THE INSTA-HIJRA: SOUTH ASIAN HIJRA PHOTOGRAPHIC PERFORMANCES

by

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ABSTRACT

DAVID FLAHERTY. The Insta-Hijra: South Asian Hijra Photographic Performances (Under the direction of Dr. ALEXANDRA KALOYANIDES)

Indian hijras have captured anthropological, religious, and media attention as they have been categorized as "third-sex," "neither men nor women," and most recently, indexed under the identity structures of "transgender" and "kinnar." From their social, religious, and cultural presences and identities as performers in and across the South Asian subcontinent, hijras primarily function as simultaneously auspicious and inauspicious performers who provide "badhai," or blessings, to newborn babies, newly-wedded couples, or other communities in exchange for money, status, and social securement. Yet, these hijra narratives figure incomplete as hijras engage in and use social media platforms, such as Instagram, to visualize their subjectivities in alternative and uneven ways.This thesis focuses on three contemporary hijras—Laxminarayan Tripathi, Abhina Aher, and Pushpa Maai—and their Instagram pages to explore the identity structures, relationalities, and visual themes that take place within and through their Instagram images. I broadly ask us to consider how these hijras position their bodies, frame their images, and use gestures and aesthetics to perform within their Instagram images on Instagram's platform. What kinds of aesthetics, mannerisms, and stylizations do they employ and perform through their media? Finally, what does paying attention to these visual expressions reveal about the ways gender and sexuality can be articulated, expressed, negotiated, and even obscured, on social media? I ultimately argue that we should approach and attend to these images as sites of visual performances from which these images do not function as static pieces of media but rather as evolving and performative spaces.

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Additionally, I am eternally indebted to my friends, especially Meredith Binder, for their emotional and physical presences in my life. Without them, I would not have completed this thesis nor my graduate program. Meredith has consistently answered my phone calls and texts to only receive my complaints, successes, failures, and desires throughout my time in this graduate program. She has profoundly shaped and guided the ways I move through this world, so I am forever grateful for her support. My partner, British McLean, has been an overwhelming ray of light, beauty, and energy during this entire thesis process. Without his unwavering support, dedication, and listening capabilities, especially after returning from my second trip to India during the midst of writing my thesis, I do not know where I would be. British, thank *you.*

I further extend my most profound gratitude to my academic family—a collective space where I have felt the most intellectually and emotionally challenged yet also enlivened and rejuvenated. My interests in Indian culture first originated in Ashley Bryan's (Ashleyji) liberal studies courses at UNC Charlotte where I began to find my voice. It is through Ashleyji's consistent encouragement and support in my writing from which I found my way into this master's program. The late Dr. Daniel J. White profoundly shaped and influenced my perspective as a student and researcher, and I only wish he was physically here with us to partake in this journey. I am also incredibly fortunate to have studied multiple years of Hindi with both Drs. Nilakshi Phukan and Rashmi Sharma. I also thank Dr. William Sherman for his challenging and demanding courses and conversations that probed me to think more analytically and deeply. From our conversations about "what is theory?" to Mariah Carey, Dr. Sherman has been a consistent voice of inspiration throughout this process.

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DEDICATION

To those who feel like giving up: Don't! It *does* get easier.

To my family: I can only hope you see the light one day.

To those writing theses and dissertations: The process will become clearer.

To British: My love. My light.

To my past and future self: You do not have to be the *best* at everything.

To those who feel the need to *strike a pose*: Do it!

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INTRODUCTION

I, as a melodramatic diva, lounge on my ripped, black leather couch in my Charlotte apartment, dreading writing my final essay for my first semester of graduate school in the fall of 2019. I scroll through my Instagram feed on my phone as a still image of Laxminarayan Tripathi, an Indian hijra and leader of the *Kinnar Akhada,* appears on my feed.[1] I have been following Tripathi's social media for a while at this point as my interests in hijras and other queer Indians began developing since I enrolled in my first "Asian Cinema" course during my time as an undergraduate.[2] But, when I see this specific image, I dramatically gasp: "What is going on?!" She sits royally atop the back of a camel, high above a mass of Indian audience members, as these onlookers use their cameras and phones to document her grandeur, theatrics, body, style, and aunty-ness.[3] She rocks a Persian red and light-tan colored sari, with alternating images of *Radha* stitched into the bottoms of her sari, as her translucent, red *dupatta* drapes around the back of her body and over her head. She gazes downward amid glamorously tossing hot-pink colored flower petals into the crowd. An exaggerated *tilak*, that constitutes three horizontal golden lines, covers the entirety of her forehead.[4] A maroon colored *bindi*—a rather large and looming one—centers between her eyebrows as a vertical,

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[1] "Feed" is a colloquial term used to describe the ways photos, videos, and other multimedia messages appear on the interfaces of Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites. I will explore the *Kinnar Akhada* later in this thesis in chapter three.

[2] I vividly remember watching Sridhar Rangayan's *The Pink Mirror*, a fictional film about the lives of Indian gay, queer, and hijra folks in contemporary India in an undergraduate course in 2016.

[3] "How to be an Auntie," speech by LaWhore Vagistan/Kareem Khubchandani, May 13, 2020, video, 12:27, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9IYJlC_VWY. I borrow this term from Kareem Khubchandani's 2020 TEDx Talks, "How to be an Auntie: LaWhore Vagistan," where he discusses the critical role of aunties—those "motherly," sassy, and tough figures on the peripheries—in academic theorizing.

[4] A *tilak* is a marking on the forehead that traditionally represents a devotee of Lord Shiva or Lord Vishnu within Hinduism. In this case, Laxminarayan shows her devotion to Lord Shiva through the horizontal lines.

red line recedes to the middle part between her hair. She wears an exaggerated assortment of jewelry (because what diva does not?!)—rings, bangles, and necklaces—as she, her body, and aesthetics take center stage and space in this image and performance.

Her embodied audience members, the crowd surrounding her in the photo, make no sound, as this is a still image on Instagram, and I am attending visually, but her Instagram followers make quite a raucous with their comments: "जय माँ भवानी [Hail Mother Bhavani];" "U looking so gorgeous…love u mam….;" "Jai mahalakshmi [Hail Great Lakshmi]." These digital comments, that switch between Hindi, in its Devanagari and transliterated forms, and English, scattered with Indianisms and broken dialogue, symbolically applaud and revere Tripathi's performance and Instagram presence.[5] After scrolling through these digital comments, I begin to realize my own participation, membership, and engagement in Tripathi's visual performance. Tripathi's visual performance communicates and engenders dimensions of gender, class, religion, and sexuality. And after this moment, I begin to dive deeper into the Instagram archive to only find more of the complex and nuanced digital worlds that hijras create, inhabit, and embody.

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I invite us to attend the previous hijra performance—one that is captured, articulated, and aestheticized through Tripathi's Instagram image—to document a particular way contemporary hijras engage in, with, and through digital platforms. In this thesis, I broadly

[5] Kareem Khubchandani, "Cruising the Ephemeral Archives of Bangalore's Gay Nightlife," in *Queering Digital India: Activisms, Identities, Subjectivities*, ed. Rohit K. Dasgupta and Debanuj DasGupta (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 88.

ask us to consider how do Laxminarayan Tripathi, Abhina Aher, and Pushpa Maai—three contemporary Indian hijra-transgender folks—position their bodies, frame their images, and use gestures and aesthetics to *perform* within their Instagram images on Instagram's platform? What kinds of aesthetics, mannerisms, and stylizations do they employ and perform through their media? How do they articulate registers of identities within these images? What do these visual performances reveal about contemporary, digital hijra performances in social media spaces? Finally, what does paying attention to these visual expressions reveal about the ways gender and sexuality can be articulated, expressed, negotiated, and even obscured, on social media? To begin answering these questions, I first argue that we should attend to these Instagram images not just as static *images of* Indian hijras but also as *performances by* hijras. Specifically, I argue that we should unpack these Instagram images as modes of performances in which they reveal the exploratory, opaque, and unstable categories of visual hijra performatives in digital spaces. By looking at hijras' digital images through performance, I reveal the ways hijras, their digitized selves—including their bodies, gazes, and poses—articulate and move through axes of identities, such as gender, sexuality, religion, class, and even the category of hijra. As I move through these photos, I unpack and destabilize commonly oversaturated representations about and of hijras as insulated in categories of the "third-sex" and "ritual performers"—categories that anthropologists, such as Serena Nanda, have extracted and relied upon—to show how we can engage with these digital images as legitimate sites of visual performances.

My research with hijras[6] and their digital performances has developed throughout my graduate training with South Asian gender, sexuality, and queer studies along with the ways we, researchers from the U.S. and other transnational academic institutions, think about, visualize, and come in contact with marginalized bodies and identity politics. Within this thesis, I am interested in continuing to explore and unpack these relationalities, especially within and through hijra performance discourses in digital spaces. I primarily focus on three highly publicized hijras—Laxminarayan Tripathi, Abhina Aher, and Pushpa Maai—and their performance cultures as expressed through their Instagram photos.[7] I invite us to attend to these visual performances and to think about ways they articulate the intersections of genders, sexualities, religiosity, nationalism, and class through their captured gestures, poses, photographic framings, and aesthetics.

I preface this introduction with a description of Tripathi's Instagram image to demonstrate the ways hijras themselves interact with and visualize their bodies in digital spaces—an area that academic scholarship on hijras has largely neglected. In other words, most work analyzing hijras, their communities, and their negotiations of subjectivity, does *not* include analyses of their visual participations on Instagram, Facebook, or other social

[6] As I explore throughout this thesis, hijra categories, identities, and subjectivities are complex, unstable, and evolving. I primarily use the terms "hijra," "kinnar," and "transgender/trans" since Tripathi, Aher, and Maai all use these terms interchangeably within their Instagram pages, writings, and interviews.

[7] Laxminarayan Tripathi's Instagram page has over 60,000 followers while Abhina Aher's page has accumulated more than 7,000 followers. Pushpa Maai might be the only one considered not "highly-publicized," but her NGO, non-governmental organization, work in Jaipur, Rajasthan is felt and seen across the queer community in India, or in other words, a kind of "glocal" (global and local) presence within LGBTQ+ social geographies. I provide more context about these individuals in the following chapters.

media sites.[8] At the same time, similar to the way *I* gaze upon Laxminarayan's digital body to better articulate her performance—one that produces registers of sexuality, class, gender, nationality, and religion—most of the scholarship on hijras *also* concerns itself with hijra bodies and their relations with and to legal, medical, academic, and activist discourses and spaces. Most importantly, however, is that very little scholarship has been written about how hijras inhabit and interact with digital spaces along with the ways they articulate and actualize their own presences, identities, and subjectivities through their images. Yet, as I have just snapshotted in Tripathi's above visual performance, hijras *do* occupy digital spaces and use them for an expression of multiple purposes, such as activism, community-making, self-fashioning and articulations of identities, or for pure fun.[9] It is these spaces—the digital, queer, and neoliberal virtual spaces—in which hijras gather that ultimately probe us to dis/re/orient our academic labors regarding South Asian gender and sexuality.[10]

On the one hand, these digital performances invite us to think through the politics and ethics of translation in neoliberal digital performance spaces, such as, for example, the ways Tripathi feminizes her body and situates it in multiple places, such as religious spaces, on curated stages, or in corporate structures.[11] And on the other hand, attending to these

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[8] This could largely be due to the pervasive digital divide in contemporary India. See Chapter 2: "Queering Digital Cultures: A Roundtable Conversation," in *Queering Digital India: Activisms, Identities, Subjectivities,* ed. Rohit K. Dasgupta and Debanuj DasGupta (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 38.
[9] The turn to analyzing marginalized communities' engagement with *masti,* or fun, is a recent turn within scholarship, as anthropologist Brian Horton shows with his work on queer Indians as fabulous subjects.
[10] Rohit K. Dasgupta and Debanuj DasGupta, "Introduction: Queering Digital India," in *Queering Digital India: Activisms, Identities, Subjectivities*, ed. Rohit K. Dasgupta and Debanuj DasGupta (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 6-11.
[11] By corporate structures, I am referring to spaces, such as The Lalit Hotel, Bollywood sets, or on the set of *Shark Tank India*.

performances in digital spaces ruptures the overly academically fetishized "on-the-ground" *badhai* performances as the singular and monolithic expression of the ways hijras participate in performance cultures. By revealing the *other* ways that hijras use their bodies in digital spaces to de/re/construct meanings, identities, representations, and translations within postcolonial hijra studies, this thesis contributes to the larger conversations within the field of South Asian gender and sexuality studies. Ultimately, to watch these hijras perform through their images is to enmesh ourselves in their *hijrascape,* a "multi-layered, multi-scalar, and multisensorial movements and flows that constitute *hijra-khwaja sira trans* relationalities, lifeworlds, and imaginaries within and across different cultures and societies," in which they reveal to users a "snapshot" of their specific geo-temporal social geography.[12]

Methodologically, my approach to analyzing hijras' images in digital spaces not only relies on explicating the ways I move through the Instagram space—and thus explaining how I choose specific photos for this thesis—but also exploring my own relationality and positionality in this specific time, space, and place from which I think and write about hijra bodies. That is, I have an ethical and intellectual responsibility to pay attention to *my attendance* of hijra performances on Instagram. As a result, I maintain that this thesis is not just an analysis of digital, hijra performances on Instagram. Rather, this thesis is also a constant challenging, exploratory, and at times, uncomfortable, dialogue between and with

[12] Adnan Hossain, Claire Pamment, and Jeff Roy, *Badhai: Hijra-Khwaja Sira-Trans Performance across Borders in South Asia* (London, England: Methuen Drama, 2022), 21. https://nook.barnesandnoble.com/products/9781350174542/sample.

myself and these hijra visual performances. I claim that this thesis is and needs to be autoethnographic. When analyzing and inevitably gazing onto and into hijra Instagram images and revealing the ways they articulate and perform registers of identities through their uploaded images, I must also maintain my own reflexivity and blind spots as an attendee, participant, and researcher of these performances.[13] I am inspired by Nikola Rajic's 2016 dissertation, "Majestic Presence: Narrating the Transgender Self in 21st-Century *Tamilakam,*" which focuses on Tamil *tirunangai* ("transgender" South Indian women) communities and their autobiographies and ethnographies from South India. Rajic's work primarily argues that "these writings are. . .rhetorical instances of coming out, most effectively communicated in the form of self-identification through self-narration, either autobiographically. . .or ethnographically," from which he localizes within Tamil culture and society.[14]

Rajic's dissertation was one of the first academic writings that introduced me to academic discourses about hijras, aravanis, and kinnars in India, but it was his *methodology*, "ethnography of empathy," that has profoundly shaped the ways I have continued to think through my own relationship to my positionality with this research.[15] I maintain that this thesis must include a brief analysis of *my own* standpoint and its performatives in order to

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[13] Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, eds., *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 29, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uncc-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1784095. This edited volume has helped develop my tools of understanding autoethnography.
[14] Nikola Rajic, "Majestic Presence: Narrating the Transgender Self in 21st-Century Tamilakam," PhD diss., (The University of Texas at Austin, 2016), 8.
[15] Ibid., 8, 19-20.

fully think about subaltern bodies—in this case, transgender Indians—in digital spaces. Thus, this thesis is autoethnographic while simultaneously an analysis of hijra visual performances in which I attempt to ultimately pay attention to the conversations between myself and the images. Just as Rajic explores his own identities through his methodology as a way to circumvent orientalizing and othering *tirunangai* communities and their autobiographical writings, I, too, follow this methodology.[16]

Resultingly, I find it challenging to explain my process in the selection of certain Instagram photos that comprise the bulk of this thesis's primary sources for two reasons: (1) I am not totally clear about how my practices of "liking" an Instagram image impacts the algorithms on social media that lead me to other similar images (in other words, many of the images and their accounts I analyze here were offered to me through often opaque social media technologies); and (2) my own positionality as a white, queer, cis-gendered male, middle-class, North American master's student who is situated in a very specific geo-temporal-spatial cosmogony compared to the hijras I bring into conversation here. Although I have previously traveled to India and interacted and formed relationships with hijras in both Rajasthan and New Delhi, my outsider perspective has been illusioned by US centric, middle-class, queer whiteness, ultimately occluding various cultural, religious, and social intricacies that shape, affect, and intersect with hijra lives. Further, the types of media I consume—on Instagram, Netflix, or even at my local coffee shop—is sought out by and

[16] Ibid., 19-25.

filtered through my Western, queer lens. I write this to highlight that my analyses of these images has limitations and blind spots from which someone living with or growing up with hijras might otherwise see.

In "Revealing the Feminist Orientation in the Methodologies of the Media, Religion, and Culture Field," Lynn Schofield Clark and Grace Chiou analyze the ways feminist theories have helped construct and shape methodologies for studying the intersections of media, religion, and culture.[17] They offer three methodological categories that those who study media, religion, and culture—categories and conversations that this thesis also falls within—historically have moved through and utilized: traditional, interpretive, and participatory.[18] Although my analyses engage with the first two categories, I also follow a participatory model insofar as, according to Clark and Chiou, "Participatory research refers specifically to efforts that recognize the agency of research participants, and that view research as part of a collaborative effort toward seeking greater justice relations."[19] I bring this research to light to generate collective conversations that can contribute to and build from what Rinaldo Walcott terms, "homopoetics of relation."[20] Nevertheless, I do not interact directly with Tripathi, Aher, or Maai by means of direct messaging on Instagram. However, they nonetheless all encompass agentic decisions in their choices of images, videos, and media to

[17] Lynn Schofield Clark and Grace Chiou, "Revealing the Feminist Orientation in the Methodologies of the Media, Religion, and Culture Field," in *Media, Religion and Gender: Key Issues and Challenges,* ed. Mia Lovheim (London: Routledge, 2013), 33.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 34.
[20] Rinaldo Walcott, *Queer Returns: Essays on Multiculturalism, Diaspora, and Black Studies* (Toronto, ON: Insomniac Press, 2016), 141.

upload onto Instagram. At the same time, my initial and sustained encounters with their posts, analyses of their images, and my decisions to include them in this thesis reflects the overarching collaborative method between them and me.

I have been actively following Aher's and Tripathi's Instagram accounts since approximately September of 2019 when I began my graduate studies and enrolled in a course on materiality and religion.[21] During this time, my fellow students and I were assigned a final research project that needed to somehow connect with the ongoing effects of material cultures in the study of religion, and since all of the texts we engaged with discussed artifacts in their tangible forms, such as Bodhisattva statues or paintings from India, I knew I desired to challenge the categories of materiality.[22] I wanted to think more abstractly about how artifacts and objects do not just coincide with tangible, physical, and non-digital objects and spaces.[23] So, I immediately turned to Instagram, a digital space that is mediated by the use of technology, such as cell phones or computers, to unpack the ways we can think more deeply about materiality as unhinged from physical objects. The digital images in this thesis are mediated and viewed through screens, but I am still physically scrolling, zooming, and tapping these images. I interact with them similarly to the ways I would flip through a book,

[21] After following and perusing Tripathi's and Aher's Instagram accounts, I quickly came across Pushpa Maai's account.
[22] Emily J. H. Contois and Zenia Kish, "Food Instagram: Identity, Influence, and Negotiation," November 10, 2022, in *New Books Network: Sociology,* edited by Marshall Poe, podcast, 49:50, https://newbooksnetwork.com/food-instagram-2. Contois and Kish discuss the ways we should take seriously the medium and technology of Instagram as a part of material culture.
[23] We read Richard H. Davis's *Lives of Indian Images,* Justin Thomas McDaniel's *Architects of Buddhist Leisure,* and Colleen McDaniel's *Material Christianity.*

turn manuscript pages in an archive, or look closely at intricate designs on a statue or in a religious space.

This thesis is organized into six chapters with this chapter, "Introduction," providing my overarching questions driving my analyses with digital, hijra spaces. I focus on three relatively well-known hijras throughout the contemporary Indian hijra/transgender culture—Laxminarayan Tripathi, Abhina Aher, and Pushpa Maai—to argue that we should *attend* to these images as serious sites of performances, an analytical approach that helps to unpack various identity structures that are enabled through participation with these digital images.[24] As I have unraveled within this introduction, I rely on these well-known hijras to offer a snapshot into the kinds of larger hijra digital performances that take place within social media spaces.[25] These three hijras represent a small sample of the other hijra accounts on Instagram, but I believe and hope that through my analyses of their Instagram performances, I will offer a glimmer of insight into the ways we can begin to attend to contemporary hijra spaces online.[26] In other words, these three hijras' Instagram accounts, but more specifically, the five total pieces of media that I analyze, operate as minute, yet

[24] I use the term "serious" to encourage scholars to participate in more research regarding the visual culture of hijras on or off Instagram. Almost, if not every, piece of research has placed hijras and their performances within the nexus of *badhai*, which typically occurs in-person and at various events.
[25] See footnote 7.
[26] I do not know an exact amount of "hijra" accounts on Instagram, but I follow between 10 and 20 "hijra" or "hijra-adjacent" Instagram pages. By "adjacent," I am referring to individuals that do use the term "hijra" to identify with on their Instagram ("transgender" and "trans" are the most popularly used) but have connections with and origins from hijra sociality. Moreover, I was informed in the latter period of this research that I needed IRB approval to include and analyze the other less well-known hijra accounts for this thesis, and given the time constraints of my program, I was unable to move through the IRB process and conduct productive and meaningful research. I was informed that I do not need IRB approval to analyze Tripathi, Aher, or Maai's Instagram accounts because they are well-known and popular figures whose Instagram accounts have open access to the general public.

productive, engaging, and exploratory nodes into larger, future digital analyses on hijras within social media spaces. This thesis offers one way of thinking through and about hijra digital performativity and does not aim to assert an overarching and totalizing argument about how all hijras use social media.

Following my argument, I explain the choices I made in the circulation of certain images in this thesis, and from there, I move into chapter one, which is my literature review and limitations for this research. Chapter two, "Performance, Photography & Representation," explores the theoretical contribution that this thesis builds upon and contributes to regarding contemporary hijra performances online and through visual media. I guide us through how understanding these hijras' pictorial spaces as indexes of performances operate in uneven and opaque ways. While my work undoubtedly contributes to how contemporary South Asian gender and sexuality are visually expressed in the digital sphere, I would be remiss to not discuss the *how* in the ways we can see these images as sites of performances. To date, there has not been an in-depth study of the ways in which hijras use the image—either taken of/by themselves, as is the case with the examples I discuss in this thesis, or how hijras take images of others—as a tool for articulating their selves. This thesis simultaneously fills in and further divides this gap.

Chapters three, four, and five all follow similar narrative structures insofar as I zoom in on two visual performances from Aher and Tripathi, and one image uploaded by Maai. I bring in a collective of five images by Aher, Tripathi, and Maai that are from different months and years (spanning from 2019 to 2022) as a way to demonstrate the inconsistent

themes, layers, and textures that appear within their digital performances. In other words, to analyze and move through these images and videos through the category of performance requires us to stay alert to the unevenness, opacity, and differences that take place between each image. I begin my analysis in September 2019, the time I started my research with hijras' Instagram accounts, and continue into the present. Each photo is a different performance that offers simultaneous conflicting, uneven, and imagined spaces for unpacking the ways hijras move through and embody the digital spaces. For Aher, who I discuss first, I analyze two photos—one posted on September 21, 2019 and the other posted September 15, 2020. With Tripathi, I bring in two images of her—one from September 7, 2019 and the other on January 16, 2020. And finally, I conclude my analyses with one image, posted on October 4, 2020, from Maai's Instagram account.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Who *are* hijras, and *why* did I invite us to attend to an online hijra performance at the beginning of this essay? It is here that I want to start my literature review: that is, I find it pertinent to emphasize that the lives of hijras exist within the incessantly reductive and porous margins of academic theorizing, a discourse that I admit this thesis struggles to move out of. And while this research tries to reveal the ways Indian hijras themselves fashion and move their bodies through their Instagram accounts, I cannot ignore the real colonial and oppressive histories that have shaped scholarship about Indian hijras. As Kareem Khubchandani, a queer and performance theorist, points out concerning hijras: *"hijra* narratives are ubiquitous, perhaps to the point of *fetishization*" [italics mine].[27] Within my analyses, I try to not create or sustain fetishization of hijras by giving and allowing the images space to make their own meanings. And this is indeed true, especially in Western, academic spaces that constantly attempt to locate and define hijras within Orientalist, East vs. West, colonial, and essentializing domains. We see this within traditional anthropological literature on hijras, such as Serena Nanda's 1999 *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India* and even within her 2014 *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations.* For example, Nanda places hijras, based on her fieldwork in Bastipore, Gujarat, and Mumbai, within the frameworks of "third-sex," "ritual performers," "neither men nor women," and as ascetics

[27] Kareem Khubchandani, "Staging Transgender Solidarities at Bangalore's Queer Pride," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (November 2014): 518, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2815210.

who renounce their sexuality.[28] This "third-sex" category that Nanda places hijras' sexualities and genders within creates yet another us vs. them discourse, exoticizes Indian hijras, and relegates them to a primordial location.[29] Contrarily, Gayatri Reddy, in her fruitful 2005 ethnography, *With Respect to Sex,* challenges Nanda's essentializing analyses as she argues that we must move beyond exclusively marking hijra narratives within reductive domains of sexuality. Reddy begins to recognize the intersectional axes of kinship, religion, sexuality, aesthetics, and *izzat* [respect/honor] that hijras navigate within and through.[30] Reddy's work, contrary to Nanda's research, shows how hijras operate within their own ontological categories of gender, sexuality, and identity. For example, Reddy explains that hijra identities subsume within the broader *koti* paradigm, and their status as, for example a *kandra hijra* or *zenana,* depends on various axes, such as religion or occupation.[31]

Regardless of these differences, both Nanda's and Reddy's works productively highlight the ways hijras actively use and engage with their bodies as sites for gender, sexual, religious, and occupational performances. Both Nanda and Reddy discuss hijras' *badhai* [blessing of newborn babies or newlyweds] performances, *nirvan* [genital excision] operations, and other performative strategies that produce specific gendered and sexual

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[28] Serena Nanda, *Neither Man Nor Woman* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), xix-xx, 5, 9-10. Asceticism continues to play an important role for hijra sociality as Vaibhav Saria points out in the introduction of their 2021 monograph, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India*; however, asceticism does not totally encompass hijra imaginaries or lives.

[29] Evan B. Towle and Lynn M. Morgan, "Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the Use of the 'Third Gender' Concept," *GLQ* 8, no. 4 (2002): 477.

[30] Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15-16, 32.

[31] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex,* Chapter 2. Reddy provides a chart of the various identities used within the *koti* (or *kothi*) cartography. As one of her interlocuters notes, "All kotis belong to one family, but we are also each of us different at the same time."

constructions. We see within their foundational works on hijras how hijras aestheticize, stylize, and manipulate their bodies for various economic, religious, and material reasons. In Ina Goel's recent work on hijras in Delhi, she further expands on the importance of hijra bodies within their communities. She argues that hijra bodies represent a socially constructed arena within their communities and shows—through their kinship structures, choices to take hormones to alter their bodies, or undergoing the *nirvan* operation—the specific instances in how their bodies shift.[32] Through this, Goel's work reveals the complexities found between and within hijra groups to contribute to the understanding of hijra bodies as socially ephemeral and in flux. In other words, hijra communities, identities, and bodies are not static but rather evolving and heterogenous.

While both Nanda's and Reddy's ethnographic works have pioneered the anthropological literature on hijras living in India, the most recent and invaluable work by Vaibhav Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India,* follows the everyday lives and movements of hijras living in rural areas in Odisha, India between 2008 and 2019. Saria reveals the "laughter, kinship, struggles, and desires" of hijras living and moving through public and private spaces—in domestic spaces, along highways, in markets, at Sufi shrines, and so forth—in a way that, as Saria hopes to accomplish, places the often-assumed hijra marginality into focus.[33] Following Saria's move to "dispute the readings of

[32] Ina Goel, "Hijra Communities of Delhi," *Sexualities* 19, nos. 5-6 (2016): 538-540, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1363460715616946.
[33] Vaibhav Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 7, 20.

marginality ascribed to hijras," the hijras brought into focus in this thesis also upend the discourse that their communities only live on and in the social and geographical margins.[34] In other words, Tripathi, Aher, and Maai's use of social media to upload Instagram images and videos highlights their visibility in popularly used and documented spaces.

While Nanda, Reddy, and Goel highlight the nuanced ways hijras inhabit their bodies and articulate their identities through gender, sexual, and material negotiations within their networks, hijras and their bodies have nevertheless been indexed under medical, legal, and colonial gazes.[35] These institutional gazes do not try to advance an understanding of hijra complexities but rather try to minimize and regulate their worlds. For example, Jessica Hinchy's compelling history of the relationships between hijras and the British officials in India, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra,* reveals through a thorough analysis of police records, communications between British officers, and legal cases, that British colonials viewed hijras as ungovernable and polluted because of their public performances, such as *badhai*, bodily aesthetics, and effeminacies.[36] Consequently, the British produced their own (and very much ongoing) colonial epistemologies and stereotypes about hijras as child kidnappers and abusers.[37] Within certain hijra Instagram pages, I have noticed that hijras might pose in overtly sexual, authoritative, and exaggeratedly feminine ways. While I do not analyze these specific accounts within this essay, I surmise that these

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Goel, "Hijra Communities of Delhi," 543.
[36] Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 44, 61-63.
[37] Ibid., 71-75.

performances are forms of resistances and (re)fashionings of hijra bodies to these colonial subjugations that Hinchy discusses. Bodies—queer, marginalized, subaltern bodies—remain at the center of medical, religious, and legal gazes.

Visual performance theories, which I explore in more depth in chapter two, are the building blocks of this research as I analyze hijra digital spaces as visual performatives that articulate dimensions of gender, sexuality, religion, and class, among other identity structures. At the onset of this research, I relied on and drew from influential scholars, such as Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, J.L. Austin, Judith Butler, and their thinkings about our movements, languages, and actions.[38] For example, while Turner's seminal work *From Ritual to Theatre* primarily unpacks the ways anthropologists can begin to categorize the kinds of "social dramas"—the conflicts, divides, flows, and movements—found through the "social actions," rituals, and processes in various societies, Turner's point that "everyday life is intrinsically connected with acting and vice versa" helps me think through hijras' performances and visual expressions on Instagram.[39] What can the curated visual performances that the hijras in this thesis participate in reveal about their lived realities? Conversely, how can these hijras' lived realities inform and influence their digital performances? Turner's work with theatre, acting, and their relationships to social dramas

[38] My initial reliance on these white, Eurocentric scholars unequivocally stems from the privileging of white and Western based voices in academic spaces and research. For example, in an undergraduate course on theories and methods in the field of religious studies, we used Daniel Pals' *Introducing Religion: Readings From the Classic Theorists* as a foundational text in which all chapters were excerpts from white, Western theorists, like Clifford Geertz or Max Weber. No Black, Brown, queer, or non-European born authors were included.

[39] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 65, 69, 113.

within societies lays groundwork for future work with performativity, as originating with J.L. Austin and his analysis of the ways words *do* something.[40] In Schechner's most recent *Performance Theories: An Introduction,* he maps the ways performativity, as an episteme that originated from linguistics, sutures with postmodern thinkings that can complicate how we unpack performativity through different performances, arts, movements, and speech acts.[41] As I attend to the hijra performances that reveal the ways performativity takes shape through the image, this research follows Schechner's observations that a performative "may be something difficult to pin down—a 'concept' (as in conceptual art), the 'idea of' performance suffusing an act or activity."[42]

My research also pays tribute and follows the recent works by Brian Horton and Harshita Mruthinti Kamath, scholars whose research lie at the intersections of queer, postcolonial, and performance theories in relation to South Asian marginalized bodies. Anthropologist Brian Horton focuses on how hijras, and other queer individuals, have fun through performances within contemporary spaces, like Mumbai Pride parades, to challenge the ontological *and* hegemonic views about marginalized individuals in India.[43] Within his broader ethnographic work, Horton shows that hijras physically embody and perform within spaces—public spaces that are regulated, controlled, and sanitized through legal

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[40] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction,* 4th edition (New York: Routledge, 2020), 231-232. As with most Instagram images, these hijra images are captioned, ultimately constructing a type of meaning to the visual that is either explicit or implied.
[41] Ibid., 251, 273.
[42] Ibid., 273.
[43] Brian Horton, "Fashioning Fabulation: Dress, Gesture and the Queer Aesthetics of Mumbai Pride," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 2 (2020): 297, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2020.1716288.

institutions—through their excessive clothing, speech, and movements. He argues that we need to see hijras as fabulous subjects, as doing and practicing fabulous kinds of work, and as agentic individuals.[44] Horton's work encourages us to think about the other, alternative ways to imagine hijra performances as not solely bound to academic, legal, or epidemiological discourses. Instead, Horton urges us to understand these performances as ones that can exceed regulation and control from these institutions. Horton's work is pivotal to deconstructing the dominant academic narratives about hijras as "third-sexed" or "neither men nor women" within scholarship through its attention to the nuanced ways hijras actively use their bodies as sites of contestation and resistance.

Harshita Mruthinti Kamath's *Impersonations: The Artifice of Brahmin Masculinity in South Indian Dance* has provided a foundation for unpacking the ways in which "impersonation," or "the practice of donning a gender *vesam* (guise) either onstage or in everyday life. . .[and which can be] expanded to indicate the temporary assumption of an identity or guise of a group which is not inherently one's own, regardless of whether this assumption is an intentional or deliberate act," fuels my close readings of these hijra visual performances, specifically the performance of Tripathi where she is, as I argue, using impersonation of a goddess to perform nationalism and reclaim hijra spaces.[45] Moreover, in *Mimetic Desires: Impersonation and Guising Across South Asia,* editors Harshita Mruthinti Kamath and Pamela Lothspeich have brought together various scholars to discuss the ways the categories of "impersonation" and "guising" translate and oscillate between various performative contexts,

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[44] Ibid., 297-98.

[45] Harshita Kamath, *Impersonations: The Artifice of Brahmin Masculinity in South Indian Dance* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 6. Though Kamath's rich ethnography focuses on South Indian cis-gendered Brahmin men who impersonate as

such as that of male actors portraying and mimicking *khwaja siras* in media.[46] Kamath's work on and with performance theories in contemporary South Asian contexts has helped me think through the ways to articulate some of the performance politics that show up in hijra Instagram images.

My work also largely builds upon and contributes to the newer South Asian queer digital studies within academic scholarship. Rohit K. Dasgupta and Debanuj DasGupta have largely documented the ways queer, Indian individuals and communities use and engage with social media. Their multi-authored work, *Queering Digital India: Activisms, Identities, Subjectivities* is a compilation of nine essays that reflect on how queer, Indian bodies intersect with other axes of power, such as class, caste, sexuality, gender, nation, and on social media sites, such as Facebook or Instagram. However, just as Rohit and Debanuj Dasgupta, along with other scholars, such as Aniruddha Dutta, in their roundtable discussion, point out, very little knowledge about hijras/kotis and their participation with social media exists. My research on hijra communities online continues to contribute to bridging this digital divide gap between Indian urban and rural queer populations.[47]

Finally, there are five hijra autobiographies that have helped ground certain epistemologies about hijra positionalities within contemporary and localized spaces and places in India: Laxminarayan Tripathi's *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* and her *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi,* Living Smile Vidya's *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey,* A. Revathi's *The*

[46] Harshita Mruthinti Kamath and Pamela Lothspeich, eds, *Mimetic Desires: Impersonation and Guising Across South Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022), 2-4, 14.
[47] See note 4.

Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story, and finally, Rama Pandey's autobiographical play, *Lallan Miss.*[48] Although I do not include all these writings in my thesis, they very much so have enriched and balanced my knowledge about hijra lives. These works do not represent the whole of hijra literature within contemporary and historical India, obviously, but they do provide glimpses into the social worlds of hijras, which helps to contextualize my own research with digital hijra spaces.

So, yes, hijras do occupy the multiple gender categories, as claimed by early anthropologists, *in some ways*, and yes, hijras are a group of gender non-conforming individuals who perform for various audiences on different occasions *sometimes,* but I invite us to begin to resist employing these categories as we approach hijra worlds on Instagram. What can we learn from hijras who do not use the term "hijra" on their Instagram accounts? What does it mean when hijras perform and visualize themselves in ways that do not subscribe to conventional understandings of them as "ritual performers?" How do these performances disrupt common narratives about hijras in contemporary India? What do these Instagram images reveal and obscure about hijra culture? And finally, what do these digital, hijra performances teach us about the ways South Asian gender and sexuality can be expressed online? I do not intend to create an overarching homogenous understanding of hijras in digital spaces through my analysis of Aher, Tripathi, and Maii's Instagram media. Rather, I want to bring into focus, or move from the margins to the center, the ways hijras

occupy the digital space. Vaibhav Saria argues in the first chapter of their monograph, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India,* that "hijras, fare from being on the outskirts of society, through their offerings of sexual pedagogy actually reveal to us the dynamics of entering and belonging in the social world."[49] I want to extend Saria's previous comment by asking what does it look like to *sit with* an Instagram image of a hijra by a hijra rather than just scroll past it? How do hijras invite us to think through and within *their* worlds by using Instagram media? This thesis invites us to participate in hijra worldmaking through their visual epistemologies.

[49] Vaibhav Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers,* 20. Saria is primarily referring to the ways the hijras they engaged with in Odisha move between domestic and ascetic realms. They state that "the forms of life that hijras inhabit, I argue, in various ways lie both within the larger Hindu and Muslim university of sociality and outside it—a posture I describe as being diagonal to that world." This directionality of entering, exiting, moving within, and outside of the world is an apt way of understanding hijra presences in digital spaces.

CHAPTER 2: PHOTOGRAPHY & PERFORMANCE

In an interview with *Mint Lounge*, a lifestyle magazine that includes stories about fashion, art, photography, and food, among other topics, which is based in India, Pushpamala N., a photographer, curator, and artist from South India, states:

> I am questioning what photography is. You won't usually find installations in a photography show, but you will find many at the biennale. There are performance works, political and activist works, and photo essays as well. But all the works use the photographic medium—there are documentary series and portraits and some video works based mainly on still images. I start with the photograph.[50]

Though Pushpamala N. is primarily discussing her curatorial work and the ways she approaches the selection process for which pieces to include, I find Pushpamala N.'s equivocal representation of photography as an endless practice, performance, and art form compelling. As Pushpamala N. continues to state, "The notion of what photography is has come a long way—medical imaging is photography, as is surveillance and the selfie."[51] In many ways similar to Pushpamala N.'s sentiments, the media I bring into focus with this project further question photographic practices as a medium, art form, and representational activity. What is taking shape, form, and understanding when viewing hijra Instagram images? Should we approach these images as not just lifeless and unanimated but rather as evolving, complex, and agentic? And contrarily, how and in what ways do these images approach us? As I argue in this thesis, the Instagram images posted by Aher, Tripathi, and Maai do not merely exist as still images but operate as sites of performances from which we can gather a richer understanding of

[50] Benita Fernando, "I start with the photograph: Pushpamala N.," *Mint Lounge,* February 17, 2019, https://lifestyle.livemint.com/news/talking-point/i-start-with-the-photograph-pushpamala-n-111641649047229.html.
[51] Ibid.

contemporary hijra culture and their expressions of gender, sexuality, temporalities, and visibility politics, among other identity structures, in digital spheres.

In this section, I want to help contextualize the *how* in how we can understand and arrive at these Instagram images as larger sites of performances. How can we go from passively observing these Instagram images, and in turn, viewing them as presumed lifeless pictures, to recognizing their performative qualities? This chapter will demonstrate the theoretical foundations from which we can better read and interact with these Instagram images. In so doing, I will provide a brief historical sketch of the colonial photographic practices in India to help establish a foundation of the colonial relationship to photography in India for readers. Although this thesis does not try to suggest that the hijras deploy new photographic practices that challenge or attempt to upend colonial ones, it is essential that I acknowledge the impact of colonial technologies and their visualizations of non-Western communities. Although my larger argument in this thesis is that these images operate as uneven sites of performances from and by contemporary hijra bodies, I also imply that we need to understand these images and performances as peripheral sites of resistances to the colonial technologies of photography and media that have surveilled, regulated, and categorized Indian communities. Following this, I will move into a discussion of the theoretical ways that we can move from viewing an image as a still medium to a performance.

The practice and profession of photography entered the Indian subcontinent in 1840, and ever since then, it has flourished as a burgeoning career, art, and praxis that has consumed colonial and orientalist imaginations. From cataloguing and visualizing the Indian landscape along with the various village communities that inhabit India to visually documenting historical sites, British officials, along with upper-elite Indians, used photography to categorize, racialize,

and exoticize India and its various peoples.[52] For example, in the introduction to the multi-authored volume, *Photography in India: From Archives to Contemporary Practice,* Aileen Blaney notes that:

> Very often, the ethnographer's camera would be used in conjunction with anthropometric accoutrements: in the 1890s, at Port Blair, an Extra Assistant Superintendent commissioned by the British Museum shot the Andamanese against chequered backdrops for the purpose of producing comparative sets of visual measurements, while calipers were frequently used by amateur and professional photographers working for the British Raj. . .to measure the heads of their sitters; all of these activities alike, performed in the name of 'science' and undergirded by racist ideologies, were mobilized to break the population down into essentialized types corresponding to categories of case, tribe and profession...Frequent traffic in photographic images. . .between India, Europe and the United States, ensured the transnational dissemination and perpetuation of certain visual stereotypes of Indian people.[53]

Since the advent of photographic practices in India during the nineteenth century, and even up to today, colonial officials and elite, upper-class Indian communities used the camera and the power of its image to surveil, classify, categorize, document, and identify varying Indian populations. As Blaney reveals, they engaged the camera through the politics and language of science to reduce groups of individuals into reductive categories. From this, colonial officials trafficked stereotypes within and across nation-states regarding Indian individuals and communities. As Christopher Pinney notes, "The state mobilized photography in its attempt to have knowledge over, and control of, diverse and mobile urban workforces, and the power relations constructed through this process came to invest photography with an authority that

[52] Aileen Blaney and Chinar Shah, eds, *Photography in India: From Archives to Contemporary Practice* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 2-3.
[53] Ibid., 3.

could not be reduced to its technical and semiotic properties."[54] The use of photography, especially through the structure and form of portraiture, in colonial India aided in the exoticization and governance of communities for the interest of British coloniality and regulation.[55]

While the hijras in this thesis were most likely photographed by another individual (versus using a tripod or selfie-stick), they nevertheless decided to pose for the camera—made evident as none of these images appear candid—and to subsequently upload their pictures to Instagram. In other words, they made an arguably agentic choice in representing and visualizing their subjectivities and bodies in a digital space compared to merely functioning as objects for colonial interests and fetishization. I make this point to articulate that these hijras have decided to present themselves in constructed, stylized, and self-directed fashions (whether conscious of these decisions or not) that evoke themes, histories, affects, and cultural lexicons from which I extrapolate, analyze, and place in conversation with the academic literature on hijras. I try not to replicate imperial and colonial gazes and stereotypes while participating in these visual expressions; however, I am keenly aware of the imbalances that exist between my perceptions as a spectator and audience member to these hijras' positionalities.[56] With this said, Charan Singh, a photographer of contemporary hijras in New Delhi, India, best conveys my point by stating that, "Given the imposition of the imperial eye in the history of Indian photography. . .I strove to maintain a faithful commitment to the sitter's live[d] experience and to establish a sense of

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[54] Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 23.
[55] Ibid., 24.
[56] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Canada: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1981), 9-16. I borrow the term "spectator" from Barthe's understanding of it insofar as I am cognizant of the dialogical and immersive relationships between these Instagram photographs and myself.

poignancy while avoiding the temptation to glamorize."[57] Singh's comment complements my general stance while reading, analyzing, and attending to the images of the hijras in this thesis; however, Singh did the work of photographing the hijras he worked with—by curating a space and narrative structure for various poses, performances, and gestures to take place—while I did not. To put it more simply, the hijra images in this thesis did the bulk of the work for the fruition of this thesis' themes in which I participated by helping to extract elements of their performances. Through their performances, I can extrapolate and interpret various themes while keeping open their ever-evolving meanings. This dialogical relationship between the image, myself, and back to the image is ultimately imperative for understanding how we can attend to these images as sites of performances and not just as static, atemporal, and unagentic photographs.

To better unpack this back-and-forth relationship between myself and these Instagram images, I draw from performance theorist Philip Auslander, a contemporary performance theorist, who has influenced my understanding of images as performances. Philip Auslander's theoretical intervention into thinking through the ways photographs and images operate as performances in and of themselves serves as the foundation from which I conceptualize the hijra Instagram images as sites of performances. In his 2006 article, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," Auslander provides two interrelated categories—the documentary and the theatrical—that have historically constituted "performance documentation," which is generally understood as the capturing of an event that "provides both a record of it through

[57] Charan Sing, "Photographic Rehearsal: A Still-Unfolding Narrative," *Trans Asia Photography* 11, no. 1 (2021). https://doi-org.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/10.1215/215820251_11-1-105. I am not a photographer and did not capture the images of these hijras, but I am replicating them in this thesis and providing analysis of them for my readers. As such, I, as a spectator and audience member to these Instagram performances, strive to not fetishize, glamorize, and objectify these images but am also aware that this project cannot fully liberate itself from such gazes.

which it can be reconstructed."[58] Auslander elucidates on the documentary category to explain it as a traditional mode of thought that presumes an "ontological relationship between performance and document."[59] In other words, for Auslander, to think and practice through and with the documentary category generally means to understand the performance of the event as preceding the documentation, or capturing, of it.[60] The photograph simply captures a performance that took place prior to the recording of it and from which the performance then legitimizes and authorizes the documentation of it.

Alternatively, Auslander describes the theatrical category as one that includes "cases in which performances were staged solely to be photographed or filmed and had no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences. The space of the document (whether visual or audiovisual) thus *becomes* the only space in which the performance occurs [italics mine]."[61] Auslander positions photographic events within the theatrical category when they were not performed prior to the camera's participation but rather only *for* the camera. Ultimately, the documentation, or the image of the act, *is* the performance. The medium of the image functions as the performance versus the performance ontologically taking place before its recording. Auslander draws upon various artists, such as Gregory Crewdson and Cindy Sherman, to make his point clearer regarding the ways that the category of theatricality shows up in photographic practices and through their various mediums.[62]

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[58] Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (September 2006): 1.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., 2.
[62] Gregory Crewdson and Cindy Sherman are two contemporary, Western artists whose works play with cinematic expressions of the image as a performance. Crewdson is known for his work exploring neighborhoods and suburban spaces in America while Sherman's art focuses on herself in the form of self-portraits.

Auslander, through his exploration of both the theatrical and documentary categories in performance documentation, ultimately aims to muddle these two categories to demonstrate the ways they intersect and work in tandem with one another. For example, Auslander uses a photographic performance piece by Vito Acconci, entitled *Photo-Piece,* to show the interrelations of both categories. On the one hand, Auslander aims to reveal that Acconci's work "serve[s] the traditional functions of performance documentation [as it] provide[s] evidence that he actually performed the piece and allow[s] us to reconstruct his performance."[63] On the other hand, Auslander demonstrates how Acconci's performance art follows the cartographies of the theatrical category insofar as his work "was not available to an audience in any form apart from its documentation. . .[and that] it is only through his documentation that his performance exists *qua* performance."[64] By muddying these categories, Auslander primarily encourages us to arrive at an image as the performance itself in which "*the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such* [italics in original]."[65] In the same way that Auslander asks us to take images' performative and theatrical qualities seriously, I also read the images in this thesis as performances in and through their visual mediums.

Before I proceed to discuss the hijras' Instagram images and how they operate as performances, I want to briefly bring into dialogue a contemporary, Indian artist whose art practices align with Auslander's conception of approaching the photographic medium as a performance per se. I pivot to this artist to not only demonstrate the praxes of taking an image's medium as a performance but also to show the transnational flows of these concerns. In their

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[63] Ibid., 4.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 5. Auslander draws from J. L. Austin's infamous theory of performativity as it relates to language to construct his understanding of performance documentation as performatives. He states, "I am suggesting that performance documents are not analogous to constatives, but to performatives. . . Documentation does not simply generate image/statements that describe an autonomous performance and state that it occurred: it produces an event as a performance. . ."

multi-authored work, *Motherland: Pushpamala N.'s Woman and Nation,* editors Monica Juneja and Sumathi Ramaswamy explore the performance art of Pushpamala N., who I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, to unearth the ways in which the "nation-state can be made visible and palpable."[66] Juneja and Ramaswamy frame Pushpamala N.'s work as a photo-performance, which generally parallels with Auslander's understanding of performance documentation as encompassing both the traditional and theatrical elements. They state that

> the term photo-performance describes not an embodied performance of the artist, but a work that takes as its point of origin either a pre-existing photograph or even a pre-existing image-type, which Pushpamala then 'performs,' restaging and remediating it. . . .Once photographed, the performative body of the artist becomes a still image as well as a new one, ready to join the stream of circulating images.[67]

Juneja and Ramaswamy's use of "photo-performance" generally intersects with Auslander's undertaking of performance documentation insofar as the concluding still image functions as the performance for viewers. However, contrary to Auslander's articulation of performance documentation as a performative, Pushpamala N.'s photo-performances typically draw on and from pre-existing stories, events, or images. Regardless of this, however, what remains at the core of both Auslander's insight into performance documentation and Pushpamala N.'s photo-performance is that performances can originate and actualize through the medium of the still image. Karin Zitzewitz comments in her chapter in *Motherland*, "What's in a Medium: Photo-Performance as Feminist Practice," that "Pushpamala began her performance-based work at a moment in which ideas about the medium were profoundly shaped by the work of Judith Butler. . .held static, both photographs of performance and photo-performances expose even more clearly

[66] Monica Juneja and Sumathi Ramaswamy, eds., *Motherland: Pushpamala N.'s Woman and Nation* (India: Pramod Kapoor, 2022), 10.
[67] Ibid.

how the artist has placed herself in the role she inhabits. . . ."[68] The still, photographic medium creates and sustains the performance from which we can simultaneously arrive at the "document as an indexical access point to a past event" and perceive "the document itself *as a performance* that directly reflects an artist's aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we are the present audience."[69]

Taking Auslander's considerations regarding the photograph *as* the performance itself rather than only a visual reflection of what happened, along with Pushpamala N.'s photo-performances, seriously, I approach the hijra Instagram images in this thesis as digital photographs cum performances. While looking at the images, Aher, Tripathi, and Maai appear in poses—whether they are sitting, standing, or resting—that suggest they are performing *for* and *with* the camera rather than just being captured *by* the camera. Although it is possible that they could have participated in a live performance in their physical spaces for an audience in which the camera documented them, I doubt this given their corporeal relationships, such as through their gazes and postures, to the camera. The digital images come across as intentional with Instagram users, such as me, as their imagined audience members. I was not present during the capturing of these images, so I am unaware of what happened before or after the production of the photograph. The only time(s) I and these images came into contact with one another is through the digital, photographic medium (also the screen from which I view these images) whenever I opened Instagram on my phone or computer. It is thus through the medium of these images that I witness and participate in these hijra performances. With this, I contend that all

[68] Ibid., 39. Zitzewits primarily draws from Amelia Jones' highly influential and seminal 1998 work *BodyArt/Performing the Subject* to continue demonstrating the ways that the photographic medium is significant in effecting a performance.
[69] Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," 9.

three hijras' Instagram photos function as sites of performances in which I am an audience member who constructs meaning, interpretation, and various feelings upon my participation.

CHAPTER 3: ABHINA AHER

"I just wanted to become a beautiful butterfly"
Abhina Aher[70]

Social activist and co-founder of TWEET (Transgender Welfare Equity and Empowerment Trust) Foundation, an Indian NGO (nongovernment organization) that focuses on equipping contemporary transgender individuals with the skills and resources to "build [an] empowered, self-sufficient, and vibrant Trans movement in India," Abhina Aher has certainly spread her wings to create a changing and revolutionary transgender movement in India.[71] Growing up in Mumbai, India in a middle-class family, and after completing college and participating in a respectable STEM career, Aher decided to join a group of hijras as her "urge to become a woman was getting stronger."[72] Following her journey into and through hijra sociality, Aher also decided to form a dancing group, known as "The Dancing Queens," consisting of various hijra and queer individuals and which roots itself in Mumbai, India.[73] From Aher's NGO work at TWEET, participation and identification with hijra spaces, the forming of "The Dancing Queens" performance group, and her zealous dedication to bettering marginalized communities' lives in India, Aher has sustained a name for herself within India.

Like Laxminarayan Tripathi and Pushpa Maai, who we will discuss in the subsequent chapters, Aher is socio-politically invested in negotiating, perpetuating, and grounding hijra, queer, and transgender rights in contemporary India; however, unlike Tripathi (and even Maai)

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[70] McCarthy, Julie, "A Journey Of Pain And Beauty: On Becoming Transgender in India," *All Things Considered: NPR.* National Public Radio, April 2014, https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/04/18/304548675/a-journey-of-pain-and-beauty-on-becoming-transgender-in-india.
[71] "About TWEET," TWEET Foundation: Transgender Welfare Equity & Empowerment Trust, https://tweetindia.org/mission/.
[72] "A Journey Of Pain And Beauty: On Becoming Transgender in India."
[73] See Jeff Roy's article, "The 'Dancing Queens': Negotiating Hijra Pehchan from India's Streets onto the Global Stage," for a more in-depth analysis of the group's performances and the ways in which *pehchan,* or identity, circulates throughout their performances.

who primarily employs the term "kinnar"—a term that many contemporary hijra activists use and leverage in political and non-political spaces to legitimize their presences given its roots in Hindu mythologies, such as the Ramayana—Aher often deploys the terms "trans" and "transgender" to articulate her heterogenous identity as a hijra.[74] Aher accomplishes this renaming by including "trans" and "transgender" in various parts of her Instagram page, such as her Instagram username, Instagram biographic section, and further includes it in captions and as hashtags. Out of the 2,183 posts that Aher has included on her Instagram, less than a quarter include the term "hijra." The languages of "trans" and "transgender" circulate throughout Aher's Instagram page in which she attempts to ultimately situate and position herself within the larger politics of visibility, respectability politics, and translation. Vaibhav Saria notes, "Indeed, hijras and trans women do not have a simple corresponding relationship; the stakes for trans women to consider themselves hijras are different from hijras considering themselves as trans women."[75]

In this chapter, I visually participate in two Instagram images posted by Aher to draw out the ways language, aesthetics, and the positioning of her body articulate the complex understandings of hijra representations in digital spaces. Both images were posted in September 2020 and showcase the kinds of themes and expressions found within other images on Aher's Instagram page. As I extrapolate from the first image of Aher, including the term "trans" in her username points to the larger performatives of language in digital spaces and ultimately reveals the ways Instagram users can attempt to frame and lock in visual narratives for attendees. Meanwhile, in the second image, I focus on Aher's corporeal presence, gaze, and her standing pose to make connections and contrasts to both her and my relationships to coloniality. Similar to the beautiful butterfly—a species that uses its multicolored, complex, and divided wings to

[74] Vaibhav Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers,* 4.
[75] Ibid.

flutter with, through, and at times, against the winds—that Aher desired to develop into since her childhood, I aim for this chapter to reveal the complex and layered ways that one specific hijra moves through the digital world.

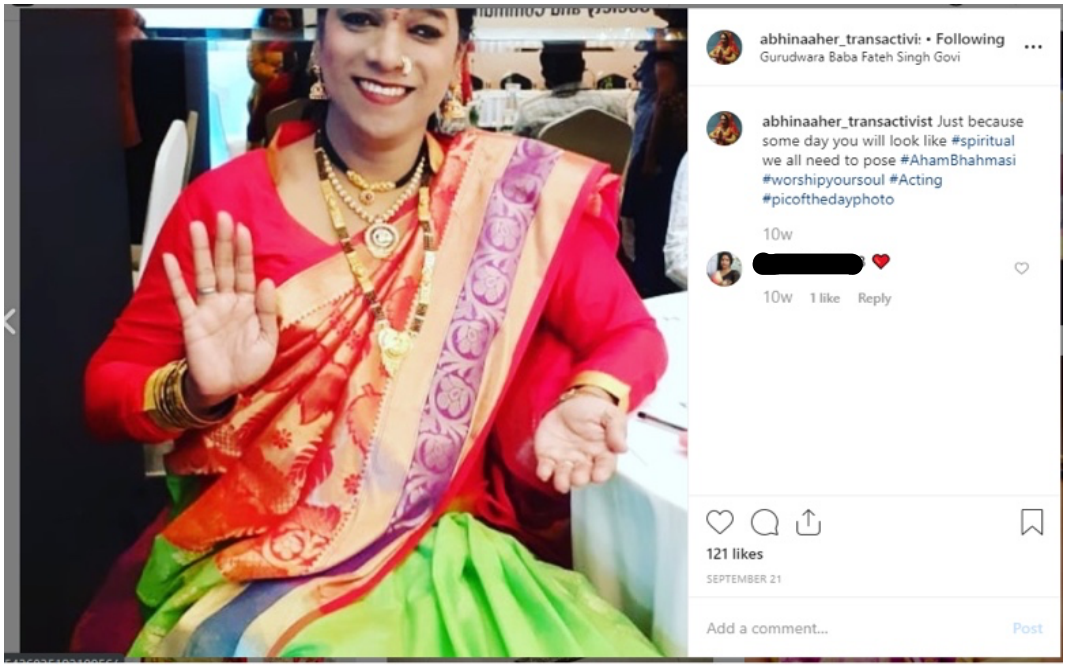

Figure 1: Abhina Aher, Instagram Post, September 21, 2019

On September 21, 2019, Abhina Aher, an Indian hijra *and* transgender-activist, posts an Instagram image of herself sitting adjacent to a table that is draped in a white tablecloth with her left elbow resting, arm pointed straight out, and left palm turned upward.[76] I intentionally join the two categories of "transgender" and "activist" with a hyphen when discussing Aher not as a way to deploy the identity category transgender as a totalizing structure for localized South Asian terms for gender variant individuals but because her Instagram username—abhinaaher_transactivist—positions and condenses these two terms. In the latter half of her username, after the underscore, Aher connects "transactivist" together in a condensed and shorthanded way to orient users arriving to her Instagram page. Moreover, using the category of

[76] Abhina Aher, Instagram Post, September 21, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B2qU1RYnS5Q/.

"trans," a Western identity structure that is often collided with and, at times, engulfing of the localized South Asian identity of "hijra," and activist together in the username harkens to the "universalization of transgender as a transnational umbrella term."[77] That is, as Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy point out in their conversation about the circulation of transgender as an identity category, "Transgender has emerged as a prominent category in the Indian LGBTIQ movement and development sector relatively recently, roughly around the 2000s."[78] As a result, Aher's use of transgender in her username points to larger discussions and performatives regarding the discourse of transgender and its abilities to subsume, erase, and displace various local regional terms, like hijra or kothi—dialogues taken up by scholar-activists like Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy.[79]

Yet while the category of transgender is a recently employed one in contemporary Indian hijra communities, especially within NGO (nongovernmental organizations) spaces that focus on LGBTQ+ and HIV/AIDS discourses, Aher's Instagram name, with the merging of "trans" and "activist" together point to the larger respectability politics that take shape within hijra and transgender spaces.[80] In Liz Mount's instrumental article, "'I am not a Hijra:' Class, Respectability, and the Emergence of the 'New' Transgender Woman in India," Mount demonstrates the ways that transgender identifying women in Bangalore, Karnataka fold themselves within larger visibility and respectability politics that continue to situate hijras in stigmatized, less respectable, and lower social spaces.[81] Through interviews and observations of

[77] Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India: Some Reflections," *TSQ* 1, no. 3 (August 2014): 321. Jeff Roy, "Translating Hijra into Transgender: Performance and Pehchan in India's Trans-Hijra Communities," *TSQ* 3, nos. 3-4 (2016): 413-414.
[78] Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 326.
[79] Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 328.
[80] Jeff Roy, "Translating Hijra to Transgender," 414.
[81] Liz Mount, "'I am not a Hijra:' Class, Respectability, and the Emergence of the 'New' Transgender Woman in India," *Gender & Society* 34, no. 4 (August 2020): 623, 633, 642.

transgender women and hijras working at an NGO in Bangalore, Mount finds that transgender women's "identity claims echo the claims of 'new' womanhood historically used to describe newfound opportunities for middle-class cis women" and that "these trans women favorably contrast themselves with the discursive figure of the hijra to contain the stigma associated with gender nonconformity and position themselves closer to the ideals of respectable womanhood."[82] As the academic literature on hijras show, hijras are often depicted as problematic characters in Indian public spaces given their ubiquitous occupations as beggars and sex workers, especially against the backdrop of the Indian Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 that saw them as ungovernable, disorderly, dangerous, and polluted.[83] In many ways, Aher's Instagram name that binds "trans" and "activist" together challenges participants to consider the complex and uneven identity categories that hijras oscillate within and through.

I also draw attention to Aher's Instagram name for two reasons: 1) to frame the rest of my analyses and engagements with hijra Instagram visual performances that are inevitably bound up with language in the form of self-written captions, Instagram titles, or comments, and 2) to showcase the ways in which Indian hijras participate in respectability and visibility politics in these digital spaces. As the works of J.L. Austin and Judith Butler, among others like Simone de Beauvoir, demonstrate, language and gender are performatives insofar as they *do* rather than simply describe.[84] In the case of Aher's Instagram name, the joining of both "trans" and "activist" constitutes, embodies, and materializes her identity for her audience in that specific temporality from which she uses these categories. Moreover, by equipping language of "trans"

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[82] Ibid., 623.
[83] Ibid., 624; Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India,* 45-47.
[84] Tanupriya and Dhishna Pannikot, "Enactment of Gender and Performing Selves: A Study on Hijra Performativity," *Journal of Language, Literature, and Culture* 68, no. 1, 27-48 (2021): 31; Nicole Erin Morse, *Selfie Aesthetics: Seeing Trans Feminist Futures in Self-Representational Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 54.

and "activist" within her username, Aher offers insight into the performativity of the language structures of class that take shape in Aher's Instagram post.

As I continue to participate in Aher's performance, I see her left elbow resting gently on the adjacent table to her left that is covered with a white tablecloth and a writing instrument placed on top of it. Moving my gaze inward through the photo, I witness multiple individuals behind her sitting and standing as they partake in their own conversations and miscellaneous activities. When I look to the top right of the image, I notice that Abhina is sitting in the Gurudwara Baba Fateh Singh Govi—a religious space and place that is dedicated to sharing the teachings of the ten Sikh gurus and from the Guru Granth Sahib, which is a text composed of various hymns and verses written by Sikh leaders—during the moment an unknown individual captures her photo. Similar to how hijras most often oscillate and transition between various religious spaces and worlds—from their relationship to Hindu and Muslim rituals, wearing specific clothing that signal religious cues, and using certain languages in specific contexts—Aher also broadly uses her Instagram page to visually document her elaborate engagements with various religious artifacts, spaces, places, and images.[85] For example, on February 18, 2020, she posted an image of herself sitting in front of a Buddhist statue in Thailand, with a caption that reads: "Throwback #thailandtravel."[86] Aher also uploaded a more recent photo on September 12, 2021 that shows her touching the feet of Jesus, who is depicted on the cross in the form of a painting on a wall, in which she writes a caption using the hashtag #praisethelord.[87]

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[85] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex,* 99-100, 105; Laxminarayan Tripathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2015), 171, 177-178. Tripathi briefly discusses hijras' relationships to Bahuchara Mata, a Hindu goddess, Shiva, and their historical participation in Muslim courts.
[86] Abhina Aher, Instagram post, February 18, 2020.
[87] Abhina Aher, Instagram post, September 12, 2021.

This switching between and within religious spaces, aesthetics, gestures, and languages is not a novel observation regarding hijras. Most scholars who have conducted research with hijras, such as Gayatri Reddy and Vaibhav Saria, have likewise observed the religious pluralism that hijras entertain. For example, Reddy notes the various ways hijras oscillate between and within Hindu and Muslim contexts, such as using either Hindu or Muslim names, wearing specifically colored saris to showcase their Hindu or Muslim identification, and participating in both Hindu and Muslim rituals and festivals.[88] But, what does Aher reveal to us more largely about the complexities of contemporary hijra practices and lifestyles by uploading visuals of her sitting in a Sikh Gurudwara or an image of her revering a statute of Jesus by touching his feet? By paying attention to Aher's staging within her Instagram image, Aher is asking us to attune and orient ourselves to the "rhythm and flow of everyday life for hijras."[89] In this case, the Gurudwara operates as the stage from which Aher is able to demonstrate the blending of religiosities, aesthetics, and power dynamics. Other than the Gurudwara serving as the stage that showcases Aher's religious plurality, Aher's sari complements and exaggerates Aher's multiple religious situating.

Looking closely at Aher's choice of fashion and makeup, I see Aher seated, facing me, with a soft and gentle smile as she wears a multicolored lime green, lavender, hot pink, and hues of red sari. This vibrant, colorful, and blended sari symbolically reflects the switching between religious spaces and elements that hijras do. Gently smiling into and through the camera at me and at her digital audience members who are reading this image, Aher wears an inconspicuous shade of foundation that blends with her skin tone, merlot-colored lipstick, and a maroon-colored bindi that is centered between her darkly tinted eyes. She wears an assortment of jewelry, such as

[88] Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex,* 101-109.
[89] Vaibhav Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers*, 20.

golden *jhumkas* (earrings), a reflective nose ring, a variety of necklaces that ascend in length, and multiple saffron-colored bangles that hang from her right hand. Though her brightly colored clothing further entertains and alludes to the religious osmosis that hijras move through, Aher's choice of clothing appears to resist the rather bland clothing that those behind her wear. Her choice of brightly inked clothing and stylizations seem to contradict the individuals seated and standing behind her, a decision that comes across as simultaneously intentional, resistant, and unapologetic.

Aher comes across gentle yet assured in her seated posture as her two hand positions center the photo. This specifically sustains and draws in viewers' attention as she places her body in a gently stylized and posed fashion. Her right hand, with her palm facing and pointed toward viewers, bends at the wrist, so her fingers ascend upward, while her left hand, with its palm facing up toward the top frame of the image, opens itself to invite participants into her performance. While one can read this hand gesture as the *abhayamudra,* in which *abhaya* is translated as "fearlessness," I read this as an ongoing invitation, an open gesture, and a welcoming into Aher's digital performance that evoke religious pluralities. Her hand opens up to the digital audience and asks them to join her. Further, Aher complements her stylized body and hand gestures by writing a caption that states:

> "Just because some day you will look like #spiritual we all need to pose #AhamBhahmasi #worshipyoursoul #Acting #picofthedayphoto"

Aher uses hashtags, such as "#spiritual" or "#AhamBhahmasi," which is a common practice on social media, to garner and attract more followers to find their way to Aher's digital page. By doing this, Aher nonetheless curates a visual performance that is framed by and blended with religious language, movement, and other identity structures. Aher curates this Instagram image

with a caption and her corporeal self. She uses the Gurudwara as a stage for this photograph, with various props, elaborate clothing and aesthetics, hand gestures, and other individuals to help stage and orient the scene. Rather than just witnessing this image in haste, as is common with the ways individuals move through social media feeds, or as a one-dimensional image, I probe us to sit with and consider the complex layers that make up this performance. When we unpack these layers, we can begin to recognize the multiple and shifting ways that hijras document themselves on social media. In Aher's image, she does not just post an image of herself on Instagram. Rather, she asks us—through the multiple aesthetics and stagings—to join in unpacking and analyzing her image and to participate as an audience in her performance.

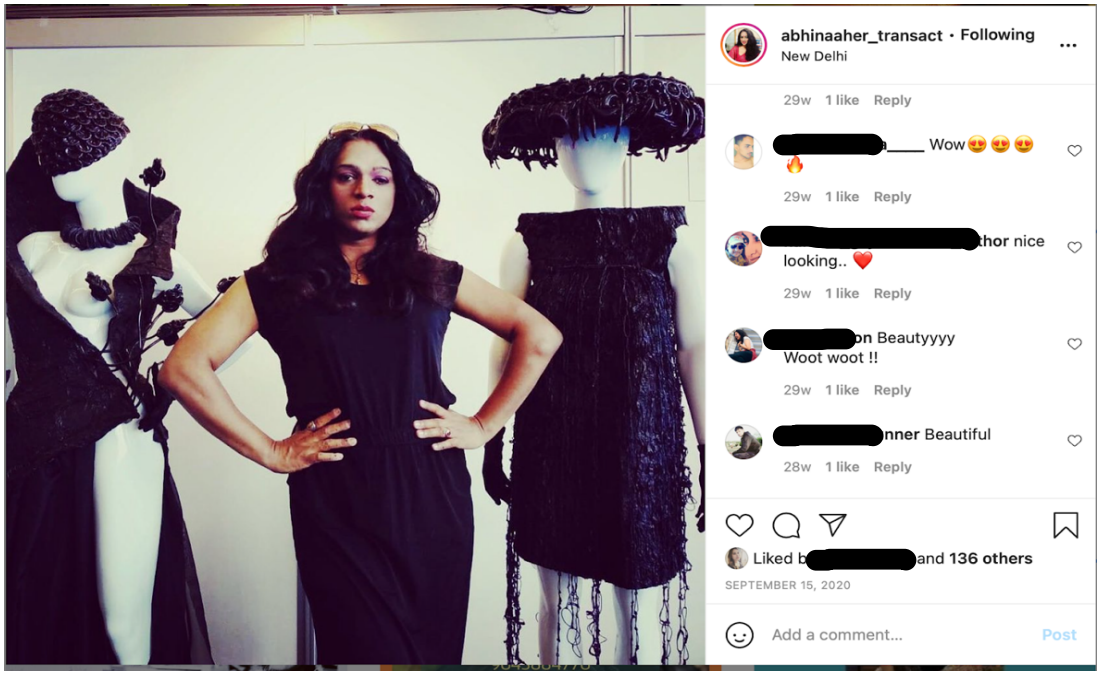

Figure 2: Abhina Aher, Instagram Post, September 15, 2020

In the second image, that Aher posted on September 15, 2020, Aher cinches her waist with her arms on her hips in between two glossy, white mannequins.[90] Sashaying in a loosely fitted black jumpsuit that slightly flares above her hands and with her right leg appearing to

[90] Abhina Aher, Instagram Post, September 15, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CFJ5XPWHCsx/.

slightly cross the left one, almost as if she could be walking down the runway, Aher takes center stage as she glamorously and seductively poses for the camera. This is especially highlighted by the two artificial, white models that are dressed in black, waxy-like outfits and are positioned behind Aher while simultaneously contrasting and complementing Aher's curvy figure. As Aher states in a 2014 NPR interview, "'I used to love to wear the clothes that my mother used to wear – her jewelry, her makeup. . .. That is something which used to extremely fascinate me.'"[91] Now strutting the makeshift runway in which a bright, golden fluorescent light illuminates and reflects off Aher's aviators that sit atop her head, Aher exaggerates her feminine body. She commands a fierce yet flirtatious engagement in her photo as she slightly puckers her lips, highlighted with sangria-red lipstick, and stares seductively through the camera at her audience members. As Vivek Shraya, an Indian-American transgender artist, notes in her interview with scholar Nicole Erin Morse in "The Transfeminine Futurity in Knowing Where to Look: Vivek Shraya on Selfies," "A good selfie is one where you know where to look. A lot of people don't know where the camera is, but don't be afraid to look back at *that* camera. I think another part of it is owning the gaze, you know? [italics mine]"[92] Aher's eyes, brightly painted with fuchsia eyeshadow, do not just gaze through the image but strike through the camera onto her audience members. Though slightly squinting, Aher's gaze radiates forth through the photograph in simultaneously direct, mysterious, and opaque ways.

Coming across this image for the first time when I began this research, I recall feeling so overwhelmingly captivated by Aher's presence. At that time, I figured it had something to do with the black-and-white minimal aesthetics Aher employed in her image—an aesthetic choice

[91] "A Journey Of Pain And Beauty: On Becoming Transgender in India."
[92] Nicole Erin Morse, "The Transfeminine Futurity in Knowing Where to Look: Vivek Shraya on Selfies," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* no. 4, vol. 6, 659-666 (November 2019): 663.

that has seemingly oversaturated Western consumption.[93] But as I have continued to look at this image, I realized it was not Aher's aesthetic choices but rather her gaze, one that animates through her ghostly eyes that are centered between her loosely curled, wavy, shoulder length black hair, that fascinated and affected me. In the same way that Shraya uses selfies as a political tool in which she is able to "reclaim the gaze or return the gaze back to [her]," Aher is using the power of her gaze, one that is contrasted with the artificial models next to her that can only reflect the space with their glossy material, to destabilize my own position of whiteness, and in turn, coloniality.[94]

While participating in this performance, I feel Aher's gaze powerfully cast onto my white body in which I am being confronted with the lasting violent legacies of whiteness, colonialism, and imperialism that are attached to it.[95] How does my gaze, one that is mediated by a white, gay body that resides in America and participates—intentionally or unintentionally—in gay *and* heterosexual capital/ism contribute to the possibly fetishizing and orientalizing visualizations of hijras?[96] What intrigues and piques my interest in participating in Aher's performance just to then circulate my analyses about and from her visual expression within and through an institution that can be understood as the "master's house?"[97] Although *I* may not have the answers in this very moment to disentangle these questions, I do know that by working toward a collective

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[93] I am thinking about North American celebrity Kim Kardashian and the monochromatic, simple, and minimal fashion choices she is known for wearing.
[94] Nicole Erin Morse, "The Transfeminine Futurity in Knowing Where to Look," 661.
[95] The very first time I viscerally felt my "doing" of and participation in a colonial project, which is inevitably bound up with perpetuating systems of imperialism, capitalism, and whiteness was when I read M. Jacqui Alexander's 2005 monograph *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred.* Specifically, Alexander's chapter two, "Imperial Desire/Sexual Utopias: White Gay Capital and Transnational Tourism," looks at the ways that white, gay tourism engages in "gay capital [that] mobilizes the same identity and operates through a similar set of assumptions as does heterosexual capital" (71).
[96] See previous footnote regarding white capital and its intertwinement with heterosexual capital and coloniality.
[97] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 25-27.

transnational dialogue and relation that does acknowledge, name, and subsequently resist colonial and orientalizing praxes, *we* will be able to further unpack these questions.

However, Aher does appear to usurp the oriental, colonial, and heteropatriarchal gaze by redirecting it back to her audience members, including me, to renegotiate the power dynamics. Aher's composition continues to suggest a play with the ongoing colonial and imperial effects of the ways transgender individuals have been photographed. Given the colonial production of portraitures in which individuals were often depicted standing vertically, it might seem as though Aher is sustaining this photographic practice.[98] However, when I participate in this performance with more attentiveness, Aher seems to suggest a blended, heterogenous, and alternative reading of her positionality against the colonial photographic practices. For example, Aher uses her hands to accentuate and move her hips from side to side as a way to complement her curvaceous movements but also contrast her body with the two, white mannequins that erectly stand on both sides of Abhina. On the other hand, Aher also appears to mimic the white mannequin to her left as the mannequin also presents a somewhat curvaceous, overtly sexualizing, and feminine visibilizing figure. The white figure has a glossy, black dress with a slit in it that provocatively shows its left, barren leg. Both Aher and the mannequin to her left stand erect while also presenting movement that pronounces sexual, feminine, and fierce themes. What remains most important, however, is that Aher positions herself—her body, her "inner soul" as one user comments, and her gaze—in the center of the stage, in front of the glossy models, with animated

[98] Jun Zubillaga-Pow, "Why Trans People Stand: The Performance of Postcoloniality and Power in Portraiture," *Trans Asia Photography* 11, no. 2 (2021): No Pagination Designation. https://doi-org.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/10.1215/215820251_11-2-205. Zubillaga-Pow relies on seventeenth-century Spanish empires' and twentieth-century British photographic practices to discuss the ways certain individuals, such as the "young and female members," and "lowest ranking in the family," were photographed as primarily standing.

features that orient audiences' eyes onto her body and also in dialogue with her powerful, piercing, and destabilizing gaze.

Outside of Aher's corporeal presence in the photograph, Aher structures her performance in a similar fashion as the way she did in the previous one we just encountered by including a caption that provides insight into the ways hijras can imagine and construct their ideal body. Contrary to the negotiation of the heteropatriarchal and colonial dynamics that Aher's positionality and gaze articulate in the previous paragraphs, I read Aher's caption—in dialogue with the image of her hands around her waist—as also a participation in creating and sustaining projects of capitalism and orientalism. With a mixture of emojis and hashtags, Aher writes:

> "When you have over confidence 🤪🤪🤪and you are overweight too you take chance and hold your breath most of the time when you are clicked #Throwback#Amsterdam PS - now I don't look the same I look more fat 😚😚😚"

Aher brings into question themes regarding her weight and overall bodily composition. During the time that this photo was captured, Aher finds herself "overweight," but she decides to hold her breath as a way to stop the in and out movement of her diaphragm. However, during the time that Aher decided to comment on the Instagram image and post it to Instagram, Aher finds her body heavier and with more fat percentage. Aher offers an ideal version of the body that she would like: one that is not overweight or fat and one that resists fluctuation. But, to take it even further, I find Aher's imagined and ideal body as one that is not excessive, does not take up too much space, and one that operates under and within diet culture.

CHAPTER 4: LAXMINARAYAN TRIPATHI

In the opening scene of The Guardian's YouTube brief six-minute documentary of Laxminarayan Tripathi, "Being Laxmi: 'I belong to the hijra, the oldest transgender community,'" Tripathi states, "I always thought I'm a performer, I'm an artist. Now the world is my stage, and I am one small character playing its role. My role is the bridge, I believe, between my community and the government."[99] And in many ways, Tripathi *is* the bridge between her community and the government. As a classically trained Bharatnatyam dancer, Bollywood actress, author, hijra, and transgender rights activist, Tripathi has secured her position as a prominent figure in the larger hijra community in and outside of India. In a recent January 2023 article on *Newsroom Post,* titled, "Suryaprabha International Award 2022: AKS honours transgenders, lauds their contribution to community," multiple images were included that featured Tripathi, among other transgender folks, who was honored with the "Suryaprabha international Award 2022 for [her] outstanding contribution to the transgender community."[100] Tripathi has authored two books, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015) and *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* (2016), acted in multiple documentaries, such as *Between the Lines: India's Third Gender* (dir. Thomas Wartmann, 2005), and starred in the 2011 season of *Bigg Boss,* a reality television show that brings together various celebrities to live and mingle in a house for the season.

Most recently, Tripathi has been known for her influence as the founder of the *Kinnar Akhara*, which, according to anthropologist Ina Goel, functions as a "Hindu monastic order of hijra priestesses."[101] As Daniela Bevilacqua notes in her 2022 article, "From the Margins to

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[99] The Guardian, "Being Laxmi: 'I belong to the hijra, the oldest transgender community'," *YouTube* video, 6:38, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpp9_YmLlck.
[100] "Suryaprabha International Award 2022: AKS honours transgenders, lauds their contribution to community," Newsroom Post, last modified January 5, 2023, https://newsroompost.com/india/suryaprabha-international-award-2022-aks-honours-transgenders-lauds-their-contribution-to-community/5221765.html.
[101] Ina Goel, "India's Third Gender Rises Again," Sapiens, September 2019. https://www.sapiens.org/biology/hijra-india-third-gender/.

Demigod: The Establishment of the Kinnar Akhara in India," "the term *akhara,* which generally means 'training ground,' specifies religious ascetic communities belonging to both Shaiva and Vaishnava orders. . . [from which] the eighth-century philosopher Adi Shankara who, according to [Tripathi], organized the Shaiva *akharas* to face social troubles and to have a voice among the masses."[102] In 2021, Tripathi led her *Kinnar Akhada* to the Kumbh Mela, a Hindu festival in which various Hindu *akharas* congregate in select locations in India in which this year's chosen space was in Haridwar, Uttarakhand. During this time, Tripathi posted various Instagram photos, videos, and stories of her and her *Kinnar Akhada* proceeding to bathe in the Ganges river and participate in other Kumbh Mela festivities, ultimately garnering thousands of likes along with both encouraging and disdaining comments.[103] And roughly two years prior, Tripathi included Instagram images, videos, and stories of the *Kinnar Akhara* attending the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad to document the historical moment in which kinnars first participated and solidified their presence as a collective.

In between these two gatherings at the 2019 and 2021 Kumbh Melas, Tripathi posted a series of three photographs that depicted her representing the Hindu goddess, Kali. In the following paragraphs, I closely analyze one of the photographs (figure 3) to argue that Tripathi impersonates the goddess Kali as a means to perform ideals of Hindu nationalism in ways to visibilize hijras' and kinnars' spaces online. By "impersonate," I use South Asian anthropologist Harshita Mruthinti Kamath's category of *impersonation,* which "connotes the practice of donning a gender *vesam* (guise) either onstage or in everyday life. . . [and] can also be expanded to indicate the temporary assumption of an identity or guise of a group which is not inherently

[102] Daniela Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod: The Establishment of the Kinnar Akhara in India," *Asian Ethnology* 81, no. 1/2 (2022): 53-82. ttps://www.jstor.org/stable/48676476.

one's own, regardless of whether this assumption is an intentional or deliberate act."[104] Conversely, I also argue that Tripathi's impersonation of Kali articulates playfulness and evokes affectual slippages—those reactions, feelings, and responses that go against the grain. In many ways, I contend that we should read Tripathi's performance as a form of drag in which she blurs binaries between the mundane and spiritual.

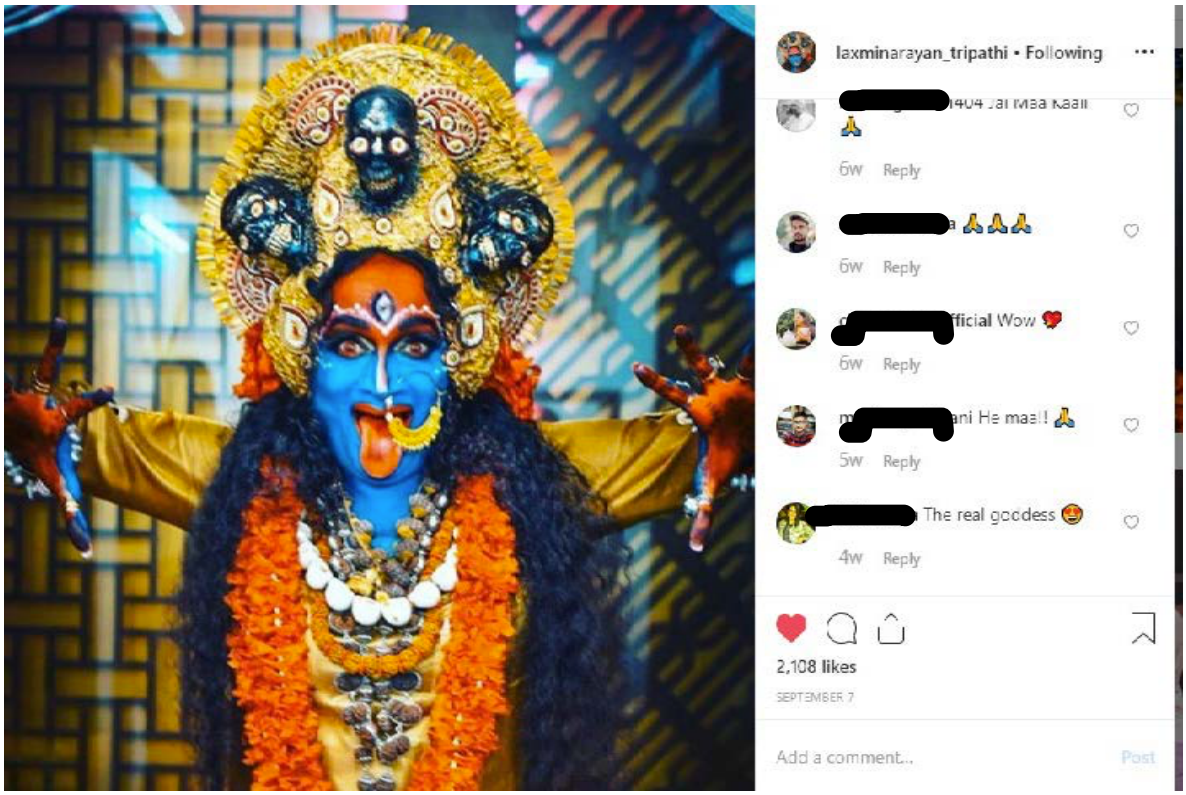

Figure 3: Laxminarayan Tripathi, Instagram Post, September 7, 2020

In a photo posted on September 7, 2020, Tripathi looms in excess and force within this performance as she posts an image of her body guised as the goddess Kali in a striking, dramatic, and curated manner.[105] She wears an ornately gold colored headpiece that flares out at the edges. This headpiece includes multiple eye-shaped designs that lie below three lapis-colored skulls

[104] Harshita Kamath, *Impersonations,* 6.
[105] Laxminarayan Tripathi, Instagram Post, September 7, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B2Ho_J_n-Rm/.

protruding from the material. Tripathi's face is brightly painted in half with two bright and demanding colors. Her intensely wild-salmon colored forehead includes a vertical white, almost translucent like, painted eye lined with a dark eyeliner. Below this middle eye lies a white curvature of dots that frame her thickly, though nicely plucked and shaped, black eyebrows. Below her forehead, her face is painted in a crisp sky-blue color, and a white line vertically partitions her nose into two halves. Her honey-gold colored nath attaches to her left nostril. Her auburn, wide eyes stare through the photo at her Instagram followers as her turmeric-colored tongue sticks out, creating a shocking pose for the camera.

Her long, wavy, black hair flows down the sides of her body along with her marigold colored phool malas. Along with her fluffy phool malas, she wears multiple chestnut-colored rudrakshas that lie atop her mustard-colored top. Tripathi's body is centered in the middle of the Instagram frame with the audience members sharing a dialogical gaze with her. In many ways, we are participating in *darshan,* a reciprocal form of "seeing and being seen by deity" that permeates Hindu theological thinkings regarding the interaction of humans with deities.[106] Tripathi's large auburn tainted eyes, pupils dilated, pierce through the screen and command attention. With her arms lifted up to her shoulders, her hands, with dark orange-colored palms and rings on each finger, Tripathi demandingly and forcefully appears to possess her viewers. By "possessing" her digital viewers, I do not intend to suggest that she does so in the possession/exorcist way. Rather, I find Tripathi's performance as one that possesses—takes over, commands, demands—and destabilizes our fleeting attention in digital spaces. Tripathi calls our attention to her figuration through her dramatic, excessive, and exuberant presence.

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[106] Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 9. See also Diane Eck's 1981 work, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India.*

To make my point clearer that Tripathi impersonates and embodies Kali, let me turn to David Kinsley's brief description of Kali's appearance as generally found throughout the Indian subcontinent:

> The goddess Kali is almost always described as having a terrible, frightening appearance. She is always black or dark, is usually naked, and has long, disheveled hair. She is adorned with severed arms as a girdle, freshly cut heads as a necklace, children's corpses as earrings, and serpents as bracelets. She has long, sharp fangs, is often depicted as having clawlike hands with long nails, and is often said to have blood smeared on her lips.[107]

Similar to the Kali that Kinsley describes, Tripathi provides a disheveled, unruly, and excessively aestheticized appearance. Tripathi's gnarly fingers, spread wide apart with an assortment of jewelry adorning them, help frame the Instagram image as she stares directly through the screen at her viewers. Contrary to Kinsley's description of Kali, we are unable to clearly view Tripathi's earrings, bracelets, or girdle, but Tripathi nonetheless has accomplished depicting herself as the goddess Kali. Instagram users applaud Tripathi's efforts as they include various prayer hand and heart emojis along with comments, such as: "Jai Maa Kaali," "Wow," and "The real goddess." For these Instagram users, especially as expressed by the last comment, "the *real* goddess [italics mine]," Tripathi does not just guise as a Hindu deity but *is* the Kali in this digital space and time.

So, while Tripathi clearly impersonates and takes on the form of Kali, I find it perplexingly coincidental that she uploads a series of three photograph-performances of her impersonating Kali during the height of the *Kinnar Akhara*'s presence against the Bharatiya

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[107] Rachel Fell McDermott, Jefrrey J. Kripal, eds., *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West* (California: University of California Press, 2003), 23.

Janata Party (BJP) political arena in India.[108] Similar to my analysis of Tripathi's impersonation of Kali on Instagram, Rohit Dasgupta and Debanuj DasGupta also make an interesting observation of Tripathi's interstitial appearance in Varanasi against the Hindu nationalist dominated India:

> The figure of Laxmi Naryan Tripathi, founder of the first *Hijra Akhara* (Hijra Hindu collective) next to the iconic *Ganga Arati* ritual at Varanasi. . . has been circulating throughout diverse digital platforms. In the image, Tripathi stands on the steps of this historic Ghat [*Dashashwamedh Ghat*] in Varanasi and announces that if Hijras are given a chance by the Indian government, they would help eliminate Pakistan from the world map. . .. In the image Tripathi's location is the iconic Hindu city of Varanasi. Tripathi's facial makeup, golden saree and huge *Sindoor Tilak. . .* suggest an excessive desire. The spatiality of her excessive desire for a Hindu nation cannot be contained territorially, but rather takes on a deterritorialised proportion through the viral circulation of her image.[109]

Tripathi's impersonation of Kali in the Instagram image sustains the performance of a Hindu nationalistic paradigm that Dasgupta observes; however, Tripathi equips the use of Instagram as a technology and medium to visualize her impersonation of a Hindu goddess. When we look closely at the backdrop behind her body, we see Tripathi standing in front of a semi-translucent yellow-colored glass wall that magnifies the lighting within the room. Multiple stage lights reflect from this backdrop continuing to indicate that Tripathi has intentionally curated a performance for her viewers. It is clear that Tripathi is intentionally performing for a camera shoot. But, by posting this curated image, with lights intended for a photoshoot, captured performance, a background to help set the scene, and an excessive and exaggerated Kali impersonation, Tripathi attempts to control the narrative of her image and how viewers should

[108] The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is one of the two major political parties (the other being the Indian National Congress) that has flourished in India. The BJP is described as being a right-winged, Hindu nationalistic political entity.
[109] Rohit Dasgupta, *Queering Digital India,* 12.

respond to it. In this moment, Tripathi *is* Kali and possesses us—through the staging, aesthetics, glamor, and excessive corporeality—to pay attention.

I remember when I first presented this image to my peers in the material culture class from which this project originated and feeling somewhat displaced by their visceral reactions after glancing at the image for the first time.[110] The students quietly chuckled, snickered, and made glances as though they seemed entertained when I first displayed this image. Although I did not think anything of it at the time, I kept using this image during conference presentations and showed it to my friends and family who were interested in my research. The same reactions—albeit in different forms, such as shock, laughter, and chuckles—took place upon viewing the image. And in many instances, I recall sharing in these affectual slippages, as I call them, but always felt a sense of guilt. How can I, as an academic based in the United States who researches about contemporary Indian hijras and their performance cultures, *dare* share a chuckle or laugh at *this* image that conveys serious textures of nationalism, goddess impersonation, and tones of digital, hijra life worlds? Why did my peers slip a chuckle or smile when I showed this visual—one that is *not supposed to* cause this reaction? What did this type of reaction largely reveal about our orientation—one that is inextricably filtered through orientalist lens—to contemporary South Asian art, imagery, and performance? Put more simply and abruptly, what happens if we come to this image as a drag performance?

Although I understand the cultural fragility and fraught in comparing an Indian hijra who engages in and draws from very specific religio-social and political settings, histories, and myths with the category of a "drag queen,"[111] I am interested in exploring the very similar reactions,

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[110] See "Introduction."

[111] Sandeep Bakshi, "A Comparative Analysis of Hijras and Drag Queens: The Subversive Possibilities and Limits of Parading Effeminacy and Negotiating Masculinity," *Journal of Homosexuality* 46, 3-4 (2008): 211-223. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v46n03_13. Bakshi compares and contrasts the figures of drag queens and hijras to

affects, and disrupted temporalities that audiences during drag shows can oftentimes evoke.[112] As performance scholar Kareem Khubchandani reminds us, "Many drag artists manipulate normative aesthetics of masculinity and femininity to incite recognition, pleasure, and discomfort in audiences."[113] Drag as an art, profession, performance, identity category, and overall worldly orientation has its roots in Western settings, and with the surge of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, it has completely captivated and overwhelmed audiences around the world.[114] And as Sandeep Bakshi notes, though ultimately disagreeing with thinking of hijras alongside drag queens, "Drag queens, like Hijra performances, often make us think about the various ways in which gender is played out and 'naturalized' in society."[115] But when participating in Tripathi's performance, it seems as though Tripathi transcends the male-female dichotomy and naturalization of gendering that Khubchandani and Bakshi write about. Tripathi, impersonating a Hindu goddess, asks viewers to take seriously her divine embodiment and impersonation of Kali.

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argue that hijras and drag queens are not and cannot be articulated similarly alongside each other as they each enjoy specific cultural and historical settings and nuances that shape their figurations.

[112] See Serena Nanda's *Neither Man nor Woman* and Gayatri Reddy's *With Respect to Sex* for further analysis of hijras' invocation of Hindu mythologies, like the Ramayana, that help secure their legitimacy in South Asian cultural imaginations and geographies.

[113] Khubchandani, "Asian Drag," in *Global Encyclopedia of LGBTQ History,* Howard Chiang, Anjali Arondekar, et al., eds., vol. 1 (Michigan: Gale, 2019), 479.

[114] Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood, eds., *The Drag Queen Anthology: The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators* (New York, Harrington Park Press, 2004), 5; Kareem Khubchandani, *Ishtlye: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife,* xxiv.

[115] Sandeep Bakshi, "A Comparative Analysis of Hijras and Drag Queens," 216.

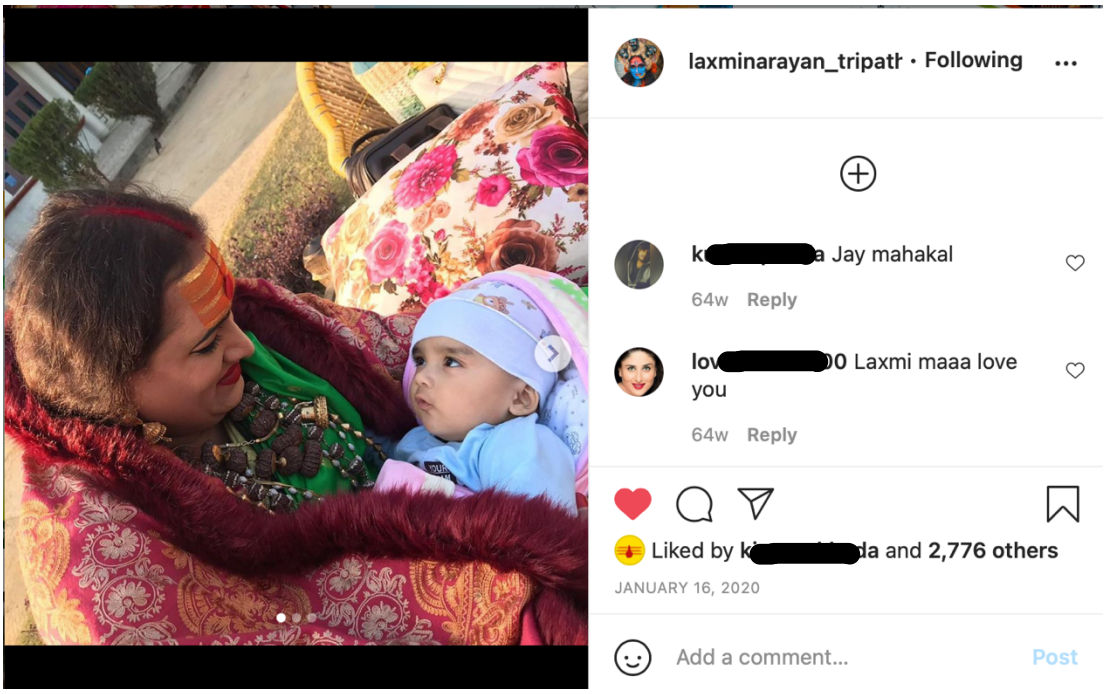

Figure 4: Laxminarayan Tripathi, Instagram Post, January 16, 2020

In the next image, Tripathi includes a set of three images of her cradling an unidentified baby as she sits in front of a rather large building with a nicely manicured lawn and shrubbery.[116] In the first photo pictured here, which is indicated by one solid white dot at the bottom of the image, we see Tripathi gazing into the baby's eyes with the baby participating in the glance by staring directly up into Tripathi's eyes. Tripathi dazzles in a thick, burgundy and maroon-colored cloak with fluffy, deep-red, faux fur trimming the edges. Wearing her usual chestnut *rudraksha* jewelry and gold *jhumkas* that we saw in the previous image, Tripathi dons a long, thick, vertical red *sindoor* that partitions her hair and lines its way through the middle of her extravagant multicolored turmeric and gold colored *tilaka.* From the outset, Tripathi uses exaggerated clothing, make-up, and various props, such as a multicolored pillow adjacent to her, the

[116] Laxminarayan Tripathi, Instagram Post, January 16, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B7YDz2-HaX2/.

presumed large building behind her with nicely trimmed shrubbery, and even the baby, to set and stage the scene for us.

And though Tripathi stages this visual performance with various accessories and objects that create a nurturing and motherly setting, I am most intrigued and interested in the framing of the image. On the surface, we can begin to ask ourselves: how does the framing of this image offer a more intimate and personal engagement with Tripathi's performance? What kind of relationship does Tripathi asks us to participate in through the angle of the snapshot? But, on a deeper and more philosophical level, I want to extend Saria's observations that hijras engage in the world through a diagonal relationship to reverse the question by asking us: how does Tripathi's Instagram performance invite *us* to enter into *her* world?[117] In other words, how do we as viewers of Tripathi's performance stand, sit, or lie in diagonality to hijra spaces and worlds? How does this Instagram performance (re)position hijras from the margins to the center and ultimately attempt to reverse the logics of colonial regulation?[118]

In many ways, an Instagram user who commented on this performance provides a beginning answer and an entry point to unpacking the aforementioned questions. In a mix of Hindi and English, they write:

> "Good evening laxmi aunty ji aapke hand mye chotta sa baby kitna aacha lg rha hye aap baby ko blessing kr rhye hye ji mene suna hai ki aap jisko bhi aasirwaad dete hai Unki manokamnaayen puri hoti hai plzzz….laxmi aunt ji mujhe bhi aapka aasirwaad chahiye plzzz...aap dijiye ji mujhe aasirwaad…"
>
> [Good evening Laxmi "Aunty" Ji. Your hand is looking good on the small baby. You are blessing the baby. I have heard that you give blessings to them. Their wishes are fulfilled. Laxmi "Aunt" Ji, I also need your blessing. Please. Please give blessings to me.]

[117] Vaibhav Saria, *Hijras, Brothers, Lovers,* 20-21, 61;
[118] See Jessica Hinchy's *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850-1900* for an understanding of the project of elimination of hijras in the north west providence of India.

Referring to Tripathi as "aunty," a colloquial term used for many matriarchal figures in and between South Asian households, this user forms a type of digital intimacy that is bound up in language. Moreover, this user's use of "aunty" to identify Tripathi also restages the ways we can read this performance as having the potential to usurp hijra kinship structures in digital spaces and think through the figure of an "aunty" as an epistemological, affective, and religious category.[119] To name Tripathi as an "aunty" or "aunt" structures Tripathi as not just an Instagram user, an "other" per se, but rather as a figure who is known, knowable, and relatable. Tripathi is no longer just a distanced and elusive Instagram user or mega hijra political, superstar who we cannot interact with. Tripathi is now an "aunty" for this user.

The user's comment also points to the simultaneously anxious yet socially legitimizing history of hijras and their relationships to the figure of the child within and under both hijra social geographies and the British reign in colonial India. From this user's understanding and hearsay ("I have heard that. . ."), Tripathi is providing a blessing, through the motions of her hand, onto this baby from which the baby's wish is fulfilled. And although I cannot visually determine where Tripathi's hand rests in the photo, this does not mean that Tripathi is not blessing the child. For this user, and from his or her knowledge about hijras, however scant or extensive the understanding of hijra cultural performances is, Tripathi's simple posting of an image of her associating with a baby creates, and even sustains, the visualization of hijra bodies as religiously potent. This is especially made clear as the commenting Instagram user asks and longs for Tripathi's hands—the same ones that the Instagram user presumes are blessing the

[119] Hijra kinship structures have been explored by and highlighted by many scholars, such as Serena Nanda, Gayatri Reddy, Jessica Hinchy, and Ina Goel. For example, in Ina Goel's article, "Hijra Communities of Delhi," Goel unpacks the intracommunal and stratified ways that hijras organize themselves in Delhi. Hijras often belong to various schools/houses, known as *gharanas*, which function in their own specific ways. See Ina Goel, "Hijra Communities of Delhi," *Sexualities,* 19, no. 5-6 (2016): 435-446.

baby with—to give blessings to him or her. The figure of the baby configures this user's participation in Tripathi's performance by conjuring up histories and discourses of hijras providing blessings, commonly referred to as *badhai*, to children.[120]

[120] Within India, and South Asia broadly, hijras will travel to various public and private spaces, such as wedding venues, homes, shops, and even on trains, to give blessings, commonly translated as *badhai,* to newborn babies, newly wedded couples, shopkeepers, and families, in exchange for money. Hijras will oftentimes sing, dance, clap, and participate in other types of performances as a means for providing *badhai* to receive money.

CHAPTER 5: PUSHPAA MAAI

"They make documentaries about us and say all these interesting things, take our blessings but when we walk out to the street, we get catcalled. Lewd comments are passed on us and whistles are blown."

"I always felt that there was no one I could share my pain of being 'the other one' or my joy about anything good in life. But I was wrong. I remember during my brother's marriage, my sister gave me her saree and everybody asked me to dance. I danced [the] whole evening in that saree. Nobody called me names for wearing it. Nobody laughed at me. Everyone called me beautiful in that attire. I slept peacefully that night, perhaps the best sleep ever."

Pushpa Maai[121]

In the final analytical chapter of this thesis, I focus on a contemporary hijra whose activist work is primarily localized in Rajasthan, India—a northern state that borders and rests against Pakistan—but spans the wider hijra-transgender communities throughout India. I specifically analyze one visual performance by Maai that offers simultaneously divergent and intersecting ways of thinking through temporality and relationality. Specifically, I pay attention to Maai's material and visual aesthetics, such as her clothing, reflection, and framed photograph, to unpack the ways that hijras can move and operate in the world as *un*sensational and without over-the-top and fantastical behaviors and gestures. This chapter attempts to move away from sensationalizing hijras and brings into focus a digital performance of Maai that offers an alternative reading of hijras and their performances. As Maai makes clear in her interview on the *Indian Women Blog,* "We have sexual orientation, *just like anyone else*, which has nothing to do with our gender at birth. . .. [emphasis mine]"[122]

As a *chela,* meaning disciple or student, of Laxminarayan Tripathi, who I just examined in the prior chapter, Maai's participation in the hijra, kinnar, and transgender communities in

[121] https://www.indianwomenblog.org/jwbs-first-transgender-story-pushpas-soul-in-pradeeps-body/. I take these quotes from *Indian Women Blog* in which an unnamed author interviewed Pushpa Maai about her life, activism, and identity as a hijra/transgender.
[122] Ibid.

Rajasthan as an ally, activist, and member has completely shifted the social landscape for these marginalized individuals.[123] From hosting and collaborating on various pride marches and events to providing resources to local hijra and transgender folks through her NGO, Maai has catapulted her life into one of determination for hijra and transgender rights and equality. Using her Instagram page, which to date has 959 posts and more than 2,000 followers, to document her advocacy work at and from her NGO in Rajasthan along with showcasing her relationships to both her guru (Tripathi) and her fellow *chelas* (students). For example, in many posts dispersed throughout her page, she includes still and moving images of Laxminarayan Tripathi with various honorific words, such as "guru," written on the pieces of media. Other than these posts, the majority of Maai's content include videos of her dancing privately on the balcony of her NGO office or images of her either working in her office or simply posing for the camera. In many ways, Maai's Instagram is quite simple and bland; however, I find this mundanity an expression of the "rhythm and flow of everyday life for hijras" in which we can engage in generative dialogue concerning hijras' presences.[124]

[123] See Serena Nanda's chapter 4 in *The Hijras of India: Neither Man nor Woman* for a general overview of hijra social organization.
[124] Vaibhav Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers,* 20.

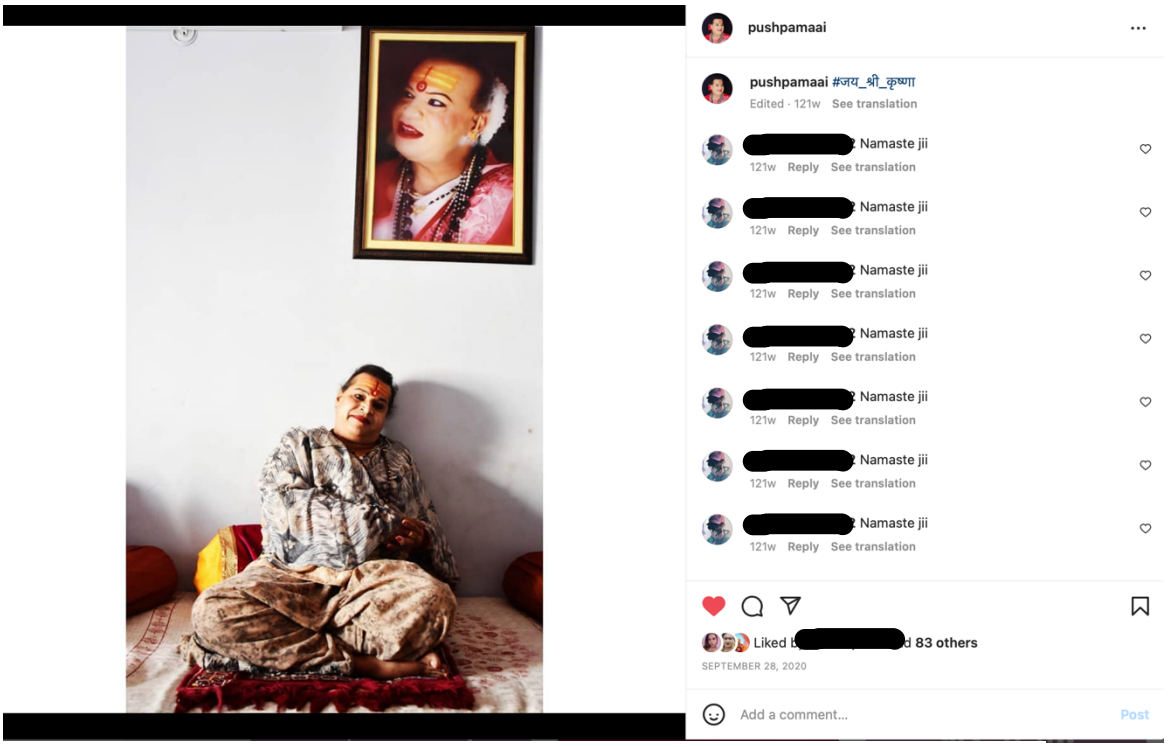

Figure 5: Pushpa Maai, Instagram Post, September 28, 2020

On September 28, 2020, Maai posts an image on her Instagram that has garnered more than 80 likes and various repetitive comments that say "hello" ("Namaste jii").[125] At first glance, I am intrigued not so much about her visual performance as a hijra on Instagram but more so for the warm, inviting, and comforting tones that her curated and positioned aesthetics creates for audience members. For example, Maai sits crisscrossed on a burgundy mat against a multicolored golden and red pillow with the left part of her back leaning against an off-white-colored wall. She wears ruffled, light-brown looking pajama bottoms with an earth-toned, loosely fitted blouse. Her hands, manicured with warm, merlot nail polish and her fingers adorned with a few golden rings, are interlaced and wrapped around the left part of her body. She looks relaxed as she tilts her head to the left and rests it on the wall behind her. Her short, brown

[125] Pushpa Maai, Instagram Post, September 28, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CFr2LsbD9ic/.

hair blends with the varying brown hues that she wears, and her make-up and facial expression are minimal and still.

Maai's tranquil embodied presence in this performance encourages us to consider the ways hijras live ordinary, mundane lives that are not always exacerbated by gaudiness, loudness, and mobilization that ethnographic literature and media on hijras proposes. In Sridhar Rangayan's 2006 short-film, *The Pink Mirror,* which explores the interpersonal lives between two hijras, Bibbo and Shabbo, and their acquaintances, Mandy and Samir, Bibbo and Shabbo are consistently depicted as exaggerated, dramatic, and excessive. For example, at the beginning of the film, Bibbo, wearing a purple face mask that Shabbo provided, a towel around her head, and a bathrobe, looks into a mirror, sees her reflection, and screeches in a high-pitched tone. After speaking with a friend to inquire where Shabbo is, she continues to dramatically look in the mirror and question what to do.[126] This "over-the-top" way of behaving, performing, and demanding attention is also mirrored by anthropologist Adnan Hossain's representation of the hijras he researched in Bangladesh. He states, "When people generally talk about hijras in Bangladesh, the image that leaps to mind is that of a group masculine in stature but feminine in attire walking down the busy streets of Dhaka clapping and demanding money and hurling raunchy comments at the public. . .. This typical image corresponds most closely to the sadrali hijras."[127] Further, in Vaibhav Saria's productive ethnographic work on hijra lives in India, they recount stories with various hijras and how they would engage in dramatic, excessive, and oftentimes violent behavior while begging for money on trains. They state, "In addition to the

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[126] *The Pink Mirror,* directed by Sridhar Rangayan (Solaris Pictures, 2006), 36 minutes. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0gT5snoyh8&t=259s. I watched this movie on YouTube, and it is during the timestamps 3:11-4:20 that Bibbo looks into her mirror and sees her reflection.

[127] Adnan Hossain, *Beyond Emasculation: Pleasure and Power in the Making of Hijra in Bangladesh* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 39.

large pins hijras kept hidden in their saris, hijras would sometimes get carried away and stun passengers with hard slaps when they were being difficult. As Chandni [Saria's hijra friend and interlocuter] would frequently get into fights that would threaten to erupt into a lot of physical violence, she was often urged to control her anger and keep calm."[128] Although these extravagant behaviors can aid hijras in their endeavors to earn money, solidify an interstitial role and space in society, and mark their literal presences, these representative performances in literature and media sustain stigmatizing colonial stereotypes and portrayals of hijras as obscene, ungovernable, and a moral panic.[129]

Yet through Maai's posture and soft gaze, we are invited to sit with her on a regal, deep burgundy mat, drink warm, soothing masala chai with cinnamon and ginger notes calming the senses and participate in gentle conversations about the emptiness of the world. Maai offers us a form of intimacy and collectivity through her visual performance. Maai's visual stature that displays gentleness, warmth, and ordinariness resist the problematic homogenizing and essentializing image of hijras as troublesome, violent, and unapproachable. Sitting against an empty, white wall (other than the photograph displayed above her), the only reflections that show up in the image are shadows of Maai's body and the pillows behind her. These shadows, particularly Maai's reflection, which operate as rhetorics and techniques of doubling—a photographic mode of expression—further help contribute to my reading of Maai's performance as contrarian to academic literature and media representations of hijras as unruly.

Nicole Erin Morse, in their hugely influential work related to trans feminine representations through selfies, *Selfie Aesthetics: Seeing Trans Feminist Futures in Self-*

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[128] Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers,* 119.
[129] Serena Nanda, *The Hijras of India,* 51; Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*, 44-45.

Representational Art, unpacks the technique of doubling to explore the ways that trans selves are constructed as individual, relational, and fluid. They state, "Doubling draws attention to identity's relationality, highlighting that 'identity' means both individually held identity and shared sameness or resemblance. Doubling. . . is also a formal effect, emphasizing the role that technics play in constructing selves as individual or as relational."[130] Morse analyzes various trans feminine selfies produced and subsequently uploaded in digital spaces through the expression of doubling, such as through mirrors, sunglasses, or other modes of reflection, to demonstrate the possibilities of trans selves as muddled, opaque, and interrelated.[131] This analytical angle of doubling and its unfixed and messy effects contribute to unpacking Maai's shadow that reflects from the left side of her body onto the white wall behind her as it opens up, rather than closes, the possibilities of understanding hijras as open-ended and beyond popular representation. In many ways, I propose that Maai's shadow reveals more about the unstructured, untethered, and complex relationalities and subjectivities that hijras navigate within and between than Maai's actual corporeal presence does.

Maai's shadow, which visually serves as a reflection of her body, rests gently on the wall behind her. On the right side of the shadow, its outline appears as the beginnings of a question mark (without the dot at the bottom of the structure) as the sides of the shadow drift away from its structure. Maai's left side of her body calmly rests against and in front of the other side of the shadow in which she and the shadow blend into one another. I go from visually participating in

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[130] Nicole Erin Morse, *Selfie Aesthetics,* 24-25.

[131] Ibid., 25-26, 49. Morse's overarching argument in their chapter on doubling is to challenge the Lacanian mirror stage—which is typically understood as producing a duality or mere reflection and double—as the primary way to read trans selfie doubling mechanisms. Instead, they show that the mise en abyme photographic expressions in trans selfies help problematize the Lacanian mirror as the primary way to analyze these images. Their ultimate argument is that "Of course, Lacan's account of the mirror stage emphasizes our *desire* for completeness, along with its impossibility. However, our drive toward wholeness, boundedness, and individuation orients us away from the messiness of intersubjective relations and the nonlinear trajectories of personal growth" (35).

Maai's corporeal body that appears demure in expression and is clothed in flowy, thin material to her shadow that has a faded, empty, ephemeral, and unknown quality. It exaggerates Maai's diffident presence by casting away from Maai's body yet remaining attached to it. Both Maai and her shadow replicate one another, which, as Morse pointed out above regarding the techniques of doubling, which accentuate each other's "sameness" in the image.[132] The shadow serves as an extension of Maai's posture, aesthetic choices, and comfortable presence from which participants in this performance can continue to engage with Maai's simple and unexaggerated presence.

The features of doubling continue to appear in Maai's performance as a framed and enclosed photograph of Maai hangs above Maai's resting body and her shadow. Contrary to the general sensation of stillness, subduedness, and atemporality that envelopes Maai's corporeal performance, the framed photograph offers a different and conflicting narrative of temporality, futurity, and desire. Below the framed image, we see Maai wearing the similar three-lined golden tilak with a bright red bhindi centered between her eyebrows that we have seen Tripathi adorn. Maai gently yet directly and controllingly gazes through the photograph onto us. Contrarily, the framed photograph of Maai that crookedly hangs above her captures Maai wearing multiple chestnut-colored rudrakshas, a multilayered red outfit, and with bold and well-blended makeup. In the framed photograph, she wears a deep-red lipstick that is boldly painted across her lips and centers the same red bindi between her thinly painted and manicured brown eyebrows with a vertical line that ascends to the middle part of her hairline and intersects with the golden horizontal tilak. Maai's gaze drifts upward, diagonally, and outward to the left of both the Instagram frame and picture frame that encloses Maai's photograph on the wall. Maai attempts

[132] See footnote 115.

to gaze into an "elsewhere"—perhaps into hijra futurity, into "queer elsewheres," or even beyond these spatio-temporalities.[133]

These two conflicting and uneven ways of embracing the Instagram performance—by simultaneously not knowing where to look but also participating in a dialogical gaze with Maai—point to the uneven temporalities that exists between the corporeal Maai sitting on the floor and the pictorial Maai that is enclosed in a picture frame on the wall. As a participant in this performance, I find my curiosities about Maai's framed image extending into questions about and interests in exploring what hijra futurities might look like. Does Maai's future look like furthering her activist work for the betterment of the local hijra and transgender communities in Rajasthan and their futures? Or does hijra futurity look like moving beyond aesthetic and political possibilities? Sitting in the tension that exists between Maai's present self in the Instagram image and the image on the wall above her seems to leave audience members with only imaginative possibilities. I leave this visual performance only to continue wondering, pondering, and poking at the prospects of these questions and to present them to the next set of participants.

[133] Jeff Roy and Pavithra Prasad, et al., "From Elsewhere," *Feminist Review* 133, no. 1 (2023): 1-10.

INTERLUDE-CONCLUSION

> Opacity is an unknowability. . . that makes up the world, and it must be defended in order for any radically democratic project to succeed. . . opacity is an ethical proposition [and] can be understood as an ontological condition and a form of political legitimacy, as well as being fundamentally aesthetic.
>
> Zach Blas, "Opacities: An Introduction"[134]

In the introduction to this thesis, I mention how my participation in these hijra visual performances operates within and through a "participatory" model that takes seriously the individuals' agencies along with our collective labors toward materializing "greater social justice relations."[135] In order to achieve this—or at the very least, work toward this reality—I want this thesis to create and sustain an analytical opacity, or an open-ended dialogue, from which next incarnations of this project can continue. While I have reached the conclusion of *this* thesis, I also have just arrived at the interlude for *these* projects. In other words, this thesis has only opened the answers to the questions I presented in the introduction rather than closed them. The visual performances of the three contemporary hijras I have brought forth in this project further unveil the ways that the fields of South Asian gender and sexuality and digital media studies have more work to do, conversations to start, and messiness to create. My analyses of these visual performances simply begin this process. But as Zach Blas, an artist-scholar, reminds us in the quote above, "opacity is an unknowable. . . an ethical proposition. . . a form of political legitimacy. . . [and] fundamentally aesthetic."[136]

I have relied on three relatively well-known hijra and transgender activists within contemporary India—Abhina Aher, Laxminarayan Tripathi, and Pushpa Maai—and their Instagram images to question the ways in which we can begin to approach their photographs as

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[134] Zach Blas, "Opacities: An Introduction," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 31, no. 2 (92) (2016): 149.
[135] See footnote 17.
[136] Zach Blas, "Opacities: An Introduction," 149.

visual performances. From the outset, this thesis asks us to consider what happens if we take seriously the digital image as a site of performance. Drawing from performance theorist Philip Auslander's analyses on the medium of an image as a performance in and of itself, along with an example from Pushpamala N., a contemporary artist whose work incorporates photo-performances, the hijra Instagram images can be understood *as* performances. This thesis ultimately contributes to the newer field of South Asian digital studies, as ushered by Rohit K. Dasgupta's and Debanuj DasGupta's edited work *Queering Digital India: Activisms, Identities, Subjectivities*. However, this thesis simultaneously zooms in and out from their work as I focus on and take seriously the site of the hijra image on Instagram and its performative qualities. As I show, approaching these images as performances requires a reflexive, back and forth conversation between the viewer and the Instagram image. My analysis focuses in on the digital image and its complementary captions, comments, and frames in a focused way that *Queering Digital India* overlooks.

Further, I am broadly interested in asking what does it look and feel like to sit and engage with these hijra visual performances? As my chapters reveal, this can feel uncomfortable, illuminating, playful, and serious. For example, my analysis with Abhina Aher's second image, figure two, shows the ways visual gazes can destabilize positionalities of whiteness and coloniality. Moreover, my analysis with Laxminarayan Tripathi's first image, figure three, has the potential to evoke spontaneous reactions and affects from audience members. I also ask what is revealed but also obscured about the ways hijras articulate expressions of gender, sexuality, and other identity structures? As my analyses and overall participation with these digital performances have shown, hijras belie common academic and media stereotypes of them as only "ritual performers" or spectacles. Hijras use language, photographic framings, and aesthetics to

dis/re/orient viewers from leaving their performances with universalizing and essentializing understandings of hijra culture. Most of the hijras presented in this thesis identify with multiple identities, such as "transgender" or "kinnar"; however, what remains most perplexing and analytically inviting is that these "hijras" rarely use the term "hijra" on and in their Instagram images. All three hijras present themselves, represent their gender and sexuality, and perform in vastly different, uneven, and complex ways.

Ana-Maurine Lara, in her work with queer : Black communities in the Dominican Republic writes:

> Given knowledge and language—not just from books legitimized by academic gatekeepers, but also from elders and communities in ceremonies, also from peers and colleagues in struggles for social justice, also from friends and family who love each other—there is a responsibility to enact that knowledge and that language, and to render with great care the many ways of being that have sustained us and that are the sources of our greatest power.[137]

I ask us to follow Lara's advice when approaching, reading, and sitting with the hijra visual performances in this thesis. The Instagram images presented in this thesis, and the future images of hijras that will circulate throughout academic theses, dissertations, and books, require a sustained interest in unpacking and furthering their relationalities, differences, similarities, and opacities with their viewers. The Instagram images of the hijras in this thesis are performances in and of themselves that have their own ontological meaning, and I hope we continue to take seriously their ongoing lives.

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[137] Ana-Maurine Lara, *Queer Freedom : Black Sovereignty* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2020), 20.

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Figure 2: Aher, Abhina. Instagram Post. September 15, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/p/CFJ5XPWHCsx/.

Figure 3: Tripathi, Laxminarayan. Instagram Post. September 7, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2Ho_J_n-Rm/.

Figure 4: Tripathi, Laxminarayan. Instagram Post. January 16, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/B7YDz2-HaX2/.

Figure 5: Maai, Pushpa. Instagram Post. September 28, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/CFr2LsbD9ic/.

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