

Introduction

Becoming South Asian

We are here to pervert—excuse me, to *preserve*—our culture.

—Teju Patel, addressing the Miss India USA pageant

As I walked into the Miss India USA pageant, I momentarily felt out of place. Inside the hotel banquet room, speaker systems buzzed with static as emcees commandeered the microphone and audience members chattered loudly with their friends. Glancing through the program booklet, I noticed that the preparation for the evening exceeded the actual events onstage. The pageant was not simply about who won the contest, but about the community itself. Threaded through the talent and fashion shows were stories about local immigrant entrepreneurs whose small businesses funded the contest; about parents who invested their time and money into the display of their daughters; and about the young women who aimed to win the crown. Throughout the evening, the pageant organizers, beauty queens, and emcees appeared to represent an upwardly mobile immigrant group. Yet while the pageant promoted a singular narrative of ethnic and national community, those who gathered at the event came from diverse backgrounds. The contestants represented more than twenty states across the United States, and as many regions of origin within India. They were Hindu and Sikh, Muslim and Christian; they spoke Telugu, Hindi, Punjabi, and Malayalam. The audience included first- and second-generation immigrants from India, as well as Fijians and East Africans of subcontinental origin. Despite my initial hesitation, I was compelled by the spectacle of belonging generated at the pageant. As an Indian national from Japan, an academic, and as a feminist who rejected the objectification of female bodies, I considered myself to be unlike the immigrants who attended and participated in this event. Yet like

other audience members, I too became part of the powerful performance of community that was staged by the contestants. Their efforts to win the crown represented an aspirational narrative of belonging, enunciated through popular music, fashion, and dance.

Historically, beauty pageants have been occasions for Asian immigrants to proclaim their allegiance as Americans.¹ At Miss India USA, what struck me were the disparate claims to class and citizenship that were made by a heterogeneous group of immigrants. The pageant was nominally a charity fund-raiser, but it required large investments of capital and labor on the part of contestants and organizers. The lavish setting of the hotel ballroom signaled the wealth of this immigrant group, but pageant sponsors included struggling small-business owners as well as white-collar professionals. Though the judges spoke eloquently about what it meant to be Indian, such singular notions of national identity were challenged by the diverse religious and linguistic backgrounds of the contestants. Moreover, the majority of the young women onstage identified as American citizens, claiming regional identities as Texans or Californians who proudly represented their states of residence.

The visible contradictions embodied by the pageant contestants, organizers, and audience members came to a head at the end of the show. Just before the winners were announced, Teju Patel, an emcee for the evening, came onstage and proclaimed, “We are here to pervert—excuse me, to *preserve*—our culture.” The audience reacted with shock and titters of disapproval as Patel struggled to regain his composure. Caught in the spotlight, Patel’s comment exemplifies the ways in which immigrants both preserve and pervert notions of belonging. For those immigrants who organized this public event, identity is staged as a coherent national and cultural construct. Cultural identities came to life through Bollywood songs and dances, a Hindu-centric iconography, and the colloquial use of Hindi. These acts of cultural preservation reproduced a homogeneous ideal of nationhood—that is, one constituted through dominant religious, ethnic, and linguistic ideas of what it means to be “Indian.” Yet for the contestants as well as their supporters in the audience, the pageant perversely generated another notion of identity, one that enabled them to think of themselves as “Americans.” They viewed the pageant as a universal rite of passage that accounted for their racial difference and showcased a middle-class immigrant group. Perversely

still, such claims to racialized citizenship were articulated through the gendered idiom of Indian popular culture.

Who won the pageant quickly became secondary to the question of what it meant to be Miss India USA. For the judges—a motley collection of Indian embassy officials and Hollywood casting agents—the title crown was reserved for those women who preserved an idea of India, cast as Hindu and Hindi-speaking. For audience members from Fiji and Africa, and for those who belonged to religious and linguistic minorities in India, the notion of a single “Indian culture” was itself perverse. As for the contestants, who juggled multiple demands from the organizers and audience members, performing onstage illustrated their agency as diasporic subjects of the Indian state and as ethnic minorities in the United States. What drew together this disparate assemblage of immigrants was not a shared belief in “culture” or “tradition,” but a collective investment in producing community, one that sustained an upwardly mobile narrative of South Asians in the United States.

The contentious relationship between preserving and perverting culture at this public event brought to the foreground how the production of diasporic community is not simply a question of ethnic identity: instead, it is a problem of locality. Locality is the means through which first- and second-generation immigrants, of varying regional, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, come to experience what it means to belong. In critical race and ethnic studies, belonging is commonly articulated through claims to place that are characterized by generational divides. Within this framework, first-generation immigrants from India may readily identify as “Indian,” whereas their second-generation offspring claim to be “American.” The transition from one place to another is represented through narratives of ethnic adaptation and assimilation, or captured by the formation of new ethnic identities (such as *desi*, a Hindi/Urdu term meaning “of the homeland”). However, each of these constructs of ethnic identity reverts to a clearly demarcated geographical site, whether a “homeland” on the subcontinent or the United States. Such claims to place fail to capture the affective experience of creating transnational communities *across* differences of generation, national origin, religion, and language. Locality exceeds nationalist frameworks of belonging by exploring how the affective experience of migration produces new forms of race- and class-based community. For those diasporic subjects who come to understand themselves as immigrants and as middle class through the

experience of living in the United States, locality engenders the production of South Asian communities.

Locality is a phenomenology of belonging that operates as a category of subjectivity as well as a means of establishing community. In *Modernity at Large*, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai defines locality as a “structure of feeling, a property of social life, and an ideology of situated community” (189). As a structure of feeling, locality is the practice of establishing relations of affinity with those seen as similar to oneself, often through a series of shared experiences and rituals. Locality is also embodied as a property of social life, one that is central to making identity and community visible and distinct. Because locality operates as an ideology of community, it does not specify the geographical boundaries of group identity. Instead, locality acquires a phenomenological quality that is “relational and contextual rather than scalar or spatial” (178). Moving away from quantitative assessments of immigrant groups in discrete geographic locales, locality signals a shift toward the affective nature of establishing identity in a diverse range of sites, including domestic, public, and virtual spaces. For many immigrants, the production of locality is a means of transforming lived space into the place of home(land). However, the forms of belonging that emerge from the production of locality are distinct from claims to countries of origin. Immigrants identify as South Asian because of their experiences as racial minorities in the United States, rather than in relation to citizens of nation-states in South Asia. The experience of being South Asian is fundamentally about localizing transnational ideologies of class and race, for immigrants who take on the project of producing locality find themselves struggling against the authority of the state and its requirement of national allegiance. Locality is therefore integral to processes of globalization, for it elucidates how communities are generated through the interplay between local racial formations and global movements of capital. Yet the fact that locality must be repetitively embodied, across multiple sites, makes it an “inherently fragile achievement” (179) that is liable to repetition, degeneration, or erasure.

For many subcontinental immigrants, locality is embodied through the production and consumption of popular culture: through reading literature and watching films made by other South Asians; performing at and attending cultural events; and participating in online forums. These everyday practices of identifying with other immigrants—a process that requires negotiating differences of language, caste, and region—lay the groundwork for

formations of diasporic community. In this sense locality is distinct from theories of cultural citizenship that subject immigrants to the regime of the state.² Viewed through the parameters of citizenship, subcontinental immigrants are identified by (and identify primarily through) nation- and faith-based constructs of identity as Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan; as Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh. By contrast, locality outlines the affective conditions through which immigrants create subjectivity and community based on a shared experience, in this case an experience of migration. These new forms of community require negotiating certain forms of difference (such as national origin, religious faith, or language) and reproducing others (such as class). As such, the production of locality is also complicit in reinforcing class-based notions of nationhood. Immigrants come to identify as South Asian within domestic frameworks of race and ethnicity in the United States, as well as in relation to neoliberal formations of citizenship in South Asia. The troubling elisions incurred in the production of locality highlight how it can be a profoundly generative experience of belonging for some immigrants but not for others. These elisions also alert us to the ways in which locality can itself be perverted, often productively, by those who are otherwise excluded from dominant representations of what it means to be South Asian.

Throughout this book I examine literary, visual, and performative texts created by and about middle-class South Asians, whose educational achievements and material wealth are frequently glossed as the “solution” to America’s racial problems.³ Representations of middle-class immigrants circulate widely in mainstream U.S. public culture in the works of writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri and filmmakers like Mira Nair, at art festivals and Broadway shows, on television and in online communities. These upwardly mobile stories of scientists, entrepreneurs, and engineers come to stand in for what it means to be South Asian despite the increasing numbers of working-class and undocumented immigrants from the subcontinent. Such popular cultural texts are frequently critiqued for their assimilationist representations of a heterogeneous immigrant group. These texts also contribute toward the erosion of working-class narratives of migration as well as the reification of patrilineal and masculinist notions of middle-class mobility. However, shifting our attention away from how these texts represent immigrant identity and toward questions of how such texts are consumed for the production of locality highlights the affective and material practices through which

immigrants become South Asian. The circulation and consumption of South Asian popular culture generate narratives of race and class that bind together a fragile coalition of immigrants who are otherwise divided by generation, national origin, religion, and language.

Because these popular cultural texts are produced and consumed within a domestic racial framework, the experience of being middle class means that South Asians are simultaneously aware of their position as minorities in the United States while also complicit in embodying multicultural ideologies of nationhood. These public discourses of multiculturalism range from the well-worn paradigm of the “melting pot” or “salad bowl” that portrays immigration as a voluntary act, to more recent neoliberal formulations that produce highly differentiated ethnic, religious, and sexual communities, coded as “color-blind” or “post-racial.”⁴ Both pluralist and neoliberal forms of multiculturalism are a means of managing racial and class difference within the state, even though the rhetoric of a “color-blind” society purports to move beyond race. Across these diverse rhetorics of multiculturalism, the emphasis on individual “choice” is particularly appealing to immigrants who, as bourgeois subjects in their countries of origin, are familiar with the prospect of full citizenship. Such enabling fictions contrast with the heightened racial surveillance of immigrant groups, particularly Sikhs and Muslims, after September 11, 2001. Yet for middle-class South Asians, multiculturalism continues to be the principal framework through which to advance their claims to being American. Multiculturalism is experienced not as an abstract legal formation but as a rhetoric of subjecthood, one that remains compelling even as many subcontinental immigrants are deliberately and consistently excluded from visions of universal citizenship. The flexible operation of multiculturalism and its alliance with narratives of upward mobility reveal unexpected linkages between domestic ideologies of nationhood and transnational practices of citizenship. As Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, “Compliance and accommodation are flexible strategies that were and *remain* important political choices for Asian Americans that are overlooked by assumptions about Asian American identity as being inherently, or desirably, oppositional” (26, emphasis in original).

However, whereas Nguyen explores the ramifications of Asian American capital accumulation within the domestic paradigm of U.S. race relations, I explore how the embodiment of class mobility by South Asians is inti-

mately linked to postcolonial formations of citizenship in South Asia. In the early twenty-first century, middle-class immigrants experience postcoloniality as an exceptional state of citizenship. More than a decade after the institution of market reforms on the subcontinent, the emergence of neoliberal ideologies of statehood in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh has transformed what it means to be a citizen.⁵ For elite diasporic subjects, access to state power in South Asia is established through modes of transnational capital accumulation and consumption. In turn, these same middle-class immigrants are routinely recruited into the expansive public sphere of the postcolonial state. Such “exceptional” immigrants can claim privileges (in terms of rights to property) that are not afforded to citizens on the subcontinent.⁶ Many immigrants also deploy their capital investments to advocate for political change in their countries of origin. Such diasporic political movements fundamentally refashion the spatial and temporal distance between the postcolonial citizen and the immigrant.⁷ Equally important, however, are the ways in which the circulation of neoliberal ideologies of citizenship transforms the formation of communities in diaspora. While subcontinental immigrants in the United States may retain regional- or faith-based categories of identity (as Tamil or Punjabi, Hindu or Muslim), the proliferation of market-based notions of individual autonomy also means that immigrants can identify with each other through a shared experience of class as South Asians. Class mobility thus becomes crucial to the production of locality, for it is through a gendered (primarily male and bourgeois) experience of class that immigrants negotiate the difference between postcolonial and multicultural citizenship.

Locality challenges the ways in which we think through racial identities in the United States. By moving away from the representational politics of ethnicity and toward the affective experience of class mobility, locality takes seriously the intimate and often vexed relationship between domestic racial formations and global structures of capital. It also highlights the compelling power of state-sponsored nationalisms, experienced as ideologies of multicultural belonging and as neoliberal constructs of postcolonial citizenship. Middle-class immigrants do not reject multiculturalism as a dominant ideology of subject formation (identifying as South Asian *instead of* as American). Rather, they identify as South Asian *because* they desire to be American. Such intense feelings of belonging are often misrecognized as

narratives that codify South Asians into a “model minority.” What these experiences reveal, instead, are the ways in which diasporic identities and communities are produced in relation to nationalist ideologies of the state inasmuch as they are embodied as a response or retaliation to state power. Understanding the production of locality demands that we consider not only the ways that immigrants embody racial difference within the state: more important, it requires that we also understand how diasporic subjects locate themselves within multicultural and postcolonial constructs of nationhood.

Examining South Asian localities thus necessitates an alternative method of analyzing diasporic subject formation, one that is equally attentive to the rhetoric of community formation and its embodied practice. Because South Asian identities and communities are forged through a diverse set of experiences, across differences of religion, gender, and sexuality, I draw upon an equally diverse set of methodological tools. Drawing upon ethnographic practices of participant observation, I explore how becoming South Asian is an everyday practice of belonging among specific communities of immigrants: across first-generation professionals and second-generation political activists, on the East and West coasts, among queer and straight immigrants, as well as between Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus. Locality is expressed in the series of affinities that I generate between immigrant subjects, the popular culture that they create and consume, and my own intervention as participant and audience member at public events. But such affective relations of identity are also expressed through writing and performance, and so I also analyze literary texts as rhetorical acts of producing community. Drawing upon popular fiction and film made by South Asians, I examine how these texts are rendered as quintessentially American stories of ethnic assimilation. By historicizing these same narratives in relation to the politics of modern South Asia, I demonstrate how these fictional and cinematic works also tell stories about a diasporic community that is shaped by memories of the 1947 partition of the subcontinent, recollections of nationalist movements for Bangladeshi independence, and participation in Hindu-Muslim communal riots.

In the chapters that follow, I integrate the literary and the ethnographic in order to unravel the constraints of form and genre that shape the ways in which we look at diasporic popular culture. I read documentary films by and about South Asians not for the “truth” of their representation of immigrant lives, but as ethnographic narratives that articulate the disjointed

production of locality between filmmaker, viewer, and documentary subject, all of whom identify variously as South Asian. Some of these documentary films circulate online and generate vibrant debates on blogs and websites about who and what is South Asian. Similarly, I consider a Broadway show about Indians in India in terms of its political implications for racial and class identities in America, by interviewing first- and second-generation actors, dancers, and audience members who participated in the making of the musical. I bend the formal constraints of popular culture by examining the work of South Asian visual artists not only as aesthetic depictions of identity but as archival texts about immigration that generate a collective viewing experience. By consistently situating literary, visual, and performative objects within a larger ethnographic field, I examine the ways in which South Asian localities have been produced and consumed across the turn of the twenty-first century.

Between 1999 and 2009 I attended public events organized in cities across the United States by immigrants of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan origin. Held in venues ranging from abandoned warehouses to marquee theaters, these community productions varied in genre and scale. Some of these public events, such as art festivals and musicals, traveled between the United States and Canada, as well as between the United States, the U.K., and South Asia. These disparate venues of cultural production were linked through a network of immigrant artists, activists, and audience members who themselves circulated across disparate national sites. Many of the participants that I interviewed self-identified as South Asian and as middle class; many more did not. How immigrants identified as South Asian, when they did not, and what it meant to embody South Asian subjectivities became the focus of my study. My engagement with South Asian public culture demonstrates how locality is experienced relationally and contextually, as an ideology of situated community that includes my own diasporic experience.

South Asians in Asian American Studies

Theorizing locality requires expanding the historical and geographical scope of Asian American studies, since the political history of South Asia and the class-based migrations of South Asians are uneasily situated within the

epistemology of the field. Asian American studies is commonly narrated as a community-based movement for racial equality that emerged out of decolonization in the third world (in particular, the war in Vietnam). Yet the impact of South Asian anticolonial nationalism on Asian American politics is rarely discussed, even though these same movements against British imperialism shaped the broader context of the civil rights movement.⁸ The absence of subcontinental immigrants from this early history of the field is also central to the racial dissonance embodied by South Asians. Although more-recent scholarship in the field represents first- and second-generation South Asians as examples of Asian American activism, these works remain oriented toward correcting an original absence. While studies of South Asian American literature and culture expand the representational claims of Asian American studies, they also retain an additive model of critical discourse.⁹ Within this context, South Asians are represented as one more ethnic group that is “like” other Asian Americans, despite the divergent histories of race, class, and empire that characterize immigrants from Asia.

Because such representational politics inadequately capture the specific processes of what it means to be South Asian, locality provides a more capacious means of attending to the phenomenology of racialized experience. As postcolonial subjects, South Asians embody a history of empire that remains outside the purview of Asian American studies, even as scholars increasingly attend to the expansive scale of the U.S. empire in East Asia as well as in the Pacific Rim.¹⁰ As ethnic minorities, the ways in which South Asians are gendered and racialized in the United States diverge from established perspectives on East and Southeast Asian immigrants.¹¹ Although scholars across the humanities and the social sciences have vigorously debated the relationship between the domestic and the diasporic as sites for the production of Asian American subjectivity, with few exceptions these debates have not taken into account the specificity of South Asian diasporic history, culture, and politics.¹²

Reorienting the purview of Asian American studies westward toward the subcontinent requires thinking through the unexpected relation between frameworks of racial politics in the United States and formations of postcolonial nationhood in South Asia: a relationship that comes to the forefront in the localizing practices of South Asians. As racial minorities who also participate in neoliberal politics on the subcontinent, middle-class South Asians demonstrate the conflation and overlap between distinct nar-

ratives of nationhood. The ties that bind these two narratives of belonging are not immediately visible, for unlike immigrants from Southeast and East Asia whose lives are directly impacted by U.S. imperialism in the region, there is no visible history that tethers the United States to the subcontinent. Instead it is a complex narrative, one that is triangulated through the legacy of British colonialism on the subcontinent. As the historian Antoinette Burton suggests, the cultural practices of South Asian immigrants facilitate “American identification with and disavowal of the British imperial legacy” (147). These real and imagined relationships between the United States and South Asia emerge in the domain of South Asian popular culture, which powerfully reshapes the topography of Asian America.

In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe examines a series of Asian American aesthetic texts—literature, visual art, cultural festivals, and theater—that critically engage with U.S. race and ethnic politics. Although Lowe focuses on cultural texts, her readings resist assimilation into the aesthetic of multiculturalism. Instead, she argues that Asian American popular culture functions as a site of “minority cultural production” that produces “effects of dissonance, fragmentation, and irresolution” within canonized forms of national culture (31). By highlighting the legislative and material processes through which Asian immigrants are racialized by the U.S. state, Lowe reveals the contradictions inherent in universal notions of U.S. citizenship. Her readings of Asian American literature and performance leads her to contend that “the contradictory history of Asian Americans produces cultural forms that are materially and aesthetically at odds with the resolution of the citizen to the nation” (30). The Asian immigrant, at once intrinsic to and excluded from the U.S. state, emerges in Lowe’s readings as an oppositional figure who contests multicultural discourses of citizenship.

My reading of literary and ethnographic texts draws upon Lowe’s foundational work but differs in two important aspects. First, I argue that South Asians are racialized as minority subjects through their engagement with U.S. as well as subcontinental nationalisms. Second, instead of operating as a site of critique, South Asian diasporic popular culture is aligned with dominant discourses of multicultural citizenship. Popular fiction and film created by South Asian immigrants almost invariably reproduce middle-class narratives of migration, despite the heterogeneous experiences that characterize subcontinental immigrants. Likewise, at the public events I attended, middle-class immigrants of diverse national and regional origins on the

subcontinent collaborated to embody unitary notions of “tradition” and “culture.” South Asian communities emerge through this erosion of national, religious, and class difference, a process that is intensified by the assimilative tendencies of multiculturalism.

To propose that South Asian localities are shaped through the discourse of multiculturalism is also to acknowledge that resistance—so central to theorizing Asian American subjectivity—is an insufficient mode of understanding racial formation. For scholars in the field, “resistance” also operates as a powerful phenomenology of belonging, one that is central to the epistemic conditions of critical race and ethnic studies. Resistance frames the discursive claims made by Asian American studies within an antiracist and anticapitalist politics; it is also symptomatic of our collective commitment to theories of social justice. What this has meant in practice, however, is that Asian American popular culture is consistently framed as a site of oppositional politics.¹³ Producing such narratives of opposition to the state constrains the ways in which we understand the dynamic production, consumption, and circulation of popular culture, particularly when the state and its ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality shape the form (if not the content) of these cultural texts.

These genealogies of racial resistance and models of ethnic community formation shape a number of works on South Asian immigrants in the United States. In their introduction to a special issue of *Amerasia Journal* titled “Satyagraha in America,” the editors Biju Mathew and Vijay Prashad advocate the critical perspectives afforded by South Asian immigrants, in particular by the “children of 1965” (xii). Framing domestic movements for racial equality in the spirit of Gandhi’s anti-imperialist call for satyagraha or “truth-force,” Prashad and Mathew view South Asian youth as racialized subjects and diasporic popular culture as a domain of progressive politics. More important, the volume established a model of activism for scholars of South Asian American studies.

In the decade since the publication of Mathew and Prashad’s volume, scholarship on South Asian Americans has evolved from an emergent field of research into an established domain of cultural criticism. However, in the humanities, research on South Asian diasporas continues to be defined by arguments for racial, gender, and sexual subjectivities that reject, rather than reproduce, dominant formations of U.S. citizenship. For example, in her book *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath employs a queer diasporic reading

of South Asian popular culture. By reading literature and film produced by South Asian immigrants as queer texts, Gopinath rejects the primacy of nationalism as an ideology of diasporic selfhood and community. While I share Gopinath's concern with deconstructing the hierarchical relationship between nation-state and diaspora, our archives of popular culture are diametrically opposed. Instead of emphasizing queer diasporic cultural texts, I focus precisely on those bearers of heteronormative patriarchy who make it "impossible" to occupy minority subject-positions. This is the cultural archive of the U.S. immigrant bourgeoisie, whose literary, cinematic, and ethnographic texts consolidate representations of South Asians as an upwardly mobile, assimilated group. Working from the center of popular culture rather than from its margins, I examine the ways in which middle-class immigrants re-embody dominant constructs of ethnicity and nationhood. One of my objectives is to understand how South Asian immigrants continue to circulate and consume heteronormative narratives of belonging, despite the visibility and centrality of queer diasporic cultural production.

In the social sciences, an oppositional politics of ethnicity likewise remains integral to research on South Asian immigration. Writing against quantitative studies of ethnic assimilation published in the 1970s and 1980s, recent scholarship has emphasized how South Asians are integral to movements for social change.¹⁴ Focusing on youth cultures, working-class immigrants, and minority religious groups, scholars such as Sunaina Maira, Shalini Shankar, and Nitasha Sharma have positioned South Asian immigrants as resistant subjects. Their ethnographic work highlights the unequal relations of power between working-class and undocumented immigrants, and middle- and upper-class professionals.¹⁵ Together, these works also emphasize how new ethnic identities (such as *desi*) exceed pluralist narratives of multiculturalism. From this perspective, to be South Asian is to reject liberal ideologies of U.S. nationhood, even though the stakes of refusing to participate in the nation have distinct consequences for different groups of South Asians.

Positioning South Asians in opposition to dominant modalities of citizenship limits the ways in which we can understand how ideologies of multiculturalism and neoliberal state formation shape practices of belonging. In literary criticism as well as in the social sciences, the turn away from popular narratives of multiculturalism has resulted in a narrowed scope for South Asian American studies. Despite the strength of its interdisciplinary interventions, over the past decade the field has been increasingly characterized

by its reliance on “good” and “bad” subjects of immigration.¹⁶ The “good” subjects (those who embody resistant racial, gender, sexual, or class subjectivities) are positioned against and in relation to “bad” subjects who conform to the status quo (male immigrant bourgeoisie, Hindu right-wing nationalists). South Asian American studies is defined by this binary logic, within which the “good” subjects of immigration operate as models of collective struggle against a neoliberal state. The forms of solidarity that are enunciated through this process generate a teleological narrative of progressive politics within which minority subjects resist assimilation to the United States.

By contrast, the immigrants that I interview and the literary and cinematic texts I study do not necessarily express a resistant ideology of race and citizenship. Nor do the chapters coalesce into a coherent narrative of struggle, one that culminates in the expression of a solidarity-based politics. Instead, the ways in which middle-class immigrants embody locality reveals how South Asian communities accede to hegemonic ideologies of belonging. Rather than distinguish between a “dissenting” citizenship and a “complicit” citizenship, I argue that the formation of South Asian communities is immersed in multicultural as well as neoliberal notions of nationhood.¹⁷ The production of locality requires that we engage with multivalent narratives of identity and community, some of which converge with dominant notions of what it means to be American. In this regard, “South Asian” is itself an interpellative term, one that brings into being the very communities that I study. For first- and second-generation immigrants who disidentify with pluralist narratives of multiculturalism, identifying as South Asian may engender an oppositional politics, creating forms of transnational community outside the domain of the state. Yet for those who identify strongly with the promise of full citizenship in America, such affective relations to place may engender partial identifications or misidentifications with regimes of ethnic pluralism. In both instances, disidentification does not operate as a form of disavowal, but rather as a reengagement with dominant structures of race and citizenship.¹⁸

In their essay “The Remaking of a Model Minority,” Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai note that “underlying the debate about SAAS [South Asian American studies] is an assumption that it is a coherent subfield centered on the study of South Asian American subjects and, implicitly, that the community-studies model needs to continue to be the basis for the new work that will ‘correct’

the neglect of certain ethnic groups” (99, note 4). They point out that insisting on a “community-studies model” obscures the fact that the field itself relies on an unstable subject of study. Puar and Rai’s response is to queer the field of South Asian American studies—that is, to pervert the very assumption of a single community or identity shared by South Asians. I share in their effort to deconstruct representational notions of South Asian community, but my own approach is somewhat different. By focusing on the production of locality, I examine how middle-class South Asians are at once complicit with normative frameworks of citizenship in the United States and generate notions of selfhood and community that question these same frameworks. This back-and-forth movement between assimilation and resistance, as well as between nationalist discourses in the United States and on the subcontinent, is central to what I see as the formation of South Asian community.

Locality reflects the practice of an oppositional ethnic politics but makes a different intervention in Asian American studies, one that expands upon the capacity of multiculturalism, as a rights-based discourse of identity, to generate a collective experience of belonging. In the chapters that follow, I turn to those sites of cultural production and to those immigrant subjects whose self-fashioning have not always aligned with progressive politics. Among my objectives is to clarify what we understand as “progressive,” particularly as this political rhetoric inflects emerging forms of racial and class identity. As I demonstrate in my readings of South Asian art festivals, self-consciously activist venues for diasporic cultural production can unexpectedly reproduce pluralist discourses of multiculturalism. In contrast, those forms of South Asian popular culture that may be viewed as retrograde, such as the Miss India USA pageant, dynamically reconfigure the transnational terrain of racial subjectivity. The ideological contradictions that are inherent within each of these venues demand our attention, for they call into question a linear and necessarily progressive correlation between immigrant art and cultural politics. Reading these various texts also requires us, as scholars and teachers of ethnic studies, to reflect upon our own investments in progressive representations of race and ethnicity. Our discomfort with these varied forms of South Asian popular culture emerges not only from its distorted representations of ethnic community, but also from the fact that ethnicity itself is constituted alongside normative ideologies of class and nationhood.