



Brown skin, white ice: South Asian specific ice hockey programming in Canada

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ABSTRACT

Ice hockey is traditionally known as a ‘white man’s sport’; however, this is a fabricated history that has erased Black and Indigenous contributions to the game. With changing demographics in settler nations such as Canada, racialized citizens are starting to challenge who is allowed to participate and speak about traditionally white-dominated cultural practices. This study uses interview data, media analysis, and reflective vignettes to examine the work that Apna Hockey does to unsettle the whiteness of ice hockey culture in Canada by amplifying the voices and experiences of South Asian hockey participants. Apna Hockey challenges dominant stereotypes about South Asian athletes and bodies through its networking opportunities and social media platforms. We argue that, even though Apna Hockey cannot undo racism in hockey by itself, it does important work with respect to creating and taking space that has never previously been afforded to racialized participants.

KEYWORDS

Hockey; Canada; sport; racism; whiteness; apna

Introduction

South Asian participation in Canadian ice hockey (herein referred to as hockey) has grown exponentially in the last decade. The National Hockey League (NHL) has only had three men of South Asian heritage play in the league; still, the increasing popularity and reach of the *Hockey Night in Canada Punjabi* broadcast (started in 2008) has helped grow grassroots participation across Canada. This demographic change has, however, created racial tension. South Asians are often marked as what Puwar calls ‘space invaders’ (1) in this white dominated sport and culture. In 2018, Szto observed that South Asian specific hockey programs were being created and/or discussed as a response to the racism experienced in mainstream Canadian hockey programs. These ‘brown out’ sporting spaces (Thangaraj 18), offer respite from racism but can also be read as a collective response to racism.

The purpose of this paper is three-fold. First, we seek to better understand how one specific program, Apna Hockey (herein as Apna), came to fruition. In an attempt to answer Szto’s call to further explore the development of ethnically segregated sports spaces (169), we unpack how Apna navigates the overwhelming whiteness of hockey. Second, we use critical reflections by this paper’s first author, Bains, to address the

question, ‘What makes Apna possible?’ We explore the messiness of being a researcher whose younger self is also a subject of the research. Bains offers personal vignettes that amalgamate reflections about her experiences as a South Asian girl navigating hockey culture with her current identity as a critical race scholar and doctoral student. Third, we illustrate the negotiated work performed by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) participants who opt into a white-dominated sport. We draw on the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon to unpack double-consciousness through BIPOC experiences in a white settler nation and the different versions of consciousness that can develop over time. This analysis elucidates the ‘time and energy [that] is spent negotiating and enduring the conflicts between who one is as a person and how one struggles to live with the misrepresentations of the outside world’ (Black 394). To begin, we situate our positionalities and our theoretical approach. After outlining our research methods, we introduce Apna and explain the significance of ethnically segregated sporting spaces. Our analysis centres the two main ways that Apna disrupts hockey’s whitestream (Denis 13): through its mentoring capabilities and social media amplification strategies.

Positionality and theoretical framework

As racialized settlers (Bains – Punjabi; Szto – Chinese) who grew up around the unceded territory known as Vancouver, British Columbia, we understand colonialism as ‘a network of oppression’ that erases violence and conceals the power relations that continue to structure the current moment (Sengupta 632). This colonial history is important because (South) Asians are often weaponized against Indigenous groups, as ‘exalted subjects’ in Canada as proof that multiculturalism works (Thobani 74). For example, the *National Post* ran an op-ed in 2013 complaining that Indigenous people need to be better ‘integrated’ into Canadian society. The author opened his piece by using the success of the *Hockey Night Punjabi* broadcast to argue that immigrant ‘children and grandchildren have become fluent English and French speakersFor aborigines who come from reserves containing a few hundred people, the mere act of taking the subway or reading a Toronto street map can seem intimidating’ (*National Post*). Assimilation into hockey culture has become a central ‘citizenship test’ in Canada, similar to how cricket and football have been used as tests of British allegiance (Burdsey 79). Despite the way that sport is often downplayed as a social distraction, the way it is invoked as a way to determine identity and social stratification make clear its socio-political value (Burdsey 80).

As Fanon highlighted in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the easiest way to gain a foothold into a society built upon white supremacy is to assimilate into whiteness and contribute to the racialized oppression of others (4). The psychological desire to be white ‘is an outcome of a specific configuration of power, of real material, economic, cultural and sociopolitical conditions that continually celebrate and empower the white subject and continually denigrate and dispossess the black man or woman’ (Hook 116). To don a ‘white mask’ is inherently problematic; yet, is often the most accessible method of reducing discrimination at an individual level. Robin James describes this landscape as a multi-racial white supremacist patriarchy (MrWASP), where diversity and multiculturalism invite ‘men and women of color ... into the offices of White Supremacy to share in the destruction of other men and women of color’ (13). All racialized Canadians must

learn to navigate and resist this field – the striving for racial equality within terms that were not collectively negotiated. We use the term racialized for two reasons: first, to name the active process of being externally ‘raced,’ and second, as a collective term to describe groups who are neither Black nor Indigenous.

For our purposes, brownness refers to ‘a political awakening from the outside in’ (Al-Solaylee 9); brownness is about an exercise of self-definition and self-determination in white supremacist societies. Brownness, as a concept, is perceived differently across various public spaces because of its ability to expand and contract with cultural, political, and social contexts. The idea of ‘brown’ representing any sort of collective experience stands in contrast to the colorblind approaches of the 1990s that encouraged citizens ‘not to see race.’ In the vignettes, Bains reflects upon her inability to articulate and challenge racism in her youth because of the way that colorblindness deflected the embodied impacts of white supremacy by invalidating problematic experiences. As a brown woman, the relationship between whiteness and citizenship (i.e. MrWASP) deliberately erases ‘complex, ambivalent, and messy feelings that women have’ (Ahmed 57). Gender intersects in a unique way for South Asian Canadians in hockey culture but, because it has been explored by Szto elsewhere, we will not cover it here. Our objective is to centre how brownness negotiates whiteness.

In introducing the concept of double-consciousness, Du Bois wrote, ‘Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in my own house.’ He wrote these words about his blackness in America but they continue to resonate for many racialized people who find themselves as citizens of a place but always seemingly out of place (Puwar 1). This precarious belonging is perhaps best exemplified by Olympic sprinter, Ben Johnson, when he won the gold medal for the 100 m event at the 1988 Seoul Olympics. He was lauded as a Canadian hero but when he was stripped of his medal for steroid use, he was discursively positioned by the media as a ‘Jamaican immigrant’ (Jackson 28). Similarly, Fanon recognized the struggle between the desire for Black people to prove themselves in a white supremacist society and the need to unshackle themselves intellectually from white definitions of success, progress, and civilization (14).

So, how can we better understand BIPOC Canadians who aim to succeed in hockey? Fanon argued that ‘what is often called the black soul is a white man’s artifact,’(6) but this is a simplistic way of understanding BIPOC participation in hockey because the dominant idea that hockey is a white man’s artifact is a false mythology. Hockey has strong connections to Indigenous histories and Black enslavement in the maritime regions of Canada (e.g., Ellison and Anderson 5); therefore, the game itself is a multicultural artifact. The metrics of success, however, have been solely determined by white (cis-male) Canada. In this way, we could argue that hockey itself has a conflicted double-consciousness internal to the game.

For BIPOC who choose to assimilate through the cultural and social capital afforded by hockey, they are consistently met with racism and othering. Consequently, we use Apna Hockey as a way to understand the complex task of attempting to find one’s authentic self within an institution that privileges whiteness. Du Bois expressed:

it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness.

Expanding on this notion of two-ness in hockey, BIPOC must also negotiate the fact that difference is maligned within the subculture of the game; and yet, difference is publicly promoted as Canada's strength (although this belief is constantly tested with varying results). To be different in this white dominated (and supposedly meritocratic) space creates unique racialized tensions.

Methods

This article is the result of semi-structured interviews, media analysis, and reflective vignettes. Interviews were conducted by both authors in Calgary, Alberta in the summer of 2019 with the co-founders of Apna, which is the main contribution of this paper. We also interviewed one coach and a hockey parent at the recommendation of the founders. Interviews lasted between 20–70 minutes. The time range reflects one's role and experience with Apna; hence, the two co-founders provided the longest interviews. Transcripts were inductively coded, and our analysis focuses on the two most significant contributions of Apna at this early stage of its development: mentorship and social media visibility. Our social media analysis centred Apna's Instagram account because the founders noted its role in the organization's growth. The interview data served as memory elicitation for Bains, enabling her to write reflective vignettes that add a temporal element to the analysis. Similar to how photo elicitation interviews can draw out more detailed recollections and feelings (Harper 14), listening to other research participants speak about their experiences in hockey brought forth a flood of memories for Bains that were used as additional data and context.

The birth of Apna Hockey

South Asians represent one of the largest non-white populations in Canada (Ontario Ministry of Finance). According to the Canadian government, 'South Asian' refers to those with heritage from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal (Statistics Canada). However, it is crucial to understand that most South Asians do not identify with this term and that ethnic tensions exist within this state determined geographic grouping (Ghosh 717). Our research participants used terms such as brown or 'East Indian.' Table 1 below provides demographic data for the three main cities where Apna operates. Statistics were derived from the 2016 national census (Statistics Canada). Hockey Canada does not keep demographic data but we know regional data from areas such as Brampton, Ontario (an area heavily populated by South Asians) have reported that South Asian participation increased approximately 20% between 2011–2013 (Sax).

Table 1. Demographic snapshot.

	Vancouver	Calgary	Edmonton
Total Population	2,463,431	1,239,220	932,546
Total Visible Minority Population	1,185,680	442,585	339,035
South Asians as Visible Minorities	291,005	115,795	86,420
Punjabi Speakers	151,205	35,780	26,425



Apna is a product of these changing Canadian demographics. The founder, 27-year-old Lali Toor, grew up in Edmonton, Alberta as one of the few South Asians in his community. His experiences of racialized isolation and racism at the rink led him to create Apna in 2017. Toor played at some of the highest levels of minor hockey and he started Apna while working on his Master of Business Administration at the University of Alberta. ‘Apna’ in Punjabi translates to ‘one of our own,’ or ‘ours.’ Thus, Apna is conceptualized as a program by South Asians for South Asians. Apna is inclusive of all South Asians but also has Sikh roots. Its logo features a silhouetted hockey player in front of a maple leaf, with both images encompassed by two sabres (kirpans) which are reminiscent of the Khanda symbol from the Sikh faith (Gunawarenda). These images represent the coming together of Punjabi and Canadian cultures. Sikhs make-up only 1.4% of Canada’s religious representation; yet, in British Columbia, Sikhs are the second largest religious group and also the fastest growing religion in the province (Todd).

While caste was not an issue that arose in this set of interviews, we would be remiss to ignore how its realities continue to affect life in Canada. Our interviewees, similar to Szto’s study, overwhelmingly represent members of the Jatt Sikhs, ‘a caste of Punjabi farmers and landlords often now living middle-class, urban and transnational lives’ (Mooney 389), and who make up almost two-thirds of the Sikhs in Canada (Basran and Bolaria 8). The presence of Jatt Sikhs is a legacy of British colonization in Canada, where Sikhs were seen as a useful martial race in comparison to Hindus (Caton). Thus, it would seem that the South Asians who are able to participate in Canadian hockey tend to mirror who was privileged in Punjab and India more broadly under Western eyes. Perhaps our participants did not speak about caste because transnational migration out of India has been positioned by many Jatt Sikhs as a way to challenge intersections of ‘caste reservations, class aspirations, and regional histories’ (Mooney 393); still, further research is needed to establish these observations more firmly.

Shortly after Apna was established, Toor brought Dampy Brar on board as a co-founder. The 43-year-old Brar played for a number of semi-professional hockey teams in Canada and the United States. He is also a member of India’s national ball hockey team. In 2018, he visited Ladakh, India to work with the Indian Women’s National Ice Hockey team. Together, Toor and Brar have created an unprecedented platform for South Asian athletes through networking, mentorship, social media amplification, and instructional opportunities.

Apna started its youth focused programming in Edmonton with hockey camps and then expanded to Calgary, Alberta; Vancouver, British Columbia; and Toronto, Ontario. The purpose is not necessarily to create elite athletes, rather its mandate is about ‘mentorship, more awareness, and more of a social media company’ (Toor). Toor describes Apna as ‘the first South Asian based ice hockey network … the infrastructure between watching hockey and actually getting on the ice.’

Currently, Apna is the only known South Asian specific hockey program operating in Canada. While there are other ethnically specific competitions, such as Toronto’s 30-year-old Asian Hockey Championship, and the Maccabi National Jewish Hockey Tournament, there is nothing else quite like Apna. The long-term aspirations of Apna are for it to (1) offer consistent development camps across Canada, (2) provide a talent showcase event for elite South Asian hockey players, (3) expand beyond hockey to highlight South Asian athletes in various sports, and (4) create a web application (similar

to LinkedIn) where South Asian athletes can create a profile for themselves and connect with scouts and other sports management personnel from around the world.

Browning out the rink

Watching hockey on channel three was a standard practice in our Punjabi Canadian household. Even though Bibi and Papaji didn't have much commentary on the game, and even though my soccer playing older sister was less than uninterested half of the time, I was captivated by it. I really wanted to play.

But it was a faraway world for me, because I saw hockey as a world that didn't invite people like me in. While no one ever told me explicitly that I wasn't allowed to play, my brown skin and chubby body identified me as someone who didn't belong.

The internalized self-doubt manifested in silent ways over the years because it was difficult to put these feelings into words. We lived in Canada, where hockey was the national sport and where we were told multiculturalism was valued. So, what was my problem? I was the one 'holding myself back,' right?

I gave it a try. And my first day playing hockey was terrible.

I remember looking around the room and seeing every other nine-year-old girl's parents tying their skates. I watched my mother study the parent beside us. I looked down at her bulging knuckles and arthritis riddled hands as she struggled to get my skates right.

My skates were always too loose, but I didn't have the heart to tell her.

Halfway through my first try-out, I waved my mom over and began crying behind the cage of my helmet. 'You're going to have to go back out there and finish the hour,' she said. Already feeling hopeless, I returned to the drills that I couldn't keep up with or even understand. I had wanted to be a hockey player so badly, but this was starting to feel like a nightmare.

(Bains, reflective vignette)

Few scholarly analyses have centred South Asian experiences in sport. In Burdsey's analysis on the exclusion of British Asians from football in England, he identified the stadium as a space where multiple forms of racism articulate: through class access, in physical representation, via group chants, and potential violence outside the stadium (42). Ratna similarly highlights that, despite including South Asian women in sport and physical activity spaces, the conditions of their experiences can vary drastically (386). These marginalized sporting experiences have arguably led to the creation of ethnically specific 'brown out' sport spaces.

In Thangaraj's ethnographic research of South Asian basketball leagues and tournaments in the United States, he explains that South Asians are able to make claims on space, challenge stereotypes, and write meaning onto their bodies in ways that are not accessible in other social spaces. In his own words, browning out:

Involves weaving in South Asian American sporting histories alongside the already present athletic histories, awards, and celebrations at the gym. These historical markers do not erase other histories but effect an integration that makes South Asian American athletic identities a normal part of this urban American landscape. (81)

Brown out spaces offer a respite from everyday racism. They enable South Asian athletes to navigate, negotiate, and challenge norms around race, bodies, and athleticism. Thangaraj observed that in brown out spaces, South Asian men were able to '[construct] acceptable racial contours to masculinity that challenged mainstream representations of South Asian Americans as nerds' (112). In other words, because South Asians are virtually non-existent in major North American professional men's sports, brown out spaces support resistance against dominant notions of race and masculinity.

Racist stereotypes about Asians as intellectually inclined 'model-minorities' limit Asian athleticism in the white imagination. The term model minority first appeared in 1966 as a way to applaud the successful integration of Japanese immigrants in the United States (Petterson). Today, the trope positions Asians in a liminal space where they are seen as educated, self-sufficient, and hardworking; accordingly, they avoid being marked as 'drains' on the welfare system or 'trouble-makers' the way that Black people have been (re)produced. The implication of this stereotype, however, is that the 'success' of Asians is often used as a weapon against Blacks (Prashad 6), Indigenous Peoples, and Latinx by suggesting that their collective oppression is the result of a lack of determination to change their social and economic circumstances. Puar and Rai locate an example of the intersection of patriotism and docility with respect to Sikh Americans in the aftermath of 9/11. Despite turban wearing Sikhs being swept up in Islamophobia, the community organized and mobilized, by crafting a particular representation for the white American audience (138). This narrative focused on Sikhs as 'respectable, exemplary, model minority citizens who have held vigils, donated blood and funds to the Red Cross' (138). The 'good citizenship' narrative acts as a barrier to facilitating real community solidarity 'across class, race, and sexuality' (139).

Apna enables South Asian Canadians to experience browning out at the rink and offers an entree into whiteness. It is made possible by the enhanced class position of a specific demographic of South Asians, predominantly represented by the children of immigrants from the 1960s wave of Canadian immigration and later (Szto 157). Previously, South Asian hockey participants lacked the socioeconomic and cultural capital to participate in hockey or collectively challenge racism. The notion of generational change has been a repetitive theme in research with South Asian hockey participants (Szto 135). As described by hockey parent Lakhi, 'now as a second generation [immigrant], I am making sure I get my son experiencing all these things.' While 'generation' is a problematic sociological concept that has narrow explanations of social mobility (Rajiva), it can mark visible shifts in hockey culture and access to participation. Binary language is often used to describe generational experience, which oversimplifies the complexity of 'the hegemonic relationship between "dominant" and "minority" position' (Lowe 28). As a result, the use of cultural and racialized identity as an 'organizing tool,' enables groups to understand and spotlight the 'heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity,' (Lowe 28) that exists across generational experiences.

Brown out spaces are complex because they negotiate space on racialized terms but simultaneously reproduce forms of oppression/racialization, such as through capitalist engagement. One hockey parent in Szto's study explained browning out at the rink as capitalism in its purest form and representative of South Asian entrepreneurship:

If the solution is, we can't get our kid into this academy or that academy for whatever reason then we'll make our own and hire the best people. Is that any different than any other business anywhere else? . . . That's the true entrepreneurial spirit, if you think about it. That's capitalism at its best. (166)

Capitalism continues to be a mechanism for racialized oppression, but it can, in certain instances, enable people like Toor to build a seat at the table where none were offered, which makes South Asian owned entities hard to mark as either firmly resistive or reproductive. Fanon points out that 'one is white above a certain financial level' (30); in other words, when BIPOC accumulate a certain amount of wealth, the system can seem less problematic because they gain access to new privileges. Hockey, in particular, pulls from the middle-class and higher socio-economic brackets because of the high costs of participation; hence, its members are generally less interested in dismantling the system. 'Capitalism at its best' means that market solutions replace anti-racism work and the whiteness that caused racial isolation is allowed to continue. For Fanon, middle-class society is especially prone to rigidity 'in predetermined forms' (175) because dismantling the system requires destroying one's own upward mobility.

Still, for racialized people to talk about racism is 'to occupy a space saturated with tension' (Ahmed 162) because bringing racism into view forces an unwanted conversation. Stories of racism make Apna possible. This does not mean that participants will not experience racism, but at least they will have a network of other athletes and coaches to look to for support. Apna makes sure that racism is not erased from the overall narrative. Toor also works with leagues such as the NHL to address the whiteness of decision-making power.

It is vital to point out that Apna does not promote racial exclusion; its programs are open to non-South Asians but focuses on South Asian mentorship. This is different from Nakamura's examination of the North American Chinese Invitational Volleyball Tournament where policing the 'purity' of race was fundamental to competition rules and engagement (41). Toor asserted some participants are mixed-race; thus, drawing strict lines around participation would prove to be an onerous (and unnecessary) task. Apna becomes a site of community building and solidarity, where the complexity of South Asian identities exists.

From here, we focus on Apna's contributions as a mentorship program, and its social media contributions. In combination, we contend that these two facets of the organization elucidate the labor that goes into navigating white dominated spaces.

Role models and respectability politics

'Our autonomy is important for our own stories, and sometimes you just need to see someone who looks like you, and thinks like you, to win.'

- Fariha Rosin

We would be standing at the bus stop after school, and people would roll down their windows and yell 'Hindu's' or 'go back to where you came from' at us.

It was only when I became an adult that Dad started talking about what it was like to be a young brown boy in a small Canadian town in the 1960's. He didn't want me to focus on his difficult experiences when I was a kid, he said.

Hockey was the ‘Canadian dream.’ A dream that, at the time, he couldn’t be a part of. I mean, how could he think about hockey when he was focused on being nine years old and losing his accent? Survival in this context, is not something I have experienced.

I always felt that me playing hockey was his way of feeling like, ‘we made it.’

It was hard to find a mentor to connect with on the ice. My contact with older female athlete mentors was slim. My contact with racialized female athlete mentors was non-existent. Visibility is something so ‘simple,’ yet hard to come by.

I didn’t know at the time that community autonomy was even possible.

I didn’t know that I longed to see someone who looked like me and thought like me, to win.

(Bains, reflective vignette)

Apna positions itself first as a mentorship network that uses hockey as its connection point. Toor explained, ‘My vision with Apna Hockey has always been to connect the top end talent and give kids in our community someone to look up to.’ Brar echoed Toor’s emphasis on mentorship:

We focus on not just developing the kids on the ice, but off the ice, and that starts in the dressing room. We have a talk before our session about hanging up your jackets, putting your shoes underneath [the bench], which we do at home. What we learn at school and at home is what we teach. We don’t want the rink to be something different, where you can just go and damage things. We talk about the 3Rs: respect yourself, respect others, respect the environment.

Toor described when he was in minor hockey, his father was socially isolated from the other hockey parents. As a result, Apna seeks to foster relationships among players and to offer parental support: ‘The intent was for parents to meet other South Asian parents and talk... I remember going to practice and my dad is standing in the stands by himself and no parents are talking to him.’ Racialized parents with no previous experience with hockey often face language barriers, time constraints, cultural differences, resentment, racism, and/ or physical violence (Szto 121).

For coach Sawan, his involvement with Apna stemmed from his lack of role models growing up. During his younger years, Sawan experienced racism at the rink, often leading to fights. Accordingly, he believes it is important ‘to give back to the community’ (Gill). ‘Giving back’ aligns with the Sikh philosophy and ritual of seva, referring to ‘selfless service through community action’ (Sohi, Singh, and Bopanna. 2068). Volunteerism without intention is a core belief of Sikh identity. Across our interviews, it was made explicit that ‘giving back’ to the community through mentorship, access, and promotion is a driving force of Apna’s existence.

Sawan also touched on the belief that hockey fosters productive citizenship by keeping youth out of trouble:

I think with social media and stuff there is that type of fear, parents have that fear that their kids will become a Surrey Jack. So, I think it’s great, the sport keeps them out and stuff.

The logic that sport can serve as a school for character building is central to Canadian nationalism. In Canada, the philosophy of muscular Christianity is built on the Protestant values of self-sacrifice, denial of the will, and teamwork (Kidd 407). Sport and exercise

(especially among Western nations) has been historically positioned as a way to foster a physically fit nation ready for warfare, but also as a way to nurture ‘good’ moral health. A good citizen is also a physically fit citizen. Sawan’s quote interjects a unique aspect of how South Asians are racialized into double-consciousness in Canada, whereby the previously oppressed must be trained for life under white standards of civilization: ‘There is only one way out, and it leads into the white world’ (Fanon 36).

The ‘Surrey Jack’ is a stereotype that circulates amongst South Asian communities in Canada, and refers to a suburb of Vancouver that, as of 2016, was almost 33 percent South Asian (*New to BC*). *Urban Dictionary* provides the following explanation:

a Surrey Jack is a typical Indo-Canadian individual who tends to show his or her heritage to the fullest. This includes, frequently drinking ‘Crown Royal’ (alcohol), and ‘polishing it off’ (meaning to completely finish the bottle) … Another main way is to listen for loud Punjabi music playing [from their car] … The Vancouver Canucks are the stand-out sports team for the typical Surrey Jack, while the Calgary Flames, the Edmonton Oilers and the Colorado Avalanche appear to be the enemy …

This definition depicts the polar opposite of the model minority. Similar to the way that young Black men have been pathologized to be social problems because of ‘their culture, their lifestyle, and their choices’ (Hartmann 86), brownness in Canada has been reproduced as a pathological issue. In an ethnographic study about what being brown means to young men in Surrey, participants attributed this stereotype to those who lack formal education, promote violence, and often are linked to illegal narcotics (Frost 222); ‘Surrey Jack’ has become interchangeable with media images of South Asian ‘gangsters’ (Frost 223). The Surrey Jack is indicative of cultural racism where whiteness is positioned as under threat by cultural Others (Burdsey 83).

Sawan’s concern stems from a running history in the South Asian community linked to media representations, specific to the Lower Mainland of British Columbia (Nijhawan and Arora 301). Divisive representations of brown bodies have shaped public perception and the social mobilization of South Asian youth in the West for decades (Nijhawan and Arora 301). The resulting public discourses direct ‘blame’ at ‘troubled youth,’ and ill-adjusted families who are purported to show ‘signs of failed social integration’ (Nijhawan and Arora 301). Hockey participation is commonly seen as a tool to separate ‘good’ Canadians from ‘bad’ Canadians (Allain 115); and, in this case, ‘good’ South Asians from ‘bad’ South Asians. Despite the fact that hockey culture is stereotypically known for excessive alcohol consumption, sexism, misogyny, domestic violence, sexual assault, and drug use, when these behaviours are performed by white men they tend to be explained as issues of masculinity, rather than as cultural or racial problems (e.g., Allain 207; MacDonald 349). Aligning with hockey culture represents a foothold into whiteness and some (contingent) aspects of white privilege.

Beyond having South Asian hockey role models, Apna wants to connect their participants with other community leaders outside of sport. Brar sees hockey players as a captive audience for creating respectful citizens:

I know a lot of police officers. They’re East Indian and I want to bring [the kids] one of each, one East Indian [police officer] and one Caucasian [police officer]. Just to talk to them about things. I think kids are impressionable and it’s great to teach the kids all about hockey, how to improve their game so they can play at a higher level at an older age, but if they can learn other things while with it, I think that is the key.

There are two points we would like to address in Brar's statement. First, systemic racism in law enforcement is a well-documented and researched issue that we will not re-hash here (Beckett 644; Lynch 184). Still, we do need to acknowledge that when police officers are upheld as role models for children, this paradigm is far more complex for Black and brown communities who are disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system (e.g., Hall; Maynard).

Second, Apna Hockey's focus on fostering upstanding citizens can be read as one way of mitigating racism by invoking respectability politics. By conforming to particular interpretations of respectability, 'good' South Asian hockey players may be able to deter racism by 'enacting the rhetorical and behavioral norms modelled in straight White men' (Khan 334). Higginbotham contends that the politics of respectability 'counter racist images and structures' (187) by policing the behaviors associated with Otherness as a temporary entry point to social inclusion. There are legitimate benefits to be gained by conforming to white sensibilities because adoption into the dominant culture 'is the key that can open doors which were still barred to him fifty years ago' (Fanon 25).

Positioning oneself as a respectable citizen in a white settler society was consequential for the Civil Rights Movement; Black bodies claiming respectability was seen as a 'subversive' act (Higginbotham 187). While respectability politics will not prevent anti-Black/brown violence/racism by itself, it can challenge racist stereotypes (Gross 422). The mentorship opportunities offered by Apna attempt to negotiate double-consciousness by helping South Asian Canadians affirm and uplift their identities within the predetermined confines of white Anglo-Saxon respectability. Akin to the Midnight Basketball programs that were used as social interventions in Chicago during the 1990s (Hartmann 6), Apna uses its platform to challenge stereotypical notions of South Asian boys and men as pathological social problems. Midnight Basketball was created to address the assumed criminality of young Black men by giving them an 'alternative' activity that could be surveilled and teach respectability politics/discipline. The main difference, however, is that Midnight Basketball was not created by young Black men for other young Black men. It was created by the Chicago Housing Authority and the Department of Housing and Urban Development with the ideology that Black youth are inherently lacking—in moral character, guidance, education, and options. Thus, while Apna includes elements of respectability politics, it is more similar to programs such as Black Girl Run! (72 chapters across the United States) that seek to claim space and address social isolation (Smith-Tran 2). The self-authorization of these spaces is premised on challenging stereotypes and supporting each other away from the white imagination.

When we consider mentorship in tandem with Apna's social media outlets, then we start chipping away at the privilege that has traditionally been reserved for white hockey players. Access to real life mentors coupled with enhanced popular representation can be powerful identity builders for racialized youth (Rezai-Rashti and Martino 59). It is through Apna hockey's social media presence where South Asian hockey players are able to challenge the national consensus about who participates in the Canadian national pastime of hockey.

Feeling seen: Social media and identity amplification

*Sometimes, all it took was a look, or off-handed comment that made me feel just as small. It was only a few times when opposing team members shouted 'paki' or 'brown b*tch' at me. It's almost like I knew what others thought about people like me, before even knowing me.*

I grew up in a suburb that had lots of South Asians. I still couldn't pin down what my problem was, with being 'different' even though I was in a place with a lot of people from my community.

Everything on TV screens and in between didn't help. I felt like the media told the world that we are a community plagued by 'extremism' and violence. Feeling the weight crushing down on my shoulders, I was driven to perfect my game.

Besides, where else could I look to be inspired?

(Bains, reflective vignette)

Participatory media has shifted who can become a media maker and who can cultivate brave spaces within popular culture (e.g., Sawhney). The relatively low barriers to entry can come with negative consequences such as cyberbullying, racism, and increased surveillance; and, participatory media operates within the same capitalist system that creates and reproduces inequality (Ferreday 51). Still, opportunities for marginalized folks to connect around the world has never been greater. Social media accounts such as Black Girl Hockey Club and Brown Girls Climb illustrate a desire for media spaces where BIPOC can see themselves and share experiences about navigating traditionally white spaces. By attending to wider 'social imaginaries' to facilitate on and offline platforms of community building, Apna represents new directions in advocacy and activism (Fotopoulos and Couldry 237).

Apna has accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram with its largest following on Instagram (5,297 followers at the time of writing). Brar described Apna's Instagram account as community building for South Asian athletes:

Instagram has really helped . . . the new generation will get to see this and 'Wow, we didn't know person A, B, or C played hockey, or Robin Bawa,' you know? . . . It's not just East Indians. It's kids coming up to me, 'I was on Instagram and I saw your video when you went to Ladakh.' So, I think that helps us be active in the community.

Hockey parent Lakh made a similar observation, explaining that non-South Asian parents often asked him about Apna when he shared photos on his Facebook account. Considering that up to 7% of the NHL identifies as non-white (Levinson-King), a social media account amplifying racialized participants offers an important counternarrative to the game's overwhelming whiteness. It is a space where dominant stereotypes about South Asians as unathletic and/or non-contributing members of society can be resisted.

Apna posts daily on its Instagram account highlighting upcoming events, sponsors, and drills, but it generally focuses on amplifying South Asian hockey players and their accomplishments. Every image shared represents a visual counternarrative (Gross 423) with respect to how hockey is produced and consumed in Canadian culture. It challenges how we view South Asian bodies, culture, and citizenship. These images tell a more comprehensive story about hockey in Canada and demonstrate an exercise of cultural citizenship where historically marginalized groups can write themselves into the national consensus (Szto 53).

Cultural citizenship has various interpretations, but we draw from the work of Boele van Hensbroek who focuses on co-authorship and co-production as necessary claims on cultural citizenship (78). We must push beyond simply participating in pre-chosen activities. Cultural citizenship requires the ability to write onto a culture and to complicate

singular interpretations of culture and history. For Boele van Hensbroek, ‘the idea of the whole exercise is to provide reinterpretations of history, to challenge or enrich existing views, in short to have an impact on the cultural consensus’ (82), or for Du Bois, ‘to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture’ (215). Apna’s social media presence enriches mainstream depictions of hockey. Co-authorship and co-production may be one of the greatest contributions of social media to marginalized groups because it enables the creation of imagined communities (Anderson 133). In networks that lack racial diversity, social media representation and connection ameliorate some of the social isolation and racialization that is experienced (Smith-Tran 11).

Toor uses Instagram to ‘shed light on players that work their butts off and play at a high level. They should get recognition. They should understand what they mean to our community.’ He continued with a reflection about what this type of media amplification would have meant to him in his younger days: ‘I didn’t know what I meant to my community because I didn’t know I had a community. That’s just how disconnected I was.’ Even though there are far more South Asian participants today, many remain isolated from each other. Apna social media accounts foster a sense of community where one may not exist easily because of geographic constraints (e.g., Hirschfield 16; Sharma 51). The visibility of Apna shifts dominant representations beyond the idea of colorblindness towards a sense of pride around cultural identity for a community that has long been forced to support the game from the margins. Apna fosters a pride in identity that eluded previous generations by highlighting the experiences and accomplishments of South Asians as the unifying force.

Toor reflected on how his difference caused him to shy away from his Indian identity:

It wasn’t easy playing [elite] hockey as a South Asian player in the middle of the prairies. It was not easy, just a lot of stuff I went through and my dad went through. I wasn’t necessarily putting my community on my sleeve at that point because I didn’t have support from them either.

Conversely, today’s youth are given permission to be proud of their identity because organizations such as Black Girl Hockey Club and Apna Hockey have created space for others to claim:

They are putting [their identity] on their sleeve because I think today’s social media allows them to do that as well. They are visible now . . . I think athletes now, especially with the whole community that we are building with Apna Hockey, people are proud, kids are proud of being who they are. (Toor)

Brar shared similar experiences of wanting to downplay his racialized difference when he was younger, joking that he would have been ‘underneath a bed, chewing on a pillow or something’ had anyone acknowledged his brownness. The racism he experienced often manifested as environmental microaggressions that socialized him into downplaying his brownness:

The racism that I faced playing hockey was not even people saying anything . . . the amount of times I could see people walking through the lobby looking at me with disgust because I scored a lot of goals. I would walk and put my head down, I didn’t want to look.

Racism is commonly understood as overt racial slurs said with malice but as Brar and Toor elucidate, silence can be equally as damaging to one’s self-identification as hateful

slurs. Therefore, media spaces where racialized individuals can see themselves in the game and as part of its future are significant for those trying to negotiate their double-consciousness. Accounts such as Apna's challenge Du Bois' realization that, 'the world I longed for, and all its dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine' ('Strivings of the Negro People') by creating a parallel world that does include 'us.' Instagram, by itself, will not overturn the overwhelming whiteness of Canadian hockey culture but it gives BIPOC a starting point where they can resist dominant narratives about hockey being a 'white man's game' and write their experiences into existence.

Apna can also use its account to speak up against hypocrisy. When George Floyd, a Black American man, was murdered by a police officer on 25 May 2020, Black Lives Matter protests spread globally to resist police brutality and support anti-racism. Every NHL team released a public statement condemning racism and committing to being part of the solution. Apna took the Edmonton Oilers to task for their lack of engagement on race and racism:

We run the largest South Asian hockey network in the world and it is based in Edmonton (same city as you) ... Yet when we reach out to your organization & Jujhar Khaira, the only South Asian hockey player in the NHL, we are responded with silence, unable to reach him or allow him to be a voice for the SA community because the culture of hockey is shut up and play hockey, especially if you are a minority.

The purpose of Apna can shift depending on the moment and the needs of the community because of its autonomy and self-authorization. It represents a significant voice for South Asian advocacy in hockey. Aside from Black Girl Hockey Club, other racialized groups do not yet have an outlet available to them to make claims of cultural citizenship. Using cultural and racialized identity as an 'organizing tool' allows for communities 'to build crucial alliances with other groups' (Lowe 32) by challenging institutional structures of oppression.

Discussion and conclusion

I learned how to deflect every gut feeling, put my head down and see how hard I could push myself.

*I asked my parents to tightly braid my thick curly hair so it appeared to be thinner and 'neater.' I didn't want to look so 'big' and brown on the ice. I dreamt of having a straight ponytail like the others on my team. I took every chance I could to deflect my culture, race, mother tongue and appearance. I was reminded when players on competing teams would shout 'brown b*itch,' but I wasn't allowed to make a scene. Instead, I remained patient and silent (most of the time) as a way to cope and continue to 'work hard.'*

I was given 'the most dedicated player' award in my last year. I was a young woman and I was in love with a game that taught me how to believe in myself, yet simultaneously also made me feel uncomfortable in my own skin. I realized then that I felt seen and liberated in a game that had also fostered my silence and invisibility.

I didn't realize during those years that my brown skin and the game I was in love with, went beyond me.

(Bains, reflective vignette)

Apna represents a unique juncture for race consciousness. If it had existed for earlier generations, it likely would not have been successful because South Asian Canadians might not have been ready to support an endeavor that centred their racial difference. But today, with some enhanced class mobility and the pervasiveness of social media, it serves as a connection point where South Asian Canadians can begin to think about their racialization and how they are collectively contributing to (not just participating in) hockey culture. In the words of Fanon, ‘the black man should no longer be confronted by the dilemma, turn white or disappear; but he should be able to take cognizance of a possibility of existence’ (original emphasis, 75). The desire to turn white and disappear is what Bains alludes to in the vignette above when she reflected on wanting thinner hair. In some ways, Apna facilitates ‘white masks’ for South Asian hockey players by grooming them into white performativity. On the other hand, it opens the door to ‘see that another solution is possible,’ because through their collective presence no single person needs to ‘disappear.’ One’s brown hair and body are free to take up as much space as is needed. Apna Hockey is a case study in understanding the difficulties of balancing psychological survival in white sporting spaces and the desire to create a more equitable future.

For too long, BIPOC athletes have resorted to ‘working harder’ as an individualized response to racism and discrimination in hockey. The idea of ‘working hard’ and ‘proving to himself that he has measured up to the culture’ (Fanon 25) is the backbone of a broader liberal agenda. The way one feels or deals with race in this context, is concealed by ideas of personal choice, discipline, and morality, that are central to producing the model minority myth. In *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Prashad posed the following question to South Asian immigrants in the United States who, along with other model minorities, are often weaponized against Black and Indigenous people: ‘How does it feel to be a solution?’ He continued:

This is not to say that we don’t feel the edge of racism . . . but we do so in a far less stark sense than do those who are seen as the detritus of U.S. civilization. Nevertheless, to be a solution has its problems too . . . Look at the Asians, the black intelligentsia was told, they work hard without complaint. True, to some extent, but they don’t seem to get very far either. (5–6)

In taking up this question, the South Asian experience has historically been moulded by white supremacist state policies, which rely on anti-blackness as a structuring force. The notion of ‘success’ is often measured by one’s proximity (and adherence) to whiteness. The structural inequalities and systemic oppression that violently impact Black and Indigenous lives in Canada are concealed by multicultural rhetoric. It is Asians who often contribute to this increasing racial separation. Therefore, Prashad’s provocation asks South Asians to imagine themselves as playing a crucial role in the fight for social and racial justice, where ‘we must fight to forge complex cultures of solidarity’ (132). We must try to de-centre this question of value and merit (Fanon 163) from the BIPOC experience. Fanon asserted, ‘For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white’ (4). That is to say, if BIPOC fail to ‘get rid of the worn-eaten roots of the structure’ (4), we will reproduce the unchallenged future of white supremacy and constantly find ourselves in a game of ‘catch up.’ Cultural spheres, including sport, play important roles in reproducing and/or dismantling white supremacy (Fanon 152).

The presence and success of Apna will not solve racism in Canadian hockey. However, alongside other non-traditional voices, such as the *Hockey Night in Punjabi* broadcast

(Szto and Gruneau 210), it performs important work in creating and claiming space where none was previously afforded. South Asian Canadians in hockey culture are actively injecting race and racism into daily conversations about hockey—conversations that are long overdue. The current technological landscape has enabled Apna to reframe possibilities for racialized hockey players through the creation of narratives that go against mainstream representations of the sport. For a nation that hates to talk about race and racism, Apna illuminates a compelling case of how to make space for such discussions. Through its commitment to building formal and informal networks online that reach internationally, silence and invisibility have been challenged with voice and representation.

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Notes on contributors

Alysha Bains' Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded doctoral research investigates the emergence of South Asian creative networks in Canada. Through an ethnographic approach, she aims to highlight a unique perspective to illuminate the ways technology, generation, creative work and pressing social issues intersect in the current period to shape the present and future of the nation.

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