

Do You Have Place? A Conversation with Sunil Gupta

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The genesis of this essay was an invitation to interview the photographer Sunil Gupta at the conference ‘Cruising the Seventies: Imagining Queer Europe then and now’ in March 2019. The ensuing conversation was titled ‘Do You Have Place?,’ the choice of which Gupta explained with an anecdote. Travelling to India from Montréal, Canada, where his family moved when he was 15 years old, he ‘began to re-think this idea of place, and having a place, and how to be a gay man one of the essential attributes I needed was to have a place in a Western sense. And what I observed going back to India, was that one of the major stumbling blocks to stepping into [a gay] identity was not having a place. Every time I met somebody the primary question was “do you have place?”’¹

Gupta was born 1953 in New Delhi, and his practice has spanned generations, continents, and cities. Having come of age in Montréal, Gupta relocated to New York in his early twenties, and later to London where he currently resides. India is interwoven as a home and a subject. Photographer and theorist Deborah Bright has described these as his ‘hybrid identity histories,’ or as the title of a series made in the early 2000s communicates, he is an artist with homelands, plural.² Place—the ground from which identity might be shaped, performed, and adapted—recurs in his practice, both on the larger scale of diaspora, and on the smaller (sometimes more private) scale of the sites in which sexuality figures as identity’s guiding principle.

¹ ‘Do you have place? Sunil Gupta in conversation with Flora Dunster,’ *Cruising the Seventies: Imagining Queer Europe then and now*, Edinburgh, 15 March 2019. All subsequent uncited quotes by Gupta are drawn from this conversation.

² Deborah Bright, “Portfolio: Introduction” in *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, p 298

Gupta has stated that ‘for me the question has always remained the same; what does it mean to be an Indian queer man?’³ In Edinburgh he posed another, wondering what Sunil Gupta, self-described in that instance as Asian, had to do with imagining queer Europe.

To this question can be added another: what does Flora Dunster, self-described as white, have to do with Sunil Gupta? We came into contact around October 2015, when I sent Gupta an email. I had recently begun a PhD on queer art and culture in 1980s Britain, and seen reference to his tape-slide projection *London Gay Switchboard* (1980), which amasses photographs of the scene around London’s long-running LGBTQ helpline. I wanted to know if the work was digitised, and if so, would he mind sharing it? It was, and he didn’t, though the version now online is a variant, the original and its accompanying soundtrack of oral testimony having disappeared in the years since its conception.⁴

I note this initial exchange to foreground that while Gupta is a photographer, this single, media-specific designation hardly covers the extent of his role in Europe’s queer communities and beyond them. He is a curator, archivist, HIV+ activist, as well as a teacher and mentor to many. He shares his time and stories, and in so doing has bridged sites and generations of scholarship and resistance.⁵ I make no claim to understand his work from its hybridised inside, but propose that it is the act of bridging which is valuable in exchanges such as the one on which this essay is premised. It is through this bridging that we tease out affinities and produce solidarities, which I hope to model here through a dynamic centred on listening, and the ensuing work of unpacking the stories behind stories.

³ ‘Sunil Gupta Interview,’ *Dreck Magazine*, 1 January 2017, <https://dreck-mag.com/2017/01/01/sunil-gupta/>

⁴ Glyn Davis unpacks the history of this work, and the re-discovery of its soundtrack, in his essay ‘The Queer Archive in Fragments: Sunil Gupta’s *London Gay Switchboard*,’ forthcoming in *GLQ*.

⁵ This became especially apparent while writing this essay, which I did during the Covid-19 lockdown. ‘Sheltering in place,’ and with limited access to scholarly resources, I found myself referring to the conversations and interviews which Gupta has shared with other academics and art writers, belying his generosity as an interlocutor.

In what follows, I reproduce excerpts from our conversation, using Gupta's self-narrativization to propose that his work challenges a simplistic idea(l) of queer Europe. First, and more materially, it needles at the continent's borders from a perspective embedded in the postcolonial sites of Montréal and India, themselves tied to Britain, a country currently in definitional flux where the concept of 'Europe' is concerned. I contextualise key works made in conversation with these places, highlighting the socio-political circumstances and events which underpin selected photographs.

Second, and more abstractly, Gupta's approach to photography nuances the arguments made by British photo theorists in the 1970s and '80s, an intellectual scene in which he played a key role. Gupta's strategic use of 'staged documentary' exposes photography's knack for 'creating subjective reality in a real place.'⁶ Which is to say, his work makes manifest that which is felt, and which demands to be brought into representation. Gupta offers a blueprint for augmenting a visually received status quo, exploiting photography's truth-claim while simultaneously revealing its manipulability.

Approaching Gupta's practice through this lens—which is at once particular and capacious—I begin by reversing his aside. What does Sunil Gupta *not* have to do with imagining queer Europe?

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Flora Dunster: Two of the places we're talking about are India and Canada, which in their own way – they're both colonies of England – are attached to Europe, but something that gets brought up in your work is what Europe means in India, and in

⁶ 'Review: Sunil Gupta: Pictures from Here and Ingrid Pollard: Postcards Home,' *foto8*, 2004, www.foto8.com/reviews/V3N1/pics_postcards.html

Montréal, and also perhaps in New York. What the imagination of Europe is, at different points.

Sunil Gupta: Living in Montréal...I met for better or worse a guy from Europe. And I didn't plan to, because I was very happy in my new Canadian identity of hot water and central heating and hundreds of gay men who were very attractive and wanted to shag all the time. It was fantastic. And then I met this guy and we began dating, and I was an undergraduate and he was a graduate. We were both students. We were on a similar wavelength, similar situation let's say. Except he was going to finish first and then there was this question of, where are we going to live? And I was determined I was going to stay where I was, but he kept grumbling about how terrible it was in North America. They just ate hamburgers and french fries, and didn't go to operas, and didn't do civilised and cultured things, like discuss Marcel Proust. North Americans were just this crass bunch of people who were interested – in those days – in disco dancing and dressing up. And all my friends said to him well then you can shove off back to Switzerland or wherever you came from. Please leave! And eventually he got the message, but said if we're going to stay together you're going to come with me... That was my first big dilemma, do I stay or do I leave, and go to this place called Europe? And my mother was horrified. She said we've come to the West, all the way from India, and you're going backwards, across the Atlantic, the other way. And I thought well she has a point... So I think in Canada, the idea of Europe was that it was kind of stale. And my generation started gay liberation, I say unashamedly. And in my case it was joining Gay McGill in 1972. And we looked at the Europeans and thought, you haven't got anything like this.

As Joni Mitchell (another Canadian) sang in 1971, Europe was ‘old and cold, and settled in its ways.’ An essay written by Gupta in 1988 for the British photography magazine *TEN.8* reaffirms this perspective. He opens by expounding that ‘sexual politics and the politics of representation that were emerging in Europe, particularly in pre-war Germany, appear to have transplanted themselves in the US. Perhaps they were the subconscious spoils of war.’⁷ Though in *TEN.8* Gupta alludes to his later experiences in New York, his insistence that ‘the twentieth century was in North America, and that was the place that I wanted to be’ situates his photographs made during Montréal’s era of gay liberation.

Exhibited as ‘Friends and Lovers: Coming Out in Montréal in the 1970s,’ Gupta’s earliest body of work archives a diverse scene which is at once softly flamboyant and overtly political. The portfolio couples intimate portraits with street photography from gay lib demonstrations, which Gupta documented and published in a local newsletter, *Gay-Zette*, as an outlet for his newfound identity and activism. ‘*Travailleurs / Gais / Solidarité*,’ reads one sign. ‘Workers / Gays / Solidarity.’ Another proclaims, ‘*Homos Francophones / Militez Et Exigez Vos Droits*.’ French homosexuals, mobilise and exercise your rights.

Buttressing these statements are the Québécois politics which define the province’s transition from the late 1960s into the ’70s, a moment marked by social and economic change. Though French settler colonialists ceded Québec to their British equivalents in the eighteenth century, it remains Canada’s only French-speaking province owing to a governmental act enshrined around the same time, which vowed protections for French language, law, and the practice of Catholicism.⁸ It is ironic, given this baggage, that Gupta’s family emigrated to Montréal. He recalls that his parents ‘didn’t want to go to England, because they had both worked for the Brits, and they were very much part of that generation

⁷ Sunil Gupta, ‘Homosexualities Part One: USA,’ *TEN.8*, 31, Winter 1988, p 2

⁸ Québec was founded on un-ceded territory stolen from eleven First Nations. Present day Montréal (the Island of Tiohtià:ke) is located on Kanien’kehá:ka Nation land.

that became free [...] They had no clue they were even going to, like, a French part. Nobody mentioned the French to them.’⁹ At the same time, a lack of local awareness as to what or where India was offered Gupta relative freedom, in that he ‘wasn’t aware of being brown because there weren’t any brown people around.’¹⁰

Québec emerged into the 1960s out of ‘the Great Darkness,’ a period characterised by conservative governance at the provincial level, which deferred to the Catholic Church, antagonised unions, and promoted values aligned with ‘a rural agricultural society in which fathers were the predominant authority figures.’¹¹ Widespread backlash, dubbed ‘the Quiet Revolution,’ demanded secularisation, greater economic autonomy, and a concomitant resolution of the poverty in which many Francophones lived. Separatism, and the cry ‘*Vivre le Québec libre!*’ (long live free Québec!) followed suit.

Canada decriminalised homosexuality in 1969, influenced by the 1967 passing of the Sexual Offences Act in Britain.¹² Members of Parliament from Québec stalled debate for three weeks, arguing that desire for change was the result of growing support for communist and atheist beliefs. Such views shed light on the necessity for groups like the Front Liberation Homosexuel (FLH), which formed in 1971 following precedent set by publicised revolutionary movements such as the Stonewall Riots in New York, led by women and trans people of colour in 1969, and locally the actions of militant separatists in the Front de liberation du Québec (FLQ), founded in 1963.

⁹ Sunil Gupta, interview by Theodore Kerr, *Smithsonian Archives of American Art*, 26 May 2017, www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sunil-gupta-17486#overview

¹⁰ Sunil Gupta, in conversation with Saleem Kidwai, *Queer: Sunil Gupta*, ed. Vidya Shivadas, Munich and New Delhi, Prestel and Vadehra Art Gallery, 2011, p 24

¹¹ Alain-Michel Rocheleau and Luke Sandford, ‘Gay Theater in Quebec: The Search for an Identity,’ *Yale French Studies*, no 190, 1996, p 118

¹² As in Britain, abortion was decriminalised at the same time.

Around this time, Gupta attended the pre-university Dawson College, which encouraged free study according to one's interests. Many teachers were gay, and involved in articulating liberation's rhetoric. This intersected with Marxist discourse, resulting in Gupta's explanation that cruising was seen as 'a kind of ultra-capitalist activity, because you were, for your solitary pleasure, selecting only one person. And it was a kind of bargain that was propped up by this whole capitalist infrastructure of gay bar, drink, spend money, the mafia gets richer, you get poorer, and it's all about not wanting everybody else in the bar.' He goes on, 'so we wrote a manifesto about this, and we would go around bars and distribute these manifestos about certain activities like cruising, which were capitalist and undesirable, and we really ought to indulge in a more egalitarian form of sexual encounters, meaning ten of us meet ten of you, or even better at the end of the night we would gather up everybody who didn't find anybody and take them all home together. And order pizzas.' Gay liberation's goals are viewed through an anti-capitalist lens, in line with the call for cross-movement collaboration.

In an oral history conducted by Theodore (ted) Kerr in 2017, Gupta hones this testimony. The post-bar rendezvous is gathered by a sociology professor, who owned an apartment in which to convene, and ordered the pizza. Snow falls outside his floor-to-ceiling glass windows, watched by the group as they fuck on the carpet. I'm inclined to imagine this as thick and white, a warm and tactile counterpoint to the city's bleak winter. 'It was never dangerous,' Gupta expounds. 'I remember this as being a very pleasant, fortunate time.'¹³

Gay McGill, of which Gupta was an initiating member, ensued in 1972, as did Montréal's first gay telephone helpline, with which he was also involved. Groupe homosexuel d'action politique (GHAP) formed in spring 1975, and it is their contingent

¹³ Sunil Gupta, interview by Theodore Kerr

which Gupta photographed at the 1975 May Day demonstration.¹⁴ Behind ‘Homos Francophones’ other signs are visible. The hammer and sickle emblazon a communist banner, and ‘1 Mai’ placards contextualise the militant labour politics of the march. The two men appealing for French homosexuals to mobilise are held by the image, mid-smile, one looping his wrist around the crooked arm of the other. Workers and gays come together, the photograph posing ‘liberation’ at their converging interests.

But it is the intimate photographs which hang most vividly. ‘Friends and Lovers’ gathers and insists on the gays and immigrants with whom Gupta became friends, stealing Montréal’s 1970s away from Leonard Cohen, the city’s cultural poster boy, and installing a counter-narrative in his place.

In *Fakroon* (c. 1974), the title subject leans against a truck, the height of its hood facilitating a comfortable angle for his pin-up style demi-repose. At a time when other Indians were ‘hidden in the suburbs,’ and Indian identity peripheral compared to larger immigrant groups (like the city’s significant Italian community), Gupta describes Fakroon Lakdawalla as ‘a fellow soul mate...a fellow Indian best friend...we used to just walk arm in arm down the street, sort of our own little demonstrations.’¹⁵ Lakdawalla’s hair curls around his face, its choppy, shag-like layers drawing out the sharp angles of his cheekbones and jaw. He wears a thick-necked halter top, illustrated with a jug which pours out the words ‘sweet cream’ in graphic typography characteristic of ’70s design. The top is a pale spring green, Lakdawalla’s smile graceful, and his gaze easy. In *Sunil with Fakroon* (1975), the two are pictured side-by-side, laughing. Gupta faces the camera, his army jacket juxtaposed by Lakdawalla’s red paisley tunic and matching pearl set.¹⁶ Lakdawalla is in profile, his eyes

¹⁴ Patrice Corriveau and Valérie Daoust, ‘La régulation sociale des minorités sexuelles: l’inquiétude de la différence,’ Québec City, Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2011, p 87

¹⁵ Sunil Gupta, interview by Theodore Kerr

¹⁶ Gupta’s army jacket is a significant detail, which recurs in photographs made during this period. His father was an ex-officer in the Indian Army, who had served in WWII and

pleasurably closed behind oversized, rectangular sunglasses. The photograph creates, in my mind, another image. It allows me to envisage the two parading down Montréal's Stanley Street, becoming in that moment the marshals of the only gay lib demonstration that matters.

'Friends and Lovers' collapses the distance between a gay, immigrant experience of the city at liberation's outset, and a queer POC experience which organisers and activists have, in recent years, worked tirelessly to make space for. Critic and photographer Teju Cole writes that 'all images, regardless of the date of their creation, exist simultaneously and are pressed into service to help us make sense of other images.'¹⁷ From its beginning, Gupta's work encourages this dialogue, a flow of politics and places which confuse an indexical logic of photographic time by inviting us into their fold.

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FD: I wanted to ask how you met the subjects in *Mr. Malhotra's Party* (2007). When you talk about that work, you describe it as a way of bringing digital communities together in a physical space – that the series creates a space for atomised groups. I wonder if you could elaborate.

SG: That series was made in the 2000s when I had gone to live there [in India]. Much had happened since I had first paid a visit – I started to visit in the '80s. In the '80s no one was out, no one would be photographed. By the 2000s there was a new generation and a new feeling altogether. So I found [that] people were more willing to be photographed, more

encouraged his son to join the Canadian Army Reserves. Gupta was trained as a sniper, but quit soon after the October Crisis of 1970, when the FLQ kidnapped a British diplomat and killed the province's Deputy Premiere, triggering the invocation of Canada's War Measures Act and temporary devolution of civil liberties.

¹⁷ Teju Cole, 'A Photograph Never Stands Alone,' *The New York Times*, 14 March 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/magazine/a-photograph-never-stands-alone.html

people were out, but the people who were doing this were younger people, and a lot of them were part of this activist group [Nigah] that came out of a campus in Delhi [Jawaharlal Nehru University] that they'd asked me to join, so they became a social network that I participated in. That's how I initially met them, even though they're very young. I began to bring photography as a contribution into their lives. This campus group that I joined used culture as a tool, so they would have a screening on the campus, some kind of queer film would be shown from anywhere in the world, and that would form the basis for local discussion. And I sensed an urgency like I did at McGill, that the campus needed to go out in the city, it was too limiting to have it just for students. So we did that, we took it out and it grew into a festival. Twice a month, and then once a year, we would have these screenings or some event, and it grew in the variety of media. Film sometimes, sometimes live performances – very popular in the local culture in India. Indians love to stand up and do something, expose themselves, or throw popcorn at you, or sing a song or something. And I brought photography, so they began to have photography shows as well. And the great thing about this is that it generated an opportunity to make work. When it first started, we would get five hundred entries from California, and five from India, so we were lopsidedly showing stuff from elsewhere, America largely. And as news of this festival spread, people began to make work for it. We got more local material. I realised festivals had this function of not just finding work, but generating it. The organisers became my initial willing subjects, and other people I met through them. It was about social networks, it wasn't a study. So they are of a certain class. But people used to ask me all the time, what's it like for gay Indians? Or some such overarching question. And I would say, I don't know, I only know about twenty of them. I can tell you about them. I'm not doing a study of the whole thing. These are young people who were educated, and privileged in their local situation, but maybe not that privileged in a global situation.

The shift Gupta describes relative to *Mr. Malhotra's Party* is illustrated by comparison with an earlier series, *Exiles* (1987). Their differing tenor demonstrates an increased ability to be out in India's 2000s compared to its 1980s, speaking to changes in cultural attitudes and the law which made 'out' a safer position to claim. Commissioned by The Photographers' Gallery in London, *Exiles* arose from Gupta's recognition of the need to visualise a gay Indian experience, representations of which seemed non-existent. He found that 'the terminology had arrived [in India] but not much else,' the category 'gay' subsumed by the expectation of heterosexual marriage, and inconsistent with Western assumptions as to its meaning and performance.¹⁸ As Gupta puts it, 'what I found was a bunch of guys who were all married, and they were having a bit of sex [with other men] on the side.'¹⁹ Over the course of multiple visits, he established a network of contacts, some of whom agreed to be photographed on the condition that the series would not be exhibited in India.

These men are pictured at cultural and historical sites around Delhi. Most turn away from the camera's lens. Though Gupta's subjects acted on homoerotic desires outside the frame, the photographs can be categorised as staged documentary. The subjects are 'really' gay, and the sites really were (are) used to cruise. But by constructing scenarios, rather than discovering them in situ, Gupta makes visible variations of 'gay' Indian experience outside the limited photographic repertoire of same-sex desire. Rather than literally exposing the subjects, the images work with them, floating culturally specific codes and cues to the surface.

A photo made at Hauz Khas, a medieval college and reservoir, shows its lone subject leaning against one of the complex's staggered domes. Back facing Gupta's camera, his

¹⁸ Sunil Gupta, interview by Fiona Anderson, *Somerset House*, 24 June 2020, www.somersethouse.org.uk/whats-on/artist-talk-sunil-gupta

¹⁹ Ibid

tangerine hued shirt glows against the aged stone. Etched into its surfaces are names and initials—Ravi, Virpal, V.M., M.K.—which position the subject within a dematerialised social milieu. A caption underneath reads: ‘It must be marvellous for you in the West / with your bars, clubs, gay liberation / and all that.’ Each image in *Exiles* is accompanied by such fragments of text, taken from recordings made on separate trips. These are asynchronous with the photographs but nonetheless indicative of men’s attitudes towards, and experiences of, their sexuality. In *Hauz Khas*, ‘the West’ is figured as a site of freedom, to be dreamed of and wished after.

Another frame challenges this view, the unseen speaker asking: ‘Why do you go on about changing the law. / I don’t want to be a martyr. / I’m happy the way things are.’ Two men look across an expansive courtyard towards a modernist building, the side of which is emblazoned with the words ‘Indira’s Vision’ in blocky red text. In the middle ground is a family, who join with the background’s reminder of state power to consolidate, in full view of the photograph’s subjects, the structures outside of which their desire is located. The men’s hands inch towards touch, neither accident nor assertion, but the kind of intimate gesture which is so discreet as to rarely be recorded.

The series’ title can be read two ways: with Gupta as the exile, removed from the life which his photographs constitute, or as referring to his subjects, who exile themselves from imported conceptions of gay liberation and defer to cultural expectations. He remembers that ‘it wasn’t a very happy scene. A few like me found ourselves outside the country and chose to remain there. Those that were here made the best of it by remaining as silent and invisible as possible.’²⁰ However, the photographs surpass their initial aim of visibility, and by staging the majority at landmarks, *Exiles* monumentalises its subjects by weaving them into the city’s architecture. They become a part of its history, the category ‘gay’ incidental to the moment

²⁰ Sunil Gupta, ‘A Return From Exile,’ 2006, www.sunilgupta.net/a-return-from-exile.html

when two men embrace, smiling, on the grassy expanse before India Gate. This is a pointed gesture, which returns brown bodies to the sites which colonial photographers pictured empty, calcifying the image of these places as within the past to justify settlement.²¹

Gupta elaborates on the series' staging, that 'in India it's completely impossible [to cruise] – everybody is in a car, or on a bus, or the subway, going from A to B. So cruising sites are really used by some very courageous middle-class men who are willing to go to certain parks and expose themselves to all kinds of harassment. And they're also the site of the underclass, so that's where they meet – they virtually live on the streets, and they live in slums, so they meet in public places. But for me to go and shoot them would be me making a study of them, because we're not pals, we're not in the same category. But the kind of middle-class people that I was meeting socially were not available, they all live in a private world. I used to make each one of them come out on the street with me, to take a picture. So there's a bunch of pictures of solitary Indians standing by themselves on the street. It's because we've gone there so I can take a picture of a homosexual male or female standing on the street outside their home, trying to look public.'

Mr. Malhotra's Party pictures a change in attitude. The subjects face the camera head on, what Gupta describes as indicative of a 'joyous' mood amongst younger queers, 'queer'

²¹ Zahid R. Chaudhary elaborates on this tendency, writing that 'photography seamlessly melds with the pre-existing habitus that is practiced in seeing the world as a picture' (140). By framing these pictures as empty, replete with ruins rather than subjects, the 'habitus' in question is revealed as that of a colonial world-view, legitimated and reproduced through photographic technologies. See: Zahid R. Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012. Early Canadian photography is also marked by the evacuation of Indigenous bodies, underscoring that such images serve the ideology of imperialism. These images present empty landscapes (crucial to the project of railway expansion), or frame First Nations people as anachronistic (and thereby 'vanishing') by highlighting their traditional ways of life. See: Gabrielle Moser, *Projecting Citizenship: Photography and Belonging in the British Empire*, University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019; Maureen Ryan, 'Picturing Canada's Native Landscape: Colonial Expansion, National Identity, and the Image of a "Dying Race,"' in *Canadian Art Review*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1990, pp. 138-149

making space for the inclusion of lesbians, amongst others, and offering a new vocabulary through which to organise.²² This willingness to be out—by association with Nigah (in which they were involved, or knew someone who was) and by association with Gupta’s practice—is linked to a different imagination of Europe. He has explained that ‘gay nights at local clubs in Delhi are always sign-posted as private parties in a fictitious person’s name to get around the law; Section 377, a British colonial law, which still criminalises homosexuality in India. Mr. Malhotra is the ubiquitous Punjabi refugee who arrived post partition and contributed to the development of the city.’²³ These parties were also fundraisers, creating income for activist work. Non-governmental organisations (including Nigah) gathered around the feeling that ‘there was something monstrous to fight,’ joining in coalition under the name ‘Voices Against Section 377,’ and generating the momentum which Gupta describes as permeating the networks from which *Mr. Malhotra’s Party* draws.²⁴

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was introduced in 1861, an anti-sodomy law imposed by Britain which criminalised sex between men, and which has ‘been used as a tool to harass and blackmail homosexual men ever since it came into being.’²⁵ Gupta’s framing of the series also references the partition of India in 1947, which saw the provinces of Bengal and the Punjab haphazardly divided on the basis of religious majority, resulting in the formation of India and Pakistan as individual states. Though Partition marked the official end of British Crown rule, it displaced millions and instigated a refugee crisis. By using his name, the series acknowledges the ‘ubiquitous’ Mr. Malhotra as a vital element of Delhi’s life and

²² Sunil Gupta, interview by Fiona Anderson

²³ Sunil Gupta, ‘Mr Malhotra’s Party,’ www.sunilgupta.net/mr-malhotras-party.html

²⁴ Sunil Gupta, interview by Fiona Anderson

²⁵ Saleem Kidwai, ‘Introduction’ in *Delhi: Communities of Belonging*, eds. Sunil Gupta and Charan Singh, New York, The New Press, 2016, p 10. Section 377 was premised on the same British sodomy law—The Buggery Act—which laid the cornerstone for criminalising homosexuality in Canada.

function, in this case through his contribution to its queer community, and generates a variation of the post-Partition narrative modulated by dissident sexuality.

Under the auspices of Mr. Malhotra's party, attendees are named. Bikram stands on the bank of a man-made lake, weight on his back foot and fingers splayed confidently over the front of his hips. Though the image's background is replete with groups – a full boat nears his place at the river's edge, two men move their bodies in time to a joke at his left – Bikram holds the viewer's gaze. His own is disarming: focused and intense. His striped shirt mirrors that of the boatman's, a flash of patterned symbiosis which embeds Bikram in the scene. Anokhi returns Gupta's attention with a similarly concentrated stare. Figures blur past her, a city in transit. Anokhi's black tunic contrasts with their colourful garments, creating the sense that she is columnar and steadfast. Hands again at hips, she is the still centre in a photograph thick with motion, challenging her viewer to pause and return her look.

The year after *Mr. Malhotra's Party* was begun, Delhi held its first Queer Pride Parade. Newspaper reports describe a small crowd, gradually growing over the course of the day to a group of 500. Answering to the imported origins of Section 377, they called on it to 'quit India.'²⁶ A year later, the law was overturned by the Supreme Court, and consensual homosexual relationships made legal. In 2013, it was reinstated, triggering a back and forth of judicial hearings which culminated in the 2018 decision to overturn Section 377 again.

Scholar and activist Gautam Bahn writes that in recent queer Indian photography, including works like *Mr. Malhotra's Party*, subjects assert themselves in the frame and render 'the city secondary to them.'²⁷ They define their place rather than vice versa, and have

²⁶ 'Delhi has its first gay parade,' *Times of India*, 30 June 2008, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/Delhi-has-its-first-gay-parade/articleshow/3178512.cms>

²⁷ Gautam Bhan, 'Forward' in *Delhi: Communities of Belonging*, eds. Sunil Gupta and Charan Singh, New York, The New Press, 2016, p 6

what Cole might describe as ‘testimonial simplicity.’²⁸ The ‘party’ which gathers the series reveals itself as something other than the private affair which the title implies. Delhi *is* the party, Gupta bearing witness to a city saturated with queerness, in spite of its intermittent need for ‘place’ to function as a private location where sexuality can be experienced and explored. Like Mr. Malhotra, Gupta’s subjects are woven into the city’s fabric, and, as in *Exiles*, by picturing them on these terms the imagination of dissident possibility is augmented.

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FD: You’ve used the camera as a way of making a place for yourself as a new person in the city –

SG: Yeah, it makes it easier. I learned to be gay male aggressive in that social cruise-y way, but I wasn’t always. The camera was an easy thing to hide behind. A camera gives me certain license to walk up to people. Without the camera I’d be walking up and saying, hello! Which would be much trickier.

FD: Would that relationship have been the same in India in the early ’80s?

SG: I didn’t go back to India for quite a while. I first came to London, and tried it in London, and it didn’t work very well. Londoners didn’t like you walking up to them, British people don’t want to speak to you. I used to go to bars and nobody would speak to you, it was terrible, a big culture shock coming here. And of course in London there was no street like

²⁸ Teju Cole, ‘Getting Others Right,’ *The New York Times*, 13 June 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/magazine/getting-others-right.html

Christopher Street. I was told when I came in 1978 that Earl's Court was like the Village, and it was and it wasn't. It was actually full of Australians, and some gay men. So to find a public space that was entirely gay was almost impossible. I found a route from Earl's Court through Chelsea; Kings Road for a while had some gay venues, and then more towards the West End. But it was ninety percent not gay. So it became more about the street rather than just the gay content [...] I came out of my MA in 1983. And instead of going to Cork Street I went across the river and joined the GLC [Greater London Council] and got involved with town hall politics and turned my back on the commercial world. And there were a lot of local funded outfits that used to exist in the visual arts. Camerawork was one of them, a very key one, focused on photography. It was a darkroom, a gallery, and a magazine. It had interesting people working there like Jo Spence and Yve Lomax, who became theorists later on. Almost every night there was a meeting somewhere about something. There were different schools in photography back then, that were quite clearly defined. I'd gone to a first college and a second one that were both art schools. In terms of my art education I had a kind of making, crafty background. A make first, think later background, if you like. I like having physical problems to solve. And then there was this other school called PCL [Polytechnic of Central London, now University of Westminster] run by Victor Burgin. And that was all theory first, make later, so when they graduated they couldn't make anything but they had thought about it too much! And they were terrified of making pictures of people because it was all so unethical.

This assessment of photography's ethics, centred here on photographing another person, contextualises Gupta's early years in the British capital, and the work which resulted. During the 1970s and '80s, photography was interrogated by figures including Burgin, Spence, Lomax, and others like John Tagg, Sue Braden, Simon Watney, Tessa Boffin, and Rosy

Martin.²⁹ At stake was the meaning of the photograph: its ontological status as an object which speaks and relays information. This examination changed the experience of making and viewing images, which Gupta notes was known to paralyse students coming out of PCL, a hotbed for photo theory.

Gupta, in contrast, enrolled first on a diploma course at the West Surrey College of Art and Design (now University for the Creative Arts, Farnham), and then on an MA at the Royal College of Art (RCA).³⁰ Where at PCL the ideological facets of power were interrogated, the RCA strove to fashion their students as an artistic elite, fast-tracked to the Cork Street galleries which Gupta rejected. Disillusioned with art education's Eurocentric blinders, Gupta 'came out of school into a kind of postcolonial world,' and began working in conversation with other Black artists and curators.³¹ Thinking about London's influence on the work which followed, the crucial nexus lies at the intersection of 'town hall politics' and a theory-based approach to image-making. Between Montréal and India a shift occurs in how photography is understood.

Photo theory emphasised deconstructing the ideology of documentary aesthetics, and practitioners in the UK grappled with what it means to direct the medium and its technologies towards a politics of representation, as opposed to the 'straight' approaches which serve to represent politics. In a *Creative Camera* forum on the status of documentary photography in Britain, Maggie Murray—co-founder of Format, a women's photography agency—expressed

²⁹ Gupta cites Martin's series *Transforming the Suit—What do Lesbians Look Like?* (1987) as a touchpoint for *Mr. Malhotra's Party*. Martin works to denaturalise assumptions regarding a lesbian 'look' or aesthetic, an aim aligned with Gupta's effort to expand the visual vocabulary associated with 'gay Indian.' See: Sunil Gupta, interview by Fiona Anderson

³⁰ Consecutively enrolling at art schools was partly done to obtain student visas and be with Rudi, the Swiss boyfriend Gupta had met in Montréal.

³¹ Sunil Gupta, interview by Theodore Kerr

that 'the term "documentary photography" has become rather overloaded and self-important; making claims for "truth" and "universal significance" which can no longer be supported.'³²

The ability to manipulate photography, and thereby use images to interrogate claims to universality, became a central tenet of the new photographic politics. Its discourse, positioned as part of a wider socialist project, encouraged staging or constructing scenes rather than 'capturing' events in situ; the use of text to complicate a photograph's sign systems; and community-centred activism which placed the onus of representation in the hands of subjects otherwise alienated by the gaze of photojournalistic or fine art practices. At its most effective, photo theory demonstrated how photography's claim on 'the truth' can be used to empower, laying bare its converse participation in widespread disenfranchisement.

Gupta's exposure to these ideas nuanced his 'very straight documentary approach' to picturing Montréal's burgeoning gay politics, which matured through his initial photographic training at the New School in New York, and climaxed with the 1976 *Christopher Street* works. A landmark exercise in street photography, Gupta cruised Manhattan's gay epicentre snapping candid photos. He describes the camera as an extension of his libidinal gaze, as a way of 'having them all.' Photo theory diverted this more sociological aim towards staged documentary, and to consciously drawing subjects from one's social networks – a key factor in both *Exiles* and *Mr. Malhotra's Party*.

This gelled with town hall politics, specifically those of the Labour-led GLC. The GLC's permissive funding of subcommittees and working groups encouraged identity-based activism, and Gupta remembers that 'it [the 1980s] was quite a separatist time. I felt like I couldn't take a picture of a woman. Women did women, Blacks did Blacks. Gays did gays,

³² Maggie Murray, 'What is the Status and Future of Documentary Photography in Britain in the Eighties?' *Creative Camera* no. 254, February 1986, p 8

and Black gays did Black gays. I don't think I spoke to a heterosexual white man for a whole decade.'

The 1986 series *Reflections of the Black Experience* is illustrative of this multi-faceted critical turn, and of a political definition which (in the UK) 'united the colonised' by rendering 'Black' an umbrella for African, Afro-Caribbean, and Asian, itself an umbrella for East, South, and Afro-Asian.³³ Commissioned by the GLC Race Equality Unit for a group exhibition of the same name at Brixton Art Gallery, and curated by Monika Baker, Gupta's photographs specify South Asian life amidst a decade marred by Thatcherism, growing (and racialized) socio-economic disparities, and industrial unrest.³⁴

The affect of the series is composed: a man reclines in a book-lined office; a woman in a headscarf leans against the departures barrier of a transport hub. This sense of everydayness is punctured by key intervals. At one, a man sits at a desk populated by neat stacks of paper. In his left hand is a telephone receiver, in his right, a piece of paper which might be a report or a cold-call script. Visible between the slats of his venetian blinds is a poster which reads "Newham-7 Need You!", a pencil sketch of a pointing man mimicking the visual rhetoric of Uncle Sam.

The Newham 7 were a group of South Asian men arrested in 1984 for confronting a cohort of racists who were patrolling the Newham neighbourhoods of Upton Park and Forest

³³ John Akomfrah, in conversation with Tina Campt, Ekow Eshun, and Saidiya Hartman, *Lisson Gallery*, 18 June 2020, www.lissongallery.com/studio/john-akomfrah-tina-campt-saidiya-hartman

³⁴ One notable instance of this unrest was a strike at the Grunwick Film Processing Laboratories outside of London between 1976-78. Grunwick's employees were predominantly women, many of whom had come to Britain after President Idi Amin expelled Uganda's significant Asian population in 1972. The country's Indian minority was itself the result of shared colonial history, and Britain's decision to import Indian labourers to the Ugandan Protectorate in the late 1800s. As a mail-in film processing plant, the Grunwick strike (which was based on the unfair dismissal of an employee) threw photographs from around the country into development limbo. The technology's capacity to function as a pleasure-based pursuit was revealed as relying on outsourced, migrant labour.

Gate, ‘us[ing] hammers and assault[ing] any South Asian person they encountered.’³⁵ These attacks followed a pattern of racially-motivated violence and murders elsewhere in London, and though arrested, the assailants were released on bail. For retaliating, the Newham 7 were charged with affray and conspiracy to cause criminal damage. This was countered with an argument for self-defence, barrister Leonard Woodley stating that ‘older Asians may be prepared to tolerate Fascists but the younger generation is going to stand up and fight.’³⁶ In Gupta’s photograph, the Newham 7 poster gestures out at the viewer, calling us to fight in solidarity with the defendants and their community.

Eddie George, one of the Race Equality Unit’s artistic directors, writes in the exhibition’s catalogue that the ‘consistency’ between the invited photographers—which otherwise leans on ‘Black’s’ expansive definition—‘lies in the emphasis placed on achieving autonomous representation of matters central to the lives of Black people in Britain.’³⁷ But these are not just images of South Asian subjects made from an Indian perspective, autonomous in their avoidance of a pre-determined and alienating outsider gaze. An early example of staged documentary, Gupta directs the camera’s reflections towards scenarios carefully chosen to re-frame South Asian identity within a British context. The series was made a year before *Exiles*, foreshadowing the latter’s intent to forge space within representation, and by extension the lifeworlds to which representation is tied.

The photographs in *Reflections of the Black Experience* are generically named: the man in the book-lined office is *Writer*, while the Newham 7 organiser is *Activist*. Their ‘straight’ aesthetic and assertive titling exploits photography’s truth-claim, the photographs

³⁵ Mohan Ambikaipaker, *Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, p 178

³⁶ Benjamin Bowling, *Violent Racism: Victimization, Policing, and Social Context*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p 108

³⁷ Eddie George, ‘Introduction,’ in *Reflections of the Black Experience*, London, Blackrose Press, 1986, p 4

insisting—proving—that these scenes are as possible as otherwise circulating stereotypes. South Asians write, paint, and have a cup of tea at their local café. They resist. In the most well-known image, *Gay*, Gupta and his then-partner Stephen Dodd stand outside the Coronet Cinema in Notting Hill. The marquee behind them advertises *My Beautiful Launderette*, Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi’s 1985 film about the romantic relationship between a white and a Pakistani British man. They are queer, too.

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Cultural theorist Stuart Hall suggests that ‘perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a “production,” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.’³⁸ Looking to the politics of photography which were prominent in London during the 1980s, a line can be drawn through Gupta’s practice. His photographs do not document a static gay and/or queer Indian identity – a feat near impossible, given identity’s introspective nature and mercurial propensity to shift over the arc of a lifetime. Rather, by picturing gay and/or queer Indian subjects in conversation with a multitude of places and scenarios, Gupta’s photographs facilitate identification. Even as some indirectly serve a documentary purpose, their staging *as documents* opening onto the matrix of feelings, politics, and ideals which prompted their making in that place, at that time, they continue to re-circulate out of it. Images make sense of other images, or in this case, images make sense of a viewer’s positioning within representation.

³⁸ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora,’ in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, p 222. My introduction to (and understanding of) Hall’s text is owed to Gupta’s friend and collaborator Tessa Boffin, who builds from it in the essay which accompanies her photo series *The Knight’s Move* (1991). See: Tessa Boffin, ‘The Knight’s Move,’ in *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs*, eds. Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser, London, Pandora Press, 1991, pp 42-50

It is crucial to emphasise that Gupta poses ‘Indian queer man’ as a question, rather than a label. Time and different locales have impressed on the shifting answer. Gupta’s historically and geographically situated bodies of work show queer identities in progress, pressed on by the discursive fields around them. This includes an understanding of Europe, its adoption or rejection as a site of freedom fluctuating over time. In Montréal’s 1970s Europe is old and cold, while for a demographic like those pictured in *Exiles* (and despite its imposition of laws to the contrary) Europe ‘feels more ahead, and more exciting, and it’s the place that has gay bars, and gay cafes, and if you’re gay that’s the place where you can be properly liberated. I think the older [gay Indian] generation probably values Europe more.’ In *Activist*, racist violence prompts the cautious assimilation of a first generation to be rejected by a second. Generational identification becomes another construction of place, another factor in how sexuality is imagined, tied to the durational experience of world-making.

In the same essay, Hall asks whether the task of representation is to bring neglected histories to light by attempting to re-discover their constituent images, or to *re-tell* these histories by generating new images altogether. He proposes that the latter strategy engenders ‘resources of resistance and identity, with which to confront the fragmented and pathological ways in which that experience has been reconstructed within the dominant regimes of cinematic and visual representation of the West.’³⁹ The filmmaker Pratibha Parmar (Gupta’s contemporary in 1980s London) makes a related judgement, describing how Black women’s photography has sought to effect representation on its own terms. Parmar writes that ‘this entails creating identities as black British women not “in relation to,” “in opposition to,” “as a reversal of,” or “as a corrective to”... *but in and for ourselves*. Such a narrative thwarts that

³⁹ Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora,’ p 225

binary hierarchy of centre and margin: the margin refuses its place as “Other.”⁴⁰ In both accounts, ‘representation’ is not a discrete noun but the product of a verb, to represent, implying politics, choices, and intentions.

At this essay’s beginning, I proposed two avenues for understanding Gupta’s practice relative to ‘queer Europe.’ In one, the material reverberations of colonialism are appraised, with the impact of legal strictures and socio-economic disparities weighed against the where and how of queer life. This overlaps with the second, which underscores photography’s capacity to hold and carry an imagination: to make feeling and experience visible. Gay (queer) Indian is produced over and again, both as the subject within the image and as the one who composes it.

It is photography’s burden to be read as always already historical; proof of that which existed, briefly, for a moment in time. But if this sense of the historical lives in Gupta’s work, it is not in contrast to ‘Europe’ as an emblem of modernity, what political theorist Rahul Rao calls its self-styled status as ‘everyone else’s future.’⁴¹ Complicating the same idea of ‘documentary’ which has aided this gambit, Gupta offers a representational logic contingent on desire, a slippery index which transcends time and place to interpellate—rather than report to—its viewer. Underscoring how Gupta’s work intervenes in a Eurocentric visual vocabulary, I propose that his photographs come together as a necessarily incomplete album of queer Indian subjectivity, constantly modified in its relationship to a viewer. These images expose Europe’s assumed position as centre by submitting a different set of salient foci, serving as ‘resources of resistance’ in their subsequent facilitation of knowing exchange, or in the challenge they pose to those outside their sign systems. In his self-conscious and

⁴⁰ Pratibha Parmar, ‘Black Feminism: The Politics of Articulation,’ in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, p 101. Ellipses original to text.

⁴¹ Rahul Rao, *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020, p 1

politicised approach to photography, Gupta offers a blueprint for re-imagining queer Europe altogether.

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A man in an airy blue madras shirt stands outside Delhi's Jama Masjid mosque. He glances over his right shoulder, locking eyes with one—or both—of the men comfortably embracing against a wall flecked with the ribboned remnants of wheat-pasted posters. The frame's other occupants don't seem to notice. But I do, and perhaps you do too.

Endnote

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