive,” then, is the expression of sadomasochism.

But the logic that links S/M sex to heterosexism is one born out of second-wave feminism (radical and liberal, Black and non-Black) that only imagines S/M within the boundaries of sexual violence. And here we must go back to Dedra Davis’s press release. Her use of the word “obscene” to describe “Addictive” was not simply a personal feeling stemming from a politics of morality, but also a legal argument that recalls the ways anti-pornography feminists of the 1970s and 1980s attempted to use the U.S. obscenity laws to define such materials as obscene and ban them from existence. As anti-anti-pornography activists like Lisa Duggan, Nan Hunter, Carole Vance, Pat Califia, Amber Hollibaugh, and Cherrie Moraga have argued, anti-pornography feminism uses images of S/M pornographic material to promote the banning of porn, and (further) demonizing S/M culture as dangerous, violent, and patriarchal. Which is to say, and to quote Amber Jamilla Musser, anti-pornography feminists saw S/M as a “pernicious extension of patriarchy because it coerced women into participating in this masculine sphere of unequal power distribution through a cooptation of eroticism.”

Truth Hurts resists such a narrative on “Addictive” by locating S/M sex as a site of Black female pleasure and power, and not pathology. And in so doing, she makes intimate what Ariane Cruz calls the “politics of perversion” and
what Joan Morgan calls the “politics of pleasure.” Hurts’s lyrics locate a Black woman’s pleasure in the erotic forms of whipping and asphyxiation, and as a result, finds S/M as a “subversive, transformative power of perversion” that resists the politics of respectability and silence governing Black women’s sexuality and that makes room for “honest bodies that like to also fuck.”

And it is in relation to this kind of female pleasure in S/M sex on “Addictive,” this kind of melding of the politics of perversion and the politics of pleasure, that I argue that Mangeshkar’s lyrics and vocals are not altered to support patriarchy, but rather perform a subversion of such norms that seek to curtail women’s sexual dissidence. Indeed, Bollywood playback singers (singing prerecorded vocals for use in movies) like Mangeshkar have been central to Bollywood’s attempt to reconcile visual erotic representations with middle-class notions of sexual morality. Mangeshkar rose to fame alongside, and consequently informed, post-Indian independence notions of proper womanhood that rendered women’s sexual subjectivity and desires (queer and non-queer) as at least domestic and at most nonexistent. Regarded as “virginally pure” and displaying an “adolescent-girl falsetto,” Mangeshkar’s voice performed nationalist middle-class ideals of femininity, providing female characters in popular Indian cinema with the forms of innocence and chastity, irrespective of a female character’s story line, that the gender politics of Indian nationalist discourses demanded.

As Pavitra Sundar argues, Mangeshkar’s “desexualized vocal style helped contain the dangerous visual” presence of nonnormative female subjectivities and pleasures represented in Bollywood film scenes; her “pure” vocal performance “thinned” and “cleansed” nonnormative representations.

In other words, to the ears of many Bollywood elite and middle-class audiences, the “purified” voice of Lata Mangeshkar resscripted nonnormative scenes and/or characters to conform to the normative logics of the Indian popular film industry, the Indian state, and the dominant milieu.

DJ Quik’s coupling of Truth Hurts and Mangeshkar for “Addictive,” then, works to undo the ways in which Mangeshkar’s vocals and lyrics render illegible the kinky female sexual desires advanced in the song and dance number of “Thoda.” Recall that while the film performance in “Thoda” features whipping and sexual flirtations, Mangeshkar’s lyrics use desexualized language of flowers and romantic attachment. On “Thoda,” the sonic betrays the visual. One could listen to “Thoda” without knowing the impropriety of the song and dance performance, and one could watch and listen to the film
performance, as DJ Quik did, in ways that fail to hear Mangeshkar’s voice and lyrics as containing and buffering the visual representations of erotic nonnormativity. For “Addictive,” however, there isn’t a visual to which Mangeshkar’s lyrics and voice respond. Instead, “Addictive” finds Hurts and Mangeshkar residing in entangled tension of female sexual dissidence. DJ Quik’s sampling of certain phrases in “Thoda” limits and contains the respectability of Mangeshkar’s lyrics. Because he does not sample the entire song or long verses from “Thoda,” Mangeshkar’s voice and lyrics are unable to fully excise the nonnormativity of the song and dance sequence that DJ Quik initially saw and recorded. And because of this, Truth Hurts is able to express Black female sexual desires and pleasures denied under the demands of the politics of respectability while simultaneously revealing and aligning with the erotic past of the song’s filmic representation that Lata Mangeshkar’s voice initially and supposedly masked. “Addictive” thus sutures and subverts Black and Indian nationalist middle-class norms of morality that disavow the erotic, and in so doing offers a cross-cultural recording that centers and articulates shared Afro–South Asian (Hurts and Mangeshkar) nonnormative female sexual pleasure, desire, and practices. In other words, “Addictive” creates space for an Afro–South Asian sociality of sexual dissidence.

(S)he Makes Me Scream

We can also read the Afro–South Asian sociality of “Addictive” as a queer performance, especially if we further analyze its relation to the “Thoda” song and dance number. In addition to its depictions of sex workers, brothels, and S/M-related flagellation, the scene is also about deception. Much of the performance centers on Niranjan eagerly attempting to respond to Mallika’s flirtations with a kiss, but to no avail—she always eludes his grasp, but still continues to flirt. Near the end of the scene, Niranjan chases Mallika around the kotha and suddenly collapses and passes out on the floor. Much to the surprise of the audience, Mallika begins to steal Niranjan’s rings and other personal items. But it soon becomes apparent that Mallika’s flirtatious activities were not genuine, and that Mallika conspired with Amirchand, a character closely tied to Mallika and Niranjan and who lurks behind the scenes out of Niranjan’s view, to rob Niranjan. Realizing Niranjan’s general wealth and infatuation with Mallika, Mallika and Amirchand decided to exploit such lust by portraying Mallika as equally, if not more, obsessed with Niranjan.
She seduces Niranjan while Amirchand slips an incapacitating agent into his drink, and then robs him of consciousness and wealth. Thus, rather than an uneven and unidirectional romantic desire with Niranjan at the center and Mallika hopelessly attached to him, this act of deception reverses such perceptions. The film’s acknowledgment of the deception repositions Mallika as the relationship’s main focal point and seductive and financial consumer, with Niranjan serving as the lone sexually addicted partner.

I go back to the song and dance performance because, as I outlined above regarding DJ Quik’s sampling of the picturized performance of it as well as the two songs’ shared thematics of kink play, the visual memories of “Thoda” bear on “Addictive.” In particular, I want to think through the ways in which audiences’ (and not to mention Niranjan’s) deception in the song and dance sequence might provide a way to read “Addictive” in such a way that Truth Hurts similarly dupes her male partner, Rakim, and its listeners in “Addictive.” If the concluding scene in “Thoda” reveals to viewers that Mallika’s interest in Niranjan is simply an act to trick him into providing her with wealth, then perhaps we could also read Truth Hurts as similarly tricking listeners and Rakim into believing that she is the one addicted to Rakim, that his pleasure is her main concern. Hurts’s lyrics briefly allude to such a possibility when she sings, “He takes care of home / but he’s not alone.” Placing Hurts’s implication that Rakim is not her only sexual partner in relation to Mallika’s conning of Niranjan gestures toward two things. First, as the playback singer for the “Thoda” song and dance number, Lata Mangeshkar’s sampled voice on “Addictive” serves as a haunting reminder that Hurts is potentially feigning fixation, a pretense of docility in order to fulfill her own sexual and economic desires—an act that re-centers Hurts as the subject of her own sexual narrative and foregrounds instead of subsumes her pleasure. Second, and more to the point on the subject of queerness, because “Thoda” and “Addictive” share narratives of women deceiving male interests/sexual partners (not to mention women-centered pleasures with kink play fantasies), I want to push for a reading of Lata Mangeshkar’s role on “Addictive” as one that partly plays as Hurts’s lyrically absent and unnamed partner. If “Addictive” at most restages and at least parallels the “Thoda” song and dance sequence, then “Addictive” must also have three characters who overlap with the three characters in the picturized performance in “Thoda.” As such, Hurts, Rakim, and Mangeshkar’s characters in “Addictive” resonate with Mallika, Niranjan, and Amirchand: Hurts/Mallika play up attraction to
Rakim/Niranjan, only to hold ulterior motives that involve Manganese/Amirchand. Importantly, like Amirchand, Manganese is literally and figuratively in the background of the sonic scene of “Addictive.” But whereas Amirchand is strictly written in the scene as a character with whom Malika conspires, Hurts’s lyrics on “Addictive” suggest that Manganese is her coconspirator and her significant other who, in addition to Rakim, “takes care of home,” a double entendre that dually signals an ability to adequately address the needs of the house as well as an ability to satisfy the sexual needs within another domestic space: the bedroom. Rakim alone does not, and perhaps cannot, solely or fully satisfy Hurts. She also has to rely on Mangeshkar to provide such addictive pleasures as well.

Nabeel Zuberi persuasively argues that Mangeshkar’s moaning on “Addictive” serves as the song’s affective register. Zuberi reads Mangeshkar’s vocables during Truth Hurts’s sung lyrics as “exhalations of sexual ecstasy,” and he interprets similar sounds during Rakim’s rhymes—particularly those concerning Rakim’s potential incarceration for dealing drugs—as “discomfort and loss.” I agree with Zuberi that Mangeshkar’s moans mediate and “materialize” the relations between Rakim and Hurts, but I want to further expand this line of thinking to read such vocalizations as also signifying opposition to Rakim’s boasts of his sexual prowess and/or general presence on the record itself. That is, I want to read Mangeshkar’s nonverbal sonic expressions as also critiques of patriarchy and/or heteronormativity, and by extension a longing for an alternative and queer sexual relation. Lata Mangeshkar’s vocables, her non-lexical gurItalic sounds, serve as a sonic extension of Hurts’s sexual satisfaction and as possible markers of Mangeshkar’s own enjoyment in Truth Hurts’s practice of rough sex. If sampling characterizes an extraction of music from the past and inserting it into a present recording, then “Addictive” brings the lyrics and sounds of Mangeshkar on “Thoda” back to life, allowing Mangeshkar’s “oohs” on “Addictive” to operate as visceral reactions to Hurts’s sexually charged lyrics. Hurts also returns the favor by providing background vocals of heavy panting and rising orgasmic sounds during Mangeshkar’s sampled Hindi lyrics. Hurts’s expired erotic performance over and under Mangeshkar’s lyrics of desexualized romance dually makes audible the sexual activity and allusions in the filmic performance of “Thoda” that Mangeshkar’s original lyrics worked to erase, and it also marks Mangeshkar’s voice as a site through which Hurts directs desire and finds pleasure. Which is to say, even as Hurts discusses the ways that she is sexually addicted
to her male sexual partner—Rakim—her aural expressions of sexual pleasure that are sung in relation to Mangeshkar casts such articulations of heteronormative monogamy in doubt. It is a doubt that consequently allows “Addictive” to voice a narrative of queer sexualities between Mangeshkar and Hurts and/or Mangeshkar, Hurts, and Rakim.

Mangeshkar and Hurts’s lyrical and vocal encounters on “Addictive,” then, where, as Roberts notes, “one voice sings words, while the other shifts to vocables that accent the lead voice,” engender a “geographically and temporally displaced duet” that relies on and materializes through the syncing up of same-sex bodies and pleasures across time and space. Truth Hurts’s verses and voice demystify Mangeshkar’s orgasmic expressions, and Lata Mangeshkar provides a sonic illustration of Hurts’s description of her sexual practices and pleasures. Both artists perform and sound a queer binding that collectively shapes and informs each recording’s and artist’s female-derived enjoyment of rough sex, and form a sonic exploration and articulation of Afro–South Asian female same-sex pleasure that is emblematic of what Juana María Rodríguez calls queer perverse sociality.

In so doing, “Addictive” challenges contentions that the lyrics and sound of “Addictive” construct an Orientalist narrative where Truth Hurts ostensibly acquiesces to patriarchal sexual pleasure, and, through Lata Mangeshkar’s voice on the song, produces India as a feminine spectacle subordinate to the masculine United States. I posit, instead, that “Addictive” elides such heteronormative logic and illustrates a shared female-centered account of pleasure, a gendered, temporal, and racialized lateral connection made along the margins of erotic practices and pleasures. “Addictive” and “Thoda Resham Lagta Hai” serve as mutually constitutive songs that uphold each track’s female-centered shared pleasure and refusals of patriarchy. The visuality of the “Thoda” song and dance performance accompanies “Addictive,” and disrupts readings of “Addictive” that use Truth Hurts’s references to rough sex and sexual fixation as tied to fulfilling heterosexual male fantasies. Further, Hurts’s lyrics highlight and literally keep alive the queer memories and reading practices that Dedra Davis aimed to obfuscate through her press release and lawsuit. Simply put, rather than sampling a non-Western record and using its exoticness to explore and shore up African American sexual politics, the music and lyrics of “Addictive” bring these seemingly disparate songs and communities together in ways that produce new meanings to both songs. This allows listeners to experience and interpret queer female pleasures and
practices that are too often silenced and rendered impossible within mainstream rap, Indian popular film/music circles, Black respectability politics, and Indian nationalist moralities.

Recovering Addict(ive)

In her 2005 essay “Bollywood Spectacles: Queer Diasporic Critique in the Aftermath of 9/11,” cultural and queer theorist Gayatri Gopinath explores the ostensible paradox of the commercialization of Bollywood cinema among non-South Asian audiences in the United States simultaneously occurring alongside the policing and disappearing of South Asian bodies and communities in the wake of 9/11. Grappling with these seemingly “curious and contradictory” processes, Gopinath invokes a “queer diasporic critique” in order to expose the highly gendered and sexualized underpinnings of Bollywood’s popularity among Western audiences, revealing the ways in which its intelligibility in the United States is predicated on the effacement of queer female bodies, subjectivities, and desires. Yet, while Gopinath’s use of queer diasporic critique astutely highlights the false paradox of the visibility of South Asians on the silver screen with the heightened invisibility of such bodies within the state, this chapter has illustrated the ways in which a turn to the other side of things, to the sonic and specifically Black popular musicians’ engagements with South Asian cultural production, can open up spaces where such female queerness is expressed and experienced horizontally between racially marginalized communities.

Examining “Addictive” through the other side of things illustrates how, rather than engaging in dominant reading practices of “Addictive” that automatically contextualize the song as an extension of the imperialist and Orientalist Indo-chic period and the post-9/11 war on terror, we need to explore the relationship between South Asian cultural production and U.S.-based hip-hop as their own relationship, independent of white consumption of South Asian cultural commodities. In so doing, we find new understandings of this Afro-South Asian cultural moment. My use of the other side of things here is not an attempt to deny that “Addictive” or similar songs engage in Orientalist tropes. But what I am pointing out is that often these same songs are involved in other progressive politics, and that is what makes the other side of things a necessary reading practice and analytic. Specifically, a turn to the workings of gender and sexuality in “Addictive” lays bare the
numerous ways that the song complicates approaches that solely analyze it through lenses of race, imperialism, and Orientalism. The politics of gender and sexuality in “Addictive” offer another way, an imagining elsewhere that I call the other side of things. If Orientalism is an imperialist binary logic of difference that shores up norms of race (whiteness), gender (patriarchy), and sexuality (heteronormativity), then it might mean that a turn toward the anti-Orientalist manifestations of “Addictive” challenges such dominant formations and opens up Afro–South Asian, feminist, and queer possibilities.

In the midst of the lawsuit, Truth Hurts was invited to perform this intercultural, cross-spatial, and cross-temporal queer sociality to a majority–South Asian audience in the summer of 2002. Given the commercial success of “Addictive” in the United States, Kamal Dandona, the chairman of the Zee Gold Bollywood Awards, asked Hurts to perform the song as part of their annual awards show at the Nassau Coliseum on Long Island, New York. According to Hurts, she was the first “American artist” ever, and by extension first African American artist, to perform at the event. The history-making set is also notable because it did not include Rakim. Instead, the set featured Hurts, surrounded by women of color dancers, singing “Addictive” alongside the sampled voice of Lata Mangeshkar. This all–women of color performance both figuratively and literally stages a queer collectivity that visually and sonically links the bodies and voices of such women of color through the practice of and pleasure in rough sex. As music journalist Corey Takahashi wrote about the proceedings, after the conclusion of Hurts’s set, “teenage girls shrieked with glee; sari-wearing grandmothers gasped.” Takahashi’s description speaks to a generational shift in the audience response to Hurts’s performance, and one that is specific to and ostensibly centered on sexual (im)propriety. Hurts’s set was a transgression of gender and sexual norms of respectability within Indian nationalist and Black cultural formations that animated the Afro–South Asian female queerness of “Addictive” and Saregama’s copyright infringement lawsuit.

But, in the end, this lawsuit stalled Hurts’s career, the financial potential of “Addictive,” and the song’s Afro–South Asian queer sociality. Saregama won an injunction against Dr. Dre / Aftermath Records / Interscope / Universal in 2002 (despite later losing the lawsuit), and it halted the sales of “Addictive” and the Truth Hurts album that included it. To this day, “Addictive” isn’t available for purchase or streaming via normative channels Spotify, iTunes, and Tidal. The injunction, the multimillion-dollar lawsuit itself,
and the attendant media attention placed too much of a burden on Hurts, and she and Dr. Dre agreed to part ways in late 2002 / early 2003. The legal fallout affected how Black hip-hop artists and producers approached the inclusion of and engagement with South Asian music. Some producers, like the Black Eyed Peas’ will.i.am, obtained permission before releasing any recorded material that sampled Bollywood music; while other producers, like DJ Quik, abandoned the whole project. But as we will see in the next chapter, some Black rap producers, notably Timothy “Timbaland” Mosley, saw the controversy surrounding “Addictive” as an opportunity to imagine and pursue a new way of working with South Asian music in his songs—and importantly, this was an other side of things that kept in play the queer and feminist impulses that “Addictive” compellingly engendered and explored.