MISS INDIA USA 2001: FLEXIBLE PRACTICES, CREATIVE

CONSUMPTION, AND TRANSNATIONALITY IN INDIAN AMERICA

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Abstract

In Miss India USA, an event that represents Indian ethnicity as imagined by the

mainstream Indian community, we can find a representation of the true dynamic

processes of self-definition that are occurring in Indian America. By looking for

evidence that the 'ideal' of Miss India USA is a construction based on the interests of

what turns out to be only one voice among many in the community, we can start to look

for evidence of other voices in the pageant. These are revealed in the ways that

contestants fail to meet the ideal of 'Miss India USA' and instead perform other versions

of Indian identity on stage. This thesis argues that discussions of the transnational Indian

community as a diaspora homogenize it in a way that hides alternate forms of Indian

identity that themselves share transnational affiliations besides those of the mainstream

community highlighted by the notion of 'diaspora.' Miss India USA reveals that

individuals in diaspora utilize transnational affiliations to create a multiplicity of

identities that can only be understood in the context of both these particular affiliations

and the locality of the individual. New enunciations of race and ethnicity in the context

of America are found in Miss India USA, as are practices of flexible citizenship by

contestants who wish to use their cultural capital of 'Indian-ness' to access transnational

career opportunities. This thesis argues that by recognizing diaspora as constituted by

multiple practices of creativity and flexibility with both ideological and material capital,

the nature of events like Miss India USA 2001 as sites of multiple Indian identities and

the transnational ties that constitute them can be acknowledged as part of a diaspora.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Miss India USA pageant is an event that invokes two nations in its otherwise standard pageant title. 'India' and 'America' are used to name this event in a way that presents it as the face of America's Indian diaspora community, while implying that the pageant is a combination of two otherwise distinct and individually pure entities. The title "Miss India USA" foregrounds India, the "USA" attached as the pageant's location, suggesting that there may be other Miss Indias in other places. Each year this pageant is held in the vicinity of one of the nation's large Indian communities; for example, past events have taken place in New York City, Edison, New Jersey, Miami, and San Jose, California.

As venues of popular culture, beauty pageants like Miss India USA are not an area of traditional academic interest, even in anthropology, where cultural performances are a favored site of ethnographic research. However, because a pageant stages a community, it puts that community's ideals on display. Ethnic beauty pageants in particular provide a rich source for cultural anthropology, as they add material to current discussions of how to approach ethnicity and nationalisms outside the limits of the nation-state model. All of this makes beauty pageants a particularly productive point from which to enter into discussion of the politics of community identity, as well as transnational identities, and how these are represented on a public stage. In addition to producing an ideal, as performances, pageants like Miss India USA reveal spontaneous and often unconscious contestations to the imagined community ideal. These self-

conscious and unselfconscious contestations, together with what can be identified as absent from the stage, help to reveal the ideals behind the production of a pageant. Miss India USA, as an event produced by diasporic Indians in dialogue with transnational Indian cultures, must be examined in the context of its connections and affiliations both within and outside of the physical diaspora community. For all of these reasons, Miss India USA provides a touchstone not only for discussion of local politics in the Indian American diaspora, but also for examination of the complications of transnational affiliations and counter-narratives of identity within the transnational community as they relate to the community producing Miss India USA.

I expected the Miss India USA pageant to represent the mainstream[1] Indian community, that which adheres to the model minority image, and fuels the complaints of its children to each other in college about being pressured into careers as doctors, lawyers, and engineers. The pageant's publicity describes it as a "family event" oriented towards a "conservative" and "traditional" Indian culture.[2] I did find many elements of the public cultural events favored by the Indian American mainstream in the pageant, including Indian nationalistic sentiments, an emphasis on American middle-class ideals, a notion of community purity that relied on the strict definition of Indian femininity, and a discourse of Indian-ness that more or less complied with the 'domesticated difference' demanded by American multiculturalism.

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[1] I use 'mainstream' throughout this thesis to denote a particular interest group within the Indian American community, primarily first generation, middle- to upper middle-class, high caste immigrants who embrace their status as a 'model minority.'

[2] See *www.worldwidepageants.com* [Website] (Pathik Patel, April 2002 [cited 2001-2002]); available from http://www.worldwidepageants.com/.

However, the pageant's stage also revealed a visual and discursive association between the pageant and the vibrant New York area South Asian youth culture. The discursive links between the pageant and this subculture highlighted generational differences within cultural practices found in the pageant. Another unexpected element of the pageant was its clear portrayal of Miss India USA, and the three levels (including state and international) of 'Miss India' pageants, as being a part of the relationship between beauty pageants and the Indian entertainment industry in India. The implication was that just as the film industry has reached out into the diaspora to become a fundamental part of diaspora life, so the pageant has assumed a spot in a now transnational Indian entertainment industry. Contestants expressed an interest in the pageant as a venue though which to gain access to entertainment careers in both India and America. Here was an opportunity for which they had the perfect social and cultural capital, a chance to win a pageant title which was the closest thing to a ticket into film in India, as well as an addition to résumés for those who aspired to American film and television. Desi youth culture, a pan-South Asian subculture associated with the music, dance and fashion of the South Asian club scene in New York, was present in the choice of Hindi film music remixed with dance beats for the background for most of the talent segment's dance numbers. The Indo-chic style of clothing that contestants wore during rehearsals, the way that interviewees discussed separate Indian community events and desi club events, and the way that audience members described the pageant in the context of New York's South Asian party scene tied the pageant to the New York desi youth culture that exists in communication with similar cultures in other diaspora cities. Indian American second generation youth culture has its own imagination of 'India.' This India

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is defined through visual media, first generation nostalgia, racialized experience in America, and the inheritance of Orientalist and American multicultural notions of Indian ethnicity. Through practices of identity which utilize a flexible notion of ethnic identity and citizenship, and through the creativity of their consumption and production of materials which link them both to India and to other diaspora communities, the second generation ties itself to an 'India' that continues to change, yet remains a source of identification in the way it is utilized in expressive culture.

Indian Americans who are excluded from the pageant, or are not interested or even disapprove of it, do not show up in the pageant ethnography. Possible reasons for disinterest or even contempt towards the pageant can be looked at by examining who is not in attendance nor on stage. Contestants tend to be primarily Hindu; Muslim and Christian candidates compose only a small percentage of those on stage. This is at least partially reflective of the smaller percentage of Muslim and Christian Indians in America, but is primarily due to the mainstream community's identification with being Hindu. As the audience is comprised primarily of the family and friends of the contestants, the audience's composition reflects that of the contestants. Participants also tend to be upper-caste, as is partially visible in the names of the contestants. Everyone who registers must pay her own entry fees (between three and four hundred dollars), support the costs of both Indian formal wear and an evening gown, and pay for transportation to the pageant. Those who participate must also therefore have a certain amount of disposable wealth, indicating that working-class immigrants, particularly those most recently immigrated, are less likely to be on stage or in attendance. The predominance of middle- and upper middle-class Indian Americans is also determined by the tendency of

this group to focus community activity around large 'pan-Indian' events like Miss India

USA. The absence of other groups mentioned further enhances the pageant's effect of

representing a relatively homogenous and unified community.

The character of the Indian diaspora in America continues to change, as the

population shifts from primarily post-1965 immigrants and their offspring, to a mix of

these groups with Indians immigrating from other post-colonial nations besides India and

new immigrants from India itself. Clearly one cannot speak of a singular Indian-

American community, just as one cannot speak of a singular India or America. At the

same time, the affluence and political prominence of the Indian bourgeoisie in America

continue to dominate the representation of Indian identity in America. This Indian

middle class ethos can be linked to a growing transnational Indian middle class,

connected through patterns of lifestyle and mobility between their residence and other

diaspora sites including India.

The processes of cultural, racial, and gender formation on the stage of Miss India

USA, and the multiple ways that these processes depend on translocal[3] practices both

within America and throughout the transnational Indian community, cannot be explained

in the context of current discussions of diaspora and transnational culture. At work in

this staged community are processes of American race politics that are divided within the

community by generation and period of immigration. Though post-1965 Indian

immigrants remained a fairly homogenous group in terms of regional and class

background, neither their children nor later immigrants retained that relative

homogeneity. American immigration legislation has lead to a complex class divide

between earlier (1960s-70s) and later (1980s onward) immigrants from India. The children of post-1965 immigrants cannot inherit their parents' general disregard for race politics, as it is part of their daily struggles. The same complications are true of the cultural identity of these diverse sub-populations within the Indian American population. The increasing circulation of goods associated with transnational capital has changed the ways that second generation Indian Americans consume and construct their identities. This is happening in conjunction with the immigration of youth from South Asia who also have very different notions of what it means to be Indian, notions that do not coincide with those of earlier immigrants.

The intent of this thesis is to trace the lines of complication that prevent one from speaking of Miss India USA as representing the Indian diaspora in America, and to show how it is instead one representation of Indian America, a representation that is full of glimpses into the complex reality of Indian America. At the same time, this project acknowledges that there must be a non-homogenizing way to speak of not only an Indian American community, but of a transnational Indian community, for reasons of history and material reality. By looking at the Indian diaspora as a set of interactions between local histories that are at the same time linked to a transnational Indian community through their members' participation in overlapping material and ideological processes, we can examine the diversity within this population even while respecting a shared history between these communities that legitimates the use of the term 'diaspora.'

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[3] I use this term to refer to the interfaces between individual groups both inside and between nations, groups differentiated by class, gender, immigrant generation, race, and citizenship.

Miss India USA and Diaspora Membership

The Miss India USA pageant reveals much about what it means to be a part of a diaspora in the U.S. at this moment in history. First, while it is clear that America's Indian communities share a dominant self-representation that can be explained by the history of South Asian immigration, discussions of diaspora in general fail to account for the politics of representation in diaspora communities and therefore also the ways of belonging to a diaspora that are obscured by these politics. Looking at the development of a mainstream Indian representation of Indian-ness in the context of the history of Asian immigration to America and historical constructions of race and ethnicity reveals that focusing on shared culture, shared origins, and shared identity in diaspora obscures the politics behind such mainstream representations of a community, and makes invisible non-mainstream ways of being a member of diaspora. It also allows us to look into the ways that South Asians self-consciously identify themselves apart from the mainstream, and to include such practices of identification in discussions of diaspora.

Secondly, definitions of diaspora identity as the shared embracing of difference, the delineation of borders or definition against them, or the shared longing for a lost 'home'[4] not only homogenize what is understood as 'South Asian American', 'Indian American', etc., but project it as naturally fixed and unchanging. My attendance at the Miss India USA pageant made it clear that there exist growing forms of South Asian American culture that can be traced to a mainstream Indian representation of Indian identity, yet are unique in their political salience as they are engaged with issues of race, gender, and class that are both historically and generationally specific. These forms of

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[4] Appadurai, 1996; Safran, 1991 Rouse, 1991, Clifford, 1997: 250.

culture are characterized by creative practices of production and consumption, including both physical and ideological materials. Such practices demonstrate the creativity of these growing forms of culture, at the same time as they tie emerging forms into diaspora through the circulation of materials.

Finally, an important aspect of membership in a diaspora community, and one that is overlooked in discussions of multiculturalism as well as diaspora, is the importance of flexible practices of identification, that is, the mobilization of multiple identifications, by diaspora members. For example, in my observations and conversations with people involved in the pageant, it was clear that familiarity with Bollywood film was a major, if not the most significant marker of membership in the Indian community. Almost 90% of the talent acts were dance and lip-sync numbers taken from Hindi film. The celebrity guests were film and entertainment personalities, and the pageant boasted of the success of its contestants in these industries. The young women competing to be Miss India USA made it clear to me that this was a venue where their Indian-ness could be mobilized to advance their own careers. A number of interviewees stated that they wouldn't participate in a 'regular' (non-Indian) America pageant, and quite a few were in this pageant as a means of breaking into the American and/or Indian film industry. Some young women who were not generally involved in the Indian community still entered the pageant, as they felt that in the context of an Indian pageant they had the necessary social and cultural capital[5] they wouldn't otherwise have in another entertainment venue. Looking at the role of film in this pageant, and the way that these young women imagined their Indian-ness as something that could be invoked as a kind of flexible

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capital, as something that could be mobilized in a transnational context, suggests that perhaps this is an overlooked, yet fundamental aspect of their diaspora membership. Through such flexible practices, members could simultaneously participate, in both the imagination and in physical reality, in contexts of the New York South Asian youth scene, the Indian mainstream's cultural production of the pageant, a transnational middle-class culture, and an emergent transnational entertainment industry. The way that contestants and other participants imagined their own relationship to this 'glamour world' through the pageant involved a specific mobilization of their Indian identity. Looking at other sites of South Asian youth culture, such as clubs, music, second-generation film, and fashion, it is clear that flexibility in how, when, and where one invokes symbols of ethnic identity is one of the identifying characteristics of diaspora membership, and one might say, a privilege of membership.

The chapters of this thesis examine these elements of contemporary membership in the Indian diaspora community: the politics behind representation, the need for a heterogeneous description of the diaspora, and the flexible practices of members. Taken together, they reveal that the Indian diaspora has and continues to consist of interfaces between many different localities that are tied together through their uses of diaspora material in the context of their lived histories. Examples include: post-1965 immigrants who created their communities in reference to the building of a modern Indian nation as well as racist hostility in America; queer South Asians who negotiate their cultural identity in relation to mainstream Indian American culture, Asian American queer culture, and mainstream American queer culture; activist South Asians who oppose

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[5] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University

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homogenizing and fundamentalist tendencies in the mainstream that are tied to far-right

politics in India; and second generation youth in Indian America who have been

influenced by the UK's vibrant and politicized South Asian youth culture, their parents'

cultures, and experiences of growing up in America, all of which effect their enunciation

of new South Asian American identities. The materials, both physical and ideological,

that these diverse individuals use to create themselves and their cultures are drawn from

sources that overlap with those used by others in the population, despite the divergence of

their local histories. In this way, that is, through overlapping sources of the raw materials

drawn upon in creative identity building, and through the circulation and consumption of

the products of this creativity, individuals are drawn into something we can call a

diaspora.

Arjun Appadurai, in his examination of diaspora as a modern transnational

phenomena, identifies diaspora as one manifestation of 'imagination as a social practice,'

an idea he derives from Anderson's conceptualization of imagined communities.

Appadurai is able to show how imagination can be deterritorialized, allowing the

imagined community to escape the bounds of the nation. This deterritorialization in turn

gives a new role to media, capital, technology, culture, and ideology, respectively:

mediascapes, financescapes, technoscapes, ethnoscapes, and ideoscapes. These

deterritorialized landscapes, though moving in a transnational field, manifest themselves

in 'locally specific' ways. However, looking at the way that cultural forms not only

move between communities, but particularly how they are consumed and reformatted, it

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Press, 1977).

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becomes clear that though useful to a point, the idea of deterritorialization as the main

characteristic of diaspora's imaginative social practices is limiting. Appadurai says,

> "....deterritorialization creates new markets for film companies, art
> impresarios, and travel agencies, which thrive on the need of the
> deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland. Naturally, these
> invented homelands, which constitute the mediascapes of deterritorialized
> groups, can often become sufficiently fantastic and one-sided that they
> provide the material for new ideoscapes in which ethnic conflicts can
> begin to erupt."[6]

By identifying the potential for media to provide the material for new ideologies that are

not based on geographic territories, Appadurai opens up the space to talk about the way

that the Indian mainstream in America produces an Indianess that, in its essentialization

and nostalgia for an imagined India, lends itself to fundamentalism. In this way we can

talk about how the practices of Indians in America have lead to the growth of the

religious right in India itself, or how gendered expectations of youth, particularly young

women, in the Indian American community are much more rigid and stringent than for

their counterparts in India. Appadurai's perspective assumes that an 'imagined

homeland' is one of the primary connections within a 'deterritorialized group.' However,

looking at the ways that 'India' and 'Indian culture' manifest themselves at the Miss

India USA pageant, and in the multiple South Asian communities in the US, it would be

hard to argue for one shared imagination of 'India' as 'home.' It is clear that Appadurai's

move towards theorizing the potential of mediascapes as material for powerful ideologies

of 'home' to develop through imaginative practices in diaspora is crucial. However, he

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[6] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large : Cultural Dimensions of Globalization, Public Worlds ; V. 1*
(Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 39.

doesn't go far enough to make room for the self-conscious use of materials hidden in the

somewhat passive term 'scapes'[7] to create new places of belonging. As Aihwa Ong says,

> "when an approach to cultural globalization speaks merely to sketch out universalizing trends rather than deal with actually existing structures of power and situated cultural processes, the analysis cries out for a sense of political economy and situated ethnography. What are the mechanisms of power that enable the mobility, as well as the localization and disciplining, of diverse populations within these transnationalized systems."[8]

The self-conscious use of shared materials—symbols, media, traditions—materials that a

person may access through diaspora membership, to the advantage of the individual or

individual group is what I see as one of the most important qualities of diaspora

membership.

In *Flexible Citizenship* Aihwa Ong focuses on the way that Hong Kong Chinese

not only imagine their citizenship as multiple, but materially access flexible citizenship

through such practices as the carrying of multiple passports. She argues:

> "in the era of globalization, individuals as well as governments develop a flexible notion of citizenship and sovereignty as strategies to accumulate capital and power. 'Flexible citizenship' refers to the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions. In their quest to accumulate capital and social prestige in the global arena, subjects emphasize, and are regulated by, practices favoring flexibility, mobility, and repositioning in relation to markets, governments and cultural regimes. These logics and practices are produced within particular structures of meaning about family, gender, nationality, class mobility, and social power."[9]

It is a similar flexibility that diaspora Indians in America demonstrate as they mobilize

different signs of identity on a situational basis to their advantage. This application of

flexibility can explain a number of apparent conundrums, such as the protests in India

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[7] Appadurai uses the suffix 'scape' to talk about shared culture in a deterrorialized setting.

[8] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship : The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 6.

against the 1996 Miss World pageant in Bangalore and the popularity of pageants in diaspora; or the community that lobbies for freedom of religion in America but supports Hindu fundamentalism in India. It can also help explain the ways that South Asian youth have negotiated trends of Indo-chic in American and European fashion, the cultural demands of their first-generation parents, and opportunities accessible through the mobilization of a highly specific version of Indian ethnicity such as that granted by Miss India USA, emerging with ethnic identities that are historically situated networks of affiliation not described by dominant models of ethnicity.

Methods

My background knowledge of Miss India USA is based on correspondence with its main organizer beginning half a year before the event, archival research in both English- and Hindi-language periodicals, monitoring the website of the Miss India triad (state, national, and international pageants) and its links for sixth months preceding and following the pageant, particularly the website's message board, and interviews with organizers, audience members, and participants of the pageant. In total I conducted and tape-recorded interviews with twenty people, including one former Miss India America/Worldwide, six current contestants, three former contestants, the main organizer and current chairperson, and nine volunteers and members of the audience. My web-based research focused on the websites for Miss India USA, Miss India Worldwide, and Miss India New York[10], but also included websites featuring the desi party scene[11] and

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[9] Ibid.

[10] All three are linked through *www.worldwidepageants.com.*

[11] *www.desiclub.com* (Desiclub.com, [cited 2001]), *Www.Desithrill.com* (Desithrill.com, [cited 2001]).

online community resources[12], a number which were linked to pageant sites. Formal statements by the main organizers found on these sites revealed the primary discourses surrounding the pageant. The Miss India USA site also features a message board that supported my background research, particularly the board's discussion of whether or not to postpone the pageant in the wake of the attacks of September 11th, 2001 in New York City. This message board also gave me insight into the kinds of people who were involved in the pageant, as well as the different ways people viewed Miss India USA. For example, some described the importance of the pageant's role in promoting 'tradition,' while others discussed it as one competitive pageant event among a number of others.

I attended Miss India USA as an invited guest of the main organizer, Mr. Dharmatma Saran. He was pleased that I was interested in the pageant, particularly since he felt that I, being a graduate student, had much in common with the contestants, who were primarily students or just out of college in career-track jobs. For example, he pointed out the winner of the 2000 Miss Indian USA pageant, and later of Miss India Worldwide, who was a journalist for a prominent US news magazine, as someone I would particularly be able to relate to. This emphasis on the level of education and professionalism of the contestants occurred throughout the pageant; at the event itself and in the publicity surrounding the pageant.

Being identifiable as Indian myself through both my name and my physical appearance, I was granted an acceptance by the people I spoke to in the audience and among the organizers and participants in the pageant. Not having been raised in an

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[12] *www.sulekha.com* (Smart Information Worldwide, Inc., [cited 2001]).

Indian community, and having only one Indian parent, my personal identification with the context of the pageant was primarily as an outsider who had become versed in the practices of the community as an adult and as an academic.[13] My presence at the pageant was responded to by my interviewees as that of a member of the community, though I observed from the perspective of a culturally-fluent outsider. Though much of my knowledge of the community has been acquired through a self-conscious process of gaining cultural proficiency in my chosen 'field,' the ways that I invoked this knowledge in my interactions at Miss India USA, for example, conversing about Indian popular culture, the tendencies of immigrant parents, or the behavior of other Indian youth, was unquestioned as part of my assumed community membership by those I spoke with. When participants found out that I was writing about the pageant for scholarly research, one common response was a startled, "but aren't you Indian?" The event was clearly staged for the community by the community, as most of the people involved in the pageant were somehow connected to the organizer and had some kind of history with the pageant or those involved.

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[13] Lila Abu-Lughod has identified the position of the 'halfie' ethnographer as being particularly valuable, arguing that it gives the ethnographer access to both a 'native' and 'anthropological' perspective. I feel that her entended argument relates to my position in a highly limited way, given the range of experience found among people she refers to as 'halfie.' Natasha Sharma has also identified the unique position of biracial anthropologists in the field, focusing more on the double difficulty of having to *defend* one's position as an insider to people in the field while simultaneously having to defend one's ability to be objective to colleagues. See:

Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, 1986).

Abu-Lughod, "Writing against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991).

Natasha Sharma, "The-Outside-Looking-in-Indian" (paper presented at the 100th Annual Conference, American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C., November, 2001 2001).

Kirin Narayan, "How Native Is a "Native" Anthropologist?," in *Situated Lives: Gender and Culture in Everyday Life*, ed. Patricia Zavella (New York: Routledge, 1997).

'Place' That is Both Transnational and Local

In a yet-to-be-published work "Democracy, Discipline, and the Politics of the Multitude" and in a lecture in April of 2002 at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Dipesh Chakrabarty speaks about Indian film's new imagination of 'limitless place." Chakrabarty uses 'limitless place' to refer to a shift that has occurred in the settings within Hindi films. He notes that Bollywood, India's popular film industry, has almost since its inception shot song-and-dance sequences in beautiful and exotic locales such as the Swiss Alps or London, but always as a part of a movement in the plot rationalized by the script. For example, a honeymoon might lead a couple to Switzerland, or a business trip might require them to be in London; therefore the song and dance number can be set in such a location. In recent films, not only are song and dance numbers shot in locales outside the possibility of the script, but there may be numerous such locales within one musical sequence. Chakrabarty traces this phenomenon to a new sense of place as 'limitless' in the Indian imagination that is at least in part symptomatic of the mobility that comes with globalization. Mobility, in this instance, does not mean that a person must necessarily have the economic resources to be mobile, but that in one's imagination of locality, s/he is not limited by physical residence. Place that is limitless allows for other apparent contradictions in meaning in the transnational Indian community, such as the fact that the Non-Resident Indian (NRI)[14] has become the ideal Indian citizen, and that children in the Indian middle class now grow up explicitly to leave.[15]

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[14] India's legal term for people of Indian origin, and a now-common symbol of success in India
[15] Chakrabarty mentioned this phenomenon in his talk entitle "Bilinguality and the Writing of History" at UH Manoa.

Limitlessness of place, as opposed to 'deterritorialization,' sets up a space for creativity and affiliations based on new ways of imagining one's locatedness. Deterritorialization opens up diaspora to be theorized as universalized and static. Unlike limitless place, deterritorialization leads to identification based only on opposition. Appadurai says,

> I propose, however, that we restrict the term *culture* as a marked term to the subset of these differences that has been mobilized to articulate the boundary of difference. . as a boundary maintenance question, culture then becomes a matter of group identity as constituted by some differences among others. [16]

The imagined place in Appadurai's conception is one that was lost, the homeland. 'Limitlessness of place,' on the other hand, allows for a full realization of 'imagination as a social practice," that is, a notion of flexible practices of identification; affiliations that are mobilized to the advantage of the person existing without or around such limitations.

Once it is recognized that imagination as a social practice describes ways of creating not only local identity and an original 'home,' but new identities and locations, we can see that these practices are multiple according to such variables as class, gender, race, locality, etc. It then becomes clear that diaspora indicates not only access to common source materials for such social practices of imagination, but that a person with access can pick and choose on a contextual basis. It is such a social practice of imagination that I refer to by borrowing and expanding Aihwa Ong's use of 'flexible" in "flexible citizenship."

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[16] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large : Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 13.

In his article *Diasporas*, James Clifford suggests that rather than locating its essential features, we can focus on diaspora's borders, on what it defines itself against."[17] He says, "Diasporas are caught up with and defined against (1) the norms of nation-states and (2) indigenous, and especially autochthonous, claims by "tribal" peoples."[18] In other words, "The process [of producing diaspora consciousness] may not be as much about being African or Chinese as about being American or British or wherever one has settled, differently."[19] This approach to diasporic imagination, where the place of settlement is most prominent, is useful for determining the politics behind the mainstream community's representation of itself. However, it does not reveal how diaspora is about old *and* new affiliations, both local and extra-local, and flexible practices that mobilize certain notions of identity to the individual's advantage. It is true that "the term "diaspora" is a signifier not simply of nationality and movement but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement."[20] At the same time, we must realize that this is a continuous process, and it is often multiple within what is thought of as a single diaspora community. Members are often defining themselves not only against what is not 'local,' but also against trends within the diaspora community itself. It is these old and constantly new affiliations, along lines of common signs, common consumption, and common culture based on gender and class in addition to race or ethnicity, which criss-cross ethnic groups within nations and extend

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[17] James Clifford, *Routes : Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 250.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 257
[20] Ibid., 252

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outside of them, that reveal the specific ways that a community is imagined at a given point of time.

Notions of hybridity and creole have also been used to describe cultures which exist because of historical interactions between delineated cultures, such as 'Indian' and 'American.' At first glance, the idea of hybridity, that is, of the creation of something through the meeting of two previously separate entities, seems to recognize a 'third-space'[21] which does not belong to one or another side of those elements which are hybridized. However, it is clear that the notion is limiting in the discussion of cultural forms, emergent or otherwise. By erasing alternate histories overshadowed by hierarchies of power, such as what Walter Mignolo calls "colonial difference,"[22] discussions of hybrid cultural forms fall into the trap of binaries that characterizes most discussions of diaspora. Using the development of music in the South Asian diaspora and its consumption and co-optation by non-Asian audiences and artists as an example, John Hutnik takes a highly critical look at not only the short-comings and limitations of the notion of hybridity, but the outright damage it is causing in its adopted as the latest darling of transnational capitalism. He argues that "...hybridity-talk drags theorists into authenticity denials and the binary logic of difference, which leaves them unable to posit a politics that does more than acknowledge complexity."[23] In the recent upsurgence of American consumption of 'Indo-chic' as evidenced by the recent success of the films *Moulin Rouge* and *Monsoon Wedding*, and the resulting revival of bindis, *mehendi*

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[21] See Homi Bhabha, "Interview with Homi Bhabha: The Third Space," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference.*, ed. Jonathon Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990).

[22] Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs : Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

(henna), and designer clothing cut from Indian cloth, we see material evidence of the ongoing problem of 'hybridity-talk." Hutnik argues that hybridity is really just another form of multiculturalism's domestication of difference, and hybrid cultural forms embody the fetishization, and therefore de-politicization, of signs of ethnicity for market-related consumption.

The notion of creole as invoked by Walter Mignolo is one way to approach the discussion of difference that respects diversity in its disruption of the false purity of binaries. The implication of the term creole is that it denotes something newly created *out of the meeting of multiple entities, rather than something purely derivative.* Unlike models such as Appadurai's context-dependent 'constellations' of transnational flows, which do not leave room for the self-conscious creation of culture in deterritorialized settings, 'creole' evokes creativity immediately. Members of South Asian diaspora, particularly in its youth culture, rather than embracing an ethnically-defined 'Indianess,' or a hyphenated identity based on clear lines of ethnic difference ('American,' 'Indian'), are creating cultural forms that do not follow binary definitions of ethnicity or cultural inheritance. Mignolo uses the idea of creole to undermine the erasure of alternate local histories in the colonial project. In the impure space of creole he finds histories that are locally specific, and which give agency to their subjects. Creole people, histories and cultures recognize the historical reality of colonialism, but from outside of the colonial gaze. I would like to suggest that the cultural forms, self-representations, identifications, and even the India(s) being created/imagined by some Indians and other South Asians as

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[23] John Hutnik, "Hybridity Saves: Authenticity and/or the Critique of Appropriation," *Amerasia Journal* 25, no. 3 (1999/2000): 42.

a cultural 'home,' often in response to the unsuitability of the often hegemonic and essentialized 'homes' available, are, by Mignolo's terms, creole in nature.

The Miss India USA pageant, an event that represents Indian ethnicity as imagined by the mainstream Indian community, reveals how South Asian Americans are constantly re-defining their ethnicity in the context of a multi-classed community that includes immigrant youth as well as youth from a number of South Asian countries. Identifying the 'ideal' of Miss India USA as representing only one part of what is in truth a diverse community allows us to look for evidence of other voices in the pageant. These voices are found in the ways contestants introduce creativity into their performances, whether intentionally or not, by failing to perform the ideal and instead performing themselves. New enunciations of ethnicity, or alternate Indian-nesses, also appear in the ways that contestants speak about and imagine the pageant as part of different locales from the one projected by the title "Miss India USA."

The following chapters of this thesis use the Miss India USA pageant as a touchstone for discussing the complications of locality that prevent us from referring to a singular Indian diaspora. Chapter two examines the historical processes that have determined both American popular conceptions of Indians in terms of race and ethnicity, as well as the community's own representations of its identity. Drawing upon the work of Lisa Lowe and Howard Omi and Michael Winant, I trace the relationship between the imagination of America and American citizenship as represented by immigration policy to American 'common sense' perceptions of the race and ethnicity of South Asian Americans. Using evidence from the historical processes evident in immigration law, the 1996 Campaign Finance Scandal, and the resulting racial profiling after the events of

September 11th, 2001, this chapter turns to examine current processes at work in both

mainstream America and within the Indian community with regard to enunciations of

race and ethnicity. Chapter three of this thesis describes the way that a beauty pageant, in

its public staging of a community, reveals the politics of representation in a community,

and the negotiation of changing definitions of the defining elements of identity such as

race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Here the 2001 Miss India Pageant is described and

located in a way that raises issues for discussion in the following chapters.

In both the politics of US multiculturalism and in the continued attempts to

homogenize Indian identity in India, currently by the Hindu-right dominated government

in India, the enforcing of ideas of the purity of identity are central. James Clifford has

observed that the anxiety produced in response to modernity and globalizing forces tends

to embrace notions of purity as a way of protecting local integrity. Clifford characterizes

this fear of being overwhelmed by modernity, or globalization, with reference to a phrase

from poet William Carlos Williams: "Pure products gone crazy."[24] Whether it be the

pure products defined by America, the pure products that support Indian nation-building,

or the pure products of the mainstream Indian community in America, Clifford makes it

clear that the future of cultural forms is not dictated by the gradual extermination of

endangered ethnicities, pure products gone crazy. History reveals that all such purities

are the result of mixing, and are therefore of impure origin themselves. Clifford

recognizes the potential for localities, freed from the fate of being endangered purities, to

find individual paths through modernity. Tracing some of these individual paths is part

of the work of chapters four and five.

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[24] James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture : Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art

Chapter four looks at the presence of the discourse of Indian femininity in the Miss India USA pageant, where an Indian identity based on 'traditional' values upheld by women is defined through a binary opposition to the West and its values. I argue that an imagination of the pageant as a transnational venue by both contestants and audience members allows for a disruption of the binaries determining 'the Indian Woman' as a pure category. Referencing feminist theories on the normative location and subversive dislocation of women, I discuss contestants' mobilization of social and cultural capital in a way that promotes their individual interests. I argue that acknowledging this transnational imaginary opens up a space to discuss women who want to retain their cultural background, yet remain free of the assignments of being a static or unchanging 'home' for an essentialized Indian identity. In chapter five, I follow-up on counter-hegemonic trends in Miss India USA 2001 as revealed in the second chapter, and explain how these trends can be talked about in discussion of diaspora once it is recognized that a diaspora is not a singularity. This chapter provides an analysis of the production and consumption of cultural materials in Indian American community, arguing that such analysis is necessary in an inclusive discussion of diaspora practices. Through a review of issues explored in previous chapters, chapter six reiterates the need for an approach to diaspora that focuses on creative practices of production and consumption of diaspora materials, both physical and ideological, and the flexible practices of diaspora members as they utilize these materials.

(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 4.

Chapter 2

Who are Indians in America? Immigration, the Second Generation, and America's 'Common Sense' of Race

We raised our daughters in our own culture. It is important that the parents can be at home, so that they don't lose their children...I wanted them to speak my language, Malayalam, at home. They even write it. But they always watch Hindi movies. They can understand Hindi....All three of them dance Bharat Natyam, and we are involved in the Keralan community in [our home city]...We raised them to be Indian. Indian and American. (11/26/01, interview with father of contestant)

It has become an event which is boundless and this has become a reality due to the foresight and vision of dedicated men and women who came to the United States of America to start a new life and to carry out all that India has to and will continue to offer. (Farook Khan[1], Chairman Miss India South Africa Corp. speaking of the pageant series.)

The history of the immigration of South Asians to the United States reveals much about how and why people came here, as well as the way that America has imagined itself as a nation in relation to these immigrants. Looking at the history of this immigration also helps to explain current politics within Asian American communities, as well as their imaginations of race and ethnicity. A community's notions of its own race and ethnicity are plastic, and exist in relationship to the American public's imagination of race, inter-community politics, economic trends, international politics, and diaspora affiliations. At the same time, the definition of identity is not simply a matter of who one is, but also of power. One of the reasons that identity assumes such importance and is so hotly contested is that what one can claim and legitimate as an identity has very much to do with the material and political resources one can also lay claim to.

"Identities," as Hanna Papanek says, "also represent entitlements."[2] This chapter aims to look at South Asian identity with regard to its relationship to the American public's imagination of race and ethnicity, both 'South Asian' as well as 'Asian,' focusing on the way South Asian citizenship fluctuates in both popular imagination and U.S. domestic and foreign policy. It will also argue that inter-community politics, economic trends in Asia and America, international politics, and diaspora relations have all figured into current projects aimed at defining contemporary South Asian identity.

Lisa Lowe's work has shown that the institution of American citizenship itself relates to the racialized founding of the U.S. as a nation; "In the last century and a half, the American citizen has been defined over and against the Asian *immigrant*, legally, economically and culturally."[3] This relationship has lead to a cycle of othering alternating with acceptance on the condition that the immigrant's difference be somehow domesticated. Lowe says,

> "These definitions have cast Asian immigrants both as persons and as populations to be integrated into the national public sphere and as the contradictory, confusing, unintelligible elements to be marginalized and returned to their alien origins."[4]

This cycle of conditional inclusion and exclusion from the American nation can be seen in the history of South Asians in America, and continues to impact their identity as defined both by America and by themselves.

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[1] *www.worldwidepageants.com.*

[2] Hanna Papanek, "The Ideal Woman and the Ideal Society: Control and Autonomy in the Construction of Identity," in *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective*, ed. V. Moghadam (Boulder: Westview, 1994), 42.

[3] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), ix.

[4] Ibid.

David Palumbo-Liu, like Lowe, has also emphasized that the conceptions of 'difference' that underlie notions of race must be examined in the historical context which yields them. He points out that the American definition of 'Asians,' both as residents of Asia and as immigrants in America, has been used historically to define 'American' identity.[5] He also draws attention to the fact that Asians in America and in Asia have been held up at various points in history as examples, not only for other racial minorities to emulate but for whites to do so as well. The politics of representation within the Indian American community must be studied in tandem with an examination of its immigrant history, and with notions of race and ethnicity in America as they have changed through time. By looking particularly at the theories of Lisa Lowe, David Palumbo-Liu[6] and Howard Omi and Michael Winant, we see that in events like the Miss India USA pageant, we can find evidence of the relationship between the American public's imagination of race and the inter-community politics that are at work in the formation of Indian American race and ethnicity.

South Asians in America

The first South Asians to immigrate to the United States came from India's state of Punjab in the early twentieth century. These Punjabi immigrants arrived at the end of what was a series of waves of immigration from Asian countries beginning in the mid-1900s. The immigrants, primarily men, filled a need for agricultural and other forms of

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[5] See Lowe, pg. 10 and Chapter 6.
[6] Palumbo-Liu consciously removes South Asia from his discussion of Asian/American, but his analysis of racial formations regarding Asian America remains useful in discussing South Asian Americans. (1999:6)

manual labor[7] on North America's West Coast from California to British Columbia. The

Punjabi immigrants were referred to generally as 'Hindoos,' though they included

Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims. At a time of growing anti-Asian public opinion, Punjabis

were seen as 'just' another group of Asian agricultural workers. As immigrants built up

wealth and began to try to buy their own farms, laws were drafted to bar 'aliens' from

owning land.[8] At the beginning of their period of immigration, a small number of

Punjabi immigrants were able to argue that on account of being Aryan, they should

qualify for citizenship under laws that allowed only white people to naturalize. However,

in the 1923 Supreme Court ruling against Bhagat Thind Singh, South Asians were barred

from citizenship on the grounds that while they may have been 'racially' Caucasian, they

were not 'white persons' in the popular meaning of the term, and therefore "aliens

ineligible for citizenship."[9] The alien land laws, in combination with California laws

against interracial marriage, severely limited the ability of Asian Americans to make a

living as farmers. A number of Punjabi-Mexican marriages did take place, as they were

not prohibited by law, and though a family-oriented community arose through these

marriages, an American-born woman lost any land owning privileges she would

otherwise have upon marrying an 'ineligible alien.'[10] The same was not true for

American-born *men*, but as immigrants were almost exclusively male, there was no

similar legislation for American-born men.

The immigration of Asians to America in the early twentieth century was halted

by a series of racist immigration laws including the exclusion acts of Chinese in 1882, of

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[7] Leonard, 38.

[8] Karen Isaksen Leonard, *The South Asian Americans* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), 41.

[9] Ibid., 48.

Asian Indian in 1917, of Korean and Japanese in 1924, and Philippine immigrants in

1934.[11] As Lowe notes, not only did these laws reflect the way that America imagined

itself as a nation against an Asian other, but it served to classify a group of immigrants

who would later be referred to together as 'Asian Americans.' This legislation regulating

immigration on the basis of race was combined with geographically-based legislation

against immigration from areas with unclear racial and ethnic status in 1917,[12] which

established a "barred zone" that prohibited immigration from India, Siam, Indochina,

Arabia, Siberia, Afghanistan and much of the Malay Archipelago. Through its focus on

geography, this legislation "also played a critical role in linking one's ethnicity to a

national identity."[13]

The growth of the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam war protests of the

1960s characterized a post-World War II American society that was more liberal,

particularly with regard to race. The growing Cold War also pushed the American

government to find technical labor outside of the country to increase our ability to

outpace Russia. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 abolished former

prohibitive immigration legislation, allowing for immigration to the U.S. regardless of

country of origin (though controls were still utilized), and also consequently expanded

the definition of "Asian American,"[14] an 'ethnic' category that continues to grow even

today.

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[10] Ibid., 52.
[11] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, 7.
[12] {Lowe, 1996 #75@180, note 14}
[13] Himanee Gupta, " American Places, Indian Spaces: Post-1965 Immigrants Negotiate Self and Community" (MA Thesis, University of Hawai'i, 2000), 40.Gupta cites Mae M. Ngai, "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924," *Journal of American History*, June 1999, 67-92.
[14] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, 7.

Post-1965 South Asian Immigration and Identity

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 allowed for the immigration of Asians with a high level of needed technical skills to fill a demand for such skills in the U.S.. Asian immigrants having such skills tended to come from privileged backgrounds. Himanee Gupta adds that, "because the laws changed at a time when India had the highest level of post-secondary education of any recently decolonized nation, the new group of immigrants, particularly those who migrated between the mid 1960s and the early 1970s, was unusually well educated.[15] Those newer Indian immigrants who knew about the previous Punjabi immigrants on the West Coast were not interested in their community, and set about establishing their own trajectories within what would soon become 'multicultural' America. They quickly established the material signs of middle-class status, settling in the suburbs and occupying for the most part professional positions.

Though Indian immigrants came to America with identities closely tied to region, language, and religion, the development of American multiculturalism in the 1980s homogenized these under the category 'Indian,' as multiculturalism defines ethnicity as linked to 'national' cultures. Despite the fact that it is based on an ideal of 'unity in diversity,' the policy of multiculturalism retains rigid notions of the possible ways to embody difference. In the Indian America community, retaining one's cultural identity has come to mean favoring Indian-ness over regional or religious identities. As Khachig

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[15] Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy, 1850-1990* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 101.

Tölölyan puts it; "the gaze of the hostland turns many different locally circumscribed identities into one."[16] Even though the multicultural imagination recognizes ethnicity over place of birth, ethnicity is conceptualized in reference to a nation. As Gupta states:

> ...regardless of whether Indians in the United States see themselves as Indians in a nationalist sense or in an ethnic/cultural sense, their identity as a community has come to be a "cultural one" linked to the "culture" of India. Culture – which literary studies theorist E. San Juan Jr. describes as a historically-constructed terrain upon which class, gender, race and ethnic categories intersect – then becomes profoundly territorialized to the point that one's defining of community as cultural in a diasporic locale becomes an almost automatic affiliation with the culture of a given nation-state.[17]

In the process of seeing ethnicity as defined by origin from a particular nation-state, multiculturalism erases the reality of immigrant affiliations as Muslims, Sikhs, Gujeratis, Punjabis, and so on, affiliations which continue to characterize daily lived culture in India. While such communities have group organizations in America, it is only as Indians, (and perhaps increasingly as Asian Americans) that they gain popular and political recognition. As an example, Verne Dusenberry[18] argues that Sikhs in America are even further marginalized than Indians in general as they are indistinguishable from the majority Hindu-Indian Americans. This erasure has tangible effects on the government's perceptions of the needs of 'Indian' Americans.

Another example of the danger of the erasure of diversity within Indian American is the resulting amplification of the efforts of India's political Hindu-right (*Hindutva*) in

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[16] Khachig Tölölyan, "Rethinking Diaspora(S): Stateless Power in Th Transnational Moment," *Diaspora; A Journal of Transnationalism* 5, no. 1 (1996): 13.

[17]Gupta, 18, citing E. San Juan Jr., *Racial Formations/Critical Transformations: Articulations of Power in Ethnic and Racial Studies in the United States* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanties Press, 1992), 62.

[18] Verne Dusenberry, "A Sikh Diaspora? Contested Identities and Constructed Realities," in *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora,* ed. Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

its homogenization of Indian identity in India. As the next section will explain, the

discursive creation of 'Indianess' by Hindu communalists in India in conversation with

Non-Resident Indians (NRI) in the West has worked to homogenize Indianess within the

transnational community.

Multiculturalism and Fundamentalism

Through their self-definition in the context of multiculturalism, 'Non-Resident

Indians' (NRIs)[19] in America are helping to create a single, elite, Hindu identity which is

represented as 'Indian' identity. This work discursively assists the Hindu-right in India

as they try to redefine India as a Hindu nation. Sandhya Shukla's reading of the 1991

'Cultural Festival of India' demonstrates the interplay between multiculturalism's Indian

America and Hindu fundamentalist work in India. A sizable production that took a year

to plan, the festival featured displays and exhibits on many aspects of 'Indian' culture. By

presenting displays on the Vedas and traditional arts alongside displays for NRI-affiliated

technology companies, both traditional and modern were negotiated and incorporated

into an Indian essence. In this way the festival fit Anthony Appiah's description of the

ways that the past and present mix in the articulation of nationalism. He says that they

"offer a return to traditions" while at the same time acknowledging the need to

incorporate functional aspects of the modern,[20] represented in the exhibit as the

technological age.

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[19] This term was coined by the Indian government, but is also now a self-identification by a number of
Indians in America.
[20] Appiah, 302 (find citation for bibliography)

The festival featured a huge walk-through exhibit on 'Indian' culture. Shukla

describes the path as one progressed further and further into the exhibit, saying that what

began as language of universalism (speaking of a 'borderless world',' and using new-age

terms such as 'healing' and 'mother earth' to describe it) became more and more focused

as the visitor kept walking. She says that the effect was subtle as the tone was

'objective,' but by the end of the exhibit Hinduism was being "emphasized in a way that

eclipsed differences and militated against any kind of politics based on interests other

than culture."[21] A revealing text is the stated motive of the exhibition: "to 'cull out the

cream' of all cultures."[22] Not only was culture hierarchical, but much of its "cream"

could be traced to a certain idealized Indian Hindu past. In the final part of the

exhibition, entitled "India—A Cultural Millionaire," was a section called "The Message

of India." Shukla describes it: "In one fell swoop, the festival resolve[d] the very

complicated and convoluted debates on the culture concept: culture was about values."[23]

In a gesture revealing the selective "othering" of the West, this very non-general

portrayal of 'culture' included the 'Indian' values of work, concentration, and

perseverance. As Shukla notes, "here, capitalist values *were* Indian."[24] As I see it, this

project also confirmed the notion of Indians as an 'ethnic' group rather than as a racial

group, and confirmed the model minority myth, a project that has been supported by the

middle and upper-middle class Indian community.

In multicultural America, the Indian diaspora essentializes a singular culture in

terms of values. Indian culture as 'values' is defined in relation to 'American culture' as

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[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 301.
[23] Ibid., 303.

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a set of values, where the differences are highlighted. In the past decade, a number of films focusing on the NRI (*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Pardes, Aa Ab Laut Chale*) have come out of India's popular film industry. This contradiction of Indian and Western values is the primary theme in these films, popular in India and with NRIs, where the good guys always reject the allure of the West on account of its unacceptable values. The discourse of Indian-ness, which follows transnational flows of media and culture, has absorbed the diaspora's enunciation of a homogenized identity, and this creates a feedback effect with India's own work to define a singular Indian-ness against Western-ness.

India has continued to work on creating a brand of Indian modernity that can be somehow separated from the West and colonialism. During the struggle for independence and ensuing nation-building projects,[25] this separation was accomplished through a discourse of Indian identity that focused on a binary of 'Indian' versus 'Western.' As we will see in chapter four, this discourse played itself out primarily on the bodies of women. Partha Chatterjee has identified this as the nation's "most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a 'modern' national culture which is, nevertheless, not Western."[26] In the discourse of Indianess, India's post-colonial project of defining a non-Western modernity joined together with diaspora Indian experience to establish a binary of Indian values versus Western values.

In the exhibitions of the "Cultural Festival of India,' we saw that certain elements of what most people think of as Western values were incorporated into Indianess

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[24] Ibid.

[25] See Partha Chatterjee for a comprehensive examination of this process

("capitalist values *were* Indian"). *Hindutva* Indian-ness has a similar relationship to Western-ness. Though *Hindutva* describes Western-ness as alien, a strictly anti-Western stance would not be of interest to those supporting *Hindutva*. As primarily high-caste, middle- or upper-class people with (often international) business interests, the leaders of *Hindutva* need to protect certain elements of modernity from *Hindutva*'s work of denouncing the West. One of *Hindutva*'s primary projects is re-writing Hindu "cultural originality"[27] into history, a common post-colonial project intended to 'reclaim' a national status that was disrupted by the colonizer.[28] The concern thus becomes creating a coherent Indian history that connects both pre- and post-colonial India (reverting to Hindu epics and myth as a source and relying on diasporic nostalgia for inertia), and re-narrating it to result in those aspect of modernity, primarily capitalist values, that benefit the elite producing the narrative.

The figure of the NRI in popular media works as a catalyst in the domestication of what is desirable from the West, while repudiating that against which Indian-ness is contrasted. Indians have lived outside of India for generations, however not until the early 1990s when the government of India introduced the "Non-Resident Indian" concept did anyone in India pay attention to these communities. At the same time as the NRI symbolizes the division between what is Indian and what is Western, the NRI necessarily incorporates Western-ness into his/her Indian-ness, because s/he lives and thrives (at least in India's popular imagination) there. As an entity that internalizes the struggle between Indian-ness and Western-ness, the NRI individual is the perfect image for articulating a

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[26] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments : Colonial and Postcolonial Histories, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).
[27] Lowe, 141 cites Franz Fanon

homogenous Indian identity that is both powerfully global, but indigenous in identity.

The NRI maintains an unthreatening modernity, one that does not endanger the status quo

in the maintenance of 'Indian values.'

After the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP), *Hindutva's* diaspora arm , solicited

donations from them as part of the December 6, 1992 attack on the Babri Masjid, NRIs

around the world have become increasingly involved in *Hindutva's* cause.[29] Recent

scholarship has begun to focus on 'diaspora nationalism' as a phenomenon in itself;[30] for

example, Dhooleka Sardhari Raj notes a trend within the diaspora towards converting the

'Indian' within the discourse of Indian-ness to 'Hindu.' "Indeed," she says, Hindus in

America "have collapsed the distinction between Indian and Hindu altogether."[31] She

claims that the Indian American community, through its experience of being a racial and

ethnic minority in America, "becomes the bedfellow of the Indian political right."[32]

Gupta feels that this participation of well-educated, middle-class immigrants from Third

World countries in electoral politics at home is understudied. She says, "While such

migrants might hold passports stamped with the seal of the USA, they exercise an

informal idea of "civic duty" elsewhere, as diasporic citizens."[33]

The relationship between representations of the Indian community in America and

identity politics in India is an important point not only in understanding Indian ethnicity

in America, but also the impact of transnational community politics on local identity in

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Through websites, temples, and community papers, the VHP asked for donations of bricks to build a new temple for the Hindu deity Ram in place of the Babri Masjid (Mosque). The site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya is claimed to be Ram's birthplace.

[30] The May 2000 (23:3) issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* is devoted to the topic, see also Vinay Lal

[31] Dhooleka Sarhari Raj, "Who the Hell Do You Think You Are? Promoting Religious Identity among Young Hindus in Britain," *Racial and Ethnic Studies* 23, no. 3 (2000): 149.

[32] Ibid.: 158.

diaspora. The presence of hegemonic forms within transnational communities, and their relationship to politics 'at home,' is overlooked in discussions of diaspora. This relationship is clearly essential to understanding current identity politics within the Indian American community. Once recognized, it can be discovered to be at work in many mainstream cultural events, such as the Cultural Festival of India and Miss India USA.

Racial Formation & South Asians in a Fluctuating 'Asian America'

South Asians are not always included in discussions of Asian America, and often consciously exclude themselves from that category. However, the relationship between South Asians and Asian America reflects both the history of South Asian immigration and political maneuvering within the South Asian community. Clearly the history of Asians in America is characterized by racist practices that reflect social relations within America as well as between America and other nations. In looking at the historical circumstance of Asian immigration, and as Lisa Lowe has shown, the laws regulating this immigration, the creation and constantly altering meaning of Asian America, including 'South Asian,' can be traced through particular historical moments. Omi and Winant derive an approach to looking at race that is based on its historicity:

> The effort must be made to understand race as an unstable and "decentered" complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle. With this in mind, let us propose a definition: *race is a concept which signifies social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.* Although the concept of race invokes biologically based human characteristics (so-called "phenotypes"), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process.[34]

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[33] Gupta, " American Places, Indian Spaces: Post-1965 Immigrants Negotiate Self and Community", 4.

[34] Howard and Michael Winant Omi, *Racial Formation in the U.S. From the 1960s to the 1980s* (1994), 55.

Even in looking just at Asian immigration to the United States in the 19th and early 20th century, it can be seen that race is not a matter only of ideology, but also of structural inequality. Omi and Winant point out that when looking at the historical construction of race, we should see it as an element of social structure rather than as an irregularity in that structure.[35]

We can constructively use Omi and Winant's delineation of the concept of "racial formation" to trace the historical processes that have defined notions of Asian race and citizenship in the last century, from immigration acts[36] through the 1996 Campaign Finance scandal and most recently the racial profiling associated with the September 11th attacks. Omi and Winant define racial formation as "The sociohistorical process by which racial categories are treated, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed."[37] They identify two steps in the process of analyzing racial formation. The first is identifying racial formation as "a process of historically situated projects in which human body and social structures are represented and organized." The second is to "link racial formation to the evolution of hegemony, the way in which society is organized and ruled."[38]

Looking again briefly at immigration legislation in the early twentieth century, we can use a racial formation perspective to see that race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation.[39] At the beginning of the 20th century, what began as protests against South Asian immigration in the Pacific Northwest turned into anti-'Hindoo' riots in 1907. Beginning with a fight between white and Punjabi lumberyard workers in

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Lowe, 22: argues that immigration law was a process of racial formation in Omi and Winant's terms.

[37] Omi, *Racial Formation in the U.S. From the 1960s to the 1980s*, 55.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

Bellingham, Washington, uprisings were triggered in a number of other towns in the area. Asian immigrants, perceived by local white labor as willing to work for lower wages than themselves, were seen as a threat. The reaction to this threat was expressed in racist form as anti-Asian protest. Immigrants who were officially called "East Indians" were derogatorily referred to as 'Hindoos' or 'ragheads.' Structural discrimination is evidenced through government documents; for example, Gupta found that during the first two decades of the 1900s, the California commission of labor statistics regarded "the Hindu" as "the most undesirable immigrant in the state" for reasons of "lack of personal cleanliness," "low morals" and "a blind adherence to theories and teachings...entirely repugnant to American principles."[40] As a result of such attitudes, California denied entry to 1,700 Indians between 1911 and 1917 on the grounds that they would need public assistance.[41] As Daniels notes, "one of the pillars on which the far-western labor movement was built was unrelenting hostility to Asian immigrants. That little of this violence was directed at Asian Indians is more a result of their relatively small numbers than anything else."[42] Other examples of the structural manifestations of these sentiments included two court rulings. In U.S. v. Takao Ozawa, the Supreme Court ruled in 1922 that a man of Japanese ancestry could not become a citizen because he was not white. The following year, the Supreme Court revoked the citizenship of a U.S. army officer of Indian ancestry by ruling in the U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind case that "white" was not a racial, anthropological or scientific definition, but a product of what "the common man" understood to be white. Because Asian Indians clearly did not look white,

[40] Gupta, " American Places, Indian Spaces: Post-1965 Immigrants Negotiate Self and Community", 44.
[41] Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy, 1850-1990*, 31.

they were not white and therefore were declared ineligible for citizenship. Omi and

Winant describe the ways that cultural or ideological racism and structural racism are

interrelated:

> The theory of racial formation suggests that society is suffused with racial projects, large and small, to which all are subjected. This racial "subjection" is quintessentially ideological. Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of her own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Thus we are inserted into a comprehensively racialized social structure. Race becomes "common sense"—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world. The vast web of racial projects mediates between the discursive or representational means in which race is identified and signified on the one hand, and the institutional and the organizational forms in which it is routinized and standardized on the other. These projects are the heart of the racial formation process. [43]

As a result of the Bhagat Thind Singh ruling cited earlier, a handful of Indians who had

received U.S. citizenship were stripped of that privilege. Federal authorities justified

their actions by saying that the court ruling had established that since Indians never had

been white, they had obtained citizenship papers by fraud. Changes in the nature of

society, based on the perceived threat to local white labor in California merged with a

'common sense' definition of the 'Hindoo race,' leading to changes in the structural

treatment of race as well.

Illustrating that racial categories constantly fluctuate, an incident similar to the

Pacific Northwest riots occurred as recently as 1987 in Jersey City, after the historical

inception of the 'model minority.' Over the course of a few days, two Indian physicians

were beaten, one dying as a result. A local newspaper soon began receiving letters to the

editor threatening more attacks on Indians. The antagonists referred to themselves as 'the

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[42] Roger Daniels, *History of Indian Immigration to the United States: An Interpretive Essay* (New York: Asia Society, 1989), 14-17.

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Dotbusters' in reference to the cosmetic dot that some Indian women wear on their foreheads. [44] The nature of the letters and the identity of the victims suggested that Asian American economic success was once again the instigation for violence against them. There are many such incidents of hate crime against South Asians, all of which can be neatly traced to processes determining the concurrent understanding of race.[45]

Another more recent example of racial formation, one which demonstrates that America's relationship with Asian America is always one of unstable acceptance, can be found in the 1996 Campaign Finance Scandal. During Clinton's campaign for re-election, two Asian American donors/fundraisers working for the Democratic National Committee (DNC) became the center of what developed into a racialized political scandal. The primary focus of media attention was John Huang, a former executive of the Indonesian Lippo Group, who was recruited to raise money from Asian-American communities. Despite the fact that Huang was personally responsible for raising only about $3.5 million out of a total of $2.2 billion raised and spent in the 1996 federal elections, he and other Asian American fundraisers received at least 90 percent of campaign's media coverage.[46] Since Asian-American communities didn't have the kind of capital nor the tradition of political giving on the scale desired by the DNC,[47] Huang solicited donations from transnational sources in Indonesia, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, and other Asian nations.

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[43] Omi, *Racial Formation in the U.S. From the 1960s to the 1980s*, 55.

[44] Gupta, " American Places, Indian Spaces: Post-1965 Immigrants Negotiate Self and Community", 49.

[45] See Vijay Prashad for a comprehensive list: Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 87-92.

[46] L. Ling-chi Wang, "Race, Class, Citizenship and Extraterritoriality: Asian Americans and the 1996 Campaign Finance Scandal," *Amerasia Journal* 24, no. 1 (1998) (1998): 12.

[47] Ibid.: 6.

Republican and other anti-Clinton forces fostering the scandal inspired media coverage that exploited the still extant anti-Asian racist sentiment behind early 20th century immigration law. Wang notes, "Overnight, the scandal was racialized and Asian Americans were collectively and effectively *de-naturalized* in the eyes of the public."[48] This resulted from a deliberate conflation by the media of 'Asian' and 'Asian American' in the donations to the Clinton campaign as 'Asians' buying up America. The DNC initiated an investigation of all 'dirty money' involved in the campaign, which turned out to refer to mostly Asian American and Asian donation.[49] The DNC also distanced itself from its Asian American electorate and community leaders as a result of the desire to repair its media image. Wang neatly traces the sentiment behind the media response to the scandal back to early 20th century anti-Asian immigration legislation:

> "Thus, Asian immigrants were denied citizenship before World War II and since then, Asian Americans have continued to be seen and treated as it they were foreigners... It is this racist legacy or nativism that the Republicans and media sought to reignite and incite and to broadly represent Asian Americans as untrustworthy and unscrupulous aliens eager to buy influence into the Clinton administration and to subvert American democracy and national security. The strategy succeeded in "denaturalizing" Asian Americans and in compelling the Clinton administration to treat Asian Americans as politically untouchable."[50]

Wang notes that both Republicans and Democrats fell back on racism in dealing with the scandal, and that in the whole matter, the crisis of campaign finance was side-stepped and the true interests of the communities represented by Asian American leaders were not addressed. Wang points out that the fundraising schemes of Huang and other big Asian donors represented the interests of a very small class of Asian Americans, only those with

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[48] Ibid.: 5.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 9-10

extensive connections to transnational Asian capital and multinational corporations. However, once the event was characterized as 'Asian,' the 'common sense' of race took over, combining with contemporary fears (at the time) of Asian tiger economies and their perceived threat to U.S. hegemony. The result was an incrimination of an entire category of people based on ideologies, or a 'common sense,' of race, resulting in further disenfranchisement of the Asian American community in electoral politics.

In the reactions of the U.S. public to the events of September 11th, we find the most recent evidence of how quickly notions of race change in relation to the historical moment, and again how unstable the notion of Asian American citizenship can be. One example can be found in the invocation of Samuel Huntington's 'civilization' discourse[51] by the government and the media in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. In his 1997 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Samuel Huntington suggested that the U.S. needed some kind of opposing 'other' to bring the nation together, something like what occurred during the World Wars. In a conflation of Asian and Asian American similar to that seen in the 1996 Campaign Finance Scandal, Huntington says that "diasporas in the United States support their home governments."[52] Palumbo-Liu found that in Huntington's argument, the 'other' needed to consolidate the United States in the face a divisive intensification of ethnic and other minority identities is revealed to be those ethnic minorities *themselves*.[53] These minorities are unfavorably seen by Huntington as more visible and vocal than ever before because of "changes in the scope and sources of

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[51] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
[52] Samuel P. Huntington, "The Erosion of American Interests," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 5 (1997): 38.
[53] Ibid.: 32.

immigration and the rise of the cult of multiculturalism."[54] Huntington see these

minorities as the 'others' against whom *we* should set our American identity politics,

since *they* have taken over the structure of the state:

> The institutions and capabilities—political, military, economic,
> intelligence—created to serve a grand national purpose in the Cold War
> are now being suborned and redirected to serve narrow subnational,
> transnational, and even nonnational purposes. Increasingly people are
> arguing that these are precisely the foreign interests they should serve.[55]

This statement by Huntington clearly recalls the paranoia surrounding "Asian" money in

the 1996 Campaign Finance Scandal, and represents a similar ousting of minority

Americans from inclusion as citizens.

Palumbo-Liu demonstrates how civilizational thinking like Huntington's was

mobilized by the event of September 11th. He says,

> Crucially in the *present* incarnation of civilizational thinking, the
> dichotomy between national identity and international civilizational
> thinking has collapsed, the two positions intermingling and recombining
> into a potent ideological position, now mobilized by the event of
> September 11. To the enemy within (ethnic and diasporic populations) is
> now added a viable enemy without, something Huntington pined for in
> order to solidify the nation just a few years before.[56]

The result of this most recent 'othering' of Asian Americans, an example of racial

formation's fickle 'common sense' of race, once again manifests itself in structural

discrimination, as racial profiling leads to the infringement upon the civil rights of

Americans who do not 'look like' citizens. After September 11th, it is hard to imagine

that the Indian community in America will be able to continue to exclude matters of race

from its political agenda in its continuing definition and re-definition of identity in

relation to America's changing 'common sense' of that identity.

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[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.: 37.

Self-definitions of Race and Ethnicity in the Indian Community

Due in part to their own choosing, in part to U.S. history, and in part to America's appearance-based 'common sense' of race, South Asians are often not included in either 'common sense' or political conceptions of Asian America.[57] Despite this, the need for recognition of South Asians grows even while they continue to be doubly invisible: unrepresented in mainstream American culture and unseen as part of the Asian American community[58] or even as part of the community of people of color in general. Though the mainstream has sought to cultivate such an invisibility as protection against racialization, and as part of racism within the community, the motivations behind this cultivation must also be examined as part of the processes of Indian or South Asian racial formation in the U.S.

Looking at the shared history of structural and cultural discrimination against Asian Americans, including South Asians, as it relates to immigration legislation and other denials of citizenship, South Asians share experiences of racial formation that connect them with the rest of Asian America. However, as a number of scholars note,[59] America's history of war with those East Asians nations whose immigrants to America are readily recognized as 'Asian American' is another important factor in the understanding of 'Asian American,' and may help to explain the exclusion of South Asians from popular conceptions.

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[56] David Palumbo-Liu, "Civilization and Dissent," *Amerasia Journal* 27/28, no. 3/1 (2001/2002): 133.

[57] For a range of perspectives on the nominal but not material inclusion of South Asians in Asian America, see Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth, *A Part, yet Apart : South Asians in Asian America, Asian American History and Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

Asian immigration in the 1980s was characterized by family reunification policies

rather than by specific professional needs in the U.S. labor market. By 1988, eighty-nine

percent of the immigrants from India were entering in the family reunification

categories.[60] This meant that the nature of South Asian America was changing yet again.

These later immigrants came from diverse class and economic backgrounds, and

therefore expanded the population of South Asians among various class groups and

professions in America, a population that was more concentrated while the 1965 act

continued to import white-collar labor into a 'model minority.' With the increasing

diversity of interests within South Asian, and Asian American ethnic groups in general, it

becomes more and more difficult to deny diversity of class interests, and to maintain the

model minority myth.

To illustrate the disagreements within the South Asian community concerning

their ethnic designation, we can look at the controversy around including 'Indian' as a

category on the U.S. census in 1980. The Association of Indian Americans, one of a

number of community groups, joined forces with other Asian American organizations to

work for the inclusion of 'Asian American' (with specific subcategories including

'Indian') as an ethnic category on the 1980 census. This effort, and its consequent

successful result, generated significant resistance in the Indian American community.[61]

As the working-class element of the community grew, people began to see the benefits of

[58] Shilpa Dave, ""Community Beauty": Transnational Performance an Cultural Citizenship in "Miss India Georgia."" *LIT* 12 (2001): 338.

[59] *See Shankar, Palumbo-Liu, Lowe.*

[60] Madhulika Khandelwal, "Indian Immigrants in Queens, New York City: Patterns of Spatial Concentration and Distribution, 1965-1980," in *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. Peter van der Veer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 101.

being a recognized minority, such as affirmative action. To receive such recognition, the community needed to be able to show that the Indian population was significant in number, and hence the desire for the new census category. Post-1965 immigrants, as represented by the Indian League of America, among other organizations, tended to be more concerned with the potential negative reaction of whites to the added benefits the community would receive from the government, and the reaction of other minority groups to having to compete with highly educated Indians for the benefits of affirmative action.[62]

The rejection of racialization by Indian immigrants reflects not only a lack of personal identification with an ethnicity defined by national origin, something that does not exist at 'home,' but also the recognition that in some respects, adopting a racial identity means becoming a person of color and affiliating with other persons of color. Resisting minority identification is also part of the pressures of liberal American politics to independently achieve the 'American Dream.' As Vivek Bald says,

> Every new immigrant group that comes to the United States is taught that the first step toward success in this country is the step away from—or on the backs of—other people of color. We are not taught the histories that have transpired here before us—histories to which we are connected, histories which we share…So whose American Dream is this? What kind of Americans are we expected to become? Who are we expected to ignore, and betray? And who is it who gains when our communities fight against each other in this country, instead of fighting side by side?

The immigration of Indian bourgeois after 1965 was short-lived, and after it was almost completely cut-off by the mid-seventies, immigrants are increasingly filling working-class positions in the U.S. As Rajini Srikanth points out, immigrants who see themselves

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[61] Gupta notes that though this controversy is often alluded to, no study has been done of the reactions to the change in the census. Gupta, " American Places, Indian Spaces: Post-1965 Immigrants Negotiate Self

as socio-economically disenfranchised and therefore more 'ethnic' will find it easier to

form coalitions with other minorities than their bourgeois counterparts, who have not

faced such disenfranchisement.[63] As sheer numbers and the racial consciousness of the

second generation begin to dominate the Indian community, South Asians will have to be

acknowledged as an ethnic group, whether as 'Asian Americans', 'South Asians', or

something as of yet unpredictable.

The fear of racialization by Indian immigrants can also be tied to racism within

the community. In *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Vijay Prashad looks at the way that racist

sentiments in the community intersect with the political right's use of the 'model

minority' to shame other minorities, particularly blacks. He quotes one South Asian

professional's comments about the increasing number of South Asian cab drivers in New

York:

> In just five years they've undone all the good work. These uncouth chaps,
> straight out of the Punjab, can't even speak proper English—can't even
> drive. I don't know how they got here. Must be through Mexico or
> something. I don't know why they let them in.[64]

In the differentiation of a self-appointed cream of the South Asian community from

South Asian immigrants who are practically Mexicans, Prashad finds both a screen

against anti-South Asian racism that might affect those speaking, and a tacit recognition

that South Asians are just about the same as Mexicans in the eyes of America's racist

'common sense.'[65]

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and Community", 126.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Rajini Srikanth, "Ram Yoshino Uppuluri's Campaign: The Implications for Panethnicity in Asian America," in *A Part, yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, ed. Lavina Dhingra and Rajini Srikanth Shankar (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

[64] Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 82.

[65] Ibid.

Today the children of post-1965 immigrants are beginning to re-define their ethnicity in the context of a multi-classed community that includes immigrant youth as well as youth from a number of South Asian countries. Current processes of racial formation in America intersect with flows of information that inform this re-definition of ethnicity, therefore transnational circulations of media as well as the increasing American consumption of Indian popular culture must be examined in order to understand new enunciations of ethnicity. This is in part the project of five. As we have seen, the perception of the place of Indians, and South Asians in general, in America's racial schema has historically been determined by a constellation of factors including both domestic and international politics, as well as the community's efforts to represent itself according to internal agendas determined by its own experience in America and by ties to India and other diaspora communities. While the Indian American community has historically been hesitant to define itself in terms of a 'racial' minority, focusing instead on 'cultural ethnicity' through events such as beauty pageants and cultural festivals, the process of racial formation has constantly updated its definition of South Asian racial identity despite them. With the growing racial consciousness of the second generation and the aftermath of September 11th, the community is taking more and more of an active part in shaping an identity that acknowledges a place among America's minority communities.

Current processes of racial formation and of community identification in general can be found in the Miss India USA 2001 pageant. An understanding of the history of South Asian immigration makes the singularity of the pageant's representation of Indian Americans clear. Though the pageant is meant to be a 'cultural' event, the politics of

race within the community and the importance of America's perception of South Asian race are present onstage. As the next chapter will show, by reading the Miss India USA 2001 pageant through both what is performed and what is silent, we can read into the community behind it.

Chapter 3

Staging the Community: Miss India USA 2001

"At one time, this pageant was regarded as a beauty contest. It no longer suffers from this narrow reputation. It has fledged out to be a mass international movement which honors the performing arts, develops finesse as a way of life and puts in communities a sense of compassion."[1]

"Representing the Indian community...I had the opportunity to travel to India and South Africa several times. I met with people from all walks of life, from celebrities, ambassadors, and politicians to villagers and activists. Along the way, I was touched by the incredible spirit of giving that is inherent in our culture."[2]

"Like, people live in this fantasy world and I just wanna open their eyes up.... since it was an Indian pageant, I wanted to do something particular to the Indian community..."[3]

At first, the reasons for the Indian American community's choice of a pageant as the venue for the performance and reproduction of self-consciously 'traditional culture' might not be readily apparent. Beauty pageants did not evolve in India, and it was the Miss America beauty pageant that acted as the prototype for the modern, media-driven beauty pageant format that is common today. In this way, beauty pageants have become synonymous with an American-style modernity.

In 1951 Miss America Corporation invented the Miss World pageant[4], but the international spread of pageantry was probably already occurring in the 1930s and 40s

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[1] *www.worldwidepageants.com.*
[2] Departing Miss India USA and Worldwide, Ritu Upadhyay, in her farewell message in 2001 program.
[3] Miss California on her choice of topics for the talent segment.
[4] Frank Deford, *There She Is; the Life and Times of Miss America* (New York,: Viking Press, 1971).

through Hollywood and newsreels circulated during the era of decolonization and nationalism in the so-called third world.[5] Currently, beauty pageants are a global form of popular culture. Beverly Stoeltje and Richard Bauman see popular culture as defined by two essential features in its form: "that [it] can be easily reproduced and recognized, and that it is easily adapted to local meaning and familiar symbols, values, and aesthetics- those relevant to the producers, performers, and consumers of the contest."[6] Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje's edited collection of work on local beauty pageants all over the world demonstrates that pageants are found virtually everywhere, and while reflecting the diversity of individual communities that sponsor them, pageants work in similar ways. These editors note that the primary commonality shared by pageants is the work they do in using female bodies to map the boundaries of a community's identity through an 'ideal female.'[7] This is true whether the group involved be is as small as a particular sub-culture in one town, or as large as a nation or transnational community. Pageants also function to school participants as to their 'proper' social and economic roles in the community.[8]

Because a pageant stages a community, it puts the community's ideals on display. In this chapter, after describing the Miss India USA pageant, I will argue that the pageant represents an 'ideal' Indian identity that conforms to particular interests of class, caste,

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[5] Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje, *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage : Gender, Contests, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 4.

[6] Beverly Stoeltje, and Richard Bauman, "Community Festival and the Enactment of Modernity," in *The Old Traditional Way of Life*, ed. R. and G. Shoemaker Walls (Bloomington: Trickster Press, 1989).cited by Cohen, Wilk and Stoeltje, 13.

[7] George Mosse has identified the signification of the 'ideal' male and female as part of the work of nationalism. I would extend this to include the work of building any imagined community, for example the Indian American community. George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality : Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*, 1st ed. (New York: H. Fertig, 1985).

[8] Cohen, *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage : Gender, Contests, and Power*, 7.

race, and gender in both what appears on stage and in what does not, for silences reveal as much as the pageant's script. The contestants in the pageant are of course not passive; even while conscious of performing an identity that fits the pageant's agenda, contestants bring their lived realities to the stage in the form of their voices and performances. In Miss India USA we find evidence of a conflict of interest between generations of immigrants, as cultural forms of the second generation intersect with those of the first generation. South Asian American youth culture appears in the pageant through the participation of Indian youth, along with evidence of new forms of transnational affiliation despite the affiliations of the mainstream Indian community. Part of the stage's construction is as a transnational venue, and as a potential platform from which to enter a transnational industry. This is accomplished through the pageant's self-conscious linkage to the Indian entertainment industry, an industry whose media travels throughout the transnational Indian diaspora. I also argue that though the winner of Miss India USA is meant to be a representative of the mainstream American community, many contestants see the pageants as an opportunity to exert a form of flexible citizenship in the mobilization of individual social capital.

Miss India USA 2001

Miss India USA officially began twenty years ago, in 1981, after evolving out of a fashion show held during the New York-based India Festival Committee's annual Indian festival in the mid-seventies. In 1994, a streak of Indian international beauty queens began when India won both Miss World and Miss Universe titles, then Miss World again in 1997, and both Miss World and Miss Universe in 2000. The prominence of Indian

beauty queens in film and advertising campaigns, forms of popular culture that are accessible and prevalent in the diaspora as well as India, together with popular sentiment in India that these pageant titles were a badge of India's entry into the ranks of modernized nations, no doubt inspired the growth of this event into the current Miss India USA pageant. This pageant continues to inaugurate more and more state pageants, and in the late 1980s initiated the Miss India Worldwide pageant to spread "Indian values, traditions and culture among the youth of Indian origin around the world."[9]

Pageant rules determine that all contestants must have a biological link to India, and that this link is more important than citizenship. The rules state: "Any woman of Indian origin (regardless of her place of birth) between the ages of 17 and 25, inclusive...never married and never having had a child, is eligible to participate. The contestant must be a resident of the state she is to represent." Indian origin is defined in the rules as having at least one parent of Indian descent. The meaning of "resident" is not defined, and as a number of contestants were Indian citizens attending college in the US or green card holders, it seems "resident" means simply someone living in that state at the time of participation. No distinction is made concerning citizenship, as Indians in America and Indians in India are defined primarily through a biological connection to India ('Indian origin'), and merely living in the US is enough to make one eligible to be 'Miss India USA' rather than one of the other Miss Indias sent to international contests. The importance of this biological link to the nation of India was made clear in the comments of one interviewee, the sister of a former contestant and current volunteer staff

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[9] *www.worldwidepageants.com.*

person, concerning the participation of a 'Guyanese' contestant in the pageant a few years

ago:

> A: And see, Miss India a couple of years ago, she wasn't Indian, that was the bad part.
>
> KV: How could that be?
>
> A: It was just horrible. She was Guyanese
>
> KV: She was Indian from Guyana? or Guyanese?
>
> A: Guyanese. I don't know how she got you know... found out about it, or got around the whole thing...
>
> KV: And she won?
>
> A: She won
>
> KV: When was that?
>
> A: Two or three years ago. Isn't that an interesting story? It was very strange. She looked nice and everything, but she walked into the room and her eyes were just kind of...just like she's not Indian. And she could not dance. And she won.
>
> KV: How did she win?
>
> A: I don't even know how she won. It was a major mistake. The entire community thinks it was a major mistake
>
> KV: She doesn't speak...
>
> A: She speaks Guyanese. There's nothing about her that's Indian. I mean, even if you're South Indian[10] you're Indian at least, or wherever you are from, but this was really strange.

Without any additional information on this occurrence, it is at least clear that this

participant in the pageant felt that the occurrence of a Guyanese Miss India USA was

'horrible' and a 'major mistake,' a feeling she projects onto 'the entire community.' The

issue of what the Guyanese contestant herself felt concerning her identity is never raised:

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[10] Her comment also highlights the dominance of North Indians in this community, and their assumption (which supports popular American conceptions of Indian culture) that Indian ethnicity refers to North Indian culture.

the only issue is that she is not biologically Indian, and therefore has no link to 'India' as far as this interviewee is concerned.

The Miss India USA pageant features one main event, but is preceded by a preliminary talent competition and VIP dinner on the night before the pageant. This preliminary event (for those who paid 100 dollars for the special tickets) was held in the basement of *TV Asia*, a New Jersey-based satellite television network which produces and re-broadcasts programs for the South Asian community in the 'tri-state area' (New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut), but also broadcasts throughout the US and internationally via satellite. *TV Asia* held exclusive rights to the recording and broadcasting of the 2001 pageant. Conversations with contestants and attendees during the prolonged wait for this event to begin late revealed that the contestants had just met that day, as they were staying in the same hotel and eating together. Some had not known about the preliminary contest to be held that evening until just a few days prior to arriving. No results were announced after the talent preliminaries, but scores were used in choosing finalists the next day.

The pageant event was billed as a night of family-oriented entertainment, a conservative event displaying Indian tradition. The application for contestants reinforces this conservatism, stating: "Since Miss India USA is a conservative pageant, proper attire for all segments is mandatory. No vulgar attire will be permitted." In addition to the pageant's competitive events, it featured five dance numbers by US-based Indian dance schools, one a stage adaptation of a traditional Punjabi folk dance (*bhangra*), and the other four choreographed combinations of Indian and modern Western dance. The pageant also featured a fashion show by Indian designer Feroze, a designer for Tommy

Hilfiger. In chatting with Feroze on stage, one of the emcees joked that he was surprised that 'Tommy' allowed Feroze to work for him, a comment referencing accusations of racism against Hilfiger in the past. The designer laughed off the comment, complimenting his employer. This minor invocation of race was the only such instance during the pageant. The skittishness of the Indian American community in discussing issues of race and racism was evident in the silence of this event on the topic of race and racism, particularly in the wake of the attacks of September 11th, 2001, as will be discussed in chapter four.

The auxiliary entertainment acts were interspersed between the pageant's four segments: Indian dress, evening gown, talent, and then for the five finalists, a question and answer session with the judges. The judges for the contest included an Indian fashion designer, an America-based television producer, the founder of the Indian women's college associated with this year's pageant, a Bollywood actor (and son of one of the most famous Indian actors of the 60s and 70s—Dev Anand), and the wife of the director of *Air India*, the pageant's primary sponsor. All of the judges were either Indians or first generation immigrants to America from India.

During the Indian dress and evening gown events, each contestant introduced herself, and as she walked the catwalk, a notecard that she had prepared earlier in the day was read by one of the emcees. Each contestant was described by her current school or professional work, and a brief statement of her personal goals. Most contestants had stated goals of becoming professionals, though a few mentioned becoming active in the community or something along the lines of one woman's comment: "fulfilling all my parents' dreams." In the evening dress competition, cards were read announcing

languages spoken, hobbies, and either the contestant's reason for entering the pageant or

her future aspirations. A number of contestants reinforced the idea of presenting the best

of 'both Indian and American culture" in their statements; being emissaries of their

tradition/heritage, but also possessing a 'contemporary outlook,' in the words of one

contestant. Every contestant also named at least one Indian language among the others

she spoke, and this emphasis on the importance of language was evident on a number of

levels. The official registration form for entry into the pageant contains a place to list

languages spoken. In addition to listing languages on the cards to be read during the

evening gown competition, many contestants greeted the audience in at least one Indian

language before announcing their names in the Indian dress event. Finally, in interviews,

the contestants themselves emphasized the importance of language in guaranteeing the

'cultural authenticity' expected of Miss India USA. For example, Sarita[11], one of the

three Miss Californias, explained the choice of performing her talent act, a dramatic

monologue, in Hindi:

> Well, from an academic standpoint, I do that in my speech. It's called
> code switching, right? That's why in my monologue...I did code
> switching actually in my monologue. I spoke in English and Hindi, and
> the reason I did that is not only because the title is an India and USA
> fusion, but also because that's my upbringing too, you know? I think that
> I tend...I think that a lot of what people tend to do is to switch to Indian
> culture in these pageants, and that's not my thing because we have to
> accept that we've been raised in a mixed environment and you don't have
> to identify yourself with one over the other, you know, as long as you keep
> an equal balance and are happy with your balance. That's all that matters.
> And if you want to be more partial towards one side, that's your
> prerogative.

[11] All names have been changed

Not all contestants were as open-minded about languages. Arti, whose sister had been in

the pageant a few years earlier, and who continued to volunteer to help backstage every

year, responded to an interview question as follows:

> KV: There are a couple of girls that have one parent who is white and one
> who is Indian in the pageant, right? [Speaking of the current pageant].

> Arti: [Referring to a past pageant] Yeah, this one girl, Sonam Desai, very
> pretty thing, to be honest, you know, but she was kind of, the thing was
> she couldn't speak Hindi, Gujerati, whatever...which was a set back *I*
> thought, I believe that you should be able to speak one language, whatever
> it is, it doesn't really matter... you know, there are a lot of those girls.

As we will see in chapter four, Sarita had a more progressive mindset than most

contestants at the pageant, and in reality Arti's comments are closer to the general

opinion of what Miss India should be.

The contestants themselves were primarily high school and college students,

though there were a few recent college graduates who held entry-level professional

positions. Their sashes named more than twenty states; some states featured more than

once amongst the thirty-five contestants. Miss India USA is the middle tier in a

progression from state and regional level pageants, the third and final level being "Miss

India Worldwide." Not all states have qualifying pageants, and contestants without state

pageants either enter into pageants outside their state, or enter regional pageants such as

'Miss India New England." For example, California had three representatives at the 2001

Miss India USA pageant – Miss California, Miss Southern California, and Miss Western

Pacific— all of whom wore sashes saying 'California.' A few states are currently

expanding their range of pageants to include contests for married women and young

teens. Recently a Miss India *America* contest, initiated by a California-based founder,

was begun. It is not a hierarchical pageant like Miss India USA, but its creation reveals

the separation between the East and West Coast Indian communities. Mr. India USA was

also recently initiated, and the 2001 winner was present at Miss India USA, indicating an

affiliation between the two pageants.[12]

Reading the Community Behind Miss India USA

As pageant organizers and participants themselves say, the Miss India pageants

are not about beauty. Farook Khan, chairman for the Miss India-South Africa

Corporation and host for the 2002 Miss India Worldwide competition says,

> At one time, this pageant was regarded as a beauty contest. It no longer
> suffers from this narrow reputation. It has fledged out to be a mass
> international movement which honors the performing arts, develops
> finesse as a way of life and puts in communities a sense of compassion.[13]

Sonam Bhandari, a former winner at the state level and model in this year's fashion

show, said,

> Another thing that sets Dharmatma Saran's[14] pageants apart from the
> mainstream American pageants is that yes, looks are important, you have
> to look presentable on stage, but there is no prerequisite that you have to
> be five feet seven inches tall minimum, or that you have to be thin. I've
> seen pageant winners who were short, or who were not really...who were
> 'healthy.' There's not a preferred look. That's a good thing.

In her article on community queen pageants in Minnesota, Robert Lavenda recognizes

that, "organizers are not necessarily looking for the most physically attractive candidate,

according to some idealized standard of beauty."[15] Instead, he sees organizers as first

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[12] The advent of Mr. India USA bears investigation. The growing policing of male sexuality in the Indian American community is a subject that has not yet been researched but is increasing under the perceived threat of the participation of Indian youth in American queer culture.

[13] *www.worldwidepageants.com.*

[14] *Founder and organizer of Miss India New York, Miss India New Jersey, Miss India USA, and Miss India Worldwide*

[15] Robert H. Lavenda, ""It's Not a Beauty Pageant!: Hybrid Ideology in Minnesota Community Queen Pageants," in *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage*, ed. Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 40.

looking to train an elite group of women in the community according to a certain

standards, and second, looking for someone to represent the community at similar events.

The winner of Miss India USA not only represents America at Miss India Worldwide, but

each year she is associated with a charitable cause and tours India as a spokesperson for

both the charity and for the American community. In 2001, the winner of Miss India

USA became the "Miss Helena Kaushik Women's College Ambassador for Women's

Education." The work of Rebecca Chiyoko King on the Cherry Blossom Queen pageant

in Northern California supports the argument that ethnic pageants are not simply about

the community's ideal of beauty. She says the winner "is a symbolic representation of

the community, but her body is also the field on which Japanese American-ness is

debated." Therefore, "'beauty standards' are not all that are at stake...but also

the...community's definition of itself and its future trajectory of the racial/ethnic

community."[16]

In the introduction to their edited collection on beauty pageants, Cohen, Wilk, and

Stoeltje note that the pageant stage is one prominent place where local identities are made

visible; identities that are increasingly made, claimed and maintained in negotiation with

the expansion of globalism.[17] In the Miss India USA pageant, such negotiations are

found in both the narrative performed by the pageant and by the unscripted text that is

both intentionally and inadvertently performed onstage. This instability of the

representations embraced by pageants is another reason that Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje

see them as valuable objects of study:

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[16] Rebecca Chiyoko King, "The Changing Face of Japanese America" the Making and Remaking of Race in the Japanese American Community"" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1998), 11.
[17] Ibid., 1-2

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> The problem of sending a coherent message is embedded in the structure of the beauty contest itself. The meaning of representations put on stage are always being negotiated and contextualized in interactions between contestants and audiences, and beauty contests can never fully achieve the idealized role they are performing.[18]

In reading this pageant, we can see both a consciously-constructed representation of the Indian community staging it, as well as the reality of the community that spills out around this representation. Everything from the marketing and advertising surrounding the Miss India USA pageant to the choice of words and talents contestants imagine will impress the judges reveals a dominant discourse which defines the nature of being an Indian in America. However, despite the pageant's clear agenda in reproducing the mainstream Indian community, it embraces elements of transnational imagination and the creativity of South Asian youth culture that overshadow the event, if not the choice of a winner. These two areas are the topics of discussion in chapters four and five respectively.

As a pageant performed by a community that is an ethnic minority in America, the Miss India USA pageant also performs the racial and ethnic self-definition of those behind the event. The immigration history of Asian Americans has lead to the application of the phrase 'model minority' to these immigrants and their children. The mainstream Indian community behind this event is characterized by its middle- to upper-middle class status, high caste, and professionally-oriented background. These interests underlie the representation of Indian identity in this pageant.

As was seen in chapter two, a number of contemporary scholars of Asian America have underlined the fact that race and ethnicity are sliding categories, defined in a

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[18] Ibid., 9

negotiation between the interests of an ethnic group in its self-representation and self-understanding, and the current definition according to the 'common sense'[19] understandings of the American public. Both Lisa Lowe and Omi and Winant have discussed the flexibility of definitions of race and ethnicity as historical products, and Rebecca Chiyoko King has described race and ethnicity as a continuum, guided by social context[20] in her examination of how the participation of mixed-race contestants in a Japanese American beauty pageant have changed the content and definition of race.[21]

Given its proximity in time to the events of September 11[th][22], and the resulting impact of racial profiling on South Asian Americans, the lack of any mention of this at an Indian event the size of this pageant stood out. Himanee Gupta notes that "events like Diwali festivals and India Day parades – enactments of identity that are preferred by the upper classes – are like shows...[expressing] the celebratory, apolitical nature of multiculturalism in America."[23] As a beauty pageant, the discourse of Miss India USA is of an explicitly apolitical ethnicity. This discourse of ethnicity allows the focus of Indian identity to remain on such things as clothing, 'traditional' arts such as are represented in the talent event, language, and other aspects of culture that are acceptable in the trope of multiculturalism.

Equally important to the apolitical representation of Indian ethnicity at the pageant was its emphasis on the 'model minority' characteristics embodied by the contestants. As contestants entered the stage in their Indian dress and evening gowns, the

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[19] Omi, *Racial Formation in the U.S. From the 1960s to the 1980s*, 60.
[20] King, "The Changing Face of Japanese America" the Making and Remaking of Race in the Japanese American Community"", 4-5.
[21] Ibid., 9.

cards they had prepared earlier in the day to be read by the emcees during these events uniformly described career goals in business, law, medicine, and engineering. Biological background was represented as less important than the embodiment of the model minority brand of Indian ethnicity, as the pageant rules state that contestants must have at least one Indian parent, and at least two mixed-race contestants had reached the national level by performing the model-minority ideal necessary for participation.

The operation of both American racism and racism within the South Asian community behind the apolitical representation of the 'model minority' has been brought to attention by the work of Vijay Prashad. In his recent book, *The Karma of Brown Folks*, he asks, "How does it feel to be a solution?...this question asks us brown folk how we can live with ourselves as we are pledged and sometimes, in an act of bad faith, pledge ourselves, as a weapon against black folk."[24] The political right in America uses the success of Asians to argue that other minorities, particularly blacks, have the same opportunities yet fail to work as hard as Asians. The socioeconomic condition of blacks in America is therefore attributed to their own weakness, a racist accusation that goes hand-in-hand with the discourse of the model minority in its denial of the structural nature of racism. Prashad argues that South Asian Americans accept what are the results of immigration acts in American and socialized education in India as proof that they are superior to America's other minorities, participating in the racist discourse of 'the model minority.' Prashad emphasizes that despite the fact that the designation of 'model minority' appears positive on the surface, it is still racist, in the way it is used against

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[22] It is particularly notable since the pageant was postponed for more than a month out of consideration for the nation's state of mourning and the safety of the contestants who would have to fly to the pageant.
[23] Gupta, " American Places, Indian Spaces: Post-1965 Immigrants Negotiate Self and Community", 94.

'non-model minorities' and in the way it hides structural racism against Asians themselves.[25] Racism within the South Asian American community is partially composed of the desire to distinguish South Asian 'race' from black 'race.' In the above comments of Arti, a volunteer at the Miss India USA pageant, the negativity she expresses about the success of the Guyanese contestant may also be traced to the perceived need to protect South Asians from being seen as black.

The 1997 PBS documentary of the Miss India Georgia pageant, like Miss India USA, reveals the importance of class in the model minority ethnic ideal for contestants. Focusing on the participation and personal contexts of four of the six contestants, the Miss India Georgia documentary reveals some of the diversity from which a singular 'ideal' Miss India USA is crafted. Of the four contestants followed in the documentary, two are middle-class, and as Shilpa Dave notes in her article on this documentary, fit the stereotype of Indians in America: they are tied to India by family and culture, they identify with white culture, and their parents are professionals. These two contestants end up being the first and second runners up in the contest. The two other contestants featured in the documentary are working class, and neither follow the standard pattern of immigration that chapter two showed to be characteristic of post-1965 immigrants from

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[24] Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk.*

[25] Ibid. Prashad notes that there are a growing number of Indian-owned corporations that import cheap Indian white collar labor through H-1b visas. These workers are paid meagre wages and denied any kind of job-related benefits (81). He also notes that the financial obligations of immigrant taxi-drivers in New York creates sweatshop conditions for these drivers (201). Other examples include glass ceilings and the sentiment among white supremacists as "We want your labor, we don't want your lives" (90).

India, and therefore do not have the same ties to India and the Indian community that the other two young women have.[26]

The unpopularity of the talent acts chosen by these two working-class contestants also demonstrates how the performance of class is essential to Miss Indias in the United States. The performance of a gymnastics routine by one contestant, and the singing of a Broadway showtune from *Evita* by the second, are not as acceptable as the more 'traditional' acts performed by other contestants. The emphasis of both Miss India Georgia and Miss India USA on conservatism and tradition can therefore also be seen as another way to protect the American class identity associated with the model minority, the upper middle-class identity that distinguishes South Asians from the kind of racialization experienced by other minorities in America. The same motivation may be used to explain the emphasis on education and white-collar profession in Miss India USA.

Contestations

The multigenerational nature of those producing and competing in the Miss India USA, as well as its performance for and viewing by multiple levels of community means that the way the pageant is understood varies considerably from person to person. Also, the contestants are not in reality always what they are represented to be, which can show through their performance. In her article on the Miss India Georgia pageant, Dave says that the contestants are redefining the monolithic "India" by their socioeconomic and

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[26] One contestant's family is Indian, but immigrated to America after generations in the West Indies. Another contestant's family has immigrated in the 1980s, moving from an upper-middle class professional position in India to wage-labor in America.

religious diversity, thus challenging cultural citizenship on a micro-level.[27] She says, "If we view the pageant as an attempt to reproduce first-generation values and the imagined community of 'Asian Indian' in the bodies of the 1.5 and second-generation children, then what happens when the bodies and minds of these children disrupt the cultural legacy?" In the example of Misty Seebachan, a contestant from a working-class background whose parents are twice-migrated Indians from Trinidad, Dave finds a lack of cultural knowledge in which she sees proof of a diversity that points to the "impossibility of a single notion of Indian-ness."[28] At the same time, the participation of non-mainstream contestants "simultaneously showcases the effort they put forth to try to represent their community."[29]

The general power of the stage, through the visibility it lends to performers, itself is accessible to contestants, regardless of the way the stage has been constructed. At the Miss India USA pageant, only one talent act represented a classical Indian art form, and that was the winning contestant's dance routine which combined *Bharat Natyam*, the national dance of India, with modern Indian dance. It is quite possible that next year there will be no representation of the classical forms preferred by the Indian mainstream, eventually leading to a shift in expectations within the viewership. Similarly, Dave argues that even though the judges of Miss India Georgia disapproved of one contestant's modern gymnastics routine, other second generation audience members might see the dance as simply part of an Indian function. She says, "such visibility might eventually

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[27] Dave, ""Community Beauty": Transnational Performance an Cultural Citizenship in "Miss India Georgia."": 339.
[28] Ibid.: 352.
[29] Ibid.: 353.

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transform the category from Indian talent to talented Indian."[30] As it stands now, the

dominance of Bollywood in the Miss India USA pageant's talent acts (32 of the 35

contestants performed dance and lip-sync numbers to Hindi film songs) suggests a shift

in the general understanding of common culture. A 1999 article on the pageant in the

magazine "India Today" notes: "What came through at the pageant once again was the

NRI fixation on Bollywood. In the talent segment, most of the participants danced to

popular hits from *Taal* and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam.* Yet the winner was Miss Hong

Kong who presented an accomplished Bharatanatyam piece."[31] As long as more

'traditional' talents are present, it seems they will be preferred; however there is no

guarantee that this will continue to be the case. The result may be a redefinition of

mainstream culture by the second generation.

Though the pageant is advertised as a specific kind of event, in this case

traditional, conservative and 'cultural' in a narrowly defined sense, that does not mean

that all of the audience members and contestants see it that way. Sarita, one of the three

Miss Californias, said in an interview,

> I think [this pageant] is a platform for women to, well, a position that they
> hold and gain a network and support from people. My platform...I know
> we don't really have to have one here, but I *do* have one, I had one in my
> last pageant and that was domestic violence. I hate to sound mean, and I
> mean 'cause I've done it before and I'm willing to admit it [lowers voice]
> but the thing is every Indian girl can go out there and sing and dance, but
> to use a talent segment to express an opinion about something, and then
> use your talent, 'cause I'm an actress also, to say something, that was
> really important to me, and I just want to get that message out there. And
> I want to increase awareness about it because there's a lot of South Asian
> women, they come here, they're brought here, and I'm not saying all
> Indian men are bad. I really don't want people to think that I'm
> generalizing but...I've, um, there's a really big South Asian community in

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[30] Ibid.: 352.

[31] Levina Melwani, "Beautiful Betis," *India Today (International Edition)*, no. December 13, 1999 (1999).

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Berkeley and San Francisco and that area, so...recently there was a big political legal case that went on about this guy who brought his wife here from India, and he abused her, but she never could speak up, because he would threaten her that 'I'm gonna have you deported.' You know, and so, I was just like "that's not fair,' you know what I mean... And people have this thing in India where, [in a dramatic voice] 'oh yeah you know just let our daughter go to America" and don't know about how she's treated and her life and you know, like people live in this fantasy world and I just wanna open their eyes up.... since it was an Indian pageant, I wanted to do something particular to the Indian community. And its not even a recent thing, its been going on for hundreds of years, you know, and that's why I think its really important.

Though her motivations were in the minority, Sarita did give her message to the pageant's audience, as she was one of the ten finalists who performed their talent act at the event. Whether or not airing Sarita's message was the intention of pageant organizers is sidestepped by the 'staging' of her personal agenda.

It is clear that even as an event that is hierarchical, and thus tied to a larger group, a pageant must be seen as reflecting the immediate community that produces it, and often, that which performs in it. As we have seen, the Miss India USA pageant is constructed to represent the ideals of the first generation, middle-class, usually upper-caste Hindu mainstream. However, contestants and many volunteer organizers come from the 1.5 or second generation of Indian Americans. In this sense, when we emphasize the importance of a pageant's locality, it is a matter of class, race, gender, regional, and generational concern.

As is revealed in Sarita's comment that since "people live in this fantasy world," which other talent acts in the pageants do nothing to remedy, she has a different agenda. The discrepancy between reality and the way the pageant represents it is something that contest participants are often aware of. In their article on Cordoban beauty pageant in Spain, Sanders and Pink address the importance of local recognition of the pageant's

hypocrisy, and say that "an anthropology of beauty pageants must address these local discrepancies first, before general arguments can be made."[32] They argue that such an approach proves a more effective criticism "than any abstract discussion of objectification or degradation." [33]

Due to the presence on stage and in the audience of second generation youth, one of the 'locals' or locales of the Miss India USA pageant is New York-area youth culture. In roughly the last five years, this culture has become tied into the British Asian[34] deejay scene. A growing number of South Asian-only, or 'desi' clubs in New York feature US- and UK-based South Asian deejays mixing dance beats with Indian pop music. The term *desi*, which literally means 'of the land' in Hindi and Urdu, has been adopted in America by the second-generation to refer to anyone of South Asian descent, regardless of birthplace. As we will see in chapter five, this sense of South Asian American identity itself is a potentially subversive invention of second generation South Asian youth which must be examined in racial and ethnic terms. The pageant's website features links for a number of websites that focus on the desi party scene, and young participants in the pageant imagined it as linked to desi culture in the New York area. Arti, who immigrated with her Indian parents from Norway to New York four years ago, has been helping 'Dharmatma uncle'[35] since her sister competed in the pageant four years ago. In response to questions about her volunteer work with the pageant, she praised it as part of a positive description of the desi scene:

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[32] Richard and Sarah Pink Sanders, "Homage to "La Cordobesa": Local Identity and Pageantry in Andalusia," in *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power*, ed. Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 59.
[33] Ibid.
[34] In the UK this phrase denotes South Asians

It's a lot of fun, you go out, let's say you have a boyfriend, and you're like, you wanna go to an Indian movie? Its like, 'oh my god there's an Indian movie thing going on,' and he's like 'oh yeah.' It really cool because its out in the open, that you can do that, there's a lot of clubs, you can go clubbing, basically Indian parties, and you can go and meet every professional guy in the city. Its like, whoa.

Arti describes the community as one where things are "out in the open," primarily dating, something not done in South Asian-focused venues frequented by first generation parents. Arti mentions desi dance clubs in the context of the pageant's locale. The style of clothing worn by a number of contestants as they rehearsed for the contest reflected this desi scene. Often referred to as Indo-chic by the American mainstream,[36] this style was developed by desi club go-ers as a combination of Indian clothes and America club fashions. Though the pageant was not explicitly placed in this locale, the participation of the second generation as contestants, volunteers, and audience members nonetheless locates it in New York desi culture.

The overlap of distinct generationally-derived cultural forms in Miss India USA reveals contemporary processes of change going on within the community. In her analysis of Miss Chinatown USA, Judy Tru-Chun Wu sees this as a characteristic of ethnic beauty pageants in general. She notes,

in defining the ideal woman to represent Chinatown, pageant organizers responded to developing cultural, economic, and political tensions within the Chinese American community broader American society. In turn, these efforts to represent Chinese American woman generated a variety of responses, reflected community conflicts surrounding but also class divisions and international politics.[37]

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[35] "uncle' is a term denoting respect and some informality by younger people for non-related adults of their parents' age.

[36] Discussed in chapter five.

[37] Judy Tru-Chun Wu, ""Loveliest Daughter of Our Ancient Cathay!": Representations of Ethnic and Gender Identity in the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. Beauty Pageant," *Journal of Social History* (1997): 6.

Though the Miss India USA pageant is not staged to represent second generation cultural forms, the representations on stage are constructed in silent dialogue with emerging identifications in the community, sometimes in order to suppress them. An example of such safe-guarding of the mainstream ideal against tendencies in the second generation was seen in the first question presented to the five finalists at the Miss India USA pageant. Arizona's representative was asked: "What role should your parents play in choosing your life partner?" This question references one of the major battles between first generation parents and second generation children. Coming from a culture that arranges introductions of prospective couples and often their marriages, the judges represented first generation concerns when they chose to make sure that its audience understood this to be a defining issue for Miss India USA. Miss Arizona answered, "They should find a guy I want, but also suited to my personality. He should be well-educated ...and treat me well." She effectively avoided answering the question, whether as a result of pressure or lack of a ready answer. No doubt many of the other second generation contestants and audience members knew what she was 'supposed' to say, but for those who did not, her effective dismissal of the question, turning it instead to focus on her own desires in a partner, negatively impacts the pageant's effort to include it in the definition of Miss India USA.

Citizenship and Transnational Capital(s)

As a precursor pageant to Miss India Worldwide, and as an event which portrays itself as one node in a transnational Indian entertainment industry, Miss India USA links itself to the transnational Indian community. The discursive aspect of this linkage is

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achieved primarily through the nature of the pageant's publicity and the choice of

personalities from this industry as emcees and judges for the pageant. The sponsors for

Miss India USA, which included *Maaza*, an Indian beverage company, *TV Asia*, the New

Jersey-based station recording and broadcasting the pageant internationally, and Air

India, also reveal capital investment in the transnationality behind the pageant.

Through the heavy circulation of Indian film, its music, and its film stars

throughout the transnational Indian community, exposure to the Indian entertainment

industry is one of, if not the most common element shared by this community. For India

itself, beauty pageants tie directly into this entertainment industry, as international beauty

queens from India most often go on to big entertainment careers, primarily in film. For

the past ten years, Miss Indias have repeatedly taken the crown at Miss World (1994,

1997, 1999, 2000), Miss Universe (1994, 2000), and Miss Asia Pacific (2000). While

these pageants are little more than inconsequential to most Americans, for many Indians,

success in the international pageant scene represents an emblem of their status as a

modernized nation. Miss India USA is discursively linked to this Indian pageant

phenomenon, through both its own publicity, and websites and other shared media. The

Miss India USA pageant flaunts its alumnae who have made it into the entertainment

world, and a number of contestants I spoke to at this year's pageant stated that furthering

their experience in acting and modeling was a primary reason for entering the contest.[38]

The choice of emcees each year for the Miss India pageant reveals a conscious

effort to link it to entertainment and film. In 2001 as in most years, one of the emcees

was a past Miss India who had successfully entered the Indian television and film

industries and become a minor celebrity. The 2001 emcees also included one other minor

Indian film star from the 1990s, and the host of a New-York based radio talk-show for

the Indian community. As the three emcees waited between acts, they chatted about their

experiences in the entertainment industry, one actor eventually even doing an impression

of a famous Bollywood actor to amuse the waiting crowd. During the introduction to the

pageant, the emcees invited the son of movie legend Dev Anand to come up onstage and

share a story about his father. This banter is one of the most effective links between the

pageant and the glamour of Indian entertainment.

In the website for Miss India USA, its primary site of self-advertisement, the

pageant committee's chairperson draws attention to the fact that the pageant has affiliates

in 30 countries (at the Miss World level), and a live Internet webcast and broadcast. The

site describes the Miss India pageants as providing a common platform for the

international community of Indians, and as dispersing "Indian values, traditions and

culture among the youth of Indian origin around the world." The registration form and

participation rules for Miss India USA also reveal a focus that is more on representing a

transnational bourgeois ideal than on a true embodiment of both India and the US. The

rules for participation state that any woman of Indian origin can participate, and she may

be either a citizen or a green-card holder. The registration form offers an interpreter if

necessary. A number of contestants in the 2001 Miss India USA contest had only

recently arrived from India, one of them becoming a finalist in the pageant. An article on

the pageant in the international edition of the Indian publication "India Today" featured

on the pageant's website says,

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[38] Since the pageant a number of contestants have successfully expanded their modelling careers, as is

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> Most of these women have set their sights on professions like medicine,
> public relations and the law. The contest gave them a chance to take a
> detour and explore their Indian identities through dress and dance.
> Perhaps it also opens up doors to new careers. Melissa Bhagat, last year's
> Miss India Worldwide from Canada is now planning to embark on a career
> in politics or diplomacy and has just appeared for the Canadian Foreign
> Service Competition. She observes: "I think the pageant completely
> changed my life because it enabled me to go beyond my own dimensions
> as an Indo-Canadian and experience the international NRI community. [39]

Even while the pageant works to educate contestants into their proper roles in this

community, and the community itself is defined by the pageant, one must understand ties

to transnational identifications to properly contextualize the work of the pageant and its

community.

At the state and national levels, the existence of an Indian beauty pageant offers

participants an opportunity to use social and cultural capital that is not valued by similar

non-Indian events, capital that has value even at the transnational level. Sarita told me

that she was working on an acting career and had gone as far as to sign with an agent,

though her aspirations were announced on stage as corporate law. In response to

interview questions about her interest in other non-Indian pageants, she said:

> I don't know if I would even be qualified because I wasn't born here, I
> was born in India. I came here when I was 6 month old, so I don't know if
> that is a requirement. If it wasn't, I would consider it, but I'm not sure
> only because I don't have... I would have to represent California, right,
> and I don't have the typical California look, you know, but that wouldn't
> discourage me, I just would keep that in mind and if anything I would
> want people to appreciate that California is just not blond hair and blue
> eyes. You know what I mean? Yeah I would consider it.

Her comments point to an ambivalence about how her ability to represent California

would be perceived on an American stage, though she recognizes both a false perception

and a political issue within this ambivalence. As she wants to add to the resume for her

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evidenced by their addition to websites featuring Indian models, such as *www.desithrill.com.*

acting career, she has chosen a venue and contest that places a higher value on her

cultural and social capital, as well as on her physical appearance and abilities. In Dave's

article on PBS's Miss India Georgia documentary, she says that "for many of the young

women who participate in the contest, it is their opportunity to participate in an event that

recognizes, and, on the surface, values their differences from dominant "white"

culture."[40] More than just valuing their ethnically-defined difference, I argue that the

Miss India USA pageant offers contestants a chance to imagine their citizenship in a

transnational community, and to perform it through the pageant's links to Indian

entertainment. In this sense, contestants are also able to participate in an Indian

community that overflows what is contained by Indian America and its model minority

myth.

Conclusion

In Miss India USA, an event that represents Indian ethnicity as imagined by the

mainstream Indian community, we can find a representation of the true dynamic

processes of self-definition that are occurring in Indian America. By looking for

evidence that the 'ideal' of Miss India USA is a construction based on the interests of

what turns out to be only one voice among many in the community, we can start to look

for evidence of other voices in the pageant. These are revealed in the ways that

contestants fail to meet the ideal of 'Miss India USA' and instead perform other versions

of Indian identity on stage. Alternate Indian-nesses also appear in the ways that

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[39] Melwani, "Beautiful Betis."
[40] {Dave, 2001 #70@337}

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contestants speak about and imagine the pageant as part of a different locale from the one projected by the title "Miss India USA." By mis-performing the ideal, whether by mistake or intention, and by using the pageant for their own purposes, either as a platform for change or to launch a career through the social capital of 'Indian-ness,' participants reveal processes constructing a false homogeneity in the community that Miss India USA is meant to disguise and naturalize. The issues raised by the pageant, both those of mainstream politics and the ways that they are contested in the context of the transnational community, will serve for further discussion in the following chapters.

Chapter 4

Transnationality and the Discourse of Indian Femininity

"Well, the way I see [this pageant] is as very much, first of all, showcasing talent. You would see classical dances from South India, you would see someone doing a folk dance from Rajasthan, somebody singing a North Indian song, or whatever, so that's definitely reflective of our culture; the arts, the music, the dances. They reflect our culture....And then, like I said, it's a very family oriented show, there's no swimsuit round, so in that sense its different from American pageants." (11/26/01, interview with a former contestant from New York)

"Incidentally, our first Miss India New York...was taken by the legendary actor/producer Dev Anand as heroine in his movie "Hum Navjawaan." Some past participants of the Miss India New York pageants have achieved stardom in Indian and American movies, television and modeling careers." (Miss India New York page at)

"Girls these days..." (Miss India USA pageant emcee)

This chapter examines two contradicting processes that were engaged on stage at the Miss India USA 2001 pageant. As contestants stepped onto this stage, they entered a visual discourse of Indian femininity which is sustained in the context of Indian media internationally. I argue that once on stage, contestants became participants in the Indian mainstream community's reproduction of an essentialized and static Indian identity in America, an identity that relies on a feminized ideal. At the same time, many participants and audience members saw the pageant as part of a non-static transnational Indian identity, one that does not fit into the pure versus impure dichotomy through which the community defines itself and Indian femininity. This is also a context into which the contestants entered upon reaching the stage.

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Feminist scholars, as well as scholars of nationalism, have drawn attention to the

reliance of communities upon women—both women's bodies and women as a discursive

category—as boundary markers in the establishing of identity. Irene Gedalof emphasizes

the need to simultaneously examine both of these uses of women in feminist scholarship.

Once women are assigned the role of being the ideological 'home' of a given identity,

they must remain a purely defined category in order to protect a group's discursive

origins. This involves both an ideological and physical policing of women, particularly

female sexuality, both as it is represented and embodied. Gedalof says,

> [one aspect] of women's particular and complex positioning within
> national, racial and ethnic identity conflicts [is] the ways in which tensions
> between locatedness and dislocation are played out through both
> discursive representations of 'Woman' and the activities of women.
> Identity narratives repeatedly position 'Woman' as 'place,' as the pure
> space of 'home' in which tradition is preserved from outside
> contamination.[1]

Once a community has used its women to define their group against others, we can see

that this group must then protect the purity of this constructed contrast, a move that

requires controlling movement and the behavior of the bodies of women, usually through

discourse, but also often physically as well. After recognizing the crucial role that

women's bodies and women as a discursive category play in defining a group's identity,

it becomes clear why beauty pageants are popular expressions of nationalism and ethnic

identity.

Miss India USA and the Discourse of the Indian Woman

By embracing India as a place of exotic origin and as the source of conservative values, Indian-Americans can share in the material benefits of being American while maintaining an acceptable ethnic difference. This 'best of both worlds' sentiment is often expressed by the mainstream Indian community, and came up in the final question and answer event at the Miss India USA pageant. When Florida's contestant, who subsequently won the contest, was asked: "What do you think separates this pageant from other pageants?" She responded, "The fact that we are all young intelligent women growing up with two cultures, and the pageant enables us to promote the best of both." With firmly established middle class status, an invisible crime rate, and no record of need for state support, post-1965 immigrants fit so well into the multicultural model that they gained the dubious honor along with other Asians of being called the 'model minority'

As participants in this pageant, contestants became part of the pageant's efforts to reproduce mainstream Indian identity, a project which depended on the discourse of Indian femininity. Though the main producer of the Miss India USA pageant and members of its official organizing committee were male, the people working backstage, organizing meals, rehearsing stage etiquette with the contestants, and filling the audience during rehearsal were mothers, sisters, and female cousins and friends of the contestants. The majority of the judges and representatives of the sponsors were also male. This division of labor in the pageant, reflects a larger divide in the community where women are described as those who do the work of bearing and maintaining culture and tradition.

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[1] Irene Gedalof, "Identity in Transit: Nomads, Cyborgs and Women," *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 7 (2000): 339.

This discourse of Indian femininity has evolved into a way of negotiating a modern Indian-ness in both India and the US. Post-colonial India has used 'the Indian Woman' as a cultural anchor as it maneuvers for its place in a global economy that moves in the language and culture of Western-ness. In the US, Indian immigrants have defined a set of cultural values against *American* values, and it is women who are assigned the work of preserving these values. In looking at the discourse of the 'Indian Woman' we see that she becomes a point of negotiation in defining Indian-ness both with and against Western-ness.[2]

Women and the Discourse of Indian-ness

The discourse of the Indian Woman, or alternately of Indian femininity, serves as a site where ambivalence towards the place of the West and modernity (linked through the colonial experience) in the discourse of 'Indian-ness' is worked out. In both post-colonial India and multicultural America, the creation of the Indian woman is inseparable from that of the discourse of Indian-ness in general.

Much recent scholarship on the relationship between India and the Indian diaspora utilizes the idea of nation as an "imagined community" to encompass the mutual constitution and contribution of India and diaspora in creating 'Indian-ness.' The discursive creation of 'Indianess' takes place not as a broadcast from the home country, nor through the diaspora's various interpretations of that broadcast, but rather somewhere in between the 'inside' and 'outside' of nation and community. Examining the communication, or discourse, which fills and inhabits inside, outside, and what is

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[2] And, he writes, "it is here that nationalism launches its most powerful, creative and historically significant

between will allow us to gain a better understanding of the way that Indian femininity is used to construct a type of 'Indianess' by the transnational population that imagines itself to be Indian.

For many Indian Americans, particularly those of the first generation, India is the source of values, with which Western values are conflicting or polluting.[3] For many Indians abroad, forging links with India provides a sense of security regarding the maintenance of a collective identity, an ethnic identity.[4] Thus the term 'diaspora,' as James Clifford notes, "is a signifier not simply of transnationality and movement but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement."[5] The community defines itself against something, and this affects the enunciation of its identity.

For example, in multicultural America, the Indian community essentializes culture in terms of values.[6] Indian values are defined in relation to 'American' values, where the differences are highlighted. These different values become the focus of self-conscious diaspora culture. This contradiction of values is a common theme in Hindi film, where the 'good guys' always reject the allure of the West on account of its unacceptable values.

A unified face helps the Indian American community gain validity in multiculturalism's particularity of recognizing ethnic "groups." Power in government consists of being able to present yourself as a member of a group with similar interests.

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project: to fashion a 'modern' national culture which is, nevertheless, not Western."[2] Pg. 25
[3] Iris Kalka, "Attachment to the Mother Country: Image and Reality," *Ethnic Groups* 8 (1990): 261.
[4] Ibid.: 260.
[5] Clifford, *Routes : Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 252.

In America, the common denominator of Indian "group" identity is displayed by the music, cuisine, and decor found in such places as the ubiquitous Indian restaurant: North Indian (upper) middle-class, upper-caste Hindu. "Indian" becomes a homogenous, singular, coherent entity in its presentation to a multicultural society, resulting in an erasure or repression of the hierarchical differences within the category "Indian." The imagined unity of 'Indian-ness' in diaspora communities enters the discourse and results in a narrow overall definition of Indian-ness in India as well, as was discussed in chapter three.

The performance of a homogenized Indianess for the host country can also be understood as a method of packaging Indian identity as a consumable object for capitalist culture. A precedent can be found during British rule in India, when knowledge of India and its people was compressed and packaged into rulable units.[7] This "idiom"[8] of Indianess was brought back to Europe and became the general understanding and discourse of Indianess in the West. It is possibly this very idiom that is present in the diaspora's presentation of itself. Sandhya Shukla says that at the Cultural Festival of India in Edison, New Jersey, a huge cultural and ideological production for the benefit of the non-Indian public, this was indeed the very Indian-ness that was represented as the uniform face of India. At the Miss India USA 2001 pageant, the program included an advertisement for Air India featuring an image of a mustached man wearing a turban decorated with icons of tourist attractions and religious images with the following text:

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[6] Sandhya Shukla, "Building Diaspora and Nation: The 1991 'Cultural Festival of India'," *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997).

[7] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge : The British in India, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[8] Shukla, "Building Diaspora and Nation: The 1991 'Cultural Festival of India'," 304.

> Jewels in my Crown: India. A priceless collection of exquisite gems.
> Architectural marvels built centuries ago. Awe-inspiring Himalayan
> villages. Scenic hill stations. Languid beach resorts. Vibrant festivals.
> Bountiful wild life. Throbbing cities. Lush tropical forests. Timeless
> desserts. Exhilarating adventure sports. Ethnic handicrafts. Innumerable
> culinary delights. Impregnable forts. Majestic palaces. And lots
> more...So come experience India with me. And take your pick of the
> jewels in my crown.

Aimed at the NRI audience, this ad recaptures a colonial fantasy of India, and repackages

it for the expatriate tourist. This vision of India brings together a multicultural ethnicity,

and the tourist and colonial gazes as their object of imagination.

With the rise of *Hindutva*[9] Hindu communalism, the ideological and physical

battle over what is "Indian" produces increasing inequality and fatalities in India. The

growth of Hindu communalism in both India and the diaspora is one lens through which

to view the circular routes of the communication of "Indianess." The Hindutva

movement has been around since before independence, but has experienced almost

complete visibility in the last ten years through its rise into national government in the

form of the BJP.[10] The BJP is one of a number of organizations composing the "*Sangh*

Pariwar," the umbrella organization and front of Hindu communalism. These

organizations support, to varying degrees, conservative Hindu political activism. One of

these organizations, the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad*,[11] is devoted to maintaining community

amongst the Hindu diaspora. Steve Vertovec[12] notes that while the impact of these

organizations on Hindu religious traditions across India has been variable due to cross-

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[9] Literally "Hinduness." This movement strives for an Indian nation defined by a specific definition of the Hindu religion, where all non-Hindus are subject to Hindu law.

[10] Bharatiya Janata Party, from which the current Prime Minister comes.

[11] "World Hindu Council"

[12] Steven Vertovec, ""Official' and 'Popular' Hinduism in Diaspora: Historical and Contemporary Trends in Surinam,
Trinidad, and Guyana.," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 28, no. 1.

cutting interests of class and caste, the case is different in the diaspora: "Outside of India

in places like the Caribbean...such organizations have come to play a highly significant

role, impacting on virtually all Hindus."[13]

Indian-ness and Western-ness

Having indicated some of the predominant threads in the intricate negotiation of

meaning between India and diaspora through tracing the discourse of Indian-ness, I

would like to use this map and focus in on one of the "others" against which Indian-ness

is constructed: 'Western-ness.' With roots in India's colonial past, diaspora

communities' lived experience in and against the West, and in India's own negotiation

with modernity as "Western-ness," Indian identification has a relationship of both desire

and repulsion towards this 'other.'

As a British colony, India was forcibly modernized though the British process of

creating and controlling knowledge of India.[14] The overhaul of India's economy,

government, geography, and society left modernism to be associated with Western-ness,

always as "displaced phenomena, the sign of an alien imprint on indigenous traditions."[15]

Partha Chatterjee notes that it was during the development of a middle class ethos

concurrent with the era of nationalism that the discourse of Indian femininity developed.

[16] Even though Western-ness continued to be construed strictly in terms of foreign-ness

(of race, land, language, etc.) after independence, Guneratne notes that "by 1992 the only

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[13] Ibid.: 126.

[14] Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge : The British in India.*

[15] Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora : Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies, Arts and Politics of the Everyday* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 56.

[16] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments : Colonial and Postcolonial Histories,* 131.

evidence of continued domination was the widely-disseminated rhetoric of economic

imperialism practiced by foreign cartels and multinational companies which threatened

native business monopolies."[17] As Western-ness continues to play a binary role in the

imagination of Indian-ness, it would seem that there are certain interests that benefit

from the casting of Western-ness as anathema. For example, people such as those of

Hindutva, concerned with creating a coherent Indian history connecting both pre- and

post-colonial India, often revert to Hindu epics. These epics are re-interpreted so that

they are understood as leading to those aspects of the modern situation that benefit the

elite who are producing the interpretation. This is one way that moderness as alien is

reconciled with a need to embrace moderness for economic development. Remnants of

the West that cannot be incorporated or indigenized become anathema, and must be

avoided in order to preserve 'true' Indian culture. In their article on America's

contemporary imagination of Japan, Morley and Robins say, "to see Japan as a cultural

enemy is a way to put America's self-perceived "soul" back into focus...What seems

clear is that America both needs and wants its Japan problem...[it] seems to meet a desire

of some kind."[18] Analogously, another way that Indian-ness desires its Western other is

through a need for the specific type of 'other' that it represents. The fierceness and

satisfaction with which this otherness is highlighted through female roles in a number of

Indian films in the late 1990s attests to this desire.

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[17] Anthony R. Guneratne, "Mediating the Rise of Neo-Nationalism in India," *Social Identities* 4, no. 2 (1998): 265.

[18] Ibid.: 140.

Bollywood and the Discourse of the 'Indian Woman'

India's Bollywood film industry produces 2.5 Hindi films every day, and featured in most is some version of 'the Indian woman.'[19] Hindi film, particularly since the advent of the VCR in the 1980s, is ubiquitous in Indian America. The negotiation of an Indian modernity against 'Western-ness' often takes the form of two female stereotypes in Hindi film. The motif of two women, one good and one bad, is often found at the center of the Hindi film's plot. It is always the 'good' girl, the one with a name evoking Indian values and the clothes to match, who ends up with the hero at the end of the film. The other woman, the one who is associated with all of the things which are signs for Western-ness, that is, alcohol, cigarettes, and skimpy clothing, gets what she deserves, rejection by the hero. Such Manichean measures are extremely common in Hindi films, where one of the select number of themes most often utilized is the conflict between good and evil. Steve Derné says that "while film-makers and film-goers associate Indianess with restrained sexuality and respect for emotion and family duties, they also make the women the primary bearers of Indian identity, as they focus on the importance of Indian women wearing traditional clothing and conforming to familial duties."[20]

There has been a trend in the nineties towards producing films that deal explicitly with the diaspora and the place of modernity in Indian-ness. Representing concerns of both Indians and NRIs, these movies are almost always set at least partially at both sites (India and one or more diaspora countries). Examples include *Dilwale Dulhania Le*

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[19] Statistics from: Ashis Nandy, "Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye View of Politics," in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability, and Indian Popular Cinema.*, ed. Ashis Nandy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 21.

[20] Steve Derne, "Handling Ambivalence Towaxrd "Western" Ways: Transnational Cultural Flows and Men's Identity in India," *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 22 (1999): 19.

Jayenge (DDLJ or "The One With the Heart Gets the Bride" (1995), *Pardes* or "Foreign

Land" (1996), and *Aa Ab Laut Chale (AALC)* or "Come, Let's Go Back" (1999).

According to Patricia Uberoi, *DDLJ* was the first film to:

> "portray *their* problems with being Indian in a foreign setting as *our*
> problems of identity as well. That is, the challenge of being, and more
> importantly *remaining,* Indian in a globalized world is one that must be
> met equally by those who stay at home and those who live
> abroad...whether it is at home or abroad it is the *Indian family system* that
> is recognized as the social institution that is now projected as portable."[21]

Uberoi notes that these films reflect India's recognition of the growing professional

middle-class migration, and their potential role as wealthy benefactors of India.[22] The

emphasis on Indian-ness as 'family values' upheld by women is found in both, and each

film ends in the marriage of the hero to the good Indian girl.

One question that comes up for the first-time viewer of a contemporary popular

Hindi film like *AALC, DDLJ,* or *Pardes* is how it can blatantly label the West as corrupt

while wearing its clothing, dancing its dance moves, and even shooting films in its

Western style (note the industry's nickname of 'Bollywood'). Any visitor to India will

realize within days if not hours that popular sentiment towards western 'things' is

characterized by intense desire. Two points to remember are, first, as Ashis Nandy says,

"however crude, melodramatic, and maudlin the use[s] of the double [the 'good' Indian

girl, and the 'bad' western girl] may seem, it helps to maintain a consonant sense of self.

[Doubles] give clarity...to the inner confusion and disintegration"[23] produced by the

East-West conflict. The second, as Derné reminds us, is that what seems like a

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[21] Patricia Uberoi, "Disciplining Desire in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge," Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32, no. 2 (1998): 308.

[22] Ibid.: 307.

[23]Nandy, "Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye View of Politics," 7.

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compromising consumption of Western forms can often be considered in light of how those forms are used to bolster national identity.

> Film-makers and film-goers have not been passive recipients of cinematic stories, film-going practices, and clothing styles from the West. Rather, they have reworked these globally produced cultural forms to highlight a national identity and a gender identity which they see as distinctively Indian, and which they define in opposition to what they see as modern Western selves.[24]

Bollywood films display examples of the practices by which Indians manage to do this. For example, men wear western dress more often than traditional dress, because the opposition to modernity is accomplished through women's dress. By the same token, men can get away with smoking and drinking, and other so-called Western practices.

The visual gendering of Indian-ness as a 'traditional' female is displayed not only in film, but also as a mode of representation in visual media in general. Another example of the discourse can be found in the 1996 Miss World pageant, the first international beauty pageant to be held in India.

Miss World in India

An illustrative example of the politics alive in international beauty contests, and one which will allow us to talk about the policing of women's bodies in the maintenance of India's construction of a non-Western modernity, is the 1996 Miss World contest held in Bangalore, India. Kerala's state government initially supported the pageant, anticipating that it would encourage tourism and bring revenue to the state. A number of people around the country wrote to national papers and journals in support of Miss World

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[24] Derne, "Handling Ambivalence Towaxrd "Western" Ways: Transnational Cultural Flows and Men's Identity in India," 18.

and beauty pageants in general. Others dismissed the pageant as certainly no worse and perhaps even better than the 'immoral' material found in Hindi films and on cable television in India. However, the loudest voices commenting on the pageant were in opposition to the pageant, voiced primarily by members of the various branches of the *Sangh Pariwar* 'family' of far-right political organizations working to make India into a Hindu nation. The three main arguments of these groups were that the pageant was an insult to Indian women, that it was a threat to India's traditional culture, and that it represented economic aggression in the form of the multi-national cosmetic corporations (MNC's) that sponsored it. By looking at the three main arguments against the pageant, we can see what was imagined to be at stake in the staging of Miss World in India by those who opposed it.

In 1994, Indian contestants won both Miss World and Miss Universe contests. The Indian public's enthusiasm over what was perceived as an emblem of success on the international stage led to the growth of an entire industry to produce winning contestants. India went on to win Miss World in 1997, and both Miss World and Miss Universe again in 2000. Like the successful testing of the nuclear bomb in the Spring of 1998, the streak of pageant success was seen as a sign of India's entry into the family of fully industrialized modern nations.

The question then becomes: Why does an otherwise positively received event, an international beauty pageant, become a highly charged political controversy when staged on Indian soil? Looking at the discourse surrounding the pageant, we see that the pageant threatened a carefully constructed Indian modernity that depended on a Western 'other' for its potency, and upon a feminized ideal.

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The protests surrounding the 1996 Miss World pageant, which was held in

Bangalore, India, leaned heavily upon the discourse of 'the Indian woman' for their

points of argument against the pageant's presence in India. One of the main complaints

was that staging this event in India, particularly the swimsuit competition, was an offense

to the Indian woman.[25] One pro-Hindu government official was quoted,[26]

> it is high time we realized that slavishly aping the Western model of
> economic planning is invariably accompanied by permissiveness, laxity in
> sexual mores, and degrading cultural norms. Women are the main
> sufferers of such permissive values which lead to the breakup of
> families.[27]

In such statements we see that the language of protest against the pageant insists that the

preservation of Indian culture lies in its women, particularly with respect to the threat of

Western-ness.

The voices of people protesting the pageant on the grounds that it was a vehicle

for the introduction of multinational cosmetic corporations into India, and on the grounds

that beauty pageants draw attention away from the reality of the lives of Indian women

were subsumed by the protest discourse of the far-right. Many of the opinion pieces

published in Indian newspapers before the pageant assumed a strict binary opposition

between India and the West. Ms. Pramila Nesargi, a BJP legislator, said,

> By letting the Miss World pageant come to India, we are buying their
> concept of beauty, accepting their dictate, their values, and their cultural
> ethos and thereby letting our youth think that what the West does is what
> we should be doing.[28]

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[25] Partha Chatterjee says that "the specific ideological form in which we know the 'Indian Woman' construct in modern literature and arts [and I would add in film and television] of India today is wholly and undeniably a product of the development of a dominant middle class culture coeval with the era of nationalism…"Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments : Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, 131..

[26] Secretary of the RSS, the 'civilian army' of this far- right family of organizations, H.V. Seshadri.

[27] "It's Exploitation of Women: Rss," *Times of India*, 11/13/96 1996.

[28] "P.M. Urged to Stop Miss World Show," *Times of India*, 9/05/96 1996.

In this statement and that in the previous paragraph, we see that the discourse of protest against the pageant accepts that the preservation of Indian culture lies in its women, particularly as they relate to the patriarchal family. The pageant becomes a threat to Indian culture as a patriarchal order that relies on the control of women for its continuity.

Miss World protests focused on the swimsuit event to be held on the final night of the pageant. The most visible and vocal protesters were from the *Mahila Jagran Samiti* (Forum for Awakening Women)[29], a women's arm of the *Sangh Pariwar* Hindu far-right organization. Two months before the competition the group had petitioned the High Court of the State of Karnataka to ban the contest, saying, "the contest…will result in a law and order problem, and spread AIDS within the country." The case was lost, but one week before the contest, the court ruled that the pageant was subject to "the law of the land," meaning that no liquor was to be served in public, and there could be no display of 'obscenity or nudity,' that is, no swimsuit event.

Protests of the swimsuit event emphasized a view of the pageant as the 'West' threatening India's 2000-year old cultural history. Banet-Weiser describes this type of rhetoric as the crisis of the nation projected onto female bodies. In her chapter on international beauty pageants, she notes that international pageants "do more than merely reflect images of Western norms of femininity and nationhood, [they also] manage crisis regarding the display of female bodies – bodies that function simultaneously as a potential site of transgression and stability."[30] The contestants in the 1996 Miss World pageant were potentially going to transgress 'Indian-ness' on an international stage by

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[29] "Mahila Jagran Goes to High Court," *Times of India* 1996.
[30] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World : Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 184.

being seen in the swimsuit event. By getting rid of the swimsuit competition, the Hindu-right's project in keeping women purely on the side of Indian-ness in the India-West binary was achieved. The majority of Indians saw this maneuvering as the hypocrisy it was, noting that cable television and even Hindi films had gone farther in exposing women than the swimsuit event would. However, as India imagines its beauty queens outside of India to demonstrate its membership in the class of modernized nations, Indian modernity at home is defined strictly against Western-ness by its projection onto an ideal female.

The discourse of the Indian woman is present in the Indian American community, brought here with immigrants, but constantly reintegrated into contemporary popular culture by the circulation of media which continues to reaffirm this discourse. The 2001 Miss India pageant utilized this discourse in the construction of its 'ideal female'[31] in the representation of Miss India USA.

Miss India USA 2001

While the preliminary talent contest of the Miss India USA pageant is one of the opportunities a contestant has to introduce creativity into her stage presence, it is also an opportunity for the judges to embrace the discourse of Indian femininity and appraise each contestant's appropriateness for the pageant's stage. The preliminaries are held the night before the pageant, and only the ten finalists chosen from the 35 contestants get to perform their talent segments for the pageant's audience. Of the 35 contestants, 32 performed dance and lip-sync routines to Hindi film songs. Of the three who did not

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[31] Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality : Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe.*

were Miss Virginia, who did a combination martial arts and dance number, Miss New York, who read a poem about peace with a vague 9/11 theme, and Miss California, who performed a dramatic monologue on domestic abuse in the Indian community. The event's MC often joked around between acts, and while he rarely commented on the film-dance performances, he did comment on these three outstanding acts. Miss Virginia's martial arts dance number, complete with artificial machetes and unsmiling countenance, lead him to shake his head afterwards and say (in Hindi), *Aajkal ki larkiya* "Girls these days..."(with an implied inability to understand). This young woman, singled out as being a 'girl' of 'these days,' was hereby deemed too far outside of the modernity conceivable within Indian-ness. She did not make the final ten. Miss California's monologue about domestic abuse was carefully constructed to allow the audience to identify with the victim as their sister or daughter, rather than with the perpetrator. Despite this, the MC uncovered the source of possible tensions when he joked that he would definitely stop hitting his wife after hearing Miss California's piece. Finally, Miss New York performed a repetitious and somewhat simplistic World Trade Center/peace-themed poetry reading to the accompaniment of recorded Hindu temple chanting. There was of course no mention of racial profiling and its impact on the Indian community in her poem. Both of these women made the top ten, performing the poem and monologue for the pageant's audience of three hundred.

I can only speculate on why Miss California's domestic abuse piece was allowed into the final production where Miss Virginia's martial arts performance was not. The pageant emphasizes charity work, particularly with causes in India, and Miss California's piece did not distinguish whether she was discussing abuse in India or America. This

was therefore a safe topic for the stage, although domestic abuse is cited by social reformers in the community as often hidden by the Indian American mainstream. Though her topic was risky, Miss California came on stage dressed as an Indian bride, spoke in Hindi, and took an appropriately non-accusative tone, allowing her to make the cut, so to speak. Miss Virginia, with her stern expression and dual machetes on the other hand, demonstrated a femininity that could not be encompassed by the construction of the Miss India USA stage. It is also worth noting that the winner of the pageant was the one contestant who incorporated classical Indian dance into her otherwise normative film-dance routine. This result mirrors the talent segment in public television's 1997 documentary on Miss India Georgia, where a spandex-clad woman performs a gymnastics routine to catcalls and the MC's jokes about its raciness. The documentary ends with the weeping gymnast in the foreground, and in the background, the victorious classical dancer, the newly crowned Miss India Georgia.

In what is a unique expression of the American adaptation of the discourse of the Indian woman, Miss India USA combines the virtues of the traditional, conservative, culture-bearer with the ideals of white collar professionalism and higher education. The Miss India USA pageant's publicity states: "Many of our past winners have made a name in the Indian and American movies and television and in the modeling career. Our past winners have also become lawyers, CPA's, engineers, business entrepreneurs, doctors and homemakers." At the same time, as was shown in chapter three, the pageant is presented as conservative in its lack of a swimsuit event and in the clothing and performance choices of its contestants. The way that contestants described themselves on the index cards each prepared to have read during her trip down the catwalk reinforced

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this dual demand placed on Miss India USA. For example, one of the two Miss New Yorks said, "my goals are to promote Indian culture and to own my own consulting business." Miss Illinois hoped, "to become a cardiologist and fulfill all my parents' dreams." All of the contestants named professional careers as a goal on stage, though as we saw in the previous chapter, Sarita for one planned to be a corporate lawyer onstage, but an actress and model offstage. Most contestants clearly understood that through their choice of talent acts, apparel, and stated goals, they must comply with the pageant's desire to find a Miss India USA who is both professional and a bearer of 'traditional' Indian culture.

As was seen in chapters two and three, the mainstream Indian community relies heavily on the class connotations of the model minority. As was noted in the previous chapter, part of the performance of Miss India USA involves maintaining the American class status associated with the model minority, an upper middle-class identity that is seen as protecting Indian Americans from the racialization experienced by other American minorities. The intersection of the discourse of the Indian woman with the model minority class ideal helps to explain the positioning of contestants as both traditionally Indian and young professionals.

Transnational Affiliation and Dislocating 'The Indian Woman'

I would like to suggest that for some of the audience members and contestants, participation in this pageant becomes participation in an Indian community that overflows what is contained by the Indian America mainstream and its infatuation with the model minority myth, and instead reveals a fund for Indian identity that can be

described without models that are structures through the binaries of Indian and Western. As the audience and contestants of Miss India USA consist of both American-born Indians and Indian immigrants, there are different cultural contexts of Indianess present. Many American-born children of Indian parents have visited India, and have heard family stories, but their image of contemporary India is often informed by Indian films and other entertainment media. These Indian youth often watch the same Bombay-produced films as their cohort in Indian Southeast Asia, and they listen to the same music as youth in New Delhi, dance music mixed by South Asian descended DJs in London. A number of people I spoke to also grouped the pageant with South-Asian youth-culture events happening in the New York area. As was discussed in chapter two, the pageant itself invokes the Miss India stage as having a context which includes both the American and Indian entertainment industries. Since the pageant, contestants who expressed the desire to further their chances of entering the Indian film industry or other entertainment careers have shown up on a number of websites with Miss India USA 2001 added to their resumes.[32] Clearly, the reality of Indian identity as present in this pageant cannot be described simply by the disciplined binaries projected by the Indian mainstream.

By identifying the ways that diaspora membership in the Indian community is defined by its linkages to 'limitless space' and a transnational imaginary, we begin to open up an 'impure' space, that is, one that does not obey the binaries through which the mainstream defines itself, to discuss women who want to retain their cultural background, yet remain free of the assignments of being 'home.' As has been shown, in the Indian community, the discourse of women as a cultural 'home' for a non-Western Indian

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[32] See the 'models' link on *www.worldwidepageants.com.*, and the models section on *www.desithrill.com*

modernity is itself transnational. Therefore merely recognizing transnational connections in diaspora is not enough. First, the existence of a hegemonic representation of Indian culture and identity must be identified within the transnational community. After this is done, we can look around it for counterhegemonies and other affiliations that allow women the mobility to travel away from their discursive place as 'home.' An element of this process can be found in the aspirations of Miss India contestants to use the pageant to mobilize their social capital for the purpose of engaging with opportunities that are not located in the discursive construct of women as place.

One way to take up the challenge of redefining 'home' so as to prevent against its restriction on the movement of women is to see locatedness in terms of the impurity of all spaces. Irene Gedalof says, "It is not so much the association of 'women' with 'place' or location that is problematic, but rather the overarching framework of purity, fixity and authenticity within which predominant notions of 'place' are constrained."[33] As Banet-Weiser was earlier referenced as stating, in a pageant, female bodies function simultaneously as a potential site of transgression and stability. Once this is recognized, we can see that there is no guarantee that stability will be maintained, either in the audience reading of the pageant, or by the contestants themselves. Irene Gedalof suggests that we recognize identity as rhizomatic rather than based on stable and immobile 'roots.' As Deleuze and Guattari explain, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be."[34] In the imagination of the pageant as part of a transnational culture that is rhizomatic, there is potential for women to escape being represented as the roots of a modern Indian identity.

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[33] Gedalof, "Identity in Transit: Nomads, Cyborgs and Women."

In her review of feminist models of identity, Irene Gedalof finds the focus on

*dis*location of women as a source of radical potential. She cites Luce Irigaray, saying,

"When women are positioned as the 'still silent ground'[35] upon which identities are

constituted, when they are called upon to stand for a pure and unchanging place of home

or timeless tradition, then they cannot... 'take (a) place' of their own." Irigaray finds

potential for overturning notions of purity and identity in the "transgressive effects of

insisting on women's right to travel."[36] In other words, by redefining women's

locatedness as part of a rhizomatic Indian culture connected through criss-crossing

transnational affiliations, and the locations of diaspora communities as impure

constructions from diaspora materials made by members to enable their own 'travel,' we

can respect women's activities and enculturation while challenging models of identity

that tie women to a particular notion of identity/place, such as 'imagined communities'

that map notions of purity onto women as 'home.'

We have discussed Miss India USA's display of Indian women, who by stepping

onstage, take up the cultural mantle of Indianess as can be seen in their Indian dress and

talents. However, by identifying the ways that membership in the Indian community is

also defined by its linkages to a transnational imaginary in this pageant, we begin to

make room to discuss identities that are not defined by binaries of Indian-ness versus

Western-ness, or pure versus impure. Feminist theory has recognized that women are

often assigned to one side of such binaries, and that *dis*locating the activities of women

from such assignments can be subversive. By first recognizing the agenda of the Miss

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[34] Gilles and F. Guattari Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Athlone, 1988), 7.

[35] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 365.

[36] Gedalof, "Identity in Transit: Nomads, Cyborgs and Women," 340.

India USA pageant in reproducing a static definition of Indian-ness, we are able to then see the subversive potential in the *transnational* affiliations of the pageant. Those participants who imagined the pageant as a transnational venue also imagined it as an opportunity for women to use their 'Indianess' to access professional opportunities in entertainment. By seeing both of these processes at work in the pageant, we open up a space to discuss women who want to retain their cultural background, yet remain free of the assignments of being a static or unchanging 'home' for an essentialized Indian identity.

Chapter 5

New Cultural Forms, Affiliations, and the Materials of Diaspora

Defy convention. Wear what suits you. (Ad in Miss India USA program for Asif's DesiTrendz.com)

I really liked it when the MC said afterwards, "You know I have a three year old daughter," and like hearing him say that made me feel like you know, I influenced him today...and I really hoped that I influenced someone else. (11/26/01, interview with Sarita, contestant, on one emcee's response to her dramatic monologue on domestic abuse)

The conflicting interests that are found in the Miss India USA pageant revolving around class, gender, and race reflect the same conflicts that appear in the Indian American community at large. An increasing percentage of the Indian American community consists of second generation and recently immigrated working class individuals, and the ways that these Indian Americans choose to mobilize materials available to them as diaspora members is influenced by their experience in America in combination with a variety of transnational affiliations. By looking at the ways that these 'non-mainstream' individuals create new cultural forms and identities, we can see that belonging to a local community that is at the same time shaped by international connections can only be explained after re-examining our understanding of the way diaspora works. For example, looking at the ways that people of Indian descent struggle with the Indian mainstream in trying to establish an ethnic identity that is also queer, activist, or 'South Asian American' reveals that simply referring to the Indian diaspora in America in terms of shared boundary marking practices or a shared imagination of home is inadequate. Examining patterns of consumption in this changing community also reveals the need for re-examining the ways that we study and discuss transnational

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communities in local contexts. The preceding chapters have revealed that representations of Indian-ness such as that of Miss India USA are projects of a mainstream Indian community—a community linked to a transnational Indian bourgeois that dominates the representation of 'India' as a nation at home as well as in the U.S. Having recognized that the Indian diaspora in America is not a singular entity, we can begin to follow up on evidence in performances such as Miss India USA that there are multiple affiliations in the community both locally and internationally.

Referring back to issues raised in chapter one, this chapter asks: How can we talk about the Indian American community without essentializing it in a way that erases difference; in other words, how can we look at people who feel Indian but do not fit the representation performed by the community in events like Miss India USA? How can we recognize the importance of transnational Indian connections without using current language of diaspora that contributes to the hegemony of mainstream Indian-ness in the community? The answer involves recognizing that belonging to the Indian diaspora cannot be described in definite terms without exacerbating the dominance of already powerful voices in both diasporic communities and in India. Instead, we can look at the material creativity and consumption within diaspora communities as they may conform to, act against, or drive historically-specific sets of local and transnational hegemonic cultural politics. Diasporas are often named, or name themselves in reference to a nation, or in the case of the Miss India USA, in reference to two nations. However, Paul Gilroy's work on the Black Atlantic shows that, "…national units are not the most appropriate basis for studying this history, for the African diaspora's consciousness of

itself has been defined in and against constricting national boundaries."[1] Though they

have different histories, Indian communities outside of India do share an inheritance from

the imperial and colonialist periods. Through this "intricate web of cultural and political

connections,"[2] and through an overlapping of the creative consumption of material and

ideological products produced within individual communities, members of diaspora are

bound together.

Cultural Production Amongst the Second Generation: The 'Desi Party' Scene

In the most recent issue of the journal *Amerasia*, co-editors Vijay Prashad and

Biju Mathews explain the name of the issue, *Satyagraha*[3] *in America*, as highlighting the

need to emphasize the struggles and conflicts within what many assume to be a

monolithic South Asian community. They also draw attention to the fact that as the

community changes, not only are the interests of post-1965 immigrants being challenged

by those of second generation South Asians and recent immigrants, but these newer

interests themselves are varied, and reflect different experiences of identity in the United

States. Whereas post-1965 upper-middle class immigrants have centered their community

culture around pan-Indian 'events' such as Miss India USA, the India Day Parade in New

York, and the Festival of India in Edison, New Jersey, which focus on classical Indian

culture and elite lifestyles, lower middle- and working class immigrants have tended to

settle in ethnic enclaves such as Jackson Heights in Queens, or in the increasing number

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[1] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic : Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 157.
[2] Ibid., 158.
[3] *Satyagraha* means 'truth force' and was the name Gandhi gave to the non-violent resistance to British colonial rule in India.

of other 'Little Indias' in major U.S. cities. In these communities, cultural life focuses

more on popular forms that exist in daily life,[4] and identity is defined more in terms of

territory than with occasion-centered upper-middle class 'events.' It can be said that the

desi culture discussed below is a popular form, like that found in 'Little Indias,' drawing

as it does on both Indian and American pop culture. However, despite some similarities,

Prashad and Mathews point out important differences between recent immigrants and the

second generation:

> Young South Asians, many of whom are very radical in different ways
> than those who come to the U.S. for higher degrees [post-1965
> immigrants], have deluged college campuses in the last five years. The
> recent migrants, on the other hand, continue to be moved by conflicts in
> the homeland (and form a bloc within the Hindu Students Council, or else
> in the Forum of Indian Leftists); there are, in addition, the tireless
> volunteers for charity organizations like Association for India's
> Development (AID).[5]

In the development of a second generation South Asian youth culture, a new sense of

ethnic and racial identity is articulated. Whereas their parents, as well as recent

immigrants, came to America from a background where 'ethnicity' was determined

primarily in terms of region and linguistics, second-generation South Asians learn racial

identities though growing up in a context where "their dignity is always in doubt."[6]

Though as of yet there is little to show in terms of a self-conscious 'South Asian' social

formation, the term 'South Asian American' *has* been adopted by second generation

youth, something that became possible as the state/regional affiliations of their parents

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[4] Khandelwal, "Indian Immigrants in Queens, New York City: Patterns of Spatial Concentration and Distribution, 1965-1980," 181.
[5] Vijay and Biju Mathews Prashad, "*Satyagraha* in America: The Political Culture of South Asian in the U.S.," *Amerasia Journal* 25, no. 3 (1999-2000): xii.
[6] Ibid.: xii-xiii.

became secondary in the second generation.[7] Use of the term *desi*, Hindi/Urdu slang for South Asian, reflects the movement of nationalisms from the realm of homeland competition (such as between India and Pakistan) to the realm of identity politics in the U.S. This moment of shifting from a sense of un-raced 'ethnicity' to a self-conscious sense of being a racial minority can be seen in the cultural forms of South Asian youth culture in America.

The Desi Party Scene

In their self-positioning and in the creation of a cultural space for themselves as children of immigrants, second generation South Asian Americans have at least the potential for becoming politicized in their ethnic/racial identities. Even if there is not yet a level of overt political activism equivalent to that of other minority youth cultures in the U.S., the manner in which South Asian youth cultures form new cultural identities itself is political. Prashad and Mathews point out that the *material* production of culture is particularly important, and often overlooked and undertheorized, as a site of political transformation They draw attention to alternative means of cultural production among South Asian youth such as electronic magazines, re-mix music, graffiti, and use of the body as a site of art (piercings and tattoos):

> If youth culture does not seem to be always overtly political, it certainly
> bears within it the preconditions for political action. The use of culture as
> a political device among young people should urge theory to extend our
> notion of the "political" and to embrace, for instance, the kinds of political
> transformations of the body engendered by the new South Asian party

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[7] Prashad and Mathews; Shankar and Srikanth.

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scene…as well as the gradual adoption of the styles of political protest within social spaces.[8]

Examples of second generation material culture and its links to desi party culture were found in the programs and website for Miss India USA. The program's advertisement for *DesiClub.com*, "The South Asian Media Source™" describes its content as "Parties, Bollywood, Style, Music, Community, Literature, CDs, DVDs, Posters, Tickets, Clothes, Dating." The presence of the Desi Party scene was made manifest by an advertisement for *Desinights.com*, a website that like a number of other youth culture-related sites, has a link on the pageant's homepage. This site serves as a bulletin board and calendar for the schedules of various deejays who play the desi party circuit in a number of clubs found in major American cities, particularly in the New York area. The Miss India USA program's advertisement for *DesiTrendz.com*, an online clothing company, describes its product as,

> The hottest new fashion wear that will amalgamate the faces of East and West. We see that fashion and entertainment [are] no longer mutually exclusive spheres. Now more than ever, entertainment is linked with fashion. TRENDZ represents more than a product, it encompasses a cultural experience that we hope to promote through our unique designs, fashion and entertainment.

This company's logo is "Defy convention. Wear what suits you." If Prashad and Mathews are correct, the message of such consumption-oriented statements of the need for something new and different to 'suit' desis is a political as well as a marketing statement. The collision between such marketing, the message of American multiculturalism, and the trend of Indo-chic in American fashion will be discussed below.

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[8] Prashad, "*Satyagraha* in America: The Political Culture of South Asian in the U.S.," xii-xiii.

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The growth of the desi party scene, first as an offshoot of the British Asian music

movement that began with *bhangra*, and now the center of a cultural form that has spread

to most large American cities with significant South Asian populations, is a productive

place to look at one of the primary sites of second generation cultural production. The

most prolific scholar on South Asian youth culture in the New York area, Sunaina Maira,

describes this youth culture as 're-mix,' saying that two discourses of authenticity operate

in re-mix youth culture. She notes that these are "the authenticity of subcultural cool and

of collective nostalgia, both of which are embedded in each other and that sometimes

reinforce but also contradict each other as their "moral projects" lead youth to different

understandings of how to be "Indian" at this particular moment in New York."[9] The term

're-mix' culture is taken primarily from the music that forms the center of the desi party

scene, where Indian American deejays, and sometimes visiting deejays from the UK, mix

Indian music with dance beats in urban dance clubs. Maira argues that re-mix culture

reveals the tension between Indian youth who want to preserve an authentic ethnic

identity, like their parents, but are also trying to position themselves in hierarchies of race

and class in America. This youth subculture creates a space for young South Asians to

socialize with other South Asians while interpreting Indian musical and dance traditions

through American popular culture.

Essential to this subculture of not only the mainstream Indian community, but

also mainstream American culture, is the music produced by South Asians in the UK,

U.S., and India. While desi youth culture represents a new moment in the creation of an

ethnic identity in the U.S., it not only encompasses both second generation South Asian

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[9] Sunaina Maira, "Henna and Hip-Hop: The Politics of Cultural Production and the Work of Cultural

Americans as well as recently immigrated youth, but also has clear discursive links to

South Asian youth cultures in London, New Delhi, and Bombay, as well as other

diasporic locations. The music that fuels this subculture began with the formation of the

Asian Underground in the UK, a group of musicians who wanted to use their music to

protest racism against South Asians in the UK and at the same time affirm their own

place in British society. The politics and ethnic pride of this music was brought to

America where it has been used by second generation South Asians to create spaces in

which are growing new structures of feeling.[10] One New York-based deejay, Navdeep

Jijher, who also self-identifies as a medical student and tabla player, explains the

increasing number of South Asian deejays: "You have second gens growing up here that

want to be heard." An upcoming movie, *American Chai*[11], also affirms more vocal and

self-conscious trends in the second generation in its portrayal of a young man who is a

medical student but wants to be a musician against his parents' wishes.

By reading South Asian youth culture simply as resistance, the ambivalence

toward race and ethnicity present in desi culture is lost. Rather than simply a form of

resistance to American popular culture, or even mainstream Indian culture, we can trace

the presence of both of these influences in re-mix culture, in addition to challenges to

them. Maira notes that this youth culture offers not a purely hybrid 'third' space,[12] but is

always embedded in the dialectic between the presumably divergent pathways of

assimilation and ethnic authenticity. An example can be found in the appropriation of

Studies," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3, no. 3 (2000): 339.

[10] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature, Marxist Introductions* (Oxford Eng.: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[11] Anurag Mehta, "American Chai," ed. Anurag Mehta (2002).

hip-hop style and language by desi party culture. While Indian music mixed with rap and reggae characterizes its soundscape, hip-hop fashion and brand-name clothes along with other material status markers serve as recognizably ethnic signs, and perhaps even lend a certain racialized toughness to desi style. Maira says, "black style [in the desi party scene] is viewed as the embodiment of a particular machismo, the object of a racialized desire, and simultaneously, of racialized fear."[13]

The strict definition of gender roles in desi culture demonstrates most clearly that while it is a new enunciation of cultural identity, the building blocks themselves are not new. It is males who adopt signs of racialized toughness through hip-hop fashion, and females who must retain an overtly 'Indian' identity. One of Maira's respondents, 'Manisha,' says,

> Guys can get away with [the 'hoody' look] but girls who are considered 'cool' dress prettier. I think the guys are intimidated by that [girls with a hip-hop look], it's taken as a sign of being closer to Latinos or Blacks, of being outside the Indian circle, as I am...the guys may think we're rougher, or not as sweet.[14]

The expectations for the appearance and demeanor of women in desi culture do not differ drastically from those of Miss India USA. Though many women and men associated with the 'desi' party scene recognize such expectations as unrealistic, they often do nothing to openly challenge them. In Vivek Bald's explanation of an exchange with one of the Indian American New York City taxi drivers portrayed in his documentary work, we can get a sense of why it becomes difficult even for those aware of the hypocritical gender expectations in the South Asian community to challenge them:

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[12] Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House : Indian American Youth Culture in New York City, Asian American History and Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 16.

[13] Sunaina Maira, "Identity Dub: The Paradoxes of an Indian American Youth Subculture (New York Mix)," *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (1999): 45.

One night a cab driver turns to me and asks: Do you have a girlfriend?...Then he continues, complaining that American women are too promiscuous, that in America South Asian women become spoiled, and they need to be restricted. And through all of this I don't say a thing—not a word of argument, not a word of protest. In my silence, I'm thinking about my girlfriend and other close friends, my feminist Indian American mother, and my grandmother from Lahore who used to rise each morning against her husband's wishes and go to sing protest songs in front of British colonial jails. But still I don't speak a word.[15]

To me this is a clear reflection of how difficult it is to challenge gendered statements of Indian identity when one's own identity and acceptance by definition thereby become jeopardized. Upkar, one of Maira respondents, says,

It's almost as if, if we disagree with our parents, we're part of the rest of society, because either you're good or you're bad...Because we definitely don't agree with everything our parents do, and by doing that, we're already wrong. But we definitely don't agree with everything society says, like there's this third place where we are, you know.[16]

Straightforward resistance to binaries becomes difficult when one is concerned with acceptance and inhabiting an ethnic identity defined by such binaries, and when the only other option is being identified with mainstream American society. As is the case for contestants in Miss India USA, acceptance within desi culture relies on compliance with this binary. Young women in clubs have the choice of being seen as desirable/Indian or undesirable/not Indian. The first choice is available only to those who adopt the correct appearance and attitudes. Those who see this as unfair or unrealistic have a similarly limited choice; if they challenge these norms then they are seen as un-Indian. Of course, there are less overt and self-conscious ways to challenge the hegemonic ideals of the post-1965 generation, involving the creativity of new cultural forms and their consumption, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

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[14] Maira, *Desis in the House : Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*, 48.

[15] Vivek Bald, "Taxi Meters and Plexiglass Partitions," in *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America*, ed. Sunaina and Rajini Srikanth Maira (New York: Asian American Writers' Workshop, 1996), 70.

[16] Maira, *Desis in the House : Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*, 87.

The Persistence of Gender and Class

The fact that Indian identity relies on a discourse of gender that is itself transnational, and has been reproduced in desi youth culture, leaves a large population of Indian Americans dispossessed. A situation is created where such a person must self-consciously work out the relationship between their own notions of gender and their ethnic identity, an identity defined by gender in a way they reject. Second generation women are expected to be 'chaste,' 'pure,' 'docile,' and 'obedient.' These ideals are taught hand-in-hand with the model minority demands of apoliticism, particularly as it does not go along with 'Indian femininity.' Young women are raised to believe feminism and ultimately, perhaps, women's strength, is anti-Indian. The result is that many Indian Americans who do not subscribe to this gendering of Indian identity, which might include not speaking Indian languages, disinterest in Hindi films, or neglecting to socialize primarily with other Indians, are seen as somehow less Indian, or as inferior Indians. Those who are seen this way often themselves reject affiliation with the Indian community.

In an article in the compilation *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America*, Das Gupta and Das Das Gupta relate the comments of an immigrant mother: "All the accomplished young women in our community seem to be leaving the fold by marriage!" The authors agree that women who marry outside of the community tend to be those who are "outspoken, outgoing, and often activist."[17] This phenomenon seems to

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[17] Shamita and Shayantani Das Gupta Das Das Gupta, "Astride the Lion's Back: Gender Relations in the Asian Indian Community," in *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America*, ed. Sunaina and Rajini Srikanth Maira (New York: Asian American Writers' Workshop, 1996), 382.

be an easily identifiable result of the demands of belonging both to the mainstream community and to desi youth culture, which also requires adherence to a strictly defined gender code and an apolitical ethnicity. The options are seen by both mainstream and desi culture as either you follow the rules, or you are not accepted. Through the patriarchal control of the Indian community's representation, the 'proper' behavior of women in the community, regardless of birthplace, has become a litmus test of community solidarity.[18] The view that activism, particularly among women, is antithetical to being 'Indian,' however, denies a strong tradition of women's activism in India, a tradition that has been lost and over-written in the process of immigration and self-recreation for majority Indian American culture.[19] For example, Das Gupta relates an anecdote concerning one of her students: "[A] young woman asked me once whether my daughter was politically active. On hearing my affirmation she proudly declared, "My family is very traditional. I live within my heritage. I would never do something like that."[20] Such sentiments are common, and have lead to the marginalization of activist elements among Indian America by the Indian American hegemonic construction of 'community.' It is partially for this reason that in the Miss India USA pageant, acts like Sarita's monologue on domestic violence are rare, a fact she recognizes.[21] As another example, in 1995 the FIA (Federation of Indians in America), a group similar to the Indian Festival Committee (IFC) which organized Miss India USA, banned all women's groups, gay/lesbian groups, and other 'political' groups from the India Day

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[18] Ibid., 384-85.
[19] Ibid., 388.
[20] Ibid., 389.
[21] See chapter three for interview.

Parade in New York City.[22] Even outsiders to the community reinforce these notions, for as a number of 'third-world feminists' have pointed out,[23] due to Orientalist notions of gender, when Asian women do become active forces 'Westernization' is given credit.

People of South Asian descent who identify as homosexual are even more ostracized by the community for failing to comply with gender-based definitions of identity and 'community' belonging. Even more than women who do not identify with Indian femininity as prescribed by the Indian mainstream, South Asian American gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals are told that homosexuality does not exist in Asia, that it is a Western perversion, and therefore they have no place in the community.[24] They find themselves a minority within a minority, whether they choose to identify with their parent communities or with the mainstream American gay community, as most do. As was pointed out in chapter two, even affiliation with Asian American groups is difficult, since South Asians are still not widely accepted as Asian Americans, even by the Asian American gay community.

Even within the desi scene, queer identities are not accepted as South Asian. The atmosphere at parties remains generally heterosexist, if not homophobic, as is true with mainstream club culture. This is not to say that queer youth avoid these parties, but they are not visibly 'out' when they attend.[25] Outside of party spaces, Gayatri Gopinath has found that *bhangra* has been strategically appropriated by queer South Asians in the West to signify South Asian-ness to mainstream (white) queer communities and to other people

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[22] Das Das Gupta, "Astride the Lion's Back: Gender Relations in the Asian Indian Community," 385.
[23] Chandra Talpade Mohanty being the first and most cited. See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review* 30, no. Autumn (1988).

of color. She says, "...bhangra enacts a subaltern "counter-public" space, as queer theorist Jose Muñoz terms it."[26] Maira has also found that at parties hosted by the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA) and in their floats for the Gay Pride March in New York, "bhangra remix has long been explicitly acknowledged as a signifier of 'queer diasporic identity' and hybrid popular style that is linked to queer desi subcultures in other diasporic communities, for instance, in Toronto and London."[27] The adoption of bhangra and other 'South Asian' musics as part of a production of an ethnically distinct queer identity that is linked to other communities worldwide demonstrates how production and consumption of diaspora materials links communities despite the manner in which the international community is defined by the mainstream.

In addition to those who challenge gender roles, the increasing number of South Asians who work in blue-collar jobs are also silenced or rendered invisible by the mainstream community. Chapter two demonstrated how the performance of 'traditional' culture in the Miss India USA and Miss India Georgia pageants worked to erase the class backgrounds of participants that did not fit the model minority image. Wealthy Indian male bourgeoisie, who produce large cultural events such as Miss India USA and the India Day Parade through organizations like the FIA and IFC, have controlled the public face of the community through these cultural institutions, as well as religious, informational, and political institutions. The post-1965 Indian mainstream has largely erased the history of activism, particularly women's activism, in India and other South

[24] Sandip Roy, "The Call of Rice: (South) Asian American Queer Communities," in *A Part, yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, ed. Lavina Dhingra and Rajini Srikanth Shankar (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 155.
[25] Maira, *Desis in the House : Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*, 46.

Asian countries. Second generation *desi* youth culture has inherited an aversion to political activism, due to first generation disinterest and the erasure of what activist work has been achieved by Indian Americans. Despite this, the small number of recently immigrated and second generation activists are some of the only forces within the Indian American population representing the political interests of the increasing number of Indians in America who do not fit the post-1965 model, such as the growing South Asian working class.

Other than the interaction of recently-immigrated and second generation youth in the *desi* party scene, second generation Indian Americans and members of the working class have little context, connections, or tradition through which to form a self-conscious community. The comments of Vivek Bald, a documentary film-maker and DJ in both the US and UK South Asian music scenes, on his work with South Asian taxi-drivers in New York City reveals this divide:

> "I tell Ahmed I have this idea about making a documentary about South Asian taxi drivers in New York. I say that I've noticed a division in our communities here. On the one hand are the people who came in the 50's and 60's—professionals who settled quietly and comfortably in the suburbs. And on the other hand the thousands of mostly young men who came in the mid 1980's after shifts in the world economy and the closing of borders in Europe—people from smaller towns and less privileged backgrounds, who are working at restaurants and newsstands or driving taxicabs to survive....Two years after our first meeting, I get back in touch with Ahmed and ask if I can interview him. And I should know by now that I'm also part of the story. With my shaky Urdu, my light skin and mixed family origins, and the privilege that puts me in the back seat of the cab, not the front, I can't escape that I'm part of the story. But there's a tense silence as I sit with the camera in my hands—the camera my parents bought me. I won't admit that while my mother and Ahmed share a birthplace, Ahmed and I might not share anything at all. Or that my few

[26] Gayatri Gopinath, "Notes on a Queer South Asian Planet: Gayatri Gopinath on Queer Transnational Cultures," *Rungh: A South Asian Quarterly of Culture, Comment & Criticism* 3, no. 3 (1995): 10.
[27] Ibid.

words of Urdu, because they're spoken here in New York, don't suddenly make us part of the same community. As I start to shoot, I want to believe we're connected, though we grew up in different nations, religions, histories, and here in New York, we're separated by a taximeter and a plexiglass partition."[28]

Though working class Indian Americans could most benefit from social and political recognition as a minority, second generation South Asians have the sense of being a racial minority that could bring them to demand this recognition. As Prashad and Mathews point out, it is the second generation who has adopted the use of 'South Asian' to describe themselves together with other immigrants from the subcontinent. However, as mentioned above, there is not yet a sense of the need for activism associated with 'South Asian' identity, because there is no social formation behind the term.[29] Despite this, Prashad and Mathews recognize the potential of the second generation to "lead us into a far more useful deployment of ourselves as a "racial minority" rather than as an 'un-raced' ethnicity," counter to the first-generation tactic of imagining itself as un-ethnic and separate from U.S. society and its struggles.[30]

Material Diaspora: The Creativity of Production and Consumption

As can be seen in desi youth culture's appropriation of hip-hop's racialized signs through fashion and language, production of commodities and practices of consumption are rich places to look into how South Asian youth build ethnic identities. These processes can also be examined to see whether or not desi culture subverts America's insistence that ethnicity, as domesticated difference, be packaged in a way easily consumed by mainstream America. Arjun Appadurai argues that when objects are

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[28] Bald, "Taxi Meters and Plexiglass Partitions," 67.

[29] Prashad, "*Satyagraha* in America: The Political Culture of South Asian in the U.S.."

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"diverted" from the path they customarily follow in their "social lives" as commodities, it is a sign of creativity or crisis.[31] The utilization of commodities that are signs of Indian-ness is one of the main tools in the creation of second generation youth culture. These commodities are part of the bank of raw materials offered by diaspora membership, and by recognizing them as such we can get beyond questions of cultural authenticity to focus on what is more important: how and why these materials are used the way the are.[32]

One example of a commodity that has become a sign of Indian-ness within many diaspora communities is familiarity with Bollywood Hindi film. While it is true that since the advent of the VCR in the 1980's, Hindi film is found in most diaspora communities, the way that its dance and music have come to figure in Indian American culture, particularly second-generation social practices, reflects the nature of second generation ethnic identity in an American context. As was noted in chapter four, thirty-two out of the thirty-five preliminary talent acts at Miss India USA 2001 were lip-sync and dance numbers taken directly from Hindi films. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the 1996 Miss India Georgia pageant documented by public television. This reflects common practice at Indian cultural events, where every holiday celebration, college cultural show, and community festival features more than one such act performed by teen- and college-age youth. Much of the community now views Hindi film as 'traditional' Indian culture, one of the reasons it is so popular in Indian beauty pageants. In contrast, within India, Hindi film holds a place similar to that of Hollywood film in

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things : Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 26.

America: many people are familiar with it and consume it on a regular basis, but it remains one of a number of popular cultural forms available to the public. Sunaina Maira remarks that although she grew up in India, she is "incapable of singing a single Hindi film song...nor can [she] easily slip into "filmi" dance gestures that bear any close resemblances to onscreen performances."[33] Despite such discrepancies between Indian Americans and Indians in India, in America familiarity with Hindi film is used as a cultural boundary marker of what is Indian.

One of the new ways that Bollywood as an ethnic sign has been incorporated into emerging South Asian American cultural forms is through music. The first South Asian musicians outside of India to combine Indian popular music with Western popular music as an expression of identity were deejays in the UK. Beginning with dance re-mixes of the Punjabi folk dance music called *bhangra*, as was mentioned above, they soon included Hindi film music in their experiments. This music was imported to the US through its 'Little Indias,' primarily in the New York area, and has lead to the growth of that area's desi party scene as South Asian American deejays follow suit. Numerous online magazines are devoted to keeping up with desi culture, noting which South Asian deejays are performing at specific clubs in major U.S. cities[34] as they develop South Asian dance scenes of their own.

In the creative practices of second generation youth culture, we can see new ways that race is imagined, as well as the imagination of the possible crossing of racial borders.

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[32] For an elaboration of this argument, see Margaret Jolly, "Specters of Inauthenticity," *Contemporary Pacific* 4 (1992).

[33] Maira, *Desis in the House : Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*, 121.

[34] A number of these online magazines featured links on the Miss India USA website, another example of its ties to *desi* youth culture.

This too can be examined through consumption. Maira's work has focused on the

position of South Asian American youth culture on both the giving and receiving ends of

cultural appropriation. Her study of urban South Asian American youth culture's

consumption of black and Latino cultural idioms,[35] particularly those of hip-hop,

describes the creation of a uniquely racialized second-generation subculture. She says,

> Remix youth culture's sampling of hip hop allows desi youth to hold both impulses—of ethnicization and also of participation in the U.S. racial formation—in a somewhat delicate balance, and as a racial project perhaps defers the question of "black" or "white through the ambiguity of adopting black style in an ethnically exclusive place [desi parties].[36]

Consumption of Indian signs in combination with more racialized signs of ethnicity are

put together in an American context, creating a new enunciation of both racial and

cultural affiliations.

American Consumption of Indo-Chic

Beginning in the mid-1990s, mainstream American culture began to consume

commodities that had functioned for many in the second-generations as signs of ethnicity.

The hybrid style created by young women at desi parties is referred to as 'Indo-chic,' a

style combining Indian fabrics and accessories with American club style. Indo-chic

became a mainstream fashion trend in the late 1990s with the U.S. fashion industry's

appropriation of Indian fabric and motifs. Second generation consumption of materials

that have acted as signs of ethnicity is further complicated for Indian American youth as

'Indo-chic' continues to go mainstream with the recent popularity of Bollywood in

America. Looking at the increasing fetishization and consumption of Indian popular

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[35] Maira, *Desis in the House : Indian American Youth Culture in New York City.*

culture by mainstream America serves as a kind of counter-perspective to the processes of racial formation at work in South Asian appropriation of hip hop. In Madonna's brief but highly visible Indian phase in 1998, Macy's "Bollywood fashion" display (complete with monitors displaying Hindi film clips) in 2000 in Manhattan, and the growing fashionability of Bollywood itself, we see an erasure of the histories of these signs of ethnicity. As Maira points out, markers worn by South Asian women that have been read as signs of "tradition," "otherness," or, in the case of the violent attacks by the Dotbusters, unassimilable "dotheads" are now packaged and sold to make white femininity "exotic."[37] Recently, hip-hop itself has picked up on Indo-chic. The 2002 track "Addictive" by Truth Hurts, a female hip-hop artist, features a background loop from an unidentified Hindi film song. The song's video presents a harem-like scene where the artist and other women wear 'oriental' outfits exposing their navels, hennaed hands, and bindi-adorned foreheads. Even the video's dance moves simulate Hindi film dance. This complicates Maira's argument that Indo-chic has become a way to exoticize white femininity. More accurately, signs of Indian ethnicity are co-opted via Indo-chic products to provide an alternative and sexualized femininity, a process which removes all evidence of their histories.

In the past year, the popularity of Bollywood with American film-makers along with the first few Bollywood films to make American independent-film house rounds, has lead to an even greater visibility of Indian popular culture in America. The increasing consumption of "Indo-chic," as well as phenomena such as an upcoming

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[36] Maira, "Henna and Hip-Hop: The Politics of Cultural Production and the Work of Cultural Studies," 339.
[37] Maira, *Desis in the House : Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*, 198.

television series (Fall 2002) called *The Guru*[38] and Andrew Lloyd Weber's new musical

Bombay Dreams (2002), complicate the expression of ethnicity through consuming signs

of South Asian-ness. At the same time as some South Asians may feel that mainstream

American consumption of Indo-chic affirms their belonging and sense of the value of

their culture, in other words, by making South Asian-ness visible, at the same time they

experience a loss of control of the signifying powers of such signs. Indo-chic

domesticates South Asian difference as South Asians themselves have controlled and

performed it. Maira argues, "Indo-chic is not only about contests of authenticity and

cultural appropriation, but also about discursive shifts and ideological strategies that

accommodate difference in the face of changing patterns of immigration, labor, and

citizenship."[39] The increasing presence of working and lower-middle class South Asian

Americans, who do not fit into ideas of the spiritual East, represent a new kind of South

Asian-ness in America which must be domesticated. Perhaps this helps to explain the

growing consumption of Indian popular culture in America, a safe form whose foreigness

becomes neutralized as an alternate femininity, as 'kitsch,' or as other translated forms

accessible to Western tastes.

Like the version of Indian ethnicity produced by the Miss India USA pageant,

which presents a palatable 'model minority' Indianess, Indo-chic presents ethnicity in a

readily consumable form. It also represents the danger in accepting discourses of

hybridity. A number of ethnomusicologists have pointed this danger out through their

work on the travel of musics through patterns of consumption. John Hutnik, as was

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[38] This series stars Heather Graham as a porn star and 'exotic dancer' and will feature Bollywood style dance scenes

[39] Maira, "Henna and Hip-Hop: The Politics of Cultural Production and the Work of Cultural Studies," 359.

introduced in chapter one, sees the popular consumption of forms described as hybrid as embodying the fetishization, and therefore de-politicization, of signs of ethnicity for market-related consumption. As Hutnik points out, hybridity-talk is another way to domesticate difference, and he draws attention to increasing acceptance of the idea of India as simply a market for ideas and capital exploitation. Fred Lau's[40] work demonstrates that even the work of ethnic-Americans can exacerbate the erasure of history, as they promote mainstream consumption of their art as products of the multicultural, hybrid, and 'exotic.' Finally, aligning himself with Paul Gilroy, Danny Hoch describes phenomena like Indo-chic: "we" take your culture from you, soup it up, and then sell it back to you."[41] These theorists draw attention to the many ways in which consumption can rob signs of ethnicity of their history and therefore political nature within America.

At the same time, the unpredictable paths and consumption of those cultural forms that *are* self-consciously political sometimes allow for their rooting and growth in new contexts, as we can argue about South Asian American adoption of 'Asian Underground' music from the UK. The work of Paul Gilroy demonstrates this potential. He says,

> The international export of new world black cultures first to whites and then to 'third world' markets in South America and Africa itself (Wallis and Malm, 1984)., has had effects unforeseen by those for whom selling it is nothing other than a means to greater profit. Those cultures, in the form

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[40] Frederick Lau, "Fusion or Fission: The Paradox and Politics of Contemporary Chinese Avant-Garde Music," in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, ed. Yayoi Uno and Frederick Lau Everett (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, in press).

[41] Danny Hoch, *Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop* (University of Massachusetts Amherst: New WORLD Theater). See discussion of his video performance in Maira, *Desis in the House : Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*, 63.

of cultural commodities–books and records—have carried inside them oppositional ideas, ideologies, theologies, and philosophies.[42]

As second generation youth cultures in America continue to form affiliations with politicized cultural forms in other places through re-creation and consumption, these practices may counter the increasing consumption and fetishization of Indian popular culture by the American mainstream.

Conclusion

By tracing the histories of materials, both physical and ideological, with which the second generation of South Asians in America is creating new cultural forms, and the creativity of their consumption of older forms, we can begin to see ways that localities, local histories, and transnational circuits are interwoven into any diasporic enunciation. Just as we are able to read the contestations of Miss India USA's representation of the Indian community within the pageant itself, such processes are visible in the practices of South Asians who reject mainstream gender identifications as they find new ways to create ethnic subcultures. They are also found in the intersection of politics of race and class with the consumption of cultural forms produced in places outside the US, yielding new forms and new expressions of American race and American ethnicity. By focusing on consumption and multiple affiliations in the South Asian American population, it is possible to discuss 'community' in a way that respects 'local' politics, in the sense of situated politics, while including the multiple interfaces that both escape situational particulars, yet are essential for understanding them. We can see that 'non-mainstream'

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[42] Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack : The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 157.

individuals in South Asian America still belong in discussions of community, even when they are hidden within in mainstream events like Miss India USA, and that it is outside of the mainstream that we find the clearest consciousness of the existence and importance of multiple affiliations. Through discussing ways that South Asian consumption of ethnic signs is complicated by mainstream America's hunger for materials signifying an Orientalized and domesticated India, the critical nature of recognizing different projects accomplished by the consumption of identical products becomes clear. Once this is recognized, we can see how the performance and consumption of identity can look the same at first glance, but may be divergent in reality. Therefore in events like Miss India USA, we can acknowledge multiple performances and agendas within what appears to be a homogenous production. Identifying the complexities of consumption also provides for the acknowledgment of people who feel Indian but do not fit the mainstream referred to in discussions of a singular 'diaspora community.' Approaching diaspora through creative practices of production and consumption allows for the acknowledgment of difference and local histories while still respecting the affiliations that criss-cross throughout transnational communities.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Locating Diaspora in Miss India USA 2001

The Miss India USA pageant is a production not of the Indian diaspora in America, but of one group of Indian Americans seeking to reproduce their ideal of the community through the young women competing in the pageant. Once this is acknowledged, and with an awareness of the multiple affiliations present within 'a diaspora,' we can look into the pageant to see the diversity within the population of Indian Americans that comes to share the stage in Miss India USA. Affiliations within the community can be traced out from the pageant in order to reveal the nature of the processes by which members of this community seek to create identities in a multitude of individual locations. Delineating the affiliations used to create situated identities paradoxically reveals that identity politics are not limited to local politics, nor towards the maintenance of localized boundaries of difference. Instead we see that mobilizations of the material that constitute diaspora, through both production and consumption, are caught up in complex and political histories that cannot be described in terms of individual nations. Defining 'Indian-ness,' whether it be in India, America, or in reference to an 'Indian diaspora,' must always remain an evolving project that respects the multiple transnational affiliations behind local histories. The chapters of this thesis have worked to reveal this fact through discussion of the many issues brought up in the Miss India USA pageant. The richness of this pageant as a site for discussion shows that seemingly frivolous events and images in truth hide the operations of multiple structures of power within them.

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Through their presentation of a homogenized Indian-ness in America and other diaspora locales, groups like the mainstream Indian community behind Miss India USA help to essentialize a kind of singular "Indian-ness" that adds momentum to the conservative Indian-ness promoted by the Hindu communal movement (Hindutva) in India. The homogenization of Indian-ness in the U.S and the nostalgia of the non-resident Indian population for a mythic past reinforces Hindutva's work of honing down the discourse of Indian-ness to include only those elements which benefit its project: redefining India as a land of Hindus, where the definition of Hindu fits a contrived singularity. This alignment of Hindutva and diaspora agendas in shaping 'Indian-ness' has also led to a recent upwelling of diaspora Hindutva. The feedback effect like that which occurs between the Indian American mainstream and far-right politics in India is exacerbated by the overlap of class- and caste-based interests in these two groups. Himanee Gupta has identified the concurrence of these interests and the increase of diaspora Hindutva with regards to representations of Indian-ness at home and abroad as signifying the growth of a transnational Indian bourgeois with shared political agendas.[1]

The work of this thesis is also meant to demonstrate that the multiplicity of affiliations behind a local production within diaspora, like Miss India USA 2001, requires a process of looking at all of the points of that network before making conclusions about any one location. For example, it has been shown that in the Indian community, the discourse of women as a cultural 'home' for a non-Western Indian modernity is itself transnational. Gender ideals in the pageant cannot be looked at as simply Indian or American, but must be put into the context of Indian pageants in the US and abroad,

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[1] Gupta, " American Places, Indian Spaces: Post-1965 Immigrants Negotiate Self and Community".

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second generation politics, and Indian and American media, among other influences. Including an examination of this discourse by tracing its relationship to India's own post-colonial self-definition, popular media, and self-definition within American multiculturalism yields a more complete picture of the processes at work in the Miss India USA pageant. This also allows for a full appreciation of the types of subversions and counter-narratives that occur on stage at the pageant, and in cultural production in general within diaspora.

Though discussions of diaspora tend to focus on what is usually called 'the homeland,' it is clear that the way Indian-ness is imagined in Miss India USA also exists in relation to India's own imagination of the Indian diaspora. As Indians have worked to find ways of being Indian that exploit the benefits of independent nationhood in a globalizing world economy, Indians in the diaspora have striven to find ways of maintaining an Indian-ness that is functional in Western societies. These parallel processes have produced a transnationally linked class of people who remain locally defined but share many commonalities. In fact, the NRI lifestyle as depicted by Indian media is now projected as the ideal by advertisers in India's new[2] material culture. This lifestyle, characterized by Indian traditions that are upheld by women through their dress and 'values,' alongside conspicuous consumption, could be described as the American middle class ideal accompanied by an ethnic flavor palatable to multiculturalism. Even so, it is now portrayed as one ideal of Indian-ness in both the mainstream Indian American community and in India. Inderpal Grewal argues that the incorporation of the NRI market consumer lifestyle has turned India's national imaginary into a transnational

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[2] since the 1991 opening of its markets

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imaginary.[3] This symbiotic relationship suggests that the method we use to discuss

Indian diaspora should be applicable to India as well.

At the same time as we can identify a growing alignment between upper-caste

bourgeois in India and abroad represented within the Miss India USA pageant, we find

that this is countered by other affiliations growing in diaspora which also reveal

themselves in the pageant. The population of South Asians in the U.S. is increasingly

working-class, and this fact, in combination with a youth culture that has a more

racialized sense of identity than its parents', suggests that what are now sub-cultures in

the community will begin to have more and more influence on the way the community

will be represented in the future. Notions of 'Asian America' are themselves being

changed as second generation South Asians with racialized political motivations work to

gain entry where popular imagination does not see them.

Within the second generation of South Asians in America we find new cultural

forms that are developing both with and against those of the first generation and their

affiliations. Adopting America's practice of defining identity through consumption, desi

youth express race and ethnicity through the consumption of hip-hop's racialized fashion

and Indo-chic's material signs of ethnicity. What began with material appropriation is

now beginning to lead to recognition of common goals between South Asian and other

minority youth. For example, Vivek Bald[4] notes that there was some South Asian

support at one anti-bigotry parade in New York, and even one Indian DJ playing

alongside one African-American DJ. These productions of identity, results of affiliations

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[3] Inderpal Grewal, "Traveling Barbie: Indian Transnationality and New
Consumer Subjects," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 7, no. 3 (1999): 801.
[4] Bald, "Taxi Meters and Plexiglass Partitions."

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with mainstream as well as minority U.S. cultures, cannot be described through their delineation of boundaries or imagination of a homeland, yet they belong to diaspora through their mobilization of materials circulated though diaspora. The products of such processes retain their histories but are mobilized in other places, forming a bond between diaspora locales while enunciating the particular self-identification of one locale. In this way the music of the desi party scene glimpsed onstage at the Miss India USA 2001 pageant, complete with a resonance of its political and racialized origins in the UK, is an expressive cultural form of the second generation linking them to other South Asian communities in the world. This music and its artists travel to other diaspora locations including Malaysia, Singapore, and India itself. The importation of this music to India, consumed as Western yet familiar, and most likely associated with the glamour of the NRI, has changed the nature of the film music from which it once originated. Bollywood films are now produced with soundtracks that feature songs already mixed with dance beats to begin with. We can now speak of an emerging ethos being created in a circumscribed mediascape of New York, London, Delhi, and Bombay, one linked to a polyglot youth culture that has a new imagination of India. The place of this mediascape in the Indian diaspora is an especially interesting topic as Bollywood reinvents itself to incorporate the cinematic and musical tastes of NRIs, and as other countries, for example America, begin to fetishize Bollywood and Indian pop-culture in what is a growing trend in both film and fashion.

The fluidity of popular cultures at a global level raises a number of interesting questions, as we find some of the same music, some of the same strands of youth culture, and some of the same imaginative and flexible practices in India as in its diaspora. Mira

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Nair's film *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) depicts Indian characters who invoke tradition and

foreigness to provide for their own social and economic mobility, imagining themselves

to operate in 'limitless space.' In the 2001 Bollywood film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*

(Sometimes Joy, Sometimes Sorrow), a young immigrant to the UK from India

impresses her older and more traditional sister by appearing in an Indian-style shirt and

scarf when she usually wears jeans and tight shirts. When her elder sister compliments

her on finally showing some sense, the younger sister responds, "Oh, it's the Indian

touch, it's in." Young women in urban centers in India wear combinations of Western

and Indian dress similar to desi women in the U.S. When women in Delhi wear bindis

with their jeans, and nose rings that follow Western rather that Indian style, is it

Westernization, or something as creative as what young South Asian American women

have done with the style now co-opted as Indo-chic?

As was discussed earlier in this chapter, in many ways, the lifestyle characterized

by consumption that is found in all of the above examples could be described as

American, as can the multiculturalism-derived presentation of difference. Inderpal

Grewal says,

> As Stuart Hall puts it, the new cultural forms in the global mass culture are
> recognizable in their ability to "recognize and absorb...differences within
> the larger overarching framework of what is essentially an American
> conception of the world" in which capital has had to "negotiate...to
> incorporate and partly to reflect the differences it was trying to
> overcome."[5]

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[5] Grewal, "Traveling Barbie: Indian Transnationality and New
Consumer Subjects," 823.

Paul Gilroy sees the activity of the commodities that come with the "American conception of the world"[6] in a somewhat different manner. In chapter five, we saw how he has recognized the subversive potential of the circulation of media in diaspora, and its importance in building new transnational affiliations between communities. The politics and potential for resistance of the creative culture of South Asian diaspora communities in the U.S. must be looked at in the context of this potential. As Gilroy has shown us, such work should begin by tracing the ways that racial subjectivities are produced by individual histories of migration combined with the structure of American society. This complex relationship has and continues to evolve as the ideology and social structure of 'race' moves with world events. For example, in response to September 11th, prominent South Asian American DJ Karsh Kale commented, "For the first time, we were faced with what we feared the whole time being here, which was the whole country pointing their finger at us and saying, "Why are you here?"[7]

Flexible and Creative Practices with the Materials of Diaspora

By assuming that diaspora connotes shared practices of identification, shared process of boundary-marking, or even the shared object of a desire for 'home,' unrealistic binaries of homeland-hostland, insider-outside, Indian-ness-Western-ness, and so on, are reinforced. At the same time, the reinforcing of these binaries obscures the politics

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[6] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic : Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 157.

[7] Corey Takahashi, "Cultural Fusion: With an Aesthetic Shaped by Thei South Asian Roots and Their American Homeland, a New Group of Artists Is Adding a Different Flavor to Music, Movies and Television.," *Newsday* 2002.

behind mainstream diaspora representations and the processes by which those who do not identify with the mainstream *do* identify themselves.

If theories of diaspora have not accounted for the emergence of new cultural forms other than as the merging, adaptation, acculturation, or indigenization of old ones, how can we theorize the new Indian-nesses being created in ways that are parallel enough for conversation, but locally specific enough to accommodate the needs of individuals with different histories and different cultural contexts? James Clifford's[8] work on diaspora and Paul Gilroy's[9] discussion of cultural, particularly artistic and musical, exchange in the Black Atlantic, among others, suggest that diaspora is not really about longing for 'home,' but rather about the effort to be a part of the host country in one's own way. This approach takes the first step towards a new way of looking at diaspora. However, as we cannot use diaspora to refer to shared cultural referents of identity *without overlooking the politics of the ways that these referents are mobilized*, such a definition cannot stand alone. By talking about diaspora as the raw material—discourses, social and cultural capital, previously existing cultural forms such as film and music— shared by diaspora participants, we can understand both the hegemonic practices of representing identity in local communities, the creative practices which utilize diaspora's raw materials and yield new identities, and the flexible practices both on the ground and in the imagination that diaspora as a shared resource allows for.

The raw materials that exist as part of diaspora come into it through individual historical contexts. However, through their use in the production of new cultural forms,

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[8] Clifford, *Routes : Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century.*

[9] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic : Modernity and Double Consciousness,* Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack : The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation.*

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such as we see in local contexts, and through the creativity of their consumption, they

acquire new histories and implications for those who utilize them in their diaspora

membership. As we have seen through the Miss India USA pageant, it is in the creative

and flexible ways that people mobilize this material—as signs of ethnicity, or as cultural

and social capital—that we find evidence of the multiplicity that exists behind the

singularity suggested by the term 'diaspora.' It is for this reason that the content of this

thesis argues that practices of production, consumption, and flexibility be the focus of

discussions of diaspora. Arif Dirlik notes,

> Culture, understood not in the abstract, or in terms of the ideologies of
> power, is inextricable from the practices through which people define and
> conduct their everyday lives, in the process generating ever new cultural
> practices as their circumstances change. It is, in other words, as alive as
> the lives that it defines and expresses. [10]

Dirlik sees the production of new cultural forms in the concrete interactions of everyday

life as the best defense we have against the reifications of culture that imprison people in

ethnic spaces, divide them from one another in everyday life, and undermine any

significant sense of the social.

As is demonstrated by the examination of topics brought up by the Miss India

USA pageant, approaching diaspora through flexible practices and through creative

production and consumption allows us to discuss local practices in a way that

acknowledges their links, or affiliations, outside of that locality, affiliations which are

essential to understanding them. Approaching diaspora in this way allows one to avoid

contributing to the increasing presence of civilization discourse in the discussion of

political affiliations in the world, yet at the same time respect the fact that, as Arturo

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Escobar puts cogently, "culture sits in places."[11] By focusing on local practices that are affiliated through the raw material of diaspora with practices in other places located internationally, culture can be understood not in the abstract, or in terms of the ideologies of power, but instead as inextricable from the practices through which people create their realities.

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[10] Arif Dirlik, "Colonialism, Globalization and Culture: Reflections of September 11th," *Amerasia Journal* 27/28, no. 3/1 (2002): 89.

[11] Arturo Escobar, "Culture Sits in Places: Anthropological Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Globalization," *Political Geography* 20 (2001): 8.

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