Working Around Ethnographic Entanglements: South Asian American Literature and Popular Culture

by

Swathi Hiremagalur Sreerangarajan

B.A. in English Literature, NMKRV College for Women, Bangalore, India, 2007

M.A. in English Literature, Center for English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, India, 2009

M.A. in English Literature, University of Pittsburgh, 2014

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

The Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

PhD in English

University of Pittsburgh

2016

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

KENNETH P. DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Swathi Hiremagalur Sreerangarajan

It was defended on

June 3, 2016

and approved by

Neepa Majumdar, Associate Professor, English and Film Studies

Tyler Bickford, Assistant Professor, English

Marian Aguiar, Associate Professor, English, Carnegie Mellon University

Dissertation Advisors: Nancy Glazener, Associate Professor, English

Shalini Puri, Associate Professor, English

Working Around Ethnographic Entanglements: South Asian American Literature and

Popular Culture

Swathi Hiremagalur Sreerangarajan, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2016

This dissertation identifies the significant demands on ethnic American artists to narrate their

identities, and it analyzes specific literary texts and cultural practices that attempt to work around

such imperatives. Interpreting the work of South Asian American authors and performers, I

depart from two main strains of reading/viewing habits that entail expectations for ethnic people

to explore and represent their (ethnic) identities. Building on the scholarship of Rey Chow, Jack

Halberstam, and several Asian American literary critics, I argue that publishers and a range of

readers often demand autoethnographic representations—i.e. cultural representations that correct

or disrupt mainstream narratives—from ethnic authors. The dissertation's introductory chapter

elaborates on these expectations as part of what I call ethnographic entanglements, or the

biopolitical situation of artists who must ethnographize themselves in order to be published.

The remaining chapters focus on workarounds produced by authors and artists, frustrating

readers who expect cultural representation. Drawing attention to how South Asian diasporic

authors have addressed ethnographic demands in their use of child characters, Chapter 2 takes up

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *An American Brat* to explore the formal potential of the "brat" as an

uncooperative figure allowing authors to circumvent readerly expectations of ethnography.

Chapter 3 considers "identity confusion" among second-generation immigrants in the context of

the cultural self-consciousness demanded of ethnic youth and analyzes fictional representations

of a distinctive kind of nightclub event, the "desi party," from the 1990s that offered temporary

relief from the everyday demands of legible self-representation. Chapter 4 argues that the Indian Canadian standup artist Russell Peters produced a form of accent comedy that rejected both the performance of stereotypical ethnic identity thrust upon brown actors on the screen throughout the 1990s and the alternative task of providing an autoethnographic corrective. The coda to the dissertation returns to the question of the ethnographic packaging of South Asian American print and media narratives and the ways in which contemporary media convergence allows artists to de-privilege "outsider" audiences.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It takes a village to raise a Ph.D. My first thanks are owed to Rajiv Krishnan and Ashley Tellis, who recognized my desire to spend another decade of my years studying literature and helped me get my foot in the door. To Nancy Glazener I extend my humblest and deepest gratitude, for her anchoring mentorship, painstaking editing, and tireless championing of students as Director of Graduate Studies. I also thank Shalini Puri, who has taught me so much as a professor, dissertation advisor, and engaged scholar. Thank you, Shalini and Nancy, for teaching me to challenge academic orthodoxy as well as refine my counter-arguments. Many, many thanks are owed to the rest of my committee, Neepa Majumdar, Tyler Bickford, and Marian Aguiar, for kindly reading multiple drafts of my work and encouraging me to think harder through matters of aesthetic choice and theoretical alignment. I am incredibly grateful, also, to my committee for their rigor in the important arts of composition and style.

Other faculty members at Pitt and elsewhere have shaped me as a thinker and writer. I thank Troy Boone for his example of meticulous proofreading and attention to detail; Jonathan Arac for his incredible kindness and farsighted advice; Marianne Novy, whose scholarly breadth made for some riveting conversations; Bill Scott for his lively classroom discussions and inspiring scholarship; Thora Brylowe for her amazing Book/Text/Author class that taught me so much; Nicole Constable for making me think more deeply about ethnography; and Donna Harsch for teaching me how historians think. I thank Geeta Kothari for some amazing

conversations I've ever had about desi writers and the publishing industry. A special thank you to Susan Andrade, for intriguing me with a comment about how Indian English fiction reads like anthropology and thus inspiring a key component of my dissertation. I'm also grateful to the Humanities Center at Pitt for organizing the scores of speakers and events that never failed to set my brain happily spinning in thought.

I'm incredibly grateful to Jesse Daugherty in the English department for his painstaking assistance on all matters plaguing a remotely located Ph.D. candidate. I'm also grateful for the Sacramento public library, which allowed me to borrow books from nearby academic libraries for free, and to "Shut up and Write," a Meetup group that allowed me to sit down with other writers and feed off their creative energy. Thanks to my current and former students, too numerous to name, who have inspired me to think in different ways and reminded me of the love I have for intellectual work.

Completed over seven years and in multiple cities, my time in the Ph.D. program has left me heavily indebted to friends and family who have provided the emotional sustenance and intellectual community without which academic work is next to impossible. Thanks especially to my oldest friends from graduate school, Elizabeth Oliphant and Amanda Phillips Chapman, for their fortifying companionship in pursuing the life of the mind. Liz, you are the ultimate confidante and every productive day in my life includes talking shop with you. Amanda, when I have trouble articulating something, I pretend I am you and suddenly I have all the words. Sincere heartfelt thanks to Jessica FitzPatrick, Clare Sigrist, Laura Renée Chandler, Govind Krishnan, and Hyo Kyung Woo. Your sense of humor and zeal for accomplishment reinforces mine, and I'm greatly improved as a person for knowing you. Cherod Johnson, you are an academic fiend. Thank you for teaching me to be devilishly unafraid. Thank you, Katie Homar,

1.0 INTRODUCTION: ETHNOGRAPHIC READING HABITS AND WORKAROUNDS

In a recent Q&A for *The NY Times*, Jhumpa Lahiri bristled noticeably at the phrase "immigrant fiction" applied casually to her work. She writes:

> I don't know what to make of the term…Writers have always tended to write about the worlds they come from. And it just so happens that many writers originate from different parts of the world than the ones they end up living in, either by choice or by necessity or by circumstance, and therefore, write about those experiences. If certain books are to be termed immigrant fiction, what do we call the rest? Native fiction? Puritan fiction?

This Q&A, called "By the Book" and published in the *NY Times Sunday Book Review*, features a well-established artist every weekend, soliciting answers to mostly low-stakes questions like "what books are currently on your nightstand?" and "which contemporary writers and artists inspire you most?" The column sometimes includes more specific questions for interviewees with a recognizable niche. For example, Bill Bryson, who has written several bestselling memoirs from travel, was asked about his favorite travel writers and books. It seems in the spirit of recognizing her niche success that this question was written for Lahiri: "What immigrant fiction has been the most important to you, both personally and as an inspiration for your own writing?" The provocation in her answer (quoted above) is reflected in the editors' decision to feature the comment as a blurb.[i]

Such a generic classification of Lahiri's work comes as no surprise, least of all, I imagine, to the author herself. Her faux incredulity is mostly rhetorical and targeted at the identity politics of authorship and the microaggressions underlying what seems to be a throwaway question.[ii] Why are only "certain books," she goes on to ask, immigrant fiction? After all, the immigrant is a longstanding archetype in American fiction. Lahiri is taking exception here to the idea that her work is primarily about representing immigrants (of Indian origin). By reminding us that "[w]riters have always tended to write about the worlds they come from," Lahiri questions the idea that her work is somehow more autoethnography than fiction. The irony in her suggestion that the term "Native" be used for American fiction is just as sharp as the epithet of "Puritan" to contemporary American fiction seems impractical. Underlying these sharp references to American history is the point that over-emphasizing the ethnographic value of her writing by calling it "immigrant fiction" implicitly segregates her work from the rest of American fiction.

"Immigrant" is arguably one of the most ethnicizing terms in currency in the United States, given its liberal use as an adjective for people and things *within the U.S.* whose cultural origins seem extraneous to the national imaginary. The idea of "immigrant" as "ethnic" finds its roots in the old assimilationist vision of America as a place where diverse people (of implicitly European descent) came to be fused into one nationality united by their individualist commitment to pursuing wealth and happiness. But this vision was clearly forged at a time when citizenship was afforded only to the white race—immigrants only needed to transcend European cultural roots to escape ethnicity and become American. One of the earliest critiques of the whiteness of American citizenship, W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" is a veritable expression of the impossibility of assimilation for non-white people.[iii] And post-1965 configurations of race and ethnicity continue to maintain emphasis on immigrant origins for non-

white people, reminding them of the double consciousness, as it were, from which they can authentically speak. A metanarrative that authoritatively fuses people of Asian descent into the melting pot of American citizenship does not quite exist yet in the national culture.

To write "immigrant fiction," in this context, is to write ethnographically about a specific group of immigrants with the authority and knowledge attributed to ethnographers and native informants respectively. Such classifications of ethnic authors, the kind Lahiri resists, participate in what Rey Chow has called "coercive mimeticism."[iv] Because ethnic authors are presumed to speak on behalf of ethnic subjectivity, Chow argues, their writing is imagined to provide unmediated access to that experience. And this is something ethnic people have nearly always contended with while navigating a white-privileged culture. In the context of 1980s Black British art, Kobena Mercer framed these pressures as "the burden of representation." Spectators and art critics, Mercer argued, often assumed that black artists were always concerned with the cultural politics and representation of Black British identity.[v] Within the Asian American context, Frank Chin's diatribe against "the Chinatown book" and his famous spat with Maxine Hong Kingston over the marketing of *The Woman Warrior* (1975) as a memoir/autobiography frame another conversation.[vi] A few years after the novel's publication, Kingston would rail against the "cultural misreadings" of her work by white reviewers: "Why must I 'represent' anyone besides myself? Why should I be denied an individual artistic vision?"[vii] We might extend her question by asking why Kingston "must" represent even herself in her work.

More recently, authors Elif Shafak and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie offer powerful critiques of how the adage to "write what you know" becomes twisted in their cases into imperatives to write about 'who' they are. During a memorable moment in her TED Talk, Shafak narrates her initial surprise at a reader who wondered why her novel (set in a university campus

at Boston) had only one Turkish character. She then comments: "I understood that I would keep disappointing him. He wanted to see the manifestation of my identity. He was looking for a Turkish woman in the book because I happened to be one."[viii] In a similar vein, Adichie reflects on a writing professor's remarks that her work was not "authentically African."[ix] Despite the different contexts, each of these authors mark what I call ethnographic entanglements, or the multidimensional pressure to explore one's own ethnicity or national (or continental!) origin and fulfill imaginary standards for its authentic representation.

As a tool of biopower, coercive mimeticism is definitely not limited to literary texts and can manifest in any number of performative arenas for racialized/ethnic subjects, as I explore further in the chapters. That is to say, ethnographic entanglements operate somewhat in common across the board in "contact zones" manifested in everyday life, print, performance cultures, and other media. Actor/screenwriter Mindy Kaling offers one colorful example of the ways South Asian American actors are often presumed to represent their identities in their work. Striking a note of irritation, not unlike that struck by the above-described authors, Kaling informs us in her 2015 book:

> Everyone knows that all white people are racist. And the clearest evidence of that racism
> is when white people (as well as people of pretty much every other color) confuse *me*
> with the characters I write for myself to play. Racism: When will it end?[x]

This passage starts a new chapter midway through Kaling's second book and catches the reader slightly off-guard. How to understand racism as the co-efficient of persistent suspension of disbelief? Once again, coercive mimeticism appears to be the best explanation. Viewers are always prone to suspend disbelief in a way that conflates character with actor, but ethnic actors

are rather persistently presumed to represent ethnic subjectivity (hence the alleged racism). At any rate, it is difficult not to take seriously her flippantly provocative comment.

While coercive mimeticism has multiple dimensions, a major part of the problem has always been that marketing is driven by the belief that American audiences are unable to fully identify with, and therefore universalize, the story of anyone who is not white, male, or straight. Long before readers offer their critiques, Asian American authors are likely to face marketing pressures to conceive of their projects as ethnographic adventures or resources for cultural knowledge. And this is probably because we have a long history of ethnographic readership to begin with. In *Beyond the Literary Chinatown* (2007), Jeff Partridge uses the phrase "literary Chinatown" to describe the kind of marketplace that demands ethnographic adventure. (While his focus is on Chinese American authors, his reader-response theory of the structural conditions of ethnographic readership easily applies to other ethnic texts.) If ethnography is the first "horizon" of reader expectation, he argues, Chinese American authors work to stretch those reading horizons beyond the metaphorical Chinatown.

Partridge's analysis of book culture and texts is informative, but I find limiting his exclusive focus on texts' potential challenges for orientalist Euro-American readers. I am not suggesting that we have outlived the need to theorize such readerships. But by focusing on the literary Chinatown phenomenon, his argument repeats an intervention within the now worn-out Chin-Kingston debates. Against a ghettoizing reading tendency that the market upholds, he argues, authors have always expressed individual identities that resist readers' constructions. On the one hand, there is the orientalist reader to whom the "literary Chinatown" caters. On the other hand, Partridge argues, authors challenge orientalist ways of reading.[xi]

Anita Mannur (2009) similarly focuses the potential interventions of South Asian American texts in relation to simplistic/orientalist ways of reading. Situating her approach to food as a "vital textual modality…that becomes a means of articulating one's sense of ethnic or national identity" in South Asian diaspora/American fiction, Anita Mannur writes:

Cursory examinations of many ethnic-themed novels will demonstrate how a visual rendering of food on novel covers is frequently also the means by which publishing houses market Asian Americanness to a readership hungry to consume delectable renditions of alterity even when the narrative may have little to no actual content focused on food and foodways. Increasingly it is also the means by which Asian American authors speak to mainstream reading publics (14).

Mannur is of course right that mangoes and red saris are to South Asian American (woman-authored) fictions what "Chinatown" is to Chinese American authors. And Mannur makes this connection clear, referring to Frank Chin's censure of (mostly women) Asian American authors using culinary idioms to Orientalize/ethnographize Asian communities. Citing Chin and his well-known cultural nationalism allows Mannur, however, to mark her own intervention in exploring through multiple chapters how "food pornography operates to both buttress and dismantle narratives of racial abjection" (15). This is borne out in several places throughout the book— where she alternatively critiques or credits artists based on their articulations of ethnic identity.[xii] Here we have a good object/bad object mode of reading that pays attention mostly to the way texts participate in the politics of ethnic representation, albeit through the specific modality of food and with more political nuance than Frank Chin demonstrated. If Mannur is aware that there are readers that hunger, as it were, in other kinds for cultural representation—for the non-"Chinatown" book perhaps—she does not represent that awareness in her critical methodology.

The ways in which Asian American writers interrogate mainstream or white readers'

assumptions have long captivated literary critics. Elaine Kim, who published the first full-length

study on Asian American writing in 1982, argued that Asian American writers struggled with

racial stereotyping and set about their work of "claiming America for Asian Americans."

Implicitly defending these writers against criticism that they were pandering to the white

audience, Kim argued: "What Asian American writers express is the desire to remain as 'others'

by defining our own 'otherness,' not as foreigners but as American 'others.'" Patricia Chu (2002)

has argued similarly that Asian American writers "claimed" America for people of Asian descent

and deployed accounts of Asian ethnicity and histories to challenge established notions of

American citizenship.[xiii]

It is certainly true that publishing markets produce ethnographic demands on Asian

American writers who, in turn, feel the need to stretch such limited reading "horizons"

(Partridge). But it is possible, thirty years after the first critical study of Asian American

literature was published, that orientalism describes just *one* kind of reader projection and that we

need to theorize other forms of readerly ethnographic projections. I would argue that there are

other forms of readerly emphasis on cultural representation that work to reinforce the logic of

coercive mimeticism. Some of these include interpretations that overemphasize the inventiveness

of ethnic identity or the politics of representation. I offer here a few quick examples of such

interpretive habits before outlining the scope of this dissertation.

In his key conceptualization of ethnicity in the U.S., Werner Sollors argues that ethnicity

is in "constant need of symbolic representation" (15) and that its representation in turn presents

the "central drama of American literature" (11). Sollors represents a trend within American

studies—dubbed the "ethnicity" school—in the late 1980s that argued that American identity

was continually shaped through the inclusion of "new" citizens from different ethnic backgrounds.[xiv] In Sollors's formulation, the project of becoming fully and recognizably American required one to imaginatively distinguish himself from European, mainly English, culture in two ways: by implicitly rejecting old-world hierarchies where nobility is based exclusively on "descent" and by "consenting" to a pursuit of happiness grounded in material wealth. (Descent is defined by relations of birth and consent by relations of law or marriage.) In the vision of pure assimilation for Europeans, descent would simply disappear as a category of selfhood and consent would take its place. But since descent—stemming from relations of blood and inheritance and race—is often not easily dispensed with, ethnicity arises as the result of rich interplay or tensions between the sometimes-contradicting vectors of descent and consent. One way of distilling Sollors's theory of ethnicity in America for my purpose here is to put it in this way: For Sollors, it is through the inventiveness and cultural syncretism built into the conflict between the "hereditary and the contractual" that narratives of Americanness have been forged, a tradition whose continuation can be traced in the work of more recent immigrant/ethnic authors. One of his main arguments is that the interpretation of ethnic literature should not be confined to area specialists of specific ethnicities, because ethnic American literature primarily represents America.

Drawing from the 1980s turn to self-reflexivity in anthropology, Sollors reads ethnic literature not as "direct social and historical evidence" but as a source of didactic "codes" for "socialization into ethnic groups and into America" (9-11).[xv] Working within the context of American literature but incorporating the broader movement toward decolonizing knowledge, he argues that ethnic authors have always crafted narratives and discourses about themselves and, in the process, contributed to re-imagining America in significant ways. And yet this belated

recognition of national subjectivity and inventiveness among ethnic authors, especially when applied to immigrants from former colonies, strikes me as simply grandiose overcompensation for historical wrongs.[xvi] It is certainly plausible that ethnic artists mediate between imagined communities and participate in ongoing constructions of national subjectivity. But, generally speaking, who doesn't invent his/her identity? What exactly is unique or new about this purported aspect of ethnic literature?

The turn to invention in theories of ethnicity represented in Sollor's work is relevant because it seeks to undermine the classical ethnographic impulse to seek cultural truths and incorporates the lesson of the 1980s that ethnographies are, first and foremost, acts of writing. If ethnography is "writing culture" (Marcus and Clifford), then it is a writerly performance that can, at best, uncover "partial truths."[xvii] This "crisis of representation" (Marcus and Fischer) served to make ethnographers self-reflexive about their own biases and knowledge practices. In Clifford Geertz's formulation, ethnographers could only offer interpretations of culture, not total representations. And in Sollors's suggestion that ethnic literature is essentially American literature, we have a thesis parallel to Micheal Taussig's formulation, for example, that "novel" anthropology does not merely represent another culture, but recognizes "the West itself as mirrored in the eyes and handiwork of its others" (*Mimesis and Alterity*, 236).[xviii] The parallelism here involves engagement with the other in order to feel the pleasures and the horrors of seeing one's own reflection.

In Sollors we find a popular mode of interpreting ethnic literature for what it reveals about American identity. But Taussig's phrase, "mirrored in the eyes and handiwork of its others," holds the conceptual key to how the new wave in anthropology has both drawn from and influenced literary criticism. While the metaphor of mirroring signals the new definition of the

ethnographic text (as a reflection of the ethnographer, or the "West"), the emphasis on the "eyes and handiwork of its others" transfers the power of knowledge—and therefore the ethnographic reader's attention—to the native insider.[xix] By virtue of this (decolonizing) transfer of power, people marked by ethnic identities outside of the black/white continuum in the U.S. are proffered the author function of ethnography.[xx] Undermining the *Western* anthropologist's claims to truth and exposing the writerliness of ethnography, this new understanding has in some ways passed on the burden of thick description to the native insider (in this context, the ethnic author) and at least shared the task of cultural interpretation between anthropologists and literary critics. If ethnicity generates a "constant need for symbolic representation" (Sollors), ethnic authors appear to provide that service.

What I am trying to elaborate is not merely a longing for universality among all these artists thwarted by the persistently visible vestiges of ethnicity. For example, it is certainly not as though Lahiri has shied away from writing about the immigrant experience or from rendering ethnic characters. My point rather is that ethnic artists are often confined by readers and critics to the work of cultural representation. For children of recent immigrants, there is the additional aura of discovering America as newcomers, and of potentially redefining (i.e. reinventing the wheel of) American identity through the fresh perspective of growing up in an immigrant family. Seemingly possessing the cultural insight of insiders and the epistemological tools to speak to outsiders, ethnicity is frequently made out to be these artists' platform. The expectation that minorities write about their ethnic groups as authentic insiders stems from a traditional dichotomy of outsider/insider now critiqued within the field of anthropology but which prevails in the marketing of ethnic writers and sometimes in interpretations of their work.

The assumption that ethnicity is a "central drama" (Sollors) that shapes American identity can, in fact, constrain ethnic artists by valuing them mainly for sociological insights. Consider an article that explores the sudden rise in the numbers of South Asian American actors on television and was written for an NPR series on the impact immigrants' children have on U.S. culture. Building on the perspectives of actors, including a comment from Mindy Kaling about how children of immigrants feel both like "insiders and outsiders in regard to American culture," it offers the following sweeping thesis: "For these children of [South Asian] immigrants, it turns out, acting is a little like what they've done their whole lives: balancing two identities, inhabiting two worlds and living convincingly in both." Slightly different from the ability to inspire suspension of disbelief, what seems to be valued about these actors is the access to their "real" lives. Working on this biographical angle, the reporter then willfully dismisses a potential exception to her argument. I reproduce the text of that move here: "[Kal] Penn says he doesn't really think of himself as a child of immigrants—even though aspects of that experience were meaningfully explored in his movies *The Namesake* and *Harold And Kumar Go To White Castle.*" The fact that Penn acted in these movies featuring second-generation themes appears to close the subject on his identity here. Not only does the article generalize about the actors' embodied approach to their roles, it also treats their work as an extension of "what they've done their whole lives." In the sheer process of being actors, they have also managed to capture lived experience of children of immigrants.

I would argue that the acts of portraying the contours of their racial otherness and exploring their complicated positionality continue to shape the most privileged and rewarded narrative insights offered by ethnic artists. In my framing, such a system entails ethnographic entanglements, which manifest through at least two kinds of implied audiences—one is the racial

11

insider audience that recognizes itself in what is being represented and the other is the broader "American" audience that implicitly demands ethnography. Both kinds of audiences enact coercive imperatives upon the artists in question, whose marketability, in turn, continues to be influenced by identity-focused reading/viewing practices.

If only to counteract the purported racism of outsider readers, so-called insider readers can project equally vexing forms of cultural nationalism and autoethnographic expectations upon artists. In one of their earliest interactions, Maxine Hong Kingston requested Frank Chin's endorsement for *The Woman Warrior* and was denied with the following explanation: "I want your book to be an example of yellow art by a yellow artist…not the publisher's manipulation of another Pocahontas."[xxi] While Chin has been roundly criticized for his masculinist cultural nationalism, he is far from singular in expecting that ethnic/minority authors speak 'well' on behalf of their communities or find artistic purpose in the politics of representation. In fact, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong's well-received defense of Kingston is that *The Woman Warrior* is not, in fact, a "Chinatown book" catering to white readers but reflects instead

> the difficulty and urgency of the imaginative enterprise so necessary to the American-
> born generation: to make sense of Chinese and American culture from its own viewpoint
> (however hybrid and laughable to "outsiders"), to articulate its own reality, and to
> strengthen its precarious purchase on the task of self-fashioning.

While she admirably takes on the literal-minded critics' denouncement of *The Woman Warrior*'s authenticity, her reinstatement depends on an autoethnographic reading of the text. Kingston may not present what the old cultural nationalists want to hear, Wong argues, but she represents the reality of the second-generation experience. Insofar as the text "make[s] sense of" two cultures

and "articulate[s]" that reality, *The Woman Warrior* remains a supremely autobiographical, self-reflexive ethnographic endeavor.

The urgency of such a task has not dissipated decades later. Consider how Samhita Mukhopadhyay, a prominent voice in the South Asian activist blogosphere, rebuts the actor Mindy Kaling's frustrations with autobiographical readings of her work:

> As much as Kaling wishes she could [create fiction] on a blank canvas, we don't have the option to ignore how race influences our lives and our art. And the only way we will see more and more South Asian artists is by talking about our experiences so others can learn from it.[xxii]

But why do "we" (artists) not have the option? Could it be because we are assuming that white racists and/or impressionable young minorities must be prioritized as Kaling's target audiences? Several more online blog platforms feature articles devoted to this question, often in relation to Mindy Kaling, of whether South Asian American artists on film and television are "stepping up to create meaningful roles and depictions for themselves in the industry" or whether they "can certainly do better [in representing South Asians]."[xxiii] Many of these articles also include long descriptions of how the speaker grew up watching TV without enough representations of Indians/South Asians and how refusing ethnicity often amounts to copping to the model-minority myth, and so forth. The dualism at play here is that either these artists are "stepping up" and providing worthwhile autoethnographic representations or they have internalized the industry's racism. Such assumptions imply that the politics of representation must guide the work of minority artists until the (unforeseeable) end of racism.

In this study, I examine two main forms of ethnographic entanglements for artists of South Asian ethnicity. Firstly, it may be impossible to fully escape mainstream ways of

reading/looking that have been shaped by nineteenth-century orientalism and ethnographic practices. And coercive mimeticism, as Chow argues, operates not just through expectations affecting ethnic artists but also by way of everyday micro-aggressions directed at people marked by ethnicity.[xxiv] People who look like immigrant others are often roped into conversations about their ethnicity, and some may wish to simply maneuver out of them instead of performing the labor. Against this ontology of immigrant otherness and the objectifications it produces, secondly, ethnic artists often have "no option" but to render autoethnographic correctives. That is to say, ethnic artists bear the burden of representing carefully on behalf of their presumed ethnic community and to use the authority given to artists to correct older representations.[xxv]

My use of "entanglements" (as opposed to Chow's coercive mimeticism") warrants some explanation. My attempt here is to build on Chow's argument about "coercion" and point out the multidirectional, intra- and extra-textual manifestations of biopower. By delineating the pressures to represent culture/identity through ethnographic entanglements, I am attending to what Michel Foucault has called the "polymorphous techniques of power" (11). The demand for the "Chinatown" book (and other ethnic equivalents) is only one channel through which imperial relations operate. The fervent desire among minorities for reparative constructions that enhance, not diminish, their sense of worth is another pipeline for the assertion of white privilege. Ultimately, the insider/outsider dichotomy defines two ends on the same spectrum of ethnographic demands. To try and work around such demands is to recognize the insidious multivalence of colonial knowledge practices.

Mary Louise Pratt's influential definition of autoethnography guides my use of the term throughout. In her pathbreaking work, Pratt has theorized the contact zone as any constructed social space (including but not limited to art) "where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple

with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination-like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (*Imperial Eyes,* 4).[xxvi] By virtue of operating within a contact zone constituted by unequal power relations, Asian American authors are presumed to be authorities relaying some form of cultural knowledge. Here I refer mainly to authors to help keep the language more streamlined and focused, but I remain committed to the idea that at least some of these issues are relevant to other forms of cultural transactions.

"If ethnographic texts," Pratt argues, "are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are texts the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations" (9). Autoethnographic expression is produced in formal and informal contact zones and written with two kinds of implicit audiences in mind—the metropolitan readers privileged in ethnography and the native-insider audience of the culture authoritatively written about ("Arts of the Contact Zone," 34-35). Autoethnography is not the only art of the contact zone for Pratt: "transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression" are some of the others. In the decades since Pratt's work, however, it might be safe to say that autoethnography has emerged as a highly politicized genre, while the other arts often feature as formal maneuvers. I appropriate autoethnography, therefore, to name the kind of texts designed to correct problematic representations of a particular ethnicity or culture.

Within literary criticism, autoethnography has been privileged at the expense of other potential arts (of the contact zone). While it remains a crucial art of the contact zone, autoethnography is not without its limitations. Firstly, it often privileges voyeuristic readership with a direct address and structurally maintains ethnographic inequality. That is, minorities are

still being represented for people curious about them. As Rey Chow argues, "[T]he state of being looked at…is part of the *active* manner in which such cultures represent—ethnographize—themselves" (153). Thus, as far as the cross-racial gaze is concerned, she argues, autoethnography is ethnography. Secondly, autoethnographies 'speak' on behalf of marginal groups and can be bound to the identity politics of visibility and representation. I grant that there can be various versions and vast formal differences between individual works but, structurally, autoethnography does not succeed in freeing members of an ethnicized culture from the entanglements of self/ethnic representation. And when readers privilege a text's autoethnographic functions, they narrowly evaluate the work in terms of its minoritarian politics. Needless to say, ethnic texts are frequently expected to be autoethnographies and are misinterpreted along those lines. Such readings can polarize a text's potential for addressing 'insiders' or 'outsiders' in ways that its author may not. Even readers who share social space with the author can hastily misread the politics of a text, especially when they are overly concerned about reception among outsider audiences.

In this dissertation, I explore and theorize another important art of the contact zone, which performs a symbolic overthrowing of the readerly position that places the burden of representation and pedagogy upon the author. This overthrowing often means deflecting/frustrating the white gaze as well as refusing auto-ethnographic representations. South Asian Americans, as part of the broad ethnic category in focus for this dissertation, get tangled in a politics of representation for three intersecting reasons: because fewer representations exist in the mainstream, because they are often compelled within their respective industries to perform or craft (auto)ethnographic narratives, and because their work is often read as self- and identity-based performances. I argue that the artists I examine in this study resist audiences who, by

16

requiring auto/ethnographic descriptions, reinforce the structural inequality of the contact zone. In refusing to perform the pedagogical functions of autoethnography, they implicitly ask why their audiences should not already know better. Reflecting an astuteness about ethnographic entanglements, the cultural texts at hand maneuver the conversation away from cultural representation. In so doing, they offer 'workarounds' to the expected labor of representing ethnic subjectivity. Such workarounds are anti-autoethnographic, insofar as they refuse the burden of autoethnography.

The archive of South Asian American works explored in this dissertation, all of which appeared in the 1990s and 2000s, emerged roughly a generation after the Immigration Act of 1965 that enabled a major influx of Asian immigrants to the U.S. This is roughly the same period as the larger wave of voluntary migrations of people from South Asia to different parts of the world (the South Asian diaspora). I use the word "desi" sometimes, which is a colloquial term for this racial category for South Asian/South Asian American, in order to streamline sentences. The central concerns of this dissertation are the various pressures upon immigrant youth and desi diasporic/second-generation artists to represent their ethnic backgrounds. The critical genealogy for this project thus lies at the (uneasy) intersection between South Asian diaspora studies and Asian American studies.[xxvii] Since I mainly focus on U.S.-based politics of reception, I have drawn on the rich discussions within Asian American studies, despite the fact that South Asians are not always in focus within them. As Susan Koshy has famously argued, the term Asian American offers us a "rubric we cannot not use."[xxviii] To read South Asian American works within the critical context of Asian American studies is to "rehearse the catachrestic status [of the term Asian American]." Far from confining us to reductive discussions of identity politics,

Koshy argues, this umbrella term tends to moor scholarship and allow for productive interventions in "current theoretical discussions on ethnicity, representation and writing." (342).

While I draw heavily from the largely East Asian-focused critical debates on the politics of representation, I also understand that, racially, South Asians are a specific, recognizable kind of "brown" in the U.S., which brings to bear its own history of ethnographic reader expectations. The geographical landscape named by South Asia has a shared history of British colonialism and even (or perhaps especially) remote parts of the subcontinent have not escaped the anthropological gaze. That is to say, Anglophone reading publics have long felt entitled to knowledge about the colonized and the formerly colonized. Such intense curiosity—which may manifest as desire for ethnographic adventure, knowledge for its own sake, or simply lay interest about others—is a measure of white privilege and a transparent aftereffect of colonialism. For the ethnic other who must educate/represent, as I have been arguing, it surfaces a provocative inequality.

The 1965 immigration Act is one of the main socio-historical circumstances that shape my project. Firstly, in public discourse, the post-1965 period manifested a substantial shift in the racialization of Asian Americans, namely their transformation into model minorities.[xxix] Ambivalence about Asian American successes plays a central part in Asian American cultural politics and informs the ideological apparatus of Asian American studies. As an objectification of Asians in the mainstream imagination, the model minority myth has preoccupied many artists and cultural materialist readings of Asian American literature.[xxx] This post-1965 period also marks a time when Asian American writers and artists have been highly prolific and, as Min Song puts it, "part of the largest and most celebrated cohort of American writers of Asian ancestry ever to exist" (8). Their meteoric rise, it must be added, was fueled by the activist

coalitions of the late 1960s and the development of the field of Asian American studies that, among other things, recognized the need for Asian American self-representation. It is not surprising that the need to correct mainstream and institutional racism has been central to much Asian American cultural production.

The pitfalls of ethnicity-based politics of representation were at the center of Rey Chow's and Lisa Lowe's respective critiques of ethnocentric scholarship in the 1990s.[xxxi] Within literary studies, the 1990s marked the turn away from identity essentialism to understandings of race as an active social relation and of the discursive constructions of identity. While the theoretical debates have deepened our understandings, they have not led literary critics away from privileging autoethnographic texts or from treating a wide range of texts as autoethnographic. In different contexts, other scholars have critiqued the identitarian bias in reading Asian American authors. Prominently, Viet Nguyen (2002) has argued that the anti-racist stance that marks the field of Asian American studies often operates within literary criticism as a practice of reading texts for their "accommodation or resistance" (4). Christopher Douglas argues that, for critics, Asian American "fictional characters or situations assume a synecdochal weight of representativeness" (120). In *Racial Symmetry* (2014), Stephen Sohn asserts that literary critics have mostly addressed Asian American texts where "the author's ethnoracial status is…directly mirrored within the fictional world."[xxxii] And expounding on the need for Asian American scholars to consider critical ground (beyond the masculinism of cultural nationalism) for feminist interventions, Rachel Lee directs our attention to Asian American authors who have maneuvered past ethnic themes with "alternative tales circulating around gender and sexual identity." Such maneuvers make clear, she argues, that "cultural nationalism is not the only seat of gender oppression in an Asian American context."[xxxiii]

These tensions are also addressed in somewhat apologist gestures from critics reminding us that the politics of representation remain important to Asian American scholars. Consider Min Song's self-reflexive comment:

> [O]ne reason that politics and aesthetics in Asian American literature can stir as much debate [as they do] is that literature as an important purveyor of narratives about Asian Americans frequently acts as a reflection of a person's relative worth. No matter how much one might decry such readings as unsophisticated, one can't separate representations from the ways in which representations mediate how others understand one and how one understands oneself (6).

Song is alternating in this section between engaging critical debates and close reading a metafictional moment in a text, but it seems clear that he is marking the political valence of Asian American representation. His move in this quick paragraph is to acknowledge the resistance (from other critics and artists alike) to reading for "politics," but then also guide our focus back to the "real" problem: racism and the way Asian American subjects often derive their sense of worth from anti-racist (autoethnographic?) representations. Crystal Parikh, in describing her study of the trope of "betrayal" in Asian American/Latino American literature, performs an analogous move:

> [The] ethico-political project I theorize in this book recognizes the pitfalls of a cultural politics of representation, no matter how flexible and inclusive. Nevertheless, the mode of inquiry that drives this project also recognizes the very necessity of the politics of representation in which it participates (27).

I do not disagree, but I would argue that a lot of critical ink has been spent at this point theorizing the urgent need for representation. Even within literary criticism, ultimately, such

conversations tend toward assessments of whether authors comply with stereotypes, render oversimplifications of social problems, or complicate existing narratives about Asian Americans. Within such a critical system, texts that refuse to indulge varying desires for cultural representation are left by the wayside and/or frequently ignored along these interpretive axes.

In *Semblance of Identity* (2012)*,* Christopher Lee offers a framework for understanding the critical debates on identity in the last decades and addresses the paradox of how ardent critiques of essentialist approaches to identity reproduce methodologies focused on representations of identity (within literary and cultural studies). As a mode of representation, Lee argues, identity offers a form, "a grammar…for making sense of and representing the relationship between the subject and the social." Post-90s critiques of identity politics mark "the breakdown of this grammar" by focusing on alternative "dissenting modes of representation" that complicate the relationship between the subject and the social. In other words, critiques of naïve/simplistic representations of identity—what Lee denotes as "post-identity" discourse— ultimately conserve a focus on identity in readings of Asian American literature.

The germ for this project was the impatience I felt reading literary criticism about South Asian diaspora that focused narrowly on how authors represented ethnic identity. These critics often opined on the politics of representation, always already assuming that diaspora writers primarily addressed metropolitan white audiences and were therefore either capitulating to produce stereotypical representations or were complicating narratives about the ethnic people in question. Indeed, critics have found ethnographic elements everywhere in the literature—in character formation, in descriptions of place, in tropes like food and dress, and even in representing alternative visions of community. My project thus began with the question of what else, if not "identity," was represented in the body of South Asian diaspora literature. I then

began to notice there was no other pattern that was as prevalent, whether in the way South Asian texts were packaged for global consumption or in the way literary critics discussed them. That is, nothing appeared with as much consistency as the issue of representing culture and ethnic identity to an unknowing audience.

My impatience with critics focusing on identity has to do with their underlying, somewhat moralizing, expectation that authors should be intervening or challenging dominant stereotypes about the culture in question. This expectation I found buried in their selection principles and lines of argument about these authors and their texts. My work in these chapters reflects my attempt to move away from the ethnographic evaluative criteria I find rampant among readers of South/Asian American literature, criteria that inform questions like: does the work effectively 'transport' unfamiliar readers to the regions in question? Does the work represent the people and regions in a way that admirably challenges mainstream/white-privileged assumptions? Both of these questions are fundamentally invested in the ways texts *represent* South Asians to readers who are not and, in so doing, they produce a politics of representation and privilege texts that evidently answer those expectations. When academics critique texts on the basis of ethnic representation, they risk reinforcing the "good object/bad object" paradigm. By and large, South Asian American texts that are not doing serious political work as autoethnographies continue to be mainly ignored within academic literary criticism. My intervention here is to suggest that requiring auto/ethnographic descriptions reinforces the structural inequality of the contact zone by privileging the presumptively metropolitan reader whose mind must be transformed. The question of whether ethnic people must remain devoted to the labor of autoethnographic representation is then the heart of this project. In some ways, my

work is itself an attempt at working around the kinds of evaluative logic found in much literary criticism of Asian American works.

While many critics have omitted non-autoethnographic works from their discussions, Yonmee Chang, Min Song, and Stephen Sohn have directly addressed authors' resistance to the "Asian American label" through their work. Chang focuses on "literature written by Asian American writers that does not contain Asian American characters or address Asian American experiences" and argues that this phenomenon evidences a "postracial aesthetic" in which writers "abnegate" their ethnic background in order to be free of the "ostensible shackles of ethnic particularity and difference." This abnegation, Chang argues, allows them to examine "transcendent universal themes, like 'love and honor and pity'" and frees them from "orientalist caricatures and reductive ethnographies"(202). Even aside from the suspect dichotomy between "ethnic particularity" and "universal themes" in fiction, Chang's analysis seems limiting. The word "postracial," in this usage, feels unduly reductive and I am not willing to characterize "ethnic abnegation" as a central feature of non-autobiographical or non-autoethnographic writing. Surely it is possible to resent reader expectations without being victim to false consciousness.

Min Song, by contrast, generalizes that a "restless relationship to form and uncertainty about the purpose of literature are connected to the meaning of race for [all] Asian Americans" (6). The term "restlessness" remains general, and he does not pick it up in his chapters. The formulation here serves to account for the resentment he encounters among Asian American writers, expressed through personal interviews and fictional moments, about being pigeonholed by their ethnicity. Referring to the tenuous labels of "Asian American" and all its derivatives such as "South Asian American," "Asian diaspora," and so forth, Song notes:

From a writer's point of view, all of these possible self-descriptors must exacerbate rather

than alleviate the problem the writer may have with a term like Asian American…A gulf

thus appears to exist between the professional writer…and the professional reader... But,

when scrutinized, this gulf might turn out to be smaller than it at first appeared. While

creative writers might not favor using a term like Asian American…and may even reject

this term outright as a descriptor of who they are and what they do, they nonetheless do

respond to the same set of concerns that mobilizes critics of their work" (13).

Having such a "restless relationship to form," for Song, then ultimately marks a fellowship

between critics and artists that may not always be evident (to artists). But "responding to the

same set of concerns" is not the same as being in agreement about how to deal with them.

Seeming to mark a similarity, Song somewhat dismisses authors' resistance to critical

nomenclature while reinforcing the importance of what critics do.

Stephen Sohn offers an intervention in this longstanding debate over the coherence of

Asian American literature as a category, arguing that a critical focus on autoethngraphic texts has

obscured texts that do not fit easily under a rubric of "tidy links between authorial ancestry and

fictional content" (2). He thus calls our attention to a body of "assymetric" nonautoethnographic

fictions which "test the limits of Asian Americanist methodologies and invite deeper

contemplation of the kinds of practices and pedagogies that can account for the messiness of

'racial asymmetries'" (6). The rest of his chapters consider first-person narratives whose fictional

"I" does not phenotypically match the author (21), a disjunction he understands as a deliberate

move on the author's part to discourage any association between his/her self and the fictional

character. This collapse of the expected mimetic function, Sohn argues, requires the reader to

take more seriously the "fictionality" of the text they are reading (22).

I consider my work in this dissertation as an extension of Sohn's work in *Racial Asymmetries,* although I do not restrict myself to any particular form (as he does with novels employing first-person narration) and, broadly speaking, the fictional contents I am concerned with do share "tidy links" with their authors' ethnoracial phenotype. At the same time, they reflect clear attempts to work around ethnographic entanglements.

Mary Louise Pratt's influential definition of the contact zone allows me to move between different kinds of cultural objects—standup comedy, novels, and independent film mainly—and treat each of the cultural producers in the context of contact-zone authorship. The politics of representation for South Asian American artists is not restricted to a particular form or genre, and I have drawn on different theoretical disciplines and aesthetic traditions in my search for potential workarounds. I have chosen not to restrict myself to a particular literary form, in order to extend the investigation to a range of literary genres and non-literary media that captivate the popular imagination. Each of the next three chapters explores a different context that stages imperatives to represent culture—i.e. ethnographic entanglements—and then reads texts that work around such imperatives.

Chapter 2 takes up literary fiction by post-80s South Asian diasporic authors who mediated between multiple audiences scattered across the globe. Specifically, I focus on how they employed child characters or the imaginary space of childhood as a way of inviting insider and outsider readers. If many of these young protagonists offer the comforts of identification, I consider the formal potential of a bratty, uncooperative child in refusing interior depth and the task of ethnography. I thus read Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* (1993) as an experiment in writing the immigrant coming-of-age novel without the (obligatory) tussle with belonging for its protagonist. What has been the main source of disappointment for many professional readers of

this novel—the main character's lack of interior depth—is a bona fide narrative accomplishment in my view. Far from affording the reader easy access, the omniscient narrator mirrors at the formal level the main character's unwillingness to explain herself to anyone within the novel's world. The refusal to ethnographize her story of migration is what, I argue, the novel derives from notions of the "American brat."

Chapter 3 moves to a different context, that of second-generation immigrants and the everyday pressures of coercive mimeticism that saturate discourses about them. To that end, I read the ubiquitous trope of "identity confusion" specific to second-generation youth as signifying both the pressures upon these young people to represent their ethnic identities and the gnawing lack of closure they experience despite reasonable attempts to do so. I pose the film *American Desi* (2001) and Tanuja Desai Hidier's novel *Born Confused* (2002) as two texts that centralize this trope of confusion in order to interpellate second-generation Indian/South Asian audiences. Theorizing confusion in the context of the cultural self-consciousness demanded of young adult desis, I take up the phenomenon of a distinctive kind of nightclub party ("desi party") as having encouraged the shedding of cultural self-consciousness and therefore rendering a temporary workaround to the everyday demands of legible self-representation. The desi party peaked in the New York area in the late 1990s and became known best for the work of DJs mixing South Asian music (mostly but not exclusively bhangra and popular Indian film music) with electronica, hip hop, and dancehall. I develop my reading of this party as a workaround by homing in on fictional renderings of this party. The third text I discuss is *Corona* (2013) by Bushra Rehman, which is not a coming-of-age text and which does not centralize "confusion." It offers, however, an instructive glimpse of this elusive party culture.

Finally, in **Chapter 4** I consider a more specific marker of cultural identity and anxiety: the accent. Drawing mainly on Shilpa Davé's scholarship on the Indian accent constructed on screen and on John Limon's theorization of standup as an art concerned with cultural abjections, I argue that the roaring success of Russell Peters's standup in the early 2000s reflected a global audience responding to the ways South Asian Americans appeared on Hollywood and American television. In a world of limited two-dimensional representations in the mainstream where minorities rarely ran the show, Peters's appeal to a multiethnic, global audience circumvented the implied white audience privileged in mainstream television. And in a visual field where South Asian Americans either played roles of quintessential outsiderness (signified in this context by the performance of the "Indian" accent) or jumped difficult narrative hoops to demonstrate cultural citizenship in America (by abjecting the accent or risking unemployment for refusing to perform it), Russell Peters produced a form of accent comedy that rejected both the part of outsiderness thrust upon brown actors and the alternative task of providing an autoethnographic corrective.

The theme of unself-consciousness has surfaced in some form, surprisingly, in each of the three kinds of workarounds I present in my chapters. I did not have this theme in mind at first, and it emerged organically as I wrote about the texts. But that it has emerged is ultimately not surprising and reflects how racial categories operate, producing imperial gazes that make people "self-conscious." In "Film as Ethnography," Rey Chow argues that the idea of "seeing" as a form of knowledge "bears the origins of ethnographic inequality." "The state of being looked at," she continues, is built into the way non-Western cultures meet the ethnographic gaze. Cultural self-consciousness is another way of naming the "being looked-at-ness" that translates into a desire for self-representation. It is no wonder that these workarounds variously feature

unself-consciousness, since they are attempts for release from the overdetermined state of being looked at and from readerly desires for epistemological control.

We probably do not have an adequate vocabulary for authors and artists who decline to participate in the politics of representation. This is evident in journalists' incredulity when a cultural producer of Asian descent rejects their invitation to talk about ethnicity in relation to her work. Such rejections become blurbs and headlines, news that is made even more provocative by the speechlessness of the people publishing them. Perhaps many of these articles are hastily thrown together, but the consistency with which such remarks are considered controversial reflects a broader intellectual laziness about the place of ethnic artists. Instead of finding the task of autoethnography to be inevitable, we need to take seriously authors' efforts to protect their work from being read as latent biographies. To that end, this dissertation is an effort to develop our vocabulary for the work of such authors and artists.

The word 'workaround' refers to a problematic situation that may be circumvented, but not overcome at the moment. At best, workarounds seem to render partial successes and imperfect solutions. But in artistic performance and in fiction, they can create unexpected encounters, shock the senses, and present what Elizabeth Freeman calls "unruly forms of relationality" (94). Being caught in ethnographic entanglements is the biopolitical situation for artists who must ethnographize themselves or somehow work around such limitations.

Queer theory has frequently grappled with such multivalent biopolitical entanglements and largely provides the grammar for my arguments here and elsewhere. My sense of productive workarounds heavily derives from Jack Halberstam's scholarship. In *Queer Art of Failure,* Halberstam speculates that failure "can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success" (3), which depend on hard work and often huge doses of what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel

optimism."[xxxiv] By contrast, failure offers a way out of the "usual traps and impasses of binary formulations…and the [coercive] logics of success." At their core, workarounds undertake multiple power hierarchies and reflect improvisations and contingent plans that are not tried and tested for success. A major risk for writers producing them is being unable to engage readers and interest publishers, evidenced by bad reviews, unpublished manuscripts, or other problems that plague struggling artists. Perhaps underneath these appearances of failure, I'm inspired to speculate, are attempted blueprints for working around the representational imperatives in question.

Coercive mimeticism and autoethnographic expectations shape two thick strands of reading habits that entangle ethnic artists within certain forms of narratives and representations. In *Proceed With Caution, when Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas,* Doris Sommer theorizes imperialistic reading practices, notably the liberal humanist approach that trains us to *understand* a book and absorb its contents. [She calls this "cannibalism in the classroom" (10).] Within a system that trains us to gain knowledge through reading, she argues, we learn to treat signs of textual resistance as hurdles or "coyness" to be overcome. It is easy to see the imperial coding of such knowledge practices. If we truly believe in democratic engagement, Sommer cautions, we need to unlearn the "hermeneutic quest for mastery" (23) and notice textual markers denoting what we cannot know. The rest of her book uncovers a "rhetoric of particularism," the system of textual signs that denies the universality of human experience and refuses to construct a liberal human subject that readers seek in literature. Against the erotics of identification, she finds, particularist literature advances a "slap of refused intimacy."

Convinced that South Asian American artists have good reasons to be wary of readerly identification, I argue that some of them refuse to make self-representation central to their work.

The unequal power relations defined and perpetuated through institutions, Sommer argues, become self-evident in the reading of "others." The otherwise distinct audience expectations for ethnography and autoethnography converge, I argue throughout, as presumptuous habits of reading. In the chapters to come, I take for granted that desi artists do not always want to build sturdy ethnographic bridges for all kinds of audiences. This also means that the "creative refusals" (Sommer) they produce have often been misread or underrated by critics. By productively failing to engineer these expected bridges, however, these artists actively discourage interpretation that unites artist, text, and reader in a shared understanding of ethnic subjectivity. I'm sure (or I hope?) many more workarounds exist than have been covered by this dissertation.

2.0   ETHNOGRAPHIC PREOCCUPATIONS AND FICTIONAL YOUTH

My first set of case studies illuminating the representational entanglements of South Asian American artists involves the mobilization of youth in diasporic/immigrant fiction.[xxxv] I focus here on post-1980s South Asian diasporic authors, specifically those who moved out of South Asia in the late twentieth century and began their publishing careers in the U.S., U.K., and Canada. Called upon by the exigencies of the market to make the South Asian people or settings, where present, both intelligible and interesting to audiences with different degrees of affiliation to them, diasporic storytelling often balances ethnographic work alongside other aesthetic preoccupations. Child characters or the perspective of childhood perform key functions within the arts of the contact zone. While many diasporic authors have used child characters to fulfill ethnographic demands, I argue, Bapsi Sidhwa's characterization of the protagonist's brattiness in *An American Brat* (1994) entails a rejection of those demands.

At the risk of being overly reductive, I suggest that when readers encounter (ethnic) child characters in South Asian American fiction, they are prone to imagine the unfolding of an authentic cultural representation. The very frequency with which a child protagonist appears in immigrant fiction reflects, for example, key assumptions we hold about children as savvy cultural mediators.[xxxvi] Children are also presumed to be unlikely to accuse others (here, readers) of racism or notice the unequal relations between the cultures they mediate. This is not to suggest that authors naively and autobiographically perform cultural translation using children as

fictional surrogates, but that they have mined themes and preoccupations associated with childhood and youth more broadly to shape a common ground between their textual objects and multiple audiences. So, before engaging *An American Brat* as a deviation from the norm, I will first discuss how diasporic authors negotiate and manage the entanglements of cultural representation through the remarkably unpredictable signifier that is the child.

In my reading of children and adolescents in these texts, I maintain a key assumption found in the work of many scholars—set forth preeminently by Jacqueline Rose—that there is no 'real' child whose essence has been (mis)represented here. In *The Case For Peter Pan,* Rose argued that "if children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (2). It is precisely because the child does not "come so easily" within our conceptual grasp that he/she functions as an empty category receptive to adult desires, hopes, and anxieties. A strict conceptual separation between adulthood and childhood is thus reflected in attempts to control and confine the meanings of what children do in the world. But the conceptual evasiveness of the child could also be a measure of its possibilities. A fictional child need not simply ventriloquize adult ideology: as unpredictable and powerfully unknowable agents driven by desire, child characters can just as easily manifest a defamiliarizing curiosity and awareness of the world that invites their child and adult readers to come out and play.[xxxvii]

In the context of South Asian diaspora literature, I suggest that child characters most frequently perform shock-absorbing or prismatic functions. Cultural and geopolitical landmines—such as genocide, civil war, rape culture, and 9/11—may be located, diffused, or transmitted in a manageable way through the perspective of an unflinching (and also unsuspecting) child observer. I instantiate this set of functions by examining the use of the child

in Jhumpa Lahiri's story "When Mr. Pirzada Comes to Dine" (1997).[xxxviii] Salman Rushdie's

Midnight's Children (1981) and Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994) surface ideologies of

childhood for the slightly different purpose of focalizing adult narrators' bitter/bittersweet

diasporic memory of the nations they left behind. Insofar as the authors intervene in global and

nationalist discourses about their respective countries, both novels are autoethnographic

treatments of the nation.

Unlike the wide chronological expanse of *Midnight's Children*, however, *Funny Boy*

covers only a seven-year period of the narrator's childhood. Accordingly, while *Midnight's*

Children uses childhood as a hook to beguile readers into taking a leap into its fictional world,

Funny Boy sustains its autoethnographic narration entirely through the perspective of a child. In

a slightly different context, Sara Ahmed discusses the transformative potential of wonder: "It is

through wonder that pain and anger come to life, as wonder allows us to realize [that] what

hurts…can be unmade as well as made. Wonder energizes the hope for transformation and the

will for politics."[xxxix] *Funny Boy*, as Gayatri Gopinath has argued, renders its "queer diasporic"

intervention by employing its child-protagonist's wonder as a pedagogical tool.

In my reading of *Funny Boy* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* especially, I am

influenced by Kathryn Bond Stockton's argument that the inequality between adults and children

intensifies the queer potential of a child. The use of "queer" here refers to the "profound

otherness and unpredictability" embodied by children that, Stockton explains, "from the

standpoint of 'normal' adults is always queer" (7). If 'queer' is a conceptually slippery way of

being that is hard to represent, children are 'queered' until assimilated into adulthood through

normative processes of maturation. Characterized by a radical unpredictability despite—or

perhaps because of—the determinative power adults hold over them, Stockton argues, children

are ritually guarded against growing "sideways" and 'out' instead of linearly into adulthood. In other words, queer children are not anomalous; children are often treated and feared by adults as possessing tendencies to slip out of control.

Thus a fertile poetics of "sideways growth," delaying or forestalling maturation, in fiction can shore up reparative possibilities and new ways of being that are not linked to marriage, reproduction, and renunciations of childlike behavior.[xl] In *Funny Boy* and *An American Brat,* the protagonists' respective failures in progressing neatly along the lines of maturation (i.e. their sideways growth) serve as textual markers for a different kind of discovery thrust upon the reader. While *Funny Boy* defamiliarizes the experience of violence in Sri Lanka through the proto-queer protagonist's perspective, *An American Brat* allows its protagonist, Feroza, to grow wild and laterally, far away from the top-down hierarchies that govern her life, and profoundly delays her identity formation.

Carolyn Steedman argues that children—as characters in literature, as performers in public view, and as human subjects of scientific inquiry—have been central to discourses about human interiority since the long nineteenth century. At some point, children became fascinating to adults not just as the "other" (as Perry Nodelman has argued), but also as unadulterated versions of humanity.[xli] The act of watching child performers especially, Steedman argues, became a way of accessing the quintessential human self, unblemished by aging and circumstance. And "exotic" children like Mignon (the child character in *Wilheim Meister* who is of Italian origin and who is physically crippled) became for Victorians "heightened embodiments of the suffering of the adults connected with them" (114). If the treatment of the child as the universal backstory to the adult's personality has not entirely disappeared from contemporary assumptions about human subjectivity, Steedman's undertaking helps explain why children and

childhood are such powerful tools for authors caught in ethnographic entanglements. Regarding children as prisms for the adult world 'on the other side' is perhaps also a habituated practice of reading. And allowing or pretending to allow readers access to the interiority of the "adults connected with them," many of the fictional child characters I discuss next help mediate cultural difference and disarm resistant readers.

Such a deep-seated interest in the child as an explanatory canvas for human subjectivity would explain why South Asian texts with child characters seem more friendly to outsider audiences and less culturally inscrutable. But what of the child/adolescent who does not carry the ideological load assigned her by the legacy of ethnographic reader-text relations? Her story would instantiate a unique sideways growth that frustrates *readerly* expectations. It is this character that ultimately interests me, one that I will elaborate as the formal potential of the "brat" exemplified in *An American Brat.* Far from allowing readers unobstructed access to her interiority, something one might feel especially entitled to by virtue of her youth, the omniscient narrator presents the bratty protagonist's unyielding reticence as a justified response to anyone who tries to control her. What follows next is meant less as an exhaustive study of South Asian diaspora/American fiction and more as an illustrative account of the ethnographic entanglements reflected in the use of fictional youth, setting up my reading of *An American Brat* as a text that advances a workaround to the labor of ethnic representation.

2.1   INVITING READERS TO CROSS CULTURAL BARRIERS

The central appeal of the nineteenth-century realist novel, Nancy Armstrong argues in *Desire and Domestic Fiction,* was its staging of interiority within a female-dominated domestic realm,

often in the form of a female protagonist. In Armstrong's iconic argument, the rise of the novel is

attributed to the form's ability to encourage reader identification with the set of ideals and

middle-class virtues represented by the "domestic woman." Not only were the mental faculties

exemplified by the middle-class woman universally available, an identification with her

perspective allowed a reader to feel like a participating member of the emerging middle class. In

a different context, Jane Tompkins offers another description of how gendered characters enable

identification across genders and geographical distance. In *West of Everything,* Tompkins

considers how Westerns imagine manhood—specifically the physically demanding work of a

Western hero—as a site of fantasy and nostalgia for the reader, offering psychological respite

from the emotional (coded feminine) demands of the present.[xlii] A Western allowed the reader,

Tompkins argues, to briefly experience an earlier, timeless America that rewarded masculine

bravery and gritty survivalism.

As I attempt to understand why child characters appear so frequently in immigrant

fiction, I am struck by the surprising similarity to narrative functions explored by Armstrong and

Tompkins. The nineteenth-century domestic novel, written in metropolitan England and set in

highly private spaces of domesticity, managed to garner audiences far removed from those

contexts. The Western is, after all, a genre of another time (and place, really, since most

American consumers do not navigate deserts), and yet its appeal hinges on its reflection of an

originary national character. Both fictional forms produced a socially determined gendered hero

who, ironically, embodied qualities that more diverse audience members clearly

desired/identified with. And by identifying with these protagonists *who do not socially resemble

them*, readers accessed and identified with relatively universal notions of human character. In the

case of post-80s South Asian diasporic fiction, the strategic treatment of youth to invite

identification from a range of readers has factored into its global success. If the gendered characters discussed by Armstrong and Tompkins bridged a wide range of readers across class and regional differences, diasporic writers have used children to bridge cultural barriers and invite a wide range of readers.

Consider Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, possibly the most famous work of South Asian fiction from the twentieth century.[xliii] Widely accepted as an allegorical narrative of the Indian nation, the novel manipulates and parodies several generic conventions. There is no question that the post-independence trajectory Rushdie's narrator seems to attempt is fraught with representational difficulties, and any self-reflexive ethnographer, historian, or novelist would recognize them, especially when engaging readerships affiliated with India as well as those who were not. It is easy to see why the novel is filled with metafictional moments in which the narrator interrupts himself, stumbles over the facts, and otherwise marks his own paralysis.[xliv] Going past the exaggerated irony and narrative self-consciousness, however, we might notice another effective strategy at work that helps peddle the national story to a transnational market: the nostalgic treatment of childhood as a utopian space, a move central to the text's magical realism and one that is presented with surprisingly little metacommentary or irony.

The novel opens with a description of the protagonist's literal birth, in a way similar to *Tristam Shandy* but with more historical and less visceral detail. The "precise instant" of his birth matches "India's arrival at independence," a coincidence that endows him and other children of similar birth, we find out later, with various magical abilities (1).[xlv] Only two children are born precisely at midnight, and only Saleem is middle class. The newborn Saleem becomes the subject of a newspaper headline, "Midnight's Child," accompanied by the text: "the happy Child of that glorious Hour" (133). The happiness is, of course, actually experienced by adults and

simply projected onto the child. The prime minister of this newborn nation writes to Saleem: "You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own." (138). Whatever the prime minister himself implied by "in a sense" is forever lost, but, in this way, the clichéd metaphor of birth to signify autonomy and the promise of newness is repurposed in service of a magical realist allegory.

Saleem and Shiva, the other child of the "precise instant," have the most potent abilities, but the other children, who hail from different parts of the country, are also immensely and bizarrely gifted. At first, these children hold "conferences" (Midnight's Children's Conferences or MCCs), made possible by Saleem's telepathic powers. Part of the utopian pleasures of the MCCs is the children's ability to identify with each other across gender and politically charged ethnic and religious identities. This identification is fleeting, to be sure, and even Saleem's gifted imagination cannot forge a long-term solidarity among these children; this is perhaps the novel's insinuation in constructing this elaborate allegory. Eventually the nation declines from a land of promise into a nightmarish dystopia, and the midnight's children grow older and turn against each other.[xlvi] Still, however temporary, the fact of their meetings and the warmth of their exchanges sustain a gleam of possibility. And it is this magical-realist glow of an imagined community that draws a reader, irrespective of geographical location and context, into the text.

Beginning with the moment of birth that connects Saleem both to the nation and to a particularly promising community, the novel grasps any reader trained to locate a protagonist and plot his/her life's arc.[xlvii] The birth story—an unusual but nevertheless plausible version of a coming-of-age plot—turns out to be a tease, however, because the novel sprints much farther back in time, and even for several pages, leading us to Saleem's grandfather's youth. This is a

bait and switch that repeats throughout the novel—each chapter offers a teasing token of face time with Saleem (who is a thirty-year-old man in the present) and then moves long back before his birth. The huge temporal leaps back and forth are alternatively frustrating and rewarding to a teleologically attuned reader in ways that have been productively delineated elsewhere.[xlviii] My point here is that the novel maps a route of reader access into its preoccupations by privileging the point of view of a particularly gifted child, as outlined by his adult self: the only reason the adult narrator's ironic self-consciousness seems justified—as far as the reader is concerned—is his defamiliarizing, unusual, 'magical' childhood. And, of course, the narrator is just one in a whole community of magically endowed children. Since these midnight's children are "handcuffed" to the nation's history (3), a reader is effectively looped into this Scheherazade-ian narration of Indian history.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1997) is another diasporic text that has 'traveled' extremely well.[xlix] Set in parts of India and the US, each story's rendering of human relationships is quite transporting. Six out of the nine stories involve either children or adult characters troubled over the welfare or lack of a child. Among these, the story that perhaps engages ethnographic expectations (from U.S. audiences) most squarely with the help of a child protagonist, Lilia, is "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine"—henceforth "Pirzada." The story is bookended by a first-person adult narrative voice that, in the opening section, helpfully sets the scene and provides the kind of historical insight that might seem strange coming from a child. This includes information about where Mr. Pirzada is from and the geopolitical tensions in the region. The bulk of the plot is narrated as a formative incident from the narrator's childhood, tracing her growing acquaintance with a Mr. Pirzada and the expansion of her mind to include the country he came from.

The very first sentence is geometrically structured to privilege both the object of the story, Mr. Pirzada, and the calm, domestic scene in which his story will unfold: "In the Autumn of 1971 a man used to come to our house, bearing confections in his pocket and hopes of ascertaining the life or death of his family" (36). This first sentence informs the reader of a domestic setting prior to describing the man, then places the man's apprehension about his family in a parallel structure operating on the verb "bring." That he brought candy (along with the hope of news) not only implies the existence of a child, but also somewhat privileges its perspective. While the word "Autumn" signals a geographical location with temperate seasons and establishes the vantage point of the story, the next sentence informs us that Mr. Pirzada is from Dacca, then East Pakistan. Striking a television newscaster's objective tone in parts, the rest of this first paragraph and the next outline the brutal realities of the ongoing civil war and Mr. Pirzada's specific circumstances. Living in the genteel poverty of a visiting scholar, Mr. Pirzada's visits had been initially motivated by the prospect of Bengali food and of watching the news. After this introduction, the adult Lilia's perspective does not reappear until the final two paragraphs of the story, which are of the same length as the first two, exemplifying the masterful symmetry of Lahiri's work. Everything in between these bookending sections is structured as a flashback—moving back to when the narrator was 10 years old and spanning just the few months when Mr. Pirzada's visits coincided with the tense civil conflicts culminating in the India-Pakistan war in 1971.

In some ways, the content of this short story reflects Rajani Srikanth's argument that South Asian American fiction explicates "the world next door" (to an implied American audience).[1] With the switch from the adult-sounding, historically-minded narrator to the ten-year-old's mind in the third paragraph, readers are settled into a warm, comfortable scene in an

American suburb even as they are made aware of uncertain times elsewhere in the world. Lilia's first impression of Mr. Pirzada, a friend of her parents and a frequent visitor, is that he is somewhat inscrutable and has a few odd mannerisms; learning more and more about the "reason for his visits" (36) and the world he comes from, the narrator warms up to him and they eventually share a profound understanding. Even as the central events of the story—the escalation of war and the lack of information about his family—are far more likely to affect Mr. Pirzada, the full stretch of his feelings remain unexamined. Instead, the first-person narration explores Lilia's evolving consciousness as she receives a kind of political education at home that is different from what she gets at school. Such a plot reflects, Rajani Srikanth argues, the "imaginative allure of geographies beyond the US for South Asian American writers" (49). Lahiri's attention to the story of Bangladesh's independence stems, Srikanth argues, from her Americanized investment in questions of freedom (50-51). In the process, she argues, the story offers a way of simultaneously engaging Lilia's ancestral culture and American ideals. While entirely plausible, there is not much within the story itself that connects the concern for freedom with the concern for South Asia—at least not in my reading, and Srikanth does not offer a conclusive close reading herself. And why render South Asia from a child's perspective?

Such a question is taken up a little more squarely, I think, in Lavina Dhingra Shankar's critique that Lahiri indulges "armchair" readership throughout *Interpreter of Maladies*.[li] Hoping to "claim" an American audience, Shankar argues, Lahiri "seems to exhibit a narrative/authorial desire to educate mainstream Americans about Bengali immigrants, without resorting to explicit criticism" (37). More specifically, the story "forgives" mainstream and Asian American ignorance of South Asia. While I do not particularly align myself with Shankar's reading of authorial intentions here, one that somewhat rehearses the Chin-Kingston debates, the hypothesis

41

about educating an outsider audience "without resorting to criticism" does help explain the use of a child protagonist. The idea of a "forgiving" embrace of all readers explains why, for example, the plot returns to a moment just before Lilia's consciousness-raising and walks the reader through that specific formation. Regressing to a child's perspective from that of an adult excuses and allows a reader to piggyback on Lilia's political education.

Shankar's critique of Lahiri is not that she chooses to represent South Asia for non-South Asian audiences but that her welcoming embrace of ignorant readers and simplified "cultural translation" is akin to a "Cliff-notes version of the subcontinent." But such an evaluative dichotomy of simple vs. rigorous does little beyond augmenting the politics of representation in its implicit suggestion that Asian American writers *ought* to offer more complex treatments of the "multi-layered and syncretic cultural identities." And if they do not, Shankar insinuates, they exhibit the "authorial desire" for outsider readerships and bask in their "prizewinning" (47).[lii] Put more bluntly, Shankar's problem with Lahiri and Divakaruni is that they offer simplistic, digestible versions of the subcontinent that do not "produce guilt or self-pity" or otherwise challenge the reader (37). I wonder, however, if challenging the reader with more complex representations would overcome ethnographic entanglements and enforce a more democratic reader-text engagement. That is, does difficulty challenge a reader to read an ethnic text without expecting to "learn" something about that ethnicity? It seems to me that particularity and complexity (especially when valued for their own sake) could simply reinforce the idea that ethnic authors inform readers about *particular* experiences.

In a slightly different context, Rey Chow has theorized that scholars affiliated with ethnic studies often criticize ethnic artists for 'selling out' or commodifying their own ethnicities for mainstream readership (*Writing Diaspora*, 6).[liii] In other words, ethnic literary studies tends

to carry a strongly evaluative element. Such defensive "scholarly nativism," Chow argues, is highly suspicious of universalizing gestures (such as welcoming non-insider readers, for instance) and prefers the treatment of cultural subjects as "distinct historical entities" (3-5). Borrowing from Chow, I suggest that Shankar's general call for intellectual rigor and privileging of particularity simply furthers a politics of representation, a scholarly nativism, that serves only to "imprison 'other' cultures" within a domain occupied by authentic experts. Meanwhile, the unequal relations of power that shape the ethnographic gaze and produce such a reactionary politics of representation in the first place remain unchallenged. In my disagreement with Shankar, then, my main intention is step away from the evaluative dichotomy of simple vs. complex representations of ethnic identity and culture. It might be more productive for scholars to refuse to engage the politics of representation themselves; at any rate, I am more invested in the possibility of alternatives to the imperative to provide autoethnography. From that perspective, Lahiri's story (and its reception) is simply one instantiation of how South Asian American/diasporic fiction has been entangled in the labors of cultural representation.

To return to "Pirzada," the cultural translation performed by the story is a little more complex than Shankar gives credits. On the one hand, the child protagonist helps assimilate implied American readers to South Asian immigrant homes by subjecting herself—and therefore the reader—to a kind of cultural education at home. On the other hand, however, the story's parting moment suggests that not everything can be laid out for the armchair reader. The slide between the adult narrator that bookends the story and the child protagonist suggests suggests Lilia's evolution from an unknowing child into an "insider" who recognizes the pain of missing someone "who was so many miles and hours away" (44)—a pain she associates with Mr. Pirzada and her parents. This final sentiment is one in which the reader has not been invited to share—it

is one that Lilia now experiences and that which united her parents and Mr. Pirzada in solidarity overcoming the India-Pakistan tensions that would have kept them apart in their own hometowns. Perhaps this is one 'nod' within the story to diasporic insiders.[liv] It may be useful, then, to revisit the story's structure in light of this parting insight. If the first two paragraphs mostly offered objective, ethnographic details, getting them out of the way before the 'flashback,' the final two paragraphs represent a "vulnerable observer" who in the act of ethnographic narration has herself become exposed (Behar, 14).[lv] And this experience of pain allows the narrator to draw a boundary that excludes non-insiders. Shedding the objective tone, the adult Lilia returns at the end to resurrect epistemological impenetrability and draw a line. For a story that has been so criticized for its welcoming embrace of an outsider reader, "Pirzada" does, after all, overtly maintain a measure of unbridgeable distance.

Lahiri has been considered particularly successful among multiple audiences and her placement in multiple national canons has intrigued at least a few critics.[lvi] But her success is not really an anomaly considering the works and fame of other diasporic authors who paved the way for her canonization outside of the United States. Salman Rushdie did not publish until after he moved out of India, and yet he made a regular appearance in Indian anthologies after his *Midnight's Children*; Bharati Mukherjee's stories are nearly all set in North America; and more and more works emerged in the 80s and 90s in the US and elsewhere by authors who had moved out of South Asia. It was not uncommon for these diasporic authors to be claimed in South Asian canons: in fact, Anglophone readers in those regions—especially those with family members settling abroad, a relatively new phenomenon in the 80s at least—were a prime market for these authors.

Diasporic authors, by virtue of their own survival, address multiple audiences, and in some cases that rhetorical situation clearly lends itself to autoethnographic work. This is perhaps a function of an outsider reader's ethnographic expectations in the first place. As more and more South Asian diasporic texts appeared on the market, starting with *Midnight's Children*, this quality of dealing with multiple audiences has been taken for granted in pedagogical approaches to these texts. It is somewhat commonplace to assume that diasporic texts translate between cultures, as is evidenced by the evaluative cultural politics wielded by scholars who commend certain texts for their intellectual complexity (specifically in relation to cultural representation) and castigate others for attempting to make these cultures "palatable" to mainstream white audiences. Set in Sri Lanka and published globally, *Funny Boy* demonstrates some of the same representational dilemmas and performs an autoethnographic disidentification with several representations of Sri Lanka.

2.2   *FUNNY BOY:* THE PROTAGONIST COMES OF AGE AS AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHER

Writing or reading about Sri Lanka presents the unique challenges of coming to terms—as an insider or outsider—with the country's long history of bloodshed and its aftermath. To think deeply about Sri Lanka is to try and comprehend its history of colonialism, ethnic conflict, genocide, and international terrorism—a set of problems made even more unfathomable by a legacy of imperialist and nationalist narratives that are full of inconsistencies and inaccuracies. Given this indeterminacy and, until very recently, the constant threat of civil outbreak, representing the region is particularly fraught.[lvii] In a rather provocative argument, Qadri Ismail

45

finds that academic research and international activism have failed the best interests of Sri Lanka; despite their different motives and politics, he argues, Sri Lankan nationalist historians and "post-empiricist" Western academic researchers have essentialized differences between Tamils and Sinhalese by deeming them the main reason for the nation's problems.[lviii] Thus assessing the limits of academic, activist, and journalistic representations—and summarily rejecting the entire fields of history and anthropology—Ismail turns to literature as a source of "singular" and "unverifiable" representations that complicate deceptively neat academic narratives. In broad strokes, Ismail argues that literary texts can represent 'the different, the subaltern, the minority, [and] the argument that lacks credence and significance" (173). In doing so, they "challenge the kinds of colonialist–nationalist accounts that confirm colonialist categories [of ethnicity] and current political forms" (186).[lix]

Ismail articulates a fervent need for *literary* autoethnographic representations that overcome the imagined ethnic gulf—a feeling that has been echoed by readers in the Sri Lankan diaspora, literary critics and scholars in the field, and within the literature itself.[lx] Especially in relation to the particular status of historiography in Sri Lanka, the turn to literature as a powerful mode of autoethnography—whether in the form of circulating accurate historical information to wider audiences or, as Ismail argues, in its function as an additional contact zone providing greater nuance—is understandable. So, least around the time *Funny Boy* was written (1994), autoethnography must have seemed an urgent task. But this urgency, as Chelva Kanaganayakam notes, has resulted in some myopic and prescriptive readings of Sri Lankan/diaspora literature by critics.[lxi] Despite his exaltation of artistic work over academic writing, for example, Ismail makes no place for *Funny Boy* as a worthwhile autoethnography. And even though Minoli Salgado suggests moving beyond the expectation that migrant authors should represent Sri Lanka "in

ways that will deepen a reader's understanding," her argument about *Funny Boy* and A.

Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* (1997) smacks of an evaluative cultural politics that also

misreads the former. The use of a child's perspective in *Funny Boy*, for Salgado, forgoes

historical depth and therefore naturalizes ethnic difference in favor of articulating a "radical"

gender politics. She writes:

> Arjie's narrative is so convincing because of its faithfulness to his youthful perspective
>
> and its immersion in the present but, concomitantly, lacks the kind of historical
>
> awareness necessary for contextualizing the ethnic conflict in anything other than the
>
> most reductive terms…In the absence of historical contextualization, ethnicity becomes
>
> not so much a strategic identity…but an immutable and transhistorical essence (9).

Salgado's reading creates a rather flawed binary between ethnicity as either "transhistorical

essence" and as "strategic identity." I would argue, however, that it is childhood, not ethnic

identity, that is treated as the transhistorical essence. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is that which is

critiqued *from the perspective* of the transhistorical child. In that way, *Funny Boy* may actually

be read as treating identity as historically constructed, because it is clearly portrayed as a tragic

source of antagonism, which may have been avoided, between characters. For example, the

backstory given for Arjie's family's policing of ethnic difference is the murder of his grandfather

by virtue of communal violence. Further, as subjects of Arjie's insights, his own family is not

spared when it comes to criticism. Prompted by her misreading, Salgado writes: "Such a

naturalization of the intransigence of ethnic identities of course feeds into the very logic of

difference that has fuelled the political conflict." In this way, Salgado's critique of *Funny Boy* is

similar to Ismail's critique of disciplinary representations of Sri Lanka—they both reinforce

ethnic difference as the central source of conflict. Against the point that *Funny Boy* articulates

ethnicity as the main source of tension and violence in Sri Lanka, there is no argument. But it is more than a stretch to suggest that the novel naturalizes ethnic intransigence—especially since the boy's perspective creates such a pathos meant to critique the folly of adults who swear by difference.

To be sure, the very expectation that an author can fully engage and provide reparations for the particular complexities and elusiveness of Sri Lankan history could be unreasonable. And perhaps regressing to a child's perspective then allows *Funny Boy* to escape some of the burdens of authentic historical knowledge one expects the grown adult to bear. But while it is true that, unlike *When Memory Dies*, *Funny Boy* does not undertake the exacting duty of engaging Sri Lankan history in detail, it does enact different and equally powerful autoethnographic functions from an intersectional perspective.[lxii] To understand this, we must recognize that sexuality is only one of the novel's many discourses, the others including but not limited to ethnic issues within Sri Lanka, migrant authorship, the politics of representing Sri Lanka, and the broader cultural politics of the South Asian diaspora. And the novel engages these discourses through a captivating unfolding of a young person's mind.

The novel takes the form of a short story cycle, composed of six short stories that progress linearly through time and share the same protagonist. Each story consists of a discrete plot exploring the conjoined social meanings of sexuality, ethnicity, and class set against the backdrop of the rising political carnage that would soon consume the nation and drive the narrator's family out. It is impossible to do justice to the many interpersonal dramas taking place in just the opening story, so I will focus here on how the novel's autoethnographic dimensions and metafictional disidentifications—framed by Gopinath as its queer diasporic interventions— emerge from an exploration of childhood.

"Pigs Can't Fly," the opening story, offers a familiar plot of childhood love and loss: Arjie and most of his girl cousins meet every Sunday to play "bride bride," where Arjie performs the coveted role, donning a sari and other adornments.[lxiii] The cross-dressing escapes the eyes of adults for a while, until conflict arrives in the form of a cousin visiting from "abroad." This cousin, equipped with the vocabulary to mark Arjie's distinctiveness, attempts to overcome her own outsider status among the girls by emphasizing Arjie's. After a heated exchange that requires adult intervention, Arjie, in all his dressed-up glory, is dragged into public view. The rest of the story recounts Arjie's growing consciousness of the loss he is about to endure and its implications for his future. The next Sunday, Arjie is consigned to play cricket with the boys, a move that pleases neither him nor the other boys who must include him. Refusing to be daunted, Arjie devises an ingenious plan to return to the girls; unfortunately, he then finds himself replaced as bride and assigned the least significant role of all—the groom. Another fight ensues, this time Arjie snagging the sari away before the new bride can wear it, and ends in confrontation with his grandmother. With unprecedented audacity, Arjie holds his own against his grandmother as long as possible and then flees the scene.

Running away from home, he faces an inevitable catharsis that clarifies the major changes to come. Pausing at the beach, a literal horizon, he perceives his surroundings: "Once so familiar, [now] like an unknown country into which I had journeyed by chance" (38). Over several moments of quiet reflection, Arjie copes with his fate as a survivor would, accepting the 'impossibility' of his desire to stay with the girls. And so here we have a poignant story about the consequences for a "proto-gay" child of what Eve Sedgwick calls "the institutional war on homosexuality."[lxiv] And because Arjie senses that he cannot grow "up" as his preferred self in his family, he grows sideways—blending better into the world to avoid humiliating punishment

while also maintaining a critical distance from it.[lxv] Nowhere else in the novel is his difference so publically apprehended; instead, Arjie becomes a watchful observer of human suffering at large, often retreating into the sidelines but always guiding the reader's emotions.

Jose Estaban Muñoz has theorized "disidentification" as a strategy of survival for minority subjects who must "interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self" (7). Disidentification refers to the way in which an individual interrogates a communal ideology or discourse *while maintaining* a social relationship with the dominant culture in question.[lxvi] What Arjie attempts in the final moment at the beach marks a disidentificatory moment that contributes to his identity formation. In the face of a contradiction, one that first provokes him to leave (a move analogous to counteridentification), Arjie adjusts himself to the facts of life and begins to accept his expulsion from the girls' world. In the process of thus negotiating his survival, he learns something new about himself—that is to say, he develops a sense of self that disidentifies with the logic behind his expulsion.[lxvii]

Where counteridentification is impossible or impractical, Muñoz posits, disidentification becomes a strategy for managing the discord among multiple vectors of desire and political affiliation. And in its adaptations, reformulations, and revisionist undertakings, the disidentificatory process restructures discourses from "within." The revisionist stance in "Pigs Can't Fly" is evident from the diasporic overtones attached to Arjie's pain. It is not simply the child's need for survival that keeps Arjie connected to the family. Even before opening the story's action, the narrator recounts:

> The remembered innocence of childhood [is]…made even more sentimental by the loss
> of all that was associated with [it]. By all of us having to leave Sri Lanka years later
> because of communal violence and forge a new home for ourselves in Canada (5).

This diasporic nostalgia frames the novel's opening story about his painful separation from the girls, marking the incident as "the beginning of my exile from the world I loved" (5). The sentiment is mirrored at the very end of the story, after he has run away, when Arjie's mind processes a staccato of negative realizations ("I would never enter the girls' world again. Never stand in front of the mirror…"). The staccato builds and culminates in the following statement: "I would be caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either" (39). The parallel of forced displacement here—initially from the world of girls and eventually from Sri Lanka—invites readers to notice the strict conceptual separations and spatial alignments that produce the diasporic and the queer.

"Pigs Can't Fly," in short, is Arjie's disidentificatory story about the world he comes from. At first, the story seems to mark the narrator's estrangement from everyone else around him and allows the reader to empathize with his specific angst (marked by queerness). On a deeper level, however, the narrator identifies a connection between himself and the rest of his family—a connection marked by the profound loss that would be visited upon them—that excludes the reader. Thus an individualistic coming-out plot that seems to invite the reader's identification turns into a deeply embedded and particularized story about his family's forced exile from Sri Lanka. Assigning Arjie an intersectional position that at once marks his otherness and belonging in the social setting, the rest of the novel takes up the complex system of silence, prohibition, and punishment that structures gender and ethnic difference in Sri Lanka.

Disidentification intervenes in a discourse by adapting it to its own purposes and tussling with it productively, reparatively.[lxviii] Describing the novel's simultaneously queer and diasporic engagement, Gayatri Gopinath offers two claims about its intersectionality that inform my own reading. Firstly, she suggests that the novel renders a diasporic perspective of "home" in which

queerness is a constitutive, and not anomalous, formation and thereby disrupts conventional, heteronormative logics of nation and diaspora. Secondly, by queering the national space of Sri Lanka, the novel disrupts the white queer rescue narrative holding that homoerotic desires can only be fulfilled by subjects moving and assimilating to the more liberated West. It is possible to read these interventions in the way the novel layers Arjie's sexual awakening within a narrative that clearly marks itself as a nostalgic diasporic rendering of a lost 'home.' As Gopinath contends, the novel calls upon the conventions of the coming out and exile narratives respectively in order to effectively rework/rewrite them. In the process of articulating Arjie's identity formation, the novel *disidentifies* with both conventional genres and thus produces a queer diasporic autoethnography of Sri Lanka.

On the one hand, *Funny Boy* references familiar tropes of queerness in Anglo-American traditions: the notion of cross dressing as transgressive, the idea of heteronormative structures that rigidly separate the sexes, and the coming-out narrative arc. But in layering these tropes in a clearly South Asian setting, in spatializing the feeling of queerness, and in referencing exclusively Sri Lankan popular cinema as the inspiration for Arjie's queer fantasy, the novel defamiliarizes the conventional markers of queerness as products of the West. That is to say, it interrogates a reader's model for South Asia as a space that must be transcended/escaped before non-heteronormative desire can be articulated. And in this defamiliarization—traced through Arjie's fertile queer imagination—the novel also interrogates a construction of Asian sexuality as "anterior, premodern, and in need of Western political development" (Gopinath 474).

Because the novel-in-six-stories does not extend beyond Arjie's childhood and because departure is only hinted at and deferred within the narrative space, the experience of queer love for the narrator is firmly mapped onto the national and the domestic space: Arjie fantasizes

embodying the magnificence of Sri Lankan film stars as he plays the role of a "bride"; he is enthralled as he watches his mother wear makeup; his friendship with Jegen, a minor character who comes from the more troubled, northern Tamil regions, transforms briefly into an unrequited attraction; and the smell of Shehan's body lingers over him as a "final memento" on the same day that he looks on the charred remains of his house for one last time. In resolutely producing a queer nostalgic narrative of home, refusing to separate queerness from the narrator's memory of the home space, the novel also disidentifies with conventional scripts of diasporic memory that emphasize heteronormative desire.

It is through the engaging perspective of a child protagonist and specifically by centralizing his identity formation that the novel intervenes in both discourses of queerness and representations of Sri Lanka/South Asian diaspora. A reader—or publisher—attempting to characterize this book might first wonder: Is this a coming out story about an ethnic character, or is it an immigrant narrative with a queer plot on the side? Who is the primary audience—Sri Lankan or North American? Because it engages multiple audiences and disidentifies with multiple discourses, *Funny Boy* converts what would have been easy identitarian classifications (for example, "this is a coming out story," "this is written for a specific national audience") into open questions forcing an engagement with the protagonist's intersectionality. While readers hoping for a detailed engagement with Sri Lankan history may be disappointed, the novel staging of a child's interiority does intervene in the ways South Asia and the South Asian diaspora get represented for global readerships.

2.3 *AN AMERICAN BRAT*: REFUSING (ETHNOGRAPHIC) ACCESS TO INTERIORITY

The first-person narrators in *Funny Boy* and "Pirzada" perform both functions of "I as protagonist" and "I as witness," occasionally calling attention to themselves as well as receding into the background and projecting other characters onto center stage. If the focus on the protagonist's childhood signaled a tale of maturation or political education, the "witnessing" I in these texts turned the characters' autobiographical plotline into an autoethnographic one. As discussed earlier, "Pirzada" thus elaborates a young Indian American girl's identification—across the seven seas and the tense, partitioned areas of Bengal—with a Bangladeshi man's diasporic experience; and *Funny Boy* renders the conditions leading up to a Tamil family's migration out of Sri Lanka. *An American Brat*, by contrast, is narrated from a relatively distanced third-person point of view, and its young protagonist does not function as a locus for reader identification. While Feroza remains the protagonist throughout, the novel is not narrated entirely from her point of view, giving it a slightly disjointed, multiple-perspective structure.

But perhaps a deeper contrast to *Funny Boy* will be productive. Framed as a nostalgic adult's return to a period of childhood, *Funny Boy* sequences its events with an announced selection principle, that of marking the queer diasporic figure's dual exile. "Pigs Can't Fly" marks the "beginning" of Arjie's exile from the "world I loved"; In "The Best School of All," the penultimate story, Arjie comes to terms with his sexual desire as a vector of separation from his family, recognizing with increased critical awareness that the two aspects of his life cannot be united. The other three stories each explore the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict from slightly different angles leading up to the final carnage in "Riot Journal," at which point the family has little choice but to emigrate. Narrated with such evident purpose announced in the first story, "Pigs

Can't Fly," *Funny Boy* easily sweeps up the reader into each of its riveting plotlines that cohere as a critique of structures of belonging.

The narrative voice in *An American Brat* lacks the structural clarity of hindsight, and the novel does not lend itself to rewarding epiphanies of the same magnitude. Feroza's maturation occurs in the fictional present, not in extended flashbacks narrated with clear purpose. What the novel does manage to do, I argue, is relinquish the pious undertakings of the bildungsroman altogether and produce a story of serendipitous adventure and relocation intriguingly (but not naively) free of cultural complexity or identity crisis. The protagonist takes her participation in multiple communities for granted and not as a laborious undertaking that takes up the bulk of her imagination. Freed from the role of cultural translation by virtue of her unrelenting brattiness, I argue, her mind expands "unself-consciously" and is not submitted to a linear narrative of self-growth.

The novel begins with all the signs of a bildungsroman, opening with the protagonist's parents mulling over certain unexpected developments in their child. The mother (Zareen) is busy resenting the growing influence of conservative Muslim leaders on every aspect of life in Pakistan and especially on the mind of her sixteen-year-old daughter. Alarmed by Feroza's conservative leanings and her increased timidity and depressive tendencies, she decides a change of environment is in order. Through the mother's perspective, readers also learn about the cultural dynamics in question: Feroza is part of a Parsee minority in Pakistan, her family is wealthy, and a tense political uncertainty in the country (eventually leading to Zulfikar Bhutto's hanging) is making itself evident in the form of increased restrictions on women. Hypothesizing that her daughter's frequent sulks are a response to the political situation and fearing her daughter will commit herself to the narrow-mindedness "touted by General Zia" (10), Zareen

55

hatches a plan to send Feroza to America for a brief holiday, just long enough to overcome the determinative power the Pakistani state has over its young adults. The omniscient narration switches briefly to the father's perspective, who is more concerned about a "non-Parsee" young man's visit with his daughter, and then returns to her mother's plans and concerns.

While the novel begins with an omniscient, clear picture of the parental musings, Feroza's behavior is narrated at the surface level of affect perceived by other characters or addressed in the narrative description. Abruptly, we learn that "Feroza banged shut bedroom doors, whipped open car doors, and smashed shuttlecocks over the net at her startled adversaries" (21). The comical image of the "startled adversaries" notwithstanding, it is clear her behavior troubles those around her and escapes their understanding. For all her parents' rationalizing, the reader recognizes, Feroza's behavior is rather inexplicable.[lxix] We are privy to her parents' bafflement in these opening scenes, for example, but Feroza's own perspective does not receive the same depth of narration. The reader is expected to be equally confused by her, and several working explanations are summarily rejected. Neither the upcoming exams nor the political situation, Zareen notes to herself, could fully explain Feroza's unspoken aggressions. Cyrus, on the other hand, assumes her moodiness has to do with a certain good-looking "non-Parsee" young man. It is tempting to chalk it up to adolescence, as readers committed to reading it as a bildungsroman have, but the story subtly refuses that explanation as well. Recalling Feroza at a much younger age, Zareen muses: "Feroza had been a stubborn child—with a streak of pride bordering on arrogance that compelled consideration not always due a child" (23). Her "steady gaze and queenly composure was disconcerting" to any adult confronting her. While Feroza's parents seemed unequal to countering her brattiness, her grandmother, Khutlibai, had been able to summon "oceanic reserves" of patience for her and forge her into an "overtly malleable" child

(24). Zareen's flashback reinforces the inexplicability of Feroza's attitude—even though her grandmother was able to draw overtly good behavior out of her, her sudden furies and unexplained prolonged rages remain perplexing.

Once in America, Feroza's brattiness is rendered from the perspective of her uncle, Manek. In the few chapters that she remains with him, we receive a much fuller picture of Manek than her. On occasion, he finds her disrespectful, "un-niece-like" and shockingly unreceptive to his advice (99-100). For his part, he is so tiresome with his "lessons" about life in America that her attempts to detangle herself from his prescriptive expectations appear understandable. The hard lines Manek draws between what is "Pakistani" and what is "American" seems caricatured, and Feroza silently ignores him. At the same time, the narrative does not reveal the workings of Feroza's own mind and, in so doing, defers the staging of her identity formation.

Interpreting the novel as a bildungsroman, a reader might assume that this multiple-perspective structure that opens with a surface narration of Feroza would give way into a more in-depth voicing of Feroza's perspective. But while the interiority of other, even less significant, characters is narrated with a certain abandon and lack of privacy, Feroza's perspective is heavily guarded and doled out in tiny portions over the course of the novel. The narrator does follow Feroza but retains its distance from her by maintaining a more or less surface narration. Given Feroza's migration to the US, it might be just as easy to interpret it as an assimilation narrative—but the novel would once again disappoint. Apart from enjoying the ability to explore and move far beyond the confining boundaries she would have faced in Pakistan, Feroza barely encounters anything in the new land that she identifies with or even desires. If she experiences either a deep melancholia or a pining for identification in the new country, we are not privy to it.[lxx] The

omnipresent narrator is either withholding information or is herself not in the know. What we do receive from Feroza's perspective are distant observations and perceptions that do not, in turn, reflect her identity formation.[lxxi] The protagonist, instead, unguardedly explores her surroundings and the narrator does little to connect her explorations to a larger epiphany about her identity. In other words, if the Asian American bildungsroman typically invites identification from the reader as the protagonist strives to become a "good citizen," *An American Brat* reads like an anti-bildungsroman that neither invites the reader's identification nor commits its protagonist to any nationalist discourse of the self.[lxxii] Overall, the omnipresent (but not omniscient) narrator does not have the kind of control over its protagonist to shape a bildungsroman structure.

Expecting the unity of an assimilative bildungsroman structure, early reviewers have complained about the novel's apparent lack of coherence. Amy Seif describes its structure as "a series of wonderful vignettes [that] had been strung together by material which could not favorably compare." Seif's criticism here points to the lack of narrative explanation for how these "vignettes" were formative to the protagonist's consciousness. If these experiences were not formative, she implicitly asks, why are they "strung together" at all? Similarly, Adele King found the novel badly written because of its inability to send the reader off with a coherent understanding, and Ira Pande expresses disappointment that the subplots involving Feroza's family members were later "abandoned as excess baggage." [lxxiii] What is common across these critiques is a reading habit that seeks narrative coherence at the level of the subject—How, Seif asks, do the little subplots add up to explain Feroza's identity formation as an adult and as an immigrant? Pande wonders what kept the novel from being a "richly-textured palimpsest of many other lives" like other "such novels." I take it from the reviewer's reference to Vikram Seth and tropes in Bombay and Pakistani film that the phrase "such novels" here refers to other

South Asian fiction. In Pande's exaltation of "such novels," then, we can find a reading formation that expects to see a palimpsestic cultural history outlined in the narration of the protagonist's life.

As these criticisms suggest, instead of elaborating a potential identity crisis of being 'caught between' two worlds, the novel summarily unloads such 'worldly' baggage as the plot propels forward. In the U.S., she no longer finds herself outnumbered by people trying to control her destiny. Feroza hurtles through life, expanding her repertoire of experiences, and soon outgrows the education her family sought for her. In short, Feroza grows wild and in unforeseen ways that remain out of even the reader's grasp. She daydreams often, but the contents of her reverie are not entirely revealed to us; she finds it increasingly unnecessary to explain herself or her choices to her family. These are clear signs, of course, of burgeoning adulthood. But the deeper significance of Feroza's maturation is that the more Feroza considers herself a self-contained adult, the less the narration becomes inclined to engage her cultural entanglements. If childhood and the bildungsroman genre in particular have been deployed for cross-cultural socialization in fiction, this novel refuses to depict her subject formation altogether. For many disappointed readers, Feroza remains a bratty adolescent who rebuffs their "intrusive human contact" (313).

My reading contrasts with the majority of criticism about the novel, which either treats Feroza as a badly conceived character or, conversely, as someone ambivalent about her belonging. The first kind of reading dismisses her as simple and unsatisfying, while the second praises the author's subtle complexity. Both kinds of readings, however, take for granted that the novel aims to portray Feroza's maturation and assimilation. I suggest instead that the near-omniscient narrator cooperates with Feroza's need for distance. While openly omniscient with

other characters, the narrator withholds information when Feroza is concerned. This withholding narrator renders her consciousness only through little peeks—and with little subplots involving other characters which do not result in large-enough epiphanies about Feroza's character.

The very idea of being "omniscient" is loaded with political significance in a novel, by virtue of its subject matter and perhaps the author's previous work, assumed to be a vendor of cultural knowledge. And because the narrator of this novel relinquishes some of that all-knowing power in order to collaborate with its main character, she (the narrator) ceases to be omniscient as far as the reader is concerned. In lieu of cultural representation, I would argue, the novel develops the protagonist's unselfconscious comfort in herself when left un-disturbed by the intruding presence of others.

In the interlude between leaving Pakistan and meeting Manek, and in a rare moment of depth narration, we find Feroza undergoing a poignant shift. While Feroza was on the plane leaving Lahore, the narrative voice noted her sense of self as "enlarged by the osmosis of identity with her community and with her group of school friends" (52). Here we have the pleasures of identity, of feeling connected to a group of people. But this pleasure soon gives way to an even headier jouissance.[lxxiv] Upon landing at JFK, she begins to yearn for the candid "unself-consciousness" she witnesses in the young men around her and chances upon the following epiphany:

> Her wide-open eyes soaking in the new impressions as she pushed the cart, a strange awareness seeped through Feroza: She knew no one, and no one knew her! It was a heady feeling to be suddenly so free – for the moment, at least – of the thousand constraints that governed her life. (58)

The phrase "thousand constraints in her life" invites speculation while making little effort to explain. Could they involve the very same things that had contributed to the swelling up of her identity? If so, it is freedom from her own sense of self and generally from the confining boundaries of identity. This moment at the airport reflects then a temporary cultural weightlessness for Feroza—in which she is not Pakistani, certainly not American, not a Parsee, not a pubescent woman guarded by her community and approved of, nor a child that is required to learn lessons from her surroundings. This is a volatile moment full of possibility, drastically different from the domestic social life that had produced her brattiness. If on the first plane out of Lahore she had felt the "gravitational pull of the country she was leaving behind" (52), she was now enjoying the thrill of being beyond its last orbit. This is a glimpse of Feroza being entirely 'free' of social function. Here is perhaps the first revelation of what I argue is the political unconscious of the novel: Insofar as young Pakistani women are subject to the public gaze—in gendering and ethnicizing ways inside Pakistan and outside—it seems like poetic justice that Feroza's character be protected/withheld from total exposure in the novel.

The moment passes as quickly as it arrived. When she sees Manek from a distance, he is imitating her gaping expression, making her self-conscious and snapping her out of her daze before she could fully explore it. It is tempting to read words like "constraints" as referring specifically to conditions in Pakistan, conditions that are transcended by merely landing at a First-World airport. Certainly, there is somewhere here a bitter indictment of Pakistan as a place that does not allow people (especially women, as the rest of the page suggests) the luxury of unselfconsciousness. But the qualification "for the moment" embedded in the em-dashes should give us pause. It is just this one instant before she met Manek (and before she unwittingly and

unguardedly finds herself interrogated by an immigration officer) that no one knew or presumed to know her.

The word "brat" can be thought of as capturing the uncooperative posturing of a child in relation to an authority figure. The OED lists two major uses of the word "brat"—the earlier sense denoting "a child, so called in contempt."[lxxv] The example sentences for this usage, dated 1513-1879, refer to child beggars on the street, children who were not particularly wanted or cherished, or children otherwise allowed to grow wild (and therefore attract contempt). By being poor and visible, it seems, these brats represented bad form. While the association with poverty has slipped away in contemporary use, the word continues to point to an impertinent child insensitive to the expectations of good behavior. Only now, it is often applied to children born in wealth or who have treated with undue importance or indulgence. While good children are trained to please with reward and punishment, brats have never needed to engage in pleasing behavior because they are never held accountable enough. If accountability structurally implies an audience—the people to whom one must explain or justify their actions—its absence comes with the gift of being unself-conscious and unreflecting. Thus the figure of the brat embodies a potential different from that of a performative, discerning child: lacking the survivalist need to be sensitive, the brat pursues pleasure relieved of adult expectations and its reward systems. A brat models the wilder way of exploring life, that of growing sideways, and a path that does not need to be explained or assimilated into an adult framework for acceptable behavior. A sideways child turns *into* a brat when faced suddenly with a controlling other.

There seems, in popular discourse, a wealthy white-American valence to this kind of youthful entitlement. Perhaps that is simply a measure of the country's economic and geopolitical might trickling down to appear like complacent parenting to people from elsewhere.

62

The very idea of an "American brat" thus suggests a geopolitically endorsed form of parenting that is, for some reason, unthinkable elsewhere. It certainly also surfaces key anxieties immigrant parents have about their own parenting styles. (Are they raising American brats or model children they could show off back home?) Also, by the time this novel was published in 1993, youthful rebellion and disdain for authority were frequent tropes in mainstream American fiction.[lxxvi] The phrase "Hollywood Brat Pack" was well in currency by the late 1980s, coined to account for the new popularity of films about angry, distant teenagers and to describe the young actors who made those films.[lxxvii] What was "bratty" about these actors was that they were precociously rich and famous and grabbed a public regard previously reserved for the accomplished (coded for 'older'). So we might extrapolate that the ideology of "brat" at work in *An American Brat* involves a measure of wealth and the privilege of being American. Part of this privilege, to be sure, is the unselfconsciousness Feroza notices in the people around her at JFK.

The heady rush experienced at JFK returns in the novel's very last pages and clues the reader into the novel's intentions. At the close of the novel, we receive a rare in-depth narration of Feroza's mind and, finally, a speeding description of her identity work.[lxxviii] On the one hand, we learn, she misses the Urdu poetry and the nuances of a language unspoken in the US. But this nostalgia takes up a couple of sentences within a two-page tableau of her consciousness. The rest explores the many pleasures of the "First World" and the reasons she would never return. Overall, her diasporic ambivalence is neither elaborately profound nor complex. While she is not blind to all the faults of either nation, her preference for the U.S. is unequivocal. As the "American" brat that she had become, she was too used to the "seductive entitlements," the "sheer physical space," and the lack of "intrusive human contact" to consider leaving. As entitled as it sounds, we are reminded, privacy is a much sought-after dimension of affluence (314-316).

And, in contrast with Manek's pragmatism about education, Feroza had caught the "bug" of intellectual exploration for its own sake: "She would indulge her choices: anthropology, psychology, journalism, astronomy. The options were endless" (313).

The emphasis here on undisturbed, limitless exploration offers a key to the novel's surface narration of Feroza's mind. I suggest that perhaps her character is not as well defined as readers might like precisely because the character *enjoys* not being defined. Thus, the early JFK moment did not simply give way to a new (diasporic) identity—it offered a glimpse of unselfconsciousness that may be ultimately impossible to sustain. But by blocking our access to Feroza's interiority, the novel undermines readerly attempts to pin Feroza's experience to a cultural formation; instead, it affords her the limitless lateral growth that is the privilege of the unknowable, unpredictable "brat."

In many instances of South Asian diasporic fiction, child characters or the perspective of childhood perform key functions toward fulfilling ethnographic needs. In some cases, as in "Pirzada," the child's perspective is similar to that of a self-reflexive ethnographer—i.e. someone who moves from the "outside" (insofar as children are socialized into a culture) into the "inside" and who offers a thorough, subjective record of the (ethnographic) event.[lxxix] Before they know it, outsider readers have also taken the same journey across cultural barriers and have, presumably, experienced the familiar pleasures of reading. The recurrence of this trope in many popular works of diasporic fiction is likely because child characters are somewhat irresistible figures for identification, and they are less likely than adults to be politicized as minorities by readers. Through Arjie's perceptive mind, *Funny Boy* constructs an autoethnography that disidentifies with existing constructions/narratives of the national and diasporic space. *An American Brat,* I argue, achieves a workaround to the ethnographic demands upon diasporic

authors to represent South Asia and/or immigrant subjectivity: the seeming lack of character development, which cooperates with Feroza's bratty opacity within the fictional universe, signifies the novel's privileging of unselfconsciousness and refusals to reveal (ethnic) interiority.

In the next chapter, I move to representations of second-generation immigrants and the trope of "identity confusion" often applied to them in literature and everyday life. I argue that what transpires as "confusion" within these contexts is one response to everyday imperatives to articulate and develop a cogent cultural identity. To that end, I theorize "cultural self-consciousness" as a broader structure of feeling burdened by external demands for self-knowledge pertaining to one's ethnicity and citizenship. Then I consider textual representations of one diasporic youth-cultural form that might have encouraged the shedding of cultural self-consciousness and therefore allowed a temporary suspension of the everyday demands of legible self-representation.

3.0   DESI PARTIES AND CULTURALLY SELF-CONSCIOUS CITIZENSHIP

There is a scene in the film *American Desi* (2001) in which Jagjit, one of several colorful characters, reads aloud the following sentence from a campus newspaper: "The Indian club is dedicated to promoting Indian culture and organizes various events throughout the year, including a Diwali show, Bhangra night, and Navratri Garbha" (39:58). His tone at the start of this sentence is neutral, but there is a sudden lift to his voice—demonstrating a peak of interest— upon reaching the phrase "bhangra night." Then his tone pipes back down and he finishes the sentence. What to make of this brief explosion of enthusiasm? How could we theorize the sheer delight in his voice in relation to only one of three events hosted by the Indian club?

American Desi is one of three texts under discussion in this chapter, all of which feature this "bhangra night" as part of a distinctive nightclub party scene—known otherwise as the "desi party"—that peaked in the 1990s in and around New York City and became known best for the work of DJs mixing South Asian music (mostly but not exclusively bhangra and popular Indian film music) with electronica, hip hop, and dancehall.[lxxx] The other two texts under consideration are Tanuja Desai Hidier's novel, *Born Confused* (2002), and Bushra Rehman's novel-in-short-stories, *Corona* (2013). One of the influences—or perhaps cultural precedents—of this youth culture is the Asian Underground/British bhangra scene, which emerged in the U.K. in the 1980s. Some of its artists, such as Bally Sagoo and Malkit Singh, became globally famous in the '90s,

as their work made it to the UK charts and circulated transnationally to South Asia and South Asian diasporic communities elsewhere.[lxxxi]

In the New York club scene, DJ Rekha (née Malhotra) is an iconic figure, known for her monthly "Basement Bhangra" party, which first launched in 1997 and has enjoyed unabated popularity for just over nineteen years at this point. (She also hosts and performs at two other parties in New York, Bollywood Disco and Mutiny, which happen less frequently.) In 2007, she released an album with four of her own original tracks and a mix of others frequently played at Basement Bhangra. The *New York Times* has called her "The Ambassador of bhangra," and in 2004 *Newsweek Society* named her one of the most influential South Asian Americans, observing that "[f]ew Americans had heard of *bhangra* when this pioneering New York DJ began weekly 'Basement Bhangra' parties. Now, her exhilarating blowouts are replicated nationwide."[lxxxii] (Of course, it is notable that mainstream recognition for someone like Rekha comes packaged with the title of "cultural ambassador.")

While there are other artists, surely, that must be credited, Rekha features prominently in all three works of fiction under discussion here, clearly marking a fellowship of artists and aligning their various aesthetic projects somewhat. Rekha appears as herself in *American Desi*, during the five-minute timeframe the film reserves for the bhangra night. The cameo serves to honor her work: the camera pauses over the hand spinning the records, marking craftsmanship, and she looks directly at the camera in two very brief close-ups, smiling as she works and clearly enjoying herself. The author of *Born Confused,* Tanuja Desai Hidier, credits Rekha in the book's acknowledgements with "blowing up my dance world with Basement Bhangra and Mutiny"(viii). She also features Rekha's work in one of the songs on the soundtrack for her novel.[lxxxiii] And finally, it is very likely Bushra Rehman (author of *Corona*) and Rekha are

friends—perhaps inevitable given their mutual presence in the New York desi cultural scene. Suffice it to say they seem to appear frequently together at readings and parties, and Rekha's glowing review of *Corona* is featured on the author's website.[lxxxiv] In "Bhangra Blow-Up" (the short story from *Corona* addressed most in this chapter), Rekha appears briefly as a character (based on herself) hosting a "Bhangra Against Bush" party that draws back in some of the "old crew from the desi political scene." These connections make it easy for me to home in on what Rekha's parties offered and to move between descriptions of her work and the fictional moments in which she is hailed.

Coming out within a couple of years of each other, *American Desi* (2001) and *Born Confused* (2002 in the UK, 2003 in the US) are both coming-of-age stories set in the greater New York area with protagonists who were raised in the New Jersey suburbs. Both their titles squarely take on the acronym ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) often applied to second-generation desis raised in white neighborhoods. A few other ABCD narratives emerged in the 90s, including two other independent films, *American Chai* (2001) and *ABCD* (1999).[lxxxv] *Born Confused* (2002) was the only ABCD novel on the same theme that was published around the same time as these films, and it has been marked as a pioneering text for its focus on desi coming of age. Conceived in the early-to-late 1990s, these texts addressed a second-generation desi audience that had gone fairly unnoticed as a target audience for mainstream and ethnic-niched work.[lxxxvi] But it was really not until *The Namesake* (2004), which only barely alludes to the theme of confusion, that desi children of immigrants became commonplace characters in mainstream and independent-South Asian literature and film. Of the early ABCD texts, *American Desi* and *Born Confused* enjoyed significant critical and commercial success.[lxxxvii] More pertinent here is that they are both set in the New York and that they both assign a

hallmark status to the bhangra/desi party, especially as a space for young desis who distance themselves from both Indian and American identities (and were hence purported to be confused).

Published more than a decade later (in 2013), *Corona* does not share this agenda of purposefully seeking out second-generation audiences. But though it does not concern itself with the idea of "confusion," the text is a magnificent rendition of the queer (of color) art of failing at life (and adulthood).[lxxxviii] The protagonist Razia is a child of Pakistani immigrants from Corona, a neighborhood in Queens, and has an inveterate rebellious streak. The novel unfolds as a collection of connected short stories and takes us through many different settings within a narrative structure that is a complex time loop. We do not begin with her childhood in Queens and follow her linear coming of age; instead, each story moves us to a different temporal and spatial setting without explanation and begins with the protagonist knee-deep in a precarious adventure. Through many of her misadventures, the book evokes the profound nobility of living through poverty, racism, and personal failure as well as the sanity of running away. In the story "Bhangra Blow-Up," set in the context of New York City's bhangra music scene, the characters travel to a popular bhangra competition held in DC.[lxxxix] Here we see from the perspective of an older protagonist the party's enigmatic appeal.

In this chapter I theorize the cultural self-consciousness required of desi youth as an ethnographic expectation to represent their citizenship and cultural identity. Cultural self-consciousness refers to a structure of feeling produced in response to the (ethnographic) gaze— what Rey Chow has called "being looked-at-ness"—and the state of awareness that typically results in identity formation. I understand self-consciousness, then, as a step toward identity formation. Identity "confusion," then, is a state of paralyzing cultural self-consciousness, prolonged by a sense of not knowing how to define one's identity. The word "identity" is a

somewhat overused and slippery term that slides between connoting self-representation and the more general "thinking about the self" that I would like to explore here. So replacing the overly used term "identity" with cultural self-consciousness in my discussion allows me to isolate and analyze the affective component produced in response to external demands for self-knowledge pertaining to one's ethnicity and citizenship.[xc]

Looking at three distinct fictional renderings of the desi party and according it a special subcultural value, I then argue that such venues encouraged the shedding of cultural self-consciousness and therefore rendered a temporary workaround to the everyday demands of legible self-representation. While Jagjit in *American Desi* is simply delighted about the party, the protagonist in the novel *Born Confused* (2002) almost spiritualizes the disorientation she experiences at the party. One moment finds her making the direct connection between a spiritual trance and the enjoyment of a party (408), but elsewhere the metaphors of limitlessness, of being someone you are not, of crossing invisible borders, and of "getting lost to be found" characterize the book's representation of the party. In *Corona* (2013), the party is featured as a queer temporal mode that allows the protagonist to inhabit a turbulent (and paradoxically more sane) way of being associated with adolescence and pre-adulthood. It is such depictions of the party as a negative space—where people lose their sense of self—that interest me in this chapter. As discussed in the previous chapter, being unself-conscious is a rare luxury for young people of color, and the desi nightclub party was, in the late 1990s, a notable social space that released one from the laborious state of cultural self-consciousness.

Gerd Baumann and Sabita Banerji were the first to study British bhangra as a distinct cultural form, tracing its evolution from the bhangra bands that played at Sikh and Hindu temples—where British South Asian communities often gathered—through the 1960s, into its

improvisation in the 1980s by second-generation artists who infused bhangra with sounds from pop culture. By the late 1980s, this music could be heard at parties and nightclubs frequented by British Asian youth.[xci] Subsequent scholarship on the South Asian dance party culture in the UK and the U.S. mainly falls into two camps: one celebrates the palpable hybridity of its music and the other cautions against such celebration, highlighting the complex and not necessarily resistant nature of the hybrid identities produced in this subculture. Rajinder Dudrah exemplifies the first camp by suggesting that "[t]he articulation of identity through a fusion-based music [i.e. British Bhangra] opens up possibilities wherein people are able to identify in a number of ways and with a number of identifications [including] Asian, black and British that aren't exclusively one of these identities, but a collective articulation of all three." (370). Here we have a reading that consolidates British Asian identity as represented by the sum of the cultures invoked by the form.[xcii] Similarly, Sanjay Sharma argues that British Bhangra enabled "[South] Asian youth to affirm their identities positively within a dominant cultural formation that 'offers' either an acculturating process of assimilation into the British nation or exclusion from it" (36).[xciii] Note in both scholars a focus on the *positive* affirmations of diasporic identities. The problem with such celebrations is perhaps self-evident: they overrate the hospitality to diversity within this youth culture as well as its resistance to dominant culture. By contrast, Gayatri Gopinath (1995) and Sunaina Maira (2002) argue that these youth cultural texts can often "recuperate" and reconsolidate hegemonic constructions of community and identity by redeploying dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality.[xciv]

In *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White outline a somewhat similar critical ambivalence in relation to Bakhtin's theory of the "carnivalesque." For many critics, Bakhtin's work has understandably offered a powerful treatment of the rich

aesthetics of carnival and their embedded transgressions of high/low social and conceptual

hierarchies. At the same time, detractors have argued, carnivalesque forms do not ultimately

undermine dominant rule because such transgressions are usually sanctioned as ritualized

exceptions within popular culture.[xcv] Ultimately Stallybrass and White arrive at the following

conclusion, one that we may extend to readings of popular culture more broadly:

> It actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are
> *intrinsically* radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves the false
> essentializing of carnivalesque transgression…The most that can be said in the abstract is
> that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable
> politically transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political
> antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle.*
> (Emphasis in original, 14).

In order to achieve momentum in my own reading of the party's transformative potential, I

borrow implicitly from the critical understanding described in this passage. On the one hand, I

find it limiting to suggest that the music straightforwardly engendered new "positive" identities

or resisted dominant constructions.[xcvi] But I am also unconvinced that the ritualized

transgressions of this party culture necessarily settled down by adapting hegemonic constructions

of community and ethnic authenticity. As Gopinath acknowledges in light of the growing

number of women DJs and club-goers, the form "remains [as of 1995 at least] in flux and under

transformation" and a totalizing theory of its form is not (yet) possible (317). As Stallybrass and

White convincingly suggest, and as Gopinath acknowledges, to theorize the politics of a form

involves positing the exact nature of its "transgression." So I hope to expand here on the

possibilities offered by this party culture, without attempting to essentialize the actual experiences of partygoers or establish the politics of this party culture.

Through her ethnographic work about this New York desi party scene, Sunaina Maira convincingly argues that, far from being confused or clueless about their culture, second-generation partygoers were culturally adept and usually produced their own discourses of cultural identity. Saliently, she argues, these youth negotiated their cultural multiplicity through gendered performances of "cultural nostalgia" and ethnic authenticity.[xcvii] Her analysis relies almost entirely on in-depth interviews with a specific group of (twenty-four) college students who are part of the "straight remix party scene" where, she argues, the "vibe is generally heterosexist, if not homophobic (which is also generally true of mainstream club culture)." In her framing, then, she marks queer-friendly parties as exceptions to the (mainstream) norm: "[B]y the late 1990s in New York, the potentially subversive queer bhangra scene existed in counterpoint not only to public spheres in which brown bodies were invisible but also to a parallel, often aggressively heterosexual bhangra remix youth subculture where queerness was invisible" (47). Her use of queerness here refers to non-straight sexualities, which explains her somewhat entrenched separation between between the straight and queer desi scene. And even though she marks the straight college-youth scene as an outcrop of a queer Manhattan scene where "bhangra remix first became a subcultural staple," she specifically frames Basement Bhangra as an exception to a wider heterosexist norm and as a space that attracted "slightly older crowds."

Both fictional and nonfictional representations represent DJ Rekha as an icon for the New York bhangra party whose work is popular among audiences young, queer, or otherwise. And while Maira's ethnography is restricted to a college-student party subculture mostly publicized

by word of mouth, DJ Rekha held increasingly popular nights that would become a well-known landmark in the larger New York city clubland and which clearly attracted a demographic that went beyond desi college students, including people who were older, non-desi, desi but not middle class, straight, queer, and so forth. Ultimately, Maira's acknowledgment that Rekha's parties mark an exception to her argument creates room for different readings of these parties. It is perhaps no accident that the fictional representations that concern me all signal an affiliation with Rekha's work and that anxieties about cultural authenticity and self-presentation do not predominate in their renderings. The crux of my argument about the desi party, which relies on fictional representations, is that for people pinned (confused) by bipolar cultural demands, it staged a defamiliarizing, non-prescriptive dialogue between cultural texts.

In what follows, I begin by arguing that both *American Desi* and *Born Confused* mined the trope of the ABCD—and the theme of identity confusion it surfaces—to reach out specifically to a second-generation desi audience. An independent film that chiefly sold through the distribution networks of Indian grocery and video stores, *American Desi* seems particularly committed to a desi youth audience with an immediate context for the word "confusion." Expanding on the term cultural self-consciousness, I consider how the trope of identity confusion brings to bear everyday pressures upon these youth to represent themselves through a coherent cultural identity. While *American Desi* introduces desi youth audience to a diasporic youth culture that takes cultural in-betweenness for granted, the novel *Born Confused* processes an ideological shift, treating in-betweenness as a source of creative inspiration and enjoyment rather than a personal failure marked by the inability to name her cultural identity. The desi party stages the protagonist's epiphany by staging cultural exchange as an unending continuum full of surprises and unexpected pleasures.

I end this chapter on the desi party by considering its potential as a form of emotional survival, as presented in *Corona*, from the perspective of an adult far removed from the real-life comforts of middle-class youth. Each story powerfully exposes Razia's (queer of color) intersectionality and poignant vulnerability; in "Bhangra Blow-up," the context is President Bush's reelection and the sense of failure that swept over New York-based desi activists in its aftermath. Staging a dramatically different interface between cultures than the war on terror, the desi party here marks a way of "stretching" time spent away from the "real" world of politics.

The linear "temporal mapping" in conventional narratives of adolescence, Jack Halberstam argues, is often incongruent with how queers spend their time, as they appear to invest much more time in activities associated with youth culture—like regularly attending "gigs" and dancing in nightclubs—well into their fifties. This is the state of affairs for Razia in "Bhangra Blow-up," as she finds herself reveling in the ritualized rebellion of subcultural style as she waits out the Bush administration.[xcviii]

3.1   CULTURAL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE CONFUSED

As the title suggests, the plot of *American Desi* focalizes the protagonist Kris's identity crisis as a child of Indian immigrants settled in the US. The opening sequence shows Kris moving out of his parents' home (with his white best friend) for college; visually, we open with Kris's childhood bedroom, its walls sheathed with images of iconic Americanness (there's the American flag, music blaring, etc.). The slow pan over the images portrays this excess as overcompensation. By the same token, his family's Indianness also appears tiresome—the father is making chai, the background music to his movements is Hindu-devotional, and the mother

(who has no dialogue in the film) performs a slightly elaborate send-off ritual. When Kris

protests the ritual, the father cajoles him to be "a good boy" and just let her do her thing. Just

before he leaves the house, the entire extended family shows up to say goodbye, foiling his plans

for a quick exit. The film thus opens with two concomitant markers of a second-generation

coming-of-age narrative—the middle-class event of going away to college at 18 and, secondly,

the discomfort with his ethnicity that saturates his self-performance.

Kris's most careful articulation of his irritation with his family's Indian excess appears a

little later in the film, during his first conversation with the character Nina. (Her ethnicity is a

little ambiguous and he doesn't yet know she's desi as well, which only adds to his discomfort

later.) Explaining that he's not thrilled with his room assignment, Kris looks around, lowers his

voice, and tells her while rolling his eyes: "They're all Indian."

Nina: "You don't like Indians?"

Kris: "No. I mean, yes I do. My parents are Indian. But they used to drag me to all these

cultural events when I was a kid, you know? And man, are they boring. And I thought

when I finally came to college I'd be through with it" (35:49).

At least part of his claustrophobic saturation with Indianness, the film establishes, has to do with

the parent-child power hierarchy that transmits culture. Against the backdrop of such an

imperative, the American motifs in his childhood bedroom reference a familiar trope of

generational tension: Pushed to revere Indian culture, Kris headed in the diametrically opposite

direction and matched the level of excess. But the trope of parent-child tension within the

immigrant family has a specific political charge, and Kris's situation is structurally no different.

[xcix] While rejecting his parents' culture allows him to access white social life, it carries the price

of internalizing the shame of ethnicity. His resistance thus comes at the price of this abjection.

American Desi clearly calls out this abjection of Indianness as problematic, but not without first sympathizing with the adolescent predicament.

If the "No. I mean, yes" part of the above-described exchange dramatizes his confusion, the rest of the film charts his emotional trajectory from abjecting to embracing "Indian" culture, from being an American Born Confused Desi (i.e. ABCD) to American Desi. Eventually, for Kris, Indian culture transforms from a generational imperative into a genuine source of connection with others. The first time he meets Jagjit, one of his roommates-to-be, Kris is knocked flat on the ground, having stumbled while walking distracted on campus. Jagjit nearly deadlifts him off the floor, providing a physical metaphor for the role he (along with others) will eventually play in transporting Kris from a confused state to a more stable selfhood. In general, his transformation is plotted alongside his encounters with other people of Indian descent on campus. The other characters present a range of orientations to India—some of them have (degrees of) Indian accent performances and others do not; Kris is not the only second-generation kid there, but the ABCD title goes to him alone.[c]

Born Confused similarly opens in a New Jersey suburb, where the protagonist, Dimple, lives and goes to school. Like Kris, Dimple has a white best friend, and perhaps the "white best friend" is another important trope of the ABCD narrative. In both these texts, the white best friend marks the protagonist's social life as unfolding in a mostly white suburb and also becomes the foil for his/her alienation—that is, despite having the best of intentions, the best friend cannot understand or doesn't recognize the protagonist's internalized shame. Like Kris, Dimple grows up with only her parents providing the context for her Indian identity and, as for Kris, leaving the suburbs widens her social life. The second half of the novel mostly unfolds in the context of New York City's expanding South Asian nightclub scene, which becomes a profound resource for her

evolving consciousness. And, as in *American Desi*, her evolution unfolds through her encounters with other first- and second-generation desis closer to her age. Characters of note here are her cousin Kavita, who moves from India to go to NYU; Sabina, who is hailed as a no-longer-confused American desi and who turns out to be Kavita's girlfriend; Karsh, the boy she meets through her parents and who turns out to be a mini-celebrity as a DJ in the club scene; and finally Zara, a beautiful transgender woman who frequents desi parties.

In both of these works, the trope of the ABCD impinges on the cultural self-consciousness built into the framing of nonwhite US citizenship. What marks an ABCD narrative is the idea that a second-generation desi adolescent does not have a clear understanding of his/her national/cultural identity. This conflict features as an elaborate metaphor in *The Namesake,* whose protagonist is assigned two names by his parents—one given hastily at birth and the other picked out more carefully later. When Gogol (the name by which readers know him best) comes across the phrase ABCD, he wonders whether living with two names was "emblematic of the greatest confusion of all" (118). But if Lahiri's novel only briefly alludes to this problem, the two texts under discussion in this section—*American Desi* and *Born Confused*—and a handful of other texts published in the late 1990s/early 2000s centralized this confusion as the plot's main conflict. As "confused" youth who are made to feel neither Indian "enough" nor American, depending on the social context, the texts' protagonists are driven (by internal and external pressures) to comprehend themselves better and define themselves coherently so they can represent that identity to others.[ci]

This pathologizing of this young people's confusion about their identities specifically reveals an everyday ethnographic imperative for people of South Asian descent to culturally represent themselves. For confusion is a failed understanding of one's "in-betweenness" and thus

marks an inability to represent both national and ethnic affiliations. While the word "confusion"

is used less frequently outside of desi discourses, popular discourse frequently applies the idea of

cultural "in-betweenness" to children of immigrants. What such narratives reveal to us is the

notion that children of (nonwhite) immigrants are in need of *cultural* training, in addition to

normative schooling, that socializes them into their cultural identity. Despite their initial

resentment, for example, the roommates are ultimately affectionate toward Kris: watching him

blunder through his romance with Nina makes them want to help socialize him into the ethnic

alignments (that they recognize as) inevitably thrust upon him. But if we assume, as the

roommates do, that children of immigrants need this cultural training, we take the confusion for a

given, an immigrant-specific version of the "long lesson in humility [and] awkwardness" that

defines childhood (Halberstam 26).[cii] The trope of "confusion" can then be seen as a culturally

situated instantiation of the unsettling waywardness, epistemological anarchy, and sideways

growth that characterize youthfulness. And if that is the case, it is easy to recognize how

ABCDs, like sideways children and failed adults, are constantly barraged with prescriptive

norms (from both adults and their less-confused peers) pathologizing their so-called "in-

between" situation as interfering in the path to normative adulthood.[ciii]

At the level of public discourse, children of Asian immigrants receive substantial political

attention in ways that kindle cultural self-consciousness. Several theorists, Lisa Lowe among the

most eminent of them, have established that the legal exclusion of nonwhite people was

foundational to the American institution of citizenship. As perceived outsiders unless proven

otherwise, Asian immigrants and their children are often entangled within mainstream

imperatives to perform American citizenship, which I suspect always inspire some thinking and

questioning about social and cultural affiliations.[civ] The imperative of cultural self-consciousness

is precisely what is behind the "safe multiculturalism" Anita Mannur locates in the general celebration of fusion cuisine as "postnational" and, she argues, in the cultural fusion embodied by second-generation immigrants—both "fusions" call for a palatable blending and assimilation in which otherness is a mild spice (or an "accent," to use Shilpa Davé's framing of the same problem).[cv] That is to say, discourses of American citizenship call on (adult) second-generation immigrants to get over their childish confusion and perform their fusion.

Amanda Chapman has argued that certain influential Romantic writers popularized in nineteenth-century European culture notions of childhood as pure, unself-conscious being.[cvi] Such notions of childhood have no doubt shaped the kind of pristine (innocent, unself-conscious) child whose protection, as Lee Edelman has argued, infuses political projects with moral urgency. But perhaps racialized kids have never benefited from such assumptions or been considered so pure of ideology and cultural determination. When children of nonwhite immigrants appear in public discourse, they appear to be overdetermined beings interpellated by the opposite vectors of nonwhite-immigrant culture and white-American nationality. Given such interpretations, cultural self-consciousness is likely inevitable for the young people marked by their ethnic difference, and the implicit pressures to define their citizenship/identity must only heighten as they grow older.

It is not surprising that Vijay Prashad harkens back to W.E.B Du Bois in his treatise on desis in the US.[cvii] As a consequence of political conservatism, cultural self-consciousness is remarkably similar in structure to Du Bois's "double consciousness." One often develops a cultural self-consciousness because s/he is made to feel like a "problem." It is true that model minorities, as Prashad has put it, have the privilege of being called a "solution." Even so, being hailed as a solution on the basis of one's culture, ethnicity, history, and so forth, equally

provokes self-consciousness in the subject being hailed. And sensing their appropriation and interpellation within dominant discourses, minorities, in turn, might want to examine the alignments offered and their alternatives more closely. A significant aspect of the politics of representation in which minority artists play a role (and are often entangled) involves identity construction: the problem of how minorities see themselves (as problems, solutions, or something else) within a larger social matrix.

The mechanism of cultural self-consciousness is this: Kids learn at an early age that their childhood experiences are distinct from "normal American" ones because their parents are immigrants. They face the choice between developing a fantasy of uncomplicated assimilation or sophisticating an existing narrative about their bicultural selves and self-consciously constructing their narrative. Either way, without the luxury of a genealogy that locates them in the United States, they must develop this cultural self-consciousness and ideally produce a self-aware narrative (i.e. an autoethnography) of where they received which embodied trait visible in their performance. A clear instantiation of cultural self-consciousness is the dual identity (Sri Lankan American, Indian American, but also the more politicized Asian American, South Asian American, etc.), the identity that marks the intersection between national and immigrant/ethnic affiliations. The dual identity acknowledges non-American cultural origins, but also re-affirms political attachment to *this* country. That is to say, it is not an organic identity (if there was ever any such thing) or even one that is worn as intimately as a name but a constructed representation of self in response to being looked at as an outsider; it is the title one gives herself for the benefit of a broader audience, American or from elsewhere, that might wonder about her nationality.

At its core, then, cultural self-consciousness responds to (auto)ethnographic demands that consider the ethnic self as a multicultural tapestry to be looked at, admired, and critiqued by

81

interested onlookers. In this context, confusion may become an illuminating (sideways) manifestation of the cultural self-consciousness frequently demanded of adult and pre-adult children of immigrants in that it understands ethnicity as a limitation, a source of awkwardness. A well-defined cultural identity, which manifests among the more savvy of youth, is a corollary form of cultural self-consciousness in that it reflects self-awareness.

The critical energy of much existing scholarship on cultural self-consciousness (cast in terms of identity formation) in second-generation immigrants lies in exploring its role within the politics of representation. The central thesis for Sunaina Maira's landmark study on this youth subculture, for example, is that the party offers a "pragmatic" purpose for (heterosexist) youth looking to enact a "visibly hybrid ethnicity" (45). The 'how' and the 'what' of self-representation clearly reigns supreme in such a discussion as is perhaps warranted in an ethnographic study. While otherwise instructive, Maira's work leaves unexplored the very real possibility of people wanting to work around the imperative of self-representation. But, as discussed in my introduction, even when literary critics gesture at the disproportionate pressures exerted by self-representation upon second-generation people/artists, they make little effort to explore what it would really mean to detangle oneself from the pressures of self-performance. In his award-winning work on the "children of 1965," for example, Min Song argues:

> the work of a writer as an Asian American—to write with race in mind or as a starting place—is at its most engaging a restless endeavor, a deliberate dislodging of being for a becoming that ceaselessly searches out lines of flight, a movement that seeks to break free from constrained and habituated patterns of thought (22).

And so, Song continues, authors who push back against the "Asian American" label in fact demonstrate the way thinking about race breeds creative work.[cviii] But what if one of the

"lines of flight" sought by Asian American writers here involves being read as someone who *isn't* writing "with race as a starting place"? How is it that we are assuming that race overdetermines the form of Asian American writing? Maybe it is the cultural self-consciousness and the reading habits that produce it that writers would like to escape. My point here is that perhaps we are too hasty in characterizing attempts to detangle from self-performance as either acultural fantasies (bred from a profound abjection of one's background) or, as Song argues, representative of what it means to write as an Asian American.

To the best of my knowledge, most academics writing about second-generation identity formation are concerned with its political implications, always already assuming the placement of identity within a politics of representation. In conversations about second-generation desis, Sunaina Maira and Vijay Prashad are frequently cited; and because their arguments are aligned with each other and frequently used as springboards, I offer a brief take on Prashad's work as it relates to the specific question of confusion. Significantly, Prashad's intervention as a cultural historian is to redress the lack of an adequate political history of South Asians and, among other things, reclaim powerful moments of black and South Asian solidarity that have faded from contemporary historical narratives that pit South Asians as a model minority against other minorities. There is a moment in *The Karma of Brown Folk* where he discusses the need for better historical representation in relation to the second generation:

> The failure to offer a better account of cultural capacity of desis in the United States leads [the second generation] either to [a] form of acultural individualism or else to a turn to a fetishized U.S. or desi culture (125).[cix]

In other words, academics and activists alike fail young desis by not offering them a large enough ideological bank to draw from as they produce their cultural identities; their minds need

to be opened further, beyond the narrow historiographies of mainstream and cultural nationalism. And certainly, better schooling is a reasonable political goal. I would argue, however, that contributing to the desi cultural/political archive through research is only one form of good-faith intervention for academics. Another would be to recognize ways in which these youth already fight back against the (racist) imperatives of self-representation and the economic/political alignments demanded of model minorities. Kris's seemingly naïve question about *why* he needs to "know" about Indian culture or identify with it is actually an excellent one. And readers may be prompted to wonder why Dimple is so paralytically self-conscious at all. It might be worth asking for whose benefit desi youth must self-consciously perform legible cultural genealogy and/or a narrative of cultural affiliation. What, apart from participating in the politics of representation, through art or in everyday performance, is the value of this cultural self-consciousness?[cx] And where does this whole system leave people who continue to be confused because they *have* developed a strong cultural self-consciousness and want nothing to do with the kinds of alignment offered? The negative feelings of confusion associated with ABCD adolescence might offer glimpses of a different ideological route, especially when they are not abandoned in favor of maturity and purportedly less confused cultural identity.[cxi]

Having laid out the central conflict troubling the ABCD protagonist, *American Desi* presents two different engagements with Indian culture by way of addressing similarly "confused" audience members. One type of engagement is diegetical, operating through the various cultural events the kids have to prepare for. The Indian club president announces that the Garbha is the biggest event of the club, taking up the most effort in preparation. Several plotlines culminate during the much-anticipated Garbha (including the Bollywood-style fight between Kris and Rakesh). Kris, Nina, and Rakesh watch *Sangam* (1964) and other films

together in order to pick out songs for the Lila-Raas event. And while the Indian club tellingly makes an event out of several Hindu festivals, Eid is privately celebrated by two of the characters in the film—Salim and Farah—as part of their own separate (romance) plotline. As Jigna Desai has noted about much second-generation diasporic film, *American Desi* makes several intertextual references to Hindi cinema, claiming an inheritance. In the character Rakesh we find the stylings of a "villain" from iconic Indian movies—the first time we see him, he has sunglasses on at night, wears flashy 1970s clothes, and has a dim-witted posse following him around. True to his villainous role, he is part of a love triangle with Kris and Nina and becomes the first person to call Kris an ABCD; he instigates (and loses) a DDLJ-style fight with Kris toward the end of the film. And not to police the film's authenticity myself, but the going-away ritual depicted at the start of the film is not common in families with Kris's last name (Reddy). They are in fact a part of North Indian Hindu culture, one that is heavily represented in Indian film. One explanation for this cultural incongruity is that the filmmaker's references to Indianness also come from popular Indian films.

There is of course plenty of enjoyment to be had in the diegetic cultural events. But as is evident in the Garbha sequence, the involvement demands a level of cultural competence. The dancing at the Garbha is also studied, following a learned pattern, emphasizing eye contact and synchrony between participants who are often (but not exclusively) partnered up by gender. Even watching films is endowed with cultural purpose. So the Garbha, the mosque-going, and the Indian film-viewing allow the performance of authenticity for these characters.

I would argue that it isn't the film's somewhat formulaic form (learn the Garbha dance, get the girl) that makes it one of the most commercially successful indie films about ABCDs. At least part of the film's appeal lies in the second form of engagement with Indian cultural texts,

represented by the bhangra night and the various college-based and subcultural artists showcased along the way. If the Garbha and other events offer the opportunity to relate to a phantasmatic past, the party culture (and the music it inspired) unfolds as a contemporary cultural form. The bhangra night features prominently, taking up five minutes of screen time, and briefly plays the famous "Beware of the Boys" soundtrack. Elsewhere in the film, Panjabi MC's interpretation of the Sufi song "Mirza"—which allegorizes the destructive power of torn loyalties—plays in the background while Salim first sees Farah at the mosque during Id. Penn Masala's rendition of the Indian film song "Aap Jaisa Koi" plays during a four-minute montage in the film, mostly marking the passage of time through dialogue-free representations of key interactions between characters.[cxii] Such musical texts, patronized heavily by desi college students, form an impressive one-third of the film's soundtrack. And the film signs off by unceremoniously playing more bhangra party music, after all the plot drama of the Garbha has settled and just before the credits roll.

Given his Punjabi accent and appearance, Jagjit's delight about this party is certainly not odd.[cxiii] In fact, some of the most iconic of the cultural producers in question, including DJ Rekha, trace origins to the Punjab region where India and Pakistan overlap.[cxiv] And yet the unambivalent pleasure in Jagjit's voice cannot be unique to Punjabis. There is clearly a broader appeal that cannot be located in such a specific cultural identity. Despite the difference in tone, Jagjit's participation in other Indian events is equally enthusiastic, and conversely every one of the American desis attends the bhangra night without hesitation. So his enthusiasm for bhangra night, while more pronounced, is not dissimilar to that of others. And unlike the other two events announced by the newspaper—Diwali night and the Garbha—bhangra night is neither prepared

for in anticipation nor is it particularly relevant to the plot. It shows up as a party where the DJ (evidently) did all the work. In other words, there is no self-conscious training: it is just fun.

In following Kris's coming of age from ABCD to American Desi, we begin to notice that every desi character in the film relies on the Indian club (that is oriented around music and dancing) for friendship and personal fulfillment. Kris attends the Indian club meeting to talk to Nina; Jagjit, it turns out, is only an engineering major because of his father—he takes charge of the decorations committee to let out the artist within. Ajay (played by Kal Penn) hears that "everyone [desi]" is attending the Indian club meeting, a fact that motivates his attendance. Perhaps then, as much as the film is about Kris's identity crisis, it is also generally invested in depicting the emergent and rich social life of second-generation desis on East coast campuses that is enabled for these kids by the umbrella term "Indian." I would resist calling the Indian club a "community" for these characters, because finding a community is often associated with finding an identity. As Sarah Thornton notes in *The Subcultural Reader*: "Community tends to suggest a more permanent population, often allied to a neighborhood, of which family is a key constitutive part" (1997, 2). It is true that having parents from the broad subcontinent is sometimes the only thing these kids share—and this connection is deeply mined and repurposed in the interest of having a social life. But the specific cultures these kids are part of are otherwise far too different, and the film does not make much of an effort to outline the terms of their integration on this campus. And as Jean Luc Nancy (1991) notes, the etymological origin for "community" lies in the ritual of communion and thus surfaces a sense of connection on the basis of nostalgia for something that is (probably forever) lost ("The Inoperative Community," 12). In this case, the word community might surface the sense of diasporic nostalgia (and its associations with diasporic identity formation), a structure of feeling I do not believe is at stake

87

here. Attending these desi events does not necessarily represent an internal exploration of self/search for identity, in my reading of the film at least. Another way to name the appeal of the Indian club for the characters is that it fulfills a general, extroverted need for socializing and clearly offers low risks of rejection for people of Indian descent. We might simply assume that, in the 90s, the umbrella of "Indian" (however defined) offered some social coherence, allowing for the kind of social mixing evident in the film.

Unlike the cultural events associated with Indian authenticity and accorded a dutiful respect by non-confused desi characters, the film blends diasporic musical texts into the cinematic texture and uses it to perform the extradiegetic role of claiming an insider audience of diasporic youth. The a cappella renditions of several Hindi songs by Penn Masala, the bhangra remix songs by Panjabi MC, "Passage to India" by Sammy Chand, and the remix of "Yeh Mera Dil" produced by Magic Mike all reflect a culture of music that did not have a far-flung audience beyond this demographic of desi-partygoers, located in the East Coast and other diasporic "nodes," at least not in the late '90s when the film was written and produced.[cxv] DJ Rekha's cameo at the bhangra night seems designed solely to the purpose of interpellating a young desi audience. The film's script makes no mention of her, and people in the fictional world seem oblivious to her fame. But the camera pays specific attention to her: close-ups showcase her hands at work and break the fourth wall with friendly, inviting eye contact. These close-ups are thus metafictional moments implying her iconic status and extending the invitation to bhangra for audiences at home.

What *American Desi* manages to do, incredibly well I think, is represent an energetic desi youth culture on college campuses and, despite its low budget, give substantial exposure to desi subcultural artists.[cxvi] That is to say, far from offering a prescriptive lesson about how to

construct one's identity, the film invites into the narrative fold far-flung American desis in more remote areas who may have assumed, perhaps like Kris, that American youth culture is only accessible to them if they abject Indian culture.[cxvii] This desi youth culture, on the other hand, accepts them and specifically invites their patronage while other cultural forms either ignored them (the American mainstream) or, filtered through their parents, demanded anthropological reverence. Within this broader invitation of diasporic youth culture, the desi party features as a thriving subcultural space and a social outlet. In this way, the film offers an "it gets better" message to young desis, telling them to leave their remote/middle America hometown and come to college.

While it seems at first to single Kris out as some kind of anomaly, the film is ultimately a lot kinder to his predicament and treats it more as a function of social environment than as a personal failure. And the desi party stages a broader youth culture that accepts in-betweenness without question. *Born Confused* takes the project of re-tooling the ABCD title several steps further, with the author's expressed intention of turning the "C" from Confused to "Creative."[cxviii]

3.2 *BORN CONFUSED:* "CONFUSION AND SOLUTION SEEM TO ME TO BE THE SAME"[cxix]

Surely nothing can bring home the labor of identity formation as clearly as reading about it in a five hundred-page novel (paperback version). In *Born Confused*, the reader has supreme access to the protagonist's interiority, which is set against a middle-class upbringing with small cultural tweaks. True to the genre of coming-of-age fiction, the exterior comfort of middle-class life is

revealed to be superficial as readers gain more and more access to the turbulent mind of an

adolescent trying to make sense of her life (which includes here defining her cultural identity).

At five hundred or so pages, the author seems to acknowledge—if not critique—the kind of

paralytic, multiple internal reflections that can burden a (culturally) self-conscious adolescent. So

when Dimple muses at one point that her life "seemed to be dragging on and on in no direction

whatsoever" (92), the remark stands as a Joycean acknowledgement of the novel's slow pace.

Perhaps the initial slow pace serves to effectively build up the tight knot of personal confusion

whose ultimate release impresses upon the reader the significant catharsis of letting go of cultural

self-consciousness. If much of this buildup entails paralyzing self-consciousness, the party scene

energizes in her a new form of comfort with herself that obviates the need for the kinds of

alignments that make one culturally self-conscious in the first place.

Like *American Desi*, we find here also a contrast between the spontaneous enjoyment of

a party and the studious atmosphere of other cultural events. Granted, dressing up for a nightclub

is a form of preparation. But from Dimple's perspective at least, there is more room for

personality and ownership in dressing for this party than in other desi events. After a long

description of the "mix-and-match East-and-West" creativity of these women's clothing, Dimple

wonders: "Where had they been hiding all this time? These Indians who looked somewhat

present in the twenty-first century? Why hadn't I seen them at Garbha and Diwali parties?"

(187). And so there is an instructive dichotomy between dutifully attended cultural events and

these "twenty-first century" parties. Dimple continues, marking a deep contrast between the self-

consciousness felt elsewhere compared to the complacent confidence fostered by the nightclub

scene:

It was a strange revelation, to be brown among the brown. Sure, it had happened in social

situations with relatives and family friends, but on those occasions it still seemed we

were a tiny ghee-burning coconut-breaking minority tucked away in someone's kitchen

while the whole white world went on outside. And even in those instances I had never

felt like my world was necessarily the one inside. And forget India—where I looked like I

fit…[but] always wound up utterly lost.

But here it could be different. This was New York City…These people were not

my relatives...The girls here had their own brand of with-it (195).

What we see in the above passage is the oft-discussed problem in diaspora studies of subjects not

feeling like they belong anywhere. But it isn't simply a search for community that gets satisfied

here for Dimple. To be "brown among the brown" in this context is to experience the relief of

anonymity ("This was New York City," "these people were not my relatives"). Dimple's

revelation here is similar to Feroza's at the airport in *An American Brat* when she realizes that

"no one knew her and she knew no one."[cxx] I would argue that this intangible relief marks a

serendipitous sensation of not being looked at.[cxxi] The other girls' "with-it" confidence is another

way of saying that they lack self-consciousness and are "brown" in a completely unapologetic

way.[cxxii] Given her open admiration, this is a new and important state of affairs for Dimple.

The thesis of the book is deceptively simple and not an unfamiliar one in books

connected to teenage angst: let go of the self-consciousness that is making you a wallflower and

embrace the inner, essential you hiding underneath. And yet it may not be an exaggeration to call

the novel a pioneering text, because few mainstream texts make this argument convincing to

nonwhite kids; and throughout the 1990s, it was mostly the party culture on college campuses

and in huge metropolitan cities that played the role of drawing desi kids out, inviting them to be

less self-conscious. While *American Desi* honors that role by giving the party a presence in the film, *Born Confused* builds it into the narrative as a space that advances a new understanding of confusion.

"Get lost to be found," forget yourself in order to "be present"—these are the terms of the new form of knowledge Dimple gains, marked by a hospitality to feelings of confusion. And the narrative makes the cognitive and affective dissonance (for her) of the party a central part of this new formation. Re-entering the nightclub after a brief walk outside, she notes: "It's hard to believe I'd been able to see the limits of this room when I first walked in; now it seemed there were none. What a trip simply crossing it had been: from insecurity to hope to fear to curious jubilation and now to a strange strain of melancholy" (209). The desi party thus allows the protagonist to revel in the pleasures of confusion, of not knowing, of having a cultural dialogue that goes nowhere in particular. As Hidier notes at one point about this transformation:

> [Dimple] turns the C for Confused to a C for Creative. American Born Creative Desi:
> This seemed to me to be a more accurate version to describe the second gen South Asians
> who peopled my world, and were in fact shaping and creating the culture as they went
> along. It seemed to embody the idea that this Neither Here Nor There is in fact a You Are
> Here.[cxxiii]

And this is indeed Dimple's final take on her confusion, all the way on page 491: "You could call it confusion on a bad day—or just a call to dance on a good."

The metaphorical embrace of cultural intermingling we find in the work of popular DJs, I would argue, leads one away from the cycle of ontological ethnicity and the coercive mechanisms of cultural self-consciousness.[cxxiv] As an art of failure à la Halberstam, confusion permits a productive form of cultural disorientation.[cxxv] "It's not such a bad thing, a little

confusion" (199), Sabina tells her at a party, kickstarting a new shift in Dimple's consciousness.

Hidier remarks, in an interview, that seeing confusion as a valid source of inquiry, and not a

phase of ignorance to be left behind, is at the heart of *Born Confused*: "It is about learning how

to bring two cultures together without falling apart yourself in the process…[and] the power of

music in [creating this harmony]."[cxxvi] Marking the party culture's centrality to this

transformation (from "falling apart" to thriving in confusion), Hidier notes elsewhere that the

party for her is a "great metaphor for people trying to balance multiple loyalties." Within the

novel, the protagonist-narrator observes with pleasured wonder at a DJing workshop how the

"songs settled together as if there had never been a frontier to cross" (302). The revelation that

songs can so easily "settle" together, for the protagonist, catalyzes a form of disorientation that

creates a new set of spatialized relations between cultures. So the idea of "bringing cultures

together" may be read here as representing more of a weave—where separate strands stand

harmoniously together but remain distinct—than an exercise in fusion. My point is that this is not

really a naïve craving for assimilation as much as a discourse of comfort, of feeling "balanced"

or harmonized between the vectors of multiple loyalties.

Hidier has commented that her novelistic treatment of the party was inspired by

Basement Bhangra.[cxxvii] The striking similarity between the above discussion of balancing

cultures and the way Rekha talks about her own work is then not surprising: "For my generation,

music is a cultural mix. We grew up hearing it all…In the course of a single night [at Basement

Bhangra], I weave all these different influences in and out."[cxxviii] And remarking elsewhere on

her dislike for the term "fusion" applied to her music, she notes:

> "Fusion" is problematic in the same way that "assimilation" is. The term carries this
>
> notion that you put two things together and you lose the originals…It's more of a

dialogue, and more interactive, and more a continuum, than people acknowledge.[cxxix]

The distinction relevant here is between the homogeneity of "fusion" and an ongoing "dialogue," full of surprises, that stands as "continuum" without resolving difference. So it is not surprising that DJ artists answer Hidier's call to rethink cultural self-consciousness. Several DJ artists and producers see themselves as consciously tinkering with and revising (through textual reuse) music that comes pre-loaded with cultural meaning. Part of their significant appeal, then, lies in the lack of museumizing reverence for the homeland. Bally Sagoo asserts, for example, that what he popularized was an artistic willingness to "tamper with" (South) Asian music and that it brought "Asian people back into Asian music."[cxxx] The word "tamper" here implicitly contrasts with treating Asian culture as a vanishing anthropological object that needs to be preserved. And in reclaiming Asian music—as described in the rest of his sentence—the idea is that the culture is not "lost" and therefore need not invite nostalgic treatment. It is simply a part of everyday life. A particularly illustrative comment comes from Detroit-based artist Kidd Skilly: "The people who influence me most seem to transcend through age groups, religions, ethnicity and race — they make people feel a certain level of comfort."[cxxxi] Throughout, the emphasis is not on coherently *representing* their multiple cultural influences, but putting them in dialogue with each other and just seeing what happens. And the surprise element of mixing musical streams that do not culturally line up with each other seems to produce a crucial source of comfort for diasporic youth, explaining its subcultural appeal.

3.3   *CORONA:* DESI PARTIES AND QUEER TEMPORALITY

As the ABCD plotline makes clear, second-generation desis tend to develop a cultural self-

94

consciousness and, eventually, an identity marking their cultural and national affiliations. There is also an ethical imperative for these kids, as beneficiaries of years of civil rights and consciousness-raising, that demands that they do not abject their brownness and, by extension, their parents' culture. One prescription for resolving confusion is thus to develop a deeper political and sociohistorical awareness that will help navigate these politics of self-representation. Another could be what was offered at the party: an escape from linear time and the obligation of self-representation that is part of adulthood. Part of the scholarly focus on the politics of representation (discussed earlier) relies on the idea that moving from adolescence to adulthood is inevitable. The underlying emphasis in the passage I quote from Prashad as well as Maira's influential reading of the party scene is that the formation of cultural identity plots alongside the linear development from adolescence to adulthood. If adulthood describes a time when desis have attained the ability to coherently self-represent or implicitly perform a cultural identity, it seems that the idea of adolescence harbors a productive blurriness that may be retroactively cherished even by self-sufficient adults.

Of course, linear time is inevitable or even desirable for straight, upwardly mobile people who live in the "real world" and who want real jobs. But fiction and art more broadly invite people with all kinds of relationships to linear time, including those with serious misgivings about the expectations of adulthood. The very fact that subcultures often become ritualized "styles" of youth rebellion informs us that even so-called straight people occasionally enjoy these brief, licensed backward leaps into a youthful mindset that energetically opposes authority.[cxxxii] But for queers, as Halberstam argues, extended subcultural involvement is more than a short break from the linear process of life. It tracks a form of survival that "stretches out adolescence" and forestalls the "maturity" to accept the logics that govern the world.

It might be said that *Corona* evokes a sense of being "in a queer time and place" (Halberstam) and is filled with stories of precarity and profound insights. The author calls it a "dark comedy about being desi in the US." Moving us through different temporal and spatial settings, breaking out of linear narrative time, each of the stories in *Corona* explores discomfort and vulnerability. As a narrator, Razia is constantly alert to the invisible, multivalent forces of discursive power that seek to define and control.

"Bhangra Blow-Up," the story that features the party, is set in October 2004-November 2005 and explores the protagonist's fraught relationship with Ravi as well as her intense participation as an audience member in various desi cultural events in New York City. It may appear at first that Bush's reelection is a coincidental backdrop to the whole plot, but it turns out that it is one of the story's main compelling events. Let me quickly note at the outset that we have leaped four years in time from the previous story, "G-TV," which was also set in New York and whose timeframe is the year between the Octobers of 2000 and 2001. The briefest story in the collection, "G-TV" renders no narrative description of 9/11, reflecting a clear decision on the author's part, and gives us instead the pathos of how unstoppable the bombings had been: "The protest happened, but Afghanistan was bombed again and again." And so in this next story, four years later, readers increasingly understand how battered New York-based desi activists had become and how deeply the failure of keeping Bush from getting reelected must have registered across the board. "People knew," Razia notes at one point describing the air right before the election results; "That's why they met in bars."

If her hot and cold relationship with Ravi plots Razia's emotions throughout the story, the Bush administration forms the political undercurrent that kindles the uneasiness in the first place. The story's opening scene (which is titled "i. The bed, March 2005") instantiates this

connection, after a quick narrative description setting the scene, literally, in her bed. A moment

filled with pillow-talk insight, Razia playfully compares Ravi's personality to that of a character

on the news. Then, as narrator, she shifts helpfully into an explanation for the reader:

> [The character] was hot for a minute, but now he's just a distant thought…[He] was a
>
> jerk to everyone. Still, he got a ton of interviews. Maybe because it was 2005, and every
>
> media channel was looking for some kind of distraction from what was really going on: a
>
> corrupt president and dead bodies filling up the ground.

The next scene moves us back to October 2004 and to DJ Rekha's "Bhangra Against

Bush" party where Razia first meets Ravi. But with this opening description, we understand that

Ravi's resemblance to the character on the news does not stop at the level of personality. One of

the main features of their relationship, we find out later, is that it comes with an expiration date

("He was hot for a minute")—Ravi is here as a PhD student and will return to India within the

year. And like the hot-for-a-minute man who distracted TV audiences from darker realities, Ravi

serves as a potent distraction for Razia, something she describes more squarely a few pages later:

"Post-election, while the activists who'd fought to get Bush out of office were getting

drunk…[he became my] substitute for drugs."

Remarkably, Razia's politics is not framed as a cynical resignation to the reality the

election represented. Walking out of the bar with Ravi on election night, Razia's musings

confront the reality that "Bush was going to steal the election" as her gaze falls on a tree's roots

"breaking through the sidewalk." This sight inspires both a deep acceptance ("The war would

continue," "the world as we knew it would be destroyed") and, consistent with Halberstam's

theory that failure can generate new forms of knowing, a strategy for survival. "Then the trees

would break through," she realizes, and the world would go back to what it used to be. "It would be okay," and all she could do at the moment was wait it out.

The strategy of waiting out a disaster is not new—it is verifiably effective, and in this case renders an alternative form of life planning that Halberstam calls queer temporality. That Razia plunges herself into her attraction for Ravi and the entertainment the city offered is itself, I argue, a queer use of time. The following passage encapsulates her new post-election life schedule:

> At the time in New York, there was an endless stream of desi art openings, dance parties, and film screenings. Ravi and I went to all of them, then met up for breakfast in the morning to analyze and dissect.

How to understand this extended involvement? That they attended and *then* went over the details of these events the day after reflects substantial effort. We know Razia is a writer, but it is not clear at this point that her source of income comes from her writing. And other parts of this story reflect her penury, so her intensive participation cannot be explained away as genteel leisure. On a parallel note, there is "no future" for them in the conventional sense, but Ravi and Razia appear hooked to each other anyway, trying to "stretch" out the present in which they encounter each other.[cxxxiii] Part of the difficulty in close reading this story is that the scenes are rendered in short, poetic glimpses, not laid out in chronological order. At the same time, the narrative form in which all of this unfolds contributes to this sense of an unfolding present lacking in teleology. In essence, her narration halts in the present, more a work of visual art than a conventional prose narrative. But perhaps "stretching out" is a better description than the idea of halting, because we do move forward in time, just in slower, more planetary fashion than linearly through action.

Increasingly, this desi cultural scene described in the above passage acts as refuge for Razia, allowing her to bide her time through the politics of the day. And Manhattan certainly offered resources for such survival. DJ Rekha makes a cameo in this story on the very first night Razia meets Ravi. Rekha had recently added another party, "Bhangra against Bush," to her regular Thursday nights, one that Razia and her sister begin to attend "religiously" and to which people from the "desi political scene had even trickled back in." On this night, however, Razia has a change of heart and leaves early. At 30, she decides she's too old for this party, noting the young girls around her who wear "stilettos and black pants" and who "never seemed to age." Perhaps the desi women who started to age, she muses more realistically, left the party scene to go on to graduate school or the wedding hall. Having done neither of those things, Razia feels what is familiar to readers as the twinge of failure: "I had spent my entire twenties trying to avoid getting married…I was thirty and had won." And yet, several pages later, readers might note that the party has not lost its appeal for her.

Along with Ravi and a younger group of people (which includes her sister), Razia is in DC only weeks later as an audience member for "Bhangra Blow Up," a huge annual Bhangra competition.[cxxxiv] There too, our narrator experiences a similarly perturbed wonder as she notes to Ravi, while watching a different group of college-age bhangra dancers: "It's so funny that these kids can rebel but still be part of the desi community. I don't understand." So here we have an association between "bhangra" and adolescent rebellion that does not quite line up with the performances in the competition. This is evident in the narrator's somewhat bitter tone evoked a little later, as the competition ends and the audience gets to participate in an afterparty set up for them. Noting the "explosive" energy in the audience anticipating this afterparty, the narrator thinks to herself:

We could have stormed the White House right then…We could've danced across the

National Mall and torn out Lincoln's beard, protested the mandatory fingerprinting of

South Asian and Arab men, protested the immigrant raids, the disappearances in the

middle of the night.

The criticism is unmistakable in the past-conditional form ("we could have") here, signaling the

idea that the explosive energy of the party *should have* turned into a political maelstrom. But

even as her critique stands, the party paradoxically allows her own performance of rebellion.

That is to say, however ritualized, the performance of rebellion staged at this party has been an

important source of emotional survival.

3.4 CONCLUSION

The problem marked by confusion—whose etymology implies disorderly fusion (OED)—is in

many ways a failure to name identity, to name oneself. And this is a conceptual failure that queer

theory has also grappled with. Eve Sedgwick suggests that "queer" can name the "open mesh of

possibilities and gaps" where meaning "does not completely line up." Cultural objects whose

meanings appear arcane or enigmatic to existing codes, she notes, become an important resource

for queer survival: "We needed there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with

each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love."[cxxxv]

 It is easy to see, then, the desi party's appeal to queers of color. Irrespective of their

sexual identities, it is possible desi kids grew up yearning for cultural texts that harbored identity

confusion. For example, in a passing moment remarking on her childhood, author Bushra

Rehman wonders: "Were all the queer pop stars giving us secret signs and posts all along the

100

way in the grey silence of the '80s? Their hit songs even penetrated the [Pakistani] ghetto where there was no such thing as being gay."[cxxxvi] In "Bhangra Blow-Up," the narrator affectionately calls one of the artists "our desi George Michael, our gorgeous crooner of R&B," translating for the reader the (queer) fascination he inspires. DJ Rekha has commented on how Prince was a huge influence to her as a cultural performer: "And largely because he, even now, even today, just does his own thing and has a lot of control over what he produces."[cxxxvii] It's wildly interesting that secretly and openly queer performers from the 1980s provided important models for both these artists and it checks out in their respective conceptualizations of the desi party as spaces where cultural meanings do not line up. If the party music can be described as a cultural text placed in continuous dialogue and surfacing the jagged edges of cultural mixing in surprising and comforting ways, the desi party might have been one of those spaces that harbored individuals uncomfortable elsewhere with their cultural trappings. Certainly, there were heterosexist and ethnocentric desi parties catering to entitled middle-class kids, but it is very unlikely that desi heterosexism possessed a stronghold in the Manhattan club sprawl in which Rekha's parties had a place.

In a roundtable about queer temporality, Jack Halberstam comments: "Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of [coming of age…], the embrace of late childhood in place of...responsibility." Thus the appeal of the "dark nightclub" for many is its queer temporality and the (performed) resistance to the norms that define adulthood. This is how I understand Razia's fascination with the party. The first time she meets Ravi—at a subway stop and in the context of their being the only two people who left the party early—Razia conjectures: "So you're thirty, too?" And yet, throughout, they have both out-participated most "young" people. Despite her consistent disidentifications with the youth at

these parties, she chooses the queer art of failure (supposedly) inherent to a thirty-year old

attending dance parties. And, of course, the pleasures of dancing itself reward this choice.

If the move from adolescence to adulthood for young desis requires cultural self-training

and, in the case of *Corona,* a resignation to the post-9/11 regime, the "dark nightclub" produced

in the desi party culture might have deliciously prolonged the adolescent phase of being selfishly

unself-aware or rebelliously confused. Arguably, dancing at a nightclub is a fictional

performance of self and the function of such settings is to encourage some measure of unself-

consciousness.[cxxxviii] As I have examined in this chapter, if being culturally self-conscious is the

norm for people of immigrant descent, even a performed resistance to the cultural clarity and

coherent, well-informed self-representation demanded of ethnic adults holds an appeal for many

who have long surpassed adolescence.

4.0   RUSSELL PETERS, THE POLITICS OF ACCENTS, AND IMMIGRANT

ABJECTIONS

In what seems like a paradox, the comedian Russell Peters performed ethnic accents to uproarious laughter in his standup while deconstructing and alleviating longstanding humiliations for South Asian immigrants/Americans about the Indian accent.[cxxxix] This chapter unravels this paradox through a discussion of the 1990s moment that shaped it, prior to the increased visibility, characterization, and plotlines that South Asian Americans currently enjoy on mainstream film and television. Russell Peters would become one of the highest-paid comedians in the world by 2010, but his work as a little-known road comic (roughly in the years 1995–2004) is distinctive as a creative response to the barriers faced by struggling South Asian American actors in the mainstream. While his contemporaries (Kal Penn, Aasif Mandvi, for example) were paying their dues doing accented roles with the hopes of eventually finding more multidimensional roles and while a growing South Asian American audience was resenting the racialization of South Asians as accented outsiders, Peters was performing at local bars and venues in Toronto, thronged by low-income audiences with immigrant backgrounds, and formulating a standup routine with an entirely different premise about accents.

In some ways, the differences in venue and audience alone were conducive for a workaround to mainstream expectations for ethnic performance. And it was because of what Henry Jenkins calls the "convergence culture" made possible by the internet that Russell Peters

would eventually become world-famous: his 2004 performance for a Canadian TV show unexpectedly went viral on the internet, notably among South Asian fans across the globe.[cxl] I focus much of my discussion in this chapter on that intriguing 45-minute performance, arguing that it reflects the comedian's critical awareness of the trope of the Indian accent. The appeal of his standup, I argue, lies in a two-fold critique of the implied white gaze of mainstream audiences that cannot imagine South Asians without an accent and the abjection of this accent as a marker of being "fresh off the boat," so to speak, by people of South Asian descent.

One of my aims in this dissertation has been to consider texts in which readers are refused access to the ethnic subject's identity construction. With Russell Peters's performances, I find that refusal unfolding in two prominent ways: First, through his "crowd work"—i.e. his somewhat distinctive move of singling out individual audience members, asking about their ethnicity, and using that conversation to springboard his (accent-based) material—he consistently draws out people in the audience who are not white and privileges them as the core audience.[cxli] This represents what I will can an anti-autoethnographic move, in that de-privileges both the cultural-nationalist insider and the racist outsider from being his main audience. Second, by mining the open "secret" that is the shame of accents for desis in the U.S. for comedy, he achieves an interestingly reparative effect found nowhere else on screen, at least in the 1990s. The relief of laughing with Peters as an audience member reflects the psychic cost of identity work and an unwinding from the cultural self-consciousness specific to the accent. In so doing, his comedy reflected a genuine workaround that did not rely on a "better" representation expounding on the virtues of any particular culture (as if such a case must be made to justify anti-racism).

Looking specifically at two unique and very popular routines, "!xobile" and "Paint," I

104

argue that Russell Peters critiques both the way accents are featured in the mainstream and the tendency of (second-generation desi) immigrants to internalize the ontology of an Indian accent as an abject marker of outsiderness. In "!xobile," the African accents in *The Gods Must Be Crazy* form the opening premise, and after disidentifying with the film as a viewer, he narrates his faux-surprise and transformative enjoyment upon encountering "real" African language. In "Paint," he discusses an Indian (-American) abjection, i.e. an open "secret" about the accent, and unravels the way Indian identities are founded on this abjection. Throughout, in spite of direct references to being "Indian," there is a sense of a wider diasporic and cross-racial reach in his work that refuses to pin him (and his audiences) down to any specific imagined community beyond what many reviewers have unimaginatively referred to as "multicultural."

There is some evidence that, by the 1990s, producers of mainstream entertainment had noticed the Asian immigrants in their suburban target audiences. For the first time in North American history, Asian Americans were one of the fastest growing immigrant populations, and many of these immigrants were well on their way to economic affluence and non-threatening model-minority status in both U.S. and Canadian mainstream culture. It is not that there was a widespread desire among networks to improve diversity in their productions, but simply that they faced more critiques of institutional racism from activist groups and incurred more questions about Asian American diversity those years than in any preceding decade.[cxlii] There had been a few short-lived shows and pilots that never aired featuring Asian Americans immediately before and during the 90s. Notable among these was ABC network's *All American Girl* (1994-5) featuring Margaret Cho, who had gained considerable popularity as a standup comedian by that time. The show ostensibly grew out of five minutes from her act about growing up in a Korean immigrant family. Despite their interest in her as a star, however, the network gave Cho little

creative control over the show.^{cxliii}

It seems that nearly all of the Asian American-centered shows were created and produced by executives who never thought about racial issues, if at all, beyond the immediate need for diversity.^{cxliv} At worst, as has been widely acknowledged about Apu from *The Simpsons*, they participated in outright racism; at best, they tokenized people of color in an industry that mostly continued to portray whiteness. It seems, then, that network television remained inhospitable to Asian American performers and audiences through the 1990s even as the demographics of their audiences had steadily changed over the last couple of decades.

While networks and Hollywood continued to treat mainstream audiences as white or simply expect that nonwhite audiences adopt the white gaze, a growing body of American-born/immigrant Asians had begun to seek entertainment in multiple avenues, subtle forms of alienation notwithstanding. It was around the 1990s, then, that many Asian American artists, independent filmmakers, and performance subcultures multiplied and thrived against this backdrop of an unwelcoming mainstream and their ongoing alienation within American culture.^{cxlv} And as critics have shown, by the late 1990s, there had emerged vibrant popular-cultural scenes in the U.S. and elsewhere, exploring the issue of cultural identity with the South Asian diasporic subject at their center.^{cxlvi}

The early success of jokes like "!xobile" explains how his humor earned the label "multicultural" in the first place. It is clear the intimacy of the standup form harnessed by this performer overcame much of the aloofness that immigrant minorities encounter in white-dominated mainstream entertainment. Peters's recordings in 1997 and 2004 are replete with the particularity and rich interactiveness of minority life. The extremely popular "!xobile" bit (17:36 - 20:08, 2004), in which he performs a cross-cultural encounter, is one instance.^{cxlvii} Broadly, the

joke creates a scene in which Russell, the narrator, is in South Africa, trying to address a man by his name, "!xobile." After a couple of failed attempts, he hears the right version and is thrilled that such a name exists. (!xo denotes a clicking sound and the rest is pronounced bee-lay.) We return to the present moment with Peters on stage saying how "wicked" a click in one's name must be, how he was going to use a click for his child's name, etc. For the joke to have endeared and not offended audiences, it needed to be fairly well set-up to avoid the minefield of political incorrectness the topic promises. It is easy to see that Peters navigates this landscape by demonstrating an acuity for the human experience of colonial and postcolonial global flows, and the years of performing for audiences in Canada, the U.K. and South Africa must have helped craft his work to that end.[cxlviii]

The chief setup for this joke begins only minutes into the performance when he does his first impression of an African language. He opens by recounting a different set during which, he tells us, some drunk white lady yelled out in a Jamaican accent ("Yeah man!") when he mentioned South Africa. Commenting on her error, Peters says: "She would have been better off saying [jibberish with African-language clicks]" (6:00). There is some laughter before he continues: "Some people don't like to laugh at this, because they think it's racist. [Short pause]" The pause signals his recognition of the political incorrectness of accent performance. Notice that he would not have to preface his performance of the Indian accent in the same way—his racial phenotype (which is the cue to his identity) would have granted him more license with the Indian accent than with an imitation of a supposedly African tongue. In the very next sentence, he openly questions the extent to which political correctness is an antidote to racism: "Ever seen that movie *Gods Must Be Crazy*? Remember the first time you saw a little brother going [impression of speech]… You were laughing your ass off, weren't you? Huh?" There is a lot

more laughter here, as the alleged racism rests upon the entire audience (and not a straw-figure white person from somewhere else). This accusation involves mainstream-consumer behavior without focusing on racial identity, boiling down to this implied accusation: 'Admit it. One of your visceral responses to the film had to do with the character's accent.' If viewers fixated on the accent even in that acclaimed film, they have not evolved and political correctness clearly does not go very far in solving this racism.

He implicates Russell (as narrator of this joke) as well, recounting how he first thought the movie had "brilliant" writers making up African speech and then, with pseudo-surprise, how stupid he felt when he listened to some present-day African men have a bantering conversation in an elevator and realized it was a *real* language. The conceit is that in his attempt to move about South Africa, there was, as if like a jolt, cinematic mediation pandering to the viewer's comfort zone. With this shift in premise, his persona is no longer a coddled spectator of a film, but instead a really clueless outsider fascinated by these people simply having an ordinary day. The unspoken shift in his performance of accent here, reinforced by the increased laughter, is that the person unassociated with the performed accent (himself, in this instance) is the person looking foolish and different:"[They are just bantering with each other like normal people would, and] I'm standing there like a jackass laughing at them, right?"

We may find, then, an argument buried in this setup about how films (not necessarily or exclusively *Gods*) pander to armchair ethnographic viewership, exaggerating the difference (and distance) between the viewer and the viewed. In his own act, by contrast, the audience member cannot assume that languages with clicks exist isolated from the rest of the world — she hears from him that human encounters are saturated with difference at every turn. He reminds his audience of this every time he performs an accent. There is an epistemological shift enacted

108

within this "Gods Must be Crazy" joke that humbles the viewer within the spectacle of difference. Moreover, this setup has an anesthetic effect on the identity politics that would have, at first blush, rendered his race humor offensive.

Another important setup to this joke is the trip he's taken to South Africa, which by the time that !xobile" arrives at the seventeenth minute, has been referenced a few times, directly or indirectly, in other bits. The first time he mentions it, he says, "You know. The motherland. Not my motherland, obviously. Black people's motherland. I'm Indian, and we have our own motherland[Pause]: England. [laughter]" (5:33). This kind of humor about dislocation/diaspora comes up again in an extended joke about how "freaked out" he was to find that Indians lived in South Africa (too). In the "!xobile" iteration, he says: "Not until [I went to] South Africa did I hear *real* African names." What this "real" contrasts with is not clear because of the cut, but the statement is captivating: the word "real" invokes Africa as a mystical place of origin where "real" (African) culture still thrives and where cultural nativity could be imagined.[cxlix] This (imagined) physical nearness to South Africa is now tantalizing enough to be a powerful source of narrative. So far, then, the act has directly invoked the intimate logistics of large-scale migration, including slavery, indentured labor, and more recent migrations to Canada. What he is offering is a taste of the pleasures of fiction unmitigated by justifications or apologies for white privilege and tailored to a collective consciousness of minorities deeply touched by different, crisscrossing, and ongoing forces of migration and globalization. This is the collective consciousness that is often shed when ethnically diverse audiences adopt the white gaze expected by mainstream North American entertainment.[cl]

"!xobile" begins minutes later and after a brief outtake — A cut exists in the video right before the joke starts, perhaps made when the tape was edited to fit the allotted time for

broadcast. It is hard to know if there was a joke or a pause in between and for how long. The scenario being played out is that the character Russell is at a blackjack table at some casino in South Africa, and his dealer is a black African whose nametag says "!xobile." The chief premise of the joke is that Russell is an outsider and therefore not competent with African names, but he blunders through the pronunciation anyway: "Can I get another card there, uh…[attempts name]." Clearly most viewers do not know how to pronounce the name, either, so they remain attentive to his exaggerated attempts. When he finally learns how to say it, Russell (i.e. the character Peters is playing) is so excited that he repeats it to himself (on stage) multiple times, compulsively. Moving from bemusement to appropriation, he now declares that his first-born will have a click in his name. The grand finale moment of the joke (as is often the case) involves the character !xobile in the middle of a sex act, asking his (female) partner to say his name. For ten seconds, and to unrestrained laughter, Peters describes and enacts that exchange. But !xobile's sexual pleasure is secondary (if at all important) to his own enjoyment of learning how to say the latter's name and just explodes into raptures about it. In sharp contrast to Cho's failed sitcom, this joke makes it possible to create audience-text familiarity and intimacy without the trappings of white suburban culture.

Of course, this awed performance of African clicks could have been set up through an exchange at a coffee shop or an airport bar. However, exchanges at a blackjack table are more intensely affective, if not long-lasting. As long as the players are seated, the dealer is the most mysterious, interesting figure at the table. Any attempt at conversation would be much more daunting, even forbidden; institutionally, the dealer's mystique is important to the players going big. The point, then, is that the enjoyment born from engaging a different culture exceeds even the routine fascination of gambling. The intimacy of cultural engagement is entertaining and

110

absorbing enough to compete with a casino environment.

Ethnic/racial difference—frequently involving accent performance—has long been central to onstage American humor. Lawrence Mintz offers a comprehensive account of how vaudeville and minstrel theater relied heavily on blackface and ethnic humor, notably that of language play and cultural misunderstandings. This brand of ethnic humor "died" around the 1920s in part due to "pressure groups, usually organized ethnic societies, which attacked humor deemed offensive to the group's image, often with boycotts, demonstrations, disruptions, and other activist techniques" (27).[cli] It is easy to see why Shilpa Davé compares Indian accent humor on mainstream film and television to these earlier practices of language humor made at the expense of unassimilated cultural groups (11). In the context of nineteenth-century ethnic humor, Werner Sollors has theorized laughter as a form of "boundary construction": "[I]n a polyethnic culture …[where] boundaries can be rapidly created and removed, communities of laughter arise at the expense of some outsiders and then reshape, integrate those outsiders, and pick other targets" (132). For Sollors, jokes are "ethnicizing," in that they make visible the network of attachments and affiliations that make them funny in the first place.[clii] In the same vein, John Lowe argues that American ethnic humor is "Americanization" humor and has been a longstanding element of American folklore and popular culture.[cliii] Lowe's argument clearly bears out the assumption that ethnicity refers to non-American origins, characterizing ethnic jokes are inevitably made at the expense of "the out-group by the in-group, or by one out-group against another, or 'self-deprecating' jokes told by members of the group itself."[cliv] Throughout this scholarship, ethnic humor among immigrants themselves reflected the need for a broader identity, self-representation and literature that would memorialize their physical and cultural passage to America (Lowe 446). Moreover, ethnic humor delineated the boundaries of this cultural

identity.[clv]

All of these arguments find something *communal* about ethnic humor (defined broadly and not restricted to standup) in that they define the humor as constructing imagined communities based on ethnic difference. Depending on the performer and context, they argue, ethnic comedy either serves to exclude people of the ethnicity in question or create an exclusive community consisting of that ethnicity. For Lowe, especially, ethnic humor helps rebuild the cultural identity lost in the process of immigration and thus *represents* it. We might wonder, however, if shoring up cultural identity is really the goal for the contemporary ethnic comedian or if it is an expectation we have learned from this long history of American ethnic humor. In other words, this abovementioned body of critical work on ethnic humor does not take into account those ethnic minority artists who might have had a more complicated relationship with their ethnicity or who might have, out of survival needs, simply shared their time between different, even mutually exclusive, communities. What if their experiences as minorities do not translate into an uncomplicated desire for communal identification?

In his recent dissertation, Matthew Daube argues that standup comedy emerged as a distinct form catering to complicated questions about the self, a form in which the idiosyncratic neuroses of the performer overtly predominates over all other concerns. Strictly speaking, standup refers to individual performers writing and crafting their own work, performing as themselves to live audiences in the form of a conversational monologue. For Daube, standup is thus always a performance of self, at least insofar as the performer is in character as his/her own self. Unlike other cultural forms, Daube argues, standup directly, unabashedly involves the author/performer's life and experience. Standup emerged in response to specific post-World War II leisure needs and anxieties about the loss of self (4). In a world increasingly dominated by

large corporations and institutions, he theorizes, escalating pressures to be approved by one's peers and to abide by institutional codes of appropriate conduct in the office turned the nightclubs into a space where the phantasmatic, autonomous individual could be reclaimed out of his/her "social character."[clvi] Evolving from older forms of onstage comedy and vaudeville, standup featured an unprecedented focus on the performer's self. The stakes and intimacy between crowd and performer were heightened, when compared to the form's predecessors; the comedian's success now depended upon his/her ability to command the room's attention, to be the "alpha" to whom the audience (temporarily) submits their consciousness.[clvii] A standup performer's words become representative of the Zeitgeist during the window of performance, and his/her audience's lives are suspended in time while they sit in judgment of society at large and sway with their performer.

In Daube's account, autoethnography was the central conceit of this kind of performance, and, for that reason, standup lent itself to expressions and negotiations of ethnicity right from its onset. Several comedians, he argues, began to choose standup (over other forms of comedy in the 1960s) "to question social absurdities and interrogate the process of identity construction" in the United States (21). Specific to the form's affinity to ethnic/racial issues, the comedian's charisma in the room derived from his/her outsider status: the standup comedian is a presumed everyman closer to the unglamorous crowd than to the stars; his/her role as a social outsider is to deconstruct aspects many simply took for granted. Exploring the lifelong careers of Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, Bill Cosby, and Dick Gregory, Daube suggests that prominent standup artists used the form to investigate racial identity formation as a process "within, not outside, representation."[clviii] This argument is useful in illuminating the distinctive qualities of standup, especially by way of explaining its attraction for (male) minority artists, and it reminds us of the

113

politics of representation and reception that minority artists consistently encounter. Daube's dissertation is expansive in historical context and autobiographical readings, but it fails to offer a reasonable explanation for why race, among all identity categories, remained a crucial point of investigation. While it is easy to understand that standup requires performances of self, it is just as difficult, within Daube's framework, to explain why the form was not initially receptive to performers investigating other forms of minority identity construction. We need a different theory, one that analyzes audience reception, to explain why minority performers exploring race came to dominate the field.

Although he defines the form more broadly to include late-night television comedians such as David Letterman and Ellen DeGeneres (most of whom began careers as standups), John Limon offers a structural theory of performer-audience relations in standup – one that helps explain what I suspect is at work in Russell Peters's comedy. Writing about nine standup comedians from the 1960s boom into the 1990s, Limon explains that abjection became the "master theme" in his study of the form. Abjection, of course, means debasement, self-deprecation, and "a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite, alienable" (Limon, paraphrasing Julia Kristeva, 6). For Limon, standup is a form that easily lends itself to the inevitability of "return" (in the psychoanalytic sense), and anything that "returns" without being invited is an abjection, or "the alienable that keeps not being alienated" (12). In a perverse manner, a standup comic's highest aspiration is to recognize and work with a cultural abjection (18). Generally speaking, a standup comedian recognizes something unspoken and abject in his/her core audience and mines it for comedy and critique.

In *Assimilating Asians,* Patricia Chu offers the clearest definition of abjection in the context of Asian Americans and as it relates to my usage here. For Chu, abjection refers "to that

114

which is cast out in order to define the limits of the subject; that is, the abjected 'other' is created to help the subject define what he or she is not" (49).[clix] Soyoung Sonjia Hyon uses a similar definition of abjection to observe that the figure of the feminized Asian immigrant is a "source of anxiety in Asian American cultural politics" and is often abjected in favor of representing Asian *American* identity.[clx] For second-generation immigrants, identifying as Americans entails abjecting their recentness, for example, or the accident of their parents' arrival narrowly before their birth. As people of color, however, these new Americans are constantly identifying and disidentifying within an environment that racializes them.[clxi] Because the Indian immigrant has come to be so closely identified with the Indian accent, it is not a stretch to consider that desis in the U.S. often construct their cultural citizenship by abjecting—removing, minimizing, feeling shameful about—Indian accents.[clxii] For (desi) actors on screen, the accent poses another layer of difficulty. As Shilpa Davé's monograph discusses at length, the performance of accents has been central to a longstanding characterization of Indians as racial foreigners. When struggling actors (of South Asian descent) sign on to such roles—as they did throughout the 1990s especially— they consent to the implicit affront to themselves as non-citizens and to the (cruel) joke made of people like their parents. For this reason, it is significant that Peters rejected accent roles early in his career but would make accent performances among the defining features of his standup. (And it is just as surprising to me that Davé does not offer even a passing reference to Peters in her research.)

Within a national paradigm, immigrants are both alienable and simultaneously, for the most part, inalienable. From this perspective, much of the mainstream popular culture Davé analyzes treat South Asian bodies as abject to the national (white) identity, and they achieve this through Orientalist/othering uses of Indian accents. We may consider the representation of

accents, then, as a trope that surfaces and alleviates popular anxiety about Asian/South Asian immigrants. As consumers of popular culture, first- and second-generation immigrants consciously or unconsciously recognize this function of accents, which, in turn, become a psychic source of worry. In this scenario, however, the abject aspects are rooted in their voices, and thus feature as physical evidence of their debasement.

American-born children of South Asian immigrants began claiming attention on national television in the 1990s in another unique form as the Scripps National Spelling Bee champions—a matter of great pride for the communities to which these kids belong, but also, more generally, a phenomenon that has been criticized for reinforcing the model-minority myth.[clxiii] These juvenile victories are not accidental: thousands of Indian American children are enrolled yearly into coaching programs specifically targeting the Spelling Bee aspiration. There now exist other spelling competitions specifically for South Asian American kids, and Indian and Indian American journals and newspapers often cover the "sport." We may ask: Why would the community, even if self-deprecatingly, bask so heavily in this glory of their young spelling champions? At least part of the reason is that when Balu Natarajan won the championship in 1985, it was the first time an Indian (American) from a modest immigrant household was televised and nationally associated with excellence. Over the years, the competition would become a fountainhead of positive stereotypes for a whole community.[clxiv] This is not to suggest that images of Indian American success did not appear before 1985, but this was an unbeatably iconic moment. Thirty years later, there is still no sign of retreat from this televised spectacle, though inside jokes about the so-called obsession and analyses of the relevant stereotypes (of strict, success-driven Asian parenting) are increasingly frequent. The Spelling Bee rage, however caricatured, is instructive: As much as it reflects the steep upward mobility and distinct

advantages of many post-1965 Asian immigrants, it emphatically reveals immigrant attempts to triumph over enduring alienation and marked identifications that clearly last generations. Educational achievement may only be the half of it; the fifteen seconds of prize-winning fame on television means enough in and of itself.[clxv] Having been an ignored television-audience for far too long, South Asian Americans had found a public space in which they could perform without an accent. That the "performers" were largely children of immigrants and naturalized American citizens with every right to the proverbial American dream only added to the urgency of winning.

We may begin analyzing the spelling-bee phenomenon alongside Russell Peters's magnificent success by simply remembering that until even the late 1990s, there were few representations of South Asians in the United States endowing them with the complete humanity taken for granted by most white performers. This history forms the dreary backdrop against which we may understand the palpable pleasure in the room when Russell Peters exclaims to his audience: "Brown folks in the room! So lovely to see my people" (0:57, 1997). There is not a trace of condescension or tokenization in Peters's tone; we cannot overestimate the excitement an audience must feel to be so directly addressed. In the 2004 video, he points in a similar fashion to the audience's racial makeup ("This looks like a Benetton ad," 0:40) and singles out, to the audience's amusement, one Indian kid for his evident enthusiasm.

By the mid-1990s, Peters had been written up very favorably by local reviewers in Toronto, notably for his locally unprecedented jabbing at the "East-Indian community," for curiously getting away with it, and for offering a new version of ethnic comedy. A particularly detailed 1994 review quotes him asserting that he did more "risky stuff" emceeing at Indian cultural programs than he did with white audiences at comedy clubs.[clxvi] Recalling these years, Peters mentions that it was a blessing for him that standup comedy was at a lull when he first

117

started and that the chances of being recorded and remembered were fewer during those times before smartphones and the internet, since it allowed him to make a lot of mistakes and craft untroubled over the course of many, many performances (13:19).[clxvii] We might consider that this decade before 2004 (when his underground fame began to explode onto the surface) was as creatively fertile for him as it was forgiving. Since he admittedly took every chance to get on stage, we may assume that the jokes that were eventually recorded for television had been attempted and polished several times and that they existed because of consistent positive feedback. And these are jokes that openly alluded to colonial pasts, different forms of racism, and the intimate realities of contemporary global flows. By 1997, he was a regular headliner on the local (Yuk Yuk's) comedy circuit: He shot his first special for the series *Comedy Now!* that year and was featured on TVOntario, a public-funded television network with a mission similar to that of NPR. This ten-minute feature offers substantial texture about his career before the 2000s, with short takes of Peters himself, his parents, Mark Breslin (owner of Yuk Yuk's comedy club), and Joe Bodolai (producer of *Comedy Now!*). Significantly, it features him as someone filling a void in popular culture by catering to immigrant audiences that had rarely been so directly addressed.

The video begins with Peters being introduced as the headliner for the night, with Bhangra music playing as he walks to the mike.[clxviii] There is a brief interview bite after this, in which Peters reflects on his intimacy with "racial issues," having grown up as an Indian guy with a Christian name going to Catholic school in the '70s and '80s (0:53). A minute later, the video cuts back to his standup, and he is telling the audience that Indians get really "upset" when they hear his name is Russell Peters.[clxix] Indignantly, Russell retorts: "What do you want [the name] to be? Apu? [Audience laughs]" Other notable moments in this video are of his father commenting

on the tradition of Jewish ethnic humor, where comedians got the most laughs by making fun of their own communities.[clxx] Mark Breslin notes how "classic" second-generation his act is, with its exploration of the tensions between homeland and Canadian cultures, and Joe Bodolai describes how, as soon as one of his shows ended, "we would receive emails from people all over the country about where he lived and when he would play again. These were mainly from East Indian associations and young East Indian students from small towns out West, Toronto, everywhere…" (6:18). Both Breslin and Bodolai found Peters's appeal (like many others in the comedy business) to be his lack of political correctness and ability to tightrope the topic of race.

Perhaps the most significant piece in this feature is of Peters himself. When asked about his career plans, he says:

> Hopefully I'll be acting. That's the reason I got into this; it's so I could act, because I knew [pause] going in as an Indian guy and auditioning, it's like [pause]: No one associates their products with us. Could you imagine us in a Sprite commercial? [Performs an imaginary slogan with an Indian accent to suggest the scenario's unlikeliness.] Like, you read the script and you know that, whether subconscious or not, … I ain't the color or the person that they're thinking of.

His message is emphatic and clear on two scores: Firstly, producers (and writers) did not find South Asians relatable to their target audiences ("No one associates their products with us"). Secondly, if South Asians were at all marketable or worthy of screen time, an Indian accent would be involved. His only hope for working around this, he says, is to amass a faithful audience (i.e. fame) for his comedy and then use his fame to negotiate an acting career. Standup at smalltime comedy clubs clearly offered an alternative space in which to practice with audiences without needing the machinery of production needed for film and television

performance. The video profile ends dramatically with the 24-year-old Peters stating, "I'm not in it for the short-term money [of making a living]…. I want fame." The word "fame" is stressed in his speech, and the video, meaningfully, ends here. Many years later, he describes his ongoing chase of monetary success and records in sales, despite his substantial record already, as part of the desire to prove the financial marketability of "us" [i.e. South Asian Americans] in the industry.[clxxi] This interview is an early assertion of issues with the industry and specific frustrations that he would channel to great success into his standup comedy, especially in the years leading up to 2004, if not later. Of course, he continued to face these problems with the mainstream even after he achieved his enormous global fame, for reasons beyond this chapter's scope. His proclaimed quest for fame in this early interview, however, reveals his intuitive confidence and knowledge that he had a larger reach as a performer than common sense would have led anyone to believe.

It seems that nobody could have imagined his millions would come from standup alone, especially in the 1990s.[clxxii] A few years later, Peters's local successes "converged" (Jenkins 2008) with the new media that allowed fans to watch videos on the web, on demand. On Youtube (which launched in 2005), the special was broken up and uploaded by fans (presumably) in shorter segments, with names corresponding to the iconic joke or ethnicity on topic. Eventually, his popularity extended beyond North American and British immigrants into parts of the world where standup had not even been an entertainment staple. It is difficult to suggest direct causation between Peters's success and the increased numbers of South Asians on television, but it is clear that his success implied that South Asian Americans could make a lot of money while also maintaining creative control over the stories told about them.

Within the general significance of Peters's career, his treatment of South Asian accents intervened in a very particular history. While smatterings of minstrel-like performances of Indians had appeared in Hollywood and British film since the 1960s (and perhaps on stage earlier), the voice and characterization of Apu from *The Simpsons* has been the most distinctive and prototypical for South Asian characterizations in recent memory.[clxxiii] For those South Asian (Americans) growing up in the 1990s, this animated character came the closest to being Indian on television, and even then he did not come close to engaging them. As others have argued, the character's appearances crystallized South Asian-specific racism in the United States, especially through Hank Azaria's exaggerated accents and as part of a wider trend of representing Asian Americans as non-threatening to white privilege.[clxxiv] In other words, Apu was written for white audiences, not the thousands of South Asian Americans who were probably also tuning in.

Shilpa Davé argues that the vocal performance of accent has consistently been a means "of representing race and particularly national origin" (2) in American film and television. The performance of Indian accents by South Asian Americans serves to emphasize their foreign origin while, at the same time, demonstrating their assimilative 'abilities' because they speak English (4).[clxxv] Davé reflects on the irony that while the economic assimilation of Asian immigrants has been encouraged and welcomed since the 1965 Act, popular film and television (and other forms of intimate publics) have resisted their national belonging by consistently reconstructing their exotic otherness. "Brown voice," then, came to represent that liminal space of privilege and irreconcilable otherness reserved for South Asians within the black-white narrative of race in the United States. For Davé, the place of the Indian accent in mainstream narratives is clear: accented minorities in a U.S. setting are the foils against which a singular white American national identity is imagined. The stakes seem particularly high if South Asian-

looking actors are only hired for their ability to perform the appropriately foreign accent.

Apu's first appearance in 1990 and recurring mainstream appeal as an auxiliary and distinctly South Asian-immigrant character set the precedent for the kinds of roles South Asian American actors would be hired to perform that decade and next. As Davé elaborates, Apu might be able to elude authorities about his legal status, but he does not fool any one of the regular characters or the audience: His accent clearly sets him apart from "Americans" and belies his national origin every time he speaks; he could not socially belong to the same country as the Simpsons or the audience. The accent was key to the meaning Apu's character generated. The reason Apu's character is so significant is that, in the 1990s, aspiring South Asian American actors could barely find work that did not involve accent performance. The L.A. times published an article in 2001 on Indian-born actors who moved to Hollywood only to be given accent-and-turban-wearing characters who were "immediately recognizable as [people] of foreign ethnicity." These actors were acutely aware the Indian accents were not accidental to the stories being told about the presence of South Asians in the U.S.[clxxvi] The article ends, however, in an optimistic note about "changing demographics" and increasing South Asian presence in the mainstream. In his recent memoir, Aasif Maandvi (from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* fame) describes his first audition in the late 1980s as a head-bobbing, accented snake charmer for commercial in excruciating detail and how "numbed" he became to accent expectations in later years. The typical accent roles helped ends meet when needed, while the stage became a place where he pursued more complex work.[clxxvii] Kal Penn offers a similar story about how having to do the accent made him feel all the characters he played were one-dimensional.[clxxviii] Even after becoming very famous in 2004 and moving to L.A. hoping for bigger roles, Russell Peters continued to be offered roles requiring an Indian accent.[clxxix] Having to perform foreign accents

as children of immigrants is a clear message to the actors (and viewers of similar background) of their exclusion from (white) Americanness and the privileges of cultural citizenship.

In a globalized environment, the stigma of Indian accents is not restricted to immigrants alone. Recent studies about the offshoring of U.S. customer-service jobs to India have been attentive to the institutionalization of accent training in those settings and how accents impact work and employment. According to one article published in 2013, employee retention at off-shored Indian call centers had become a serious problem.[clxxx] Many businessmen had clearly underestimated the problems of cultural, linguistic differences between consumers and laborers. Most outsourcing before had involved manual production labor and required zero interaction between American consumer and third-world laborer. By contrast, the outsourcing of customer service involving communication and problem solving gave rise to a slew of baffled, angry customers who wanted to know why they must interact with foreigners to discuss their complaints. Among other things, the accents were too hard to understand. In response, businesses began to scramble together institutional policies requiring accent training and neutralization. This was an effort to maintain the comforting illusion for American customers of speaking to someone in the U.S./U.K. regions and mask the outsourcing of this labor. The abovementioned study found that customer racial abuse and the pressures of accent modification were the main reasons for dissatisfaction on the employee end; those who found it harder to neutralize their accents also suffered more patronizing behavior or outright racial abuse and were more likely to quit their jobs. This was significant, because the researchers found that seventy-five percent of the Indian employees they contacted had experienced these behaviors (221). The article finally deduces that the inability to retain employees was a result of employers' placing the pressures of cultural reconciliation on the employees who, in turn, received little protection

or support against the abuse beyond instructions to minimize the accents so offensive to consumers. Given that the call center is one of India's massive industries, reaching its heights in the early 2000s, we might imagine that the country's urban English-speaking youth are fairly acquainted with anxieties and stigmas associated with the Indian accent.

At its onset, the call-center job emerged as a remarkably well-paying alternative for urban Indian, English-speaking youth who would have otherwise sought long, drawn-out professional degrees. In such cases, accent training may have seemed like only a mild inconvenience.[clxxxi] This call-center generation–people who worked at call centers or knew those who did–is clearly also the demographic that would respond intimately (from across the globe) to Russell Peters's comedy. The title of Peters's 2006 special *Outsourced* is a shoutout to this phenomenon. Of course, by this point, Indian immigrant comedy had demonstrated success in India. Meera Syal, creator of the groundbreaking, hit British Asian series, *Goodness Gracious Me,* recounts how "Filming an episode in India was very special. They definitely get the humour: Goodness Gracious Me still pops up a lot on Indian television. In fact, when the show was first being shown over here, a huge black market cropped up - people were taping it and sending it to their relatives all over the world."[clxxxii] A similar black market, with the help of the Internet this time, fueled the success of Peters's accent-based comedy as well.

Let us look at about a minute from Russell Peters's act recorded in 2003 (the same one, in fact, that was broadcast in February 2004 and which went viral in the months after). The punchline is still the Indian accent, a big part of his early jokes, but it also includes meta-commentary about the ways people read the accent. The joke he tells just before this had to do with his trip to Hong Kong, how Chinese people are much smarter, how "their" English is much better than "ours," and so forth. It's unclear how long the laughs and applause lasted, however,

because some material was cut from the recording two seconds after the joke ended to move it along faster for the non-live audience watching months (and years) after the show. In any case, we are to assume that no actual jokes were narrated in that time that were cut; if anything was cut, it was audience response time. What happens next on this video is Peters transitioning into the joke I am about to describe with a sort of nasal expression, somewhere between a sigh and a laugh. I mention this transition only because it's not really a transition. It's a pause long enough to justify trailing into a new topic, which he moves into very quickly after the pause, as though it was really connected. Even though he's going to talk about Indian accents next, the inadequate transition blurs the two together; there's no real change of topic, even though it looks like there is. The underlying tonality or point of the joke remains the same, which is, roughly speaking, "You might think people with accents are dumb, but they aren't." This might be a really uncontroversial thing to say to most people. But accents have been systematically used all across popular culture to sift Americans from the non-Americans in ways that undermine not just immigrant stakes for national belonging but also their full humanity. Most people in Peters's core audience must know this, as they clearly respond to his work here. Most of his accent jokes are surrounded (before and after) by this kind of meta-commentary, crucial to his success and to the overall lack of offense given by his performances of accents. We may be able to notice this structure clearly in this joke, transcribed here:

> I'm going to let out a secret about Indian people. For all the people here… or all the people watching, whoever you are wherever you are — if you're not Indian, this is a message to you, on behalf of all Indian people. Hope my brown people don't get upset that I'm letting out our secret. (Audience laughs)
> But just so you guys know: Indian people (Pause) are fully aware (Pause) of what their

125

accent sounds like (Long Pause, audience laughs).

We don't actually need *YOU* (Emphasis added in his voice, Long Pause of 6 seconds while audience laughs): We know exactly what it sounds like.

We know it's not the coolest accent in the world, you know.

…[Segue into impressions of Indian accent, laughter from audience]

We know what it sounds like, you know? And don't think for one second we don't know that you're mocking us when we're not around. It's an accent; we're not deaf! Don't think when we walk into Home Depot and (in accent) "Hello, I'm looking for paint"… [acts out generic-white-employee response; this character directs the Indian character to the paint aisle, then finds a coworker with whom to laugh about the accent:] "He's looking for *Paaint…* Let's go have a cigarette and talk about this for half an hour…" We know what you're doing, you bastards…

But Indian people know what their accent is good for and what it isn't.

It's not good for getting laid…. [accent joke about guy in a bar with Indian accent]

…

You know what Indian accent is good for? Cutting Tension…

Picture a serious courtroom drama. [In character:] "Your honor, my client…. [in accent] would like to plead guilty!!!" [gush of audience laughter]

Tension's gone.   (*Comedy Now!,* 26:33-28:59)

I quote this routine at length, transcribing the metacommentary about accents but simply indicating the parts in which he performs the accent. The actual impressions of accents do not interest me here as much as everything he does around them. It is important to notice that for all this playfulness, the topic is a difficult one and Peters recognizes this. His language is both

126

tentative and repetitive, and he takes a much longer time than usual (for him) to get to his punchline(s). It's worth noticing how he introduces the topic as a "secret" that brown people share about each other and that he's playful about the importance of this cross-cultural message he's about to transmit. ("Hope my brown people don't get upset," etc.) As the joke unfolds, however, it becomes not so much about withheld knowledge (i.e. a secret) as about reframing that knowledge. The secret that he's letting out, then, is something everybody already knows: the fact that Indians know they have an accent ("It's an accent; we're not deaf"). But what is new here is the way the joke frames that knowledge as cultural awareness and perspicacity, not a sign of shame and embarrassment. The joke is a refusal to continue in self-identifying as members of an abjected race.

The tentative wording of this joke, particularly the way its meaning is framed and encapsulated by the word "secret," is worth unpacking a little further. At best, this awareness of accent is an open secret; at worst, it's an unacknowledged abjection. Even a "secret," however, names something that isn't readily spoken of, is meant to be hidden, and, in the best case, forgotten. And when someone holds a secret, it's a (self-)knowledge they do not want exposed, because it would lead to an unwanted reaction from others—a reaction that the holder of the secret may actually believe he/she deserves. A secret can be frequently, then, a product of self-hate and abjection. As Peters outlines in his joke, the Indian accent has, historically, been far from "the coolest" and that's common knowledge. The real "secret" here is that Indians don't need to hear "from *you*" how uncool their accent makes them sound; they already know this and there is enough self-hate to go around within the community about the accent without you reminding them. There are two registers to this joke: In the first, he's addressing this as a message to people who are not Indian. But this playfulness is a decoy, of course, and a safe route

127

to the meta-message, which is really directed at Indians, about the shared angst around the existence and portrayal of the accent. The moment when he over-enunciates "YOU" (from "we don't need you…") is when the audience picks up on this meta-comment, explaining the logic behind the pause and the sudden burst of laughter. The full sentence, had the joke needed explanation, would have looked something like: "We don't need you….[to tell us we have an accent]."

The "you" refers to anybody who might treat the Indian accent as an occasion for comic relief and as a sign of difference. Those called out could be young children in school with the power to bully brown kids or mainstream film and television that refuses to hire South Asian American unless they do accents and perform sidekick roles for comic relief. Within the joke, these people represented by the Home Depot employees who would actually take a half-hour long cigarette break to discuss their encounter with an accented Indian. The way the joke is structured, the idea that those employees would spend time in that fashion suddenly sounds more ridiculous than the accent ever could. It probably isn't a coincidence that most T.V. shows also have a half-hour time slot, and there is much more direct reference to the use of Indian accents on T.V. at the tail end of this joke.

Structurally, this bit looks as if it is an exercise in reworking images of Indian identity — by implying that Indians have a "secret," that they "know" what white people do with their accents, the joke seems at first primarily to interrogate dominant terms of affiliation and "coolness." But what it really does, I would argue, is reflect back on the immigrant community's abjection and sense of inferiority. The bit thus reflects the underside of identity work, which is the abjection of everything hinting at one's foreignness (here, represented by the accent).

Ultimately what's cathartic here is that, despite the emphasis, the object of the sentence

("you" non-Indian people) is of little consequence. The sentence, then, revokes white people's power to control representation, and its effect on the audience is palpable. But he doesn't just call out the evident self-hatred among Indian immigrants (and very possibly their children, given that the writer of this joke belongs in that category), the result of long decades of objectifying accent jokes made at their expense, but reframes it as a form of consciousness. This history of shame goes beyond Canadian immigration, of course, and has roots in the enterprise of colonialism. By framing it as a form of knowledge, he marks the immigrants' awareness and perhaps their piercing gaze back at those (white people) mocking them. The assertion "we know" appears more than five times in the span of this joke; and this knowledge undercuts possible ridicule. In other words, this is the empire writing back. As a comment about immigrants and their awareness of how their accents are read in the mainstream, the joke has all along been about celebrating the "brown people" with the "secret" and undercutting the self-hate and internalized ridicule of accents in the first place.

Through his ethnic humor, Peters powerfully addressed the vexed problem of the performed Indian accent, which peaked in the 1990s as a racist trope that made "Indians" perpetual outsiders and understandably made the second-generation demographic feel invisible and othered. Through standup Peters worked around a form of ethnic self-performance in a way that would have been impossible as a television actor subject to network writers and producers. His accent performances were not circumscribed by the racist context in which accents have been typically reproduced (on television); instead, he performed a whole range of accents, not just the one associated with South Asians, and with a stupendous confidence and accuracy testifying to his congenial familiarity with people from those cultures. His accent performances, then, were not for the benefit of an ethnographic white gaze—which would also have been

stymied by the asymmetry between his voice performances and racial appearance—but for the people in the audience whose cultural backgrounds he was honoring through imitation; his knowledge of their accents in English, oddly enough, represented a claim for fellowship and connectivity with people clearly othered by middle-class white American notions of citizenship. The significance of his humor is that he managed to work around coercive mimeticism as well as the concomitant labor of correcting the racist imagination by reaching out instead to non-white audiences.

5.0   CONCLUSION: ETHNOGRAPHIC PACKAGING AND CONVERGENCE
CULTURE

"Cultural theorists have, to my mind, neglected and perhaps bypassed a third level of mimeticism, namely, the level at which the ethnic person is expected to come to resemble what is recognizably ethnic…I propose it be defined as a coercive mimeticism—a process (identitarian, existential, cultural, or textual) in which those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected… to resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them, a process in which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus authenticate the familiar imagings of them as ethnics."

–Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

Mimetic representation, Rey Chow declares, a few sentences before what appears in the epigraph, is a particularly thorny problem in "cross-ethnic representation" (103). She goes on to name three "levels" of such representational issues—or what she calls "mimeticisms"— concerning postcolonials, two of which happen to be familiar to us from prior scholarship. The first level involves the image of the white colonizer as the human exemplar against whom the colonized were judged and proclaimed inferior. Thus reviled, the colonized subject attempted to "mimic" the colonizer, striving for such mysterious perfection. The ongoing implication of this "white man as original" problem may be found in the well-known problem of ethnic abjection— the nonwhite ethnic remains plagued by her inability to simulate white citizenship.

The second level of mimeticism, for Chow, is the more nuanced paradigm for the psychic interiority of the colonized famously expounded by Homi Bhabha. Here the colonized never achieves stable or legible selfhood, by virtue of her psychological ambivalence, i.e., the "thoroughly entangled feelings of wanting at once to imitate the colonizer and to murder him" (Chow 105). Importantly, this theory of ambivalence renders the colonized subject opaque (to be distinguished from voiceless) within official narratives and thus moves us away from the rigid foregone conclusion about the colonized's dehumanization. But while Bhabha's approach to mimesis is to expound on its impossibility, Chow argues, it is "the incompleteness of the mimetic attempt (a point on which the second level of mimeticism, in fact, concurs with the first) that makes the nonwhite subject theoretically interesting" (106). Her point is that this second level of understanding colonized subjectivity, which posits the ambivalence and inconsistencies that always already mark articulations produced within unequal power relations, continues to understand the construction of the nonwhite subject in relation to the "white man as original." For Chow, then, this second level of cross-ethnic mimeticism is limited by presenting postcolonial subjectivity as discursively constructed through (failed and ambivalent) imitation of whiteness.

Chow's third level, that of coercive mimeticism, has preoccupied me throughout this dissertation because of its implications for ethnic authorship. While she posits that critics have "neglected and perhaps bypassed" the third level by virtue of their preoccupation with the second, however, I suggest a bit more forcefully that the tendency to focus on constructions of identity within literary criticism ultimately reinforces the idea that ethnic-authored texts could provide readers access to ethnic interiority. In other words, to me, to focus on the second level of mimeticism is to participate in the examined and unexamined structures of power that produce

the third. Even though the very possibility of reliable mimetic representation has been justifiably problematized by Bhabha and poststructuralist theories more generally, academic critics as well as marketers and reviewers mainly treat ethnic texts *as* representations of ethnic subjectivity. Even the failures of representation acknowledged in the first two level of analysis presume an attempt to represent. To that extent, ethnic authors have remained vested with what I refer to as the ethnographic author function, or the ideology that the interpretation of works by ethnic authors must hinge on the representation of (ethnic) subjectivity.

The subtle and manifold expectation for ethnic authors to "resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them" (Chow 107) informs, I argue, the ethnographic author function. This is perhaps most evidently at work in the subtle and overt ways in which work authored by or involving ethnic people tends to be marketed and packaged. A casual glance at the cover art and synopses featured on these texts suggests that marketing stimulates or reinforces the readerly assumption that ethnic authors are reliable cultural experts. Paradoxically, this purported expertise is, in fact, a deeply monitored and controlled performance elicited by people packaging such ethnic-authored texts. While most authors are subject to the control of their media producers—in ways masked by the ideology of the author function— ethnic authors receive editorial notes specific to their preconceived task of representing ethnic subjectivity legibly to a non-ethnic audience. As has been well documented, they are pressured to adopt markers of ethnic authenticity—often but not always extraneous to the plot—including the tropes of food, dress, the generation gap between "traditional" parents and Americanized children of immigrants, and so forth.[clxxxiii] In short, these texts are tailored to simultaneously produce the aura of cultural authenticity around the author and contain the nature of cultural knowledge transmitted as what Chow calls "familiar imagings" of the ethnicity in question.

The three core chapters of this dissertation each represent my attempt to think through a series of ever-present, overlapping issues: the place of desi writers within the publishing industry and the academy, the everyday pressures of coercive mimeticism more generally faced by people marked by ethnicity, new media and its cult audiences that allow ethnic artists to deviate from established forms, and the myriad ways in which artists work around ethnographic imperatives/pressures. The focal point for these distinct threads of discussion, in this dissertation, is the question of how ethnicity operates in the production and reception of contemporary South Asian American literature and popular culture. Diasporic/ethnic authors are often tangled in the fraught problem of representing ethnic subjectivity. Broadly, I use the term 'ethnographic entanglements' to describe the biopolitical situations that enmesh ethnic artists in the politics of ethnic representation. To extend this dissertation's examination of such entanglements and to point to future areas of exploration, I briefly discuss in this concluding chapter how ethnic authors/artists tend to be marketed in traditional media forms and the potential shift produced by what scholars have called "media convergence."

Desi authors' embodiment of ethnic authenticity often marks their participation in contemporary book culture, but such coercive mimeticism is not limited to literary authorship. For example, the fact that phenotypically South Asian actors are frequented cast in roles requiring Indian accents—as outlined in chapter 4 and elaborated upon in Shilpa Davé's research—also counts as the coercively mimetic packaging of ethnic bodies. Coercive mimeticism also undergirds what I understand by the term "cultural self-consciousness" discussed in Chapter 3: the diffused imperative to be knowledgeable about one's ethnic culture and to belong to one or more cultural locations inevitably elicits a self-consciousness among desi youth specifically oriented to their burgeoning cultural self-awareness (i.e. identity).

Coercive mimeticism—here, the coercive imperative to embody an ethnic identity—often functions by way of upholding multiculturalism and other neoliberal discourses of American identity. Consider, for example, that in January 2012, the State department funded three South Asian American comedians to go to India on a 7-day tour called "Make Chai Not War" as part of a longstanding cultural initiative to build goodwill for the U.S. around the world. The State department spokesperson, Victoria Nuland, justified the spending with the argument that the comedians would represent the United States well in their "talk about religious tolerance, about the importance of breaking down prejudices, and about the positive experiences they had growing up as Indian-Americans in the United States" (Dec. 29, 2011). That the U.S. spent close to $100,000 on this comedy tour (and a range of other expenses unrelated to defense) became a topic of controversy during the Senate hearings after the Benghazi attacks (Blair 2013). But prior to the Benghazi fiasco, it was not controversial that these Indian American artists were "packaged" as entertainers whose bicultural competence would promote U.S. diplomacy. If Nuland's statement makes the purpose of the tour seem heavily didactic (perhaps a necessity to justify government funding), the comedians' take, upon finishing the tour, reveals more excitement about the career experience of performing standup in India, of "connecting with [that] audience" rather than "lecturing at them" (Satyal, quoted in Hennison, 2012). Overall, their comments did not manifest a commitment to U.S. diplomacy, even though they were careful not to affect disdain or indifference toward their benefactor. The point here is that the specific kind of cultural self-consciousness named in the bureaucratic packaging of this standup tour is elusive at best in the work of these artists, a sentiment half-heartedly evoked by one Republican senator's critique of the expense.

More directly than in any fictional text, the controversy around Kaavya Viswanathan's alleged plagiarism offers us a glimpse of how toxic the book publishing industry's coercive mimeticism could be. At the time the accusations surfaced, Viswanathan was a Harvard sophomore and had become famous for her incredible success story: receiving an unprecedented two-book deal, a movie franchise, and an advance of half a million dollars all at the age of seventeen. Her now-withdrawn novel, *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life* (2006), garnered rave reviews and huge popularity at first, but alert fans soon began blogging about the similarity of certain passages to stretches of various other works of fiction. Within a month of its publication, the scandal was in full force, with readers and pundits weighing in and mostly participating in the public stoning of the author.[clxxxiv] What is striking here is that it was Viswanathan alone who was forced to issue a public apology, face the thunderous public censure, and endure the ruin of a literary career. The fact that Viswanathan plagiarized is unquestionable, but we might note in passing that the very idea of plagiarism at stake here, a legacy of copyright law that continues to be debated, does not quite conform to what we know about the longer history of textual reuse in literary authorship.[clxxxv] But, more importantly for my current inquiry, it is clear that a systemic culture of packaging and promotion of ethnic authors is at work here, even though the exact details are blurry. One *Boston Globe* article reported that the material originally seen by her agent was not considered "commercially viable" and that he suggested she consult with Alloy Entertainment, a media-packaging conglomerate with a focus on the teen market and with demonstrated book-turned-TV-show successes like *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars*. It is clear that the plot and overall conceptualization for Viswanathan's novel emerged from this collaboration. Alloy clearly resolved the problem of marketability since the publisher, Little, Brown, rapidly picked up the project and offered Viswanathan the ill-fated deal.

That Viswanathan, a college student, was then compelled by contract to write her first novel within the year *and* share half the copyright is unsettling enough—at this point, it is clear there wasn't a legal adult around who was watching out for her interests. While the details are not clear, it seems from the exchange with Alloy and the ensuing form of the novel that her book had been envisioned to fill an 'Indian chick-lit' slot, for which there was clearly an audience by 2006. The resulting book perfectly exemplifies that form, taking shape as a witty model-minority-girl-strives-for-Harvard narrative. It is slightly implausible that a teenager possessed such writerly astuteness about the dramatic needs of the genre. The very fact that she shares the copyright makes the mediation of corporate interests apparent. In other words, this was a situation where her authorial genius, while not insignificant, was less important to the book producers than the marketability of the particular kind of model minority plot mirrored in her own young-Harvard-student persona. Overall, the producers of her book appear to have deployed her authorship for marketing without granting her much authorial control.

It is thus ironic that Viswanathan's authorship came to be so strongly asserted in relation to the book's ultimate failure, both by the media corporations that had until then vigorously claimed the book's profits and shared the spotlight with the author and by the bloodthirsty fans and pundits who found blame in Viswanathan alone. That she bore the entire blame for the alleged plagiarism exposes the vulnerability of authors alone to certain risks of reception. That is to say, despite the heavy-handed coercive mimeticism at work in production and marketing, publishers promote the primacy of authors when they want to fend off bad reviews and, as in Viswanathan's case, allegations of unfair use. The ethical problems with the publishing industry's treatment of authors are aggravated in this case by the author's youth and the marketability of her ethnicity and cultural location. More generally, it is clear that ethnic authors

are on their own when it comes to censure of any kind directed at their work, including their representations of ethnicity. By and large, I would argue, literary critics have also upheld the sole liability of authors for the nature of their cultural representations.

As much as this scandal registers as an isolated case in which only the author is to blame, I would argue that it reflects one among many ways in which ethnic authors tend to become narrowly confined into certain kinds of (ethnographic) projects. In the context of this dissertation, the scandal beckons towards future exploration in the form of a bibliographic project focused on the marketing and behind-the-scenes production of South Asian American works. This would require expanding my scholarly network to include more authors, especially those who have struggled to publish, requesting conversations and manuscripts. It would also mean talking to editors about their work, the reasons some projects go into the "slush pile" and so forth.

Understanding ethnographic entanglements through what goes unpublished would advance my work in at least two directions. First, such a project would allow me to study more closely contemporary manifestations and trends in ethnographic packaging. It is not that critics have not understood the book industry's toxic expectations before, but I find often a lack of rigor in their treatment of them. As I have argued, they are often restricted to chastising authors or not finding them brilliant enough. A deeper study is needed in relation to what it means to engage ethnographic expectations *before* a book launch.

Second, the texts discussed in chapters 3 and 4 were possibly produced in or because of a cultural milieu where fans' influence and authorly remediation of traditional forms were more pronounced. Here I'm referring to what Henry Jenkins calls "convergence culture" and my working hypothesis that, in some cases, convergence culture allows ethnic artists freedom from

unwanted ethnographic attention. The texts discussed in chapters 3 and 4 benefit from what is called media convergence, or the contemporary dynamics of remediation where the fictional text "responds to, re-deploys, competes with and reforms other media" (Bolter and Grusin, 35). An attentiveness to media convergence and the demonstrated success of the party culture among their (less sought-after) target audiences, for example, allows the ABCD texts under discussion in Chapter 3—the novel, *Born Confused*, and the independent film, *American Desi*—to productively mine the trope of the ABCD that appears less in canonical texts but seems ubiquitous across a range of media featuring diasporic issues. Russell Peters' examination in his standup of the implicit barriers for South Asian Americans who refuse to perform accents on screen represents another artistic move inspired by media convergence: even his earliest fans, arguably, understood the tenor of his comedy at least partly because they were seasoned film/television viewers.

For Henry Jenkins, this convergence culture vigorously reactivates what has been a "waning public sphere" and is fueled in turn by a public that has been feeling outraged by its own mounting irrelevance. In a way analogous to a public demanding back their democratic rights, for Jenkins, active fan cultures challenge the increasing corporate control over artistic production. The crux of his argument is that technologically empowered consumers are beginning to play a greater hand in the determining the content and the distribution of cultural texts. One outcome of convergence culture, then, lies in the potential new kinds of imagined/target audiences that remain in the blindspot for traditional media establishments to organize themselves and exert influence. Among other things, Jenkins argues, such a potential wrests at least some of the determinative control away from the kind of publishing

conglomerates that so desperately wanted a success in Viswanathan or the bureaucratic wishful thinking that went into funding "Make Chai Not War."

While traditional, conglomerate-owned book publishing is clearly less hospitable to the "grassroots" potential Jenkins sees in fan cultures, the novel-form more generally has not been impervious to the various media shifts elsewhere owing to convergence culture. Jim Collins has argued that relatively older media such as films and books continue to be reshaped by virtue of "the increasing convergence of literary, visual, and material cultures" (*Bring on the Books for Everybody,* 8). In the context of ethnographic entanglements, it is possible that artists may be increasingly able to work around the formal constraints in "older" established media cultures (such as the novel or film) by attending to tactical moves more readily available perhaps within materials from another media. Incorporating an immensely affective and participatory form such as the dance party in a literary (or film) text reflects the adaptation of the novel especially to an audience accustomed to multimodal engagement.

Active and media-savvy audience participation, a key feature of convergence culture for Jenkins, has been responsible for the subcultural and mainstream successes of at least two kinds of workarounds examined in this dissertation. I do not mean to suggest that convergence culture by default delivers artists from ethnographic entanglements or provides hope for workarounds where none could be found beforehand. It seems true, however, that increased youth audience participation in the distribution and reception of these texts was instrumental in the latter's proliferation and success. It also happens that some of these texts worked around ethnographic imperatives in ways that are pertinent here.

The popularity of British Bhangra-inspired desi parties and the circulation of Russell Peters' standup among desi youth (and others) worldwide are both examples of how fan cultures

have wrested some determinative power away from media conglomerates. Tapes of British Bhangra albums, such as Bally Sagoo's *Star Crazy,* sold everywhere in the desi world in the '90s, for example, and, as researchers have noted, adaptations of such music were produced at parties in various South Asian diasporic nodes. Some DJs who performed live at such parties would become known for their (original) work and peculiar dexterities in handling the music that, overall, circulated as part of a subcultural form associated with this party culture. Such parties, in various parts of the world, eventually consolidated the kind of substantial fanbase that engendered the 'break' into mainstream/commercial success signified by Panjabi MC's "Beware" (2003). Russell Peters' commercial success is even more blatantly a product of convergence culture: a televised forty-five minute segment of his standup achieved rapid circulation via internet file sharing and Youtube, attributed to the participation of a diverse audience pool aware of ethnic abjections more generally as well as the complex forces at work in media performances of Indian accents.

That ethnic authors are subject to ethnographic pressures from the mainstream/global market is well known and understood within literary criticism. Terms such as "self-exoticization" and "self-orientalization" are in common usage for describing how ethnic authors garner success on such terms. I have found, however, that discussions critiquing so-called essentialist representations of identity often do little beyond chastising authors for not producing more "complex" representations (of identity). The problem lies in the fact that these criticisms reinforce the somewhat dubious notion that authors are still responsible for producing auto-ethnography. Ethnic-authored texts are expected to yield a sense of the author's singular identity or her ideological stance about the nature of ethnic identity. As I have been arguing, a moralizing imperative for (auto)ethnographic writing emerges from this expectation. More than anything, it

renders another paralyzing form of entanglement, this time moral or political (and not commercial) in nature, within the framework of cultural representation. Many artists rise to the challenge and produce works that counter dominant stereotypes, stereotypes that might even be promoted by their publishers or marketers. But those who do not autoethnographically represent identity, I suspect, risk eliciting readerly wrath or, perhaps worse, suffering from neglect.

There are limitations for South Asian American writerly (and readerly) practices that remain stubbornly tethered to canonical formations and (postcolonial/academic) theories of aesthetic value that rely on the ethnographic author function. As Chow argues, the various levels of mimeticism are most prevalent within contexts of "cross-ethnic" production, and such contexts arise when readers invested in some form of ethnographic description are chief target audiences. Convergence culture has, at least in the cases of British Asian-Bhangra culture and Russell Peters's comedy, allowed ethnic artists to become famous despite choosing to set aside the task of autoethnography (loosely, the representation of a culture for audience members who do not belong to that culture). Their fame is owed to the active participation of often-overlooked audiences who maybe also resist ethnic-authorly pretensions or attempts at ethnic mimesis. Ultimately, this dissertation does not argue that workarounds are the exclusive or primary concerns of South Asian American artists. Rather, my aim in studying the cultural texts in question has been to demonstrate the metanarrative of ethnography, the everyday expectations for cultural self-consciousness, and the workarounds that artists sometimes manage.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"ALA's 2003 'Best' Lists." Chicago: Booklist Publications, 2003. Print.

"Bill Bryson: By the Book." Sunday Book Review. *The New York Times.* January 17 2016. Web.

"How Kaavya Viswanathan Plagiarized, Got Published, and Got Caught." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52.35 (2006): A10.

"Jhumpa Lahiri: By the Book." Sunday Book Review. *The New York Times.* September 5 2013. Web.

"Partying in Little India: It's a Party." *Little India* 7.21 (1997). Print.

"Power and Influence." *Newsweek Society* (2004). Web.

"Russell Peters: A Profile." TVO: Ontario, 1997.

"The Unending Heartbreak of Great Expectations: Why I Can't Watch the Mindy Project Anymore." Crunk Feminist Collective n.d. Web.

Adichie, Chimamanda. "The Danger of a Single Story." TED (2009). Print.

Ahmad, Ali Nobil. "Whose Underground?: Asian Cool and the Poverty of Hybridity." *Third Text* 15.54 (2001): 71. Print.

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. Print.

---. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis,

Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. Print.

Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Print.

Auslander, Philip. "'Brought to You by Fem-Rage': Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender." *Acting out: Feminist Performances* (1993): 315-36. Print.

Baumann, Gerd. "The Re-Invention of Bhangra. Social Change and Aesthetic Shifts in a Punjabi Music in Britain." *The World of Music* 32.2 (1990): 81-98. Print.

---. and S Banerji. "Bhangra 1984-8: Fusion and Professionalisation in a Genre of South Asian Dance Music." *Black Music in Britain: Essays on the Afro-Asian Contribution to Popular Music* (1990): 137-52. Print.

Behar, Ruth. *The Vulnerable Observer : Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. Print.

Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York;London;: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Bhaskar, Sanjeev and Meera Syal. Interview. "How We Made Goodness Gracious Me." Laura Barnett *The Guardian*, 2014. Print.

Blair, Elizabeth. "State Department Sends 'Chai' Comedy Tour to India." NPR, 04 Jan. 2012.

---. "Rand Paul Calls Out Hillary Clinton Over Indian Comedy Tour." NPR, All Things Considered. 23 Jan. 2013.

Blum, David. "Hollywood's Brat Pack." *New York Mag*, 40.18 (1985). Print.

Bolter, J. David, and Richard A. Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999.

Braziel, Jana Evans, and Anita Mannur. *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*. Malden, MA:

Blackwell Pub., 2003. Print.

Brennan, Timothy. *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*. Houndmills,

Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989. Print.

Bryant, Jennings, and Dolf Zillmann. *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*.

Mahwah, N.J: L. Elbaum Associates, 2002. Print.

Chang, Yoonmee. *Writing the Ghetto: Class, Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic

Enclave*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2010. Print.

Chapman, Amanda. "Self-Consciousness and Childhood in the Long Nineteenth Century.*"*

ProQuest Dissertations Publishing 2015. Print.

Chin, Frank. *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*. Washington: Howard

University Press, 1974. Print.

Chinn, Sarah E. *Inventing Modern Adolescence: The Children of Immigrants in Turn-of-the-

Century America*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2009. Print.

Cho, Margaret. *I'm the One That I Want*. Ballantine Books: St. Paul, Minnesota, 2002.

Chow, Rey. *Entanglements: Or Transmedial Thinking About Capture*. Durham and London:

Duke University Press, 2012. Print.

---. *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Columbia University Press,

2002. Print.

---. *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. Bloomington:

Indiana University Press, 1993. Print.

---. and Paul Bowman. *The Rey Chow Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Print.

Chu, Patricia P. "Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America."

(2000). Print.

Clifford, James, and George E Marcus. "Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of

Ethnography: A School of American Research Advanced Seminar." (1986). Print.

Collins, Jim. *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular

Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence

against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991): 1241-99. Print.

Dasvani, Kavita. "South Asian Actors Find Little Support, Lots of Stereotypes." *Los Angeles

Times* 2001. Print.

Daube, Matthew. "Laughter in Revolt: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in the Construction of Stand-

up Comedy." ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2010. Print.

Davé, Shilpa. *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and

Film*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013. Print.

---. LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren. *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*.

New York: New York University Press, 2005. Print.

Deery, Stephen, Vandana Nath, and Janet Walsh. "Why Do Off-Shored Indian Call Centre

Workers Want to Leave Their Jobs?" *New Technology, Work and Employment* 28.3

(2013): 212-26. Print.

Desai, Jigna. *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*. New

York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Detweiler, Craig, and Barry Taylor. *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*. Baker

Academic, 2003. Print.

Dore, Shalini. "Achievement: 25 Years in Comedy: Giving Back." *Variety* (2015). Print.

Douglas, Christopher. "Reading Ethnography: The Cold War Social Science of Jade Snow

      Wong's Fifth Chinese Daughter and Brown V. Board of Education." *Form and*

      Transformation in Asian American Literature. Ed. Zhou Xiaojing, Samina Najmi. Seattle:

      University of Washington Press, 2005. Print.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk; Essays and Sketches*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & co.,

      1903. Print.

Dudrah, Rajinder K. "Drum 'n' dhol: British Bhangra Music and Diasporic South Asian Identity

      Formation." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 5.3 (2002): 363-83. Print.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press,

      2004. Print.

Farley, Christopher John. "On the Beach with Dave Chappelle." *Time Online Edition* (2005).

      Print.

Ferguson, Roderick A., Halberstam, Judith. et al. "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A

      Roundtable Discussion." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.2 (2007): 177-

      95. Print.

Foucault, Michel. "Authorship: What Is an Author?" *Screen* 20.1 (1979): 13-34. Print.

---. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. Print.

Freeman, Elizabeth. "Monsters, Inc.: Notes on the Neoliberal Arts Education." *New Literary*

      History 36.1 (2005): 83-95. Print.

---. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press,

      2010. Print.

Gajjar, Saloni. "Aziz Ansari, Diversity, and Being Able to Finally See Yourself on TV."

      Complex: Pop Culture. Web.

Gallop, Jane. "Beyond the Jouissance Principle." *Representations* 1984.7 (1984): 110-15. Print.

Ganatra, Nisha. *Chutney Popcorn*. DVD. Mata Productions, 1999.

Gelder, Ken, and Sarah Thornton. *The Subcultures Reader*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Shadow Lines*. 1st American ed. New York, NY, U.S.A.: Viking, 1989.
Print.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass:
Harvard University Press, 1993. Print.

Goodyear, Sara Suleri. *Meatless Days*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. Print.

Gopinath, Gayatri. "Bombay, U.K., Yuba City: Bhangra Music and the Engendering of
Diaspora." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 4.3 (1995): 303-21. Print.

---. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Perverse
Modernities. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. Print.

Gubar, Marah. *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature*. Oxford ;
New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.

Halberstam, Judith. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New
York: New York University Press, 2005. Print.

---. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.

Hale, Dorothy J. *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000*. Malden, Mass.:
Blackwell Pub., 2006. Print.

Hall, Stuart, and Paul Du Gay. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Thousand Oaks, Calif;London;:
Sage, 1996. Print.

Hamamoto, Darrell Y. *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of Tv Representation*.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. Print.

Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.

Hennigan, Elise. "'Make Chai Not War' Travels to India." Filter Magazine, 25 Feb.2012.

Hidier, Tanuja Desai. "On What ABCD Means to Her." *The Aerogram* (2014). Print.

---. "People Aren't as Far Away as They Seem." Ed. unknown: Push, date unknown. Print.

---.*When We Were Twins*. Purple Bat Productions, 2004.

---. *Born Confused*. New York, NY: Push, 2003. Print.

Hsu, Hua. "Panjabi Mc Beware." *Color Lines Magazine* 43 (2003). Print.

Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge, 2001.
        Print.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Canadian Historiographic Metafiction." *Essays on Canadian Writing*. 30
        (1984): 228. Print.

Hyon, Soyoung Sonjia. "Anxieties of the Fictive: The Immigrant and Asian American Politics of
        Visibility." ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2011. Print.

Ismail, Qadri. *Abiding by Sri Lanka: On Peace, Place, and Postcoloniality*. Public Worlds.
        Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. Print.

Iwata, Edward. "Word Warriors." *Los Angeles Times* 24 (1990): 1-9. Print.

Jain, Anupama. *How to Be South Asian in America: Narratives of Ambivalence and Belonging*.
        Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011. Print.

Jani, Pranav. *Decentering Rushdie: Cosmopolitanism and the Indian Novel in English*.
        Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010. Print.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New
        York University Press, 2006. Print.

Jones, Joanna. "Clubs Drive Panjabi Mc to Two on German Chart. (International)." NewBay

Media LLC, 2002. 4. Print.

Kaling, Mindy. *Is Everyone Hanging out without Me? (and Other Concerns)*. 1st ed. New York: Crown Archetype, 2011. Print.

---. *Why Not Me?* First edition. ed. New York: Crown Archetype, 2015. Print.

Kalita, S. Mitra. "India, America Merge in Teen's 'Confused' Life." *USA Today* (2002). Print.

Kanaganayakam, Chelva. "Dancing in the Rarefied Air: Reading Contemporary Sri Lankan Literature." *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 29.1 (1998). Print.

Keshavan, Meghana. "Bollywood Nights: A Generation of South Asians, a New Cultural Mix." *Metro Times* 2007. Print.

Kim, Elaine H. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982. Print.

---. "Defining Asian American Realities through Literature." *Cultural Critique*.6 (1987): 87-111. Print.

King, Adele. "Book Review: An American Brat." (1994). Print.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. "Cultural Mis-Readings by American Reviewers." *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue*. Ed. Amirthanayagam, Guy. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982. 55-65. Print.

---. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. 1st ed. New York: Knopf : distributed by Random House, 1976. Print.

Koshy, Susan. "The Fiction of Asian American Literature." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9.2 (1996): 315. Print.

Kuortti, Joel. *The Salman Rushdie Bibliography: A Bibliography of Salman Rushdie's Work and Rushdie Criticism*. Frankfurt am Main; New York: P. Lang, 1997. Print.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. Print.

---. *The Namesake*. Mariner Books. Boston: Mariner, 2004. Print.

Lamba, Navi. "Why I Am Disappointed in Mindy Kaling." Vice 2015. Web.

Lee, Christopher. *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature*.
        Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012. Print.

Lee, Rachel C. *The Americas of Asian American Literature: Gendered Fictions of Nation and*
        Transnation. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999. Print.

Lim, Shirley, and Amy Ling, Eds. *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*. Philadelphia:
        Temple University Press, 1992.

Limon, John. *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Durham, NC: Duke
        University Press, 2000. Print.

Lippi-Green, Rosina. *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the*
        United States. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.

Lowe, John. "Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter, Laughing." *American Quarterly* 38.3
        (1986): 439-60. Print.

Lowe, Lisa. "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences."
        Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies 1.1 (1991): 24-44. Print.

---. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press,
        1996. Print.

Macfarlane, Robert. *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century*
        Literature. Oxford; New York;: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Maira, Sunaina. *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*.
        Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002. Print.

---. "Henna and Hip Hop: The Politics of Cultural Production and the Work of Cultural Studies." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3.3 (2000): 329-69. Print.

---. "Identity Dub: The Paradoxes of an Indian American Youth Subculture (New York Mix)." *Cultural Anthropology* 14.1 (1999): 29-60. Print.

Malhotra, Rekha (DJ). Interview. "Defiantly Undefiant." *American Desis Podcast.* 2015. Print.

---. Interview. "Desi Making Waves." Elaine G. Flores. Date unknown. Print.

Mandvi, Aasif. *No Land's Man*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014. Print.

Mani, Bakirathi. *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012. Print.

Mannur, Anita. *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010. Print.

Marcus, George E., and Michael M. J. Fischer. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. Print.

McGill, Scott. *Plagiarism in Latin Literature*. Cambridge;New York;: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Mehegan, David. "The Six-Figure Sophomore; How Kaavya Viswanathan Got Noticed, Got An Agent, And Got A Monster Two-Novel Contract." *Boston Globe* 22 Feb.2006.

Mehta, Anurag. *American Chai*. DVD. 2003.

Mendes, Ana Cristina. *Salman Rushdie in the Cultural Marketplace*. England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. Print.

Mercer, Kobena. "Black Art and the Burden of Representation." *Third Text* 4.10 (1990): 61-78. Print.

Mietkiewicz, Henry. "There's This Indian Comic." *Toronto Star,* 1994. Print.

Mintz, Lawrence E. "Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque." *MELUS* 21.4

      (1996): 19-28. Print.

Mishra, Vijay. *Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. New

      York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

Mora, Celeste. "The Mindy Project's Controversial Episode on Race Didn't Clear up Any

      Concerns." The Bustle 2013. Web.

Mukhopadhyay, Samhita. "Why Mindy Kaling Refuses to Talk About Race--and Why I Care So

      Much." Talking Points Memo 2015. Web.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications : Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*.

      Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Print.

---. "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the

      Depressive Position." *Signs* 31.3 (2006): 675-88. Print.

Nair, Ajay, and Murali Balaji. *Desi Rap: Hip-Hop and South Asian America*. Lanham, MD:

      Lexington Books, 2008. Print.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Race & Resistance: Literature & Politics in Asian America*. New

      York;Oxford [England];: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print.

Ninh, Erin Khuê. "Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature." Ph D.

      University of California, Berkeley, 2011. Print.

Nodelman, Perry. *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns

      Hopkins University Press, 2008. Print.

---. "The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature." *Children's Literature*

      Association Quarterly 317.1 (1992): 29-35. Print.

Nuland, Victoria. "Daily Press Briefing" U.S. Department of State, 29 Dec. 2011.

Pal, Amitabh. "Indian by Day, American by Night." Madison: The Progressive, Inc, 2004. 29.
      Vol. 68. Print.

Pande, Ira. "Book Review: Bapsi Sidhwa's an American Brat." *India Today* (1994). Print.

Pandya, Piyush Dinker. *American Desi*. DVD. 2001.

Pandya, Sameer. "The Spelling Bee: America's Great Racial Freaks-and-Geeks Show." *The
      Atlantic,* (2014). Print.

Parikh, Crystal. *An Ethics of Betrayal: The Politics of Otherness in Emergent U.S. Literatures
      and Culture*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009. Print.

Partridge, Jeffrey. *Beyond Literary Chinatown*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007.
      Print.

Patel, Krutin. *ABCD.* DVD. 1999.

Penn, Kal. Interview. "Actors Recognized for Stereotype Roles Talk About Starring in Their
      Own Comedy, 'Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle'." N.P. n.d. Web.

Peters, Russell. "Episode 7, Feat. Russell Peters." *All-India Bakchod*. Ed. Khamba,
      Gursimranjeet and Tanmay Bhat2012. Print.

---. "India Questions Russell Peters." Ed. Roy, Prannoy. India: NDTV, 2008. Print.

---.*TV Episode. Comedy Now!* 1997.

---.*TV Episode. Comedy Now!* 2004.

---. *Outsourced*. 2006.

Peters, Russell, Clayton Peters, and Dannis Koromilas. *Call Me Russell: Inside the Outside*.
      Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2012. Print.

Prashad, Vijay. *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* (1991): 33-40. Print.

---. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Vol. 2nd. New York;London;:
      Routledge, 2008. Print.

Puri, Shalini. *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory*.
      New Caribbean Studies. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Print.

Raj, Dhooleka Sarhadi. "Where Are You From?" (2003). Print.

Randall, Marilyn. *Pragmatic Plagiarism: Authorship, Profit, and Power*. Toronto:University of
      Toronto Press, 2001.

Rehman, Bushra. *Corona*. Alexander, AR: Sibling Rivalry Press, 2013. Print.

---. "Corona Playlist and Soundtrack." The Poet's Playlist. Ed. Sharon Suzuki Martinez. 2013.
      Web.

Rose, Jacqueline. *The Case of Peter Pan, or, the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Language,
      Discourse, Society. London: Macmillan, 1984. Print.

Roy, Anjali Gera. *Bhangra Moves: From Ludhiana to London and Beyond*. Farnham: Ashgate,
      2010. Print.

Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New York: Random House, 1997. Print.

Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children : [a Novel]*. 1st American ed. New York: Knopf, 1981.
      Print.

Ryzik, Melena. "Bhangra's Ambassador, Keeping the Party Spinning: Dj Rekha's Sound Has
      Won over Even Her Parents." *New York Times (1923-Current file)* 2007: E1. Print.

Salgado, Minoli. "Writing Sri Lanka, Reading Resistance: Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy and
      A. Sivanandan's When Memory Dies." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39.1
      (2004): 5-18. Print.

Sarkar, Bhaskar. *Mourning the Nation : Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009. Print.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. Print.

---. "How to Bring Your Kids up Gay." *Social Text* 29.29 (1991): 18-27. Print.

---. *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. Print.

---. and Adam Frank. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Series Q. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. Print.

Seif, Amy. "A Pakistani Girl Discovers America: An American Brat." *International Examiner* 1994. Print.

Selvadurai, Shyam. *Funny Boy: A Novel in Six Stories*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994. Print.

Sen, Asha. "Child Narrators in the Shadow Lines, Cracking India, and Meatless Days." *World Literature Written in English* 37.1 (1998): 190. Print.

Sengupta, Somini. "To Be Young, Indian and Hip." *New York Times* (1996). Print.

Shafak, Elif. "The Politics of Fiction." TED (2010). Print.

Shankar, Lavina Dhingra. "Not Too Spicy." *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India* 99 (2009): 23. Print.

---. and Rajini Srikanth. *A Part, yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998. Print.

---. and Floyd Cheung. *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012. Print.

Sharma, Sanjay, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma. *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the*

New Asian Dance Music. Atlantic Highlands, N.J; London;: Zed Books, 1996. Print.

Sidhwa, Bapsi. *An American Brat*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1993. Print.

---. *Cracking India: A Novel*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Milkweed Editions, 1991. Print.

Simon, Scott. "Bhangra's DJ Rekha Takes the Dance Floor." *National Public Radio* 2008. Print.

Singh, Amritjit, and Peter Schmidt. *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000. Print.

Singh, Sujala. "Postcolonial Children Representing the Nation in Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa and Shyaaa Selvadurai." *Wasafiri* 19.41 (2004): 13. Print.

Sivanandan, Ambalavaner. *When Memory Dies*. London: Arcadia Books, 1997. Print.

Sohn, Stephen Hong. *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds*. New York: NYU Press, 2014. Print.

Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Print.

---. Ed. *The Invention of Ethnicity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.

Sommer, Doris. *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999. Print.

Song, Min. *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American*. London;Durham;: Duke University Press, 2013. Print.

Souri, Ranjit. "More Than Bhangra: A Conversation with Dj Rekha." *India Currents* 88.22 (2008). Print.

Srikanth, Rajini. *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004. Print.

Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, N.Y:

Cornell University Press, 1986. Print.

Steedman, Carolyn. *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995. Print.

Stockton, Kathryn Bond. *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. Print.

Subramanian, Anand. "Why Do So Many Asian Americans Win the Spelling Bee." *The Alternet.* June 12 2012. Web.

Tarlo, Emma. *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Print.

Taussig, Michael T. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Thoma, Pamela S. *Asian American Women's Popular Literature: Feminizing Genres and Neoliberal Belonging*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014. Print.

Tompkins, Jane P. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.

Tribunella, Eric L. *Melancholia and Maturation: The Use of Trauma in American Children's Literature*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010. Print.

Viswanathan, Kaavya. *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life: A Novel*. 1st ed. New York: Little, Brown, and Co, 2006.

Whitaker, Mark P. "Abiding by Sri Lanka Qadri Ismail's Way." *Religion* 38.2 (2008): 181-86. Print.

Winokur, Mark. *American Laughter: Immigrants, Ethnicity, and 1930s Hollywood Film Comedy*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. Print.

Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston's

the Woman Warrior and the Chinese-American Autobiographical Controversy."

Multicultural Autobiography: American Lives (1992): 248-79. Print.

---. *Maxine Hong Kingston's the Woman Warrior: A Casebook*. Casebooks in Contemporary

Fiction. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.

---. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton University

Press, 1993. Print.

---. "Sugar Sisterhood": Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon." *Amy Tan* (2009): 49-83. Print.

Wu, Ellen D. *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*.

Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014. Print.

Xing, Jun. *Asian America through the Lens: History, Representations, and Identity*. Walnut

Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 1998. Print.

NOTES

Introduction

[i] The Lahiri Q&A was published in September 2013, around the time "The Lowland" was released. The blurb reads: "The author of the forthcoming novel "The Lowland" says there's no such thing as immigrant fiction: 'What do we call the rest? Native fiction? Puritan fiction?'" "Jhumpa Lahiri: By the Book" *The New York Times Book Review,* September 5, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/08/books/review/jhumpa-lahiri-by-the book.html. Bryson's Q&A appeared at the same website on January 14, 2016.

[ii] Christopher Douglas chronicles a similar "faux surprise" and indignation from Amy Tan in response to ethnographic readings of her work. "Reading Ethnography" *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature,* 2005. pp 101-124.

[iii] In his memorable words, double consciousness is part of feeling like "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." Among other things, this accounts for how the inability to be racially white—of which society offered/offers plenty of reminders—disallowed one from feeling wholly American. Du Bois (1903). Also see Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).

[iv] In *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2002), Chow argues that ethnicity is primarily a "relation of cultural politics…enacted by a Westernized, Americanized audience with regard to those who are perceived and labeled as 'ethnic'"
(22). So-called ethnic subjects, she argues, are often "expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imagings of them as ethnics" (107).

[v] See Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," in: Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art & Culture, 10, vol. 4, Spring 1990, pp. 61–78. Subsequently, Mercer and other critics have called for a rethinking of cultural representation in an increasingly globalized world marked by dizzying global flows and cultural hybridity. And, of course, such shifts are important to recognize as cultural theorists. But while circumstances are different, these global changes have not structurally overcome coercive mimeticism and the concomitant politics of representation as far as they concern this dissertation—Lahiri's comment that opens this introduction was made in 2013, for example.

[vi] I'm invoking here the prominent Kingston-Chin debates that have energized much critical discussion within Asian American literary studies. Quickly: Chin alleged that Kingston and many other Chinese American (women) authors attained their success with American

audiences—and particularly among white feminists—by essentializing Chinese culture and exaggerating its patriarchy. Chin's position remains a prominent example of the identity politics of cultural nationalism, and Kingston's subsequent responses to him set her apart as a trailblazing artist who set aside such restrictive identity politics to experiment wildly with autoethnography.

For more on the Kingston-Chin debates and a defense of Kingston's work against autobiographical "misreadings," see Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Autobiography as a Guided Chinatown Tour?" *Maxine Hong Kingston's* The Woman Warrior*: A Case Book.* 1999. 29-53. Alongside a persuasive close reading of Kingston's work, Wong rebuts Chin's and other insider critiques with research that Kingston, like many first-time authors especially, had little control over the way the book was marketed and reviewed.

[vii] Kingston, "Cultural Misreadings by American Reviewers" (1982) p 56.

[viii] "The Politics of Fiction," TED Talk. July 15 2010.

[ix] She continues, to intermittent laughter from the audience: "Now, I was quite willing to contend that there were a number of things wrong with the novel, that it had failed in a number of places, but I had not quite imagined that it had failed at achieving something called African authenticity. In fact, I did not know what African authenticity was. The professor told me that my characters were too much like him, an educated and middle-class man. My characters drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore they were not authentically African." ("The Danger of A Single Story," TED Talk. October 5, 2009.)

[x] *Why Not Me* (2015), "Mindy Lahiri, MD, Everygirl, Mild Sociopath."

[xi] Other critics have made similar arguments about the interventions of Asian American authors. For example, Patricia Chu defends Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) from critiques of how it exoticizes Indian women by suggesting that the very exaggerations making up Jasmine's characterization "teaches readers to recognize and view with suspicion the idealogical work that such myths do" (131). Chu, Patricia P. *Assimilating Asians: gendered strategies of authorship in Asian America*. Duke University Press, 2000

See also Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American literature: From necessity to extravagance*. Princeton University Press, 1993; Kim, Elaine H. *Asian American literature, an introduction to the writings and their social context*. Temple University Press, 1982.See also: Chin, Frank. *Aiiieeeee!: an anthology of Asian-American writers*. Howard Univ Pr, 1974. Kim, Elaine. "Defining Asian American Realities Through Literature" *Cultural Critique*. (Spring, 1987), pp. 87-111. Kim was the first scholar to produce a monograph devoted to Asian American literature, in 1982.

[xii] See, for example, her reading of the short story "School Lunch" by Pooja Makhijani alongside Geeta Kothari's autobiographical essay, "If you are what you eat, then what am I?" *Culinary Fictions.* Pp 151-157.

[xiii] Kim, Elaine H. *Asian American literature, an introduction to the writings and their social context*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982. ---. "Defining Asian American Realities Through Literature". *Cultural Critique* (Spring, 1987), pp. 87-111;

Chu, Patricia P. *Assimilating Asians: gendered strategies of authorship in Asian America*. Duke University Press, 2000.

See also: Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American literature: From necessity to extravagance*. Princeton University Press, 1993; Lim, Shirley, and Amy Ling. *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.

xiv See Schmidt, Peter and Amirjit Singh. *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*. Jackson: U Mississippi Press, 2000. Page 10-12.

xv See *Beyond Ethnicity* pp 9. For 1980s turn, see Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus. *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography: a School of American Research advanced seminar*. Univ of California Press, 1986.

xvi For an outline of his treatment of ethnicity as invented, see Sollors's introduction to *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989): xvi.

xvii Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus. *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*. Univ of California Press, 1986.

xviii Taussig, Michael T. *Mimesis and alterity: A particular history of the senses*. Psychology Press, 1993.

xix See Narayan for a critique of how this naïve transference of power does not do away with the burden of authenticity but actually places it squarely on the "native" anthropologist. Narayan, Kirin. "How native is a "native" anthropologist?." *American anthropologist* 95.3 (1993): 671-686.

xx For author function, see Foucault, Michel. "Authorship: What is an Author?" *Screen* 20.1 (1979): 13-34.

xxi The Pocahontas reference advances a fairly sexist allegation that Kingston was just being manipulated by her (white) publishers' benevolent racism. Kingston wrote back protesting that her work constituted an experiment with genres. (Iwata, Edward. "Word Warriors," *Los Angeles Times,* June 24, 1990.) Like Chin, her print reviewers would also ignore the formal experimentation and focus on how her work represented Chinese culture.

xxii Mukhopadhyay, Samhita. "Why Mindy Kaling Refuses to Talk about Race—and Why I Care So Much." Talking Points Memo. 06 Feb. 2015. Web. 04 May 2016. http://talkingpointsmemo.com/theslice/why-mindy-kaling-refuses-to-talk-about-race-and-why-i-care-so-much.

xxiii The dates of publication and author names for some of these articles are unknown. Gajjar, Saloni. "Aziz Ansari, Diversity, and Being Able to Finally See Yourself on TV." Complex: Pop Culture. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 May 2016. http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2015/11/indian-american-representations-television; "The Unending Heartbreak of Great Expectations"" Crunk Feminist Collective. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 May 2016. http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2013/05/16/the-unending-heartbreak-of-great-expectations-why-i-cant-watch-the-mindy-project-anymore/;
In lieu of more discussion, let me offer a couple more representative links for this debate: Mora, Celeste. "'The Mindy Project's Controversial Episode on Race Didn't Clear Up Any Concerns." Bustle. N.p., 20 Nov. 2013. Web. 04 May 2016. http://www.bustle.com/articles/9309-the-mindy-projects-controversial-episode-on-race-didnt-clear-up-any-concerns; Lamba, Navi. "Why I Am Disappointed in Mindy Kaling." Vice. N.p., 15 May 2015. Web. 04 May 2016. http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/why-i-hate-mindy-kaling-283;

xxiv Questions like "Where are you really from?" for example. See Raj, Dhooleka Sarhadi. *Where are You from?: Middle-Class Migrants in the Modern World.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

xxv I say "presumed ethnic communities" because this is where immigrant/second-generation identifications depart from those present in the nations of origin—"South Asian" and "Asian" are politicized racial identities in the U.S. that do not represent any coalitions between the countries they reference. So if artists do the work of representing their own cultures for global audiences, they do so to intervene in the discourses *in* the white Anglophone world in which their work is received. To put it bluntly, the message of *The Woman Warrior* is not confined as a representation of a specific Chinese tribe to which the author's parents belonged. In order to effectively perform the political intervention of an autoethnography for U.S. readers, the novel must (and it does) intervene in the way all those cultures (including those outside China) that are dumped into the image of "Chinatown" are perceived by ethnographically minded readers.

xxvi See Pratt, Mary Louise. "Imperial eyes: Studies in travel writing." (1992); and ---."Arts of the contact zone." *Profession* (1991): 33-40.

xxvii See Shankar, Lavina Dhingra, and Rajini Srikanth. *A part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America.* Temple University Press, 1998.

xxviii In "The Fiction of Asian American Literature," Susan Koshy points to the central conflict in defining the "boundaries" of Asian American studies as a tension between the historical necessity for a unified political identity (which also marks the foundations for the field) and a more recent demand to acknowledge and represent the increasing heterogeneity and late-twentieth century renegotiations of Asian American identity.

xxix The reformulation of Asian Americans as model minorities coincided with neoliberal constructions of "good" citizenship that emphasize "personal responsibility" and self-care without using up public resources. And, by the 1980s, Asian Americans were one of the fastest growing immigrant populations and had become notable as economically affluent minorities. Their successes would then be upheld as a sign that discrimination was no longer a problem the government had to redress. For a specific discussion of how such discourses relate to South Asian Americans, see Vijay Prashad's foundational work, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (2000).

xxx See, for example, Erin Khuê Ninh readings of mother-daughter relationships in Asian American literature to describe the immigrant family's role in producing the model minority subject. *Ingratitude: The Debt-bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*. NYU Press, 2011.

xxxi Lowe, Lisa. "Heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity: marking Asian American differences." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1.1 (1991): 24-44.Chow, Rey. *Writing Diaspora. Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

xxxii He continues: "The 'politics of difference' certainly has propelled the field forward, especially in the way that it allows a host of different types of Asian American literary studies to negotiate the intersectional, fragmented, and comparative nature of racial identity. The entire field constellates around this foundational methodology: scholars make apparent what Lisa Lowe…calls the 'heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity' of Asian American lives, whether

related to the issues gender, sexuality, class, diasporic trajectory, age, disability, generational dynamics, or psychic structures, among other such markers of difference and social rubrics" (18).
[xxxiii] Rachel Lee, *The Americas of Asian American Literature: Gendered Fictions of Nation and Transnation*. 1999. Page 11.
[xxxiv] To paraphrase her memorable formulation, cruel optimism names the paradox of being hopeful about fulfilling lifelong desires, notably that of "the good life," against substantial evidence to the contrary. Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Chapter 2: Ethnographic Preoccupations and Fictional Youth

[xxxv] 'Diaspora' refers to that literal and imaginative space, or "ethnoscape" (Appadurai) occupied by people who identify with each other on the basis of sharing an original 'homeland,' of having moved to the same 'host' nation, or both. A lot of scholarship has emerged since the 1980s focusing on how an author's location in the diaspora—i.e. their relationship to the cultures of homeland, diaspora, and the hostland—informs his/her aesthetic choices.
Appadurai, Arjun. "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology." (1996): 48-65. For diaspora criticism, see Braziel, Jana Evans, and Anita Mannur, eds. *Theorizing diaspora: A reader*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2003; Mishra, Vijay. *The literature of the Indian diaspora: theorizing the diasporic imaginary*. Routledge, 2007.
[xxxvi] Of course it is always the author performing the work of mediation, through the device of the child character. Analogous arguments have been made about diasporic/Asian American texts using purportedly universal experiences to mediate between more particular cultural experiences. For studies about food as a cultural mediator, for example, see Mannur, Anita. *Culinary fictions: Food in South Asian diasporic culture*. Temple University Press, 2009; Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. 1993.
[xxxvii] I'm influenced here by Marah Gubar's arguments that even writers steeped in the era of the Romantic "cult of the child," were fairly skeptical of primitivist notions of the child as untouched other; Instead, Gubar's close readings demonstrate, authors of children's literature "generally conceive[d] of child characters and child readers as socially saturated beings, profoundly shaped by the culture, manner, and morals of their time" (4). See, especially,"The Rise of the Child Narrator," for a discussion of less-known women authors who seemed to recognize their child readers' ability to notice and resist didactic messages in books and who therefore created more colorful child narrators that their readers would actually enjoy. Gubar, Marah. *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature*. 2009.
[xxxviii] Some other texts that I will not be discussing but where the child clearly performs these functions include: Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1991), Arundathi Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997)*,* Amitava Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* (1988), and Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* (1989). In all of these cases, the child's lack of knowledge parallels that of a perhaps equally unsuspecting reader in a way that may either obscure or ultimately amplify the reader's complicity in the violence depicted. But this is not an exhaustive list, and I do not mean to suggest that all of these texts attempt some formulaic characterization of children or childhood. In fact, the vividness and flair with which all of these texts present the child characters makes it impossible to discuss them all in justifiable detail. For a related discussion of some of these novels, See Singh, Sujala.

"Postcolonial Children Representing the Nation in Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa and Shyam Selvadurai." *Wasafiri* 19.41 (2004): 13 ; Sen, Asha. "Child Narrators in the Shadow Lines, Cracking India, and Meatless Days." *World Literature Written in English* 37.1 (1998): 190.

xxxix Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.* 2004. p 181.

xl This approach to the performativity of childhood aligns Stockton's work with other investigations of "sideways" formations and queer survival, such as Eve Sedgwick's memorable theorization of the "proto-gay child," Jack Halberstam's theory of failure and Jose Estaban Munoz's theory of disidentification. It also helps describe the ways in which child characters often disrupt existing ideologies and narratives.

xli See Steedman, Carolyn. *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995; Nodelman, Perry. "The other: Orientalism, colonialism, and children's literature." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 317.1 (1992): 29-35. Opening with a discussion of how the child character Mignon in Goethe's *Wilheim Meister* fascinated Victorians and how Mignon, as a deformed but enigmatically cheerful child, reappeared in various guises and contexts within Victorian culture, Steedman considers how questions about human life and death brought attention to the body of the child. If the physiological sciences became newly invested in childhood development as a source of insight into the human body, Steedman argues, humanistic theories began to emerge that treated the child as "a personification of vast tracts of evolutionary and cultural history." She reads Freud's theory of the unconscious, for example, as "a meta-theory of childhood." (95).

xlii *West of Everything*, 6-7

xliii The publication of this capacious novel in 1981 contributed to a major rise in Anglophone South Asian publishing and global circulation. For an analysis of *Midnight's Children*'s self-reflexivity as a commodity on the global literary market and of its self-deployment as a "cultural broker," see Mendes, Ana Cristina. *Salman Rushdie in the Cultural Marketplace*. Burlington, VT, 2013. Also see Huggan, Graham. "The postcolonial exotic." *Transition* 64 (1994): 22-29. For a sense of the massive field of "Rushdie studies," see Kuortti, Joel. *The Salman Rushdie bibliography: a bibliography of Salman Rushdie's work and Rushdie criticism*. Peter Lang Pub Inc, 1997. For an argument about how Rushdie's fiction has dominated the field of (South Asian) postcolonial studies, placing other forms of South Asian fiction under erasure, see Jani, Pranav. *Decentering Rushdie: Cosmopolitanism and the Indian Novel in English*. The Ohio State University Press, 2010.

xliv For more on "historiographic metafiction," see Hutcheon, Linda. "Historiographic metafiction." *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (1988): 61-77.

xlv Saleem's power is that he can read minds. Shiva, Saleem's nemesis, is powerful in combat, another child changes genders, and yet another walks in and out of mirrors. The narrator cautions us against disbelief, bizarre and random as these powers seem. If it is true that India became an autonomous nation, as history tells us that it did, it was also true, he argues, that such autonomy rendered these powers to the midnight's children: "[A]ll over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents—the children of midnight were also the children *of the time*: fathered, you understand, by history. It can happen. Especially in a country which is itself a dream"(131).

xlvi Saleem loses his telepathic powers a few years after his tenth birthday, disconnecting him from the alternate world they potentially shared together. Shiva, a midnight's child, gains prominence in the military, and is ultimately responsible for hunting Saleem down. Eventually, an adult Saleem is tortured into naming all of the midnight's children, who are then rounded up in a government operation and 'sterilized' of their powers.

xlvii As far as reading habits are concerned, this recalls Aristotle's "unity of action," or the idea that a plot must chart a course of action with a clear beginning, middle, and end and which elicits a clear emotional response from the reader. Readers of the realist novel are perhaps particularly trained in this expectation. See   Hale, Dorothy J., ed. *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. p 112.

xlviii For an overview, see Brennan, Timothy. *The national longing for form*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989.

xlix For a discussion of Lahiri's "meteoric rise" as an author, her ability to garner "mainstream and minority audiences," and the difficulties of labeling her identity as an author, given that she seems to appear in multiple literary canons, see Dhingra, Lavina, and Floyd Cheung, eds. *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*. Lexington Books, 2011.

l Srikanth, Rajani. *The World Next Door.*

li Shankar, Lavina Dhingra. "Not Too Spicy." *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India* 99 (2009): 23.

lii I cite Shankar here because of her specific commentary on "Pirzada" in this essay, but very similar commentary about Lahiri exists among several other critics. See: Rajan, Gita. "Ethical Responsibility in Intersubjective Spaces." *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits. Ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim et al. Philadelphia: Temple UP* (2006): 123-41; Srikanth, Rajini. "What Lies Beneath: Lahiri's Brand of Desirable Difference in Unaccustomed Earth." *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies. Ed. Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books* (2012): 51-74.

liii Chow, Rey. *Writing diaspora: Tactics of intervention in contemporary cultural studies*. Indiana University Press, 1993.

liv Another being the father's mild annoyance that Lilia's school curriculum does not include much world history and geography.

lv See Behar, Ruth. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart.* Beacon Press, 1996.

lvi See Dhingra, Lavina, and Floyd Cheung, eds. *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*. Lexington Books, 2011.

[lvii] This is probably true of all postcolonial nations that have plunged into civil wars or regional tensions along ethnic lines within years of independence, not just Sri Lanka. There is some scholarship on the ways reticence around national traumas in standard historiography provokes "a return of the repressed" in works of art and unofficial narratives that inevitably surface those traumas. In other words, artistic and colloquial representations engage history in ways historiography cannot or will not. For a reading of the evocative silences around partition in Indian cinema, see Sarkar, Bhaskar. *Mourning the nation: Indian cinema in the wake of Partition*. Duke University Press, 2009; for a reading of the disjunctures between personal and official memories of the 1975 Emergency in India, see Tarlo, Emma. *Unsettling memories: Narratives of the emergency in Delhi*. Univ of California Press, 2003. See also: Puri, Shalini. *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory*. Palgrave, 2014.

[lviii] That is to say, they have ignored the ways in which ethnic conflict has been the 'front' behind which other political and imperial gains have been carried out. See Ismail, Qadri. *Abiding by Sri Lanka: On peace, place, and postcoloniality*. U Minnesota Press, 2005.

[lix] Ismail's argument and methodology have been roundly criticized, and perhaps justifiably, and yet there remains an important kernel of similarity between his approach to Sri Lankan literature and that of several literary critics. His main point in discrediting (traditional) anthropology lies in its colonialist frameworks that treat ethnicity or "culture" as a source of division; and his problem with historiography is that the field shares with nationalism a belief in an objectively "real" history. When it comes to writings about Sri Lanka, these do not really sound like gross misconceptions. And while it is true that both of the disciplines he critiques have undergone serious renovations in the last few decades, discourses about Sri Lanka have continued meanwhile to be informed by inadequate disciplinary and nationalist narratives. Ismail's argument, however faulty in execution, demonstrates the unequal relations of power clearly visible in academic and activist "peace" debates about Sri Lanka as a direct legacy of colonialist representations. For the most thorough criticism of his lack of nuance and knowledge about newer disciplinary methods in anthropology and history, see Whitaker, Mark P. "Abiding by Sri Lanka Qadri Ismail's way." *Religion* 38.2 (2008): 181-186.

[lx] Minoli Salgado writes, for example, that the "critical reception of literature from Sri Lanka is shaped in large measure by the country's recent political history" (5).

[lxi] There has been some migration from Sri Lanka throughout the twentieth century, but many literally fled the country around the "Black July" events of 1983. While a large number of Tamils sought asylum in various other countries, many Sri Lankans left simply to escape the unrelenting reality of civil conflict in the country. (The final story, "Riot Journal" in *Funny Boy* alludes to these events as the reason for his family's move to Canada.)
Sri Lanka changed its official language to Sinhala in 1956, producing a nationalist thrust toward indigenous writing, but English remained popular among the growing urban middle class and there was a sudden rise in Sri Lankan writing in English corresponding with the post-80s middle class migration. Sri Lankan diasporic authors—who have increased access to global circuits of publishing, the protection of being far away from the site of conflict, and very possibly the desire to write about where they come from—have attracted serious attention. And with the recognition

that came with Michael Ondaatje and other writers publishing in the 90s and writing as much for Sri Lankans as for non-Sri Lankan readers, Chelva Kanaganayakam argues, Sri Lankan literary academics received a concomitant "responsibility" to parse through this literature and establish a taxonomy of their significance. For a discussion of the evaluative cultural politics enacted by critics that defensively fixated on the issues of representing the nation and the positionality of the diasporic author, see Kanaganayakam.

[lxii] For intersectionality, see Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stanford Law Review* (1991): 1241-1299.

[lxiii] Looking at a range of literary texts plotting the loss of a loved childhood object, Eric Tribunella argues that the traumatization of children, where seemingly justified as necessary for maturation, is a recurring and even celebrated trope in children's literature. The resulting loss of "innocence" provokes a melancholic nostalgia in the reader for that mythic pre-trauma childhood. See Tribunella, Eric L. *Melancholia and Maturation: The use of Trauma in American Children's Literature.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010

[lxiv] See Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "How to bring your kids up gay." *Social Text* 29 (1991): 18-27.

[lxv] I appropriate this reading from Stockton's theorization of a "ghostly gay child" who perceives the adults' apprehension about his normative maturation and grows sideways by retreating physically and emotionally from them. See Stockton. P 14-17.

[lxvi] Identification is, of course, never an easy project. As Eve Sedgwick cautions us in *Epistemology of the Closet*, the processes of identification informing the trajectory from childhood to adulthood are always "fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal." This means that individuals—perhaps most colorfully so during childhood—always identify, counteridentify, or partially identify with different aspects of the social world(s) they inhabit.

[lxvii] Where counteridentification appears unwise or unsafe, disidentification comes in handy because it both adopts a reigning discourse and, by adapting it, recovers it from its unsavory/unfriendly elements. As such, disidentification articulates powerful ways of belonging as well as unbelonging. While most people disidentify with dominant discourses at some point in their lives, Munoz contends, it is a strategy of survival for queers of color. When it makes its way into artistic representation, disidentification is a powerful source of critique and a damning elucidation of unequal relations of power that can occur even within common alignments. In other words, disidentification articulates intersectionality and critiques the identifications and counter-identifications that produce it.

[lxviii] For a persuasive account of the political and intellectual value in moving beyond a "hermeneutics of suspicion" toward more reparative readings of dominant ideology and discourse, See Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You." Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. Eds. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

[lxix] Here again, we might contrast Arjie's clarity of feeling with Feroza's unexplained affective excess. While Feroza is not subject to the same harsh punishments as Arjie and is much older in age, she seems paradoxically less in control over herself. Arjie perceived and theorized (with the

perspicacity of an adult looking back), Feroza has unexplained "flashes of temper, which vanished soon after they appeared," and is "racked by the discord in her perceptions" (22-23). So, while *Funny Boy* maintains a cohesive narrative voice with Arjie as author-narrator, *An American Brat* offers only little (ultimately unsatisfying) peeks into its protagonist's consciousness, mostly from other characters' points of view.

[lxx] Here I deviate from anupama jain's reading of the novel as a "hybrid bildung." Within a larger project exploring South Asian American "narratives of ambivalence and belonging," jain reads this novel as troubling mainstream assumptions about assimilation and the American dream. While her historicized reading of the novel's cultural hybridity is informative, I would argue that the novel itself does not demand such interpretive research. For the most part, the novel's surface-level narration of Feroza's mind, I argue, simply, straightforwardly, denies the reader the processes of her self-construction. jain's reading, I would argue, stems from the novel's structural dependency on transnational complexities rather than a direct invitation from the novel itself. Rather than dismiss the novel's straightforwardness and working to expose the transnational complexities that inevitably structure such a novel, as jain does, I would argue that the novel deliberately shuts the reader out of Feroza's thoughts and therefore resists its own role of representing diasporic identity formation. See jain, anupama. *How to Be South Asian in America.* 169-185.

[lxxi] By this I mean that it is not that Feroza desires *or* particularly mistrusts the American dream—it is that readers are not offered any of her thoughts on this matter. Upon her arrival, for example, both her raptures about the extravagance on Wall St. and her shocked apprehension of abject poverty mere blocks from Wall St. are rendered at the surface level. That is to say we do not witness and must only surmise her processing them at a deeper level. This is true of several other moments in the novel.

[lxxii] Patricia Chu has prominently argued that Asian American writers have adapted the bildungsroman form to "claim Americanness for Asian American subjects, and [to represent]… Asian Americans as grounded in highly specific ethnic histories in America" (4).
See Chu, Patricia. *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
Such strategies, of course, require a reader to have unobstructed access to a young/ethnic person's consciousness. It is the problematic expectation of unobstructed access that concerns me here.

[lxxiii] Seif, Amy. "A Pakistani Girl Discovers America: An American Brat." Seattle, Wash:, 1994.; King, Adele. "An American Brat." University of Oklahoma, 1994; Pande, Ira. "Book Review: Bapsi Sidhwa's An American Brat." *India Today.* 15 July 1994.

[lxxiv] I use this term for its colloquial meaning—an overwhelming sense of pleasure—and also as a Lacanian concept elaborated by Hélène Cixous as the empowering rapture of "being limitless." Cited in Gallop, Jane. "Beyond the Jouissance Principle". *Representations* 7 (1984): 110–115

[lxxv] This particular definition is attributed to Samuel Johnson from his 1755 English dictionary.

[lxxvi] The now common trope of high-school drama first exploded in the 1980s, with films like Breakfast Club, etc. that treated adolescent life with far greater attention than before.

[lxxvii] David Blum first used this phrase in his 1985 article in reference to the supposed clique of young actors who appeared together in the iconic *The Breakfast Club* (1985), among other films.

Considered a negative, infantilizing portrayal at the time, the phrase has since been recuperated as a description of what that generation achieved in film. Even in the original article, however, one can easily detect a germ of admiration underneath its wry depiction of a supposed clique of Hollywood "brats." See Blum, David. "Hollywood's Brat Pack" New York Mag, 1985; Gora, Susannah. *You Couldn't Ignore Me if You Tried: The Brat Pack, John Hughes, and their Impact on a Generation*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2010.

lxxviii For a sustained analysis of her "ambivalent Americanization" depicted in this scene, see jain (2011).

Chapter 3: Desi Parties and Culturally Self-Conscious Citizenship

lxxix I use these terms as understood within discourses of ethnography; even though the dichotomies of "inside" and "outside" have been questioned, they remain useful in describing the structure of an ethnographic encounter. I do not have a particular interest in those terms here or elsewhere in this dissertation beyond their usefulness in describing the basic reader-text configurations that undoubtedly influence the authorship, publication, and marketing of South Asian diasporic fiction.

lxxx A 1997 article highlights two salient features of this party culture: first that it mostly featured "remix" music and second that college students were instrumental in organizing the parties. Students would hire a nightclub and pass the word, sometimes bringing in hundreds of people. Author Unknown. "It's a Party." *Little India* Jan 31 1997: 21.

lxxxi Somini Sengupta names Bally Sagoo's album, "Star Crazy" as a seminal text, quoting Lil' Jay, a New York-based DJ: "After 'Star Crazy,' it all blew up…I was, like, wow! I had never heard Indian music mixed before. So I started doing it." Sengupta, Somini. "To be Young, Indian and Hip." *The New York Times* 1996. Not only were DJs inspired by the form pioneered by British Asian artists, records like "Star Crazy" were likely just played at parties organized by young students in the 90s, since the students could not always afford to pay DJ artists. A little later, Panjabi MC's "Beware of the Boys" (1998) became the first to top the charts worldwide and at this point has sold into the millions. Punjabi MC made a guest appearance at one of the first few of DJ Rekha (another subcultural but not as world famous icon)'s Basement Bhangra parties in 1998, and it is possible that he DJ'd elsewhere in New York before he came famous. He has returned to Basement Bhangra for a few times since. Four of his remixed songs appear in *American Desi* for example, and this 1998 song enjoys substantial airtime during the five-minute sequence devoted to the party. This is possibly the most recognizable song from the subculture—particularly since its re-release in 2002 featuring Jay-Z. See Hsu, Hua. *Panjabi MC Beware*. Color Lines Magazine, 2003; Jones, Joanna. *Clubs Drive Panjabi MC to Two on German Chart. (International)*. New Bay Media LLC, 2002.

lxxxii Newsweek, March 22, 2004. For a glimpse of what her parties look and sound like, see: http://lpr.com/lpr_artists/basement-bhangra/. For more on her groundbreaking influence, see Nijhon, Raeshem Chopra. "Making Brown like Dat," Ajay Nair and Murali Balaji. Eds. *Desi Rap: Hip-Hop and South Asian America*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008. p 85.

lxxxiii Hidier wrote and produced an album, *When We Were Twins,* to go with the novel's central themes, and she performed most of the vocals for the songs alongside the London and New York City bands she collaborated with. DJ Rekha provides the beats for one of these songs.

http://thisistanuja.com/music/when-we-were-twins/. A couple of years later, Rekha named *Born Confused* as one of the books on her reading list. The two have appeared together multiple times in combined reading/dance party events.

lxxxiv See author website: http://www.bushrarehman.com/bhangra-blowout-and-other-stories/

lxxxv *Chutney Popcorn* (1999) is also notable here as an independent film about second-generation desis; but even though it surfaces some of the same themes, it is does not really take on the specific plotline of an ABCD narrative I'm about to trace.

lxxxvi South Asian diasporic writers, including second-generation authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, had of course become famous at this point, but their appeal was considered/marketed on a global scale—the second-generation (youth) audience is obviously a part of such an audience base, but not the direct addressee. The bhangra music youth culture pioneered in the UK and which travelled to the East Coast by the late 1990s, on the other hand, did.

lxxxvii Despite its low budget as an indie film and lack of mainstream distribution, *American Desi* grossed nearly four times its production costs. Its production budget was $250,000 and the film grossed $902,054 within the first month and showed on 38 screens in the United States (imdb.com). Jigna Desai notes that mostly played at metropolitan venues patronized by South Asian communities and relied heavily on the diasporic channels of distribution that circulate Bollywood films—Indian grocery stores and the smaller South Asian video stores where legal and bootleg versions were typically rented and sold (*Beyond Bollywood,* 42). The novel *Born Confused* received several positive reviews, including that it "gave voice to a new generation of Americans" (*USA Today*) and was named an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults.

lxxxviii See Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure* (2011) for how failure can produce alternative ways of being in the world beyond neoliberal models of success and maturation into adulthood.

lxxxix This is a mainly college-based competition, but it brings in substantial audiences from all over the East Coast—sometimes these are people related to the college students participating, but the ticket costs are not prohibitive to a disinterested viewership. The main attraction, too, is the after-parties held for the audience's benefit.

xc The party culture in question here (and second-generation literature elsewhere) has been described even more confusingly as a reflection of "hybrid identity." While some critics caution against the celebration of metaphorical hybridity in these new social outlets, they retain the (ethnographic) focus on how cultural meanings are surfaced and negotiated at these parties. Throughout there is a slippage between identity as a psychological process (how one thinks of oneself) and identity as a spoken narrative of that self (as in the assertion "I am Indian," for example).

xci See Banerji, Sabita, and Gerd Baumann. "Bhangra 1984-8: Fusion and professionalisation in a genre of South Asian dance music." (1990); Baumann, Gerd. "The Re-invention of Bhangra. Social Change and Aesthetic Shifts in a Punjabi Music in Britain." *The World of Music* 32.2 (1990): 81-98.

xcii It might also be worth noting that Dudrah seems to use the phrase "hybrid" colloquially to indicate a combination of two or more different racial identifications. To explore hybridity via Homi Bhabha would be to consider further the dialogic process of moving between these identifications, as other critics have done.

[xciii] See *Disorienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Music.* (1996).

[xciv] Gopinath, Gayatri. "'Bombay, U.K., Yuba City': Bhangra Music and the Engendering of Diaspora." *Diaspora.* 4.3. (1995): 303-321; Maira, Sunaina. "Identity Dub: Paradoxes of an Indian American Youth Subculture (New York Mix)." *Cultural Anthropology.*14.1 (1999):29-60. See also: Ahmad, Ali Nobil. "Whose Underground? Asian Cool and the Poverty of Hybridity." *Third Text* 54 (Spring 2001): 71-84.

Sunaina Maira's work in *Desis in the House* (2002) is particularly salient and well known. Drawing on intensive interviews with party-goers, she argues that Indian American youth employ the "the hybrid aesthetic" of what she calls remix culture to performatively explore the dichotomy (from available discourses) between contemporary/urban "cool"ness and nostalgia for authentic Indian culture that permeates discourses about second-generation identity.

[xcv] By necessity, I am offering a schematic summary of that discussion here. See Stallybrass and White 1986.

[xcvi] The argument is structurally similar to 1980s literary criticism that understood "Asian American" as a powerful and new identity that asserted American citizenship without abjecting Asianness to do so. See Elaine Kim (1986). Representing one's identity is perhaps no longer an urgent task.

[xcvii] *Desis in the House,* 2002.

[xcviii] Hebdige, Dick. "Subculture: The meaning of style." *Critical Quarterly* 37.2 (1995): 120-124.

[xcix] Historically, Americanness has often been narrativized in terms of rebellion against (European) models of authority, and immigrant parent-child relations have often staged such narratives. Sarah Chinn argues, for example, that what we know today as discourses about adolescent rebellion first emerged in the 1920s in relation to working-class urban youth who were children of European immigrants. But this is also a familiar trope in literary fiction as coming of age narratives set in immigrant families tend to read as mappings of assimilation. See

[c] This is probably another reason why the suburban setting of his childhood home (and also Dimple's in *Born Confused)* receives so much narrative focus at the beginning—as the term "coconut" makes more clear, the idea of an ABCD is fairly classed as a function of growing up in a very white neighborhood. There is a subtle implication within these texts that desi kids who grow up in communities of color seem more able to embrace their own difference and feel the need to code switch less.

[ci] Sunaina Maira (2002) offers an excellent description of some of the pressures upon second-generation youth that get thrown under the rug by the epithet of "confusion." On the one hand, she argues, the first generation works out its anxieties through the children, making them feel the need to live up to some frozen (she uses the phrase "petrified") image of authentic Indian culture. On the other hand, mainstream US culture associates India with mysticism or with "ancient" arts and kids who try to live up that image end up "self-orientalizing" themselves as well. See also Prashad 2000.

[cii] *Queer Art of Failure,* p 27.

[ciii] Here I'm borrowing from Halberstam on how failure (which is one form of growing sideways) often disconcerts successful people by embodying an alternative way of life. It is likely that ABCD confusion is similarly upsetting to "successful" models of cultural identity.

[civ] Because whiteness has always defined American citizenship, generations of nonwhite immigrants have existed subject to public suspicion and reserve. And even without malicious intentions, the frequent "where are you from" questions work to reinforce the foundational ideas of American citizenship.

[cv] See Mannur's theorization of fusion and Davé's reading of brown voice. Interestingly, despite their different critical angles (Mannur focuses on culinary registers, Davé on performances of Indian accents on screen), both scholars close read *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle* as disrupting narratives of safe/model minority multiculturalism.

[cvi] The authors in question for her include Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Friedrich Schiller, whose work participates in the broader reconceptualization of childhood in 19th century British discourse. In her final chapter, Chapman examines the prescription of "good form" that surfaced in British public schools as part of "increasingly stringent demands that children be unselfconscious." Chapman, Amanda (2015) "Self-consciousness and Childhood in the Long Nineteenth Century." Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh.

[cvii] Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk* (2001).

[cviii] Song (2013). Offering a literary history of countless Asian American works since 1965, Song reflects throughout his work on how the vexed category "Asian American" surfaces in or offers each of these texts and how the literature might guide our theorizing about the scope of Asian American studies. Supported by some impressive close readings, he offers a forceful argument that "there *is* something particularly Asian American about them, even as this literature might slip past such critical boundaries or challenge their configuration" (10). What this "something Asian American" is for him is the way the authors in question grapple with various expectations called forth by the term "Asian American" applied to them in life.

[cix] See Maira (2000) for a similar reading of second-generation cultural appropriations. Maira, S. "Henna and Hip Hop: The Politics of Cultural Production and the Work of Cultural Studies." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3.3 (2000): 329-369.

[cx] This type of self-consciousness is not unequivocally a bad thing—obviously, it is often the basis of good pedagogy to make students become more self-aware about their latent ideologies and the political and social backgrounds that inform their lives in the present. But even as we push to make students think harder about issues like, say, white privilege, it might be good to recognize that self-consciousness is frequently demanded of adolescents, and children of immigrants to varying degrees have always labored over questions of who they are and where they are from.

[cxi] An exploration of such abject feelings lies at the heart of Halberstam's readings of failure. For more on negative affects of brownness, see Muñoz, José Esteban. "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position." *Signs* 31.3 (2006): 675-88.

[cxii] Penn Masala is an a cappella group formed in 1996 by college students from University of Pennsylvania. Like most a cappella groups, Penn Masala remains rooted to the UPenn campus and has branded itself as the first "in the world to bring the sounds of the Indian subcontinent to a cappella." True to the a cappella form, this performance features no musical instrument, making it very unlike the original.

[cxiii] See Anjali Gera Roy for how bhangra texts—including the remix forms in which they circulate globally—reiterate and celebrate Sikh warrior masculinity. Long before it became stylized into remixes spinned by DJs in the 1980s and 90s, bhangra texts traveled far and wide with migrants. Roy argues, for example, that the hypermasculine body of the Sikh (embodying coded tensions in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial India at least) performed in bhangra continues to be the site for producing Sikh youth identity and cultural nationalism today. Roy, Anjali Gera. *Bhangra moves: From Ludhiana to London and beyond*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2010.

Of course, the appeal of bhangra parties post-80s extends far beyond the Sikh community (and issues of masculinity).

[cxiv] Perhaps historically bhangra music has been more subject to the hybrid cultural processes known to happen at borderlands than other cultural forms/festivals like Diwali or Garbha Raas. Even beyond the regional culture, early-twentieth century migrants from India to the US tended to be Punjabi farmers (historically, bhangra is strongly associated with the season of harvest and farmland masculinity), and huge numbers of Pakistanis and Indians from Punjab (essentially the land torn apart by partition) permanently settled in England in the years before and after 1947. This early concentration of Punjabi migrants in parts of the US (Northern California, mainly) and the UK is one explanation for why bhangra music represented the transnational pulse long before Bollywood existed. The southern parts of India have been less vulnerable to the borderland effect, which possibly also explains why South Indian forms like Bharatnatyam dance or Carnatic music tend to be seen as "classical" forms while bhangra or Bollywood music have always seemed more amenable to remixing.

[cxv] Two performances among these are featured almost in their entirety—the "Aap Jaisa Koi" song that provides background to the narrative montage and the breakout hit "Mundiah Do Bachke" by Panjabi MC. Some of the other Panjabi MC songs play in low volume in the background, but most of this song is in blaring volume and the plot simply stops as we watch a few people dance energetically. (The remaining songs on the track feature a mix of English bands and classical Indian music.)

[cxvi] Though, of course, DJs were not playing solely for the youth audience. The reason for starting Basement Bhangra, for example, seems to have more to do with avoiding the trappings of the youth or yuppie, middle-class market than catering to it. In multiple interviews, Rekha notes that when DJing for desi crowds, she was often asked *not* to play bhangra because it attracted the "cab driver" crowds. For obvious classed reasons, promoters wanted to restrict the crowd to young professionals. (One only needs to look around a little on the internet to find those kinds of "Bollywood"/Desi parties marketed to young professionals. By contrast, her parties do not enforce dress codes and huge cover charges.) As Rekha notes, not every party makes "certain kind of South Asian men still feel welcome and safe—are they getting into the other clubs? I don't think so." (American Desi Podcast).

[cxvii] *Born Confused* also has several moments in the beginning where the protagonist sees herself uncomfortably situated in cultural binaries, exacerbated no doubt by the opposite messages relayed within the home and without. For example, when her mother says "You need a nice Indian boy," our protagonist thinks: "But I didn't want an Indian boy to appreciate me. What did

being appreciated by a geek, or by someone who looked more like a cousin or brother, mean anyway?...What I wanted was even half a glance by someone cool" (83).
See Maira (2002) for more on the dialectic between "cool" and "Indian" that makes up second-generation identity.

[cxviii] Tanuja Desai Hidier. Interview. Q&A: Push Voices.

[cxix] This line comes from one of the songs in the album, *When We Were Twins*; http://thisistanuja.com/resources/Tanuja_Desai_Hidier-When_We_Were_Twins-Lyrics_Booklet.pdf.

[cxx] See chapter 2 in this dissertation.

[cxxi] For a treatment of "being-looked-atness" as part of the manner in which ethnic people represent their identity, see Chow, Rey. "Film as Ethnography." Ed. Paul Bowman. *The Rey Chow Reader*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2010.

[cxxii] In other words, they are not taking pains to perform the "I feel American but I'm connected to India" affective paradigm. This refusal to either choose or carefully construct a specific combination of cultural avowals and disavowals idea is also reflected in the first song of Hidier's "booktrack" for this novel: "They say, Baby, how you gonna choose your world/ I say, Lately, I'm just not that kind of girl."

[cxxiii] "Neither Here Nor There is in fact a You Are Here" also appears as a line in one of the songs from the booktrack.

[cxxiv] My reading here differs from the celebratory camp of critics who read the intertextual references in remix songs as *representative* of second-generation cultural hybridity. (Of course it is, in the sense that all texts are representations. But I'm arguing that its appeal to audiences lies in its call to be unself-conscious about their confusion.)

[cxxv] For the new forms of knowing and relations potentially engendered by states of forgetfulness, stupidity, or spatial disorientation, see Halberstam 2011.

[cxxvi] Tanuja Desai Hidier. Interview. Q&A: Push Voices.

[cxxvii] Hidier, Tanuja Desai. "'Born Confused' & 'Bombay Blues' Author Tanuja Desai Hidier on What ABCD Means to Her - The Aerogram." *The Aerogram*. N.p., 01 June 2014. <http://theaerogram.com/tanuja-desai-hidier-abcd-born-creative-dreamers/>.

[cxxviii] Malhotra, Rekha. cited in Detweiler and Taylor, 148.

[cxxix] She also dislikes the term "world music" for being too "anthropological and voyeuristic." https://www.indiacurrents.com/articles/2008/05/05/bhangra-beyond-the-basement; http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=19087315.
For a discussion of the problem of "fusion" discourse, see Mannur (2009).

[cxxx] *Disorienting Rhythms.* page 90

[cxxxi] Keshavan, Meghana. "Bollywood Nights: A Generation of South Asians, A New Cultural Mix." *Metro Times*. August 22 2007.

[cxxxii] Here I'm influenced by Halberstam's critique of readings of subculture popularized by Dick Hebdige in *Subcultural Style*, including the notion that subcultures first emerge as expressions of resistance but eventually become ritualized "styles" that are themselves incorporated into mainstream entertainment/subsumed under capitalism. However, the appeal of these symbolic rituals, Halberstam argues, do not simply wither away for its (queer) participants with that

transformation; subcultural venues continue to 'house' folks who do not feel welcome in the mature time zones of adulthood. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005).

cxxxiii See Lee Edelman and Halberstam on queerness and not planning for the future.

cxxxiv This is very likely a reference to "Bhangra Blow Out," a major bhangra competition held every year in DC and whose scale matches what is described in the novel.

cxxxv Sedgwick, *Queer and Now*, 3.

cxxxvi This remark appears on a tumblr post where she's describing her fantasy soundtrack for *Corona*, one that would become reality if the book was picked up for a movie and she was given a "gazillion dollar budget." While most of the stories have 1 or 2 songs, "Bhangra Blow Up" receives 6, a clear remark on its relationship to the mediums of music and dancing. One of these songs is Panjabi MC's "Dhol Jageero Da."
http://poetsplaylist.tumblr.com/search/bushra+rehman.

cxxxvii Interview with Elaine G. Flores, date unknown (but roughly sometime in the 2000s when DJ Rekha began to enjoy critical and media attention).

cxxxviii After all, at least part of the appeal of the nightclub is that you dress differently than you normally would and that you get to 'inhabit' a different personality for just a little while before the real world catches up to you. Nightclubs are designed to offer an atmosphere completely different from your daily life that envelops you and makes you behave differently i.e. dance.

Chapter 4: Russell Peters, the Politics of Accents, and Immigrant Abjections

cxxxix I say "Indian accent," but of course people from other parts of South Asia have been just as subject to the stereotyping involved here. The specifics of their geographical origins are somewhat immaterial to the symbolic racism applied to the accent.

cxl Henry Jenkins argues that new media platforms have decentralized traditional media conglomerates somewhat and engendered a massive cultural shift "where the power of the media producer and the power of the consumer interact in unpredictable ways." *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, 2008. The pirated videos that eventually made Peters famous would be one example for consumer behavior in contemporary convergence culture.

cxli I do not go into detail about his crowd work in this chapter, but his dexterity with engaging specific people in the audience matches his talent for different accents. Note Roseanne Barr's comment, for instance: "He's the only comic who can do crowd work at Madison Square Garden —I saw it and was blown away — he held the capacity audience in the palm of his hand." Cited in Dore, Shalini. "Russell Peters Celebrates 25 Years in Comedy." July 15 2015.

cxlii For example, Fox was the center of heavy protests and unprecedented public censure in relation to how *The Rising Sun* (1993) represented and perpetuated stereotypes about Asians in the United States. The activism around television diversity was a result, at least in part, by the exponential numbers of young, impressionable, middle-class, Asian American viewers of popular film and television through the 80s and 90s.

cxliii The show aired for only one season due to poor ratings and received criticism for its stereotypical treatment of Asian families. In her memoir, Cho attributes her severe depression and breakdown to the network's treatment of her and insistence on mainstream audience expectations. Writing a few years after the show ended, she recalls vaguely sensing at the time that the ethnic jokes written for the show were not funny, but also feeling a distance from that reality because she wanted mainstream success and believed the show would provide it. See Cho, Margaret. *I Am The One I Want* (2000). We might frame this in the same context as Dave Chappelle's abrupt departure from his own show in 2006 and consider the particular challenges for minorities within the industry. The clearest explanation Chappelle offers is that he "lost" his voice because of what fame and money did to him, that he experienced a major disconnect from reality that obstructed his standup work and made him question the honesty of his own writing. See Farley, Christopher John. "On the beach with Dave Chappelle." *Time Online Edition* (May 15 2005). While Cho's and Chappelle's circumstances are completely different, there is a sense here of the "network" taking over and stunting their own visions.

cxliv For the ways in which Asian American representations on television reproduced white American racism, See Hamamoto, Darrell Y. *Monitored peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation*. U of Minnesota Press, 1994.

cxlv The 1990s witnessed a rise in Asian American Independent media as a corrective to mainstream and institutional racism. See Xing, Jun. Asian America through the lens: History, representations, and identity. Rowman Altamira, 1998; and Davé, Shilpa, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren, Eds. *East main street: Asian American popular culture*. NYU Press, 2005. See also Greenberg, Bradley S., Dana Mastro, and Jeffrey E. Brand. "Minorities and the mass media: Television into the 21st century." *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (2002): 333-351.

cxlvi My use (and that of critics) of the words "diaspora" and "cultural identity" derives from: Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation." *Black British cultural studies: A reader* (1996): 210-222. Hall's theorization of identity as "in process," as inherent to practices of representation has engendered a large body of cultural studies scholarship exploring identity-cultural work in South Asian diaspora literature and popular culture.

cxlvii We do not have access to all versions of the video and how it has been cut up since 2004. However, "!xobile," along with "Beat your kids," "Cheap Indians," "Be a man," are the existing segments with the most hits and unique versions on Youtube. Oldest version available of "!xobile" was uploaded eight years ago, and has had 2 million hits. Overall, the video exists in countless iterations and segments, and it's likely many that once existed have been retired. Accessed 06 February 2015.

cxlviii "!xobile" appears in the *Comedy Now!* special recorded in 2003. It's highly likely that the jokes here have been shaped by his unrecorded standup tours up to that point. This is the recording that went viral on the internet in 2004. His 1997 set is also available on Youtube, but the 2003 recording is decidedly better crafted.

cxlix This is, of course, the classic diasporic imaginary invoked within much diasporic literature and popular culture. See Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary.* Routledge, 2007.

[cl] I do not mean to imply here that Peters was the lone voice against the implied white gaze of the mainstream at all. But it is significant that his standup made those critiques accessible and entertaining to minorities in the audiences wherever he performed.

[cli] See Mintz, Lawrence E. "Humor and ethnic stereotypes in vaudeville and burlesque." *Melus* (1996): 19-28.

[clii] Sollors, Werner. *Beyond ethnicity: Consent and descent in American culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986; Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. No. 145. WW Norton & Company, 1989.

[cliii] For a similar argument, see Winokur, Mark. *American laughter: Immigrants, ethnicity, and 1930s Hollywood film comedy*. Macmillan, 1996.

[cliv] The term ethnicity works here within the framework of assimilation and race. Ethnicity in the U.S. defined one's (European) immigrant origins, and its relative visibility reflected the immigrants' pace of assimilating into whiteness. Assimilation and citizenship were only available, of course, to free white people. Among these, Jewishness has been a prominent ethnic category. As immigration became liberalized and the civil rights movements took force in the 1960s, ethnicity as a politically correct descriptor was extended to most non-white immigrants, but having an ethnicity in the U.S. without fitting into the umbrella of whiteness is, from a historical perspective, still confusing. This confusion, as I will discuss soon, has been central to mainstream 'humor' about South Asians.

[clv] See Lowe, John. "Theories of ethnic humor: How to enter, laughing." *American Quarterly* (1986): 439-460.

[clvi] Here, Daube is fallaciously assuming that identity exists outside of the "social" aspect of one's character.

[clvii] This is also the reason touted for why there are comparatively few female comedians: historically, audiences have resisted blatant domination from women. See Auslander, Philip. "'Brought to You by Fem-Rage': Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender," in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances, ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993.

[clviii] Hall, Stuart. Cited in Daube, Matthew. "Laughter in Revolt." Proquest. 2010.

[clix] Chu goes on to argue that male Asian American authors abject the "Asian feminine" by way of defining their own Asian American identities.

[clx] Hyon theorizes in her PhD dissertation that the "Asian immigrant cannot be reconciled under nationalist tropes, narratives, and aesthetics as a subject. Instead, she emerges as a dangerously transgressive and excessive figure that produces critiques of normative formations of subjectivity and identity." Hyon, Soyoung Sonjia. *Anxieties of the Fictive: The Immigrant and Asian American Politics of Visibility.* ProQuest Dissertations Publishing; 2011.

[clxi] This is a standard formula for identity work, especially in relation to cultural citizenship, and has been extensively explored within Asian American studies. See especially Lisa Lowe's prominent work. *Immigrant acts: on Asian American cultural politics*. Duke University Press, 1996.

[clxii] Sociolinguists have argued, moreover, that a perceived accent makes one an outsider and allots him/her a place in an unspoken hierarchy of social relations, which, in turn, justifies inequality and discrimination. So the desire to neutralize accents is not uncommon, especially

since it alleviates a significant measure of everyday racism. See Lippi-Green, Rosina. *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. Psychology Press, 1997.

clxiii For a quick summary of stereotypes reproduced about Indian culture and model minorities in relation to the spelling bee, See: http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/06/the-spelling-bee-americas-great-racial-freak-show/372528/ and http://www.alternet.org/story/155831/why_do_asian_americans_win_so_many_spelling_bees

clxiv Overnight, Natarajan was an Indian household name at a time when there were not as many Indian names circulating in the mainstream.

clxv Hari Kondabolu, a standup comedian, refers in jest to the Scripps Spelling Bee event as "the Indian Super Bowl." This kind of excitement isn't restricted to the spelling bee — a similar communal excitement enveloped Nina Davuluri when she became the first Indian American to be crowned Miss America in 2013. For a reading of how an embrace of American popular culture has worked to create Indian diasporic identities and communities, see Mani, Bakirathi. *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America*. Stanford University Press, 2012.

clxvi Mietkiewicz, Henry. "There's this Indian Comic: MET Edition." *Toronto Star* 1994.

clxvii See Khamba, G., and Tanmay Bhat. "Episode 7 Featuring Russell Peters." Audio blog post (podcast). *All India Bakchod*. N.p., 9 May 2012. Web. 22 Feb. 2015.

clxviii This is curious, since it would not become featured in any other taped version of his performance and since it situates this recording squarely in the late 1990s when Bhangra and Indian-themed music seem to follow young South Asians everywhere, from independent films to dance parties involving South Asians. See chapter 2.

clxix Indian Christians are not uncommon, so perhaps these people imagined he had changed his name because he lived in Canada. (It is hard to know.)

clxx Part of what his father is getting at is the way ethnic comedians push at the boundaries of what they can and cannot reveal about their communities and whether that information leads to further racist stereotypes. Sanjeev Bhaskar from the pioneering British South Asian sketch comedy, *Goodness Gracious Me* (1996-2001), reflects a similar experience in a recent interview: "We did get some negative reactions from the British-Asian community, particularly from the older generation. One guy came up to me in the street and said: 'Why are you washing our dirty linen in public?' I said: 'Wouldn't you rather your dirty linen was washed?' Someone else told me the show was just peddling stereotypes. I pointed out that we had more than 100 characters: how can you have 100 stereotypes?" Sanjeev Bhaskar. Interview by Laura Barnett. The Guardian. 5 May 2014. Web. <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/may/05/how-we-made-goodness-gracious-me-meera-syal-sanjeev-bhaskar.>

clxxi I paraphrase this directly from an interview in India with young people. See "India Questions Russell Peters." Roy, Prannoy. India Questions. NDTV. 15 Nov. 2008. He has said versions of this in his own book and a couple of long podcast interviews.

clxxii Commentators on standup comedy roughly allude to the following timeline for the form: Mort Sahl in the 1950s was the groundbreaking figure who transformed joke-telling into the conversational, everyday style distinctly associated with standup today. The 1960s and 1970s was a period of upsurge, when comedy clubs thrived across the country and performers such as Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, and Richard Pryor pushed its confrontational edge. In the 1980s and 1990s most comedians divided time between television shows and standup, and, competing with television, comedy clubs lost their former charm for audiences. Comedians still performed in clubs, but received their real breaks from slots on late night talk shows or, in the 1990s, specials on channels like Comedy Central. In the 2000s, however, the internet began giving audiences access to performers like never before. Some of the top-grossing comedians now fill arenas and giant halls (in contrast with the more intimate Laugh Factory-type) of self-selected audiences as a result.

clxxiii *The Simpsons* has aired from 1989-present on Fox; Apu's first appearance in 1990 as an immigrant with shaky legal status was wildly successful. See Davé (2011) for more on this and on earlier Hollywood appearances and representations of South Asians. While Apu was a bit of a game changer, for reasons I will describe a little later, early accent humor in Hollywood was a way of comprehending South Asians as foreigners, where consistent repetition of the accent was a way of concretizing otherness and warding off any desire for them.

clxxiv This trend has been spoken of as a post-Yellow Peril, World War II period, where Asian Americans are no longer the "enemy" but increasingly represented as the model minority within mainstream cultural narratives, including film and television. While hostility to East Asians constituted the Yellow Peril, post-1965 Asian immigrants, from the East and the South of the continent, came under the newly defined immigrant hierarchy as model minorities. See Wu, Ellen D. *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013

clxxv This meaning of the accent takes hold among audiences, Davé's argument implies, who imagine English belongs to Anglo-American nations only and not former British colonies.

clxxvi "I'm tired of the two-dimensional way that Indians are portrayed. Do people know that South Asians are among the best-educated and highest earners in this country?" says one of the interviewees, an Indian-born actor, in a clear fit of indignation that middle-class behavior has not protected South Asians from American racism. See Dasvani, Kavita. "South Asian Actors Find Little Support, Lots of Stereotypes." Los Angeles Times. 2001.

clxxvii In 1998, Mandvi began performing a one-man show he wrote, *Sakina's Restaurant*, that won him critical acclaim and recognition.

clxxviii See http://hub.contactmusic.com/kal-penn/penn

clxxix Peters writes in his 2011 memoir: "I was always asked to play characters with an 'Indian accent,' and I kept turning those roles down—much to my agents' annoyance. As one of my agents, who's actually an Indian guy, told me, 'Look everybody has to do these roles at some point.' Not me. I may have fun with the accent in my act, but I didn't want to play an ongoing stereotype in these TV shows and movies I was auditioning for. When I would read the script, I'd never see any reason for the characters to have an accent. It just didn't make sense." (171).

clxxx Deery Stephen, Vandana Nath, and Janet Walsh (2013).

[clxxxi] See, for example, Pal, Amitabh. "Indian by Day, American by Night." *The Progressive*. The Progressive, Inc, 15 July 2004. Web. 22 Feb. 2015. <http://www.progressive.org/news/2004/07/6085/indian-day-american-night>

[clxxxii] Meera Syal. Interview by Laura Barnett. *The Guardian*. 5 May 2014. Web. <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/may/05/how-we-made-goodness-gracious-me-meera-syal-sanjeev-bhaskar.>

[clxxxiii] See Huggan (2001), Patridge (2007), Mannur (2010),

[clxxxiv] See "How Kaavya Viswanathan Plagiarized, Got Published, and Got Caught." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52.35 (2006): A10.

[clxxxv] See Randall (2001), MacFarlane (2007), McGill (2012) for discussions of literary authors and the contemporary framing of plagiarism.