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Do(ing) Something Different

Cross-Cultural Collaboration in the Work of Timbaland and Rajé Shwari

Tim was pretty much doing a lot of Indian stuff at the time. But he wanted to do something different.

—Bill Pettaway, interview

Several years ago, I interviewed guitarist and music executive Bill Pettaway, who is most known for cowriting Milli Vanilli’s “Girl You Know It’s True” and for discovering Toni Braxton. But at the time of my interview with him, he was the A&R (artists and repertoire) head for rap producer Timothy “Timbaland” Mosely, for whom he was developing a pool of South Asian American talent. Timbaland, as discussed in chapter 3, produced Missy Elliott’s hit “Get Ur Freak On,” and soon produced other chart-topping songs that sampled South Asian music—Tweet’s “Oops (Oh My)” and “Call Me” and Bubba Sparxxx’s “Ugly” being the exemplary recordings—that, along with Truth Hurts’s “Addictive,” helped usher in the mainstream popularity of and visibility to South Asian music in U.S. (Black) popular music.1 But then things started to slightly change for Timbaland. He stopped sampling South Asian music and started to create songs with a South Asian American singer named Rajé Shwari. Shwari, born Rajeshwari Parmar, had enjoyed minor success in Europe in 2000 and 2001 while working with house producer Todd Terry, and had begun working on a demo in the summer of 2002 in the hopes of securing a record deal with a major label. Shwari’s work soon landed in the hands of Pettaway, who was impressed with it, and then took it to
Timbaland. Timbaland, like Pettaway, loved Shwari’s demo, quickly signed her to his production company, which Pettaway ran, and started to work with her on his upcoming projects with Jay-Z, Kanye West, Beenie Man, and his own solo efforts. When I asked Pettaway about what drew Timbaland to Shwari, he told me, “Tim [Timbaland] was pretty much doing a lot of Indian stuff at the time. But he wanted to do something different. He was tired of everyone sampling. So he wanted to change music again—he’s the king of that, you know—and Rajé [Shwari] fit where he was going.”

This chapter explores Timbaland’s desire to “do something different,” and in particular his collaborations with Rajé Shwari that such a desire engendered. I read the music that they created together, their collective effort to “do something different,” as a form of what I’ve called throughout this book as the other side of things—an alternative imaginative space of Afro–South Asian music making that holds cross-cultural coalitional and queer political implications and possibilities. Timbaland and Shwari extended the queer Afro–South Asian impulse of Truth Hurts’s “Addictive” that I discussed in the previous chapter, but they did so with a twist. Rather than a sample serving as the South Asian representational construct in U.S.-based rap and R&B, as it had with “Addictive,” Shwari’s presence on songs and her coproduction and cowriting with Timbaland shifted focus to the agential. That is, the music that Timbaland and Shwari collectively developed brings to the fore the collaborative and the face-to-face contact of what performance theorist Patrice Pavis calls the “intercorporeal,” and how such intercultural music making practices shape the racial, gender, and sexual meanings of Afro–South Asian music during this moment of increased sampling of South Asian sound. I’m interested, in other words, in the queer and cross-racial musical solidarities that potentially arise within, are cultivated out of, and expressed through the Afro–South Asian interpersonal collaborative workings of the other side of things.

Shwari and Timbaland’s tapping into and elaboration of the other side of things most chiefly recalls the collective work between Miles Davis and Badal Roy that I addressed in chapter 2. In both examples, we find a famous and influential African American artist working with a lesser-known South Asian (American) musician. But there are two significant differences between these two collective groups and moments that explicate how Timbaland and Shwari continue the legacies of these Afro–South Asian collaborative efforts. First, while On the Corner was a response to Black Power politics, formal
politics did not drive Shwari and Timbaland’s creative processes. As noted above, the popularity of South Asian samples in U.S.-based Black popular music led them to work together. Timbaland noticed the ubiquity of music producers sampling South Asian music, and consequently sought other ways to include South Asian cultural production in his music that didn’t contribute to the trend’s oversaturation. As for Shwari, as she informed the New York Times, while she was working on her demo in the summer of 2002, she was “hearing Indian samples in hip-hop, so I sang some background vocals and made them sound like samples, because of Timbaland.” In order to make her vocals “sound like samples,” Shwari recorded herself in Hindi, and used software that filtered her voice to emphasize high and mid-range frequencies in such a way that they produced a vocal tone like that coming from a telephone receiver. This altered vocal sound is key for Shwari’s demo and career because it resembles and mimics the timbral, temporal, and spatial characteristics commensurate with digital sampling. But more than the mechanics of sounding like a sample, Shwari’s statement to the New York Times points to how Timbaland’s popularity and association with sampling South Asian music was the impetus to her sample-sounding demo—it was her way to appeal to Timbaland’s aesthetic as well as get his attention. And so, when Timbaland heard Shwari’s demo, it coincided with his desire to “do something different” with South Asian music. It was Shwari’s emulation of samples that was that difference. It illustrated what a South Asian (American) social actor, and not simply a sampled object, could sound like in hip-hop.

The second way that Timbaland and Shwari’s collaborations differ from Davis and Roy concerns gender. Shwari’s gender as a woman informs her sample-sounding demo and work with Timbaland. While On the Corner is an all-male affair, Shwari and Timbaland’s cowriting and coproduction work took place between a woman and man. I draw attention to the gender difference between Shwari and Timbaland because, at this time, hip-hop producers disproportionally sampled South Asian women’s voices (usually Bollywood) for their songs, which, in return, exacerbated critiques that such producers and sampling practices were Orientalist—the masculine as West and the feminine as East. Shwari’s sample-sounding demo and performance, then, contends with this narrative. But, like Timbaland, Shwari is interested in doing, and then later very much does, something different: she gives the sample agency. Rather than the status of a static sampled South Asian woman—a commodity that a rap producer manipulates or to whom a featured artist
(i.e., singer/rapper) references in their song—Shwari’s performance as this gendered sample allows the recording to address its surroundings—the featured artist(s), the theme of a song, the pitch and rhythmic patterns of a song—and further contributes to the meaning making of the song. Shwari, and I’m alluding to Fred Moten (who was drawing on Marx) here, creates a space from which the commodity, the gendered sample, can speak (back). As we’ll soon see, Shwari kept and made central the sample-sounding demo performances and effects for her future collaborations with Timbaland. And in so doing, Shwari and Timbaland’s intercultural collaborative work complicates and challenges the Orientalist framings of Afro–South Asian rap that predominated this kind of music at the time. In moving from object to subject, Shwari and Timbaland produce new racialized, gendered, and sexual narratives of and for Afro–South Asian music.

In order to explicate these new narratives, I want to consider Shwari and Timbaland’s two most prominent songs: “The Bounce,” which Timbaland produced for Jay-Z, which is Kanye West’s first featured performance in a major rap track, and which is Timbaland and Shwari’s first collaborative release; and “Indian Flute,” which Timbaland produced for his and his long-time rap partner Magoo’s album, which features a rap from Timbaland’s brother Sebastian, and which was the last single that Timbaland and Shwari released together. These songs are thus bookends of Shwari and Timbaland’s Afro–South Asian collaborative projects, and I argue that they illuminate the breadth and complexity of Shwari and Timbaland’s dual desire to “do something different.” This difference, as we will see and which has been highlighted throughout this book, is a difference that sits at the intersections of race and sexuality, a difference produced through Black and South Asian (diasporic) relationalities, and a difference that facilitates queer Afro–South Asian bonds.

What’s Beneath the Bounce?

Soon after signing Shwari, Timbaland enlisted her assistance in writing and producing a song titled “The Bounce” for Jay-Z, a song that features the then-emerging rapper/producer Kanye West, and which was slated for Jay-Z’s highly anticipated album The Blueprint 2: The Gift & the Curse. By the time Shwari entered the studio, Timbaland had finished the beat, Jay-Z had already recorded his verses and his chorus, and West had completed his verse. The song’s beat is sparse and heavy. It comprises a steady yet syncopated
non-pitched tabla that underlies an interplay between a hard-hitting kick drum and a slapping clap. “The Bounce” also features an array of synthesizer-based sounds that give the song a strong base but fail to render a melodic impulse. Jay-Z’s verses center on him boasting to male rappers about the success of his previous album, The Blueprint—“Rumor has it / The Blueprint [sic] classic”—and how its and his success are causing other rappers to mimic his style, his proverbial blueprint—“It’s like you tryin’ to make The Blueprint 2 before Hov.” Kanye West, who produced a significant portion of The Blueprint and became famous for his contributions to its sound, complements Jay-Z’s verses with similar gendered boasts—“Magazines call me a rock star, girls call me cock star / Billboard pop star, neighborhood block star.” And Jay-Z uses part of the chorus to instruct male listeners that he can teach them how to become a star like him—“Point out the bounce! / Ima show you how to get this dough in large amounts ’til it’s hard to count.” With most of the song recorded, Timbaland asked Shwari to add to Jay-Z’s chorus. Given that her demo featured her singing songs like a sample, she decided to record a short rendition of the chorus of the 1993 Bollywood film song “Choli Ke Peeche” and use that to add to and overlap with Jay-Z’s voice and lyrics in chorus of “The Bounce.” Additionally, Shwari placed the same sample effect on her voice while she recorded her cover of “Choli Ke Peeche” for “The Bounce,” and the contrast between Jay-Z’s present and strong voice against the distant and faint voice of Shwari gave the song’s chorus added texture, depth, and melody. Jay-Z and his record label apparently liked the final version of “The Bounce” enough that they kept Shwari’s vocals, included it on The Blueprint 2, and even made “The Bounce” the B-side single to his soon-to-be crossover and Grammy-nominated hit “Excuse Me Miss.”

It is somewhat poetic that “The Bounce” is the B-side to “Excuse Me Miss.” While “Excuse Me Miss” is a song about heterosexual romance, “The Bounce,” as the B-side, as the flip side, as the other side (of things), is quite queer. And it is queer precisely because of Shwari’s lyrical and vocal performance in the song’s chorus. Her rendition of “Choli Ke Peeche” indexes the representations and history of queer female expressions tied to the song. Monika Mehta notes that “Choli Ke Peeche” engendered enormous national debate in India for its purportedly explicit discussion of Indian female sexuality, a topic rendered unimaginable and impermissible within patriarchal Indian popular film industry and print media. Specifically, many saw the chorus of “Choli Ke Peeche,” which is “choli ke peeche kya hai” and translates from
Hindi to English as “what’s beneath the blouse?” as a “veiled sexual reference” intended to transmit “improper sexual mores.” At the height of this controversy, the chairman of the Central Board of Film Certification of Bombay received more than two hundred letters and petitions calling for (among other things) the deletion of the song from the film it was set to appear in, titled Khalnayak. Eventually, out of concern for the film itself and the song and dance number that accompanies “Choli Ke Peeche,” the Bombay Film Examining Committee reached a compromise with the director of the film, Subhash Ghai, to edit scenes from the song and dance sequence in order for Khalnayak to receive a “parental guidance [rating] for children under twelve years old.”

However, despite the changes, certain gestures involving sexual desire remained in the scene, and for many, these gestures were queer. The scene in Khalnayak in which “Choli Ke Peeche” is performed centers on the interplay between two women who use the song to seduce, and eventually capture, the male antagonist of the film. For Gayatri Gopinath, while the scene takes place between two women and one man, Khalnayak sets up a “structure of female homosociality,” where female homoerotic desire between two of the film’s heroines is articulated via the “triangulated relation to the male character.” Both female characters appear on a stage presumably as spectacles for the male antagonist’s gaze, but once the scene begins, the male figure increasingly “becomes peripheral to the scene of desire as it takes shape between the two women, who are clearly more engaged with each other than with him.”

I want to mine this queer visual scene in Khalnayak in order to think through the queer musical moments in “The Bounce.” That is, I want to shift Gopinath’s analysis from a reading practice of visual culture to that of an interpretive frame of aurality. And to do so I want to further analyze Shwari’s performance as a sample on “The Bounce.” I’m particularly interested in thinking through how Shwari sounds and what she does when she sings her rendition of “Choli Ke Peeche.” On the original version, Bollywood playback singer Alka Yagnik sings “choli ke peeche kya hai / choli ke peeche” twice at the beginning and end of the song, in a loud, confident, and crisp voice. Conversely, Shwari’s voice is soft, seductive, and distant, and she sings the chorus as follows: “choli ke peeche kya hai / choli ke peeche kya hai / ke peeche / peeche kya hai/kya hai / [pause] / choli ke peeche kya hai / choli ke peeche kya hai / choli choli / ke peeche/peeche kya / kya hai.” Shwari’s rendition constitutes what Jason King refers to as “reconstruction,” a performance
that “restructures the original in ways that reorient both the melodic and lyric foundations of the original, as well as its performative cultural and political effects.” Shwari’s seductive vocals and lyrical repetition of “choli”—“blouse”—and “ke peeche”—“beneath,” emphasize and announce a queer female erotics that the original song did not and could not. Indeed, while the original song teases female sexual desire, Yagnik resolves the question of “choli ke peeche kya hai”—“what’s beneath your blouse?”—by singing in the next line “choli me dil hai mera”—“in my blouse there is my heart.” Here, by moving from a gesture toward breasts to a focus on the heart, Yagnik mutes the erotic potentiality of “Choli Ke Peeche”; she shifts the possibility of prurience to a reality of normative romance. Shwari’s interpolation, on the other hand, refuses this kind of de-eroticized resolution. Her repeated use of “choli ke peeche” ensures that listeners’ attention will be on women’s breasts in general and the queer female controversy around them in particular. We might imagine the relationship between Yagnik and Shwari on “Choli Ke Peeche” and “The Bounce” as resembling that of Lata Mangeshkar and Truth Hurts on “Thoda” and “Addictive.” Hurts’s lyrics and Shwari’s performance as a sample (re)center the (queer) female sexual dissidence that Yagnik’s lyrics and Mangeshkar’s voice seek to curtail. And in so doing, Shwari’s sample-like reconstruction of “Choli Ke Peeche” is a resurrection—it raises/razes the queer memories and queer pasts of “Choli Ke Peeche.”

My use of resurrections and razings is deliberate here because I want to take seriously Shwari’s status as a sample, and read it as a performance that sits at the nexus of the temporal turn in queer studies and what Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut call “deadness” and “intermundane collaborations.” In their article “Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane,” Stanyek and Piekut use posthumous duets, like Nat King and Natalie Cole’s 1991 “Unforgettable,” to think through the late capitalist colaboring between “the worlds of the living and dead” marking much of post–World War II recorded music. Intermundane collaborations challenge predominant, but in no way exclusive, scholarly and popular assumptions around the split between presence and absence in performance, and help us to see how various spatiotemporal patterns and repatterning that animate and (re)frame the interlocking and colaboring practices of intermundane collaborations, provide alternative imaginings of sound recordings and recording studios. Stanyek and Piekut thus seek to illustrate how collaborations are not bound to face-to-face interpersonal encounters, but instead spatiotemporal colaborings that engage
with and engender the entanglements of life and death, presence and absence, past and present in formations of capital, sound, agency, and kinship.

Although absent from Stanyek and Piekut’s article, the potential for deadness and the intermundane to produce and highlight unexpected meetings of and exchanges between bodies and subjectivities through and across space and time dovetails with queer studies’ recent focus on temporality. Queer temporalities refuse the Western schism between and chronology of past, present, and future precisely because such organizations of time and history are violent to queers. They negate, for example, the ways in which the past has often been a site of queer subject formation in the present, and how the rhetoric of “growing up” and the demands of futurity are often tied to and privilege reproduction and normative ways of life. As such, queer temporalities focus on disruptions to the normative logics of time, the “straightness” of time (e.g., the linear, progressivist divides of past, present, future; and birth, marriage, child, death), and how such disruptions can produce queer subjectivities and forms of desire and pleasure. Queer temporalities open up, as Elizabeth Freeman notes, “a set of possibilities produced out of temporal . . . difference” that afford new and exciting approaches to and inhabitations of queerness. They allow us to imagine queerness differently.¹⁴

Thus, as I explained in the previous chapter, if sampling is a schizophonic, mimetic practice that splits sound material from old recordings (the past) and then inserts and reorganizes this material into “new patterns” (the present), then Shwari, as someone performing as well as transforming into a sample, must in some degree inhabit the past; she must constantly attempt to reach across time and tap into the past.¹⁵ Shwari’s repetition of lyrics and the differences between her and Yagnik’s tone highlight how her relation to “Choli Ke Peeche” mark a channeling of and connection to the past. The past exists in and is expressed through Shwari’s voice, speaking to and through her like the mediums that scholars such as Molly McGarry read as queer. For McGarry, mediums channel “the voices of the dead as a means of connecting with the past . . . imagining both worldly and otherworldly figures.”¹⁶ As a sonic medium on “The Bounce,” Shwari’s vocal and lyrical gestures dually summon the queer memories and ghosts of the visual and material history of “Choli Ke Peeche” and enacts a haunting of such ghosts on “The Bounce.” Shwari, through her vocal and lyrical transformation of “Choli Ke Peeche” into a sample intimates a calling for the pastness of the latent female homoerotism within the song’s eponymous song and dance
performance as well as demands for such a past to take root in the present particularities of “The Bounce” and the presence of Jay-Z and Kanye West. This move of temporal dissonance and re/misalignment reorients the heteronormative and masculinist frame of “The Bounce” (sans Shwari, “The Bounce” is a fully male-dominated production, Jay-Z and West’s imagined listeners are men, and West boasts that “girls call me cock star”) to one that centers on queer female possibilities. It is with “The Bounce” that Shwari performs temporal drag, to borrow from Elizabeth Freeman. Shwari indexes and inhabits this queer and erotic past in ways that resist how the Indian film company in 1993 and Jay-Z and Kanye West’s lyrics in 2002 render such queer, female, and queer female articulations invisible and inaudible.

Shwari’s invocation of “choli ke peeche kya hai” not only engenders a queer sonic space on “The Bounce” in general, but also potentially queers Jay-Z in particular. By creating a South Asian diasporic queer soundscape on “The Bounce,” Shwari interpellates Jay-Z within this South Asian queer narrative, history, and imagining. Rather than upholding the male rapper as active speaker to the passive woman sample that dictates most practices of sampling South Asian music in the United States at this time, Shwari’s position as a sample allows her to, at minimum, reverse the (aural) gaze and, at most, render such heterosexist logics useless. To explicate this point, I want to briefly explore the chorus of “The Bounce,” which, as a reminder, centers on the interplay between Jay-Z, who raps, “Point out the bounce! / Ima show you how to get this dough in large amounts ’til it's hard to count,” and Shwari’s reconstruction of “choli ke peeche.” If we read the chorus as a dialogue between Shwari and Jay-Z, a queer situation emerges. While Jay-Z informs Shwari that he will show her how to increase her wealth, Shwari’s response of “choli ke peeche kya hai”—with, again, emphasis on “choli” (blouse) and “ke peeche” (beneath)—is directed toward Jay-Z. And in so doing, her answer to Jay-Z dually queries and points to Jay-Z’s supposed blouse and what lies beneath it. The juxtaposition of Shwari’s lyrics with the presence of Jay-Z on the track produces a reading of “The Bounce” that renders Jay-Z queer or genderqueer in the sense of cross-dressing, and potentially as a sex worker as well—he uses what’s “beneath the blouse” to earn money. It is, then, in the interplay between Shwari and Jay-Z that he emerges, is queered, as someone whose gender expression and wage-earning practices are trans(gressive) and nonnormative within the dominant logics and articulations of labor and Black male masculinity.17
While these queer valences of “The Bounce” highlight Black male queerness and provide useful ways to imagine queerness within hip-hop, I propose that specifically analyzing Shwari’s lyrics in relation to the song and dance sequence of “Choli Ke Peeche” allows us to glean the ways in which Shwari’s queer positionality articulates queer female South Asian diasporic desire. Moving back to McGarry’s contention of mediums’ desire to connect to the past, I want to suggest that the consistent and incessant repetition of the words “choli ke peeche kya hai” act as a chant, a calling for another female voice to enter the song and successfully reenact the song and dance performance of “Choli Ke Peeche.” To put it another way, and to allude to “Addictive,” because the visual scene of “Choli Ke Peeche” features two women and a man, and because only Jay-Z and Shwari occupy the space of the chorus in “The Bounce,” “The Bounce” subsequently fails to restage this scene—another female voice is required. Shwari’s repetition of the phrase “choli ke peeche kya hai” serves as an invitation for and interpellation of a second female presence. This ghostly call aims to replicate the scene in general and the latent female queer desire imbued in the scene as well.

As Shwari’s status as a sample attempts to allow for a reopening of the queer memories of “Choli Ke Peeche,” her positionality recalls what lesbian musicologist Elizabeth Wood theorizes as “sapphonics.” Analyzing nineteenth-century operas as illustrative case studies, Wood defines sapphonics as “a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of lesbian possibility, for a range of erotic and emotional relationships among women who sing and women who listen.” My use of sapphonics is in no way an attempt to impose a Euro-American lesbian identity on the queer female sonic space of “The Bounce” or queerness within Shwari’s vocal performance. As this book has articulated, the queerness of the other side of things, of these Afro–South Asian genealogies of sound, refuses an easy lining up with such an identity. But I find sapphonics a useful and compelling framework because of its allusions to transgression; of destabilizing normative boundaries, binaries, and logics; and its ability to vocalize, as Wood notes, “inadmissible sexualities.” These are similar sexualities and pleasures that the Indian film industry and nationalist politics aimed to censor “Choli Ke Peeche” (the song as well as song and dance sequence). Using sapphonics, Rajé Shwari, as a living sound of the past, functions as the queer female singer calling on past queer female desires and subjects. Yet, because sapphonics is predicated on the female singer and female listener tied by the erotic bonds of desire, we must then ask who constitutes the female listener?
While in Wood the listener is the queer female audience member attending an opera, in “The Bounce” it seems as if the listener is the sonically absent woman whose presence completes the sonic restaging and translation of the “Choli Ke Peeche” song and dance performance. Because of this, I want to consider the multiple desires that might emerge from Shwari’s use of “Choli Ke Peeche.” Her repetition of “choli ke peeche kya hai” attempts to sonically re-create, via the absent listener, those queer desires and pleasures found in the visual rendition of “Choli Ke Peeche.” It articulates a desire for the listener to hear and share Shwari’s queer calling. Applying this to “The Bounce,” we can glean the ways in which Shwari invokes these queer intimacies between her and her listeners. She articulates an affective longing for such a queer listener, a politics centered on queer desire that is rendered impossible in the Bollywood film from which it is associated. It is a desire for such a queer desire to exist, a desire that Wood powerfully notes is “the desire for desire itself.”

It is perhaps Shwari’s indexing of “Choli Ke Peeche” on “The Bounce,” and its attendant queer female desires and memories, that forced the Bollywood film’s director, Subhash Ghai, to threaten a lawsuit. In a similar move to, and on the heels of, “Addictive,” Ghai informed news outlets that he was considering taking legal action against everyone involved in the recording and release of “The Bounce.” He noted, “[It’s] more than just a line, it is an entire concept they’ve taken.” As the director of the film, Ghai’s statement, particularly his contention that the song’s concept had been appropriated, points to a recognition of “The Bounce,” via Shwari’s status as a living sample, as a song indexing and potentially reopening the queer memories, voices, desires, pleasures, and possibilities inherent in “Choli Ke Peeche.” But because of how Shwari performed “Choli Ke Peeche,” how she reconstructed it as a sample, “The Bounce” did not qualify as copyright infringement. Ghai was unable to sue, and so “The Bounce” avoided the fate of being another “Addictive.”

Blowing the Indian Flute

After “The Bounce,” Timbaland and Shwari began working on more songs. They created a track for a multimillion-dollar KMart and Joe Boxer underwear ad campaign, Timbaland introduced Shwari to his friend and colleague Pharrell Williams who enlisted her to sing on a song for the Charlie’s Angels movie sequel, and Timbaland and Williams agreed to coproduce Shwari’s debut album and help her obtain a record deal with a major label. In order
to further advertise Shwari’s work, Timbaland collaborated with her as a singer and writer on his and his rap partner Magoo’s third studio album, *Under Construction Part II*. Together, Shwari and Timbaland developed a song on the album titled “Indian Flute” that, once released, they believed would be “the most amazing Indian urban record yet,” and a song that would further evidence their Afro–South Asian pursuit of “doing something different.” Notably, “Indian Flute” was going to be Shwari’s first A-side single and her first track to have an accompanying music video.

Divided into three verses (and an eight-measure bridge), “Indian Flute” centers on flirtatious dialogue between Shwari and Timbaland, Magoo and Shwari, and Sebastian and Shwari, respectively. In the first verse, Timbaland remarks that he has been “eyeing you [Shwari] from afar”; the second verse features Magoo informing Shwari that sleeping on the same bed and watching late-night movies would inevitably lead to a sexual encounter; and in the last verse, Sebastian advises Shwari on how to keep their imminent sexual relationship a secret. Shwari engages the sexual advances of Timbaland, Magoo, and Sebastian, but does so speaking in what Nabeel Zuberi defines as “Punjabi-inflected Hindi.” For example, she queries Timbaland “zara sa choom loo to kya?” (why don’t you give me a little kiss?). The trading of pickup lines within each verse concludes with a linguistic crossing and exchange—Shwari sings a line in English, and her male interlocutors respond in Hindi.

It is within these linguistic exchanges that we begin to understand why Shwari heralded “Indian Flute” as a groundbreaking Afro–South Asian hip-hop recording. As the previous chapter illustrated, mainstream Afro–South Asian rap in the United States predominantly concerned the interfaces between African American artists and producers and sampled South Asian musical phrasings. “Indian Flute” completely shifts this dominant way of engaging South Asian music. Instead of sampling a song from an Indian film recording, Timbaland, Magoo, and Sebastian directly worked with a South Asian American artist in Rajé Shwari. Moreover, in having the African American male artists rap in Hindi and Shwari sing in English during the closing couplets of each verse, “Indian Flute” explodes the linguistic limits placed on previous mainstream Afro–South Asian hip-hop, where African American rappers rap in English and use the Hindi sample as the sonic representation of South Asia. In “Indian Flute,” Shwari’s use of English and the male performers’ utilization of Hindi breaks from this normative script, and as such broadens the potential listeners and prospective fans of the song to communities that
understand English and/or Hindi. The track’s use of English and Hindi provides a space for Hindi- and English-speaking South Asian and South Asian diasporic as well as African American communities to mutually engage one another on this record. Indeed, although (and because of being) mediated by capitalist interests, the song also sought to forge bonds between the two communities (Black and South Asian) rather than produce a distance and mark them as disparate.

When I interviewed hip-hop producer Hannon Lane, who was Timbaland’s protégé and Shwari’s close friend at the time of the recording of “Indian Flute,” and who was present at the recording of the song, I asked him to tell me about the recording session for “Indian Flute.” Lane eagerly responded:

Tim one day came to Magoo and said, “I got this beat, Magoo, I got this beat I want you check out.” You know that’s how Tim talks. So he played the joint. He was like “I wanna go like [in the song’s melody] ‘I got my Indian flute, boo da doo da doo da doo, sing it to me.’ And then I think Rajé should sing in Hindi.” It was like he premeditated that song. Like how you heard the song was exactly how he sung it to Magoo . . . and then he went into the booth, and did some mumbo jumbo [a common practice in rap where a rapper uses non-lexical phrases to establish a vocal cadence, rhythm, or flow for a particular verse, and later replaces them with words that conform to this rhythmic vocal structure]. And then Magoo turned Tim’s shit into words. And then Rajé came in and did her verses in Hindi. And then she started teaching them how to say certain things in Hindi . . . So Magoo was like “How do you say this in your language?” And so she taught them how to sing whatever the line was, she taught them how to say it, so they learned how to say it and then incorporated it into they [sic] rap . . . so it was kind of cool to see the process. That’s how Tim, Magoo, and Rajé made the song. It was kind of cool to see that whole process, and them working together like that. It was kind of cool.23

The sequence of events that Lane outlines highlights the collaborative beginnings of “Indian Flute.” Initially, each performer—Timbaland, Magoo, and Shwari—added on to the previous performer’s work—Magoo reinterpreted Timbaland’s nonsensical phrasings into intelligible words; Shwari complemented Magoo’s rapping with sung lyrics; and then at some point during the recording of “Indian Flute” the session became a collective, dialogic, and intercultural endeavor. Ostensibly searching to enhance his rap
verses (both for himself as well as for Timbaland), Magoo asked Shwari to teach him not only how to translate certain English verses into Hindi, but also how to pronounce the verses in Hindi. Lane’s emphasis on “she taught them how to say it” suggests a pedagogical aspect of the song, a critical and mutual site of teaching and learning that bridges and intertwines cultures and languages. Furthermore, Lane’s repeated phrasing of “she taught them how to say it,” works to highlight the centrality of Shwari in the music making process. Rather than simply being told what to do and/or how to sing certain things, Shwari had agency and shaped the entire form of the song. She helped move it from an African American rap song featuring a South Asian American singer, to an experience in Afro– South Asian collectivity. Indeed, I interviewed Timbaland’s longtime recording engineer Jimmy Douglass who, like Lane, attended and participated in the recording of “Indian Flute,” and I asked him about Shwari and Timbaland’s recording process for the song. Douglass was initially frustrated with my question because, as he explained to me, far too frequently people ask such questions to pit Timbaland and Shwari against each other in discerning who should receive “credit” for the creation of “Indian Flute.” Douglass then curtly informed me, “It was a collaborative thing, OK? And people that are creative realize that.”24 We should not ignore the significance of the place of communal activities, of being a “collaborative thing” for Douglass or “working together” in the words of Lane’s reflective awe. Instead, we should read Douglass’s exasperation and Lane’s excitement as constitutive of the song’s mutual authoritative structure. Interpreting their experience in this way illumines the potential for “Indian Flute” to envelop listeners into similar forms of the communal and the collective.

It was perhaps this aim to produce Afro– South Asian alliances that led Shwari to inform the New York Times that she saw “Indian Flute” as a response to “these MC’s [sic] who sample Indian music without understanding it.”25 Shwari’s statement was a thinly veiled critique of African American rapper Erick Sermon and his 2002 hit song “React.” “React” features a sample from the Bollywood film song “Chandi Ka Badan,” and specifically a vocal line from the song’s playback singer Asha Bhosle: “Kisi ko khudkushi ka shok ho tow uh huh kya kare.” The sampled lyric translates into English as “If someone wants to commit suicide, what am I to do?” Sermon was unaware that the sampled line was about suicide, and rapped alongside the sampled verse with his own line, “Whatever she said then I’m that.” The song features the Bhosle sampled lyric throughout the song, and Sermon
refers to Bhosle as an “Arabic chick” to whom he makes sexual advances and mocks her accent. Erick Sermon’s misogyny—his use of “chick,” his dismissiveness, and his unprompted sexual advances—xenophobia—his mocking of non-English speech—and Orientalism—his conflation of Hindi and Arabic as homogenous—on “React” illustrate, as Nitasha Sharma rightly posits, “a general American ignorance of both geography and non-European languages . . . [and] relays the message, though, that artists who have become commercially viable do not need to do their homework.”

For Rajé Shwari, then, “Indian Flute” is a corrective to songs like “React.” It dares to “do something different.” And Shwari’s position as a sample on “Indian Flute,” much like on Jay-Z’s “The Bounce,” operates as a mode of critique. “Indian Flute” addresses a similar thematic and story-line structure to that of “React”: African American heterosexual male rapper makes sexual advances toward a South Asian (diasporic) woman (one whose sexuality is unknown and rendered irrelevant to the male character); South Asian (American) woman responds in a South Asian language (Hindi, in both cases); male rapper confesses that he does not, cannot, and will not try to translate or locate a shared and equal form of communication, and thus maintain his misogynist pursuits. Shwari, Timbaland, Magoo, and Sebastian signal these narratives on “Indian Flute,” but, in a shift in standard hip-hop practice, allow the sample (i.e., Shwari) to respond to these propositions. Upon first listen to “Indian Flute,” Shwari seemingly constructs a reverse discourse in which she performs the role of the active subject who initially pursues Timbaland, Magoo, and Sebastian. She sings with verses in Hindi that translate to “why don’t you give me a kiss?” which position her as an erotic and desiring (active) subject who also desires and enjoys pleasure from someone else. While it is apparent to listeners of the record that Shwari is shaping the contours of the flirtatious conversation, the masculinist rappers on the song imagine themselves to be the ones holding that position.

But despite the attempt at heterosexual consummation, audiences are left without any confirmation of successful and mutual heterosexual erotic pleasure. The chorus of “Indian Flute” highlights the degree to which Timbaland, Sebastian, and Magoo love Shwari’s “Indian flute” (what some have posited connotes her clitoris), but the chorus ends with them lamenting that they “can’t understand a word you’re sayin.” Interestingly, they use Hindi as an attempt to “understand” Shwari, but it is at the moment that they speak in Hindi that Shwari begins to sing in English, producing another layer of misunderstanding, missed connection, and failed heterosexual erotic fulfillment.
“Indian Flute” is, in other words, a song about arrested heterosexuality. By performing as a sample on “Indian Flute,” and using that status to create a parody of songs like “React,” Shwari enacts a queer of color feminist critique that lyrically—through the literal misunderstandings that occur between Shwari and her African American male counterparts—and sonically—the temporal and spatial distance produced by Shwari’s status as a sample—arrests heterosexual pleasure, and renders it unimaginable and impossible.

And in this way, “Indian Flute” offers a response to and critique of the theme of romance that looms large in Afro-Asian studies. From the real-life marriage of James and Grace Lee Boggs to the fictionalized story of Matthew Townes and Princess Kautilya in W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Dark Princess*, Afro-Asian studies scholarship has long privileged romance narratives. Vanity Reddy and Anantha Sudhakar argue that Afro-Asian studies scholars are drawn to these stories because they ostensibly bear “potential as a political strategy to denaturalize the production of racial divisions under global capitalism and produce new forms of community.” And yet these narratives are disproportionately heterosexual and racially gendered in such a way that the African (diasporic) subject is a man and the Asian (diasporic) subject is a woman. “Indian Flute” takes this narrative and refuses to make it celebratory. The inability of Timbaland, Magoo, and Sebastian to develop a romantic relationship with Shwari forces us to consider new ways we might imagine Afro-Asian relationalities. It was the rubric of failure rather than success, misconnections instead of connections, queerness instead of heteronormativity, and difference rather than sameness—what Stuart Hall sees as the power of articulation—that served as the foundation for their Afro-Asian exchange.

With “Indian Flute” recorded, with the decision that it would be an A-side single, and with Timbaland’s record label greenlighting a music video for the song, it seemed like Timbaland and Shwari would have a platform for their collaborative project of doing something different, of articulating an intercultural production of the other side of things. However, a few weeks before the shoot for the “Indian Flute” video, Timbaland and Shwari parted ways. The reason for the split remains vague (Pettaway informed me that “Tim and I had a plan, but she wanted to do things her way”). Regardless of the reason, Timbaland decided to move forward with shooting “Indian Flute” without Shwari.

The “Indian Flute” music video failed to visually restage and translate the song’s sonic and lyrical critique of heteronormativity and Orientalism in
songs like “React.” It opens with a computer-generated view of the front entrance to the Taj Mahal. The camera then takes the viewer into the assumed interior of the space, where an older South Asian male snake charmer plays his flute (it resembles a recorder, not a *pungi* or *been*). Instead of a snake, however, a brown-skinned woman slowly emerges from the basket. The camera moves from the snake charmer to an open, harem-like area where multiple women of color surround and caress Timbaland, Magoo, and Sebastian. Their raps are predominantly shot within this space, with belly dancers performing in the background, and with other women of color lip-syncing Shwari’s verses. The camera then pans to the snake charmer, who throws away his flute and begins to grab his penis and simulate various sexual positions. The spot ends with him “charming” his female partner back into the basket, and the camera zooming out of the interior room and back to the full shot of the front of the Taj Mahal.

If the musical recording of “Indian Flute” marked another sonic site of Afro–South Asian connectivity and South Asian female diasporic queer-ness, the song’s video betrays such equitable and progressive politics. Orientalist fantasies are on display throughout the clip. The older male snake charmer in general, and his seated position during most of the video in particular, represents a South Asian antiquity in relation to the modern U.S. nation, embodied in Timbaland’s, Magoo’s, and Sebastian’s upright and youthful performance. Further, the video’s mixing of South Asian and Middle Eastern cultural commodities and performances (i.e., belly dancing) expresses an imaginary of a homogenous and mysterious Orient. Moreover, gender and sexuality shaped these racialized representations. The women of color function as objects of the male characters’ heterosexual desires and pleasures, through their caressing and flirtations with Timbaland, Magoo, Sebastian; and the snake charmer’s literal control over his female partner’s moves. In essence, rather than parody songs and videos like “React,” the “Indian Flute” video parroted them instead, and raises the question whether Timbaland was truly interested in the kind of pursuit of the other side of things that Bill Pettaway called “doing something different.”

**From Bollywood to Bollyhood**

But such a question was perhaps premature. Following their split, Timbaland and Rajé Shwari continued to create music that centered on collaborations between African American and South Asian (diasporic) artists. Timbaland
has worked with British Asian singer Amar, British Asian singer and rapper M.I.A., South Asian American emerging artist Shakti, and most recently South Asian American breakout singer and rapper Raja Kumari. With some of these artists—Amar and Shakti—they’ve performed on his productions as samples, while others—M.I.A. and Kumari—have used their natural/human voices. Regardless, Timbaland’s previous and current South Asian (diasporic) collaborators illustrate that he remains committed to “do something different” collectively, to develop an Afro–South Asian sound that further pushes the boundaries of music.

Similarly, Rajé Shwari has also remained steadfast in her pursuit of doing something different. After she and Timbaland parted ways, she started to work exclusively with Hannon Lane. Lane and Shwari’s shared experiences with Timbaland seemed to have led them to work together. Lane recalls his work with Shwari as a collective endeavor: “We kind of fell in love with each other’s work. Kind of just married ourselves, our music together. You know what I’m saying? We just was vibing. So I’d go to Philly [Shwari’s hometown] all the time. Allllllllllll the time, man . . . working with Rajé was definitely an amazing experience.”32 Lane’s use of “marriage” to describe his collaborations with Shwari not only suggests an Afro-Asian sonic, interracial, and cross-cultural union, but also a oneness implicated within the realm of the intimate. In other words, Lane’s interpretation of his work with Shwari illuminates a central argument of this chapter as well as this book: that the musical, the racial, the cultural, and the sexual conspire within the articulations of Afro–South Asian sonic music making practices in Black popular music—that the other side of things is a space where race, gender, and sexuality meet in an expression of Afro–South Asian collective music.

Recently, Timbaland and Shwari have reconnected, creating music for her upcoming album _The Queen of Bollywood_. The title of this work seeks to bridge the South Asian film industry, and cultural space of South Asian and South Asian diasporic identity formations (Bollywood), with the “hood,” a space, much like the street corner in Miles Davis’s _On the Corner_, that confers African American identity and political consciousness within hip-hop culture.33 At the time of writing this book, these songs have not been released, and so it is unclear if they will speak directly to formal political situations or if Shwari will perform like a sample. What is clear, however, is that Timbaland and Rajé Shwari are still dedicated to working together, to doing something different, and to pursuing the other side of things.