This book presents yet another compelling argument about the lives and struggles of new immigrant youth in public schools and demands the attention of educators, policy-makers and academics. In the post September 11th political, economic and social climate there are silenced and forgotten young immigrants in our schools. Racist nativism, Islamophobia and hegemonic discourse have in many ways legitimized the false information and emerging stereotypes that are disseminated by popular culture and the media. From the perspective of working class Sikh youth, who have unduly borne the brunt of such hostility and racial profiling, we learn about their daily lives both in their communities and schools. The youth engaged in identity politics and occupied contradictory hybrid spaces of being neither here nor there. Attempts to transplant religious identities led to personal battles of self definition and transformation. In contrast to the available literature on the Asian American “model minority”, Verma explores the working class experience of South Asian families who face downward economic mobility, limited opportunities, low academic achievement, racism and marginalization from both their communities and the mainstream public. Hidden under the umbrella of the model minority stereotype, the needs of working class South Asian youth are largely compromised as their engagement from school plummets. In the midst of shifting politics of belonging, citizenship and nation-building, the reader is drawn to listen to the personal stories, hopes and dreams of youth who face uncertain realities and doubts about the grandeur of the “American dream”. 
Backlash: South Asian Immigrant
Voices on the Margins
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Voices on the Margins

Foreword by Michael W. Apple

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One of the effects of the “war on terror” in the United States, England, and elsewhere has been to make the unsayable sayable. Racist nativist sentiment—always just beneath the surface in many nations—has been given legitimacy. The “other” is among us. They are dangerous. They seek to destroy our way of life. There are terrorists everywhere. A climate of deep insecurity and mistrust has been created, and has all too often been manipulated in cynical ways. Civil liberties are being constantly threatened, internationally accepted codes of conduct are ignored, the collateral damage of civilian deaths due to our bombing is lamented but continued, and torture is condoned. All this in the name of democracy.

Predictably, one of the results of this has been a loss of sensitivity and a growing fear within the nation. There has been a series of attacks on those who “look different.” Arab-American communities, and especially Muslim communities, are suspects. But not only them. For some people, any “dark other” bears the mark of danger. Thus, indiscriminate suspicion leads many to a position where even turbans equal terrorist.

This is not the entire story, of course. In many ways, the United States is a vast experiment. It is constantly “in process,” with its population and its cultural forms and content continually shifting, building, creating something new. In essence, this country is an experiment in attempting to build a nation from all over the world. And the openness with which so many people here approach this is a remarkable statement of what the United States also is and can be.

Diasporic populations are powerfully present here. Entire parts of cities throughout the nation are now richly textured around the multiple experiences of people from India, Pakistan, Korea, and elsewhere. What counts as common culture is now subject to powerful and needed debate (Apple 2000, Apple 2006). This has fueled even more of an emphasis on various kinds of multicultural education, some powerfully evocative and critical and some simply weak and with no critical edge whatsoever. And it has asked teachers to deal more honestly and critically with the historical and current political, cultural, and economic relations to which this nation is so closely linked (Bigelow and Peterson 2002). Of course, the often unequal nature of these sets of relation is not something entirely new. Among other things, the nation itself from the very beginning was formed from stolen land, and forged by the often murderous exploitation of Africans stolen from their own lands.

One thing is clear from all of this. It is impossible to understand the internal realities of the United States without thinking globally. Although a bit of a rhetorical trope, one of the reasons for this is captured by a phrase often applied to Britain and its own rapidly growing diverse population. As it is said there, “the empire has come home” (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982).

Words like empire and globalization are crucial signposts for major transformations. But that is not all. They also have (or at last should have) a critical edge. They ask us to think critically about what it means for us to live in interconnected societies where the forces of neoliberalism and neoconservatism have become ever
FOREWARD

more powerful (Apple in press, Apple and Buras 2006). However, thinking about all this can most productively go on when it is linked to multiple experiences, to “top” and “bottom,” to what happens to people whose lives are being reconstructed by these forces.

Many discussions of the effects of globalization have been theoretically elegant and have contributed significantly to our perspectives on the relationship among diversity, pluralism, and global/national citizenship both in the larger society and in education (Pinson and Arnot 2007; Apple and Buras 2006). However, at times they have remained at a rather abstract level. There is a danger that the actual embodied lives of real people in real communities remain either invisible or are subject to stereotypes. And in the process, the diversity, the daily struggles, the hopes and fears, and so much more are marginalized or sometimes even lost (see Davis 2006).

One of the key sites where these daily struggles go on and where the formation of identities is realized and contested is the school. There have been insightful volumes on the educational and social experiences of, say, “model minorities” in the United States (Lee 1999, 2005), on Muslim students (Sarroub 2005), and on black youth in England (Mirza 1992) for example. And these have led to a much more nuanced understanding of the realities faced by students in schools here and elsewhere.

In Backlash, Rita Verma stands on the shoulders of such work and extends it both theoretically and empirically. As a person of Indian heritage herself, she is both participant and observer. As a woman, she is very insightful about how gendered hierarchies are built and contested within diasporic communities and between such communities and the “mainstream.” And as a critical scholar and educator, she clearly wishes to challenge the taken for granted assumptions inside and outside education. Because of all this, her portrayal of the ways in which Sikh youth make their way in the world is rich and detailed. Verma is careful not to homogenize these youth. The complex and contradictory relations among class, gender, and age are illuminated. The at times competing relations among religious and secular impulses are also pictured in insightful ways.

But Rita Verma is not content with engaging in thick description, although she is very good at that. She spent a number of years as a teacher in urban schools filled with diverse populations. Because of this, she is also deeply concerned with what can be done inside schools to make curricula and pedagogy more responsive and more critical. The book’s conclusion speaks honestly about the limits and possibilities of pedagogic action.

This is a book that will be of considerable interest to anyone who cares about the ways in which youth from some of the fastest growing populations in the United States, England, and other nations live their lives in schools and communities.

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REFERENCES


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CHAPTER 1

MARGINALIZED SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANT VOICES

I walked into class and the students had drawn a picture of me with a turban and hand grenade. Next to the picture it said: go back to your country Nina! You, Taliban terrorist! (Nina, 7th grade student)

Proud to be Sikh-American.
(Bumper sticker common in Sikh communities after 9/11)

Nina was in tears when she approached me. She came to my classroom that day feeling helpless. Nina went on to explain that she was ridiculed on a daily basis about her ethnicity and social class and her complaints to teachers fell upon deaf ears. A recent immigrant to the United States from India, Nina is of the Sikh faith and her family struggles to make ends meet. Her family represents a growing group of immigrants from India that is facing increasing barriers socially, economically and politically. Several years after I had conducted extensive research on the experiences of new working class immigrants from India, I was not surprised to hear of such a sad incident in my own school on the East Coast where I was a teacher. I was again reminded that schools are not immune to the political and social climate around us.

In late January of 2007, another horrific act of hatred took place when a 17 year old Sikh student was attacked close to my residence. The student was walking home from school with his sister when three men attacked him, called him a terrorist, tore off his turban, cut his hair and slashed his stomach several times. In May of 2007, a high school freshman in Queens, New York was attacked and had his hair forcibly cut off in his school. This prompted a citywide analysis of Sikh youth as victims of hate in New York City schools which led to the finding that 77% of Sikh youth are victimized daily. Complaints by Sikh youth about racist behavior to school personnel are also mostly ignored, further leaving them with little resolution. These atrocious hate crimes against Sikh youth is a stark reminder of the ways the underlying tensions and fears of the “Other” are being unearthed. These are the silenced and forgotten victims who need to be recognized, heard and understood. If we take a moment to deconstruct the racist attacks on Nina and these young men, they echo some of the political projects of the time that have permeated our public and private spaces after 9/11.

The political projects of 9/11 have not come without costs. Heightened racial profiling and the creation of a dangerous foreign “Other”, a surge in racist nativism and Islamophobia, the scapegoating of targeted communities, the development of a “culture of fear” and paranoia in preparation for enemy attacks, irresponsible media and gross violations of civil rights are examples of what I view as the political projects of 9/11 and the war on terror. September 11th, 2001 represents a moment of transformation in dialogues of race and global politics. In the aftermath
of the terrorist attacks, nations such as the United States, Great Britain, Germany and France redefined national politics of citizenship and belonging. Religious symbols such as Muslim headscarves and Sikh turbans were banned in public schools in France. Immigrant communities from South Asia and predominately Islamic nations have especially faced the backlash of the anti-immigrant ethos. These communities have become victim to media images and political rhetoric which have established the suspect and dangerous “Other” as a brown skinned, bearded, turbaned male terrorist. This image of terror has most obviously been associated with Osama bin Laden, but it also reflects a broader anti-immigrant ethos wrapped around cultural and religious symbols that have nothing to do with terrorism. In the case of images of the East, the Third World, and specifically Arab nations, media culture has engaged in a dramatic spectacle and disinformation campaign that dehumanizes and villainizes Arabs. Anti-Arab media also portray stereotypical images of the “civilized West” and “barbaric Arabs” that further become part of an oppressive hegemonic discourse. Rallying and mobilizing violence against this fabricated vision of evil and these representations contribute to a discourse of violence against Arabs and others who resemble them. Thousands of hate crimes occurred and continue to transpire today in the United States that are based on these assumptions. Hate crimes in England also went up six hundred fold after the July 7 attacks in 2005. Little attention is given to the silenced and forgotten victims of the disquieting global trends and war on terror to combat an “enemy” that has been defined as a brown-skinned foreign “Other”.

I was struck by an article in the New York Times on July 31, 2005 after the 7/7 terror attacks that described the lives of working class South Asian males in Leeds, England. The article focused on young working class males who faced uncertain paths to cultural adjustment as they sought after spaces of belonging within the contradictory cultural worlds of their parents’ traditional values and working class British culture. The young males chose a new assertive and transnational identity as Muslims. Their experiences included not feeling included or accommodated in schools where their cultures and histories were not celebrated. Expectations of “hardness”-to be able to fight, also became part of their identity. The youth were described as NEET-not in education, employment or training. Alarming rates of drug usage, selling drugs and serving prison terms were noted as a reality. Young males were described as being attracted to a more radical, politicized Islam. The article further states, that “efforts to create an Islamic identity in British Muslims has been fueled by the belief that the West is waging a war-a “crusade”, the word President Bush used in 2001-against Islam”(Bernstein). This article reminded me of the dangers of simple answers to complex issues. It also signals a heightened Islamophobic sentiment and it raised a fear in me that predominately Muslim or South Asian working class neighborhoods will become targets of misguided scrutiny. This fear is often realized as raids occur sporadically in these neighborhoods and places of worship. Pending social issues such as the despair experienced by South Asian working class youth and their struggle to secure a sense of belonging are in need of great exploration. Living on the margins with little hope spawns uncertain identities. Rather than reproducing trite answers that state that Asian Americans succeed due to their innate abilities and rigor in the face of hardship or to say that
working class Muslim youth may turn to a more radical Islam we need to look more intimately at what is taking place in these communities and schools and complicate rather than simplify the dialogue on immigrant experiences. The marginalization of individuals by racist forms and the oppression of class systems is widespread with far-reaching consequences. Individuals experience such oppressive forms in diverse ways and it is important to closely observe their impact in order to disrupt them. In this book, there is an opportunity to understand working class South Asian immigrants as they take center stage.

The focus of this book is to provide a personal human perspective of the stories of Sikh immigrants in the United States who face an experience that is not often told. What I hope to share in this book is the obvious but oftentimes overlooked struggle of working class immigrant folks who land upon American shores with big dreams and faith in the American way. The Sikh community in particular has faced the immediate and long-term impact of the shifting social and political climates. Understanding the lives of Sikh working class immigrant youth now requires a careful understanding of how they are situated in current reconfigurations of global politics and national politics of difference that collectively shape their everyday experiences. At the heart of this book is a desire to understand how families cope with injuries of class, race and postcolonial subjectivity in the face of downward economic mobility and a shifting social, cultural and economic landscape, defined in part, by terror and terrorizing. I pay particular attention to how the Sikh youth responded to race and class politics in their communities and schools that further influenced identity development, aspirations and definitions of the American Dream. How youth articulate class and community consciousness will also be understood. This book provides yet another intriguing example of the dynamics of the immigrant experience and urges us to broaden our scope and definitions of immigrant students’ hardships and needs. Their ensuing challenges and heartbreaks reveal much to us and these stories can only add to the rich conversations on immigrant education and remind us to keep the dialogue open.

GLOBAL CULTURAL FLOWS

When looking back at the history of immigration from India, distinct waves of immigration can be recognized. People from the Indian subcontinent have migrated and continue to migrate for various reasons; the political, social and economic climates of India and the receiving country all influence how immigrant adjustment may unfold. Immigrant groups from India have faced different realities. Migration from India dates back to the early 1900’s as Sikh farmers from Punjab migrated to work on farms in California. “A tide of turbans” from Northern India arrived during the late 1800’s and early 1920’s in the stir of the indenture migration in the United States. More than 6,000 men from Punjab landed on the West coast of the United States to work on California farms. As “laborers”, the earliest immigrants from India experienced multiple repercussions as they attempted to secure rights to citizenship and land. Between 1940 and 1960 fewer than 400 Indians moved to the United States each year; in the 1960’s, the legal flow reached 27,000 per annum and then increased again to 37,000 in the 1990’s.
In general, the South Asian influx of immigrants that arrived to the United States had more access to American employers and to professional positions. Many of the members from this particular wave of immigration came to occupy professional positions. There were however large groups of immigrants that were working-class. The 1965 Asian migrants created the basis for kinship migration for the less well-educated families and relatives that would arrive decades later.

The nature of migration within the past fifteen years (1990–2005) has also been distinct as illustrated by the experiences noted in this book. The post 1965 immigrant wavers sponsored these particular families. Many of the new arrivals did not find professional positions readily available and they were increasingly drawn to predominately working class insular neighborhoods. Perceptions of life after migration and realities of the West have also shifted dependent on time of migration. Views of the West for members of the 1965 immigration wave were different from what is now perceived by newer immigrants. The transformation of media and film can be viewed as a prime catalyst for these shifts in perceived ideas of life in the West. Visualized notions of success and “making it” are now more accessible, vivid and “fantasy” like than they were in the past.

What “cultural imaginaries” or dreams of the “West” or life in “Americaah” do families have as they embark upon decisions to migrate? Further, what memories are revisited and held onto as the disappointment that is experienced once the struggles and challenges of adjustment in American schools and communities surface? How are identities negotiated and redefined? These questions are pivotal in understanding what types of expectations families may have had and further may assist in the understanding of their confessions of unfulfilled dreams and promises. The Bombay film industry plays a key role in such creation of the Western fantasy for Indian movie connoisseurs.

The flow of money, ideas and people between India and her global diaspora continue to grow and transform throughout the decades. Migration is explored through images that suture East and West through the genre of Bombay film. Media production has become increasingly central to cultural and political processes for national and diasporic projects. Bollywood (Bombay cinema), the largest film industry in the world, imparts powerful images of the East West fusion to Indian audiences within India and across the diaspora. Global cultural flows bridge the distances between nations. As defined by Arjun Appadurai (1996), “mediascapes whether produced by private or state interests, tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them in a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as of others living in other places.” (p. 37)

Through the medium of film and music, the Indian diaspora maintains a distinct rootedness to India. The Hindi-speaking, Hindu members of the diaspora (portrayed as beautiful and successful or “almost white”) are mainly represented and celebrated in Bombay film. Groups, such as Sikhs and Muslims in India, are not represented, or attributed with characteristics of success and beauty and may not be able to identify or find a voice in Bombay film. It has only been in recent years that independent filmmakers are exploring the plight of Sikhs and their oppression in
India. These films, in the face of a strong Bollywood culture, oftentimes face controversy and struggle to draw large audiences. Sikhs tend to be portrayed as terrorists, less than intelligent and as uncivilized (often becoming the butt of jokes) in mainstream Indian film.

Bombay cinema has become a powerful cultural vehicle engaging audiences worldwide with fantasies of wealth, beauty and happiness associated with perfect lives and “modern” (read: Western) amenities. These powerful images unfortunately convey messages to the viewing audience that Whiteness, patriarchy, and economic affluence are equated with happiness and perfection. Happiness and perfection are reserved for the Hindu and the Hindi–speaking global upwardly mobile Indian. Images of the East/West fusion with its majestic homes, greener pastures, fast cars, seductive women in scant clothing, freedom and economic opportunity are laced into Bollywood films. Bollywood engages in a love/hate relationship with the West as it promotes Whiteness and scantily clad women with beauty, affluence with happiness yet it sharply criticizes the West as a place of decayed morality and is quick to honor traditional roles for men and women with fanatic Hinduism playing a pivotal role. Such stereotypes coupled with flirtatious fantasy convey strangely contradictory images. These contradictions, perhaps, foreshadow the many struggles that youth may face as they juggle expectations and gender roles from two worlds.

Bollywood plays a role in reinforcing or selling the Western dream and aspirations to Indian audiences; Bollywood stimulates a heightened desire to consume. Wealth and mansion like homes are depicted as the “norm” in Bollywood films. The tensions that exist in regard to East versus West and the allure of wealth and freedom as depicted in Bollywood film may translate in heightened desires or false hopes of “acquiring” such amenities and lifestyles upon arrival after migration. The image of the diaspora, as portrayed by Bollywood, can also be criticized for “buying” into the model minority stereotype and marketing that to audiences worldwide. This image may serve as a sense of pride for those families who hold onto the model minority stereotype as their entry into the American dream; on the other hand, it is a far cry from the lives and realities of immigrant families in urban America who struggle to make ends meet. The image may also serve as a marketing tool to the world that asserts images that India and Indians are not poor, downtrodden, traditionally bound, nor unattractive; rather, they are rich, beautiful, White and modern. Along with powerful messages and images that stem from Bollywood, encouragement from family members who have succeeded can reinforce relatives to begin the process of migration. On the other side, in settled diasporic communities, Bollywood provides the consumer with a medium to engage in cultural nostalgia and remain connected to “India” or the constructed vision of it. As stated by Appadurai (1996),

At the same time, deterritorialization creates new markets for film companies, impresarios, and travel agencies, which thrive on the need of the relocated population with contact with its homeland. But the homeland is partly invented, existing only in the imagination of the deterritorialized groups, and it can sometimes become so fantastic and one-sided that it provides the fuel for new ethnic conflicts. (p. 49)
The process and phenomenon of global “migration” has been understood and theorized in different manners in social sciences research. Understanding the transformations in immigration processes and in immigrant communities is an essential component of migration theory. Anthropologists and sociologists, among others, have asked important questions in regard to migration theory. Anthropologists ask the question, “how does migration effect cultural change and affect ethnic identity?” Sociologists ask “what explains immigrant incorporation?” (Brettell & Hollifield, 2000). Anthropologists and sociologists further inquire about cultural processes that commence once immigrants arrive to the United States. Both of these questions are important points of departure to begin to understand the complexity of international migration. Assimilation, or the understanding that all immigrants will “assimilate” into the American mainstream, is a linear model. Hegemonic forces encourage “assimilation” into mainstream America as a favorable route of cultural adjustment for immigrants and foreigners. On the other hand, some groups are seen as “unassimilable” in the negative sense. Families who hold onto cultural roots from their country of origin have been marked as the enemy, as suspect, and as dangerous. As the Japanese were “feared” and placed in internment camps in American history, other groups have been “feared”. Within the current global events, Arabs, Muslims and “brown bodies” are now feared and seen as enemies of the state and under this current racializing terrain are becoming victims of “mistaken identity” and seen as the perpetual “unassimilable” foreigner.

Rumbaut and Portes’s model of incorporation (2000) in relation to the United States provides better insight and they draw on multiple factors to address the social and cultural processes experienced by immigrant groups. Their model of incorporation postulates outcomes for different groups according to contexts of reception that vary with reference to (1) U.S. government policy that passively accepts or actively supports; (2) labor market reception that is neutral, positive, or discriminatory; and (3) an ethnic community that is nonexistent, working class, or entrepreneurial/professional (Brettell & Hollifield, 2000). Additionally, there are factors that influence cultural adjustment that are unique to the community’s social, political and economic dynamics. Since immigration has become a network driven process, the newest migrants are gravitating to urban America where ethnic enclaves are prominent and thriving. The literature also suggests that newly arriving immigrant groups are heading for urban America, therefore making the newest wave of immigration an essentially urban phenomenon. This tendency to cluster has both positive and negative prospects. The social networks may provide an initial platform for newly arriving families; however, with the drained urban economy, competition for limited jobs, the rejection and low acceptance of foreign degrees and qualifications, poverty, the surge in anti-immigrant attitudes and legislature, and class fractures within immigrant communities, paths to upward mobility have stagnated.

Suddenly, Bollywood fails to provide perceptions or images for what success is for the families in the West. Although Bollywood misrepresents in totality the immigrant life, the youth continue to watch the movies for entertainment. Perhaps they are increasingly aware of the oppressive nature and “dangers” of the messages implicit in such films. Perhaps they provide a good laugh and a sarcastic reminder
of what they hoped for, yet have not yet savored. These realities, amongst others, all play an important role in the lives of the families in this book.

UNCERTAIN IDENTITIES

In India, I had America in my home.

Aman described her affluence as having “America in my home”. She explained further that “America in her home” meant having modern facilities, nice furniture, fancy appliances and nice cars. The youth described living in nice homes with all modern amenities in India. These comprised elements of their social and cultural capital. Their communities were also economically affluent. The many personal stories shared in this book speak about a middle-class lifestyle back in India. This, of course, is in sharp contrast to their present realities as they are living in lower income neighborhoods and facing the harshness of borderline poverty in urban America. Through transnational migration, a loss in cultural and social capital was realized (Ong, p. 3, 1999). The parental loss of status was stressful on the children. The families could not necessarily identify with the working class lifestyle, identity or social mores in their new homes and communities. This is in contrast to communities that have thrived in working class neighborhoods for generations; where youth negotiate, resist and adhere to social class norms (Willis, 1978). Performative practices of class identity shifted from middle class to working class for the families. This came with economic and psychological costs. Abandoning certain aspects of their identities based on a downward shift in class status and further negotiating unfamiliar identity markers based on race and class was traumatic.

One particular memory of their local communities in India remained in their minds; the memory of family and friends taunting them and criticizing them for the decision to migrate was still very vivid. It seems that although America was associated with affluence, it was also coupled with “losing your culture”, corruption and decayed morality in the eyes of friends and relatives in India. When listening to the youth describe the manner they were stigmatized, I sensed the anger and anxiety. They remembered messages about being seen as a “bad” person if they migrated.

Yeah, they say you will become bad and lose your culture, but look if they had the chance to come, they would … they are so two faced. They are the ones that are confused. (Mankaran)

Some friends kept taunting us and saying, oh you are going to cut your hair when you go America. (Aman)

Processing through memories and their present realities prompted discussions about nationhood, identity, and what it meant to be an Indian. I did not expect to begin my conversations with the youth on such a sad note. When we spoke about memories of migration and the many unfulfilled promises they faced, I could sense the anger and disappointment in their responses. When the families were in India, they described receiving passionate letters that held grand promises of work,
money, support and good schools in America. The youth expressed to me that the families put all their trust in one or two relatives in the United States with the hopes that they would help them and provide them with resources to settle down. The families honored their sponsorship to migrate. Their visa status was still unpredictable and many of the families filed for green cards based on political asylum. Back in India, the families spent thousands of dollars, sold businesses, property and assets, all with the hopes of “making it” and forging better lives for their children. The families unfortunately faced some very dim realities once they landed in the United States. America as the land of opportunity may in reality be the land of scarcity. Families here promised support after migration and did not support them once they came to the United States. They were treated as “dogs” and as “illegals” according to responses from the youth.

Our uncle was so enthusiastic and excited that we would come to America. He would say just come here and I will take care of all the rest. He promised that my dad would have a job once he came to the United States and that we would live in a nice place. Well, we came to the United States and we were placed in a shabby room and were treated like we were dogs. My father was not given a job and then when my dad asked my uncle where his job was and why we were being treated poorly, he kicked us out. My mom found an odd job working in a deli and the owner also abused her there. He was Bengali and he would insult her because she was Punjabi. I could not believe, my mom who was so educated was being treated like she was a servant and as low-class. My uncle did not support us like he had promised. He had been in the United States for almost 20 years and he would send thousands of dollars back to India to support political parties, yet he could not spare the money to help us out. He just simply said one day, get out! (Aman)

I became involved in many aspects of the students lives. In their homes, the gurudwara (Sikh temple) and in informal social settings- I also maintained contact with several of the families for several years after the research was formally completed. Several families lived in clusters in the central section of the city and others were scattered around. It was not until several trips later that Sikh boys and girls began to approach me. I was nervous that my formal introduction would deter people from approaching me. I spent the first weeks by just participating in the gurudwara service and in the langar (community food). There was one male youth, Harmeet, who began to speak with me while he was busy doing his duties at the service. He was very reserved in his conversations and he would tell his friends that they should speak with me. Everyone was extremely friendly and welcomed me with open arms. It was the day when one particular young woman named Aman approached me that I truly felt that I would be able to engage with the community. She said to me, “I want to speak with you about school and this place.” After this initial introduction with Aman, several youth approached me; they were motivated to introduce me to others younger members of the community and to begin to engage in conversations with me. As time went by, twelve students would shape the heart of this book.
Aman and Harmeet approached me in the beginning stages of my visits to the gurudwara and they continually introduced me to their friends and relatives. Aman was a senior and Harmeet was a junior. The close-knit family had been through much trauma through the process of migration. A better education for their children was the prime motivator to migrate. Their parents were well-established professionals in India. The mother was a History Professor while the father owned a business. Now in America, their father worked in gas stations and as a taxi cab driver and the mother as domestic help. Aman worked with her mother to clean homes and Harmeet would do some work at the gas station. Aman had a vision of ways to make things better and she truly believed her efforts and patience would pay off. Harmeet felt the same way and he felt very strongly about his Sikh roots. They both were college bound when I initially spoke with them. They both would speak about their freedom to practice their religion in America. However, as time went by and the post 9/11 backlash hit home their enthusiasm faded. Harmeet still wore his turban and Aman had not cut her hair. Their aspirations for college and their performance in school also faded away.

Mankaran was a sophomore and Maninder was a junior in the same school. Their parents were landowners in India and sold their family property in order to emigrate. In the United States, their father worked at the gas station and their mother stayed at home. She was asked to work at the gas station pantry as an attendant and was beginning to work there during my last visits at the gurudwara. Maninder and Mankaran had both cut their hair as a result of racist attacks and violence at school. Their mother spent her time crying at the daily worship in gurudwara. They told me that her crying expressed her remorse and sadness that her sons had committed sacrilege by cutting their hair. The experiences of the two boys in school ranged from threatening notes on their lockers to a teacher who understood and reached out.

Jasbir was sophomore, Amandeep, a junior and Harkiran, a senior. Their family had come to seek a better education for their children. The parents were bankers in India; both mother and father held Master’s level degrees. They left behind a government funded home, a positive reputation and networks in the community and nice benefits. Their motivation to migrate was largely based on the stories they had heard of rags to riches stories and of better education from relatives who had settled down. Now in the United States, their father works as a taxi cab driver and their mother cleans houses. All three struggled in school with a number of issues. Jasbir felt most strongly about not being able to take regular classes and regretted being tracked into ESL classes. Jasbir and Harkiran were both victimized by physical assaults in school by other students.

Lakbir, Balvinder and Jasjit spent much of their time at school together. The bond they shared provided a source of support and friendship. Their families shared similar backgrounds. Their fathers were landowners in Punjab and their mothers worked as part-time teachers. This common bound brought the girls closer to one another. Now in the United States, their fathers worked at gas stations and as cab drivers. Their mothers did domestic work and sometimes worked as assistants.
in the gas stations. The girls shared the common sentiment that America was one big disappointment. They were angry about many aspects of life in America and were confused about the bigotry they would see amongst the different minority groups at school.

Parminder, a female and Harminder a male both had similar experiences as well. Their parents worked at gas stations and as cab drivers and were victims of hate crimes. Parminder had been chased, assaulted and ostracized at school and in the surrounding community. Their sense of hope continued to wane as time went by. Harminder had cut his hair to avoid being harassed. He felt that the decision, however, did not lessen the amount of bullying he experienced.

THE VOICES THAT WILL BE SHARED

This book is based specifically on immigrant families who arrived during 1993-2003 and who had experienced downward economic mobility in the process of migration. These families were now socio-economically disadvantaged in the United States. These families all emigrated through the Family Reunification Act of 1965. Those families that immigrated in the 1960’s and 1970’s were responsible for sponsoring family members through this act once they became U.S. citizens. Many families, who may have previously desired to retain their Indian passports, took on U.S. citizenship in order to invite their relatives. The newer members of the community were generally employed at gas stations, as taxi drivers, domestic servants or in the food service industry. The majority of the older community held U.S. citizenship whereas the newer immigrants held temporary visas or are seeking political asylum. The families that newly arrived could not visit India until their paperwork had been cleared. The long wait for paperwork to be filed by the INS created a gap in visits back home and deepened the sense of displacement. The wait had been prolonged due to post 9/11 anti-immigrant legislature.

I conducted interviews with members of the community who fell into the age group of 16-21 years of age; twelve participants, seven males and five females, were in high school or had recently graduated and were at a decision-making stage in regard to the work and college aspirations. I also spoke with the older members, both older and newly arrived immigrant to further understand their experiences, impressions and insight. The lives of the twelve students reveal the common thread of downward economic and social mobility after emigration.

The children of the families in this book attended two different public school settings. The public schools in the larger area of the town of Singh have a minority student enrollment that stands at 82%. The 100,000 students in the school system speak no fewer than 36 languages. Eight of the youth attended a school in the heart of the urban center that had a large minority population. I will call this school Diversity High due to its large minority population. The student population in the urban school consisted of predominately Hispanic, White, African American and some Asian American. There were a growing number of immigrant students from various parts of the world in the school. The other four students attended a school in a neighboring suburban area that had a majority Caucasian-European population (the majority of the students identified themselves as White American). This
school will be named Uniform High due to its homogenous population and absence of great diversity. An understanding of both experiences will provide an illuminative comparison.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY AND RESEARCH PROCESS

The community that is the central focus of the book is located in the Midwestern United States; I name the community that resides within the ethnic enclaves in this larger ethnically diverse city, the town of Singh. The larger outlying city is urban, industrial and highly segregated by race and socioeconomic status. The city has been named a majority-minority city. More than half of the city’s residents are members of racial and ethnic minority groups. The city’s population, totaling some 600,000, is about 49% non-Hispanic white, 38% Black, 9% Latino, 3% Asian-American, and 1% Native American. The city has experienced the phenomenon of “white flight”. Many Whites left in search of economic opportunity. As old manufacturing jobs died out within the city limits and new enterprises sprang up outside, highly skilled workers followed the money to the city’s fast-growing suburbs. The less-skilled, often members of ethnic and racial minority groups, were largely left behind in the inner city. The poverty rates in the city demonstrate that 25% of all children within the city limits live below the poverty line. A segment of the Asian and Latino potential work force lives in the inner city; the rest resides outside the city. Asian, Latino and Native American men are over twice as likely to be unemployed as are White males and this holds for Asian, Latina and Native American females as well. Discrimination plays a large role in the labor market in the city with wages for minority groups being less than those of their White counterparts. There are also racial tensions that exist between the different ethnic groups.

Within the city limits and some outlying suburban areas, about three thousand Sikh families have made this area home. The middle class, successful members of the Sikh community live on the outskirts of the community in suburban sprawls, and frequent the gurudwara to make their contacts there with the working class sector. Within this community, there are Sikh-run businesses, gas stations and a few restaurants. Due to the concentration of Sikh families and resources, newly arriving families do not venture out into the larger community. Upon arrival into the United States, these families are brought directly to the concentrated urban Sikh community or local gurudwara and from there, they engaged in the existing networks to find work. This community is established, as there have been Sikhs in the community for over the past thirty years. In addition to the older established community that consists of professionals (doctors, lawyers, engineers, professors and business owners), there are a growing number of families that are now coming into the area. These families are able to rely on these established networks developed by the older NRI’s (non resident Indians) to initially integrate into the United States.

Based on my previous understanding of the diverse challenges that are faced by immigrant groups according to time of arrival, immigrant status and work choices, the town of Singh seems to be rich with experiences and voices to help us further
understand the diverse immigrant experiences within the Punjabi diaspora. Not all places where Indian immigrants have settled encompass such dynamics as this Sikh community. The settlement of different waves of immigrants, the professionals of the 1960’s and the families that have arrived through the Family Reunification Act of 1965, create various tensions, unities, and gaps within the community. Families that arrived in 1960 were facing different challenges than those that have arrived in the decade of the 1990’s. Class, race and gender politics manifest in complicated ways in the town of Singh. Politics both within and outside of the diaspora signaled fragmentations in the community. The stark class differences of the community in the urban center in comparison to the affluence of the families in the outlying suburbs produced certain relationships of power. These relationships of power by class manifested in cultural forms at their common meeting place, the gurudwara. Taken together, these class fractures and the tensions around them provide an important insight into the diversity of the diaspora.

LOCATING MY RESEARCH SITE

As a first generation South Asian immigrant, I was intimately aware of the subtle and obvious social interactions that were taking place within the Sikh communities. I wanted to capture the experience of the newer immigrant arrivals who were facing difficult challenges. Locating an ideal site to conduct my project required some exploration and careful thought and with time it became a personal journey. Although Indian diasporic communities have settled down throughout the United States, I was interested in choosing an urban setting with a highly concentrated working class community. I was hoping to meet families who had recently immigrated and who were blue-collar workers. It is within such concentrated urban communities that the greatest transformations and class struggles in the diaspora are taking place and unfortunately they have been largely understudied in educational research. A thriving working class population marks these neighborhoods. Within these densely populated communities, or insular neighborhoods, Indian immigrants have formed isolated self-sufficient communities. Such insulated neighborhoods provide networks that enhance survival skills and contacts for newly arriving members.

After much thought, I chose the gurudwara as my prime research site because it was a place where the families of the differing socioeconomic status and of different immigrant waves came to congregate and interact with one another. There is a sense of “community” at the gurudwara. Speaking a common language, Punjabi, and practicing Sikhism created a communal bond that lessened the isolating experience of immigration. In many respects, the multiple functions of the gurudwara are critical for the community in the reproduction of the Sikh religion and Punjabi culture and language. Many immigrant communities become more religious after migration and the community temples become prime sites of cultural affirmation and religious identity formation. Understanding the role of Sikhism in this community is essential in order to cultivate a greater understanding of not only the many families in the town of Singh but of other large Sikh communities throughout the United States.
After several visits, I felt that I would be able to spend time at the temple and slowly come to an understanding about the many families that participate in Sunday worship. I visited both gurudwaras in the area. The gurudwara at the outskirts of the city was larger and attracted a greater number of families and interaction between the older and newer wave of immigrants. I spent the majority of my time attending the gurudwara at the outskirts of the city due to this.

The gurudwara is tucked away in a small neighborhood off of a busy road. One may easily pass it if not looking for the saffron flag that displays the symbolic Sikh symbol, the chanda. The site that is now the gurudwara was formally a Catholic church. In the early 1990’s the church was renovated and transformed into a place of worship by the Sikh community. Many of the cars in the parking lot of the gurudwara are marked with American flags and had bumper stickers that read, “Proud to be Sikh American”. On the front door of the gurudwara was a sign, which read, “Sikhs are not terrorist nor are associated with Osama Bin Laden”. The flags and the sign were symbolic of the times; life after 9/11. Leaflets were available that described how to avoid dangerous situations and harassment. Not walking alone at night, only traveling when absolutely necessary and being proactive about explaining the distinction of the Sikh religion from Islam were a few recommendations.

Upon entering the gurudwara, sounds of the morning prayers can be heard. The worshipping area is in a large room to the right and to the left are the gurudwara library and the area to place your shoes and coats. One may not wear shoes in the worshipping area and must cover one’s head with a scarf at all times as a respect to the Sikh religious text and religion. There are no chairs; the congregation is to sit on the floor. Directly in front of everyone is the guru garant sahib, or the Sikh religious text. Most worshippers enter, bow before the Sikh religious text and offer alms or a donation to the temple before sitting down. Downstairs there is a large kitchen set aside to make the langar, or community food, which is served to the congregation after the service. Women and men arrive quite early and spend a few hours making food for three to four hundred worshippers. Each week, a different family donates their money to pay for the entire langar. Many families enroll their children in Punjabi language classes and in music lessons that are offered at the gurudwara. Youth learn to read and write Punjabi as well as learn how to sing religious songs. During the year, Sikh youth have many opportunities to sing in competitions and during the regular religious service. There are camps that meet several times a year and youth and adults attend these retreats in order to immerse themselves in religious teachings and cultural lessons. During special holidays and festivals, youth are given the opportunity to sing and present to the congregation. Many youth also hold fundraisers and engage in community service.

Although I possess similar physical and psychological markings as the people of the town of Singh, it is important to understand my location in relation to whom I study. I understand the place of being the “Other”. Throughout my life, my body has been marked as “Other” due to various facets of my identity. Although my experiences may differ from those of members of the town of Singh, the psychological space of the “Other” is familiar to me. We all especially felt “uneasy” and “scared” as the post 9/11 anti-immigrant backlash took place. Commiserating on
our experiences of being harassed and assaulted was an important juncture of understanding. Throughout the experience, I continually evaluated my place and relation to the many people I interacted with and I take great responsibility in representing the lives and experiences of the persons in my book.

WALKING THE FINE LINE OF BEING INSIDER AND OUTSIDER

A critical approach was taken to address the many experiences in this book. Understanding immigrant experiences from a critical perspective stems from my underlying belief that there are systems in place that privilege certain members of society over others and that there is a relationship between knowledge and power. Those who have the ability to frame and distribute knowledge are at a clear advantage to disseminate discourse that subordinates certain members of society repeatedly. These systems of power need to be recognized and deconstructed to better understand why certain inequalities are reproduced. This book will inevitably deal with such issues and suggest means of change. In addition to recognizing systems of power that privilege certain groups over others in research, understanding one’s identity as a researcher and one’s location in specific projects is crucial.

I feel closest to the Punjabi immigrant community that consists of families of both the Hindu and Sikh faith. Although I am not originally of the Sikh faith, the language and common ancestral roots enhance elements of familiarity between members of the town of Singh and myself. As a member of a first generation immigrant Punjabi-Hindu family, I have felt both the pain and joy of feeling both placed and misplaced. I am very proud of my community and there is a rare beauty and essence that captivates. Yet despite the strengths and goals of every community, there exist traumatic moments for those who struggle to fight between different worlds that are not easily understood nor willingly embraced. A desire to expand and invite other voices to the conversation on Punjabi-Indians, and to the greater debate on Indian Americans inspired me. I see fragmentations in my local community and can sense the “Othering” of newer arriving immigrants by the older immigrants. There are no fixed struggles or frozen cultures that stand alone in time, hence understandings and conclusions about them must be continually reevaluated, expanded and questioned.

Parents of first generation immigrant families most often emigrate from India with the welfare of their children in mind. Education becomes the prime motivation to emigrate, not economic gain. The opinions of the children may not have so much bearing on decisions to leave India. Fragments and notions of Punjab and India illustrate a part of the transplanted Punjabi Indian immigrant household. This book is unique because the families emigrated shortly after the Khalistani movement in Punjab. Questions of identity, statehood and nationhood were not only challenges of being immigrants in the United States, but were also questions that were being contested while they were in Punjab. India, Punjab, Sikh, Hindu and the constructions of a homeland became blurred identities and visions.

My journey as a researcher was punctuated with my challenges of being an insider, an outsider and simultaneously both. One’s identity takes a strong role in
shaping the way in which one understands, rationalizes and analyzes the world. Given certain raced, classed and gendered positions, a researcher may choose various topics of study. When one chooses to study one’s own ethnic group and in a personal way plunge deeper into the building blocks of that group’s identity, some difficult moments may surface. The way in which one identifies oneself can result from familial, community and environmental influences. For example, for a first generation immigrant child, the selection of an “identity” is a very conflictual and complex process (Rumbaut, 1996). If one describes oneself as “Indian” and has never lived in India, understanding the Indian immigrant may come easier than trying to understand the reality of India.

I felt confident that I had entered a private realm of being an insider with the many members of the community that I have communicated with. I believe I have an insider perspective and I feel I can relate on many levels to my respondents who are similar to yet different from me. Having the honor to listen to the struggles of these families was also a learning experience for me. I may have been characterized as just another rich Indian by the youth. I understood that this class barrier could have turned the students off to my interactions with them. Over time, with continual interaction and building trust and friendship with the Sikh youth, I was invited to listen to their struggles and commiserate on a personal level. Understanding the manner I may have been positioned and learning from the students and community allowed me to learn more about myself and take away something on a more personal level.

The insider/outsider stance is debatable. John Stanfield poses the following aspect of the debate on this issue. People of color, and others traditionally outside the domain of research authority have argued that only those researchers emerging from the life worlds of their subjects can be adequate interpreters of such experiences. Dominant researchers (whites and traditional outsiders who embrace mainstream perspectives) have argued fervently against the claims of those outsider scholars claiming to have an insider monopoly on the production of knowledge regarding the life worlds from which they hail (Stanfield, 1994).

My informants are faced with navigating between multiple identities that I can foresee. They negotiated between multiple worlds as I had. Within this context, I felt quite confident that I had in some ways broken the barriers of whether one truly can be an insider or not when conducting research. This has also reminded me to look within myself and to probe deeper for meaning. A powerful statement made by Susan Krieger (1996) remains with me. She speaks about subjectivity in research:

My task was to try to uncover what I could with the tool of myself and my personal recognitions. I sought not simply to impose or to apply my newly developed recognitions, but to expand those recognitions by constantly challenging my existing understandings: challenging my perceptions of others with what I now felt I knew about myself and, at the same time, confronting my self-understanding with what my interviewees seemed to be telling me that was different. I think that often social research; this is what we really do. We see others as we know ourselves. If the understanding of self is
limited and unyielding to change, the understanding of the other is as well.
(p. 190)

There are however, certain class privileges that I came to the table with that became obvious to me. Throughout this research, I will take the responsibility of recognizing where I possess certain privileges as the researcher. As stated by Kirin Narayan (1993), “factors such as education, sexual orientation, class, race and sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider and outsider status.” (p. 672) Narayan’s statement is significant because it points out the many important factors that challenge the insider vs. outsider conviction. I would be considered a native anthropologist because I am studying my own ethnic group. Native anthropologists, however, cannot possibly know all that there is about their own group. Given the diversity within cultural domains and across groups, even the most experienced of “native” anthropologists cannot know everything about his or her own society. Narayan also poignantly states, “..the threads of a culturally tangled identity demonstrate that a person may have many strands of identification available, strands that may be tugged into the open or stuffed out of sight. A mixed background perhaps marks one as inauthentic for the label “native” or “indigenous” anthropologist; perhaps those who are not clearly “native” or “non-native” should be termed ‘halfies’ (p. 673).

It has been unnerving to see how communities are deconstructed, analyzed and so often misunderstood when a researcher may not have all the tools or knowledge needed of the community to complete the research task. A “voice” for a community can be channeled for the world in many ways and it may be legitimate. I recognize the need to be careful as I write about a community that is migrating transnationally and to be wary of the manner in which Third World bodies are represented by the western project. I do not desire that the voices that are shared simply become a production of knowledge for the “West”. I feel I have connected with the many families under study on a closer level and I hope to represent them on their own terms. I would prefer to say that my work is adding to the discussion and troubling certain assumptions about the Punjabi diaspora.

LAYOUT OF THE BOOK

This book is laid out in chapters that will provide snapshots of these family’s lives. I capture these moments in the community, the workplace and in school.

In Chapter 2, I take a moment to look critically at various areas of literature that deal with aspects of the Asian American immigrant experience. I take the time to look at the work of post colonial writers and contemporary ethnographers as well. Understanding where Sikh immigrants have been represented, spoken for and understood can only further help inform the findings in this book.

Chapter 3 deconstructs the politics of 9/11 and its impact on immigrant communities in the United States and around the world. Of central importance to this chapter is an exploration of how the cultural politics of 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror has created a long lasting backlash on South Asian communities who
have become available victims to the hegemonic discourse surrounding discussions on terrorism due to their physical appearances and ethnic origin. A closer look will be given to how one Sikh community describes their immigrant experience before and after 9/11.

Chapter 4 explores the lives of working class Sikh immigrants living in insular neighborhoods. They are the “Other” within the “Other”. This community is characteristic of the new “rainbow underclass”. As taxi drivers and domestic helpers, this community faces little upward mobility and their children struggle in schools. In this chapter, Sikh families will reveal their daily struggles to survive, their encounters with increasing racism due to the 9/11 backlash and their shifting perceptions of the American Dream.

Chapter 5 takes us within the school settings. My observations and understandings about the schooling experiences of the youth were based on numerous conversations and interviews with students. Sikh youth described their experiences, struggles and aspirations in their efforts to succeed and build their dreams. This chapter endorses the existing small body of literature that addresses the struggles behind the Asian American model minority. I appreciate the many implications, both negative and positive, that “schooling in America” had in the lives of the newly arrived Sikh youth. I understand students’ descriptions about what took place within school walls and how they coped. I ask the question, how did these struggles further impact their dreams and goals to be educated in American schools? I also understand definitions and redefinitions of success as defined by the youth as they continually demolished and resurrected visions and dreams. Experiences from both Diversity High and Uniform High are woven together to highlight themes from student responses. Sikh youth tell their stories of their struggles in schools both academically and socially. Marked by injuries of race and class, Sikh youth have low academic achievement and are dropping out and pursuing jobs at gas stations and domestic work. This cycle of poverty amongst South Asians is further exacerbated by schools not meeting the needs of South Asian youth.

In my concluding chapters, I address where my research fits within current debates on the shifting images of Asian American bodies, the larger struggles over definitions of core knowledge, and in regard to the impact of the Right wing hegemonic alliance on the South Asian immigrant experience. I also look at broader implications of the current political climate. After understanding how South Asian communities are struggling with racism and the 9/11 backlash, I take a moment to look generally at the lack of general discussion in schools on stereotyping, hatred and prejudice. How are youth responding to the war on terror and the media? In conclusion, curricular and educational practices are explored that promote peace and human rights education during times of war. Building a peaceable classroom is critical and I share my stories about teaching after 9/11.
America was supposed to be the land of the free, it seems like it is only free if you look a certain way and practice a certain religion. (Aman)

In order to locate the discussions and scholarly gaze on Sikh immigrants, it is important to understand the larger frameworks that have situated them. Immigrant adjustment can be greatly challenged as the political climate in the host country plays a vital role in shaping the immigrant experience (Rumbaut & Portes, 1996). Historically, the Asian American story has been used as an umbrella to speak for a vast group of immigrant experiences. This is limiting and has only homogenized further the intricacies and diversity of experiences that exist. Discourse about South Asians has shifted from the early part of the century as the yellow peril to the model minority and now back to seeing South Asians as “dangerous” in contemporary discourse. This rhetoric is taking place in the United States as the racial terrains shift to accommodate a fear of foreigners and as the face of terrorism is equated with certain physical attributes. Under the global conditions of mobility and transnationality, different discourses of emergent forms of racism can be observed. As Fazal Rizvi reminds us, racism is best viewed as a dynamic ideological form that is continuously changing, being challenged, interrupted, and reconstructed, and that often appears in contradictory forms. Its cultural production can be expected to be complex, multifaceted and historically specific (Rizvi, 2004).

To begin this story, we can deconstruct one structure of oppression that immediately faced the students after migration; Orientalist rhetoric and the model minority myth. Through the lens of Orientalism, the strong shifts in hegemonic discourse about Asian-Americans can be observed. These shifts are significant and provide an important social, political and cultural context in which to embed the findings of this book.

ORIENTALISM AND SHIFTING IMAGES OF ‘ASIANS’ IN EDUCATIONAL DISCOURSE

Homi Bhabha introduced the idea of an “in-between-ness” to capture the essence of the immigrants’ paradoxical existence. The immigrant is viewed as living on the borderline producing a complex identity of shiftiness, movement between here and there, past and present, colonial, post-colonial, neo-colonial, traditional, modern and East-West (Bhabha, 1994). DasGupta (1997) states that the ‘in-between space’ that the Asian Indian immigrant occupies represents a transnational hybridity where the world of linkages and connections comes alive and throws all those concerned into the paroxysms of confusion and conflict.” The “shiftiness” of Asian Americans is articulated and perpetuated by neo-colonial forms as Orientalism in the United States.
Orientalism (Said, 1979) can be used as a form to look at the formation of subjectivity of Asian and Indian immigrants in the United States. The question of what Orientalism produces as a post-colonial discourse of power today is relevant here. What work is being done to “Orientalize” and construct images of the East that have become an “internal presence” in the United States? The “internal presence” in the United States has resulted in the migration of the East or Asians to the geographical setting of the West. The presence of an “internal Orientalism” in the United States allows for the engagement of the productions of subjectivity and the creation of specific attributes about Asians and more specifically of Indians. The categories of yellow peril and model minority barely cover the expanse of categorizations for Asians.

The invention of an exotic silent, feminine and Oriental Other in the United States has been contradictory and fragmented and has taken on different “categories” throughout history. Along with the blatant Othering of the Indian diaspora in the United States, of most particular interest is the relationship between knowledge and power and how hegemony and Orientalism have maneuvered populations such as Indian immigrants. Discourse (literature, art and culture) that stems from Orientalism does not in essence tell a true story, but rather is an interpretation of how European Western civilization perceives the Orient. Rudyard Kipling’s fictitious stories of “colonial” India illustrate literature that engages in Orientalism. A clear distinction is made between East and West, with the West possessing a clearer and stronger identity. “Knowing the Oriental’ is to have authority over it. Further, the relationship between knowledge, culture and power depends upon who has the power to define it (Said, 1978). In this sense, the colonizer possesses the greater power differential. Said has been challenged, however, for not being concise in regard to the “continuity” of Orientalism over the centuries between and among different colonial powers (Moore-Gilbert, 1997). Interruptions, contradictions and fragments that concern Orientalist discourse from the era of colonial France and Britain to the United States are not specifically addressed by Said. It is my belief that the presence of Oriental forms in the United States still continue. These forms serve as a tool to categorize and “Other” Asian groups. The continued presence and result of Western colonial forms can still be observed through the present day treatment of immigrant communities.

Orientalist discourse also offers a perspective from which to observe the “shift” in how dominant discourse has framed and described Asian immigrants. In Orientalism, the Far East is “captured” or held captive by the authority of the West. An equal relationship does not exist between the West and East, but rather the West is in clear authority and has cultural superiority over the East. “Theses of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West most easily associated themselves early in the nineteenth century with ideas about the biological bases of racial inequality.” (Said 1979, p. 206). Late nineteenth century Orientalism was characterized by an advanced/backward binarism, further placing “Orientals” in subordinate roles. This parallels the construction of current racial formations that view Asians as “invading” the U.S. with their growing presence and this seems to provoke more resistance towards them. American jobs being taken away and “outsourced” to Asia also evokes similar attitudes.
Coupled with being characterized as backwards, the Oriental was linked to elements in Western society (delinquents, women, the insane, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien (Said, 1979). The Far East has historically been described as if it includes one large homogeneous group. This notion of homogeneity is also important to address. Educational systems can also be viewed as perpetrators of engaging in Orientalist forms of colonization. The internal colonialism model is evident in education systems where immigrant children are akin to colonial subjects. “Education for the colonized perpetuates racial and cultural oppression not only through dependent teaching but also by denying, if not depreciating, the culture and race of the colonized” (Kelly, 1988). Such colonized ethnic groups are lead to occupy certain roles that are dictated by schools (i.e. model minority stereotype).

Questions regarding the “Orientalizing” of Asian populations in education lead one to look at other interconnected themes. Culture, the state, and the politics of knowledge take on different forms of power. Hegemony and the resurgence of neo-liberal and neo-conservative alliances in England and the United States are also responsible for the creation of Asians as the “Other”. Hegemonic power can take on various forms when agendas in Education are formed because hegemony plays an influential role in determining areas such as curriculum content, teacher preparation and academic standards for students. Hegemony gives power to predominant structures to define and sustain power over certain subordinate groups in a society. This parallels the West’s creation of the East as the subordinate and Oriental. The new hegemonic alliance in the United States and England encompasses a wide array of groups. Current and past hegemonic discourse is not characterized by total control, but rather a partial exercise of leadership by dominant groups, or by an alliance of dominant groups in some, but certainly not all spheres of society (Apple, 1996). New hegemonic blocs have the potential to influence the “common sense” to adhere to a romanticized notion of “Eurocentric Education”, values, cultural forms and traditional knowledge. These measures are strategies that are used by neoliberal forms and agendas. These agendas can carefully align groups together and also create oppositions. There are also contradictions and tensions within these alliances. Asians historically have been deployed as a weapon against other minorities. The anti-black racism that occurs in both schools and communities and that has been bred from the binary oppositions created from the model minority stereotype also illustrates this point.

South Asian American Identity and Race Politics

The individuals in this book, as do many new immigrants, struggled to understand American race politics and further where their place was in the color line and racial terrain. The history of race and identity politics for the Asian and specifically Indian diaspora is complex. The previous discussion of “Orientalist” forms and its strategic and manipulative use by the conservative alliance represent the manner in which all Asian-Americans are “Othered”. Asian American studies can be expanded to engage in dialogues about the global political climate. For example, Sunaina Maira (2006) explains that “crafting a theory of empire in Asian American studies
calls for an analysis of the current form of empire and a discussion of how ethinicization, racialization, and citizenship within the multicultural nation are constructed in relation to imperial power that extends globally and that co-opts the very notion of cultural difference. The discourse of a “clash of civilizations”, for example, which seeps into Bush’s talk of the War on Terrorism- the war between American democracy and freedom and Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism..is also used to suggest that there are “good” and “bad” Muslims”(p. 122). This call to merge Asian and Arab American studies is timely and important to recognize given that the post 9/11 victims of racial and political profiling were South Asian and Arab Americans. Both groups share similar relations to the state that are marked by racial and political oppression. Forging a collective based on these issues would greatly strengthen anti-hegemonic discourse.

The Asian-American categorization as a “hegemonizing” form for groups that are massed together within this group has worked against the multiplicity of voices in the diaspora. “Asian-Americanists” have been participating in the marginalization of certain groups under this label. “Asians” in America can be allotted two distinct categories; East/Southeast Asians and South Asians. Asians who originated in the East/Southeast Asia include the countries of China, Taiwan, Thailand, The Koreas, Japan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and the Philippines. South Asia would include India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Immigrants from South Asia have also experienced similar struggles. Historically East/Southeast Asians have dominated the Asian-American platform. South Asians are a fast growing branch of the Asian family (Srikanth & Shankar, 1998).

As stated by Srikanth & Shankar, “South Asians want their unique attributes to be recognized and their particular issues discussed; and some of them want this to occur, initially at least, within the Asian American paradigm, for they think that they must surely belong there. Yet, they find themselves so unnoticed as an entity that they feel as if they are merely a crypto group, often included but easily marginalized within the house of Asian America.” (p. 3)

South Asians, hence, are both included and excluded by the Asian-American group.

As stated, Asian-American categories were pioneered in the 1960’s by a largely East Asian constituency. The category was adopted to counteract derogatory identifiers such as “Oriental”, “slant eyes” and “yellow peril”. South Asians have been more or less ambiguous in discussions and this has elicited an “invisibility” of the group. There are multiple and contradictory forms at work here. The “non-mongloid” appearance of South Asians excludes them from fitting into the East Asian dominated hegemonic group. Who is Oriental or “Asian” enough to be included in these groups? This type of internal racializing has led South Asians to forge their own collectivity. The census bureau has also classified South Asians in a different category. There has been an inability to classify the “race” of South Asian immigrants. Sikhs were the first group of immigrants from India in the United States and they were placed in the category of Hindu (a religious
affiliation). The Hindu classification did not suit Sikhs since they were not of the Hindu religion. The 1930 and 1940 census added Hindus to the classification; the 1950 census returned South Asians to their earlier designation as “Whites” converted them to “Other” in 1960 and 1970, “Asian Indian” in 1980 and then to “Asian and Pacific Islander” (Shankar, 1998). In 1974, the Associations of Indians in America lobbied to be categorized as Asians rather than Whites so that they could claim economic benefits as minorities. The ambiguity on how to define the “race” of Indians has added to the current element of uncertainty with the South Asian identity. “White” is used strategically among South Asians when they seek to assert a certain model status. Discussions on race in the United States also assume a “purity” of racial categories. Groups must fall into White, Asian, Black or Latino. Certain physical attributes are also allotted to these categories. Asians are often stereotypically associated with having characteristics of East Asians. In the American psyche and common sense, this is also the case. Hence, the obscure placement of South Asians leaves them largely marginalized. This is not only a reality of South Asians; many other groups such as “biracial”, or “multiracial” groups and Arab Americans, also experience this.

The inclusive and exclusive categorizing of South Asian immigrants can also be illustrated by their absence in curriculum in schools and in Asian American and Ethnic Studies departments in university settings. In schools, Indian youth face the inevitable East Asian dominated Asian American category and are oftentimes ignored in discussions about Asian culture and heritage. In universities, South Asian writers are largely excluded from reading lists and anthologies which discuss writers from within the Asian American diaspora. Historians and social scientists have also largely overlooked people of South Asian origin. There is a long list of contemporary South Asian writers who could be included; however, many South Asian authors are not associated with Asian American studies but have been considered Third World intellectuals. (i.e. Arjun Appadurai, Homi Bhabha, and Partha Chatterjee) (Shankar & Srikanth, 1998).

“South Asian” is also obviously inadequate and contributes to the essentializing of groups. Other factors that may contribute to the invisibility of South Asians are legacies of history, colonialism, and displacement which have forged different realities. Indian immigrants for example, may be largely preoccupied with other experiences. India, as a nation, is still in the process of reclaiming and decolonizing herself. Efforts to bring India together as a unified nation have been largely unmet. Immigrants from India may be more directly involved or concerned with projects in the “homeland”, rather than concerns of American culture and politics. Amritjeet Singh (1998) states that “. . . diasporic South Asians have been heavily invested in projects directed toward homeland nationalisms of one kind or another- political, religious, ethnic and regional. The net effect of these tendencies is to reinforce “national” or religious identities and impede any progress toward global citizenship or active participation in American life” (p. 37). Concrete examples of these cases are illustrated by Hindus and Sikhs abroad financing and strongly supporting political groups such as the BJP (Bharata Janata Party- current right wing Hindu party in power in India) and pro-Khalistan (Khalistan or a separate Punjab) fundamentalists. The parameters that define the South Asian community can be
defined in the following three manners: first, by religion which is often but not always synonymous with nation (India/Hindu, Pakistan/Muslim, etc); second, by language, which is often but not always synonymous with region or class (Tamil/Tamil Nadu, Hindi, Gangetic Plains, English/elites, Punjabi/Punjab, Nepali/Nepal); and third by class (professionals, taxi drivers, shopkeepers etc.) (Shankar & Srikanth, 1998).

A coherent South Asian agenda given these vast differences would require the group to gloss over class, religious, language and cultural lines. The clashes and tensions between class, religion, language and culture among not only the South Asians, but also East and Southeast Asians must be addressed. Pan-Asianism, however, becomes important during periods of political mobilization to trouble racializing and “Othering” forms (Espiritu, 1999). As stated by Gayatri Spivak (1990), “when a cultural identity is thrust upon one because the center wants an identifiable margin, claims for marginality assure validation from the center.” The conflation of racial categories is used for overtly racist purposes and coalitions are forged to resist oppressive measures as these. Oppositions within the Indian American group have only added to the decay in advancement in all spheres. Where South Asians decide to position themselves to politicize and maximize political clout is debatable. South Asian immigrants have been marginalized on the basis of their religious adherence and identity. Such oppression has given the community little political bearing and voice. Transforming one’s Eastern religious identity and converting to mainstream Christian identities marks one strategy towards assimilation by politicians of Indian descent such as Bobby Jindal of Louisiana.

With no doubt, religion plays a key role in the reconstruction and reassertion of identity for Indians abroad. Mobilizations around religion have created oppositions within the South Asian diaspora group; such as the Khalistan versus the Hindutva movement. As noted by Khyati Joshi (2006), “religious affiliation, like race, has been the basis for exclusion, and discrimination throughout American history.” (p. 118) Joshi notes that the racialization of religion can render religious oppression, both invisible and acceptable. Further stated by Joshi,

Religious oppression manifests the majority’s belief in the superiority of Christianity and the inferiority of Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism and the oppressor’s desire for a homogenous nation…..Religious oppression in the United States exists and is perpetuated by and through a specific combination of facts and acts, each building upon its precedent: first one particular group, Christians, has the power to define normalcy; second, the histories and belief systems of Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism are misrepresented and/or discounted; third, harassment, discrimination and other forms of differential treatment towards non-Christians are institutionalized; and fourth: religious oppression is manifested through violence or the threat of violence. (p. 123)

For Sikh immigrants who have a unique history, ethnic conflict is part of their struggle and it continues to occur in the present day over questions of religion, identity, and statehood. This community has faced oppression under both Hindu
and Christian hegemony. Immigrant families engage in constant negotiation to interpret and to define their homeland Religious and cultural oppression of Sikhs in India and their sense of homelessness create unique elements within the Sikh diaspora. Within the diaspora there is a strong desire to locate a home, reproduce the cultural and religious values of Sikhism and inspire pride in Sikh practices. These concerns of the Sikh diaspora may not have always been central to dialogues of a strong South Asian Hindu constituency. Being considered “White” in the census may be feasible for many South Asian groups who “visibly” may try to assimilate; for Sikhs adorning a turban it is not. A large part of the struggle for the Sikh diaspora has been the need to forge distinct coalitions apart from larger South Asian constituencies to fight for their unique struggles.5

A HISTORIC VIEW: ORIGINS OF THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH

Migration of Asians to the United States has taken place over the past 150 years. These migrations were further characterized as invasions not only in terms of geography but as a contaminant in schools and social institutions. Historically, Asian Americans have been discriminated against and named a “yellow menace” by school systems. In 1885 the San Francisco Board of Supervisors made a strong claim against allowing the integration of Chinese immigrant children in the schoolhouses. As was stated by the committee,

Guard well the doors of our public schools that they do not enter. For however stern it might sound, it is but the enforcement of the law of self-preservation, the inculcation of the doctrine of true humanity and an integral part of the iron rule of right by which we hope presently to prove that we can justly and practically defend ourselves from this invasion of Mongolian barbarism. (p. 3 Nakanishi & Nishida, 1995)

The attitudes of the committee closely paralleled Orientalist rhetoric (Said 1978). The Chinese immigrants in California in the late 1800’s were viewed as “yellow barbarians” and were seen as “contaminated”. Separate but equal doctrines (1902, Wong Him v. Callahan) were established by the courts, but districts were denied the right to practice it. This left Chinese students with the option to attend missionary schools (Nakanishi & Nishida, 1995). Missionary schools were open for the Chinese community to educate their children. Reverends of such schools saw the Chinese population in the missionary schools as the opportunity to acquaint them with the spirit of higher civilization and purer faith. The underlying assumption appeared to be that the Chinese religion was “impure”or in need of “purification”. Chinese communities in San Francisco fought strongly to open the doors of segregated schools in the early 1900’s. Strong anti-Japanese sentiment also surfaced in the early 1900’s, as they were put in separate schools to avoid the impression they may make on White children.

During the 1960’s Civil Rights movement, a landmark case, Lau vs. Nichols was won on behalf of Chinese speaking students in San Francisco. The class action suit claimed that Chinese students were not receiving the proper instruction that they were entitled to as limited English proficient speakers. The denial of such
education to the students was resulting in higher drop out rates. Winning the case opened many doors for limited English speaking students from other Asian nations. The limited English speaking student, according to the Supreme Court decision, must be able to participate effectively in the classroom and they must receive an education that is both “meaningful” and “comprehensible” (Wang, 1995). The Lau case was a victory for minority communities not only in California, but nationwide to unite together to survive politically. Hence, the Civil Rights movement during the 1960’s and 1970’s was also a time for Asian American populations to proclaim their spaces and to ensure that their civil rights were being secured. Given the discriminatory and hostile nature of school districts towards various Asian American communities (Chinese, Japanese), and the resistance to that in the 1960’s, one may sense that the predominant hegemonic bloc clearly did not accept this population. Asian Americans were characterized with certain “contaminatory” attributes, yet they were also feminized and placed as silent and Oriental.

Amid the growing discontent among African American and other minorities in the post 1960’s era, a different image of the Asian American student surfaced. The popular press began giving coverage to the strong academic achievement among some Asian American populations, and further the “model minority” stereotype began to take shape. Glorified accounts of Asian American students (Japanese American and Chinese American) performing at peak academic levels were presented and applauded. Asian Americans were admired for “finally” overcoming racial barriers and for having had “finally succeeded in becoming accepted into white, middle class society through their hard work, uncomplaining perseverance, and quiet accommodation (Suzuki, 1995). Asian American activists were surprised at the sweeping generalization, the failure to address the “stereotypic” nature of the model minority myth and the failure to acknowledge outright racism that still existed towards Asian Americans (Nakanishi & Nishida, 1995). Homogeneity was also assumed for the group. A very distorted image was being presented to the media and public, and it was quite obvious that a voice was being created for the Asian American population through the authority of another, or the hegemonic bloc. The voices of Asian Americans groups were not only being “spoken for” in the model minority stereotype, but the entire group was characterized by a few created traits, such as being docile and quietly accommodating. These reflect theses of Orientalism that compare Eastern populations to a woman (in this case women are viewed as the weaker sex) (Said, 1978). In the United States, the model minority stereotype became the basis of cultural understanding of the Asian diaspora for the dominant culture. Contradictory realities to the model minority stereotype such as being working class and dropping out of school were largely unaddressed and ignored.

Ethnographic research on Asian American students who struggle academically has been sparse and requires attention. Timothy Wong summarized the literature that asserts the Asian American success myth and sees three distinct assumptions that are made about the group. Asian Americans are assumed to do well because of a nature/genetics argument, or essentially an assumption based on “scientific racism”, the second argument is a nurture/culture argument that implicitly suggests that they have the “right values” and further other groups that don’t are culturally
deficient, and lastly the relative functionalism argument states that structural factors and folk theories of success lead to the Asian success story (Wong, p. 76). Commonly held beliefs by teachers, administrators and researchers in the field assume certain adaptation patterns to schooling for “Asian American” immigrant children (Ogbu, 1987; Gibson, 1991). Anthropologist John Ogbu is known for his work on theories of success in regard to voluntary and involuntary immigrants. According to Ogbu, “…eventually they (immigrant minorities) appear to adjust and learn more or less successfully or, put differently, the immigrants succeed in crossing cultural/language boundaries to do relatively well in school” (Ogbu, 1987). Ogbu further asserted “the immigrants see the cultural differences as barriers to be overcome in order to achieve their long-range goals of future employment and not as markers of identity to be maintained” (Ogbu, 1987). For immigrant minorities, these perceptions or interpretations of learning the cultural features of the school to adjust socially and academically are not seen as threatening to their own culture, language and identity. These aspects are seen as an additive to learning. Ogbu argued that immigrant success is nurtured as the immigrants’ interpretations and reactions to their relationship with the schools also facilitated their academic success. Immigrant minorities see the schooling in the States as superior to the country of origin, feel they are treated better in the school systems, and the discrimination felt is rationalized as them being “guests” in a foreign land with no choice but to tolerate it. In conclusion, Ogbu posited that the academic success of immigrant minorities can be traced back to the fact that immigrants do not equate learning English and other aspects of the culture of the Whites that are essential for school success, with learning a cultural frame of reference that threatens their own language, culture and identity. Quite to the contrary, the responses of the students in this book paralleled more closely with the framework of Ogbu’s involuntary minorities.

The model minority category appears to be politically constructed (Omi, 1998). Kim (1975) offered an interesting description of the “model minority” stereotype:

The model minority stereotype has “marginalized” Asian American students, this sense of not only being neglected but also the use of it has made Asian Americans resentful of the success myth; they charge that Asian Americans are used as “proof” of a racial inequality that does not exist, and posed as showpieces of how docile acceptance of white supremacy is the key for non-white Americans (p. 102).

Dismantling the model minority stereotype is critical. High achievement in school may not necessarily be the case when one looks across certain “Asian American” populations. Falling into the trap that assumes all “Asian American” immigrant children are “high-achievers”, willing to “assimilate” and/or “play by the rules” of the dominant culture to secure their “economic and social mobility” is potentially dangerous. Further stated by Timothy Wong,

Seeing Asian Americans only as a “model minority” may seem complementary at first, but it serves only to unfairly homogenize an extremely diverse group of people. The model minority myth ignores important
historical and socioeconomic realities about Asian Americans. The notion that Asian Americans are the model minority is somewhat similar to the European immigrant analogy. The European immigrant analogy views success in terms of poor immigrants who work hard to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and advance socially and economically in the United States. (Wong p. 68)

Researchers such as Stacey Lee (1996), Wendy Walker-Moffatt (1995), Vijay Prashad (2000) and Timothy Wong (1998) have written valuable work on demystifying the model minority myth. The negative effects of the model minority stereotype represent the echoes of Orientalism in the U.S. and also contribute to the categorization of Asians as “acceptable” or “not acceptable” to the dominant group. Within these larger Asian-American formations, South Asian voices tend to be drowned out. Many South Asian communities embrace the model minority title as a form of entrance and entitlement to the American mainstream.

THE MODEL MINORITY AS SOCIAL CAPITAL

Gaining access to the dominant mainstream and certain opportunity structures through the utility of the model minority label assisted professional Asian American families. Using the platform of success in order to gain access signifies agency in regard to gaining representation and a political voice. The assumption is that immigrant parents expect nothing less of their children and demand that they succeed and uphold the model minority expectations. The literature on Indian immigrant families and academic achievement proposes a certain pattern. There seems to be a well-documented case that parents expect their children to be achievement-oriented in schools (Gibson, 1987; Prashad, 2000; DasGupta 1997, Lassinger, 1995; Gupta, 1997; Gonsalves-Pinto, 1997; Saran & Eames, 1980). Such expectations may be due, in part, to the idea that education acts as the sole tool for economic and social mobility. DasGupta (1997) captures this idea well by stating, “...in the United States, immigrant parents see their children’s academic performance as the only tool available by which to fight the stigma attached to the minority status, or, as the only way one can be Indian and be proud at the same time. This in the United States, high academic performance is expected from both boys and girls” (p. 124). Although there is sufficient literature that supports this, there tends to be an oversight in the research. Unfortunately, the gains made by the model minority success model had a downside.

The placement of Asian American populations in politicized and racialized categories (such as the model minority stereotype) in the educational arena suggests an indifference to individual struggles within the group. It also suggests the tokenization of the Asian American immigrant community as successful and without struggle. Such categorization is reminiscent of the reality of the political construction of race categories. Omi & Winant (1998) argue that race is merely a social historical concept.

..it is only through developed social practices and the particular elaboration of historical and material relations in the United States that “white consciousness”
with its associated category “white people” emerged. Likewise, it is only through similar historical and social practices that racial “others”- who in reality have varying economic and social positions-emerged under the definitions of “black”, “Latino”, and “Asian”. In this sense, racial categories have varied widely from decade to decade. The variation both reflects and in turn shapes racial understanding and dynamics. It establishes often contradictory parameters of racial identity into which both individuals and groups must fit in. (in McCarthy, 1998 p. 58)

The model minority stereotype has also been deployed in multiple ways and has pitted minority groups against one another, further mimicking racism. When Indian immigrants align themselves with the majority White community, they perpetuate racial forms and oppression of other groups. As noted by Prashad, “Attacking Blacks by paying tribute to “Asian intelligence” makes one immune from charges of racism, and the model minority thesis is thus a pillar of inferential racism.” (Prashad, 2000). Model minority expectations have also created damaging cleavages within the Indian community. Middle to upper class desis (Indian immigrants) have gracefully accepted the applause of the model minority “compliment” and view their hard work as being recognized. 6 In their eyes, newer immigrants from India are the unmodel minority. The surge of working class desis in the United States are viewed as “tarnishing” this image and unraveling all the hard work that merited a model minority label. Prashad (2000) demonstrates the type of tensions that are happening.

But we are good immigrants. We have advanced degrees. Sotto voce, our desi brethren on the Upper East Side of Manhattan bemoan the fact that almost 50 percent of the taxi workers are now from South Asia. These cabbies, noted one Indian professional, are “lowering the tone”. They are “spoiling things for us”, even “ruining our image” in the United States. “In just five years they’ve undone all the good work. These uncouth chaps, straight out of 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.” The new working class migration is turning us into Mexicans! That means we know that we are, after all, just about the same as Mexicans in the eyes of white supremacy. (p. 87)

Within this statement, there are multiple racializing forms at work. Punjabis in India are typically stereotyped as “backward” 7 and according to this quote these attitudes may continue to prevail in immigrant circles in the U.S. Professional Indians who view working-class Indians as “Mexicans” also demonstrate the racial tensions that are taking place across class and ethnic lines.

THE OTHER WITHIN THE OTHER: THE UNMODEL MINORITY

The success myth of the model minority has become a filter within communities and schools to stratify and segregate themselves. Timothy Wong (1998) reminds the reader of the need to address the plight of the working-class Asian immigrant.
Their experiences and needs are largely ignored and silenced. Working class immigrants from South Asia, or professionals from Punjab who take on blue-collar work in the United States, are viewed as the unmodel minority, further tainting and spoiling the state of affairs and status of the professional model minority classes. It seems that the South Asian professional classes have in essence valued the model minority myth as a mark of social mobility and a gain in social and cultural capital. Amitava Kumar (1997) asks the question, at what cost is privileged status (model minority) being celebrated within the South Asian diaspora?

Elitist, class privilege and a celebration of certain “color” (lighter skinned Indians) lines are indicative of racial formations. South Asian elite adopt many forms of “Western” culture that become symbolic of class status. Their mannerisms, strict use of English in the household, participation in social clubs, and the purchase of exquisite homes, cars and jewelry, are some examples of their gain in social and cultural capital. The social and differentiating dimensions of “habitus” are displayed by the mannerisms and styles that the group is engaged in. Further, stated by Bourdieu (1997),

the differentiating form of habitus can be seen in the form of dispositions which are so many marks of social position and hence of the social distance between objective positions… and correlative, so many reminders of this distance and of the conduct required in order to “keep one’s distance” or to manipulate it strategically, whether symbolically or actually, to reduce it (easier for the dominant than for the dominated), increase it, or simply maintain it by not letting “oneself go”, not “becoming familiar”, in short “standing on one’s dignity” or on the other hand, refusing to “take liberties” and put oneself forward”, in short “knowing one’s place” and staying there. (in Swartz, p. 80)

Within South Asian communities, the model minority myth becomes a status to attain for those working class immigrants who are seen as backward, poor and dangerous. Working class immigrants are also associated with negative portrayals and connotations of “Other” minorities such as welfare dependent African American. Aiwha Ong (1995) speaks of the blackening or whitening of Asian immigrants according to their class status. Welfare dependent Asians, for example, are “blackened” and are associated with the negative assumptions and stereotypes that label them as incapable and lazy. The black/white dichotomy and the model versus the unmodel minority category reveal the hegemonic nature of these positions. Prashad (2000) further elaborates, “such accounts show us that black itself does not refer to peoples from any specific place or time. Rather white power, determines who is to be black at specific periods of time for various reasons. If “black” is contingent, so too is “white”, but the power relations between “black” (inferior, bad) and “white” (superior, good) are not provisional.” (p. 159)

Class divisions within the South Asian diaspora communities are expressed differently depending upon where one investigates. In the United States, for example, the success myth has become critical to race dialogues as are prescribed by the dominant group. Again, in the words of Vijay Prashad,
In order to differentiate between the ‘parasitic’ migrant (manual labor) and the ‘productive’ migrant (the professional) the South Asian migrant is inclined to support measures against working-class migration. This can be seen in the large South Asian support for Proposition 187 in California (to exclude all undocumented residents from state services, including education and medical care). The solidarities that must be crafted to combat our oppressive present must be alert to the desire among South Asian migrants to set themselves apart from the obvious targets of American racism (here the Latinos). The recent Welfare Reform Bill, which seeks to restrict the benefits to legal immigrants, demonstrates that the anti-immigrant dynamic knows no convenient boundaries, as is widely recognized even by the South Asians within the Republican party (Prashad in Srikanth & Shankar, p. 118).

South Asian immigrants who comprise fifty percent of cab drivers in New York City express similar class and race tensions. Solidarity among numerous working class immigrants to demand better working conditions and recognition of human rights for the “sweatshop of wheels” reveals working class alliances. Taxi drivers in New York City recognize that they are ostracized from the elite Indian classes and set forth to preserve their own niches separate from the stereotypic model minority.

In what manner are the segregated working class communities reacting to their prescribed role as unmodel and undesirable by the dominant group, South Asian professionals and the hegemony of India’s politics? The South Asian diaspora is deeply connected to events in the homeland, further indicating the global nature of the cultural struggles and their identity politics. Cultural forms of resistance reveal a youth subculture that is seeking to redefine and reassert their presence in the diaspora and are redefining the boundaries of what it means to be of Indian origin. The Khalistan movement in Canada and London represent an extremist Sikh militant group that draws support on the basis of the violence, oppression and subversive activities committed by the Indian government against Sikhs and its hegemonic politics. Many youth become devout followers of these organizations and utilize the platform to assert their identities as working-class males. The Khalistan movement is also symbolically in opposition to the worldwide Hindu fundamentalist movement that seeks to identify India with a Hindi-speaking, Hindu religious male citizenry.

Young working-class South Asian youth in London have used music as a powerful medium to express their cultural, class and gender politics. Many young desis (Indians) in England and North America have fashioned their cultural politics around several of the icons of black diaspora culture, which itself seeks a way to prevent being culturally normalized at the same time that blacks are economically disenfranchised. The bhangra, jungle, ragga, and D.J. sounds of Birmingham and Southall fill the headphones and the parties of the youth with the music of XLNC, Asian Dub Foundation, Apna Sangeet, Apache Indian, and Safri Boys (Prashad, 2000). Although the fusion of desi music and Afro-Caribbean sounds serves multiple forms of resistance, generational, class, and racial, it created ethno-racial subcultures which both enriched the lives of youth and also managed to pit certain
groups against one another. Culture is fluid and is a field upon which some of the most important political battles are fought, such as questions of gender relations, the status of faith and of religious practices, the question of education, and questions of elitism and prejudice (Prashad, 2000).

The silence in regard to the South Asian community results in the failure to recognize the cultural, class, gender and racial battles that are being fought. The class divide and the subsequent oppositions that have solidified within the South Asian immigrant community reflect the manner by which the model minority myth is contested. Privileged, elite South Asians have embraced the model minority label as a mark of their hard won status and “acceptance” in the Western metropolis. The elite professionals are prescribing the unmodel minority label to the working class migrant by virtue of their class status. The “unmodel” South Asian working class immigrants, or the “Other” within the “Other”, represent the largest growing immigrant population from South Asia. The model minority success myth has succeeded in many ways to segregate and stratify Asian immigrant communities. Some attention has been given to defy the myth in terms of academic achievement, racial hostility and general ability to adjust to the Western culture; greater attention needs to be given however as communities are increasingly segregated and as children simply become “bodies” in schools.

THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH AND CURRICULUM

In addition to the model minority stereotype, the sparse, almost absent knowledge about the vast Asian diaspora illicit messages to Asian American students about what is considered core and legitimate knowledge in America. The marginalization essentially conveys a message to both the mainstream and marginalized students about who and what matters in the American fabric. Despite contributions that had been made for centuries by Asian and Asian American immigrants in America, they are excluded for the most part from the American fabric of what is considered “core” knowledge. What “core knowledge” is is debatable. Michael Apple reminded educators that “core knowledge” in American schools should be interrogated as to “whose knowledge” is being hailed as “core” (Dr. Michael Apple, November 15 2003 Transforming Urban Schools: Whose Vision? CUNY GRADUATE CENTER, New York). This “core knowledge” essentially celebrates the history and experiences of a limited sector of the overall population. Curriculum that validates and recognizes the “Other” is not seen as traditional knowledge. Cultural politics is a politics characterized by the interplay of various factors. Those factors may be economic goals and values; visions of both the family and gender; and class relations; the politics of culture, difference and identity; and further the role of the state in all of this (Apple 1996). Cultural politics play an influential role in the educational agenda as they alter the varying struggles that are experienced by groups such as Asian immigrants. This alteration can lead to placing these groups on the margins and only allowing select groups to penetrate the dominant group. Construction of the “we” (we as the dominant group) vs. the “they” (they as the other) in the conservative agenda reflects elements of the reproduction of values and power. The right wing resurgence in
both England and the United States is aimed at creating a “new majority” with a return to a conservativism and traditional morality. The new hegemonic bloc presents the strongest criticism of curriculum in schools that addresses topics beyond “Western ideals” and Eurocentric values and state that they must be removed. Although there may be selections in the curriculum that reflect Asian Americans, they are incorporated by the dominant group. In essence the hegemonic group takes the authority to situate the “Other” or the “Oriental” within the dominant discourse. Hence, the internal Orientalizing of the invasion of the East in the boundaries of the United States has produced certain discourses of power that ultimately place the Asians as the silent, yet obedient, “Other”. Presently, knowledge about India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Middle East is largely centered on democratic decay, third worldism, and suspicion. Such representations of countries and understanding of them in America essentially leads to misunderstandings and feelings of marginalization for students of such background.

Historically, education has been a principal site for the reproduction and elaboration of racial meaning and racial identities. An examination of racial discourses within the overall trajectory of curriculum and educational theories and practices rapidly disabuses us of the notion that education is a “neutral” or “innocent” institution with respect to racial struggles (JanMohamed, 1987). Commonly held beliefs by teachers, administrators and researchers in the field assume certain adaptation patterns to schooling for “Asian American” immigrant children (Ogbu, 1987; Gibson, 1991). Discussions after 9/11 in schools tend to center around the “attacks” on American soil by certain “enemies”. The “enemies” are portrayed by images of men in turbans with beards and dark skin. Leaving students with such images in their minds to associate evil with and without engaging in any real discussions about the victims of hate crimes after 9/11 is dangerous. “Select knowledge” can be more dangerous than an absence of knowledge.

THROUGH THE LENS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON ASIAN AMERICANS

Immigrant families and their children face various challenges and upheavals as they begin their new lives in the Western nation states. The profound effects of the process of finding a meaningful place in a new society can lead to conflict and stress (Rumbaut, 1996). Suturing together memories from India and the current realities of life in the United States may elicit the need to forge entwined identities for both parents and children. The strategies that immigrant parents and their children employ to respond to various conflicts may differ. Preserving traditional culture while participating in the American one can prove to be a great feat for these individuals. There is a struggle to preserve and invent “authentic Indian culture” in their homes in America. Schooling, ideas about paths to adjustment in the United States, visions of India and homeland, responses to racism and life goals reflect arenas where generation gaps may arise. Regardless of their lengthy presence and numerous contributions to the U.S., Asians are still considered to be foreigners that are invading a land not to be called their own. Newer immigrants of
CHAPTER 2

the nineteen eighties and nineties are largely service providers; in stark contrast to
their earlier counterparts in the nineteen sixties and seventies who are professionals.
The body of literature on the Asian American immigrant experience is growing
and as each decade goes by, the type of migrant that arrives and their experience
during any particular wave of immigration changes. I would like to briefly visit
some key research studies that have been conducted on the Asian American youth
experience. These studies help inform my work and reveal where my work
confirms and contributes new ideas to the discussion.

The existing literature focuses on “cultural identities” of South Asian immigrant
youth and families. Discussions tend to be highlighted by themes on generational
gaps, the suturing of American and Indian cultures, transforming gender roles and
strategies of acculturation. There is a predominant theme in the literature that
emphasizes the dichotomy between the Indian and the American culture and identity.
The agency of individuals to choose from various cultural modes within the public
and private spaces is examined from multiple settings. The research that is currently
available focuses on the lives of upwardly mobile second generation children who
have perhaps already realized their access to certain social economic and cultural
circles due to their social status. On the other hand, the working class identity,
coupled with hostility from the mainstream community, and being “Othered”, lead
to different available identities for individuals. In this book, being “American” in
the public space may come with uneasiness and a fear of surveillance – in contrast
to the available literature-the process of identity formation in this book focuses
on the impact of class demotion, the perception of limited opportunities, the fear of
mainstream backlash, and an ongoing process of self doubt and questioning.

I agree with the important issues raised by Marcelo Suarez Orozco in regard to
the modest attention that has been given to understanding changes over time as
different groups of immigrant youth adapt to U.S. schools. As each decade passes,
the nature of youth cultures shifts as well; understanding these shifts is vital to
appropriately addressing the changing needs of immigrant communities. There is a
need to understand the experience of those immigrants who have made America
their home in the past decade and who are facing a unique plethora of challenges.
Education becomes a contested and complicated terrain for the Sikh families that
are newly arriving to the United States and recognizing the diversity of the South
Asian community will facilitate a greater understanding of the complexity and not
homogeneity of the Indian immigrant group. There is limited literature that exists
on the schooling experiences of South Asian, and more specifically Sikh immigrant
youth. Therefore, there has been a great reliance on the few studies that are
presently available for researchers and educators. This has led to a minimization of
the experience that is in need of scholarly revisitation.

Margaret Gibson’s work on Sikh immigrant families has been widely cited and
used as a primary example to represent the Sikh experience in educational research.
The work of Margaret Gibson (1988) may have provided an initial yet limited
perspective on the immigrant experience of Sikh immigrants in the United States.
Her findings from the early 1980’s may not speak to the current experiences of
immigrant youth. Gibson described how Sikh youth balanced cultural worlds as
“accommodation without assimilation”. Gibson’s study, however, contributes to
the traditional dialogue of the success stories of South Asian immigrant students and the resilience of “voluntary” minorities. Gibson’s arguments also contribute to the discourse that separates a distinct “American” culture and “Indian” culture without consideration of the phenomenon of global cultural flows. The interconnectedness of nations and the sharing of cultures through globalization, media and the Internet are not explored. Immigrants who have migrated in the past decade have experienced the impact of globalization on Indian culture and have been exposed to American cultural forms.

Kathleen Hall (1995) conducted a study on British youth in Leeds that provides an important perspective to compare transnational Sikh diasporas. Hall draws upon multiple cultural identities that are forged as British Sikhs participate in various social contexts and spaces. She names these cultural fields. Hall notes a constant negotiation between family honor and British cultural purity. The pressures on girls were different from that of boys. Girls were observed to be more closely attached to family honor and respect, and further their comportment in all cultural fields were constantly monitored to protect the image of the family. There was a choice of when to act Indian and when to act English. Spaces where young Sikh teenagers “acted Indian” were in the gurdwara (Sikh temple) and at home where a very Indian parent-child space is expected. Times to act English were at places like the mall, school and “English nightlife”. The challenge to choose between the British self and Asian Other, lead many young British Sikhs to live two lives.

Complimenting the dialogue on second generation issues of identity formation and conflict, Karen Leonard (1997) writes about the transforming South Asian identities that are forthcoming in the diaspora in the United States. The South Asian second generation is illustrative of the formation and new conceptions of identity. Such conceptions of identity have led to a generational gap. Leonard described the multi-faceted cultural venues across the United States of the South Asian second generation. Cultural venues include music and dance forms such as the Punjabi bhangra that is unique to India. The South Asian community has found many niches to nurture and celebrate their ethnic pride. Given the fact that the South Asian community has adapted, there remains an intergenerational gap between immigrant families and their children. Parents are described as having hopes of economic success for their children, and desires to maintain Indian tradition. The fears of the dominant society being more alluring for the younger generation take its role in this intergenerational gap. Leonard presented the view of critical religious leaders. These leaders criticized the young South Asian generation for marrying outside of Indian tradition and children not allowing parents to arrange their marriages. In regard to gender issues, young women are active in creating a strong voice. “Overprotective” parents have become obstacles for children, and have resulted in the engagement of premarital sex, dating outside of the ethnic group and secret marriages. South Asian children are choosing to form a unique identity that is spiced with both the “Indian way” and the cultural aspects of the dominant group. Leonard shed light on some of the struggles faced by the South Asian second generation and the new conceptions of identity. Leonard’s work is supported by other literature that reaffirms the desire of parents to remain traditional and the children’s desire to “Americanize”. In a similar vein, Sunaina
Maira Desis in the House (2002) focused her work on second generation Indian college youth living in New York City area. Her research focuses mainly on the way that these youth negotiate American, Indian and transnational cultural spaces. She understands how these youth negotiate contradictory expectations of gender roles and sexuality and their ability to be upwardly mobile in a society that still racializes individuals to be black or white. Her work delves into the cultural phenomenon that has been born of the fusion between authentic Indian culture and American “cool”.

Gender studies have also been limited on the South Asian immigrant experience. In this book shifts in gender identity formation are explored through the process of migration. Research has been conducted on various Asian American communities. Nancy Smith-Hefner (1993) conducted an ethnographic study among Khmer refugees in the metropolitan Boston area. Smith-Hefner looks specifically at Khmer women and why disproportionate numbers drop out of school. Changes in gender roles and gender ideology and their implications for generational conflict played an important role. Stacey Lee (1997) also observed the lives of Hmong women. The Hmong women in the study are aware that the Hmong culture is in the process of changing and they see themselves at the center and as agents within these changes. They see themselves as pioneers leading the community into the next generation. These changes have created tensions between the women and the elders in the community. Points of cultural struggle have been around issues of marriage and higher education. The pressure for women to have children and get married is a challenge. Education is seen as the road to financial security and economic mobility for the young women. In addition to this, the women see education as a form of self empowerment and freedom from male domination. Loukia Sarroub’s (2005) work on young Yemeni girls also provides important insight into the ways these young women navigate multiple terrains—given their religious and racial background. Amita Handa’s (2003) doctoral research on young Canadian girls who are second-generation South Asian also offers a detailed and illuminating picture of the complex socio-cultural factors that influence their sense of individuality and selfhood. Handa argues, young South Asian women in Canada experience conflict in their identities and within their communities by not conforming to the norms of either community, which are polarized and viewed as oppositional and mutually exclusive.

Prema Kurien (in Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003) explores the relationship between immigration and Indian immigrant women. Looking at mothers and wives provides interesting insight. She finds that women are empowered and burdened at the same time. They are empowered because of their additional responsibilities and burdened and restricted by these responsibilities as they limit the women’s options to wifehood and motherhood. The women in her study did not work outside of the home prior to migration. Kurien urges the need to further explore forces operating at the household, community and organizational levels.

There is less research conducted on young males in the South Asian diaspora. Oftentimes there seems to be an assumption that they are given freedom to acculturate, are succeeding in school and are doing well. These assumptions go in line with the model minority stereotype. According to DasGupta & DasGupta (1996)
the “daughters of the community (Indian)” are “disproportionately burdened with the preservation of the culture.” I explore how young males are afforded that burden. In the Sikh community, a young male family member can hold many responsibilities to uphold the family honor. Whether to have a turban or not is one aspect of the Sikh identity that is contested in the town of Singh. There are real pressures on young males to “reproduce” cultural and religious forms by the family, the community and religious leaders. This dilemma is highly contested in the Sikh diaspora and becomes a point of contention for moderate and fundamentalist Sikhs. Cutting hair is associated with downward cultural mobility and “giving into” Western culture. Issues of bearing the cultural burden through maintaining symbols such as hair and the turban became contested terrains for the males in the study. These choices and negotiations of identity formation amongst the young males is discussed. Understanding definitions of masculinity and toughness will also be brought forth. Young men are also finding it to be cool to drop out and work instead of focusing on academics. These experiences seem to be counter-intuitive and are worth investigating. Nancy Lopez (in Hodagneu-Sotelo, 2003) also makes interesting observations about South Asian males as she writes about the racial hierarchies in the work place for immigrants and the manner women are viewed as more exploitable than males. She writes, “in the United States, the “symbolic taint” attached to men of dark skin casts them as unstable, uncooperative, dishonest, uneducated, and generally unreliable workers, while their female counterparts are viewed as more exploitable.” In the town of Singh, the men who were turbaned and viewed as suspicious, “terrorist like” and as potential “dangerous Other” found it extremely difficult to find work and keep work.

Indian immigration to Canada, in comparison to the United States, has also been extensive. In 1902, Sikhs immigrated to Canada from the Indian subcontinent. They were largely laborers and were an isolated group. As they became more isolated, Sikhism arose as a defensive minority group situation. The rise of the ghadar movement or revolutionary movement among South Asians in Canada indicates the strong ties they had to international relations. Post 1960’s, there were enormous changes in South Asian Canadian experience. There was a sharp increase in the range of cultural, ethnic and national backgrounds of incoming immigrants. Defining who a South Asian essentially was became a tense debate; the dominant group tended to categorize all South Asians as Hindoo. There are many South Asian ethnic enclaves in Canada that are contained and in many ways exclusive. Class is the primary determinant of community association among South Asians Canadians. Communities are segregated and stratified and have been the victims of racial tension and violence. Labeled as “forever immigrant”, South Asians are harassed in schools and in public. Racial slurs include derogatory comments about South Asians and their turbans, spices and saris. The stereotypes of South Asians are described by Buchignani, Indra & Srivastiva (1985):

South Asians viewed having condemned social practices including living in extended and overcrowded households, bringing over unqualified or illegal relatives, forming residential ghettos, and exploiting government services. South Asians have additionally been stereotyped as clannish, self-centered,
arrogant, argumentative and confrontational. These stereotypic ideas are given support by the almost universal belief that South Asians are a homogenous ethnic and racial group. (p. 221)

The politics of recognition among the Sikh diasporas is understood as well in the work of Verne Dusenbery. Dusenbery (1997) observes the following about the Sikh community in Canada and Singapore: “In Singapore, Sikhs have been constituted as a model minority, the ethnic Other-now delinked from the negatively stereotyped “other Indians” (i.e. Tamils)-seen as most similar to the valorized and idealized industrious, successful Chinese Singaporean majority. By contrast, Sikhs in Canada constitute an “inflexible, culturally different enclave”; they are the negatively stereotyped ethnic Other who, in offending the self-image of the liberal (white) Canadian majority, is deemed undomesticable and therefore literally unrecognizable.” (p. 755)

The challenges faced by various Sikh communities in the global diaspora have striking parallels. The “unassimilable” Other in contrast to the “desirable” model minority are contested positions that Sikhs in the United States occupy. The experiences of marginalization that are reflected in this book share similar characteristics to those of the global diaspora.