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A Community History of Satrang:

Negotiating Visibility as LGBTQ South Asian Americans in Los Angeles

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Asian American Studies

By

Ami Ramesh Patel

2013

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Community History of Satrang:

Negotiating Visibility as LGBTQ South Asian Americans in Los Angeles

By

Ami Ramesh Patel

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Valerie Matsumoto, Chair

This project uses oral histories and ethnographic accounts to explore the founding, history, and community building efforts of Satrang, the South Asian American LGBTQ community organization in Los Angeles. Through the three examples of the Coming Out Day Parade, the Coming Out Coming Home Workshop, and Satrang's online presence, the project critically analyzes how individuals comprising Satrang, as well as the organization itself, negotiate a collective visibility that reflect the complex identities and needs of its members. Furthermore, the project disrupts the homonormative narrative of "coming out" as an ideal by demonstrating how Satrang members are flexibly disclosing their identities as LGBTQ people of color.

The Thesis of Ami Ramesh Patel is approved.

Victor Bascara

Purnima Mankekar

Valerie Matsumoto, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the beautifully complicated community

that is Satrang, and to my LGBTQ South Asian diasporic dreamers.

Thank you for seeing all of me, and letting me see all of you.

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I. Introduction

As the sun sets on a chilly fall day, I open my closet and stare at the few saris tucked in

the corner. In a few hours, I will be attending Satrang's annual Gala, an event where LGBTQ

South Asian American community members[1] and their loved ones come together during the

holidays to eat, drink, dance, and enjoy each other's company. I got involved with Satrang, an

organization for South Asian American LGBTQ individuals a few years ago, and have attended

events throughout the years. Many, like me, use the Gala as a chance to dress up in our fancy

attire, a way to celebrate our full cultural selves. As I awkwardly pleat and tuck to the best of my

ability, I recall the last time I wore the sari was at a tense family engagement party. That evening

at the banquet, there is full acceptance in the place of tension. We eat biryani and curry while we

watch performances from fellow Satrang members. One man does a full Bollywood dance in

drag. Another woman shares her poetry. Yet another has found a way to spin her painful

experiences about "coming out"[2] into a comedy routine. That evening, we enjoy each other's

company. There is an understanding that flows in the space: we may identify as LGBTQ, but we

are not any less culturally South Asian.

The South Asian American community is a growing community with diverse

intersectional experiences.[3] Throughout the decades, a number of organizations have been

created to attend to these diverse needs. Although in recent years there has been an emergence of

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[1] The community I am focusing on for this project are those that identify their sexual and/or gender identities as
Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) and trace their ethnic lineage to the South Asian
subcontinent. This is a cursory definition that I will expand upon later in my Cultural and Historical Overview.

[2] The term "coming out" is referring to the process wherein a person reveals their LGBTQ sexual and/or gender
identities to family and friends, often as an individual act of proudly claiming their identity. However, in this thesis I
will expand on Queer of Color scholars' work which explores how individualist and linear "coming out" processes
do not find the complex identity formation of LGBTQ people of color.

[3] I am using Kimberlé Crenshaw's theorization of intersectionality from "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality,
Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." Crenshaw defines intersectionality as the ways in which
identities of race and gender "interact to shape the multiple dimensions" of structural conditions and individual
experiences. Throughout the past few decades, many scholars have expanded these identities to include many others,
including class, sexual orientation, and citizenship, to name a few.

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panethnic South Asian political organizations in the South Asian diaspora,[4] many are based on a

specific ethnic, religious, or linguistic affinity, and many provide a space for cultural support.

The majority of these organizations that cater to the social networks of South Asian Americans

in the United States are not directly political—they may have nationalist ties to their home

countries, but do not explicitly claim a political mission. In many of these groups, sociocultural

harmony often times becomes a priority, which often silences those who deviate from the

dominant South Asian American narrative.[5] Therefore, South Asian American organizations that

do not fit the paradigm of financial success and ethnic conservatism often emerge within

contentious environments, or are forced to establish themselves outside the community.

Satrang is one such organization that is placed outside this sociocultural paradigm and

therefore immediately marked "political" because it caters to the LGBTQ community.[6] Satrang

has informally existed since the 1980's and officially became a "social, cultural, and support

organization" in 1997, with a mission to "[provide] a safe space to empower and advocate" for

the multiplicity of social and political needs of its South Asian American LGBTQ community in

the greater Los Angeles area "through education, networking, and outreach."[7] Initially a social

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[4] Vijay Prashad in his book *Uncle Swami* defines South Asian panethnicity as veering from what he claims is the "culturally nationalist identification" of many South Asian organizations, who are tied to the nation-building motives of their country of origin, such as a Bangladeshi diaspora organization that raises money to send back to Bangladesh. In contrast, panethnic South Asian organizations that have emerged in the last 15-20 years in the United States are rooted in political and social movement building that expands beyond nationalist identification to the country of origin, and instead focuses on the needs of the South Asian community in the United States and how they are connected to the community building efforts of other communities of color.

[5] Visweswaran, Kamala, and Ali Mir. "On the Politics of Community in South Asian-American Studies." *Amerasia Journal* 25.3 (2000): 96-107.

[6] I acknowledge that there is a tension of identification that emerges when talking about intersectional communities, and so have decided to be as transparently inclusive as possible. Moving forward in this paper, I am choosing to use the term LGBTQ as opposed to queer or LGBT. Additionally, South Asian encompasses a varied range of experiences, and I will continue to use this term moving forward to mean anyone currently residing in the United States of South Asian descent. And finally, many Satrang members live outside of Los Angeles, and so when I use Los Angeles or the greater Los Angeles area it means the broader Southern California region, including the Inland Empire and Orange County.

[7] "Satrang - Mission Statement." *Satrang - Serving Queer South Asians of Southern California since 1997.* Satrang. Web.

collective of individuals who craved a cultural connection but felt isolated from the larger South Asian American community because of their gender and/or sexual identities, Satrang has evolved into an organization that balances supporting the personal journey of its many community members with that of expanding their public events and campaigns. Satrang has engaged with South Asian American communities throughout the greater Los Angeles area, inserting the narrative of LGBTQ South Asian American existence at cultural and community events, providing information and education, and advocacy.

A multi-decade organizational history of Satrang provides insights into the political emergence of a dynamic community that is constantly renegotiating their public representation as a visible organization while also maintaining a private safe space for its members. Over the past 15 years Satrang has expanded its mission to incorporate the social and political desires of its members, and is now a regular community presence in both South Asian American and Asian American spaces. My exploration of Satrang is grounded in ethnographic accounts of Asian American LGBTQ community histories and ethnographies that similarly focus on personal relationships to build a community narrative. For example, Asian American Studies scholar Martin Manalansan has called the networking efforts of Filipino gay men in New York City "a style of imagining a community."[8] This is a fluid definition of community that allows for those gay men to find affinity with each other in private spaces while continuing to negotiate their identities as both gay and Filipino in the public world as safely and comfortably as possible. Much like the Filipino gay men that Manalansan writes about, Satrang in its early years relied heavily on imagining a safe space for South Asian Americans who identified as LGBTQ. Eric Wat, who wrote a detailed history of the emergence of the Los Angeles-based organization Asian Pacific Lesbians and Gays, states "a community cannot be understood with an atomistic

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[8] Manalansan, Martin F. *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. 151.

epistemology. How it comes to be is a historical question."[9] In other words, the creation and

evolution of a community cannot be separated from the historical, social, and cultural conditions

in which it emerges. In this instance, Satrang is historically and geographically situated in Los

Angeles, which creates a unique organizational history that reflects larger patterns of

immigration and development in an urban cityscape. This allows for community building in local

pockets but because of its unwieldy sprawl, also benefits from incorporating digital community

building.

In this thesis, I will chart the growth and evolution of Satrang, focusing on the Coming

Out Day Parade, the Coming Out Coming Home writing workshops, and Satrang's online

presence, to show how Satrang has expanded discourse on South Asian American narratives.

Additionally, throughout the thesis, I will complicate the presumed notions of "coming out" and

"visibility" that LGBTQ identity is often crafted around. More specifically, Satrang is able to

balance the complicated tensions of individuals articulating their own shifting sexual and/or

gender identities. This provides a supportive space that validates the flexibility of disclosing

those identities in different forms in different times and places. This idea, which I term collective

visibility, allows Satrang members who are more comfortable in their public identification as

LGBTQ to claim a collective identity on behalf of claiming space and telling the stories of those

who are not necessarily as comfortable or "out."

I will focus on three examples that highlight Satrang's community building and collective

visibility. First, the Coming Out Day Parade in Little India was an annual event that was held

from 2007-2010 on National Coming Out Day. During these pivotal years for the organization,

the Parade allowed the Satrang community to continue creating affinity within its own

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[9] Wat, Eric C. *The Making of a Gay Asian Community: An Oral History of Pre-AIDS Los Angeles*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002. 1.

organization, establish a presence in the broader South Asian American community and nurture its collective capital. Second, the annual Coming Out Coming Home workshop and culminating reading have become a public redefinition and reclamation of family and home for writers and audience members. And finally, Satrang's online presence incorporates both individual and organizational narratives that complicate the meaning of identity and community on a digital platform. As someone involved with the organization, I draw on my experiences to ground my research, which is based on oral histories of founders and key members of Satrang and its collaborating organizations, participant observation, online media, and background literature addressing the cultural nuances of South Asian American LGBTQ experiences.[10]

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[10] In 2008, Satrang received a small grant to begin documenting their organizational history, and completed and archived three full interviews with one founder and two key members. These interviews are currently housed at the Southern California Library, along with their Needs Assessment Report and a number of books and movies (fiction and nonfiction) documenting the South Asian experience. As of May 2013, I had conducted six additional interviews, five of which are in the process of being fully transcribed and added to the Satrang archive. Additionally, Satrang and other South Asian LGBTQ organizations across the nation, are working on a timeline documenting the emergence and evolution of the larger South Asian American LGBTQ community.

II. Cultural and Historical Overview

Although the South Asian American community, which generally encompasses individuals residing in the United States who trace their ethnic lineage to the South Asian subcontinent, tends to be diverse in multiple ways, such as socioeconomic class, religious affiliation, diasporic migration and settlement, to name a few, there are some similar community values that are salient amongst the broader South Asian American community that are shaped and reinforced by the sociopolitical and immigration history of the United States in the past few decades. More specifically, the South Asian American community, like the larger Asian American community, has developed in a racialized hierarchy. Within current racial configurations in the United States, they are perceived as the "model minority" hard-working immigrants. This narrative was further normalized after the 1965 Immigration Act enabled the immigration of highly educated professionals from South Asia.[11] And although the community values of shying away from discussions of sexuality can be traced back to South Asian cultures, this cannot be fixed as tied to the culture. In fact, the silencing around sexuality is often times reinforced and exacerbated in South Asian American immigrant communities, especially because many in this community are intent on upholding the immigrant "model minority" myth maintaining a narrative of "culturally authentic" community values. In other words, many South Asian American communities are attempting to maintain a narrative of "culturally authentic" community values. This leads many to uphold a static view of their community cached in heteronormativity, exemplified by marriage[12] and biological children.

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[11] Although I am providing a brief history of the "model minority" myth and how it relates to my project, I recommend *The Karma of Brown Folk* by Vijay Prashad, which provides a thorough historical analysis of the origin and evolution of the "model minority" in South Asian American communities.

[12] In this instance, I mean marriage between two adults that are heterosexual and cisgender (meaning an individual's gender identity aligns with their assigned biological sex).

Any deviation from this ideal is invalidated because it is not deemed "culturally authentic." Therefore, LGBTQ identities are "seen both as a threat to national integrity and as perpetually outside the boundaries of nation, home, and family."[13] An individual's coming to terms with their LGBTQ sexual and/or gender identities can be especially challenging because collectivism tends to be salient in South Asian American communities, favoring the stability of the family/community over the individual proclamations of one member.[14] So by voicing any sexual and/or gender identities that do not fit into perceived notions of "cultural authenticity," an individual effectively threatens not just their own reputation within the community, but risks the moral validity of their family within the larger community.

To further complicate the issue of sexuality and gender within the South Asian American community, the perception of the label LGBTQ within South Asian American communities does not always capture the lived realities of individuals. Many individuals (not just South Asian American) may have thoughts or engage in behaviors that could be identified as falling into the LGBTQ label but may not necessarily identify that way, further moving away from any semblance of being able to label and identify all individuals who think or behave a similar way as identifying the same.[15] Additionally, LGBTQ narratives within some South Asian American religious/spiritual practices have been erased throughout centuries of colonial interventions that imposed a Westernized gender binary.[16] This has created a cultural disconnect that is often times promulgated in South Asian American communities. Ironically, these same binaries created and reinforced by colonizers have become embedded as the norm in South Asian American

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[13] Gopinath, Gayatri. "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 5.2 (1997): 469.

[14] Das, Ajit K., and Sharon F. Kemp. "Between two worlds: Counseling South Asian Americans." *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 25.1 (1997): 23-33.

[15] Shah, Nayan. *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West*. Berkeley: University of California, 2011.

[16] Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 20-24.

existence, and anything besides the binary is deemed a shameful deviation from the culture (and by extension, the nation). So now, according to journalist Sandip Roy, "we have been bombarded with the message that [being LGBTQ] is a Western perversion."[17]

For South Asian Americans that identify as LGBTQ, individualist identification within a collectivist context creates a double bind, leaving many LGBTQ South Asian Americans to seek support outside of their family of origin or face tough decisions on their own. This is where Satrang plays a vital role, as a culturally familiar organization that embodies a more liberating type of collectivism for its members—one predicated on embracing the spectrum of LGBTQ identities and stressing a family-like support network. This theorization of Satrang and its tactical negotiation of visibility requires delving into the multiplicities of experiences of LGBTQ people of color that often do not fit dominant modes of homonormativity, which is most specifically addressed through Queer of Color Critique.

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[17] Roy, Sandip. "The Call of Rice." *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*. Ed. Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998. 175.

III. Queer of Color Critique and Theorizing Collective Visibility

Queer of Color Critique engages with the often contradictory and contested processes of heteronormativity, nonheteronormativity, and homonormativity, and further explores how racialization and other modes of difference are entangled in these modes of sexual othering and regulation.[18] These multiple ways of being are never distinct—there is a constant reformation of values linked to each identity construction. Therefore, Queer of Color Critique provides a necessary intervention into dominant discourses of LGBTQ identity construction. The role of Queer of Color Critique is to provide an analysis that intentionally places difference as the connecting element. This difference is rooted in race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, ability, and other factors. Queer of Color Critique engages with these differences without falling into the convenience of separating each identity as its own unit, because the process of regulating queers of color is based on a convergence of identities that are deemed unworthy by the dominant culture.

Whereas Queer Theory operates out of a centering of sexuality and the binary of normative/deviant in its analysis of power and politics, Queer of Color Critique is compelled to explore fully the ways that multiple manifestations of difference are mediated and/or coopted through language, policies, and enforcement.[19] For example, Queer of Color theorist Jasbir Puar theorizes her work through assemblages, which she states are "temporal and spatial reorderings"

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[18] In his book *Aberrations in Black*, Roderick Ferguson ties the emergence of heteronormativity to the industrial nation-building project of so called modern nations, such as the United States. Heteronormativity integrates heterosexuality and patriarchy as the core values of a stable citizenry, through marriage, single family homemaking, and biological reproduction. Nonheteronormativity, then, is defined as those who do not fit into the parameters of heteronormativity. In her book *The Twilight of Equality?*, Lisa Duggan defines homonormativity as the process by which homosexual individuals invest in the liberal rhetoric of being deserving citizens without acknowledging the possible limitations of aligning themselves with dominant nation-state ideology that continues to marginalize many communities.

[19] Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer times*. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. 125.

that allow for identity to converge dynamically.[20] This approach challenges fixed notions of identity, which proves useful when thinking about the multiple needs of Satrang's members and how these needs change over time for each individual and the organization as a whole.

Satrang is inherently racialized as outside of the heteronormative and homonormative sphere, most specifically because they do not abide by the need for "coming out" and visibility. Especially in this post 9/11 era where South Asian Americans are inherently racialized as a threat, their investment in visibility and acceptance as LGBTQ South Asian Americans becomes even more complicated. According to Puar, and many other Queer of Color theorists, visibility is a "liberal predicament" that entraps queers of color; through their public "outing" as queer, these queers of color are also risking possible surveillance and regulation.[21] However, there is also a way in which the U.S. nation-state utilizes the tactic of invisibility as exclusion; if there is no recognition of a community, then they do not receive the same rights as other citizens.[22] Thus, I assert that the mode of visibility is a flexible construction not predicated solely on disrupting a top down power flow from the U.S. nation-state. In other words, queers of color are not fixed in their identities, and will not be fixed in the ways that they are invisible or visible. By understanding visibility as a constantly changing tactic, queers of color can find ways to utilize visibility to their advantage in certain contexts, while fighting hyper-visibility in other contexts.

As my oral histories reveal, Satrang does not operate publicly to resist the ideologies of the nation-state; instead many actually mentioned that understanding their individual role as part of a collective is central to the way they navigate visibility, both as individuals building their own relationships to other Satrang members, and as a community organization. Therefore,

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[20] Puar, 220.
[21] Puar, 187.
[22] Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004. 69.

collective visibility is a strategic intervention that Satrang utilizes through the various identities and abilities of its members; in this way, Satrang operates as a family, with members who contribute their particular skills while also seeking individual fulfillment from the organization.

For Satrang, the idea of family is mobilized through kinship based on emotional and cultural needs, which moves away from heteronormative perspectives of family**.** However, I am not implying that the ways that LGBTQ communities envision family are without fault—many continue to perpetuate both intimate and structural violences.**[23]** For the purposes of this project, however, I am utilizing the reimagined potential of family as a way that Satrang has been both challenged and strengthened. Many of the interview subjects expressed feelings of intimacy with their Satrang members that led them to call Satrang a family. This sense of family, however, is not based on the erasure of struggle and difference in order to uplift a one-dimensional understanding of family. In fact, many in Satrang saw the constant struggle as constitutive to their values of family, which meant committing to a continued dialogue in order to build a more inclusive space for all of its members. Although their idea of family may be rooted in the cultural, Satrang members revision these experiences through their daily lived experiences. Therefore, Satrang is in a constant dynamic process of contending with the complexities of its family-like model. The relationships and community building efforts of Satrang simultaneously reifies certain assumptions of family while also reconfiguring the definition of family through a continued individual and organizational reflexivity.

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[23] For example, in *Families We Choose*, Kath Weston documents the divisions based on difference that many LGBTQ communities face even as they continue to call each other 'family,' such as classism and racism. Furthermore, Weston contends that this might lead to a further feeling of disunity and disillusionment for many individuals who rely on the LGBTQ community for a much needed sense of family and home. Additionally, Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, bell hooks' *All About Love*, and Cherrie Moraga's *Loving in the War Years* speak to the complicated ways that generational trauma converges with both the internal and external violences that occur in relationships with and amongst people of color, particularly LGBTQ people of color. However, many doing activism and advocacy work in these communities are proactively working to find sustainable and accountable ways to address these intimate violences; one such example is the anthology *The Revolution Starts at Home*, edited by Ching-In Chen, Jai Dulani, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha.

In other words, Satrang collectively functions as an organization, but not without the multiple efforts and investment of its members, who are drawn to the organization because of its familiarity and kinship. These individuals, then, interact with each other through their understanding of their intersectional experiences. Some are "out" in all of their social spaces while some are only out in a few capacities and some have decided not to disclose their identities to anyone outside of Satrang. Consequently, there will be a mix of these attendees at both public and private events, constantly shifting their engagement based on what they can offer in that moment. There is no explicit value placed on which roles are more important; the community functions as a collective, and therefore relies on collective visibility to incorporate as many invested community members in whatever way they can. And these needs change over time, based on an individual's own decision to share and incorporate their shifting identities, their process with their families of origin, and how they choose to disclose what in different spaces and times. This immediately complicates presumed notions of visibility that rely on being "out" as an individual's moment to celebrate their own self. In this case, Satrang elevates individual experiences not as standing apart from, but as a part of the larger mission of Satrang to empower and advocate for the multitudinous experiences of its community members.

For example, Satrang founder Rashmi Choksey shared her experiences of marching in the annual LGBT Pride Parade in Los Angeles, often critiqued as homonormative because of its lack of questioning corporate sponsorships and its reliance on elevating the narrative of American civil rights. But Rashmi realized that visibility is more complicated than being "out" as an individual:

> *"And by participating I realized that I was affecting other people as well…the effect that watching other people who were out and about makes in a person's life…I realized there*

were people who were looking at me when I was marching down-- I saw South Asian

faces. They might have been queer, they might not have been. But if they were, just

watching somebody else marching down, saying, 'Oh look, there's somebody who is

South Asian, who is queer, who's like me, well maybe, you know, it's okay.'"[24]

In this instance, Rashmi articulates the ways that LGBTQ people of color exemplify an

intervention beyond the binary of powerful nation-state and "closeted" subject. She is able to

contextualize her publicly marching in the Pride Parade as someone who holds the place for

those with similar identities who may not be able to march, but can still find comfort in realizing

that someone is able to at least visually speak to their experiences.

 Queer of Color Critique also elevates the ways that personal relationships and

experiences can provide individuals a support network to build their resilience as LGBTQ people

of color. Manalansan defines this as the "everyday" that allows Filipino gay men to understand

the complexities of their community's social, cultural, and political needs. Similarly, Satrang

members situate the "everyday" as a "tactical maneuver" central to their own identity

development and community building, which helps them navigate a landscape that often forces a

particular narrative of the proper way to be LGBTQ.[25] By experiencing the "everyday" moments,

collective visibility is nurtured; by knowing the individual identities and experiences of its

members, Satrang can more clearly craft a flexible approach to community building that

incorporates the different scales of "outness" (to a few friends, close family, just work, just

Satrang) that members choose.

Members of Satrang are also complicating notions of "coming out," as they weigh the

risks and benefits of what it means to be "out," both as racialized individuals historically and

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[24] Kalra, Anand. Interview with Rashmi Choksey. 17 July 2008. Satrang Archives.
[25] Manalansan, 90.

politically situated in dominant narratives of homonormativity, and in their intimate relations with their multiple social and family spaces. For a number of emotional and cultural reasons, many may stay silent about their sexual and/or gender identities in different spaces, whether it be with their family of origin, their workplace, or school. This silence is not due to their shame or stigma—many have been involved with Satrang for years in various capacities, and do not see the need to be "out" as defined by dominant homonormative notions of public "outness." Similarly, Manalansan's informants discuss their hesitancy around "coming out" because they see it as a drama that doesn't befit their understanding of their cultural and filial selves. Although some of them struggle with their family of origin's silence around their gender and/or sexual identities, the silence is not in direct contradiction to acceptance.[26] As will be revealed in my analysis of the Coming Out Day Parade, the Coming Out Coming Homes Workshop, and Satrang's digital community building, if some Satrang members display a hesitancy to reveal their LGBTQ identity to everyone in their life, it is not necessarily because they are doomed to an oppressed "closeted" state. This manifestation of silence in their biological family and their navigation of visibility in the "interstitial gaps" is a fluid and dynamic relationship that reveals a tactical agency.[27] Furthermore, these informants are aware of intimate consequences for forcing a "coming out" process of identifying as LGBTQ in all of their community and family spaces. This is why they turn to Satrang, which is negotiating the complexities of presenting a visible LGBTQ South Asian American experience that also acknowledges the intimate family dynamics that may require additional measures of safety and privacy.

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[26] Manalansan, 30.
[27] Pérez, Emma. "Sexing the Colonial Imaginary." *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999. 5.

IV. Methodology: Oral History as a Collective Process

I come to this research project as someone who has been involved with Satrang for almost five years. I have volunteered at events, attended multiple Coming Out Day Parades, participated in a Coming Out Coming Home Workshop, and formed social relationships with individuals affiliated with the broader Satrang community. Thus, I am what many academics would call the insider/outsider scholar. According to many scholars, an insider/outsider scholar is connected to the people they are researching as an "insider" in a non-academic relationship but through their academic work can be seen as an "outsider."[28] In my case, I know intimately the community that I am researching, which can be both beneficial and challenging when it comes to creating scholarly work that both uplifts the voices of this community while also critically analyzing its complexities and limitations.[29]

Through my involvement with Satrang, I've seen and heard many stories about the emergence of this organization, and the deeply transformative moments that many individuals have had as members. I wanted to know so much more beyond just these scattered stories told in passing while setting up tables for a movie screening or while enjoying a home cooked meal together. I wanted to focus on how Satrang and its members continuously recreate its community narrative through its socializing, storytelling, and events. I wanted to explore the contradictions of thriving by claiming public space while at the same time guaranteeing a safe space to hold the personal journeys of LGBTQ-identified South Asian Americans. Why did members invest so much time and energy in Satrang? How have the dynamics changed over time? What are some of the goals and needs of this community, and how has Satrang played an active role in addressing

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[28] Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed, 1999. 137.
[29] For example, out of the six interviews I did, one is my current partner, and two I have regular social contact with outside of Satrang. The other three I also interact with on a regular basis, either through my involvement with the Satrang Youth Group and/or attending Satrang affiliated events.

them? How does this organization create a space for a rather complex community to just be? I realized the voices of other members throughout this organization's nearly three-decade existence could create a nuanced history of how and why people put effort into creating and continuing Satrang, so I decided to ground my research heavily in oral histories. In particular, my project views oral histories through the Critical Race Theory approach, which stresses that oral histories are testimonies "usually guided by the will of the narrator to tell events as [they see] significant" and tend to be "an expression of a collective experience, rather than the individual."[30]

The organization received a small grant in 2008 to conduct three oral history interviews with key founders. These interviews are housed in Satrang's archive at the Southern California Library, along with their Needs Assessment Report and a number of books and movies (fiction and nonfiction) documenting the South Asian American and South Asian diasporic experience. I have interviewed six additional Satrang members, who range in age, ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual identity, and when and how they have been involved with Satrang. I acknowledge that since I used a snowball sampling method of a community I have personal connections to my interview subjects came from those who have been involved as founders, board members, or regular participants in events. However, not all of them have been involved in the same events in the same ways, which demonstrates that even those who may seem more publicly visible still inhabit multiple levels of "outness" and its perceived meanings in different spaces and at different times.

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[30] Huber, Lindsay Perez. "Disrupting Apartheid of Knowledge: Testimonio as Methodology in Latina/o Critical Race Research in Education." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 22.6 (2009): 644.

Indigenous Studies scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith states, "the critical issue with insider research is the constant need for reflexivity."[31] In this vein, it has been important for me, as a community member of Satrang to identify my role as an academic and scholar and the contradictory slippages between these particular roles that can happen before, during, and after the interview process. I use slippages to imply that although there is an implicit binary created in the term insider/outsider, the two roles cannot be separated. This means that both my interview subjects and I passed in and out of the seemingly separate scholarly and social relationship, which we accepted as part of the interview process. I hope that being critically transparent about the ways I am an insider as well as an outsider in this organization will allow a deeper understanding of how a dialectical process of scholarly analysis and community storytelling can craft the collective memory of Satrang.

Before moving forward with this project, I received not only IRB approval, but the approval of the Satrang board as well. And since these interviews will be part of the Satrang archive and therefore available for future researchers, I had my interview subjects tell me if there was any information they did not feel comfortable having on record. My biggest concern was not if they were afraid of speaking ill of someone, but rather for their safety and privacy as LGBTQ individuals. Most people I interviewed are "out" in some ways, at least in Satrang, and they feel comfortable enough with others in their lives knowing their connection to this group. However, this might not carry over for someone unknown to them accessing the archived interviews and using some of these intimate details that could inadvertently "out" them on a much bigger scale. Therefore, even if my interview subjects agreed to the interview and the subsequent archiving of their interview, I also offered the option of changing their name and/or identifying details. Out of my six interviews, one interview subject decided to use his partial name, while another interview

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[31] Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 137.

subject who is active in the youth group but who is not "out" to the Southern California community they grew up in, decided to use a pseudonym.[32]

As someone utilizing oral histories, it is ideal that my interview subjects feel ownership over their memories and life experiences through their own words. This ownership is tied directly to perceived and actual marginalization and silencing of this community's narrative, a pattern that extends to many other communities of color. Woman of color feminist bell hooks states that language is "action—a resistance…a place of struggle."[33] I believe that for the interview subjects, deciding to use all or part of their name or choosing a pseudonym proved to be one of many ways they actively continue to shape their narrative, which is tied directly to not just their personal life experiences, but how they navigate spaces as racialized people of color. In other words, claiming space with their name disrupts preconceived notions of what constitutes an authentic and valid LGBTQ South Asian American narrative. By tying their oral history directly to their name, it injects a political dimension to the work I am doing, which is centering and uplifting the complex and often contradictory experiences of the South Asian American LGBTQ community. Keeping this political project of voicing previously silenced narratives, I minimally changed the oral history quotes I used because I wanted to rely on the words of the interview subjects to articulate their intersectional reality. I purposefully chose to keep colloquialisms such as "like" or profanity in my interview quotes, and minimally edited the structure and grammar of interview subjects, especially with those interview subjects for whom English was not their first language.

For my interview subjects, there were parallels in the reasons they agreed to the interview. Since those I interviewed know me personally, they may have felt more inclined to be

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[32] Although the youth member decided on their own pseudonym of Arwa Jaffri, for added safety and privacy, we jointly decided I would use gender neutral terms when referring to them in this project.
[33] hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston, MA: South End, 1989. 28.

involved to support my scholarly endeavors. However, it seems that my interview subjects also agreed to share their stories because of their understanding of their collective ties. They realized the power of documenting these histories for others who may need to hear about the resilience of an immigrant and people of color LGBTQ organization. Many expressed gratitude for my work and were more than willing to offer additional information to help me. This could be seen as a personal investment in my success, but I believe it speaks to the ways in which communities of color are constantly creating their narratives as acts of building "community cultural wealth."[34]

In moving forward with my interviews, I had to contend with possible consequences of not only my own community ties, but also the possible ways that my oral history project could have consequences for other relationships within the organization, both professional and personal. These interviews display moments of both individual and organizational struggle, and although struggle is unavoidable in community building, as an insider/outsider scholar, it is important for me to think not only of the moment of interview and analysis, but also of the affective interpretations that influence possible memory formation.[35] For example, current board members, upon reflecting on past events, might speak about previous board members who are current friends of theirs. Regardless of any explicit value judgment in their interviews, how will their interviews be perceived? My role then, is to responsibly examine the nuances of each interview. This does not mean shying away from discussing painful or conflicting memories; it is, as Tuhiwai Smith says, the power of reflexivity that can provide a liberatory framework that acknowledges the complexities of intimate community building in an organization like Satrang.

[34] Yosso, Tara J. 'Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth'. *Race Ethnicity and Education,* 8:1 (2005): 69-91.
[35] Murray, Alice Yang, "Oral History Research, Theory, and Asian American Studies." *Amerasia Journal* 26:1 (2000): 105-118.

As an insider/outsider scholar, then, my aim is not objectivity. In historian Valerie Yow's article "Do I Like Them Too Much?: Effects of the oral history interview on the interviewer and vice-versa," she stresses that not only is the goal of objectivity unattainable, but that a critical reflection on subjectivity can actually strengthen oral history projects. Furthermore, she states there is a "complex web" of "interpersonal relations" that will influence the oral history process between the interviewer and their subject.[36] Many scholars, such as historian Alice Yang Murray, refer to this complicated set of social dynamics as "positionality."[37] In other words, it is important not only for me to recognize the multiple intersecting identities that my interview subjects hold and how that could affect what and how they share, but it is also important for me to be actively aware of my own intersectional identities and how the perception of them affects our interview dynamic. Furthermore, there are specific cultural dynamics that I could not deny because that would feel unnatural and make it very clear that I was forcing a particular scholar-subject relationship, which would be off-putting.[38] This meant following the "everyday" ways that we interact as community members. For example, when entering D'Lo's home, I took off my shoes, gave him a hug, and followed his lead, which led to joining him in his kitchen as he made juice for the both of us to drink. If I had decided I needed to come in and start the interview immediately and proceeded to the living room, I would not have allowed D'Lo to get comfortable before starting the interview, which for him meant feeding both of us and setting up his dining table as the place he chose for the interview.

As a relatively young looking, feminine presenting, second-generation Indian American woman, and as a community member that these interviewees know personally, there were

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[36] Yow, Valerie. "Do I Like Them Too Much?: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-versa." *The Oral History Reader*. Ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. London: Routledge, 2006. 63.

[37] Murray, Alice Yang, "Oral History Research, Theory, and Asian American Studies." *Amerasia Journal* 26:1 (2000): 105-118.

[38] Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 138.

interview slippages rooted in our cultural and personal relationships. As Asian American Studies

scholar Kale Fajardo states in his ethnographic accounts of Filipino seafarers, "everyday

practices of identity and belonging are unstable."[39] By acknowledging our social connection, I

was allowing the "dynamic" and "shifting positionalities" to be a part of, rather than a hindrance

to, the interview.[40] Therefore, although I might be younger than some of the interview subjects,[41]

or second-generation, or raised Hindu, these identifiers are shifting, so I cannot ascertain how my

interviewees respond to just one particular identity of mine, or theirs. In that particular moment

of the interview, our relationship together creates a particular oral history narrative, which in and

of itself speaks to the complex ways that LGBTQ communities of color are continuously

rearticulating their histories.

The interview process was rooted in cultural dynamics that were informed by our

intersectional identities as LGBTQ South Asian Americans. One example was where we would

meet. I offered to meet at their home or another place that would feel comfortable. Most agreed

to meet at their home, but three had different needs. As a busy student, Aakash needed the

convenience of meeting on campus, but the requests to meet outside their home by two other

interview subjects reveal that privacy and safety is not necessarily tied to their home space. M.

Kumar felt more comfortable meeting at a coffee shop, because he is his mother's caretaker. And

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[39] Fajardo, Kale Bantigue. *Filipino Crosscurrents: Oceanographies of Seafaring, Masculinities, and Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2011. 37.

[40] Fajardo, Kale Bantigue. 37.

[41] Although there are cultural norms tied to age and generation, namely around deference to elders, in my experience, this is not necessarily fixed in relationships between those that can be seen as "elder" Satrang members and those that are seen as "youth" Satrang members. Particularly, beyond being what could be seen as the proper age that defines them as "elders," the life experiences of older LGBTQ South Asian Americans often deviate from the heteronormative markers of generation, such as marriage, children, and grandchildren, that might label them as "elders." Therefore, although many do call Satrang a family, the heteronormative family structure and cultural norms that are cultivated within this structure are constantly renegotiated between Satrang members. This means that although people may understand the cultural norms of interacting between so-called generations, they may not necessarily be invested in it in the same way in Satrang as they are in their family or community of origin. I did not delve into this analysis beyond thinking about my own positionality as a relatively younger community member, but I do believe that further analysis might provide some useful insights into the ways that LGBTQ people of color negotiate cultural norms tied to age and generation.

although his mother accepts that he is gay, he felt it would be too much for her to overhear all the experiences of his life as a gay man. And since Arwa lives with their parents, we brainstormed on possible places to do the interview before finally settling on my home. My place, a space that has been used for various youth group related events, felt more intimate and safe for them.

Secondly, the incorporation of food in my interview process demonstrates how my relationships with the interview subjects were predicated on our non-scholarly social interactions. All of my interviews involved some kind of food or beverage, usually offered by the interview subject.[42] By contrast, other interviews or focus groups offer food or monetary compensation to their subjects. This speaks to the insider/outsider slippage of our relationship as scholar and subject. I am not just a scholar with a particular type of authority that will come in and set up the interview with certain standards my subjects have to follow. I have a prior social relationship that is based on a friendly affinity for each other, which means I accept and acknowledge their generosity as an extension of that social relationship. For example, upon entering Alicia's house, she promptly offered snacks, and before starting our interview at the coffee shop, M. Kumar bought me tea. These two interactions are not just examples of our interpersonal social interactions, they are also indicative of how Satrang centers food in its community building efforts. So to stray too far from that and force a particular scholar-subject environment might have affected their trust and willingness to share their experiences with me.

And finally, the interview itself became a ritual of storytelling that we both embarked on together. With every interview, I took time before I turned the recorder on to check in as two people who knew each other, reasserting the trust and respect of our relationship, since jumping

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[42] Aakash was the one interview subject who was interviewed in a library conference room that regulates the consumption of food and beverages. However, I did offer the option of eating or drinking something before we entered and as we were leaving. Additionally, Arwa, who was interviewed at my house, stayed after the interview to help prepare and eat dinner, which shows another facet of how we build community through food.

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into the interview would feel like a forced scholar-subject relationship. And after every interview, I asked them to reflect on the process off the record, which I felt transitioned us back to our relational roles, as opposed to an abrupt end that might not allow a joint reflection on how we stepped into unfamiliar interviewer-subject territory together.

At the forefront of the process of every interview was the power of this group's storytelling as a legitimate form of research, especially in the tools they used to explore their identities and navigate their multiple community spaces on their own terms. For me, this is an integration of research designed, as Tuhiwai Smith proclaims, to "celebrate survival," in this instance, the survival of an organization and the long-term investment of its members in creating a community that embraces a multiplicity of identities and needs.[43] This celebration of survival is important in a community-based organization like Satrang, a space that merely for the fact of its existence is a political statement.

[43] Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 145.

V. Finding Each Other: The Early Years

Because settlement patterns of South Asian Americans in the United States have been influenced by secondary migration within the country and family reunification efforts, the community has densely clustered in large metropolitan areas with an established South Asian American community. According to the 2010 Census, metropolitan areas with the largest South Asian American populations are New York City, Chicago, Washington DC, Los Angeles, and San Francisco-Oakland.[44] This means the number of LGBTQ South Asian Americans is also higher in big cities, and the first LGBTQ South Asian American organizations emerged in cities highly populated by South Asian Americans.[45]

Many South Asian Americans in the greater Los Angeles area who identified as LGBTQ in the 1980s and 1990s were involved in various community outreach efforts, and the desire to create community motivated individuals who wanted to connect with others sharing a similar background.[46] This common background transcended national, linguistic, or religious ties from the various home countries in South Asia.[47] Instead, what emerged was a broader panethnic identity of South Asian-ness, which Social Historian Vijay Prashad asserts has been adopted by many South Asian "culturally and politically progressive groups" in the United States "to contest systems of patriarchy and homophobia within the cultural worlds of the migrants."[48]

Initially, the community in Los Angeles found each other through the help of Trikone, the San Francisco Bay Area LGBTQ organization for South Asian Americans. Trikone, founded in

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[44] South Asian Americans Leading Together. *A Demographic Snapshot of South Asians in the United States*. Publication. Asian American Federation, Feb. 2012. Web.

[45] The first two organizations were Trikone in San Francisco and SALGA (South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association) in New York City. As of June 2012, there are nine South Asian LGBTQ organizations, all located in metropolitan areas.

[46] In the next two sections, I aim to outline a history of how Satrang was founded and developed. However, as with many community organizations, there is no formalized narrative, so dates may be fuzzy.

[47] South Asia comprises India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives.

[48] Prashad, Vijay. *Uncle Swami: South Asians in America Today*. New York: New, 2012.

1986, was the first organization to emerge on the West Coast that catered specifically to LGBTQ

South Asian Americans. There were no other organizations created specifically by and for

LGBTQ South Asian Americans in the United States at the time, even though there were

informal meet-ups and groups in other metropolitan areas, including Los Angeles. For example,

Mushtaque Jivani was not only one of the founders of what would become Satrang in the 1990s,

he was one of the individuals who was actively connecting LGBTQ South Asian Americans

since the 1980s:

> *"It was just friendship, not knowing what to talk about because everybody was so*
>
> *nervous. And then we become friends, all four of us. And then we started slowly slowly*
>
> *getting together…then I started having parties at my house…but it was not anything*
>
> *official…I kept in touch with everybody, kept a list of the names of everybody, and kept*
>
> *doing it…every time I would call them and say, 'Bring your friends.' So you know, one*
>
> *brings out their friend and brings other friends, and it keeps going on."[49]*

When Mushtaque asked to be listed as a Los Angeles contact in Trikone's quarterly magazine, he

instantly became the person contacted by other South Asian Americans identifying as LGBTQ in

the greater Los Angeles area. After a few of these individual calls, Mushtaque, sensing a need,

attempted to organize formal support groups. These groups, varying from five to fifteen people at

the time, were an attempt to bring together the few South Asian American individuals grappling

with their sexual and/or gender identities. However, these formal groups did not last, due to the

newness of the community's development. These individuals were connected through

Mushtaque but still did not know each other; therefore they had to build their community before

engaging in more vulnerable conversations. Although the formal groups stopped during that

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[49] Kalra, Anand. Interview with Mushtaque Jivani. 17 July 2008. Satrang Archives.

time, Mushtaque and others continued to check in with individuals and organize informal social events, inviting anyone who contacted them looking for support.

Salman Husainy, a past board member of Satrang, remembers how he, along with Mushtaque (who he affectionately calls Mush) early on recognized their role as an available support network for those who were grappling with their sexual and/or gender identities:

> *"Mush called and said, 'There's this woman,' and I called her multiple times [laughs]. And she wasn't ready but the key was, and that's what Mush had told me, to just be persistent. Not to force it on them, but say you're available and here for them. So I would continue to call people once a month or something to see where they were at…there were a few people who said, 'Oh stop, this is too much for me.' and I said, 'Okay, great, whenever you're ready, call me, this is my number.'"[50]*

Although the original founders were not able to establish formal support groups, this support system of one-on-one conversations continues to this day, with Satrang members taking on the role of reaching out to newer members or to those that may be struggling with various issues.

In the 1980's and 1990's, Mushtaque continued his dinner parties, and the informal social circle and support network continued to grow, with individuals inviting the scattered friends they had made along the way. In the first few years only a handful of individuals were met regularly, but over time, mainly at Mushtaque's dinner parties, the numbers grew past 30, so big that cooking became an effort for Mushtaque and he changed the gatherings at his house to potlucks. Thus, although a formal organization was not established until 1997, Mushtaque and others were building community amongst LGBTQ South Asian Americans through the seemingly simple act of socializing together at group outings and hosted events, and many involved in Satrang have asserted that these friendships have lasted to the present time.

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[50] Kalra, Anand. Interview with Salman Husainy. 16 July 2008. Satrang Archives.

VI. Growth, Transitions, and Name Changes

Beginning in 1997, the South Asian American LGBTQ community in Los Angeles affiliated themselves with Trikone by calling themselves Trikone-LA. They felt that since Trikone was already a visible presence within the South Asian American LGBTQ community, and since communities in other regions, such as Atlanta and Texas, had adopted the Trikone name, the Los Angeles group would have stable name recognition if they recruited under the same name.

While the main impetus of Trikone -LA was providing a safe space for people to connect and support each other, there were individuals within the LGBTQ South Asian American were looking for additional ways to connect with people and get involved in other spaces. Rashmi was excited by the possibility of political activism. As an undergraduate, she had started a South Asian group at California State University, Northridge. After graduating, Rashmi was looking for other ways to expand her political framework and involve the South Asian American LGBTQ community, and she found a possible opportunity:

> "*Queer Awaaz was, for lack of a better word, an organization that was more politically driven in its ideology, in its motivation, and so the people that got together were quite willing to be out to do stuff, to not care what anybody else thought. And I remember going to the first meeting…and the energy was just different than what I had seen at the get-togethers at Mushtaque's place. Because here there were people that wanted to do something. It was not just to hang out and meet. We did that as well. But it was to do something more, beyond that, which was quite attractive.*"[51]

Trikone-LA was doing its own form of political work by providing a safe space for its community to be their full intersectional selves. Rashmi, however, was also looking for a space

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[51] Kalra, Anand. Interview with Rashmi Choksey. 17 July 2008. Satrang Archives.

to be publicly political as a first-generation Indian American lesbian, by claiming a political queerness[52] and engaging with other organizations and individuals outside of Trikone-LA. This shows that early on many South Asian American LGBTQ members had varying needs that may not have been directly or explicitly met by Trikone-LA. However, in 1998, Queer Awaaz disintegrated after two years of existence when the founder moved away from Los Angeles.

The disintegration of Queer Awaaz highlighted the LGBTQ South Asian American community's need to expand its base and have various active members engaged in sustainable and transparent work. So the two groups, Trikone-LA and the now disbanded Queer Awaaz, which had a fairly large overlapping base of members, decided that they would move forward as one group, in a state of outward consensus. But internally, conversations around the character and extent of political activism continued, especially regarding the needs of some of their members who were not "out." Some individuals wanted the group's mission to evolve into an explicit political stance, and some wanted to maintain the social support aspect of the earlier meetings. Almost from the beginning, the founders realized they had diverse members looking for different things at different times from the organization. Throughout the last few decades, it has become clear that the social and political realms of this organization are not mutually exclusive. However, what Trikone-LA established at the time was a continued dialogue about the needs of their diverse community, in order to provide some sense of collective investment from each of its members.

In 2005, when seeking incorporation as a non-profit, Trikone-LA decided to drop its named affiliation with Trikone so they wouldn't be mistakenly dismissed for grant opportunities that both organizations might apply for. The group's conversations around renaming the

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[52] Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* speaks of the various ways that "queer" has been mobilized as a political identity beyond sexual and/or gender identity.

organization pointed to the persisting tensions within the group throughout the years, exacerbated by the dissolution of Queer Awaaz. For one, the overtly political representation of putting "queer" in the name made some members uncomfortable. A few didn't even want to have any named association with LGBTQ—they wanted a way to suggest the organization's mission without the literalization of it in the name. Secondly, many in the organization may have been "out" to whomever they felt comfortable with in their family, but they were not "out" to the larger South Asian American community. Rashmi recalls:

> *"We talked about putting people's names on the website, it was like, 'Okay, isn't it kind of sad that not all board members are out?' It was the first time we addressed that…what kind of example are we leading by…that some of us are not willing to be out there and say, 'Hey, I'm on the board, I'm queer, this is my name, contact me!'"*[53]

As has been documented, the linear narrative of "coming out" is complicated within Asian American communities—many choose to be "out" to a select few people for reasons of safety, fearful of being shunned by the extended family or of the public shame that being "out" can cause in the larger community. This leads to an "expanded closet" that includes a few other allies, but it still maintains the anxieties of having to navigate between different realms of "outness."[54] Rashmi reveals how notions of collective visibility, although not explicitly part of the conversation of naming, became important. Rashmi was implying that those who were active in the organization as board members and volunteers held a different kind of responsibility in being available as resources and publicly accessible as representatives of the organization, and by extension, a manifestation of what it meant to be an LGBTQ South Asian American. Rashmi was stressing that, in order for this organization to seem like a safe space, they needed to actively

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[53] Kalra, Anand. Interview with Rashmi Choksey. 17 July 2008. Satrang Archives.
[54] South Asian Network, and Satrang. *No More Denial: Southern California LGBTIQ South Asian Community Needs Assessment Report*. 31. Rep.

model the existence of LGBTQ South Asian Americans not to prove a dominant semblance of "outness," but as a responsibility to those other LGBTQ South Asian Americans who were seeking community. However, it also reveals a contradictory process that decouples the assumption that "closeted" means unaware and uninvolved. This complication occurs to this day, with some in current public leadership roles with Satrang committed to their work within the organization while continuing to negotiate their own visibility in different realms throughout their own life.

The organization asked for name suggestions from its members, and put the names up for a vote, collectively settling on the name Satrang. It means "seven colors" in Sanskrit-based languages, of which Hindi is the most common. The inference in the name was the seven colors in the rainbow, the well-known symbol for the LGBTQ movement. The group name was a bright manifestation of the diversity that Satrang was poised to embrace. And as individuals within the group continued to dialogue about the needs of its members and the responsibilities of the organization, it opened them up to community collaboration and political engagement.

As Satrang expanded in membership, it also expanded in different modes of visibility and collaboration, both within local South Asian American community organizations and with non-South Asian American LGBTQ organizations, including broader umbrella Asian American organizations. As such, individuals within the organization now found a way to connect their intersectional experiences as LGBTQ South Asian Americans to many of their non-Satrang projects. Salman was not surprised that Satrang was expanding its work to incorporate the needs of its members, because individuals had already been doing work that spoke to their interests:

> "*A lot of individual members within Satrang, or Trikone-LA, were already going out there and raising awareness. Because it was not just Salman…it was Salman the South Asian Muslim …So I mean, I think people individually were doing a lot of that.*"[55]

As Salman highlights, through their involvement in various forms of community work outside of Satrang, many Satrang members were representing their intersectional selves in broader realms.

However, there were organizational challenges in translating the political activism of individual Satrang members to a broader Satrang vision. This transition period lasted a few years after the name change. Aakash Kishore, who was a board member from 2008-2010, recalls the internal hesitation about how to respectfully integrate a political mission with the established social space:

> "*I think there was a little bit of timidness around…should we really be doing this, can we really be doing this… in my bones I kind of felt like several years ago when I started out that Satrang was kind of looking to New York, looking to the Bay Area, for what structure should be, what the organization should look like, and there's a lot of history there, and there's good reason for that.*"[56]

According to Aakash, many of the board members at the time were supportive of political engagement, but were not quite sure what the growing pains would entail. These board members also recognized that although many members would support organizational collaboration and political events, they would not necessarily be directly or publicly involved. And yet the organization remained open to expanding their mission, by continuing their community presence at the Indian and Pakistani Independence Day events (Satrang had been doing outreach at these events since 2000, which Aakash has dubbed "revolutionary because nobody [had] been stepping

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[55] Kalra, Anand. Interview with Salman Husainy. 16 July 2008. Satrang Archives.
[56] Kishore, Aakash. Personal Interview by Author. 22 May 2012.

into those spaces before"[57]), and by beginning conversations with other local organizations about possible issues and campaigns.

Other South Asian American community leaders began to notice the expanding community-building efforts of Satrang and recognized the potential for collaboration. For example, the South Asian Network (SAN), based in Artesia, a region more popularly known as Little India, has been finding ways to incorporate the needs and experiences of the LGBTQ South Asian American community for about a decade. Sanjay Chhugani, who joined the Board in 2000, has seen first hand the evolution of the relationship between SAN and Satrang:

> "*Hamid Khan [then the Executive Director] reached out [in 2000] and initially provided a space to hold some rap sessions at their office in Little India but later on wanted to collaborate on including queer programming for SAN. At first we helped develop a sensitivity training for SAN staff and volunteers. This eventually led to the ground breaking Needs Assessment that we collaborated on with SAN.*"[58]

The Needs Assessment, published in 2007, is a 33-page document that analyzed the results of 94 surveys of individuals who identified as LGBTQ and South Asian American living in the greater Los Angeles area. The results describe a diverse community with specific needs not met by mainstream LGBTQ organizations or culturally specific South Asian American organizations. Although from the outside the respondents may seem socioeconomically established with reported high levels of income and education, they reported a high rate of healthcare and mental health issues, and nearly 80% had faced discrimination and harassment.[59] The Needs Assessment reflects Satrang's ongoing community-based work and is a tangible

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[57] Kishore, Aakash. Personal Interview by Author. 22 May 2012.
[58] Chhugani, Sanjay. Personal Interview by Author. 2 Dec 2011.
[59] South Asian Network, and Satrang. *No More Denial: Southern California LGBTIQ South Asian Community Needs Assessment Report*. Rep.

document that captures Satrang's movement from being a safe space for LGBTQ South Asian Americans to becoming a public advocate in the larger South Asian American community.

VII. Parading on Pioneer

SAN and Satrang continued their collaboration by launching the Needs Assessment Report at the first Coming Out Day Parade in Artesia's Little India. The Parade occurred from 2007-2010 for a total of four consecutive annual Parades, and did not continue on due to shifts in leadership and capacity for both SAN and Satrang. However, the Parade is still seen as an integral event for Satrang, so much so that many, including M. Kumar and Aakash, have discussed reestablishing it. For SAN and Satrang in the mid 2000's, planning and executing the Parade was an assertive move for the two organizations, complicating notions of "culturally authentic" representation. Out of the 30 who showed up to march at the first Parade in 2007 (the official launch of the Needs Assessment Report), SAN's staff (some who also identified as LGBTQ) actually outnumbered Satrang's nine Parade-goers. The low numbers of Satrang members marching in the first Parade may have been due to initial anxiety about individuals' visibility. However, the participants assessed their discomfort in relation to what they could do for the greater South Asian American LGBTQ community in Los Angeles, namely centering the fruitfulness of collective visibility. For example, although Rashmi was excited to march in a show of *"solidarity and pride,"* she acknowledges that others may have felt the dual tensions of **"*a sense of nervousness and a sort of assertiveness among the Satrang members...for once, we wanted to be seen and heard, for being like everyone else, as complete human beings with feelings and needs."*[60] According to Rashmi, although there may have been some anxiety for some of the Satrang members who participated, they recognized the excitement of celebrating their existence in their own cultural community space.[61]

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[60] Choksey, Rashmi. Personal Interview by Author. 2 December 2011.
[61] The Parade was not exclusively for SAN and Satrang members or those that were South Asian American—in fact, over the four-year span, many allies participated in a show of solidarity and support.

However, some decided not to participate in the Parade because of tensions between their desire to participate and the perceived consequences of being involved. And being active and occupying a public role in Satrang's leadership didn't necessarily equate to being at the Coming Out Day Parade, further complicating the linear assumptions of "coming out" as tied to public manifestations of sexual and/or gender identities. For example, although M. Kumar was on the board at the time, he didn't join the first Parade, and actually hadn't participated in any of the following Parades. In reflecting on why he didn't join the first year, M. Kumar exemplifies the constant navigation of his public and private identities:

> *"I've been to Pride Parade, but I felt like that's a more safe space than Artesia…The first [Coming Out Day Parade] I distinctly remember, that was before I came out to work, and I was not comfortable at all doing it…[There is] some reservation…I don't know whether I can do it, but some people still…marched, it's amazing…Maybe some day I will do it."[62]*

Interestingly, M. Kumar places the Coming Out Day Parade in relation to the larger Pride Parade, at which he felt safer. The Pride Parade is a grand public spectacle, shutting down major streets in Los Angeles for thousands of LGBTQ individuals and allies to march in support of the community. By contrast, the Coming Out Day Parade was a small Parade in the middle of Little India. For the first Parade, M. Kumar's decision was tied to his not being "out" to his co-workers, many who were Indian and frequented Little India on the weekends. Therefore, the Little India area felt too intimate for him to step into as a publicly visible gay Indian man. However, M. Kumar quickly followed up with "You guys marched, amazing…I really admire your courage to do that…I supported it."[63] Through this revelation, he demonstrated his

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[62] Kumar, M. Personal Interview by Author. 26 March 2013.
[63] Kumar, M. Personal Interview by Author. 26 March 2013.

interpretation of collective visibility. Although M. Kumar and other members may not have attended the Parade throughout the years, they continued to advocate for the South Asian American LGBTQ community in Little India by participating in other significant ways, such as being the liaison between SAN and Satrang, or making posters. Furthermore, M. Kumar acknowledges the power of the Coming Out Day Parade, and is grateful that others in Satrang were able to represent on behalf of others like him.

M. Kumar reflects how the stakes were much higher for many Satrang members in the culturally familiar space. Pioneer Boulevard in Artesia, the main artery of Little India, is a six-block stretch of South Asian American grocery stores, restaurants, and retail stores. The Parade has taken place on Saturday mornings in October, a regularly busy time for the area. On the weekends, there are many South Asian American families, mostly first- and second-generation, that come from all over the greater Los Angeles area to eat, shop, and socialize. Additionally, there are a scattering of Hindu, Jain, Muslim, and Sikh places of worship in the Artesia/Norwalk area, which means that families will go to their place of worship and come to Artesia, all in the same trip. As the Parade continued down the street, with a megaphone, drums and cymbals, and bright signs in multiple languages, families would be eating lunch at restaurants with windows spanning ceiling to wall, cars blasting Bollywood music would drive by, and shop owners would curiously step toward their open doors to get a peek.

SAN, a credible voice in the community, was the visible counterpart that culturally anchored the message of the Parade. Working in the community on labor and housing rights, SAN has developed close relationships with many in the area; before the Parade, they called on their contacts to spread the word and ensure there is no overt hostility. The day of the Parade, SAN marched with Satrang, and a few SAN staff would go in front of the Satrang banner,

greeting the shop owners as the procession marched by. During the Parades, the reactions from

the shop owners and customers in Little India varied, as Sanjay explains, *"from open mouthed*

surprise to horror to honking in support. In the beginning people just didn't know what to do or

how to react. Some people just [crossed] the street and [didn't] look at us. Others [would]

engage and ask questions and sometimes even join in."[64]

Throughout the years, the Parade grew to over 50 people, and actively countered the

silencing of LGBTQ voices in the larger South Asian American community. Satrang and SAN

did this through a number of ways. Firstly, they used culturally and linguistically relevant

messaging and signs—the bright signs were in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil, or other regional

dialects from South Asia. When I attended the last two Parades, I found these signs had

expanded not just in language but also in identity: many of them proudly proclaimed "Gay

Muslim and Proud" or "Transgender Indian and Proud," forcing the community to visually

recognize and reconcile the multiple identities that people hold. These signs and chants also

recognized the diversity of intersectional experiences within the broader South Asian diaspora.[65]

To Aakash, these chants were a conscious move toward South Asian panethnicity and

inclusivity:

"*The chants that we yell are like the longest chants you'll ever hear [laughs], but for the*

purpose of really wanting to include everyone and to speak to Muslim experiences and

Christian and Jain and Hindu and Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi and Indian, and talking

about gender and sexual orientation, and letting them intersect. And all of those pieces

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[64] Chhugani, Sanjay. Personal Interview by Author. 2 December 2011.
[65] Visweswaran, Kamala, and Ali Mir. "On the Politics of Community in South Asian-American Studies." *Amerasia Journal* 25.3 (2000): 96-107.

get thrown into the chants and so it's like the longest most impossible thing to repeat, but

it's beautiful also."[66]

For example, the megaphone was passed around to Parade participants fluent in their heritage

language, who translated the chant into their language. This made for a drawn out call and

response: the chant "We are your family! We are your friends! We are your community!" began

in English, but would end in any number of languages. The participants responded, sometimes

clumsily, sometimes fluently, gaining the attention of non-English speakers in the process.

Throughout the years, the main chanter directly involved Parade participants in chant creation

mid-Parade, asking "Who have we missed? Did we do anything with Muslim? How about

Bisexual?" This may not be an efficient conversation to have while marching in a group on

Pioneer Boulevard, but it created an intimate Parade experience. Everyone was accounted for

through check-ins that punctuate the chants.

Secondly, the Parade was in the heart of Little India, and through a megaphone,

percussive instruments, and chanting, the Parade not only took up physical space but auditory

space. By loudly declaring, "We're here, we're queer, we're out on Pioneer!" the procession

literally vocalized a counternarrative to the erasure and stigma that LGBTQ South Asian

Americans face. This "shifting narrative" of the Parade disrupts the "static geographic area" and

the attached dominant "culturally authentic" beliefs represented by Little India.[67] This narrative

is predicated on the assumption that LGBTQ South Asian Americans are not part of the

community, so by placing the Parade in the center of the cultural community space, Satrang

reintegrates themselves into their own cultural community.

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[66] Kishore, Aakash. Personal Interview by Author. 22 May 2012.
[67] Manalansan, 64.

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Thirdly, the Parade did not just rush down Pioneer Boulevard. Preeti Sharma, a previous SAN staff member and active organizer of the Parade, stated the Parade stopped at strategic street corners, to ensure there was an opportunity to "[dialogue] with people on the street about SAN and Satrang visibility," which is important since the Parade marchers actively "[broke] the gaze" that often let the public remain as unengaged passersby.[68] Additionally, since being LGBTQ is stigmatized, many people did not initiate an interaction with Parade marchers in public, and so providing flyers for enabled those interested to privately and surreptitiously absorb the information without feeling nervous about associating themselves with such a public procession.

Lastly, the Parade has refashioned its messaging to speak to the shifting sociopolitical context as well as cultural values. In 2008, the Parade was "charged with election energy and urgency" because of Proposition 8, the ballot initiative that Californians voted on that year to ban same-sex marriage. As community activist-blogger Tanzila Ahmed wrote on the South Asian diasporic blog Sepia Mutiny, "though Proposition 8 is clearly not just about the South Asian community, this rally served to give a voice to South Asians in the community who are going to be deeply affected should the proposition get passed."[69] Unfortunately, Proposition 8 did pass, banning same-sex marriage in California, and the next year, in 2009, Satrang returned with signs proclaiming, "Hate is not a family value," focusing on cultural values of home and filial loyalty instead of legal and electoral rhetoric. This recentering of "family values" can be seen as both a reification and a reincorporation of South Asian American LGBTQ individuals into the dominant South Asian American narrative. In other words, Satrang members are simultaneously reinserting their narrative into the South Asian American community by proclaiming they have

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[68] Sharma, Preeti. Personal Interview by Author. 2 December 2011.
[69] Ahmed, Tanzila. "We're Here. We're Queer. We're on Pioneer." Weblog post. *Sepia Mutiny*. 14 Oct. 2008. Web. <http://sepiamutiny.com/blog/2008/10/14/were_here_were_1/>.

been part of the community fabric all along, but they do so with culturally familiar language, which is filtered through a number of heteronormative and/or cultural discourses on what it means to be a good family member.

However, by publicly declaring their stance on Proposition 8 through the lens of filial relationships, Satrang countered assumptions that the public and the private are separate realms, which is not the case for communities of color, especially for LGBTQ communities of color.[70] Instead, they complicated notions of the "culturally authentic" family through their presence in Little India by stepping into the public with what could be seen as a private issue. Instead, they expanded the dialogue about family values to the broader South Asian American community, acknowledging that community dynamics shape intimate family relations, and vice versa.

In 2010, Satrang and SAN, after years of organizational collaboration, held a Townhall that invited community members in the Artesia area to come and hear stories of LGBTQ South Asian Americans as a way of countering the hurt caused by media outlets that blamed communities of color in California for the same-sex marriage ban. Throughout the morning, Satrang hosted dialogue sessions and panels focusing on specific health and safety issues, and in the afternoon showed video diaries of some of the Satrang members with their families. What was powerful for Preeti Sharma, a SAN staff member at the time, was the way the community was able to honestly interact with each other: "*Older walking club members asked about queer people and said 'I don't see any, are they in this room?'—and the space was so safe that most Satrang members felt safe to identify themselves as queer and talk about their relationships with their parents.*"[71] Many of the community members were people who utilized the services of SAN, and because of the relationship they had with SAN, felt enough trust and security to come

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[70] Manalansan, 34.
[71] Sharma, Preeti. Personal Interview by Author. 2 December 2011.

to the Townhall. And after just a few hours, they came to recognize the diversity of LGBTQ

faces within their community, something that they would take back to their homes and families.

Many Satrang members were part of or have heard about these Parade interactions and

experiences, which is part of the reason why although the Parade only existed from 2007-2010,

many are working to revive the Parade as part of a yearly event.

VIII. The Power of the Word

The 2007 Needs Assessment also illuminated another desire for many in the Satrang community—to find a safe space to connect and share their stories, as a process of reflecting and celebrating their existence as LGBTQ South Asian Americans. In the same year, the Board met with D'Lo, a transgender and queer Sri Lankan American performance artist, to begin conversations around how the stories of the community could be cultivated and documented.[72] For D'Lo, who was going through his own difficult process with his family, this project was close to his heart:

> *"For me, it was like the gentleness that I was giving over to participants, I needed to see that for myself at that point. I needed to see me being gentle with other people. I had facilitated so many different workshops…but this was the first time I was actually taking people on a lengthy journey."[73]*

The Coming Out Coming Home Writing Workshop was formed out of these conversations. The workshop's mission was to "create a protected environment in which people can openly and creatively share their story and 'coming out' process."[74] The first workshop was a series of six three-hour workshops facilitated by D'Lo. Additionally, to ensure that the stories were not just being written by and for the group of workshop attendees, the workshop culminated in a reading open to the public.

According to Alicia, a new member of Satrang and workshop participant, most of the eight participants in the first workshop did not consider themselves artists or writers. They were there to share their stories and create community:

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[72] Satrang Timeline. Satrang. Web.
[73] D'Lo. Personal Interview by Author. 26 March 2013.
[74] "Satrang – Coming Out Coming Home." *Satrang - Serving Queer South Asians of Southern California since 1997.* Satrang. Web.

"Most of us were in a space where we hadn't written about those experiences [of coming out] before…and so I think that was really powerful…because we were all sort of going at the same rate of delving into our experiences…but it was really good, because no one was judgmental and D'Lo…makes the space really nonjudgmental."[75]

D'Lo, a previous Satrang board member and public figure in the South Asian American LGBTQ community, recognized his specific creative and facilitative skills he could contribute to the collective experience of Satrang. By connecting his workshop to a larger community narrative and gently pushing people to open up, has been able to create a safe space in his workshops.

Furthermore, D'Lo's experience as an artist and writer enables him to help workshop attendees to develop their voice and own their life experiences. Two powerful workshop exercises focus on expanding perspective and reclaiming memories. In the first, D'Lo has his workshop participants write from the perspective of a family member, allowing for individuals to hold the nuances of pain and love that emerge in a tumultuous moment of finding out a family member identifies as LGBTQ. In the second exercise, the workshop participants revisit a memory of when they were half their age in order to ground their own LGBTQ experiences in their complex memories, including but not limited to feelings of isolation and validation.[76] When I was in the third workshop, I wrote about a memory of mine as a teenager, and realized that I had a queer friend who was supportive of my journey, even though I was not quite ready to acknowledge it myself. The workshop exercises illuminate both how we are conditioned to think about gender and sexuality, and how we maintain resilience through external expectations.

Thus, creative expression becomes the catalyst for community building and solidifies the need for crafting individual narratives as a move toward collective visibility. In talking about the

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[75] Virani, Alicia. Personal Interview by Author. 29 April 2012.
[76] Kishore, Aakash. Personal Interview by Author. 22 May 2012.

role of creative expression for youth of color in urban high schools, Education scholar Korina Jocson asserts that creative writing "offers one way of understanding how marginalized youth name and shape their social worlds—worlds that are often pathologized or hidden from public view…[and] validates youth's varying identities, both emerging and existing within larger sociocultural and political contexts."[77] The Coming Out Coming Home Workshop, similarly, provides the South Asian American LGBTQ community a validating environment in which to reflect upon their individual and community experiences. Alicia, who has been a workshop participant three of the four Los Angeles-based workshops, has described the bond created through the emotional intimacy of exploring such intense family and community issues:

> *"Even with some of the people I…identify as acquaintances I still feel again…there is that trust that was built that you can call on folks for anything, really. So I definitely think that was such a cathartic and healing experience for so many people in the group...I feel like I witnessed transformation happening even in the span of eight weeks."[78]*

For South Asian American LGBTQ individuals, "coming out" can be a multi-year, even multi-decade process with their family, and often times there is never a finite closure to these "coming out" processes. Aakash was in the middle of a multi-year process of "coming out" as transgender to his family when he hesitantly attended the first workshop, which he considers important not just in his journey but his family's as well:

> "*In an indirect way it really helped me to articulate [being transgender]…and move into the next phase of my process…the piece that I wrote, I shared it with my mother when I was trying to then articulate to her what my process was going to look like. And I think*

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[77] Jocson, Korina M. ""The Best of Both Worlds": Youth Poetry as Social Critique and Form of Empowerment." Beyond Resistance!: Youth Activism and Community Change : New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth. Ed. Shawn A. Ginwright, Pedro Noguera, and Julio Cammarota. London: Routledge, 2006. 131.
[78] Virani, Alicia. Personal Interview by Author. 29 April 2012.

that it was…the one thing that I shared with her that really moved her into the next level

of understanding…it was a tool that not only helped me move myself but it helped my

mother, my family, you know, come to understand what was up."[79]

The Coming Out Coming Home workshop, which started in Los Angeles with Satrang, has now expanded to working with South Asian American LGBTQ communities in the Bay Area with Trikone and in New York with SALGA. D'Lo facilitates each workshop and keeps the attendance purposefully small to about ten participants in order to provide an intimate and safe space conducive not just for writing vulnerable truths, but also for community building.

The public reading is still a key component and the culmination of each workshop. Alicia has witnessed firsthand the power of sharing her stories with a large audience:

"When I shared about my coming out process with my dad, it was really scary. But after,

either people came up to me…and told me about their experiences with their parents, or

people…Facebook messaged me or emailed me after… that helped me to be okay with

sharing that kind of stuff in that large audience."[80]

Additionally, Alicia realized her intersectional identities as a *"queer South Asian Ismaili Muslim woman"* were important because audience members related to her experiences:

"Other people who identified as queer and South Asian or queer and Muslim in the

audience I think related to my stories because…I like to talk about the religious aspect of

my family…so I remember there was a Muslim woman in the audience who I spoke to

after. And another Muslim woman who wrote to me after."[81]

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[79] Kishore, Aakash. Personal Interview by Author. 22 May 2012.
[80] Virani, Alicia. Personal Interview by Author. 29 April 2012.
[81] Virani, Alicia. Personal Interview by Author. 29 April 2012.

Even though Alicia might have been nervous about sharing her story during the reading, she came to recognize that her words helped others feel supported in their own experiences grappling with their gender and/or sexual identities.

However, although the public reading implies being public, some workshop participants disrupt the idea that involvement means a willingness to be public with their story, especially when it might disclose vulnerable and intimate details to an unfamiliar audience. Arwa was part of the most recent workshop, and in conversations around the reading, became visibly uncomfortable:

> *"I really want to be the person to read it, but I can't…I don't know who the audience is gonna be, I can't put my name on that paper…this would be a great opportunity, but it's just too sensitive, and I'm not comfortable."[82]*

Although D'Lo stresses that participants should be ready to share their stories at the end of the workshop, that is not explicitly tied to the individual actually publicly reading their story. This is where the tactic of collective visibility becomes useful. Arwa expressed that they want their story to be heard by the audience, and has discussed with D'Lo the possibility of having someone else read their piece. Thus, although the contradictions of visibility play out in Arwa's reluctance to visibly occupy a public space as LGBTQ, Arwa's experiences are still lifted up as part of the community through the act of another Satrang member taking on the responsibility of making sure Arwa's story is voiced.

Since there are very few spaces and forums for the South Asian American LGBTQ community to share such vulnerable stories, the Coming Out Coming Home workshop becomes an important place not just to write personal experiences, but also to share them with a larger audience who may be going through similar experiences. For attendees, the workshop helps

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[82] Jaffri, Arwa. Personal Interview by Author. 27 March 2013.

cultivate a sense of shared experience that ties them to the larger work of Satrang. Additionally, it has pushed Satrang to think about other ways to share their community stories. A recent project in the works has been to collect all the pieces read at the Coming Out Coming Home workshop and to create an anthology, which would be the first of its kind. This anthology would collect stories from every single workshop, and give individuals the agency of having their name on the story or choosing to remain anonymous. Having a physical anthology to give or sell to individuals and institutions could become an important resource and tool, which could have a very big impact on how people think about and talk about the South Asian American LGBTQ experience in the United States. This anthology would also further disrupt notions of what is a "culturally authentic" narrative, by providing complex multi-layered narratives of the South Asian American LGBTQ community.

IX. Navigating the Digital Realm

In the last decade, Satrang, like many organizations, has utilized the services of web-based social networking and digital media. The organization has a website, a Facebook page, and an email listserv of nearly 700,[83] all of which are used to disseminate a variety of information, such as news from across the diaspora, upcoming events and collaborations, and additional resources that may prove useful for LGBTQ South Asian Americans. However, the ways that Satrang members access and navigate digital space reflect the complicated and multitudinous identities of both individuals and the organization. As Lisa Nakamura states, "the nuanced realities of virtuality—racial, gendered, othered—live in the body."[84] In this vein, Satrang members encompass a spectrum of intersectional experiences and levels of "outness," all of which are mediated differently through digital space.

Scholars have only recently begun to explore the uses of digital media for creating community through social networks. These scholars argue that the internet provides a certain kind of agency for many marginalized communities, who then use the tools of the internet to write their own narrative.[85] However, many of these articles are also split across diasporic identity and LGBTQ identity, which affects the type of narrative creation. Diasporic communities create a sense of shared remembrance through homeland and culture that LGBTQ identified individuals may have a difficult time embracing due to possibly being shunned or silenced in these collective memories.[86] On the other end, scholarly work about LGBTQ communities stresses the benefits of "enhanced identity expression" and the "affirmative

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[83] A few of my interview subjects mentioned that 700 may be an over-inflation of actual unique emails, because some people have multiple emails or there are emails that continuously bounce back. Although I can only speculate, I imagine that there are still a few hundred unique emails on the listserv.

[84] Nakamura, Lisa. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 7.

[85] Alonso, Andoni, and Pedro J. Oiarzabal, eds. *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community*. Reno: University of Nevada, 2010.

[86] Eng, David L. *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Durham [NC: Duke UP, 2010.

celebration of sexual diversity" that the internet provides for LGBTQ individuals, which also may not fit those who do not explicitly label themselves as LGBTQ and/or are not publicly "out."[87]

The digital narrative of Satrang does not fit into either the literature on diasporic identity or LGBTQ identity online, which demonstrates how the complex needs of their community members offline translates to an online space as well. Firstly, in contrast to digital diasporic communities, Satrang members are not solely invested in a nationalism-steeped diasporic narrative. Secondly, in contrast to the assumption that "out" offline means "out" online, many Satrang members are also strategically covert about their gender and/or sexual identities online. Since Satrang members have a different set of needs than other digital community spaces, there is no tangible model for what seems like a contradictory digital project: attempting to craft a community narrative online that is public, accessible, and inclusive, while also protecting privacy. As Media Studies scholars Radhika Gajjala and Venkataramana Gajjala state in the preface to their anthology *South Asian Technospaces*, these "disjunctures of new media practices" that Satrang is engaging in through its online presence offer "complex glimpses of how digital technologies function in particular locales."[88]

All of my younger interview subjects (younger than 30) mentioned they had heard of Satrang through the internet, either through their own searches or someone relaying online information, such as an email from a member or browsing the website. This implies a certain sense of technological privilege, both in having access to technology and in knowing how to use technology. My own discovery of the organization speaks to this phenomenon as well. A few

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[87] "Introduction." *LGBTQ Identity and Online New Media*. Ed. Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper. New York: Routledge, 2010. 4.
[88] "Preface." Preface. *South Asian Technospaces*. Ed. Radhika Gajjala and Venkataramana Gajjala. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. xi.

years ago, I chanced upon Satrang while doing a Google search of "Desi"[89] and "gay" and "Los Angeles." However, simply learning about the organization through friends or the internet does not guarantee immediate public presence or involvement. For example, in 2005, while Aakash was a student at Pomona College, someone in student affairs had connected him to Rashmi, who promptly emailed him back. Aakash recalls:

> *"I thought about meeting up, but I also was like "Oh my god these are basically aunties and uncles like my parents, except gay [laughs] and I have no idea what that would look like, or how to even wrap my mind around that, or whether I would feel connected to people who she said were mostly first generation immigrants, they're mostly a little bit older, their late 30s and 40s, and at the time I was like, 20, so that felt ancient to me [laughs] ...so long story short, I ignored her email, and didn't really talk to her, didn't reach out."[90]*

It was not until Aakash met Rashmi at ArtWallah, a South Asian diasporic arts festival at which Satrang was doing outreach, that he felt he could benefit from what the organization offered. Although the internet allows people to connect based on perceived shared interests and identities, Aakash felt he needed an offline connection before his online connection could be understood as a genuine social invitation. It also speaks to the anxieties of visibility and belonging. As a younger member who is second-generation and transgender, Aakash was trying to imagine how he could relate to others who would be bringing their own public and private selves to the Satrang community space. There is more at stake for Satrang members connecting online, because they are not only meeting new people, they are also revealing a vulnerable truth about themselves.

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[89] Desi is a diasporic term used to refer to South Asians. For a more nuanced origin of the term, refer to *Karma of Brown Folk* by Vijay Prashad.
[90] Kishore, Aakash. Personal Interview by Author. 22 May 2012.

Regardless of these seemingly contradictory negotiations between online disclosure and offline engagement, just knowing the organization exists is enough for many. Arwa states:

"The power of doing something online [like the Satrang Youth group] is that it's not like a magazine you're hiding under your bed…you can browse on your computer, clear your history and a kid doesn't need to worry about their parents coming through and seeing it. It's something that anyone could have, and anyone can access even if they're not able to attend those meetings or those social events. They can still see that they have support and solidarity with other South Asians who are queer."[91]

This experience relates directly to the mode of collective visibility. As an organization with its own digital presence, Satrang is visible in that it pops up in browser searches and can be linked from other pages (such as other South Asian American, Asian American, and/or LGBTQ organizations). This means that there are many LGBTQ South Asian Americans and South Asians of the broader diaspora who access the website for a number of reasons, one of them being the feeling of support that Arwa describes above. Even though many may not be "out" in some offline spaces, they can still follow the progress and evolution of this community online, and move beyond feelings of isolation or alienation they might be experiencing in their offline life.

Many of the members who have been involved for much longer have willingly taken on a visible role, possibly because they realize the need to be "out" and available for other LGBTQ South Asian Americans who may use the internet to find stories that resonate with their cultural experiences. For example, many I interviewed referenced watching clips of D'Lo's performances and/or reading his poetry as a moment of connection. As a performance artist, D'Lo actively occupies a visible role in the South Asian American LGBTQ community, not just in Los

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[91] Jaffri, Arwa. Personal Interview by Author. 27 March 2013.

Angeles, but nationally, and more recently after his multi-city tour in South Asia, globally as well. D'Lo embraces being a performer and occupying a public role, both offline and online. Interestingly, he expresses appreciation for the ways that the internet has allowed his family to see the value in what he does:

> *"I mean thank God for Facebook because it has helped [my family] understand what it is that I do, who I am…and the respect that I get…I don't know what my family thought but it was probably nothing as worthy as other people who appreciate what I do…And so now they get, through Facebook, they're like 'oh well, this mother fucka's not down and out', and like a weirdo and…struggling or troubled…so now through Facebook, you know, my cousins, my younger ones at least are seeing how it is I roll and then I'm sure that they have conversations with their parents about what it is that I do and many of them have reached out and said 'oh I watched your videos' and half of me is like [gasps], and then, [laughs] well fuck it, it's out there."[92]*

D'Lo's online visibility has multi-faceted effects that he sees working to his benefit. As someone who has diasporic family ties across the United States, Canada, and Sri Lanka, the internet acts as a facilitator for family members to dialogue about D'Lo's transgender and queer identities. It helps in his process of disclosure and "coming out," yet only those in his family who have technological access and the desire to know more about him will actively seek out this information. Thus, there is a constant mediation between expressing his identity for performance and how his family perceives his work, and by extension his identity.

Since the beginning, Satrang has recognized although individuals would attend events or be involved in leadership, publicly associating individuals with the organization or its events outside of particular spaces might "out" them. Therefore, Satrang has taken precautionary

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[92] D'Lo. Personal Interview by Author. 26 March 2013.

measures to ensure their members feel their various public and private needs are attended to. For the past few decades, this has meant making sure there are no photos and videos taken of people who do not feel comfortable having their name or image publicly affiliated with the organization. Now, the digital realm has opened up the organization and its members to a new and constantly shifting process of negotiating their visibility online.

Through any number of social media sites, Satrang members can be linked almost immediately to an event in progress,[93] requiring Satrang to learn and adapt to these constantly changing features. The organization's main Facebook Page is public, since they want to be able to come up in search engines. This means individuals can still come to the page without actually having to "out" themselves by joining the Facebook Page and consequently having their name listed as part of the active Facebook membership. Secondly, as of May 2013, the page has only one photograph posted of a small group of Satrang members at a movie night—a posed picture that meant that each individual had the choice of not being in it (for all we know as the viewer, there could be others who are standing off to the side because they did not want to be in the picture). Additionally, the website only lists bios of board members, and on its soon to be revealed blog, first-person stories, both volunteered and from the Coming Out Coming Home workshop.[94] For the workshop stories, they will be only from those who gave permission to have their stories posted. The tactic of collective visibility is demonstrated in the precautions that Satrang as an organization tries to take when representing their identities online.

Satrang members also provide alternative narratives of how communities of color articulate different relationships with the digital realm, based on their differing online and offline

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[93] These websites include, but are not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. Many of these social media sites have a 'check in' feature where you can tag other members as being at an event.
[94] Both M. Kumar and D'Lo mentioned that as of now, they are starting with the Coming Out Coming Home stories, but in the future hope to have regular bloggers or other members' stories, which I imagine will continue Satrang's dialogue of the different modes of digital accessibility.

needs. Satrang adds to the current scholarship on social media by tackling the contradictions of

visibility that can emerge in digital spaces for a community with diverse intersectional

experiences like the LGBTQ South Asian American individuals involved with Satrang. For

example, Media Studies scholar Christopher Pullen and sociologist Margaret Cooper claim the

online realm allows LGBTQ individuals to continue to explore their "social agency," which is

inherently tied to "emancipatory politics."[95] In other words, if an individual is "out" in their

offline communities, then the linear trajectory tied to these narratives of "coming out" assumes

the individual will be "out" in their online communities as well. However, Pullen and Cooper

value the digital mode of social agency solely in terms of self-expression and "outness." They

believe that the online world allows LGBTQ identified individuals to step fully into their

identities, which in turn frees them from the isolation and alienation of a "closeted" life. This is

the same type of unidimensional narrative of "coming out of the closet" that does not allow for

the constant renegotiation of identities that LGBTQ people of color juggle in their multiple

communities throughout their lifetime. Thus, I move away from tying social agency solely to this

specifically visible form of emancipatory politics. Invisibility is not necessarily oppositional to

agency—choosing not to be visible can exercise agency as well. Therefore, I posit that Satrang

members find agency in deciding when and how to disclose specific parts of their identities.

For example, although Arwa is involved in the Satrang Youth Group, they regulate what

their friends post on their Facebook and Twitter accounts:

> *"I have a couple cousins who are on my Facebook, I have a lot of friends who I knew*
>
> *growing up…they're that part of that South Asian community that I'm not out to, so I*
>
> *definitely don't want them to catch wind and go to the aunties, the aunties go to my*
>
> *parents, and then my parents just sit there and cry…I don't wanna have to deal with any*

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[95] Ed. Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper. 10.

of that shit so I tell them to cut that crap out…they forget a lot of times that I'm not out

because…I'm doing all this shit…it's just that stupid fear that's way too real."[96]

Arwa articulates how the differentiation and regulation of their identity between online and offline spaces is a purposeful act. Specifically, the fear of being "outed" online is not an indicator of an helpless "closeted" state—in fact, Arwa knows very well the possible consequences of enacting a specific type of public "outness" that is not available to many LGBTQ people of color. Arwa, who is actively involved in the youth group and the larger Satrang community, is controlling their online identity not in spite of, but because of their offline community building with Satrang. Much like other social spaces, the digital realm is another space that Satrang members assess and occupy in various ways. Therefore, the way Arwa stays covert in the digital space demonstrates a disruption of the linear and spatial assumptions of "outness" by countering assumptions that being "out" offline implies being "out" online.

Since Satrang members have a fluid understanding of their roles and relationships to their varying communities, their emancipatory politics is nested within their multiple relational identities that tie them to their family and community. By knowing the intricacies of their identity as both South Asian American and LGBTQ, these individuals have an arsenal of tools that help them navigate their social and cultural realities. And what they decide they cannot disclose at a particular time in particular spaces, Satrang keeps confidential, while maintaining a public visibility as an organization. So although certain individuals are not publicly "out," they still feel connected to this organization that is actively involved in campaigns and social events.

This online intimacy can be contradictory, because although digital space can be useful for many in the Satrang community to access information and feel connected, these same

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[96] Jaffri, Arwa. Personal Interview by Author. 27 March 2013.

individuals often simultaneously crave offline interactions as well. M. Kumar feels a great deal

of satisfaction in moving offline for his community building:

> *"I know where we're going…with the Facebook and all the social media…[but] it can't*
> *replace when you meet a person, say hi, hugging…or talk to them. You can't replace that,*
> *it's still going to be there. You know, all the social networks come and go, but our family*
> *will still be there."*[97]

As an older member of Satrang, M. Kumar said that when he first began to realize he was

gay and was looking for resources, "there was no Facebook," implying that his process was more

connected to non-web media at the time, such as magazines and movies. This may be tied to his

expounding on the need for centering in-person social interactions as his mode of community

building. However, he also acknowledges that this online realm of communication is here to

stay, and it provides an ease and convenience for an organization such as Satrang, which is now

a part of their organizing and community building efforts.

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[97] Kumar, M. Personal Interview by Author. 26 March 2013.

X. Conclusion: Family and Community

I walk toward the house scattered with multicolored lights. It is Christmas Eve, and although many involved with Satrang do not religiously celebrate the holiday, it still has cultural significance as a time that family comes together. As the evening goes by, about twenty people come to eat dinner together and socialize. For some, like me, it is a moment to catch up with individuals who I consider family but have not seen regularly throughout the year. For others, it is an extension of their regular social interaction, with an added feeling of intimacy underscoring the evening. It is a holiday, and for a variety of reasons, many do not spend it with their family of origin, which makes it that much more important to assert a sense of belonging in these spaces.

To be South Asian American and LGBTQ is to never quite align with dominant narratives of whiteness or heteronormativity. What the evolution of Satrang demonstrates is how personal journeys are reflected in the development of a community—as stated on a Satrang Youth group flier, "Change starts at the personal level," and for many individuals who have taken on leadership positions or active volunteering roles in Satrang, their personal journey is often intertwined with their involvement in the organization.[98] Satrang has provided a space for LGBTQ South Asian Americans to reconcile split experiences of their multiple identities.

The LGBTQ South Asian Americans in Satrang are continuously redefining notions of family and home. Rashmi attributes much of her personal growth and stability to Satrang: "*Satrang has provided to me a space I can be myself completely, without division…without reservation. It is my chosen family and I'm very attached to and protective of it.*"[99] As Queer of Color literary scholar David Eng states, "home as a regulating principle, might, on reflection,

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[98] Satrang Youth Group Flier. *Satrang Youth Group.* 2011.
[99] Choksey, Rashmi. Personal Interview by Author. 2 December 2011.

constitute one of queer activism's organizing conditions of possibility."[100] By creating home through dinner parties, celebrating holidays together, speaking the same language or worshipping the same way, Satrang members have felt supported in their own needs, enabling many to explore how their involvement in Satrang can benefit a larger community narrative of South Asian American LGBTQ resilience. Thus, being LGBTQ is not a threat to their South Asian-ness—rather, through Satrang, LGBTQ South Asian Americans feel re-rooted in their cultural selves. And Satrang has created a visible community that is now a regular presence in many South Asian American organizations and at many South Asian American events. They are redefining family not just within the private confines of a Satrang dinner party, but also at nationally cultured places like India Day and Pakistan Day events. The courage of Satrang members is apparent in the ways they interact with the South Asian American community: there is no self-shame, there is no bowing to stigma. This self-confidence and group confidence are decades in the making, and those who have been involved with Satrang for most of their adult lives are hoping future iterations of Satrang will continue to incorporate its members' varying needs and continue active outreach and broader community collaboration.

However, Satrang and its members understand that creating a sense of family and home is a continual and messy process. As Aakash observes, *"I think Satrang has really nuanced my community. It's been that reminder of like, what family looks like is ugly and complicated [laughs]…I love that I'm able to have a community that sometimes says the wrong thing."[101]* For Aakash, Satrang is a family that is not perfect, but continues to try. By recognizing the ugliness of Satrang, he is disrupting the notion that Satrang as an LGBTQ space has countered the hurt and pain that many families of origin may create. In fact, Satrang members sometimes replicate a

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[100] Eng, David L. "Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies." *Social Text* 52/53 (1997): 32.
[101] Kishore, Aakash. Personal Interview by Author. 22 May 2012.

misunderstanding and judgment similar to other community and family spaces. However, Aakash does not dismiss Satrang for the wrong things that people say or do (mostly around his being transgender), but like others, remains committed to the constant and often times troublesome conversations in the space, because it allows Satrang and its members to continue to contend with the diversity of experiences within their own organization. Similarly D'Lo states:

> *"At the ten year anniversary [Gala] we had like old-school lesbians and, you know, people still not even understanding what queer is, and you had this whole section of South Asian young people who identify as queer…we have a great space and maybe the sides don't mingle all the time, but there's a place for somebody."[102]*

D'Lo articulates that although these conversations are still continuing, and people may not fully understand each other even within Satrang, the organization continues to create space for whoever needs it. Satrang creates a family-like environment, which is supportive and is pushing to be inclusive, but it is not without its faults.

Additionally, many who have been involved in the group acknowledge the need to broaden their recruitment of and accessibility to those in the South Asian American LGBTQ community who may be even further marginalized. Although there are hundreds on the Satrang listserv, there are anywhere between 30-100 that show up to events, so there is a challenge to continue to provide a variety of resources that incorporate its community members' different needs. Furthermore, many Satrang leaders believe there are other South Asian American LGBTQ individuals to whom they should outreach. Sanjay recognizes that Satrang *"need[s] to be mindful of the diversity of our community and change our programming and events to reflect this diversity without sacrificing the safe space that brought us all together in the first place,"* which means safe and targeted outreach to groups such as gender nonconforming individuals, non-

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[102] D'Lo. Personal Interview by Author. 26 March 2013.

English speakers, low-income individuals, and undocumented immigrants, and acknowledging the constant learning curve that is present when creating an intersectional community.[103] Aakash hopes that Satrang will continue to expand its presence in not just the broader South Asian American community, but the Asian American and immigrant community as well:

> *"Satrang has so much heart and I think it needs to take that into the other organizations, into the other parts of the community, like the broader queer [Asian Pacific Islander] community, because it's gotten a lot done just on the fuel of like passion… I think Satrang has a really important role to play as an ally."[104]*

As Aakash mentions, he sees Satrang occupying a powerful ally role for organizations doing advocacy work on a variety of issues throughout the greater Los Angeles area. This allyship means understanding the intersection of issues within LGBTQ communities, such as immigration, labor, and health, and actively working to incorporate the needs of various communities in relation to these issues.

Many Satrang members are entering their 50s and 60s, and are now facing multiple health, family, and social issues that complicate being both South Asian American and LGBTQ. Mushtaque, one of the original founders of Satrang and a grounding presence in the Los Angeles LGBTQ South Asian American community, passed away in November of 2011. Many in Satrang are still mourning the loss of a friend, family member, and trailblazer. Similarly, many other members may be facing health complications or getting older without a "traditional" family to take care of them. Even as newer members are joining Satrang and pushing the organization forward in its mission and vision, others continue to find comfort in the strength of the personal relationships they have built through Satrang. The challenge now is to continue the dialogue and

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[103] Chhugani, Sanjay. Personal Interview by Author. 2 December 2011.
[104] Kishore, Aakash. Personal Interview by Author. 22 May 2012.

collaboration that many of my interview subjects stressed. The integration of dialogue in the community building efforts of Satrang is important, because it has enabled Satrang to hear the needs of its own members. The Satrang community continues to disrupt the notion of traditional family values, providing a dynamic counternarrative that shows a community creating a family by challenging each other, supporting each other, and recognizing the love in each other. Along the way, Satrang has developed a unique voice grounded in a strategic collective visibility that pushes its individual members and the broader community to recognize and respect the diverse voices of the South Asian American community.

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