genealogy

MDPI

Article

South Asian Diasporic Music and the Performance of Race

Varshini Narayanan

Division of the Humanities, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60637, USA; varshini@uchicago.edu

Abstract

In this article, I analyze white American performances of South Asian music as concurrent performances of racial identity. I deploy a performance studies perspective that treats the visible and audible manifestations of race as performative agents in the manufacturing of racial structures. Scholars of interracial performance such as Philip Deloria, Eric Lott, and E. Patrick Johnson have long examined the ways white Americans have used the traditional art forms of ethnic Others as a means of understanding their own whiteness in silhouette. Likewise, I argue here that the performance and consumption of Hindustani music in its American diasporic context serves as a sort of funhouse mirror, forcing white practitioners and spectators to confront their own Orientalizing impulses and thereby affording them the opportunity to do whiteness differently. This article is structured in two parts. The first follows ethnographic interviews with a white American sitar player across his interactions with South Asian collaborators and audiences; the second reverses this gaze, this time analyzing a South Asian tabla player's performance before a white Euro-American audience. I demonstrate the ways the question of authenticity generates a productive anxiety in white practitioners and consumers of South Asian music, one that ultimately leads them to perform their whiteness differently before the brown gaze. In calling this a "performance" of whiteness, I mean that these cross-cultural transgressions go beyond making whiteness visible, as Lott and Deloria suggest, towards actually producing a different *kind* of whiteness, one that is in dialogue with the perspective and demands of the non-white Other.

Keywords: performance studies; whiteness; ethnography; South Asian music

1. Introduction

From Deloria's (1998) *Playing Indian* to Johnson's (2003) *Appropriating Blackness*, studies of interracial performance often begin with the postulate that these are, at core, artistic representations of the racialized Other. These scholars describe performance practices in which the white performer uses music, language, ritual, or dress to momentarily transgress racial categories, temporarily wearing the Other as a disguise. Through this process, whiteness is revealed; the stories white people tell themselves about the Other almost invariably turn out to be stories about whiteness itself, which, it would seem, is more readily accessed via its own negation. In this article, I propose a reframing of interracial performance that reads these would-be transgressions instead as fundamentally performances of *whiteness* before the non-white gaze. In calling these performances, I mean that cross-cultural musicking goes beyond making whiteness visible, as Johnson and Deloria suggest, towards actually producing a different *kind* of whiteness, one that is in dialogue with the perspective and demands of the non-white Other.

Check for updates

Received: 4 June 2026
Revised: 24 August 2026
Accepted: 28 August 2026
Published: 1 September 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

While we can easily categorize live music before an audience as a sort of "performance," Richard Schechner famously distinguishes between that which "is" a performance and that which can be read "as" a performance, the former being a historically and culturally determined category and the latter an interpretive lens (Schechner 2002). This latter understanding of performance as a hermeneutic has paved the way for discussions of the "performance" of race and gender, identities constructed via a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1988, p. 519). Judith Butler here builds on the foundational theory of performativity first proposed by J. L. Austin, who defines the performative as a grammatical category in which spoken words have the power to enact real change in the world (Austin 1962). To call race performative in the Austinean sense, then, is to say that the ways in which race is made visible and audible serve not only to represent race, but to actively construct it. This idea has been taken up by scholars of racial performativity including Muñoz (1994), Johnson (2003), Chambers-Letson (2013), and Nyong'o (2018), who variously analyze the role of theatrical and quotidian representations of race in constructing our real-world experiences of racial identity. As an ethnomusicologist, I build on this lineage of work to examine musical performance as also performative in the sense proposed by Austin and Butler. I give particular attention to what ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin calls "micromusics"—musical subcultures that must necessarily find alternatives to the racial frame of the nation-state as they develop their own internal hierarchies of taste and belonging (Slobin 1992). The performance of race within diasporic subcultural communities follows a transnational logic; it is informed by both local and global perspectives on the dominant group—which in the context of the United States is to say, white people. This article accordingly considers transnational musicking as a space where whiteness is made both visible and audible, and thus serves as an opportunity to do race differently.

My research is based on ethnographic and autoethnographic fieldwork with the South Asian musical community of New York City. The first half, "Anxiety," is based on a series of interviews with white Hindustani musician Galen Passen. Our conversations reveal the ways Galen works to account for and mitigate his whiteness in artistic encounters with different ensembles and audiences. The second half, "Authenticity," is based on a single fieldwork event, a concert at which Bangladeshi tabla player Mir Naqibul Islam performs before a majority white audience whose mode of engagement with his performance, to my view, reinforces Orientalizing tropes. In my recounting, the white gaze here fails to exert the same performative influence on Mir that the South Asian gaze exerts on Galen, so that Mir is able to "perform" his own racial authenticity while Galen "performs" white anxiety. In a way, this framing of performance and performativity recuperates the very act of cross-cultural music making, providing a viable avenue for transnational musical encounter in a multicultural society.

2. Methods

Stanely Brandes first identified the category of "ethnographic autobiography" in 1982, while anthropologist Barbara Tedlock dates the emergence of what she calls "narrative ethnography" to the 1970s (Brandes 1982; Tedlock 1991). Writing in the nineties, Tedlock seems to consider autoethnography a bold undertaking, saying: "The public revelation of participatory details of the fieldwork experience is still considered embarrassingly unprofessional by some ethnographers" (Tedlock 1991, p. 71). This perspective has been roundly challenged, most significantly by feminist scholars of color such as hooks (1984), Ahmed (2017), and McLaurin (2001), who in *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics* argues that "issues of Self and subjectivity are never secondary but are intricately woven into the direction, content, analysis, praxis, and materiality of our scholarship" (McLaurin 2001, p. 52). This emphasis on subjectivity as itself a form of theory

extends to my interlocutors, whom I treat as co-theorists by way of their racialized artistic practices. Artist–scholar Jonathan Leal considers this emphasis on lived experience and this "intentionally open-ended, context- and medium-specific understanding of *theory as action*" to be a way of "draw[ing] attention back to marginalized, differently racialized individuals and communities who have been repeatedly denied opportunities for their own self-articulation" (Leal 2023, p. 8). An auto/ethnographic methodology becomes particularly apt in my discussions of racialized affect, as I argue that it is the sense of anxiety generated by the white and South Asian gaze respectively that engenders crucial alterations in the ways whiteness is performed. Writing as a South Asian American musician, I am able to analyze the structures of feeling that govern this type of interracial encounter from a firsthand perspective. The result is to heighten the stakes of these conversations for a multicultural audience and to insist on their direct relevance for my own life as well as my cultural and artistic community.

My fieldwork took place over roughly eight months in Brooklyn, New York. During this time, I attended concerts and jam sessions, performed in venues ranging from cramped apartment buildings to professional theaters, and conducted both formal and informal interviews with practitioners, consumers, and promoters of South Asian music in the United States. There is a demographic slipperiness to my use of "South Asian diasporic" in the title of this article, as I understand this to be a deeply heterogenous community that also makes room for non-South Asians who find themselves drawn to our music—although not, as I discuss, without deeply held caveats. The characters of Galen, Mir, and myself offer a productive triangulation between white American, South Asian, and South Asian American participation within a transnational South Asian musical scene, as we variously negotiate our individual senses of belonging and alienation within our shared community. The conversations and events described here are shared with permission and narrated through a deliberately subjective lens, as I insist on affect and perception as performative agents of racial identity.

3. Anxiety

Galen Passen is appropriately self-conscious about the way he presents: translucent skin with long blond hair tied up in a loose bun, sitar under his arm. After our first interview, he sends me a self-satirizing video of a sitar performance he's recently given in a local salt cave (Figure 1). The point, it seems, is to let me know that he's in on the joke; he's not one of *those* white people, at least not really.

The brief biography that starts our interview is illuminating. Galen was raised in upstate New York in what he describes as a "very homogenous town" where there "wasn't much of anything culturally." His introduction to South Asian music came at the age of sixteen from a white man who had bought a sitar on the internet, but knew little about South Asian music himself. Soon afterwards, Galen found himself traveling to India to study the sitar with little to no knowledge of the country's culture or traditions beyond what a brief Wikipedia search taught him about Hinduism.

Galen is profoundly, painfully aware of how he might be perceived as a white man studying Hindustani music. He says of India, in an offhand yet confessional tone: "You know how indelible the effects of colonization are there." For the Indian nationals Galen has met over subsequent years of traveling to and from the subcontinent, the response to his interest in Hindustani music has been overwhelmingly positive, to what Galen describes as an embarrassing degree. This local embrace has not been without its downsides, as Galen also describes a sense that his first *guru* didn't feel the need to "put [him] through" the rigor of traditional instruction, excluding him from many of the social aspects of his teachings and even frequently watching cricket during their lessons. At the time, Galen was bothered

and even offended by what felt like discriminatory treatment or neglect. In retrospect, he acknowledges his *guru*'s likely impression that the stakes of learning Hindustani music were simply not very high for him as a white American: "I could come back [to the US] and the most that would have been broken is my pride," he concedes. Still, Galen does not hide his frustration with the dismissive attitudes and assumptions he sometimes encountered in India, which he summarizes in quotes: "Look at the rich guy who found his next hobby." Never mind that Galen is from a working-class family and worked as a bus driver to support his artistic pursuits; in India, his whiteness is interpreted as a sign of wealth and marks his artistic practice with the privilege of frivolity.



Figure 1. Galen Passen performing at Gaia NoMaya, Brooklyn, NY. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Stateside, too, the way Galen is perceived as a white practitioner of a non-white art is never far from his thoughts. He characterizes the U.S. scene as somewhat more "egalitarian" than India, although he still sometimes senses that he is being catered to differently as a white man. I myself frequently describe him to friends as a "white guy who plays the sitar," an epithet that in its very pointedness alludes to some form of caricature. At best, Galen tells me, he hopes to distance himself from a particular kind of white person that we mutually struggle to define. In retrospect, I believe the distinction is fairly simple: unlike many of his peers, Galen is a white man who thinks about his race. This ought not to be controversial: it is a foundational tenet of whiteness studies that the vast majority of white people are not often compelled to reflect on their race, particularly in their interactions within their own racial community (Lambert Swain 2023). Meanwhile, in parallel with his sitar studies, Galen received a Bachelor's degree from Goddard College, a nontraditional

academic program where he was frequently encouraged to reflect on his whiteness from both practical and theoretical standpoints, including through split residence in India. As such, an active part of Galen's artistic performance practice involves thinking through the racial, cultural, and political implications of the opportunities he is presented with as a white man playing the sitar.

I believe this matters. Galen's presence as a white man in South Asian musical spaces is not, in itself, exceptional. Neither is his markedness, his visibility, in these spaces. Indeed, while many within the field of critical whiteness studies have theorized whiteness in terms of its invisibility (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Dyer 1997; Feagin 2009; Frankenberg 1993; Lewis 2004), Sara Ahmed and others have suggested that this foundational assumption is itself an "exercise in white seeing, which does not have 'others' in view, those who are witness to the very forms of whiteness, daily." (Ahmed 2004). From a non-white perspective, Galen has never *not* been visible as white. What is exceptional is Galen's *own* experience of this visibility, and his awareness of *himself* as white. Galen's Hindustani performance practice plays a crucial role in his engagement with his own whiteness: it generates a foundational anxiety, one that is tied to being perceived as white by a non-white audience. This is, I believe, a productive anxiety. Indeed, Ahmed goes on to theorize a "white subject [that] would come into existence in its very anxiety about the effects it has on others, or even in its fear that it is taking something away from others." Galen's anxiety functions as a performative agent in the manufacturing of his race: it encourages him to *do whiteness differently*. As Ahmed goes on to ask: "Is a whiteness that is anxious about itself—its narcissism, its egoism, its privilege, its self-centeredness—better? What kind of whiteness is a whiteness that is anxious about itself? What does such an anxious whiteness do?"

Such questions need not be taken in the abstract, as anxious white people often do make conscious changes to their behavior in non-white spaces, both to signal a "good" white identity and to establish their belonging within their chosen communities (Lambert Swain 2023). Indeed, Galen makes a concerted effort to counteract the privilege he holds as a white man playing a South Asian instrument. He consults his South Asian *guru* before deciding whether to accept gigs that he believes he might have earned for the wrong reasons or that seem outside of his skill level as an artist. In our musical interactions across multiple ensembles, he audibly holds back, allowing the South Asian performers in the room to occupy the main stage. At our first jam session with *Kathak*[1] dancer and tabla, he busies himself with maintaining the *nagma,* an ostinato accompaniment figure, giving the South Asian dancer and percussionists at the session complete creative control. In many subsequent sessions, he frequently takes on the role of student, attempting to shadow other South Asian performers' improvised ideas and only rarely directing the creative flow himself. His performances as a practitioner of South Asian music thus serve to make his whiteness audible as well as visible in the moments of interracial encounter.

This function of *making visible* or *making audible* is not separate from the ability of musical performance to actually engender race. Indeed, this dialogue between *being* and *being perceived* is at the heart of Butler's "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1988, p. 519), eliding the visible and audible manifestations of race, the *doing* of race—here discussed from an external vantage as the *perception* of race—with race itself. Interracial musical performance is thus doubly performative in the way that it *makes race happen.* Galen's cross-cultural musical practice—"is" performance—simultaneously serves as a manifestation of his lived racial identity—"as" performance. His performance of the sitar, a racially inflected instrument, is always simultaneously a performance of his whiteness, especially as the instrument brings him into contact with South Asian cultural spaces, thus magnifying the visibility and audibility of his whiteness. From this perspective, we might consider cross-

cultural performance itself a form of identity work, wherein the performer's racial identity *outside* of the boundaries of the performance is ultimately rendered audible and visible—which is to say, rendered—by its manifestation *within* the boundaries of the performance.

To a certain extent, this framing recuperates the very act of crossing racial lines in musical performance. Galen's adoption of the sitar and his participation in South Asian cultural spaces could, on the surface, be understood as an appropriative interracial performance of brownness; but I would argue that it is both more accurate and more productive to understand Galen's performance practice as a performance of *whiteness*. Galen's "anxious" performance of his own racial identity through the performance of Hindustani music, a racially encoded genre, produces a different kind of whiteness, one that exists in relation to non-white communities and in attempted defiance of the normative structures that govern these relations. Understanding Galen's transgression of racial categories as ultimately a performance of whiteness denies the white performer the power to define or embody the racialized Other and instead subjects this white performer to the brown gaze, which thereby plays a role in producing whiteness.

This emphasis on the visibility and audibility of whiteness before the brown gaze offers a novel perspective on interracial and cross-cultural performance, which, we find, is not really about the Other at all. Indeed, Galen's "anxious" feeling of rejection by the insular NYC community of classical South Asian musicians has led him to find a second home in the avant-garde scene, where he often performs before white audiences. These performances differ in marked ways from his Hindustani performance practice. Galen describes his process of making original music for white audiences, in which he intentionally shies away from situating his compositions in particular *rags*[2]; instead, he says he tries to consider the sitar an instrument akin to a violin, in the sense of having access to a wide variety of musical and cultural traditions. The goal, he suggests, is to show that "this instrument has a certain history and a culture and it's also [just] a musical instrument."[3]

This fundamental *lack* of anxiety around the sitar as an instrument—or perhaps, this attempt to divorce the sitar from its anxiety-inducing, racialized context—is a form of white privilege that Galen has yet to reject. Indeed, we should not fail to note that Galen's characterization of the violin as "just" a musical instrument is itself the result of colonization, as the violin, which is today a ubiquitous feature of Carnatic concert performance, was first introduced on the Indian subcontinent by British colonial officials in the nineteenth century (Weidman 2006). From my own perspective, as a South Asian American Carnatic musician, I cannot separate my instrument from its racial context. My instrument is a "scriptive thing": it is situated and citational; it is a performative that hails me into particular modes of behavior and interaction (Bernstein 2009). I cannot take my instrument outside of its racial, cultural, and historical context without intense anxiety and without real consequences for my relationship with my *guru*, my parents, and my community. The stakes, for Galen, are simply not as high. "Even though [Hindustani music is] the most important artistic thing in my life. . .I don't really have a horse in the race," he admits, later even going so far as to say, "My interpretation of *raga* is not a thing I need to bring into this world as an artist."

Rather than reading Galen's cross-cultural performance practice as an appropriative performance of the Other, it is interesting to think of it as a self-conscious performance of whiteness, and thus as a rejection of the privilege that accompanies invisibility. At minimum, this framing allows us to understand the potential value of cross-cultural performance when undertaken with a degree of reflexivity and care. In Galen's case, his performance succeeds only insofar as it produces the necessary anxiety for him to perform a different white self, a white self that is in dialogue with the brown gaze. It brings him into an alternate mode of relating with his chosen community and a deliberate renegotiation of hegemonic racial structures. The following section reverses this gaze, this time analyzing a

South Asian musician's performance before a white audience—although one that, I argue, nonetheless enables both audience and performer to do race differently.

4. Authenticity

For U.S.-based practitioners of South Asian music, the charge of cultural appropriation holds one particularly vivid association. Sarah Morelli quotes fellow white *Kathak* dancer Charlotte Moraga, who says: "People assume that if you're older and you're white, you must be some New Age hippie" (Morelli 2019, p. 140) Many diasporic practitioners of South Asian music and dance reference George Harrison's popularization of the sitar in the 1960's and 70's and the emergent hippie subculture, one that largely involved white people listening to the music of Harrison and his contemporaries while consuming psychedelics. A reductive depiction, perhaps; but the connection between mind-expanding drugs and the mainstreaming of Hindu spirituality during this time period is embodied in the legacy of figures like Ram Dass and the Hare Krishnas, and the trope is seared into the minds of contemporary white practitioners of South Asian music, so that all-too-frequent references to Harrison and other notable white figures in the history of South Asian music are generally accompanied by jocular disavowal. The indelible image of the drug-addled hippie and the continued popularity of New Age spirituality in many musical subcultures—this is the very imagined community that Galen attempts to distance himself from, as such associations are commonly thought to delegitimize any viable interest in Eastern artistic traditions.

In June of 2022, I was invited to a house concert where Mir Naqibul Islam would be performing tabla alongside a talented young *santoor*[4] player, Vinay Desai. Knowing Mir as a heritage practitioner of Hindustani music and an exceptional talent who was deeply imbricated in the South Asian classical tradition, I arrived anticipating a relatively traditional cultural event. I was quickly set straight. The multi-floor condo where the event took place was shared by six young adults of various ethnicities and boasted a spa in the basement and a spacious living area with beautiful acoustics, perfect for hosting musical events. That night, the room was filled with mostly young white European expats; the small handful of middle-aged and older South Asian people clustered in the back seemed strangely out of place. Shortly before the performance began, I was discreetly made aware by our host that mushroom tea was available for consumption. I politely declined, mostly for the sake of my field notes. I watched with interest as everyone around me (with the exception of Galen, sitting beside me, and the aunties in the back) sipped their tea. I then proceeded to watch Vinay and Mir give what Mir later described as one of his all-time best performances, reaching tempos he had never before achieved onstage or even in his *riyaz*.[5]

My field notes are, at first, colored by outrage. "It is clear that the intention behind tonight is to take drugs. The music is secondary." Further down the page comes a comment that could either connote ongoing disbelief or begrudging appreciation: "I can't believe this is happening in 2022 but now it's us making the music." Back to outrage, with slightly more room for interrogation: "I feel tricked. Unpack!" "It feels like Galen and I and this aunty are the only people in this room who know anything about this music. Why does that insult me?" Finally, two pages later, with unmistakable enthusiasm: "I think I have to do one of these gigs."

Why the shift? In retrospect, I'm uncertain whether it was the roomful of white people or the focus on psychedelics that initially maddened me. Likely it was the combination of the two, an aversion towards the particular kind of whiteness that the union of South Asian music and psychedelics implied. Part of it was, of course, my own elitism as a classically-trained musician. Like opera in the US today, South Asian classical music demands a certain virtuosity on the part of its listeners, with the term *rasika*, often translated as "connoisseur," lending a dignified legitimacy to the cultural and artistic knowledge required to engage

with the music "correctly." I was becoming used to drugs and alcohol on the periphery of South Asian American musical events, but something about this evening suggested that psychedelics would in fact be taking centerstage for many participants, were perhaps even the primary motivation for attending the concert. Given my understanding of the training, dedication, and focus Mir's performance demanded both of him and of his ideal audience, I looked down on listeners whom I assumed would only be engaging with the music insofar as it enhanced their highs.

As quickly became apparent from Galen's muffled laughter beside me, I was not alone in my sense of superiority. There is an ethics attached to different modes of consuming and performing South Asian music in the West. A common theme that emerges within the New York scene, even more acutely among white practitioners, is a careful policing around what "kinds" of gigs are morally and artistically permissible. Galen's aforementioned performance at Gaia NoMaya, a local "social wellness" venue that caters mostly to New Age white people, is an example of the kind of opportunity certain musicians might avoid, or else feel some shame about accepting. For example, white Hindustani cellist Jake Charkey admits:

> I mean the Gaia NoMaya thing, like, you know I'll play that gig and then I'll think about it for days, about what it meant that this person asked me that question, and this person wasn't paying attention, and this person was paying attention but in the wrong way, and this person was showing me their feet, and this person was looking at their phone, and that person—you know, I see everybody in the room, and I absorb all of it, and, yeah. I mean, I think about it. A lot. And what it means for me also as a white guy to go in there, make some money. . .

Particularly for full-time artists whose financial well-being is contingent on garnering and accepting as many artistic opportunities as possible, the competing impulses behind performing for monetary gain and performing in service of their artistic and moral imperatives can create an acute inner conflict. Galen mitigates this contradictory impulse by taking advantage of what he considers lower-stakes performance opportunities to practice *rags* he does not feel he has mastered; when his audience is not likely to be aware of his mistakes, he feels freer to take risks and to allow his mistakes to serve as jumping-off points for nontraditional improvisations. From the didactic mode in which Mir introduced his performance at this particular house concert, I quickly surmised that this audience, too, was expected to have little to no familiarity with the genre at hand. At the same time, Mir's refusal to phone it in—the commitment to his practice that led to an exceptionally virtuosic performance, even in the context of a less-than-knowledgeable audience—astonished me. A few weeks later, over a midday chai, I asked Mir about his perspective on the performance. His response loses some of its poeticism in my retelling; still, I offered it then and offer it now as a sort of parable, a justification practitioners like Galen and Jake might offer themselves:

> [Mir] was like, look, you can have a guy who makes really good biryani[6], right? And someone is going to like, you know, they've got their job in construction down the street and they get hungry and it's lunchtime and they come over and eat some *biryani*. And then you have an expat who's been craving *biryani* since they left the country and they come home and they eat there. And then you have a gourmet Michelin starred chef who is coming to try—like, they're all going to get something different out of that *biryani*. The product stays the same. And the ultimate impact of that product of reducing your hunger remains the same. And he was like. . .The goal of my music is to reduce hunger.

https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy10040122

Following my initial judgment of the audience at Mir's concert, I was left shamed by the respectful focus many of them seemed to exude as they observed the performance. The insightful comments made after the event—from the comedy one listener found in the tabla's characteristic "liquid" bass strokes, to the fleeting moments of synchronized improvisation another listener astutely identified—revealed that I had been mistaken in my assessment of their priorities for the evening. They had come to dine, and their hunger had been sated.

In a New York Times article published a few days after Mir's performance, the Indian luxury fashion designer Sabyasachi discussed a wedding between two white men in which he had outfitted both grooms in traditional *sherwanis*.[7] For Sabyasachi, this non-Indian embrace of Indian haute couture represented a step forward, key to his own global expansion as an artist as well as the global status of Indian aesthetics writ large (Mari 2022). In a lineage of South Asian artists that includes Ravi Shankar, Chitresh Das, and Ali Akbar Khan, the belief holds that an uninitiated audience is a net positive; expanding the global reach of South Asian music is part of these artists' mission. Indeed, over chai, Mir stresses to me his fears for the future of Hindustani music without young American audiences' engagement. He describes hippies and their cultural descendants as a major consumer group, one to whom he is perfectly happy to cater. He simultaneously denounces what he calls a "destructive" perception among South Asians that classical music is inherently difficult to understand, insisting that he treats his audiences the same regardless of their level of exposure or experience. Artists like Mir trust themselves to disseminate their chosen art forms in an "authentic" mode, even as they venture into unconventional performance territory.

It is significant that Mir, a Bangladeshi, expresses markedly less anxiety around performance context than his white American counterparts. The desire to share his art supersedes any concerns about the reverence for or legitimacy of the art form that white practitioners feel pressured to uphold. It would have been difficult for Galen or Jake to play the same gig that Mir and Vinay had accepted without at least a sense of ironic detachment. Mir's performance is not wholly removed from Galen and Jake's experiences at Gaia NoMaya; in both contexts, these practitioners perform Hindustani music for a majority white audience whose prior knowledge of the art form is minimal and whose mode of engaging with South Asian culture reinforces exoticizing Orientalist tropes. However, Mir's brownness enables him to subvert these tropes by providing what he can claim as an authentic and satiating musical experience, even in a nontraditional context—a claim that is authenticated by his race as much as by his artistic prowess. His *visible* brownness transmutes into an *audible* brownness, not only shielding his performance from suspicion but tangibly authenticating it, and enabling him to deliver a performance of South Asian music dissociated from and independent of the surrounding white gaze. Meanwhile, it becomes clear that such a philosophy is not readily available to white practitioners, whose claims to expertise are often externally contested or else internally fraught.

Put differently, the anxieties around authenticity that accompany white entry into non-white performance cultures fundamentally differ from the anxieties that might accompany a brown artist performing South Asian music before a white audience. While Jake and Galen's anxieties seem to revolve around the demands they make of themselves as artists and a desire for external validation of their cross-cultural efforts, Mir's sense of legitimacy is untroubled by his audience's perception of his performance. Rather, it is my white interlocutors who seem the most preoccupied with the justification for their particular modes of performance. For Galen and Jake, the stereotypical white consumer of South Asian music serves as a sort of funhouse mirror, a distorted and exaggerated reflection of the Orientalist impulse they recognize within themselves. Meanwhile, Mir's determination and his uncontested ability to provide an authentic musical product—his *performance* of

authenticity—legitimizes the South Asianness of the encounter, its majority-white context notwithstanding. He does not allow his audience to have a superficial or appropriative experience; instead, he treats them as sanctioned consumers of a product he stands behind. Good biryani is good biryani, and everyone needs to eat.

5. Conclusions

This article demonstrates the usefulness of performance and performativity as metrics for analyzing race in a transnational context. Scholars of racial performativity such as Chambers-Letson (2013) and Wong (2004) have emphasized the particular salience of performativity for the Asian American diasporic narrative; likewise, I here interrogate the heightened degree of racial awareness as well as agency afforded by musical performance in the South Asian American community. However, in this article I turn our gaze outwards towards whiteness, arguing that the hypervisibility of white people in POC spaces affords them the opportunity to perform their whiteness in accordance with the non-white gaze and thus to do race differently. This framing denies the white performer the ability to embody the Other while also offering an alternative to the extractive colonial model of cross-cultural and interracial performance.

It is worth noting that all of my interlocutors featured here—Galen, and Mir, and Jake—are men, and must navigate this gender position as much as their race in moments of collaborative performance. At the first jam session where I played with both Galen and Mir, a female *Kathak* dancer commanded the proceedings with an authority that led another tabla player to address her as *didi*, elder sister, despite their similar age. Galen's artistic instinct to hold back in these spaces is a function of his maleness alongside and in connection with his whiteness. The traditional gendering of various instruments in the South Asian classical repertoire adds another important dimension to these diasporic collaborations; as a queer female-bodied practitioner of a male-dominated instrument, I negotiate a hypervisibility in South Asian classical spaces that Mir escapes as a practitioner of the male-dominated tabla. Weidman (2003) and Putcha (2023) have discussed the gendered politics of visibility in the history of, respectively, Carnatic music and *Bharatanatyam*; both of these scholars are key interlocutors for expanding this discussion into more intersectional terrain.

Finally, I do not here mean to present an overly optimistic view of interracial performance. Time and again, racial boundaries have been transgressed through performance in violent and colonial ways. The anxiety generated by any reversal of the dominant gaze is just as likely to provoke aggression as introspection. But my work insists on the possibility of responding otherwise. The brown gaze, catalyzed by the visible and audible transgression of racial categories and cultural borders—by the *performance of race*—can have a transformative impact on whiteness, which can then be exercised in service of productive interracial encounter. This analysis represents an important intervention into both mainstream and academic discussions of cultural appropriation, which have typically favored an extractive model that, I argue, ultimately prioritizes the agency of the appropriator—as does the broader field of whiteness studies, whose canonical theory of invisibility is a missed opportunity to center the brown gaze. Transnational musical encounter offers white performers the opportunity to resist the normative script. In doing so, it opens the very possibility of reciprocal artistic dialogue.

Funding: This research was supported by a Dissertation Research Travel Grant from the Division of the Humanities at the University of Chicago.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy10040122

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 A classical South Asian dance form characterized by intricate footwork and storytelling.
2 The primary melody-structuring principle of South Asian classical music.
3 See Farrell's (1988) "Reflecting surfaces: The Use of Elements from Indian Music in Popular Music and Jazz" for a discussion of the sitar's role in popularizing South Asian music in the West.
4 A South Asian hammered dulcimer.
5 Focused and systematic practice of an artistic tradition.
6 A popular South Asian rice dish.
7 A formal garment traditionally worn by South Asian men.

References

Ahmed, Sarah. 2004. Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism. *Borderlands* 3. Available online: https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/13911/ (accessed on 10 August 2026).
Ahmed, Sarah. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Austin, John Langshaw. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
Bernstein, Robin. 2009. Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race. *Social Text* 27: 67–94.
Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2003. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
Brandes, Stanley. 1982. Ethnographic Autobiographies in American Anthropology. In *Crisis in Anthropology: View from Spring Hill*. Edited by E. Adamson Hoebel, Richard Currier and Susan Kaiser. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.
Butler, Judith. 1988. Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Gender Theory. *Theatre Journal* 40: 519–31. [CrossRef]
Chambers-Letson, Joshua. 2013. *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America*. New York: New York University Press.
Deloria, Philip J. 1998. *Playing Indian.*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. London: Routledge.
Farrell, Gerry. 1988. Reflecting surfaces: The Use of Elements from Indian Music in Popular Music and Jazz. *Popular Music* 7: 189–205. [CrossRef]
Feagin, Joe. 2009. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. London: Routledge.
Frankenberg, Ruth. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
hooks, Bell. 1984. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press.
Johnson, E. Patrick. 2003. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Lambert Swain, Ainsley. 2023. Marked and Managed: Performing a 'Good' White identity in Non-white Spaces. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46: 2633–53. [CrossRef]
Leal, Jonathan. 2023. *Dreams in Double Time: On Race, Freedom, and Bebop*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Lewis, Amanda E. 2004. 'What Group?' Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of "Color-Blindness". *Sociological Theory* 22: 623–46. [CrossRef]
Mari, Francesca. 2022. How Sabyasachi Made the Sari Haute. *The New York Times*. June 26. Available online: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/22/magazine/sabyasachi-profile.html (accessed on 10 August 2026).
McLaurin, Irma. 2001. *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
Morelli, Sarah. 2019. *A Guru's Journey: Pandit Chitresh Das and Indian Classical Dance in Diaspora*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
Muñoz, José Esteban. 1994. *Disidentifications*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Nyong'o, Tavia. 2018. *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*. New York: New York University Press.
Putcha, Rumya. 2023. *The Dancer's Voice: Performance and Womanhood in Transnational India*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Schechner, Richard. 2002. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
Slobin, Mark. 1992. Micromusics of the West: A Comparative Approach. *Ethnomusicology* 36: 1–87. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
Tedlock, Barbara. 1991. From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 47: 69–94. [CrossRef]
Weidman, Amanda. 2003. Gender and the Politics of Voice: Colonial Modernity and Classical Music in South India. *Cultural Anthropology* 18: 194–232. [CrossRef]

Weidman, Amanda. 2006. *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Wong, Deborah. 2004. *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*. New York: Routledge.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.