

Professor Philip Crang
Fashioning Diaspora Space: Textiles, Pattern and Cultural Exchange
Between Britain and South Asia
End of year report for 2008

The research is generating important findings in relation to theoretical approach, substance and research practice.

In terms of theoretical approach, it has become apparent that the project is developing a dual role for material culture with respect to questions of diaspora, migration and identity. First, it explores how material culture objectifies diasporic social relations, sensibilities and identities. For example, the project research on contemporary British Asian women's dress is seeing how items of clothing enact familial ties, constitute prosthetic memories, and act as contextually sensitive technologies of embodied selfhood. Second, though, the project is also finding out how things themselves can be 'diasporic', constituting fields of cultural dispersal, exchange and invention -- a traffic in culture -- that is not always reducible to the migrations of people. Here questions of appropriation and fabrication come to the fore; about how 'South Asian' culture and its differences are made and used in Britain. In such processes the common admonition to commodity fetishism -- that people make things -- is reversed, in so far as we are discovering how things make people (or at least fashion subject positions). For example, we are seeing how in mid-late C19 British design reform the appropriation of Indian textiles was central to the production of both cosmopolitan and local, artisanal subject positions. Furthermore, in investigating such processes our work is illustrating not only what an attention to material culture can bring to diaspora studies, but also what diaspora studies can bring to wider work on object worlds. For example, recent debate on contemporary global cultural economies, and the goods circulating within them, is complicated in our research, both sociologically -- by moving away from a focus on the corporately associated brand as the source of products and towards diasporic identities and geographies -- and historically -- for example, complicating a presentist focus on design intensive cultural economies with evidence for the role of Indian textiles in the very emergence of British design in the C19.

With regard to substantive findings, the strand of work on Indian textiles in C19 British culture has yielded some particular highlights this year. Progressing work that framed the Indian objects in the South Kensington Museum as an exemplary 'imperial archive', our research is teasing out the different modes of collecting, the different logics of typification, and the different materialisations of Indian textiles being enacted through the South Kensington complex. In summary, the research is highlighting their different geographies of circulation rather than their common presence in the collection. For example, in a paper published in 2008, the research examines how these circulations include the translation of Indian textiles into 'designs' -- in both senses of the word, as motifs and programmatic interventions. The focus here is on Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament*, where the project has traced the abstraction of Indian textiles into chromolithographic plates and general principles of design, and their application onto consumer products and spaces, such as wallpapers.

Methodologically, a particular feature of the project is its inclusion of practice-led visual arts research, centred on the drawing research of Helen Scalway. The residencies at the Drawing Research Space, Wimbledon College of Art in 2007 continued into 2008, and again proved invaluable. An artist's blog, 'Moving Patterns', hosted on the V&A website (http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1750_scalway/blog) is not only opening up this work to a general public, but has also proved a genre well suited to the reflexive nature of this research practice. Such research is designed to

ensure that the visual encounter with South Asian textiles and their presence in diaspora space is not solely commented on, but re-worked into new experiential forms. The use of drawing practice to achieve this has particular resonance in that drawing was a principal technology for the abstraction and appropriation of Indian craft skills within the colonial Design Schools. Rather than abstraction, the project research is drawing out the diasporic transruption of orthodox geographies of place, landscape and identity.

In the second year of the project our principal foci have been the progression of the project's substantive research; and the initiation of the project outputs that will dominate our third year. Substantively, research has been largely completed on our selected acquisitions within the V&A's Indian textile collections, and this work has added a significant new curatorial resource of public access descriptions in the process; the qualitative research on contemporary British Asian women's dress is complete; textual analysis of the British Asian fashion press is well progressed, but interview work with designers has been delayed into year 3; 'community engagement' events at the V&A have been progressed and are on-going; and the visual arts practice-led research has seen a completed residency and exhibition in the Drawing Research Space, the initiation of an on-line blog, fieldwork in India as well as London, and the 'prototyping' of a number of visual forms (e.g. dioramas, montages, installations and geometric drawings) in relation to the major public exhibition in 2009. With regard to outputs, that exhibition's title (Moving Patterns), location (Royal Geographical Society, South Kensington, London), date (May 7-21 2009), and 'architecture' / form have been resolved. The speakers for the project conference (Fashioning Diasporas, Sackler Centre, V&A Museum, London) have been recruited, and advertising is on-going. The project book (to be titled British Asian Style) has been proposed and contracted (with V&A Publishing; to be published September 2010), and contributors have been contracted from within and beyond the project team. The project presence on V&A On-line has been slowed in comparison to what we hoped for 2008, due to a V&A website re-design, but is ahead of the schedule in the application.