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G. S. Sahota

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# Some Soprano lessons: On approaching diasporic marginality, absence, and television

G. S. Sahota

University of California Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA, USA

## ABSTRACT

What does the mass cultural phenomenon *The Sopranos* have to suggest for diasporic criticism? A great deal, claims this essay. Through thick descriptions and critical analyses of marginalized presences in the television series, this essay zeroes in on the phenomenology of absence, the complicated connections between racial stereotypes and the culture industry, and the morbid political impasses of late capitalist culture.

## KEYWORDS

*The Sopranos*; minorities and media; diasporic viewing; race and mass culture; critique of stereotypes in/ and the culture industry; technologies of marginalization

## Introduction

Composed as a constellation of images and fragmentary meditations on absence and marginality, this essay explores minority diasporic perspectives on popular media through a reading of ethnic and racial coding in the highly influential television serial *The Sopranos*. By situating subjectivity on a plane equal to the object, this essay argues that one of the roles of the diasporic critic is to focus on the techniques of erasure that national-popular phenomena mete out to various social groups, including the critic's own. From the vantage point of a viewership rendered off-screen, the task is not merely to center analysis on miniaturized presences, however fleeting, but to draw out from what is marginalized critical approaches and styles of reflection that undo the racial hierarchies of contemporary capitalism. Through its sophisticated interplay of diegetic and extra-diegetic encoding, *The Sopranos* offers hard lessons regarding the social logic of stereotypes, the role of the culture industry in perpetuating them, the instrumentalization of identity-categories, and the violent closure of collective possibilities in late capitalist society.

## Images and Fragments

*Methodology for the voided types.* Though hardly anyone would remember now or perhaps have noticed at the time, the hit television series *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) presents not so much the non-existence as the absence of various marginalized minorities. They – Sikhs included – are on the screen, but in a manner that renders them invisible. Thus, ordinary televisual technology partners with general socio-political processes of marginalization to render the disappearance of peoples and figures who remain literally



A Sikh mechanic with rumpled turban pleads with Dr. Melfi while repairing a Jaguar.

right before one's eyes. How this is possible and what ramifications these techniques portend for a phenomenology of mass-mediated absence (ethnic or otherwise) are questions worth pursuing in their own right. But, given their relevance for addressing various glaring lacuna within and between the fields of critical theory, phenomenology, media, diaspora, and ethnic studies, these questions, if pursued through the various voids, may lead to some methodological engagement with respect to those subjects that are nearly imperceptible despite their presence. *The Sopranos*, with its quasi-novelistic irony and epic reach across the various topoi of late American empire, provides a laboratory of sorts for the distillation of lessons for reading absence, marginality, and ethnic identity within the ever-hardening racist structures of contemporary capitalism. In the show's dream sequences, the repressed micrological presences become so amplified as to push momentarily the main elements to the side and stage the making of absences. The methodology that may be derived from these televisual techniques is one that mediates other absences from what the medium absents.

*Your televisual flow will be televised.* The TV that the characters of *The Sopranos* are watching reflects the ironic possibilities of television itself. This has to do with what Raymond Williams early on conceptualized as the quintessential modality of the medium: 'flow.'<sup>1</sup> Unlike the other genres such as film which present their products as discrete units that stand apart from the flux of quotidian life – such as the special event of going to the movies or the theater – television is always on, always embedded within the usual environment, and so intermeshed with the ordinary as to make itself indistinguishable from it. Its near seamless oneness with the outside reality allows it to follow the logic of this social totality and mirror it back to us in striking ways. As one watches all of the narrative threads become sutured by the recapping 'previously on *The Sopranos*' before each episode, one also watches within this flow the possibilities of a medium that mirrors the ironies of contemporary society. Thus one can catch a glimpse of Tony (James Gandolfini) himself coming across a rerun of the film *The Prince of Tides* in Season 5. The film, about a man (played by Nick Nolte) working through the psychic traumas of a dysfunctional family life into the amorous arms of his therapist (played by Barbara Streisand), so suggestively mirrors Tony's own therapy sessions and desires for Dr. Melfi (Lorraine Bracco) that he is able to identify with what he is seeing and sends her a packet of Tide detergent and a flower signed 'the prince of tides.' How funny that a

man hardened by the dark underworld of organized crime could fall for the sappy happy endings of Hollywood fare and imagine a similar denouement for himself! This is but one example of the many in which TV has the last laugh, transferring the fictions of the culture industry back into the ordinary realities from which they had been derived, *aufgehoben*. Indeed, during one of the dream sequences Tony nearly comes to the realization that he is a mere TV reality. At the show's most ironic moments, Tony's very existence finds itself fading. TV presents the artificial sparkle of tinsel town, but only as if packed back into an ordinary cardboard box. Thus the Emmy trophy that has to be pawned off by Chris Moltisanti's (Michael Imperioli) hapless prey is hardly worth anything compared to an Oscar. TV is anything but extraordinary, but this self-deprecating irony should not be taken at its word. It is this quality that allows it to be leveraged for critical insight, for TV can reveal realities that remain unmotivated, aleatory, or reticent. *The Sopranos* spins out narratives that are beyond the contrivances of mere plot. Its epic gestures in this respect converge with the everyday realities of the racial logic of late capitalism. Behind the scenes of TV's sardonic self-dismissal in *The Sopranos* lies a logic of parasitical laughter that speaks voluminously about the relationship between media and minorities.

*Critique of the stereotype industry.* Despite the often sharp contrasts established between the diegetic and extra-diegetic levels of *The Sopranos* as a series, there are moments when one bleeds into the other. The currency of the stereotype is a case in point. Despite the extra-diegetical plane's attempt to distance itself from the racist banter and casual stereotyping that is part and parcel of the diegesis, this metalevel of the show reveals itself to participate in the logic of stereotyping as well. The question of the stereotype is a complicated one, as the diegesis itself will lay out, and this topic will need to be examined at each turn over the course of this essay. Yet nowhere is this complication more rife than when the gang's venture into movie-making and the release of 'Clever' earns them accusations of trafficking in stereotypes about Italian Americans themselves. Putting this all off on the diegesis though will not do. We can grasp the compelled complicity of the extra-diegetical level itself at the moments when it is mirrored by the logic of the culture industry depicted within the show. Take for instance episode 7 of season 2, 'D Girl.' No amount of laying bare the stereotype industry will exonerate this commercial form of its vampiric tendencies. Every attempt merely implicates the extra-diegetical plane. Christopher's inchoate desires to make it to Hollywood as a screenwriter entice him to meet the director John Favreu (played by himself) and his even more seductive female assistant, Amy Safir (Alicia Witt) through a family connection. When Christopher arrives on the set while filming is taking place for Favreu's new movie, he proves his value to the director by suggesting the term that would be used by Italians of Brooklyn 'buchiach' (glossed as 'cunt') instead of the 'bitch' that the actresses find tired and lame. This impromptu suggestion alerts Favreu and his staff to the key element of authenticity that they lack and that Christopher can effortlessly provide as a quasi-native informant of New Jersey's seedier side. Favreu states his intentions: 'You could tell me the way shit goes down, you know, like what makes sense, what people really say, you know what I mean?' The instrumentalization of Christopher for authentic material will ultimately lead to complications relating to Favreu's incorporation into his own screenplay of an incident to which Christopher should not have made him privy. This

revolves around a horrid story of acid burning of a transsexual by one of Christopher's fellow wise guys back in the day, an event that was never to be revealed to an outsider, let alone one who could broadcast it over the airwaves. When Christopher discovers this pilfering of his tale, he goes searching for Favreu on the set, only to discover that he has absconded back to Hollywood. 'That fucking cocksucking mezzo finook!' Christopher blurts out, only to have Jeaneane Garofalo (playing herself) ask 'What does that mean? Got more stuff like that I can use?' The culture industry, needless to say, is the stereotype factory, fetishizing and exploiting what it can for saleable material. 'So many people with their sordid volitions,' goes the song ('Caught my Mind' by Pushmonkey) on the TV Adriana is listening to while waiting for Christopher to return to their apartment. The lyric emanates out of, in, and about the culture industry all at once. But merely allowing TV to establish this claim regarding people's sordid volitions does not put its producers and directors above the fray or make them autonomous, let alone absolve them of what they are exposing. At best, this self-reflection merely demonstrates that they are working within the traps of a historical logic that seems as inscrutable and necessary as any fate created by the Furies, themselves engendered by drops of blood spilt on earth.

*No identity shall go unmediated.* Ethnicity is substance in *The Sopranos*: it is the material that underlies the variety of forms in which characters and people come in the show. And there is no escaping it. Unequivocal ethnic belonging is what defines one's place within a hierarchy of types, and to imagine that one could stand above it, as might occasionally be suggested at the extra-diegetic level, is to fall under the spell of a corrupting innocence. Tony's entire Weltanschauung is undergirded by the American tautologies of race and ethnicity, where one can be nothing more or less than what one already is: this or that race, this or the other ethnicity. How things got this way is never explored; no point in asking, for a tautology will do: it is what it is, which is to say, race and ethnicity are the structure through which everyday experience is had, and to imagine a way of life beyond the war of all ethnicities is so chimerical as never to be entertained as a possibility. Hence, the tautology, which cannot even establish a predicate, but instead reproduces the subject. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, or your typical 'whites' make up an ethnic category that only rarely appears in *The Sopranos*, despite being the producers and underwriters of this color hierarchy. The pinnacle upon which they exist can be found in a realm distant from the urban jungle of New Jersey such as New Hampshire, where Vito Spatafore (Joseph Gannascoli) encounters them as if they were an entirely different species. Blacks, on the far opposite end of the scale, represent the enclave of destitution and *Lumpenexistenz* into which American life presents the threat of economic fall and devastation to all other races and ethnicities.<sup>2</sup> In between we find the slew of intermediating types as well as the varieties of stereotypes that issue out of this everyday prison house as if spontaneous byproducts. Even by the logic of the show's diegesis, as will be further elaborated below, the stereotype emerges as the convenient shorthand for signifying the injustice of racial hierarchy, while acting as a medium for taking advantage of the vulnerabilities to which it exposes those below one's own standing. Just recall the conventional 'two unidentified black males' to which every atrocity on the street can be stuck. 'Oh yeah, those two guys,' Paulie 'Walnuts' Gualtieri (Tony Sirico) remarks in jest, being completely familiar with the trick that works with the police and just about everyone else, every time. Being in between these extremes of black and white has

ramifications for the Soprano family. Tony's daughter Meadow (Jamie-Lynn Sigler) was considered too dark by the lighter Italian-Americans in the family when she was born, and the very idea that she is going out with the half Jewish-half African American college student sends Tony into one of his tizzies and onto the kitchen floor with vague memories of an Uncle Ben's rice container. The threat of bringing an uncle Ben into *casa nostra* provokes anxieties about racial occlusions within the very category of 'Italian-American.' Hidden in plain sight is the fact that Italian-Americans too were exploited by the white puppet masters of inter-ethnic conflict, and a measure of their American success is how much they can in turn do the exploiting. To be Italian-American means to eat heaps of gabagool (capocollo) and be swallowed up in turn by this imaginary ethnoscape. Regardless of how distant the mother country might be, one must protect it, oneself, the memories of suffering of one's ancestors as they broke ground in the new land, and, of course, the foods they supposedly brought with them and bequeathed to their children along with Americanized surnames. To imagine there is some easy out from these constraints is silly, for the stereotypes generated from the ubiquity of racial and ethnic exploitation await to frame you and drag you right back in from wherever you hoped to escape. 'Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in.'

*Pseudo-identities of instrumentality.* Tony knows a racket when he sees one. Though he occasionally gives in to bouts of sentimentality regarding the old ways, he is perfectly aware that no innocence can be afforded regarding the identity categories that have issued from the cauldron of American race relations. Not only were ethnic and racial categories exploited for their potential in creating working class inter-ethnic competition, resentment, and animosity (and thus hampering proletarian self-recognition), these categories could also emerge as artifices for ruthless self-advancement for any opportunist. Identity is the instrument of grifters in episode 3 of season 4, titled 'Christopher' in connection with Columbus and the impending controversies between Native Americans and Italian-Americans around the celebration of Columbus Day. Like so much engineering of collective dissension in the American tradition, the occasion of Columbus Day seems nearly designed to draw one group against another, to pit the rise of one against the struggles of survival of another, as if identity must be a zero-sum game. The mutually competing claims of victimization draw together the resentful elements from each side. Those who have the most tenuous connection (or none at all) to the identity categories at hand emerge as the most vocal. Pretendians scuffle with wannabe dagos. Ralphie Cifaretto (Joe Pantoliano) hangs the threat over the Native American leading the protest against the Columbus Day parade that he will reveal to his public the reality of Iron Eyes Cody, an Italian-American who posed as native in Hollywood productions over a long career. Tony brings this up to Chief Smith (Nick Chinlund), tribal chairman of the Mohonk Indians and native casino boss. The chief, of course, bears no phenotypical features in common with his native group and admits to passing as white most of his life. Yet he certainly knows how to capitalize to the fullest with this available identity category, for as soon as the casino bill passed, he had a racial awakening and claimed his Mohonk heritage (his maternal great grandmother was a quarter Mohonk, apparently). Regarding Iron Eyes Cody, Chief Smith tells Tony that finding out he is not really Native American is like finding out James Caan in *The Godfather* is not Italian. The artifices of identity categories go hand in hand with open

secrets about their unseemly occupants. (Anyone heard of Professor Andy Smith of UC Riverside?)<sup>3</sup> The academic grifter knows to couple their identity claim with a self-serving pseudo-philosophical critique of evidence. There is always a way to rig the system, even in the name of those misfortunate ones one is attempting to be, depriving them of what is rightfully theirs.

*Imperial platforms and the staging of ethnic absence.* Though the camera rarely leaves the environs of north New Jersey and New York City, the long form of the TV serial allows it to draw into its orbit the social, cultural, and even psychological ramifications of the wider imperial world. The years of the show's existence coincide with the events of September 11 and the dual invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan that followed, which is to say, with the reconsolidation of the American empire around the world. The implications of this hegemony is made manifest in a whole variety of ways, from the manner in which it lays out a pathway into military service for Tony's otherwise directionless son AJ (Robert Iler) (who, in a prophetic gesture par excellence, with nothing else on the horizon also imagines himself working under Trump); or new assignments in the War on Terror to special agent Dwight Harris (Matt Servitto) who is re-stationed in Pakistan and returns to the neighborhood with a stomach parasite (though that does not prevent him from ordering his favorite sandwiches at Satriales, where he will regularly run into Tony and his gang). The intersections between the imperial operations abroad and various relations among the races and ethnicities on the domestic front is what the show is able to track. That is, it is possible to read the different depictions of various Asian nationalities – Korean, Chinese, Indians, and Pakistanis – or the different religious communities – Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists – as if upon an imperial platform, each occupying the bit meted out to them by the needs of the narrative, each in their subordinate place, even at the margins of the screen – except during key dream sequences, as we shall have occasion to observe. Under the unfortunate auspices of imperial war abroad, the marginal types stage their non-presences while still on screen. The show works incidentally, if not by design, to mark all at once the existence of the marginalized when needed to perform essential services, and their critical silence and absence when no longer required. Like the Sikh mechanic at the garage who comes out from under a car to answer a couple of Carmela's (Edie Falco) questions and immediately goes back beneath to continue working, these types are essential but rendered faceless and unmemorable. They make possible the movements and developments of the main characters, and yet are easily dismissed and forgotten with little compunction. Whenever they might draw attention to themselves, like the Asian director conscripted to make 'Clever' for the gang, the microphone is taken away from them. A closer eye on the marginalized indicates the operations of televisual invisibility of presences and the staging devices of absence on the imperial screen. A sharper focus on these figures and the operations that frame them as absent allows one to face the workings of the stereotype in making expendable and even dead what hardly was granted any existence in the first place.

'*What am I, a swami?*' No, Junior Corrado (Dominic Chianese), no one would mistake you for a swami, especially not in New Jersey, let alone in India. But the very fact that this line and so many others like it are strewn throughout the entire series alerts the minority

viewership referenced by these asides to the worlds where they are generally situated: off screen, or at the edge of existence, but on-call for any kind of cameo of their type. It is very much in the role of service personnel that they exist within the bounds of the show's screen world: as mechanic, as already mentioned, but also as doctors, cab drivers, nurses, pharmacist, painters; or as petty drug dealers who can be thrashed around; or gawking regulars at Bada Bing (about whom Tony can inform Dwight Harris for his terrorist surveillance efforts on very little grounds). Even when Meadow needs emotional support after being dumped by Jackie Jr. (Jason Cerbone), there is her dorm mate Ambujam ready to drive her and make sure she stays on track. But these types' significance is even greater when they are not present at all and their existence can be invoked from a safe distance. From afar Chris can go off about 'towel heads' in 'Diarrheastan' just when he started to seem likable again. Or Janice Soprano (Aida Turturro) can talk about loving life in 'Pradesh' – she herself may not recall which one – where she adopted the name 'Parvati' – mispronounced on every occasion in the show – in her jaunt through yet another variety of new age spiritualism, to Tony's skepticism and chagrin. He is in turn able to get her goat and roil her calm discipline learned in anger management courses by calling her 'Mahatma Gandhi over here.' The diasporic viewership is able to grasp the ironies as well as the dangers lurking within these casual invocations of themselves as user-friendly others. They can laugh simultaneously at the inside joke as well as sense themselves being rendered faceless, unmemorable, expendable – as dead as any stereotype renders their individuality. Diasporic laughter is liable to dissolve into dread.

*Ciphers of absence.* That Asians are not excluded from the world of *The Sopranos* should be obvious, for one can point to them as patently there on the screen: like the Asian prostitute Tony hires when alone in a swank hotel room after seeing the television commercial offering any number of interchangeable exotic specimen by simply dialing 1-900-555-JADE. (The Asian call girl enters the screen space to bend over the mini-bar with a skin tight dress revealing a g-string beneath, and then – cut.) The fact that the presence of Asians is hardly ever felt, referenced, or remembered suggests that they are not fully included either, or at least not as full presences, but rather, in keeping with the Western tradition, as 'the mark of an absence, an area of non-representation' or as signs of the status of those they are servicing before they are signs of themselves as well.<sup>4</sup> (This is in sharp contrast to the status of whites, who hardly ever appear on the screen, as noted above, but whose presence is felt at every moment as the absent center upon which the racial hierarchy taken as a given by the show ultimately rests.) In its beguiling self-reflexivity, *The Sopranos* is able to indicate that Asians are ciphers in American society of something that is missing, something that eludes even their status as signs of social subordination: they are emblems of something absented, indices of a blank face, markers of beings without personality, people imprisoned in indistinguishable uniformity, a humanity undone by interchangeability. It is interesting to note that in a previous episode revolving around Tony's hapless cousin Tony Blundetto (Steve Buscemi) and his difficulties in subordinating himself to the Korean owner of a laundry mat, being an immigrant in the US is equated with being a prisoner. The immigrant is locked into the pigeon hole of being a negligible nonentity, interchangeable with any other number of faceless nobodies. On this occasion, the culprits who are suspected of



killing Jackie Jr. are no longer the usual two unidentified black males but rather ‘chinks.’ The show once again plays two cards at once: revealing the guilty system of racism at the extra-diegetical level while inevitably perpetuating it through its diegesis. We glimpse through its conflicted coding the faint outlines of a horizon beyond these confines as well as Hollywood’s usual real-life game: making distinguishable, individuated, and thus human the (semi-)white faces, while rendering interchangeable, uniform, and sub-human the Asian ones.

*Everything in its nonplace.* That absence is not self-evident should be self-evident. Far from being an objective given, absence requires for its noticing the specific presuppositions of a subject regarding what should, might, or could be there, but is not. We know from the show itself that a particular subjectivity is involved in a particular economy of noticing and not noticing, of centering and decentering with the gaze. This for instance is put on display in one especially ironic shot in the series. We are at the Bada Bing!, the strip club run by Tony’s consigliere Silvio Dante (Steven Van Zandt) where Tony also maintains an office and regularly meets with the gang. While strippers are often rendered the equivalent of wall paper, womanly flesh undulating in the background or sliding up and down poles to the hard bass grinding from the speakers, they are at the very least within the range of the desirous masculine gaze surrounding them (especially when the gaze is borne by the South Asian Muslims who occasionally frequent the place, indicative of the gender segregation and sexual repression of their domestic environments). But when the football game is on the TV, the presence of the strippers is rendered so marginal as to be extinguished. A quick lesson is provided in phenomenology, or how seeing works: the camera follows the gaze of the male crowd by panning over the strippers’ twerking hips on the stage, passing them over without the slightest notice despite their comeliness. Dictated by other desires, the camera turns to the action on the TV screen. Nothing new here: The center of attention has the capacity to blot out the margins. Yet a challenge is put forth to the diasporic critic, one who notes the absences and has an eye for the edges: To not be guided by the same gaze as the mass, but rather to focus on the absences and bring to the center of analysis the miniaturized presences, however fleeting, like the bhangra Meadow is banging out to in her new car, or Dr. Mehta, who is being dismissed and undermined by Dr. Kennedy in their treatment of Tony’s uncle, or the figures of class exploitation, whether it be the Hispanic truck driver who requests a beating to make sure his superiors think he did put up a fight against the heisters, or indeed Tony’s working class cousins who are pushed to the side of the party and saddled with duties to allow the more elite members of the family to go on with their festivities. The diasporic critic sees him or herself in what is absented from the center. The absented viewer looks out at everything from this non-place, draws our attention to the labor of the foil, and the exploitation occurring at the margins – *locus classicus* of *la famiglia* Soprano. The absented becomes the point of mediation for all else that is made absent: *ex existentia absentiae absentia est*.

*Absence and social totality.* The notion of absence that I am working with would not have entered the picture had not *The Sopranos* indicated things missing from the locus of the lifeworld of the main characters. Only tangentially from the Buddhistic flair of the late dream sequences would one have any inkling of the existence of the notions of absence



Dr. Mehta explains to Carmela Soprano and her mother the need for surgical intervention.

in the philosophical traditions of southern Asia, such as Vaisesika, from which the present reading secured its points of reference. Taking this category (abhava) seriously, classical Indian logic and ontology derived a state of affairs that is no less objective than one premised on the presence of objects. Absence for the classical Indian logicians was irreducible to the objective realm and established instead ‘a *sui generis* type of perceptual experience,’ a specific phenomenology with respect to a particular kind of property premised on what is not there, or could never be there, such as heat in an ice cube.<sup>5</sup> Only in the context of dream do the elements of the wider social totality that are the bearers of what is generally absent or repressed in the diegesis come into focus. Scenes engaging with near death experiences and the hallucinatory dream sequences – as when Tony is in the hospital after being shot by Uncle Junior in a state of delirium – allow the narrative and the diegesis to careen out of the usual bounds of the series’ life world and encounter what is otherwise denied centrality. Indeed, as we shall see, it is in the dream sequences that an alternative social reality is given center stage and the usual course of things is reversed, or indeed, vomited out, bringing into relief in the process what is otherwise repressed.

*Traveling with Kevin Finnerty into nothingness (sunyata).* The dream sequences stretching over two episodes in season 6 demand interpretative frameworks that seem to exceed the bounds of the usual spectator (hence the complaints David Chase received by perplexed audiences) and the typically trained media critic (hence scarce commentary on these



Buddhist monks look warily upon Tony Soprano/Kevin Finnerty who has been summoned to their monastery.



Tony Soprano/Kevin Finnerty defending himself before the Buddhist monks.

episodes in the critical literature). These episodes, 'Join the Club' and 'Mayham,' decenter the usual Western metaphysics redolent of Catholicism, and displace Tony from his usual milieu, family, neighborhood, occupation, and thus his very self. Now in a dream induced by the proximity of death, Tony is on the verge of sloughing off the old and assuming a new persona as a Kevin Finnerty – or is it now Kevin 'Finnity,' on the verge of expiration. Indeed, the voice that emanates from behind his new identity is nothing like the nasally New Jersey accent that has characterized Tony thus far. Upon awakening momentarily on his hospital bed, he asks those looming over him, 'I'm dead, right?' Hovering between living and dying, he returns back to his dream of finitude, caught in the non-places of airports, hotel lobbies, and nondescript hotel rooms, cars, and locations, all of which mark the end of one existence and the possibility of another. Indeed, we have departed from the Christian metaphysics of heaven and hell and its attachment to the physical body to an Eastern-inflected one of reincarnation. The encounter with the Buddhist monks, who serve as metonymy of this new more encompassing metaphysics, concentrate in full force the slew of stray references to things Indian over several seasons, such as the Buddhist spiritual leanings and home décor of one of his mistresses, Gloria (Annabella Sciorra). To drive home the point, mention is made in the parallel waking diegesis to a Dr. Budraja, who never appears, but rather suggests that we have entered a space in which the Buddha is now raja (king). The reversal of powers at play is put on jocular display when one of the Buddhist monks that Tony/Kevin keeps running into (or rather is inscrutably drawn to) pushes him and sends him tumbling. (No Tony Soprano would have ever tolerated such brazen attitude, but Kevin Finnity does not retaliate.) The critical spectator may suspect that the dream coding allows for the reversal of the waking world's hierarchies and presences. No one knows if he is Kevin or Tony. No one seems to really care. The elder Buddhist monk remarks that for them 'all Caucasians look alike.'

*No fun in 'Funhouse.'* Reading from the vantage point of diaspora means being attentive to metonymy, as has already been alluded. For only indirection and implication by means of fragments bring into perspective hidden relations between disparate worlds. Who would have thought that Salvatore 'Big Pussy' Bonpensiero (Vincent Pastore), that rat within Tony's pack, and Indian food, with all of its foreign spices, would have anything to do with each other? Who would have imagined that along with Tony's repressed ink-lings regarding Pussy's status as an informant for the FBI would also emerge

metonymically – in this case, as vomited Indian food – the economic exploitation of hapless Indian immigrants, most likely undocumented? Assimilated immigrants exploiting those recently displaced and longing to reconnect with their homeland – by phone cards or whatever it takes – from a bewildering place: could anything be more American? Let us step back and reconstruct the scene and the implications of its associative logic, for they get to the very core of the racially stratified late capitalism off of which *la famiglia* feeds. ‘Funhouse,’ the episode that closes season 2, is a complicated one, bringing to a high feverish pitch a variety of disparate notes of previous episodes. Being composed of dream interludes that draw into their hallucinatory associative logic everything from the chicken vindaloo that Tony feasts on with Sundeep (Ajay Mehta), his accomplice, after making a killing on a phone card scheme that robs recently arrived Indian immigrants, to an encounter with Pussy, who is now a talking fish for sale on a desolate boardwalk that admits to Tony all that had been suppressed in his consciousness. The interplay of associations is rich, as are the cinematic qualities.<sup>6</sup> The dream world becomes as usual the *mise en scène* that allows hidden dimensions of psychic and social realities to be revealed momentarily, whether intentionally or not. It is not clear exactly what has led to Tony’s bout with indigestion. Is it a bad feeling about Pussy? Or could it have been the mussels he ate at Vesuvio’s, Artie Bucco’s (John Ventimiglia) restaurant, whose name itself suggests eruptions from below? Artie downplays that possibility and points the finger right at the Indian food, affirming Tony’s own suspicions that it had to have been the chicken vindaloo. ‘Fucking goddess with the six arms – no wonder!’ Was it chicken or a cocker spaniel? The blaming of a food item becomes the means for scapegoating an entire civilization and its peoples. Artie drives home the connection to get himself off the hook. Recent immigrants are there to be scapegoated. He brings up the dangers of getting a ‘rancid hit of ghee’ and mentions how at the funeral of Indira Gandhi, the corpse had to be smeared with ghee, as if that has anything to do with what ails Tony. In the midst of the racist banter of ‘fucking, motherfucking wogs,’ ‘ragheads,’ and smelly spices, Doctor Cusamano (Robert Lupone) shows up to check on Tony. With a stance in keeping with the extradiegetic level, the doctor notes that it was probably the mussels from Vesuvio, for the spices in Indian cuisine ‘kill the bacteria.’ But the string of associations in the dream draws together Pussy as a fish for sale and the calling card scheme, both of which entail monetary exchange, the form under which processes of exploitation take place in capitalist societies. With the bad feelings that Tony had about Pussy, other unsavory aspects of racial exploitation under capitalism come to the fore, as if of their own accord.



The scheme in action as one Indian immigrant pitches a calling card to another at a pay phone.



Sundeep celebrates with Tony Soprano the success of their calling card scheme in an Indian restaurant.

*Late capitalist style.* It all could have been otherwise, but even that tragic self-realization is impossible within the framework of the show. Everyone is driven by a sense of inevitability, and an evasion of any sense of a palpable alternative, even when one might appear. Several critics sense that the show had no other choice but to end in media res and irresolution for it had resulted in a situation of never ending loops of vengeance, hopelessness, stasis, and, regarding the possibility of doing anything about it, lateness. This sense of tragic inevitability ultimately pervades even the extradiegetic dimension, as it seems to aver that even though one might expose the system as deeply racist, there is no easy way out of the play of racial typologies and stereotypes upon which one must rely. We are in a state of long-term demise of the mode of production itself, yet so deeply mired within it that the thought of alternatives is hardly possible. As Gramsci put it, ‘La crisi consiste appunto nel fatto che il vecchio muore e il nuovo non può nascere: in questo interregno si verificano i fenomeni morbosi più svariati.’<sup>7</sup> Only from the vantage point of all those elements that are on the margins or repressed altogether, barely acknowledged to exist in the first place, can one glimpse any possibility of transformation that is lost to those at the center of the narrative. The diasporic critic, attentive to absences, notes as well the absence of hope, and maintains its memory. The shift of perspective that marginality offers is merely the indicator of possibilities of new unexplored horizons, which can only be pieced together like a puzzle through metonymic reading. The task is admittedly much larger than what any discrete identity group can bear.

## Notes

1. For Williams, ‘the fact of flow’ is ‘the central television experience.’ See his ([1974] 2003).
2. A catalogue of all of the races and ethnicities that populate the *Sopranos* remains a desideratum for the social scientist as well as cultural critic. Any such effort would reveal a highly motley ensemble especially from the middling complexions of ethnicities that pass as white after a generation or two all the way down to the darkest tones where such patterns of upward mobility is effectively blocked.
3. Viren (2021).
4. Robbins (1986).
5. Ganeri (2021).
6. As with the other episodes that include dream sequences, this one emphasizes a variety of techniques from a split diegesis (dream/waking life) and the transposition of a soundscape

of a central scene on an ominously creaking boat onto other scenes. These overarching techniques in turn give license to arresting tableaux, incongruities in the mise en scene, irises through which Tony sees a foreshadowing of his own actions, and mismatching of subjects in shot-reverse shot edits of a conversation, including an encounter with his own guy Pussy as a fish ready for sale.

7. 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.' Gramsci (1971). For original Italian, see 'Ondato di materialismo' e 'crisi di autorità' in Gramsci (2007).

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