DESIS IN THE HOUSE

INDIAN AMERICAN YOUTH CULTURE IN NEW YORK CITY

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For my parents,
and the desi youth who lent
their stories to this book
and anxieties, intellectuals . . . have enriched this site for everyone else too” (1992, p. 179); for example, Hebdige’s work purportedly gave new attention to British punk, and a growing body of work focuses on South Asian diasporic popular cultures as objects of study (Baumann 1996; Gopinath 1995a, 1997; Hutnyk 2000; Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma 1996). A mutual influence always exists between “the researcher” and “the researched,” no matter what the area of inquiry. Even more salient for the study of popular cultures created by immigrant or ethnic minorities is cultural studies’ “voracious appetite for all that is labeled ‘hybrid’” (Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma 1996, p. 1). The fetishization of ethnic popular cultures is indeed a danger to be mindful of, and so-called insider accounts are no less susceptible to exoticizing cultural marginalia than those by “outside” observers. This does not, however, mean an end to all analysis or interrogation in this area. Rather, it is important to integrate a critique of essentialization in studies of popular cultures with an approach that draws on lived experience and daily practice, to guard against the inclination to devise mythical interpretations in solitary engagement with cultural “texts.” The romance of popular culture should not cloud our insights into the ways in which second-generation youth cultures still remix strains of nostalgia and beats of gendered myths.

Nostalgia
Ideology and Performance

“This Third Place Where We Are”

met Veena and Kaushalya soon after I moved to New York City in 1996. Both women were undergraduates at New York University (NYU) and were sharing a suite in their East Village dormitory with two other Indian American women. Veena and Kaushalya grew up in New Jersey, the children of Indian immigrants who came to the United States after the Immigration Act of 1965. Their stories paralleled each other in some areas and diverged in others; their family histories of immigration reflected some of the major arcs of the Indian diaspora in the last half of the twentieth century and patterns of migration to the United States in particular.

Veena’s family originally came from the state of Gujarat in western India and belonged to the Patidar caste, a Hindu landowning community with a long history of migration and entrepreneurship around the Indian Ocean. Her father had migrated from rural Gujarat to Uganda, then a British colony, and established a business there, as had numerous other Gujarati Patidar families for generations before him. When the family was expelled from Uganda in the mid-1970s with the creation of independent nation-states in East Africa, Veena’s father migrated to New York City and the rest of the family moved to London. Transnationalism was writ large in Veena’s story, but she had learned about these
multiple migrations only in bits and pieces. Ironically—or perhaps not so ironically, considering the parental propensity for protectiveness despite family histories of adventurousness—Veena’s parents had been nervous about her move across the river to an urban campus; only after she began living in Manhattan did she learn that her father had worked in a business in New York City when he first arrived in the United States.

Kaushalya’s parents hailed from the Telugu-speaking community in Andhra Pradesh in South India but had lived in Madras, a major city in Tamil Nadu, and so had already experienced geographic and cultural displacement within the borders of the nation. Her father came to the United States in 1965 to study engineering, sponsored by his sister, who had migrated earlier and was working as a doctor. He returned to India in 1975 and was introduced to Kaushalya’s mother, who came to the United States with him after their marriage. Kaushalya was born in the Bronx in New York City, and like other immigrants who initially arrive in urban areas, her parents moved to suburban New Jersey after a few years. Her parents socialized mainly with other Telugu families in the area and were active members of the Telugu association for North America. Her father had been president of the association for a year, and Kaushalya had regularly attended their conferences, one of which drew ten thousand Telugu families to Long Island. Similarly, Veena’s family belonged to a transplanted network of Gujarati Patidar families known as Panch Gam (literally, “five villages”), bounded by their geographic locality in India and by codes of endogamy, or in-marriage, in the diaspora. Her parents hoped that she would marry into one of the families who belonged to the Panch Gam community, just as Kaushalya’s parents hoped she would marry a “nice Telugu Naidu boy” who belonged to the same caste and linguistic-regional group. Yet Kaushalya had violated her parents’ ultimate taboo by dating an African American in high school, a relationship she hid from her parents for over two years.

Both young women were concerned about parental pressures to marry within the group and about sanctions against dating, especially for daughters. Kaushalya reflected, “It’s funny ’cause I think, I know my parents and the parents in our circle are stuck in how it was when they were in India and they come here and they’re stuck with the ways they had when they were back there, ... whereas you go there, and the girls of our age, their Indian parents have kind of gone with the flow because they’ve seen the changes and they’ve seen what’s goin’ on.” Cultural fossilization creates the paradox of a community that is socially and ideologically more conservative than the community of origin, clinging to mores and beliefs that have remained static, albeit contested by their children. The implications of this cultural petrification for the second generation is one of the key themes explored in this chapter.

Despite her parents’ monitoring of her social behavior, Veena managed to go to quite a few parties in New Jersey while she was in high school, but these were mainly events organized by various Indian and regional associations or by other young Indian Americans. At NYU, she was initially wary of the cliques that were notorious for dominating South Asian student organizations and was hesitant to join Shruti, the NYU student club for South Asian Americans. Veena recalled her early impression of Shruti—“It’s a cult”—and Kaushalya rejoined, laughing, “Once you’re in, you don’t get out!” Kaushalya, too, had not expected to become a part of the South Asian student social network on campus but was drawn into it after meeting her Indian American roommates.

John and Upkar were both active members of Indian American associations that were attempting to create different kinds of communities for second-generation youth. Both young men studied at Pace University, a private, commuter college in Manhattan. Upkar was president of the Indo-American Association at Pace, an organization that, despite its appellation, included Pakistani and Sri Lankan American students. John was a member of Iota Nu Delta, a recently formed fraternity for Indian American college students in New York State, whose long-term goal, he explained, was to form “a network ... of Indian professionals.” John’s father was a federal government employee and his mother, like many other immigrant women from the state of Kerala in southern India, was a nurse. His mother emigrated first, which is not typical of most Indian immigrant families, and later returned to India to get married. John’s father had been working in the family rubber business and, after moving to the United States, took some university classes and did “odd jobs” for a while. John was born in Staten Island, and his family later moved to Queens and eventually to Long Island, which has a growing Indian immigrant population. Like many other Keralites, John’s family were Catholic; his father was president of the
Indian Catholic Association in Long Island. They were also members of FOKANA, a national organization of Keralite associations in North America.

Upkar grew up—not too far away from John’s home—in Flushing, Queens, an area that also has a large Indian immigrant population. He told me his family lived in an “upper-middle-class” neighborhood with very few other Indians. His father’s story also traced the wide arcs of the Indian diaspora, for he had migrated to Vietnam to work as a salesman in Saigon and later came to the United States after getting married. Upkar had gone to a predominantly White school in Queens but had become involved in organizing the fragmented South Asian student community at Pace. In addition to taking the helm of the Indo-American Association, he was actively involved with a youth forum that he had established with other members of the Swaminarayan temple in New Jersey, a Gujarati Hindu institution with chapters throughout the far-flung Gujarati diaspora. Upkar continued to work with this youth forum after going to college because he was troubled by the lack of communication between young Indian Americans and their parents and felt there was a need for mentorship and initiation into the temple.

Upkar and John acknowledged that their parents did not monitor their social behavior as rigidly as they did that of their sisters, and they were critical of the gendered double standard in their families and for Indian American women in general. John elaborated, “From what you see in old-world India and what you see in Indian movies, like, older Indian movies... how your parents kind of mold your sister to be... a certain way, for Indian women to be a supporter, take care of the family, ... that pressure is still placed on them.” Yet both men also thought that Indian American women should embody a certain domesticity, modesty, and virtue. John commented, “I always do think that the women are the center of the family and that sort of helps us... she gives you the morality, it’s like the center.” Upkar thought that the temple was important for young Indian American women because it would “make sure that they stay on the right track” and not be corrupted by what he saw as the sexualized youth culture of high school.

In another echo of each other’s stories, Upkar and John both said they had been headstrong when younger and had often gone against their parents’ wishes. Interestingly, they admitted that they had done things they hoped their own children would never do, or that at least they hoped their children would be able to talk about such things more freely with them: “’Cause now I think about it and I know I’m wrong, and that’s why I tend to revert more to the traditional thing,” reflected John. Upkar, too, felt strongly about the need for adherence to moral and social codes, particularly those derived from religion, but was concerned about the dichotomization of identities in relation to the much-maligned “American society” feared by the immigrant generation: “It’s almost as if, if we disagree with our parents, we’re part of the rest of society, because either you’re good or bad... Because we definitely don’t agree with everything our parents do, and by doing that, we’re already wrong. But we definitely don’t agree with everything society says, like there’s this third place where we are, you know.”

This chapter critically examines the construction of this third place and the ways it is shaped by gendered and classed experiences. This third place is not a fixed location but an emerging set of disparate, sometimes contradictory, experiences and narratives of hybridity and nostalgia in the second generation. As Homi Bhabha writes, emphasizing that the third space is a shift away from originary notions of culture as pure, discrete starting points: “The importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom” (1990, p. 211). The practices and rhetoric of cultural reinvention in the second generation suggest, however, that the positions emerging from this third space are not utopian or liberatory and do, in fact, create “new structures of authority.” The abstraction of theories of “third space,” as outlined by Bhabha among others, is challenged by the complexity of cultural practices and relations of power in daily experience. A deep desire remains among many Indian American youth to find a clearly defined point of origin and to circumscribe the locus of tradition, even as these yearnings are challenged by the everyday paradoxes of second-generation lives. For many of the youth I spoke to, the notion of being “truly” or “really” Indian involved possession of certain knowledge or partici-
The nostalgia that is produced in Indian American youth subculture rests on underlying ideologies of authenticity that create status systems and moral hierarchies, ranking individuals in a social order. Ethnic authenticity is an ideology in John and Jean Comaroff’s sense of “an articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs of a kind that can be abstracted as [the] ‘worldview’ of any social grouping.... [T]his worldview may be more or less systematic, more or less internally coherent in its outward forms. But, as long as it exists, it provides an organizing scheme for collective symbolic production” (cited in Hall 1995, p. 262). This ideology of nostalgia is not simply the ethnicized flip side to a notion of subcultural “cool” based on American youth culture, reproducing and reifying the tired binary of assimilation/authenticity, but a layered complex of ideas and practices that has its own internal contradictions. Embedded in the yearning for ethnic authenticity is a particularly second-generation self-consciousness about culture as produced, performed, and commodified, a reflexive understanding that flows into popular cultural productions of youth in music and dance. Yet this artisanal or even consumerist notion of culture as needing to be made or acquired coexists with a naturalization of tradition that is paradoxical but not surprising, given the imperatives of multiculturalism and the prevalence of ethnic student organizations on college campuses.

The longing for ethnic authenticity in the college years has to be placed in the historical context of the unfolding lives of second-generation youth, in the kinds of responses to spatial and cultural displacement suggested by the thumbnail biographical sketches of the four youth that opened this chapter. The ways in which cultural nostalgia or coolness is produced by youth in late adolescence or young adulthood are shaped by childhood experiences of managing what Kathleen Hall calls “cultural fields”: “Cultural fields exist as ‘relatively autonomous social microcosms,’ each composed of constellations of power and authority, cultural competencies and influences that are ‘specific and irreducible to those that regulate other fields’.... The regularities of routine practices in a cultural field both reproduce and create cultural expectations for bodily gestures and dress... as well as cultural knowledge people use to interpret social interactions” (1995, p. 253). Hall’s study of the cultural fields inhabited by British Sikh teenagers in England, such as the school, the gurudwara or Sikh place of worship, and “English night-life,” is informed by the practice theory developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu’s analysis of different forms of capital—cultural, social, and economic—and unspoken systems of classification, or “doxa,” brings a Marxist critique of social structures and class reproduction to an ethnographic understanding of cultural symbols and daily action. Bourdieu argues that adolescence is a socially constructed rite of passage that is part of a larger social taxonomy that serves a political function by “symbolically manipulating... the boundaries which define age-groups” and often “disadvantage... the young.” These generational categories are marked by “the symbolism of cosmetics and clothing, decorations, ornaments, and emblems... which express and underline the representations of the uses of the body that are legitimately associated with each socially defined age” (Bourdieu 1977/1994, p. 116). These uses of the body are part of the “habitus” of adolescence, to use Bourdieu’s “taken-for-granted term for dispositions of daily life” that perpetuate social structures and divisions of labor (Knauf 1996, p. 116). Bourdieu’s work has been criticized for not sufficiently emphasizing individual agency and for focusing on class structures at the expense of gender, ethnic, and racial ideologies. (See Knauf 1996 for a review of critiques.) As refined in the work of American anthropologists such as Sherry Ortner and in Sarah Thornton’s research on British youth culture, however, the attention to cultural practice in Bourdieu’s work has offered a way to think about the connections between ideology and daily experience and the bodily expression of cultural distinctions.

In this chapter, I explore five discourses and cultural practices that feed into the ideology of cultural nostalgia and also are informed by it: (1) the mapping of discrete cultural identities onto distinct cultural fields; (2) rituals of “going back” to India and “coming out” as ethnic; (3) the performance of nostalgia at culture shows and the creation of ethnic student organizations; (4) participation in religious nationalist and secular organizations; and (5) expressions of desire and ethnic purity. Before I delve into this analysis, I briefly sketch some of the ways in which theorists across different disciplines have attempted to define ethnic identity in the United States.
Mapping Ethnic Identities

Different models of ethnic identity have emerged at particular historical moments in debates over immigration, citizenship, and cultural difference in the United States, for ethnicity is an ideological construct, a cultural system that makes claims about the condition and direction of society (Aronson 1976). This is clear in the shift from “straight-line” theories of assimilation to more nuanced, contingent views of ethnicity as dynamic, multiple, and even deterritorialized. During the influx of European immigrants to the United States in the early twentieth century, Robert Park and the Chicago sociologists predicted a “race relations cycle” of “contact, accommodation, assimilation,” and ultimate “amalgamation” of ethnic groups through interracial marriage and social interaction across generations (Kivisto 1990, p. 462). This “melting pot” model was challenged during the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s by pluralistic theories which argued that ethnic groups would continue to maintain their identities in later generations (Alba and Nee 1997, p. 827; Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Greeley 1974; Novak 1971). While these “salad bowl” approaches were an improvement over the ethnocentrism of the melting pot, they did not fully acknowledge the historical inequalities between ethnic groups that were embedded in the racial structures of U.S. society (Kitano 1980; Patterson 1977; Steinberg 1981). Later work in the 1980s and 1990s attempted to analyze social and historical determinants as well as subjective, situation-specific ethnic identifications (DeVos 1982; Gans 1992; Kim and Hurh 1993; Kivisto 1990; Ramirez 1984; Roosens 1989; Waters 1990).

Sociological research on the children of post-1965 immigrants has suggested a model of “segmented assimilation,” proposing that different groups of second-generation youth enter different economic sectors and subcultures in American society (Gans 1992; Portes and Zhou 1992; Rumbaut 1994; Waters 1994; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Some of this research, however, tends implicitly to create a racialized hierarchy of assimilation trajectories and to suggest that second-generation youth who identify with urban youth of color are throwing in their lot with a maladaptive or delinquent group, sometimes coded as “underprivileged and linguistically distinctive” or “adversarial” youth subcultures (Zhou and Bankston, 1998, p. 7). This stigmatizing portrayal of urban Black and Latino youth is a consequence, perhaps unintended, of instrumentalist approaches to ethnic identification that focus primarily on its implications for opportunities for upward mobility and academic achievement; the refutation of homogeneous portraits of second-generation youth sometimes comes at the expense of understanding the psychological nuances and ideological implications of young people’s daily experiences and cultural productions.

Disciplinary approaches and schools of thought also vary in their emphases on the subjective or structural aspects of ethnic identity, reflecting the range of theories of identity implicitly or explicitly used in debates about cultural essentialism, invented selves, and political and material constraints. Ethnicity often overlaps with other social constructs, such as race and culture, and while the distinctions between these are not always kept clear, there has been a move away from “primordialist” or biologically deterministic definitions of ethnic identity in the research literature for quite a while (Isajiw 1974, cited in Royce 1982). An emphasis on common “origins” and “culture,” however, is still an element in traditional sociological theories of ethnicity (Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Yinger 1994). Other theorists clarify that cultural beliefs and practices are not necessarily inherent in an ethnic group but are the cultural “content” marked off by the boundaries of the ethnic group, constructed as part of the process of “ethnogenesis” (Barth 1969; Roosens 1989).

A discussion of ethnic group origins, similarly, often suggests a spilling over of ethnicity into nationalism, since both ethnic group and nation are “constructed symbolically and presuppose the existence of boundaries” demarcating membership (Guiberneau and Rex 1997, p. 5). Ethnicity, however, is not always correlated with citizenship (the basis for “civic nationalism,” among other things), and it is these disjunctures that lead to struggles, if not violent conflicts, between ethnic group and nation-state (Greenfield 1992, cited in Guiberneau and Rex 1997, p. 5). Contemporary studies of immigration suggest that often what is at stake in the conflict between ethnic and national identities is the claim to cultural citizenship, as new categories of citizens or social movements organized by disenfranchised citizens demand both state “recognition” and “redistribution of resources” (Rosaldo 1997, p. 30; Lowe 1996; Tuan 1999). Notions of cultural citizenship are made more complex by work on transnational immigrants or diasporic communities whose social and economic ties cross national boundaries, and who may use these transnational links to provide ideological or material...
resources not available to them within a single nation-state (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Ong 1999), or in some cases to practice a form of “flexible citizenship” (Ong 1999). It is against the backdrop of this “ethnoscape,” or movement of people in the era of global capital (Appadurai 1996), that the stories of second-generation youth such as Veena and Kaushalya, Upkar and John, must be understood—as attempts to make meaning of and manage their ethnic, gendered, and class locations.

The Discourse of Situational Ethnicity

Indian American youth experience early in their lives the ways in which the different social spaces, or cultural fields, they occupy are associated with particular notions of generationally appropriate behavior and ideologies of citizenship and ethnicity. Second-generation youth learn in childhood that they have to negotiate different ideals of youthful behavior in specific contexts and select certain images or identifications within particular social and structural constraints. This manipulation of contexts is not unique to second-generation Indian Americans, even though the cultural “content” of the strategies may vary among ethnic communities and social classes. (For other studies of Asian American youth and situational ethnic identifications, see Thai 1999; Yang 1999; Park 1999.) I was interested initially in learning how Indian American youth strategically managed these different models of adolescence while moving from one cultural field to another; for in a sense they sometimes had to switch not just linguistic codes but their general habitus, their embodied worldview—or so the academic and popular discussions about “biculturalism” and second-generation “identity conflict” would suggest.

All the youth I spoke to grew up managing situational, or context-dependent, ethnic identifications that generally took their most compartmentalized form in childhood. (For studies of situational ethnicism among first-generation Indian Americans, see Helweg and Helweg 1990; Saran 1985.) Many of them spoke of having an “American” social circle during the week, when they socialized with White American children at school, and an “Indian” set of activities and friends on weekends. Sujata, who went to an all-White Catholic school in Windsor, Connecticut, until sixth grade and then to a public school that had a predominantly White student population, said, “That’s when I was taking Indian dance, so my culture was a lot more forced on me, and then, I basically, it was basically I had two different lives, I had like my American life and I had my Indian life, and by the time I went to public school I didn’t mind that, you know, I was okay with being Indian.”

Sujata defined her American life with non-Indian friends as consisting of activities such as “going to the mall, being with my friends, just like hangin’ out, going to parties, you know, driving around, doing whatever . . . that didn’t really constitute to my Indian life, which was more religious. I also have an Indian group of friends, you know, like, from my dance class, there’s like a group of us, and we used to all, like, get together on the weekends and have sleepovers and parties and stuff but it was, like, different, you know.” Sunita, who also spent most of her childhood in suburban Connecticut and socialized with her Indian cousins on the weekends, said, “It was definitely like my weekend life versus my weekday life; Fridays, there was definitely a difference.”

The difference between these cultural fields is sometimes articulated in terms of differences in social practices, but at other times the distinctions were not as tangible. Yet it became clear from the ways in which almost every second-generation youth I spoke with described this experience of “situational identities” that these different spaces and times were always associated with different structures of feeling—or “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” as “inalienable elements of a social material process” (Williams 1977, pp. 132-33)—that were coded as “American” or “Indian.” Not only was there a mapping of discrete cultural lifestyles, defined in terms of nationality and ethnicity, onto different cultural fields such as home and school, but these ethnic and national categories were also temporally organized, with a “weekday” life distinguished from “weekends.”

I found that Indian American youth developed varying ways of conceptualizing this compartmentalization of their daily lives in space and time and of dealing with this shifting habitus. Madhu, who was one of a handful of Indian American students throughout her school years in Hazlitt, New Jersey, experienced it as unproblematic because it was simply her daily reality. Recalling the distinct social activities with her “American” friends and with members of the Halari (Oswal) and Kutchi Jain caste associations to which her parents belonged, she commented, “It was just the way it was, when I’d go to the Halari parties, it was all my Halari friends, and when I went to the Kutchi parties, it was all my Kutchi friends, and when I went to the association parties, it was all my association friends. I just got used to that kind of thing.”
The partitioning of social worlds is not binary, as the popular rhetoric of "being torn between two worlds" suggests, but multiple; for Madhu, even the "Indian" cultural field was subdivided into the different groups to which her mother and father belonged. While her family networks may have been particularly complex, other youth also concluded that their movement among different cultural fields was, at least for a few years, not something they questioned but simply the way they lived their daily lives. So, did this rhythm of daily or weekly switching among modes of being and socializing entail a clash of different habitus for these youth, or did it, in its complex and layered entirety, represent their own habitus, their life unquestioned until they encountered the nativist doxa of monoculturalism?

Some second-generation youth felt a sense of guilt or unease about what seemed like acts of dissimilitude, a tension that apparently had less to do with the juggling of different performances than the production of these different "selves" for agents of authority, particularly parents. Pulling wool over one's parents' eyes is an age-old ruse, by no means particular to Indian American or even second-generation youth, but it is clear that for these youth, the "selves" performed were not just "good" (parent-approved) or "cool" (peer-approved) but were ethnically and nationally marked, "American" and "Indian." Some of this switching of cultural codes involved using style and language that evoked varying images of youthfulness in different situations. Ravi, a young man who grew up with a large Indian American social network in southern California, spoke of being respectful, conservatively dressed, religiously observant, and more "Indianized" in speech at home and of adopting one of a range of youth styles when on "the outside." For Ravi, the "outside" performance of identity was experienced as less inhibiting than that associated with family and was viewed as an expression of choice rather than of a dutifully prompted image; "on the outside," he could choose the style he wished. Kathleen Hall, too, suggests that the school is the cultural field where British Sikh youth not only feel "the most English" but, as one student put it, free to be "what they want to be" (1995, p. 256), implying that it is the "English" habitus that is freely chosen by youth. Yet any style of self-presentation is selected, and then perhaps recreated, from a particular repertoire of available options, and these selections, far from being arbitrary or willfully chosen, connote particular kinds of economic or "cultural capital" in society, in Bourdieu's sense of the term. Looking or acting like the dominant group or participating in the "structure of feeling" associated with a particular mode of being an American youth is an ideologically informed practice that cannot be understood outside the context of schooling as a site of cultural reproduction, where youth are socialized into the national culture and workforce (Eckert 1989; Suzuki 1995; Willis 1977). These inflections of style or language also carry with them different kinds of "subcultural capital," allowing youth entry into various social groups or images of being "cool"; adolescents imagine, adopt, or reinvent different style codes from these subcultural repertoires. Ravi's "slicked-back look" outside the home was deliberately chosen to evoke a certain image—of "wildness," perhaps—which is as culturally coded as the "traditional" appearance favored at home.

Furthermore, as Ravi pointed out, the stress inherent in these performances is sometimes heightened for young women, creating a gendered tension in the management of different images. The literal switching of feminine styles, from demure to sexy, on the way to a party epitomizes the different habitus represented by the cultural fields of family and youth culture. For women in particular, the division of social spaces by cultural proscriptions of gendered behavior is linked to ideologies of "true Indian womanhood" that are used to control the sexuality of young Indian American women, as is explored in the next chapter.

Other youth interpreted the opportunity to belong to a social network parallel to the one at school as a social advantage. Bina, who grew up in Spotswood, New Jersey, and went to a predominantly White school, reflected that a dual social life offered an alternative context for winning acceptance not available to her non-Indian friends, who had "to go out of their way to be Number One with" the other students at school, whereas she could always "hang out" with the "Indian crowd": "You had that escape when you're, like, you have the school and then you have the escape. Whereas these people in the high school, they couldn't do anything, they had to be friends with these people, there was nothing else." Echoing the enjoyment in access to dual social worlds that other Indian American youth express, Bina considered having a peer group apart from her school friends a social resource and perhaps even a source of additional subcultural capital (Thornton 1996).
On the Border: Partitioning Cultural Fields

For second-generation Indian Americans, the tension in performing situational identities derives not just from the actual switching of codes or clothes but also from the responses of the other social actors. Many of their non-Indian friends, their teachers, and their parents do not know about or do not understand the reasons for the different social roles that second-generation youth enact on a daily basis. John, who went to a predominantly White Catholic private school, commented: “Actually it was very weird ... because all my [White] friends in high school didn’t know my friends outside of high school and vice versa.” The management of different social identities was often driven by immigrant parents’ ignorance, presumed or actual, of their children’s adoption of forbidden behaviors or styles. The discrepancy between varying cultural (and subcultural) ideals of success made the experience of situational identity, of changing the presentations of the self across social contexts, a highly performative one for many youth. Sujata’s reflections are especially illuminating on this issue. Since her parents prohibited dating, she had to lie about her boyfriend, but she thought her parents believed that what they saw was all of her: “I liked to do wild things, which constitutes a lot of lying, you know [we both laugh] a lot of sneaking around, so no matter what social situation they saw me in they thought it was just me, you know ... I don’t think they really noticed the difference in that degree but that’s just because they didn’t know what was going on in my life on a more social level, [they just thought of me as their] Indian child.” What is interesting, however, is the self-consciousness with which Sujata and other second-generation youth understood this ideal as a cultural performance to be elicited in particular settings for specific audiences, and the degree to which they were able to articulate the situational, if not relativistic, nature of the moral codes or ideologies of goodness embedded in these performances.

The complex ways in which youth internalize this compartmentalization of their lives became apparent in my conversations with these young Indian Americans. The seemingly impermeable division between sets of experiences was often not the result of a conscious partitioning but rather a manifestation of the degree to which these differences were felt to be incommensurable. The discrepancies were clearly embedded in broader political structures of race and class. Swapna, for example, spoke of her experience growing up in a predominantly White community in Florida: “In my prep school, it was a very distinct population; it was like, old South Tampa White families; everyone had streaked blond hair, everyone had the tan from being on the ski slopes, and I never felt comfortable, even with my closest friends, who totally knew me well, saying like, this is my religion, this is how I practice [it]. The mandir [temple] doors would always get closed when they came over.”

For Swapna, the hesitation to talk with school friends about Indian cultural practices stemmed in part from a sense of inequality based on at least three perceptions of social difference. One was the awareness of racial, that is, phenotypic, difference: She is not “White” or “blonde.” The second axis of difference she implicitly invokes is that of class, a privileged rootedness in the landscape—“old,” well-established Florida families whose most recent migration was perhaps only to the “ski slopes,” as contrasted with her own peripatetic, thrice-migrated mother and immigrant father. While her parents, both doctors, probably enjoyed an upper-middle-class status, Swapna described their concerns about consolidating their economic position in the United States and leaving behind the financial insecurity of newcomers who brought little with them except their educational and social capital. The third sense of difference was that of religious practice: Swapna recalled the closing of the doors of the family shrine when “outsiders” came to visit. Later discussions in this book explore the different ways in which religion becomes a source of internal boundary marking for second-generation youth, but for now it is enough to note that this shutting of doors is symbolic, perhaps too obviously but nonetheless evocatively, of the many levels of “cultural privacy” in spaces where immigrants and their children interact with others. Swapna’s sense of difference demonstrates the many layers, particularly those of race, class, and religion, that have shaped many second-generation youth’s early awareness of their lack of “cultural capital” in local status systems.

Cultural Normativity

Why did Indian American youth use the strategy of shielding the Indian realm of their lives from others or experience a hesitation in sharing aspects of this culturally “private” arena? As is clear from the biographical reflections of the youth I interviewed, facets of self become
marked “identities” that are highlighted as “different” because of, first, the presumed normativity associated with certain experiences and, second, a questioning by youth of what they previously accepted as simply their way of life. The awareness of difference from a wider cultural norm was particularly acute for some youth when they were younger, especially in kindergarten or elementary school, when they were uneasy about standing out as different from their peers. A common anecdote among the youth I spoke to was that other children made fun of Indian Americans in the schoolyard or playground by yelling “Wha-wha-wha,” in a mockery of a Native American war cry, not only drawing attention to the supposed primitivism of their Indian playmates but confusing their origins as well. Discomfort at being singled out as different or mistakenly represented is often due to the homogenizing impulses present in certain age groups and the socialization function performed by schools. Upkar, who grew up in the multiethnic neighborhood of Flushing in Queens, recalled being the brunt of “basic minority jokes” and being labeled “Hindoo.” He commented that he moved from an early desire for reassuring conformity to a rejection of assimilationist pressures. The uneasiness that lingers for adolescents who are reluctant to open up their “Indian lives” to their non-Indian, particularly White American, friends may stem from a similar early understanding that these social categories are embedded in cultural ideas about normativity and relations of power.

Some of this awareness of the political meanings of cultural “difference” in the United States comes not just from the peer group but also the media. John, who grew up in what was initially a predominantly White community in Long Island, before the arrival of other Indian immigrant families, reflected, “When I was really younger, growing up where I did, I always denounced my Indianness ... When you’re younger you feel always like, you see the things on TV, how they make fun of people and stereotype and so subconsciously you [accept these stereotypes] and as you get older, and it’s more open and more accepted—being Indian—it’s easier for you to come out [and be comfortable being Indian].” This observation illustrates the role of both structural and subjective evaluations, which is key to Frederik Barth’s (1969) interactionist perspective on ethnic identity: ethnic identification is the result of both self-ascription and identification by others. The marking of difference and of ethnic boundaries for these second-generation youth occurs in symbolic interactions that are embedded in wider social, economic, and political contexts. Second-generation Asian Americans seem to share the experience of a swing from an early desire to “fit in” a mainstream peer culture to an often intense identification (akin to a “coming out”) as an ethnic subject in the college years (Hong and Min 1999; Leonard 1999; Thai 1999). This shift is propelled, perhaps, by the development of cognitive capacities to reflect on social identities and to question power relationships (Keating 1990; Torney-Purta 1990), as well as by changes in peer group dynamics and the new ethnic identity politics of college campuses.

In addition to the social and psychological shifts of adolescence, which offer opportunities to rethink ideas of power and belonging, second-generation youth have access to transnational norms of family and child-rearing through travel to India or family visits that provide an alternative frame of reference. For example, Madhu commented, “I always knew our family was close-knit, and we always just did things together. ... But I mean, like, big differences like, I didn’t even realize ’til high school, a lot of things ... and that’s when I was like, ‘Whoa! My family’s like, is this normal or abnormal, you know?’ Here it’s abnormal but in India, it’s like, maybe normal, you know.” National representations of the “normal” American family—a myth challenged by the diversity of family arrangements even as it is reified—were complicated for Madhu because she had traveled to India and developed an awareness that another set of cultural norms existed elsewhere. For second-generation youth, cultural relativism becomes not an abstract idea but a lived experience that prompts a cross-cultural or transnational analysis of one’s own daily realities. This is also true for African American, Latino, and Native American youth, and for anyone whose lived experience cannot be bounded by the mythologized white picket fence of middle-class White American family life.

Madhu’s comments, and those of other Indian American youth, suggest that second-generation Indian Americans often learn to consciously reflect on and to articulate the various cultural norms to which they are exposed. This reflexive, self-conscious ethnic identity is characteristic of the experiences of second-generation children across national boundaries, as indicated in the work of anthropologist Eugene Roosens (1989) on second-generation Moroccan and Italian children in Belgium. Roosens observes that second-generation children who are forced to question the normativity of their experiences may objectify their family culture, viewing it analytically or “from the outside,” even
as they maintain an emotional attachment to family or community. This increasingly reflexive vision can lead to an awareness of cultural borders, and so on. Acknowledging that all social actors routinely manage multiple cultural frameworks normalizes cultural complexity, instead of attributing it only to those who presumably deviate from a monocultural norm (Amit-Talai 1995). What makes this conceptualization of identity particularly important to theorizing second-generation ethnicity is that studies have traditionally portrayed second-generation Americans, or Europeans or Australians for that matter, as being preoccupied primarily with only two identities: that of their family's ethnic ancestry and that of the nation-state in which they live. Analyses of second-generation experiences that frame questions of ethnicity in this way not only let gender, class, race, and other dimensions drop out of the picture but also lead to a particular politics of "culture" in which immigrant families are positioned as outsiders to the nation. Social anthropologist Gerd Baumann critiques the simplification of the "between-two-worlds" trope of identity commonly used when discussing second-generation South Asian youth in Southall, London:

I could not work out why they should be suspended between, rather than be seen to reach across two cultures. More importantly, which two cultures were involved? Was there a homogeneous British culture on the one hand, perhaps regardless of class or region, and on the other hand some other culture, perhaps one which was shared with their parents? If so, how were these parental cultures defined: was it on the basis of regional origin or religion, caste or language, migratory path or nationality? Each of these could define a community, culture, and an ethnic identity in the same breath, it seemed. So between which two cultures was any young Southallian suspended? (1996, p. 2)

Kathleen Hall notes that the second-generation British Asian youth in her study used this rhetoric of "two worlds" themselves, even while their daily lives suggested a more complex picture of multiple cultural influences. She argues, "These contradictions—and the sets of oppositions such as Indian/English, traditional/modern, black/white to which they conceptually correspond—each exist at the level of ideology as objectified forms of culture abstracted from the more fluid, ambiguous, and plural processes of cultural production that occur in daily life" (1995, p. 248). Shifting from an emphasis on duality and so-called bi-culturalism to a picture of multilayered identifications and social locations leads to a more complex understanding of the ideologies of ethnicity that are available to and reshaped by second-generation youth,
and of the strategies they use to manage these cultural and political fields. Hall's insight, not quite fully developed in this summary of her study, is that the discourse of “two worlds,” while contradicted by the multiple cultural influences of daily life, is a strategy used by British Sikh youth to make sense of the contradictions they witness as they move from one cultural field to another. The processes that underlie the construction of these contradictions themselves help shed light on the ideological work of these “cultural contradictions” and their implications for youth and for narratives about nation. These felt contradictions of ethnic identity are ultimately about questions of power and the relationships of immigrant communities to the nation-state; it is these definitions of cultural citizenship and racialized nationalism that help keep this rhetoric of “between two worlds” alive, in the face of individual creativity in managing multiplicity in an era of massive global migration. In the case of the Indian American youth in New York to whom I spoke, this discourse of keeping worlds separate seemed partly internalized, because it was a framework offered by ethnic institutions and the family as well as by higher education institutions and the mainstream media—a result of both American nativism, fueled by Orientalist notions of Asian “traditions,” and immigrant nostalgia. The rhetoric and strategy of compartmentalization become, for many second-generation youth, a necessary response to a situation created by very real historical processes and ideologies of difference that guard the borders of nation and citizenship in the face of growing immigration from the “Third World.”

The dichotomization of cultural fields and identifications—for instance, “American” versus “Indian”—occurred, first, because when these Indian American youth were going to school in the 1980s, most lived in towns without many Indian or South Asian families or, when they could afford it, their parents sent them to private or Catholic schools where there were even fewer South Asians. Second, for many youth, ethnic activities were associated with specially organized events, such as religious festivals, dance performances, and language classes, and with weekend gatherings of Indian immigrant families and social activities with other Indian American children that rarely spilled over into daily, schoolgoing life. The “public” world of school thus rarely overlapped with the “private” spaces that represented things Indian for second-generation youth, and their weekday or public life was experienced as non-Indian, coded as “American.” This division of cultural fields was partly the creation of their parents, who attempted, successfully, to produce a parallel social world for their children and whose economic resources generally allowed them to live outside urban ethnic enclaves, where less affluent Indian Americans tended to cluster, or to send their children to private schools. The ethnic infrastructure that Indian immigrants have created in the form of national, regional, or religious organizations provides an institutionalized social context largely intended to reproduce, and sometimes to reimagine, the social maps that the first generation carried with them to the United States—maps of regional subcultures, religious communities, or nationhood.

**Immigrant Organizations and Networks**

With the increase in the number of Indian immigrants to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, the number of ethnic organizations and organizations for specific regional subcultures has mushroomed (Fisher 1980; Lessinger 1995; Maira and Levitt 1997; Shukla 1997). The pages of Indian community periodicals, such as India Abroad, India Monitor, News India Times, and India Today's North American special edition, and ethnographic studies of Indian Americans feature regular reports of regional association conferences. Nearly all the youth I spoke to said their parents were connected to a local network of immigrant families and were, to varying degrees, involved in pan-Indian or regional organizations in their local communities. In general, Indian immigrants in the New York City area tend to create organizations along national, if not regional, boundaries rather than as part of broader, pan-ethnic alliances. Nationalist celebrations draw huge crowds of Indian Americans in Manhattan, most notably the Federation of Indian Associations' (FIA) India Day Parade on Madison Avenue, an annual display of national pride on Indian Independence Day. In New York City, however, there are tensions between groups that are strictly national in focus and those with emergent pan-South Asian identifications. These divergences stem partly from political contestation of membership in these national categories, tensions that are sharpened in public stagings of national identities. In the case of the India Day Parade in New York City, the FIA actually barred South Asian organizations from participating in their annual national celebration for several years on the grounds that organizations must be exclusively Indian in membership (Lessinger 1995, p. 153).
dentally, however, the banned organizations, such as the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association, were politically progressive in orientation and undermined the construction of the nation as family, based on heterosexual reproduction (Mukhi 2000; Sengupta 1997). In these ethnicized spaces, ideologies of nationalism, gender and sexuality, and class are produced and also challenged, offering to Indian American youth multiple understandings of “community,” its orthodoxies, and its subversions.

Local ethnic newspapers and magazines that target Indian immigrants also tend to sustain national identifications, appealing to homecountry allegiances with names such as *India Abroad*, *News India Times*, *India Monitor*, and *Little India*, with some recently created newspapers targeting specific local communities, such as *India in New York*. At the time of my research, only a couple of periodicals, such as *Asia Observer* and *Asia Online*, had an explicitly South Asian focus and agenda. To build on Anderson’s (1983) argument about “imagined communities” based on national identity, one can see that these publications recreate collective imaginings outside national borders, within which print capitalism may have first helped to support nationalism in newly independent nation-states. ²

Second-generation youth who did not have access to an ethnic organization sometimes had other links with Indian Americans through practices of consumption generated by businesses targeting ethnic communities. Sunita, who grew up partly in Queens and mostly in Stamford, Connecticut, made trips with her family to Jackson Heights, where restaurants and stores selling South Asian food products, music, clothes, and publications are concentrated (Khandelwal 1995). This “Little India” enclave was the source of “all Indian things” for Sunita and her family, for there were very few other Indian Americans and no such ethnic resources in her hometown.

Sunita also came into the city with her family to attend religious meetings of the Jain Society while other youth sometimes accompanied their parents to the nearest temple or church in their area. Biju, whose family belongs to the Syrian Christian community from Kerala in South India, attended the Marthoma church in Long Island, which serves the large Malayali community in the New York City area, and also participated in the national convention of the Federation of Keralites in North America (FOKANA). A couple of youth went to summer camps sponsored by branches of Hindu nationalist organizations, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a worldwide Hindu organization linked to the Hindu fundamentalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India (Mathew and Prashad 1996; van der Veer, 1994). These organizations have attempted to portray a convergence between Indian and Hindu identity and have targeted diasporic Indian Hindus in the United States for fundraising campaigns as well as for drawing in young members from the second generation, as is discussed later in this chapter.

Indian American communities are organized not only around transplanted religious identities but also along the lines of regional/linguistic and geographic groupings, which seem to be reproduced by second-generation youth who are socialized into various subcultures that come with their own versions of ethnic pride. These regional identifications have assumed growing institutional significance in rapidly expanding
Indian American communities such as that in New York, where Indian immigrants can now cluster according to more specific levels of difference. For example, Sujata attended a weekend program for Indian American children where she learned Gujarati, but while her father is (broadly speaking) North Indian, Sujata’s mother is from South India and encouraged her to learn South Indian classical dance. For Sujata, these organizations transmitted different regional languages and traditions that did not always coexist easily. Other youth pointed to a certain degree of regionalism, if not parochialism, among first-generation social networks that undermined a pan-Indian identity. Nikhil, who grew up in New Brunswick, New Jersey, said, “I would have to say, there was a level of . . . disassociation . . . [among] my parents’ friends, first of all, there’s so many to choose from, so many Indians, North, South, whatever, that it wasn’t an issue of like, actually, exclusivity, it was just that my parents chose to associate, in a group, in a large circle, where there were mostly North Indians.” It is also striking that second-generation youth sometimes express regional biases and cultural stereotypes about, for example, “North Indian” versus “South Indian” social behaviors. What is troubling to some is that stereotypes associated with the cultural geography of India are being transplanted from the “old world” to a new spatial context and reproduced in the second generation. As Nikhil and others observed, pan-Indian cohesiveness among social networks is less evident in areas where Indian American communities have become large enough to break down by region. Thus, there are tensions between regional identifications and pan-Indian associations in the second generation, although these are not as impassioned as they might be for first-generation Indian Americans.

While many of these students grew up with connections to Indian American communities, a few complained about the hostilities and internal divisions that they and their parents encountered within these communities. These contestatory regional and religious affiliations sometimes become enmeshed with the production of second-generation nostalgia in the Indian American youth subculture in New York. Indian American associations and social networks socialize second-generation youth into a model of multilayered but still tenuous pan-Indianness that they must grapple with when they create their own organizations in college.

Rites of “Going Back” and “Coming Out”

The college context offers many second-generation Indian Americans the opportunity to become part of an Indian American peer group on campus and, for those studying in urban areas with large concentrations of Indian American youth, exposure to a specifically Indian American youth popular culture. Nearly all the interviewees thought that the transition to college had strengthened their ethnic identification, as is the case for many other Asian American youth (Leonard 1999; Park 1999; Yang 1999) who experience a surge of interest in ethnic identity as they move into contexts where “difference” is acknowledged, even celebrated, within the limits of multiculturalism. Reena, who is now at Hunter College, noted, “I think college really changes you so you become proud of who you are. In high school it’s like, you want to be mainstream, and be like, I want the Gap clothes.” The sense of ethnic or national pride that Reena described as emerging when she came to college was mentioned by others as well. Madhu commented on the Indian American students who belong to the South Asian association: “The members of, the Shruti people, they’re like, very Indian pride-type people.”

For Sujata, who like Madhu was at NYU but who did not completely identify with “Shruti people,” this nationalistic fervor in the college years was akin to the display of gay pride, an overt display of an integral part of identity that had been suppressed for many years: “So I think they’ve come to this point, where it’s almost like they’re coming out of the closet, you know [we both laugh] they’re like flaming all over the place with this Indian heritage stuff. All their life they’ve just been kind of like, ‘I’m Indian’ [in resigned tone], you know, and now they’re just, like, ahhh, jumping out, going crazy.” Interestingly, the metaphor of “coming out” to describe this ethnic revival crops up in narratives of other second-generation Asian American youth who experienced the shame attached to this “closeted” and racially stigmatized ethnic identity in childhood, demonstrating the power of social context to produce ritualized affective responses that reflect the political predicament of a collectivity. Sujata was cynical about this ethnic “coming out” because she felt the enthusiastic celebration of Indian heritage among her peers was somewhat superficial; their ethnic pride was not based on the kind of ongoing process of education in specific
Indian traditions that she had received and that she considered the basis of a “true” Indian identity.

For youth who had not grown up with an Indian American social network, the most salient aspect of the transition in college was the connection to other second-generation Indian Americans. Purnima, who had an ethnically diverse group of friends in New Jersey and North Carolina and who was at Columbia University when we spoke, said, “Now my best friends are all Indian, because I think when you come to college, I never thought I’d do this, but you just kind of bond with people that you have the most in common with. It just ended up to be Indian people because you don’t have to go that extra step, you know. You already share this common background, common values, common rules, almost.”

After years of being one of the few Indian Americans in her hometown in North Carolina and of feeling caught in the middle of the Black/White racial polarization in the South, Purnima gravitated toward the Indian American students she met on campus. Yet Purnima herself was surprised at the degree to which her social circle became exclusively Indian American, and she was ambivalent about the ethnic self-segregation she thinks is endemic to college socialization. Part of her immersion in the Indian American community on campus was voluntary, but her social choices were also shaped by the ethnic self-segregation that students observe across campuses in New York City. Ethnic student organizations and the social relationships they encourage are supported by a multiculturalist vision of ethnic identity and difference, which is used by the academy “in its claim to be an institution to which all racial and ethnic minority groups have equal access and in which all are represented, while masking the degree to which the larger institution still fails to address the needs of populations of color” (Lowe 1996, p. 41).

Yet the discovery of an Indian American peer culture was not equally salient in the lives of all the youth to whom I spoke. Sunita, who was also at Columbia but grew up close to her cousins in Connecticut and made visits to Jackson Heights and the Jain temple in Queens, did not think entering college marked as significant a change for her as for some of her peers. The entry into an Indian American youth subculture in college thus depends on several factors: access to an Indian American social network or ethnic resources at other stages in life, the desire to be part of an ethnic peer group in college, the extent of identification or involvement with the campus South Asian/Indian American student organizations, and the degree of inclusiveness or ethnic self-segregation on campus.

A couple of men pointed out that the transition to college is deeply gendered and can be far more significant for Indian American women who had led “sheltered lives through pre-college years,” according to Ravi, and then “lost it” on moving away from home for the first time. Another young man, Vijay, who was at NYU, thought that college provided Indian American women with a new freedom from their parents’ rules and sanctions, and he observed that students who had not grown up in the New York metropolitan area or who came from suburban towns generally threw themselves into social life with greater vigor than he did. While these men’s observations of Indian American women out on the town demonstrate an undertone of paternalistic protectiveness, and perhaps some disapproval, most young men were also sympathetic to the frustrations of female friends who encountered harsher restrictions than the males had at home. Some British Asian men in Hall’s 1995 study echoed these views, pointing out that women suffered doubly because of parental control; they were constrained while living with their families and then overly distracted by the catharsis of unfettered social lives, sometimes at the expense of academic performance. Among the Indian American youth in New York, however, the price women pay for newfound social autonomy in college is not academic achievement but evaluation within a sexualized framework of “good” and “bad” girls, as I discuss later.

“Coming out” as Indian American is thus not a uniform rite of passage in college but is contingent on gendered experiences of parental control, on previous exposure to the social opportunities of an urban context, and on material realities such as notions of economic mobility and career expectations. These factors that shape the transition to college influence all students, not just Indian Americans, but family norms for children’s behavior and gendered sanctions tend to be culturally coded.

In addition to the entry into an ethnic peer culture and multicultural educational context in college, transnational ties and travel often spur a rethinking or new interest in ethnic ancestry for second-generation Indian Americans in late adolescence. Just before or after they enter college, when they are old enough to travel to India on their own and make decisions about their course of study, second-generation Indian
Americans often use visits to India to engage in a specific cultural (and political) project of “authenticating” their ethnic identity. Travel to India requires material resources that not all immigrant families have available for their children, but it was remarkable how many of the second-generation youth I interviewed spoke of the trip to India, particularly the first visit, as a critical turning point in their understanding of ethnicity and nationalism. Vijay recalled his visit to his mother’s hometown in Rajasthan in western India: “I discovered, sort of, my heritage. I went back to Jaipur and I was, like, when you’re younger you don’t realize any of these things, but when you come back now, you know, my grandmother was doing all these big ceremonies because I’ve been past the age of eighteen, so now I’m a man, whatever.” Vijay’s statement reveals two interesting aspects of journeying to India to “discover” one’s Indian identity: (1) the sense that this experience is a rite of passage for many second-generation youth and (2) the notion of return, or “going back” to a presumed point of origin. Both tropes are writ large in second-generation travel narratives that are part of the everyday discourse of Indian American youth, as well as in the media (for example, Kalita 1999).

The ritualized nature of this journey was highlighted for Vijay by the coming-of-age ceremonies his grandmother performed for him, which created a sense of passage into a new phase of life. While none of the other youth I interviewed mentioned participating in a formal ritual on the visit to India, many who experienced a turning point in their self-identification on the trip pointed out that for the first time they had traveled to their family’s place of origin on their own, unaccompanied by family, which heightened the aura of “discovery” that surrounds narratives of such journeys. A couple of youth I spoke to described their visits to India as involving a “mission” to acquire knowledge of Indian languages, religion, or aspects of Indian cultural tradition. Madhu said, “I went back to India and at least, I don’t know if my parents saw it as a mission, but my uncle saw it as a mission to make me very aware of my Indian culture and my Indianness and got me involved in everything that was Indian. So . . . one aunt made me take religious classes, that was one year, and another year, my uncle made me learn to read and write the language, going to a tutor.”

The “culture mission” that Sujata and Madhu describe has a ritual dimension, a search for specific knowledge and traditions, that is associated not just with the catalyzing visit-to-India narrative but also with the larger question of what constitutes second-generation ethnic identity. The word mission evokes the purposefulness of the quest and the importance of the task to be achieved, echoing the goals of someone setting out “with authority to perform a special service,” such as the work of religious missionaries “to preach, teach, and convert” or that of a delegation sent to a “foreign country” to accomplish a task across national borders (Webster’s New World Dictionary, 3rd college ed.). While none of these formal aspects of a mission was directly engaged on the visits to India, it is not far-fetched to say that Madhu’s uncle, for example, wanted to inculcate in her or convert her to an awareness of a particular perspective on Indian culture and religion. The metaphor of a mission and emphasis on discovery of cultural “roots” conceals the imaginative nature of this project, as Stuart Hall points out, for there is no premade, packaged cultural identity waiting to be revealed. Rather, “the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of a rediscovered, essential identity entails” for diasporic subjects is an “act of imaginary reunification . . . imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation” (Hall 1990, p. 224). Cultural identity, Hall emphasizes, is an act of production, not an artifact waiting to be unearthed, in which second-generation youth are engaged through the telling of travel stories. The trope of cultural mission, however, suggests a fervor associated with this journey to India; indeed, nostalgia as faith is at work here—a belief in the authenticity of “Indian culture” as unifying hitherto fragmented lives.

The Indian tourism industry has eagerly exploited this quest for “authentic” cultural knowledge associated with travel to the country of origin. Travel agencies that target affluent diasporic Indians and their children package and commodify the cultural authenticity recovered through the rite of “going back.” Johanna Lessinger notes, “Tourist agencies in India now use the Indian immigrant press to promote the educational value of family travel to the country’s historic sites, nature preserves and great temples” (1995, p. 56). An article in the Indian American press underscores that the desire to visit India is tied not just to the acculturation issues of the second generation but also to business ventures spurred by the liberalization of the economy: “Suddenly everybody is headed for India—from businessmen in search of a piece of the post-liberalization cake to NRIs [non-resident Indians] taking their children on a discover-your-roots trip. Or so the mushrooming agencies that cater to India would have one believe . . . This [Indian
were born in the United States or elsewhere and who nevertheless spoke of “going back” to places they had never, technically, left. Roosens points out that the second generation can simulate but never actually “return to a ‘former culture’ that they never had” (Roosens 1989, p. 138; see also Gans 1979). Even in the case of actual relocation, cultural beliefs and practices, being dynamic, will be different from those their parents left behind. For the second generation, the language of return expresses a sense of displacement that is, in most cases, based on emotional and political rather than geographic dislocation; it is their parents who were spatially displaced, and the legacy of nostalgia for the country of origin lives on in the second generation. As Arjun Appadurai observes, “one of the central ironies of global cultural flows, especially in the arena of entertainment and leisure,” is that they are often marked, in the diaspora, by a “nostalgia without memory” (1996, p. 30). There is indeed a collective memory, but it is a recreated popular memory based on a myth of pure origins—a yearning to recover a presumed missing link—that is historical, cultural, and personal. What this language of return indicates is that cultural recovery is most charged at moments when the naturalized basis of ethnicity or tradition is in perceived doubt, when the trope of return expresses a sort of collective mourning for a seemingly lost culture (Dirks 1994; Suárez-Orozco 1995), as is evident in the discussion of bhangra remix youth culture in New York. As Marilyn Ivy notes in her analysis of the work of cultural nostalgia, national culture industries that uphold “a past that is sometimes trooped as ‘traditional!’” provide “a recognition of continuity that is cotermious with its negation,” for “such reassurance would not be necessary if loss, indeed, were not at stake” (1998, p. 97).

The desire to “return” stems from layers of second-generation experience, many of them imbued with emotional significance, that give rise to wishes to learn more about family history and background, to feel a sense of “belonging,” or to resolve conflicting identity issues. At the same time, many Indian American youth clearly romanticize the “ancestral homeland.” Kathleen Stewart (1992, p. 252) suggests that nostalgia is an interpretive strategy individuals use in response to “an increasingly fluid and unnamed social life” in late capitalist culture. While her postmodernist emphasis on identity fragmentation is rather abstract and overdrawn—and one also cannot veer into indulgence of an intellectual or historical nostalgia for a time of greater social certainty, a nostalgia that is itself culturally produced—she points to the
longing for wholeness or completion that seems to underlie the work of cultural nostalgia for second-generation youth. In Ameena Meer’s novel *Bombay Talkie*, a second-generation Indian American adolescent fantasizes: “Maybe in India she’d be able to straighten it all out, she’d thought. Maybe she’d be able to find a happy medium between what her parents wanted her to do (the good Indian girl) and what she wanted to do (the bad American girl). Maybe she’d figure out what it was she really wanted to be” (1994, p. 35). India and America represent moral choices, standing in for the conflict between duty/responsibility and freedom/wantonness, yet the ancestral homeland remains the hoped-for site of self-discovery, thus individualizing this cultural dilemma.

In the second generation, it can be said that there is a “second migration” (Leman 1982, cited in Roosens 1989) that may take the form of a “psychosocial return to the ethnic group” or a geographic relocation, a “radical remigration.” On a psychological level, the second migration may express a need for a sense of closure in second-generation individuals who turn to ethnic origins to “complete” their identity or family history (Suarez-Orozco, personal communication, 1996). It also echoes the refrains of the American ethnic identity trope of “the search for roots”—the idea that ethnic identity origins need to be recovered and authenticated. Identity politics in the United States encourages this view of ethnic identity as a search for validating origins, as a claim that must have geographic roots elsewhere (Prashad 1997; Waters 1990), contributing to the production of nostalgia. Ethnic yearnings are based on imaginings of the place of origin that are reinforced by these larger cultural narratives and structural factors.

The “second migration” may be a passage in psychosocial development as well, for traditional American conceptualizations of adolescence figure the transition to adulthood as involving a literal journey away from the family and into a new social context as well as a symbolic “journey into the self” that involves shifts in ethnic and other social identities. Developmental psychologists conceive of late adolescence in particular as a period when individuals reflect on their identities and their relationships to their community and society (Erikson 1968). As other theorists have suggested, ethnic identity is closely intertwined with rites of passage and crises in the life cycle; coming of age is a rite of passage that may be a “highly emotional symbolic reinforcement of ethnic patterns” (DeVos 1982). Arnold van Gennep’s (1960) pioneer-
India can thus no longer be held up as a model of social virtue and unchanging tradition, for cultural beliefs and practices, being dynamic, have evolved. This leads to a paradoxical situation in which second-generation Indian Americans, especially those visiting middle-class relatives in urban areas, find they are more familiar with formalized cultural rituals and more likely to use traditional symbols of regional or ethnic identity than are their peers in India. Their relatives on the subcontinent do not need to assert a symbolic ethnicity, as Madhu observed of her Indian cousins:

In terms of culture . . . I felt, sometimes I felt I was more involved in everything being here, they took everything for granted. To me, dancing and going out for Navratri [Gujarati festival] and things like that was always, like, things I wanted to do; I have like, at home, I have like, five or six chania choris [ethnic dress], whereas my cousins and my friends have like one or two, you know. And they're like, "Oh, we don't go!" And they don't even know how to play dandiya raas [Gujarati folk dance] or things like that, and I'm like, "Oh my gosh! Those are big things for me, you know!" . . . And in some sense, yeah, I just felt like I was more of aware of being Indian than they were.

Many second-generation Indian Americans have adopted ethnic clothing, performances of traditional dance, and celebrations of Indian festivals as emblems of ethnic identity. For Madhu's cousins in India, however, these symbols, while more easily accessible, were probably not imbued with the same emotional significance that they held in the diasporic community. These emblematic features of second-generation identity are the focus of rites of "coming out" or "going back"; they are the commodities or events discovered, or recovered, by these "journeys," but they are also in a sense created by this search. Ethnic authenticity becomes commodified through the use of various objects that come to stand in for tradition, such as clothing, and through cultural practices of consumption involving food or music that are part of a cultural economy of nostalgia.

Both the self-consciousness of these ethnic identity constructions and the ritualized participation in activities that uphold ethnic identification are addressed in theories of the "symbolic ethnicity" of the second generation. Herbert Gans's (1979) notion of symbolic ethnicity was based on a study of middle-class third- and fourth-generation White Americans; according to Gans, ethnic needs are "neither intense nor frequent" in the third and fourth generations, so individuals look

Recollecting her relatives' comments, Sunita felt she needed to defend the authenticity of her ethnic identity, for this was what was at stake in the cross-national comparison. Visits to India and transnational family relationships, while catalytic, can both support and challenge second-generation Indian Americans' sense of ethnic identification; they can bolster the ideology of ethnic authenticity and simultaneously lead to an awareness that "true" Indianness is contingent on the place where it is enacted. While the ritualized visit to India is a nostalgic project that binds together second-generation youth who share a certain diasporic experience, it is ultimately part of a larger politics of authenticity in their lives, for some are seen as "more truly Indian" and thus culturally and morally superior to others. As Nicholas Dirks observes, "While rituals provide critical moments for the definition of collectivities and the articulation of rank and power, they often occasion more conflict than consensus" (1994, p. 488).

Furthermore, while some second-generation youth idealized India as a mythical place of origin, for others the nostalgia projected onto India as the embodiment of authentic culture was disrupted by the realities of cultural change apparent on their visits there. Indian immigrant parents often uphold a dated, if not idealized, vision of the India they left anywhere from ten to thirty years ago, clinging to a fossilized definition of social mores that they then hold up as a yardstick for their children's behavior (Agarwal 1991). Second-generation Indian Americans are sometimes surprised to find that the dynamism and globalization of culture have changed many of the social norms their parents described to them as epitomizing Indian "tradition." For Ravi, this encounter with "Westernized" Indian youth in urban areas was read in terms of a temporal trajectory of modernity and contemporaneity in popular culture: "If anything, kids there have really progressed as well. They're not too far behind, if anything they could be ahead. But they're not far behind in things, or in dance . . . they're very Westernized, and I think the parents have moved on as well . . . Whereas I think over here, Indian parents are still back where they left India, you know what I mean?" While Ravi depicted the liberalization of social norms and the Westernization (i.e., Americanization) of style as "progress," he also associated this modernity with the "vices" that Indians commonly cite in lamenting the "immorality" and crime that presumably tarnish U.S. society: drugs, prostitution, and, inevitably, AIDS.
for “easy, intermittent” expressions of “voluntary” ethnicity that do not conflict with their largely assimilated lifestyles (1979, p. 8). Bhabha’s notion of cultural translation addresses this objectification of culture by second-generation youth, who constantly move among different systems of meaning. He writes, “By translation I first mean a process by which, in order to objectify cultural meaning, there always has to be a process of alienation and of secondariness in relation to itself” (1990, p. 210). For example, Sharmila decided when she visited India during her junior year in high school that she wanted formal instruction in her family religion, Jainism, because she had gone to a Catholic school and because at the Indian Sunday school she had attended, the other students were Hindu. In seeking a formal, intellectual approach to religion, Sharmila took her parents and her relatives in India by surprise, for to them religion was to be accepted uncritically as a part of life. Few young Indians made this kind of deliberate effort to seek out philosophical training from a priest, as Sharmila pointed out:

Even all my [Indian] relatives were like, “So tell me about Jainism?” Like, just as a joke, because they didn’t really understand, like they know, but they never questioned anything, and I wanted to know why, you know, all the reasons, and I was just asking all the time, and he [the priest] was like, “God! These girls from America!” You know, how they say these things, like, “Why do you have to know everything?” And I’m like, I need a reason, you know, because I’m not going to believe in something that I can’t, you know, whatever, and he was giving me these reasons and giving me these books, “Fine, you look it up!”

This analytical, reflexive approach to ethnic identity emerges from the ability of diasporic or postcolonial subjects to see their culture “from the outside” (Roosens 1989, p. 151). The sense of desiring something (“Indian culture”) to which you feel close and yet from which you feel removed is also, according to Stewart, the fundamental condition of nostalgia, which “sets in motion a dialectic of closeness and distanciation” (1992, p. 253). This dialectic of nostalgia is visibly apparent at the “Indian culture shows” produced by Indian American college students, where the performance of “tradition” both brings it closer to “home” and calls attention to itself as a theatrical moment removed from daily life. The next section considers the meaning of these performances for second-generation youth in light of their experience of movement among cultural fields in childhood and the cultural translation that it necessitates, as well as their ritualized “coming out” as ethnic subjects in college.
Performing Tradition

The South Asian student organization at NYU, Shruti, held its annual culture show at a high school in Chelsea in April 1997, and for weeks beforehand there was intense planning and preparation, a gradual buildup of excitement, nervousness, and the occasional organizational glitch. The last-minute cancellation of the on-campus venue seemed almost overshadowed by the controversy over which party promoters were officially hosting the much-anticipated “after party.” But now, in the large auditorium, with friends and families in attendance, all attention focused on the show, titled “Harmony, Pride, and Heritage.”

As the president of Shruti explained in the program, “We try to bring our members together in harmony, we take great pride in our culture and our heritage is something most of us hold close to our hearts.” The goals of the culture show were explicitly tied to ethnic pride and the project of cultural authentication: “Through each act, you will observe the magnificent beauty of our culture; your eyes will witness the richness of our diversity. . . . These acts portray who we are and manifest the fact that all of our acts come from some sort of ancient tradition.”

In keeping with this manifesto to define “our culture,” the opening performance was a Bharat Natyam dance performance; in fact, almost every South Asian or Indian American student culture show I have attended has opened with a classical Indian dance, performed by a woman, as an exemplar of “real culture.” In the same month, Club Zamana, the South Asian student organization at Columbia, staged its own culture show, “Tamasha,” which the students defined as “exciting spectacle.”

The program announced that Tamasha’s purpose was “bringing the splendor and richness of the South Asian culture to life for students here,” suggesting that this spectacular enactment would revitalize a cultural tradition lying dormant in the diaspora.

Culture shows fulfill two important functions: They showcase definitions of what constitutes “Indian culture” (or pan-South Asian culture, as both student organizations emphasized) for second-generation college students, providing theatrical displays of idealized as well as contradictory versions of culture; and they provide a medium for the performative aspects of symbolic ethnicity in the second generation, creating a formally organized occasion for enacting ethnic identity at the event and during rehearsals. These shows are a site for packaging and performing cultural nostalgia, but in performing the dialectic of closeness and distanctiation, they also highlight some of the contradictions of the ideology of ethnic authenticity, especially when situated in the context of ethnic student organizations and the Indian American youth subculture at large. At the Shruti culture show, several of the acts that followed the classical dance performance reenacted dance sequences from Hindi films, and interspersed with these were the mandatory fashion shows and a couple of bhangra remix dance numbers. The dance sequences were highly polished and perfectly coordinated, the participants having viewed and re-viewed the film performances to reproduce them on stage.

This mimetic performance had a surreal quality for me as I sat in the Manhattan auditorium, far from Bollywood—as the Indian film capital of Mumbai is called—and it brought home the irony of transnational popular culture. Though I spent the first seventeen years of my life in India, I am still incapable of singing a single Hindi film song (perhaps a few lines, if my life depended on it); nor can I easily slip into “filmi” dance gestures that bear any close resemblance to on-screen perform-
ances. (Perhaps some Indians would describe me as an inauthentic desi.) It is apparent that, in the United States, the circulation of videos through Indian grocery stores and screenings at selected theaters has made the viewing of Hindi films a marker of second-generation Indian American identity. Hindi films offer a contemporary resource from popular culture for fashioning a symbolic ethnic identity, but they also can be used as boundary markers in the politics of authenticity. Nikhil, who had little interest in watching Hindi films but was passionate about theater, recounted that he was labeled “Indian trash” by his friends who thought him less Indian because of this “aberration”: “Some of my friends would object, on different occasions, they’d call me Indian trash... Indian trash is a phrase used for somebody who’s really very White, is Indian, and because I never took an interest in Hindi films... my friends always used to get together and watch Hindi films, maybe it [his presumed inauthencity] was because of me taking an interest in acting.”

Hindi films are not only considered a canonical element in an authentic Indian identity but also provide a template for second-generation performances of ethnic identity at culture shows. The emphasis in the reenactments of film sequences was on verisimilitude and mimetic precision, and indeed, the students seemed to have rehearsed every flirtatious shrug of the shoulder and coy glance; and though I had never seen the “original” performances, the expressions and movements struck me as faithful reproductions. The “culture show” evokes for the spectator the experience of being a tourist, in a sense, watching staged fragments of what are clearly not everyday cultural practices. Edward Bruner (1996) argues that in cultural spectacles performed for tourists who are well aware that this is theater, the concern of the audience is not with issues of authenticity but with verisimilitude. In these student culture shows, however, the question of authenticity cannot be so easily separated from the emphasis on credibility and aesthetic quality. These performances stage a particularly diasporic version of the project of authentication, which is understood as having a purpose very different from that of the “original” performances in India; their authenticity feeds into a politics of nostalgia that may or may not be relevant to Bruner’s tourists in Indonesia. Sunita Sunder Mukhi, commenting on a Hindi-film dance performance by a young girl at the Indian Independence Day culture show in New York City, suggests that the mimesis involved in this act produces a vernacular nationalism capable of being reproduced and embodied in the diaspora: “Using Michael Taussig’s definition of the mimetic faculty as the ‘nature that culture uses to create second nature,’ I can say that the child’s self-taught mimcry of the dance naturalizes her talent and her Indianness... persuades us, comforts us, that Indianness is indeed, second nature... that it is alive and well in the body of our children and will continue, even on Madison Avenue, New York City, United States of America” (1998, p. 193).

In contrast to the “tainted” culture of remix club music and dance, performances of Hindi film dances are seen as representing “traditional” Indian culture and evoke a “distant India” for the immigrant community, according to a study of second-generation Indian American women and dance performances (Ghei, cited in Leonard 1997, pp. 136-37). This is somewhat ironic since Hindi film dances are themselves hybrid performances and often exhibit influences of American and European dance and fashion trends, but they are read as being virtuously Indian and imported directly from the homeland, hence lending authenticity to the women who perform them. Few acts on Shruti’s program were hybrid performances; only three or four out of a total of twenty were choreographed to remix music and used club dance steps rather than classical or “filmi” movements. The costumes, likewise, were for the most part traditional; for the fashion show, the women wore saris while the men wore blazers, and all the “models” bowed their heads with a traditional Indian “namaste,” hands folded, at the end. The fact that the female models wore traditional clothing while the men wore American- or European-style jackets is indicative of the gendering of this cultural reproduction. At remix parties, too, flyers often state that while men should wear “proper or elegant attire,” even specifying jackets at some events targeting upwardly mobile youth, the recommended dress code for women is “ethnic attire,” and a club sometimes will bestow a discount on the cover charge for women who sport “Indian dress.”

The expectation that Indian American women should embody a community’s ethnic identity is powerfully enacted in Miss India, Georgia (Grimberg and Friedman 1996), a documentary film that follows four second-generation women who compete in a beauty pageant for Indian Americans. Not only are the women in the film literally paraded on stage as the “prizes” of the community, but the pageant clearly favors “traditional” dress and classical dance over any kind of
synergetic style or performance. Women are expected to embody unsullied tradition, chaste Indian womanhood, which underlines the double standard that applies to sexual behavior for young South Asian American women and men. Sayantani Das Dasgupta (in Das Dasgupta and Dasgupta 1996, p. 386), a second-generation Indian American woman, writes:

Throughout my life, I have been involved in Indian community dances, poetry recitals, musical festivals, and pujas. While and I countless other little Indian girls were sari-swathed, paper-flower-garlanded, primped, and prodded for most our youth, our male counterparts got off, for the most part, scot-free. The young women I met at a recent Indian American 'Youth' Conference perhaps said it best. "We girls are expected to deck out in Indian clothes at every bhangra," they complained. "But the guys can just wear their baggy jeans and backwards baseball caps. They dress like homeboys and no one says anything."

Das Dasgupta and Dasgupta conclude, "The daughters of the community [are] disproportionately burdened with the preservation of culture in the form of religion, language, dress, food, and childrearing" (1996, p. 386). The gendering of tradition in the diaspora is a critical issue to which I return in the next chapter.

The performances at the Tamasha show, in contrast to the Shruti event, drew to a somewhat greater degree on hybrid enactments of Indian dance and music. The opening act was performed to a remix by DJ Karma, a local Indian American, and except for a couple of classical and film dance performances, most sequences fused Indian and American dance, clothing, and music. A hybrid aesthetic was at the forefront of this show, in contrast to the largely mimetic performances staged by Shruti; yet individual youth on both campuses spoke of performances of Indian classical or folk dance and classical music as stagings of "real" Indian culture.

These performances reveal several levels on which ideas of cultural authenticity are played out: One is the level of discourse or rhetoric about ethnic authenticity; another is the level of theatrical performance; and a third is daily action or situated cultural practice. Contradictions emerge among expressions of ethnic authenticity in these different spheres, so that youth may say they think one thing and then enact another view on stage or in an everyday situation. There is a gap between everyday cultural practices and staged events, between discourse and performance. Individuals who were critical of one criterion to evaluate cultural authenticity still defended another's ability to measure "true" and thus superior ethnic identity. Sujata, for example, was critical of her peers' dismissal of non-Hindu Indian Americans as less authentically Indian, but she also thought that Shruti's (few) hybrid performances of ethnicity were not truly representative of "culture":

I mean they try Indian things ... but I think the biggest problem, the reason why they have it so forced and the reason why they're trying so hard, is because overall it's not a cultural organization. As Indian as they say they are, like, at the fashion show, for example, we go on stage to this Indian song, and then, the next segment, the fashion show, people are going on stage and the Fugees [a Haitian American R&B group] are playing in the background, you know, and they're wearing saris, and I'm just like, what are you doing, you know? Or they have this, like, rap music playing in the background.

The production of hybrid "cool," as discussed in the previous chapter, mixes uneasily with the performance of nostalgia evident at culture shows. The dichotomy second-generation youth create between "pure" Indian traditions and an "inauthentic" mixed aesthetic overlooks the reality that hybridity has shaped even so-called authentic cultural traditions on the subcontinent, which has had a long history of multiple cultural influences and cross-fertilization with other cultural traditions. This point is emphasized by the British social anthropologist Pnina Werbner (1997, p. 4), who, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of linguistic hybridization, argues that a more useful distinction is that between "conscious, intentional hybridity" and "unconscious, 'organic' hybridity." Intentional "aesthetic hybrids" use "deliberate, intended fusions of unlike social languages and images," but they build on the foundations laid by organic hybridity, which is a feature of all cultures. Werbner points out, "Despite the illusion of boundedness, cultures evolve historically through unreflective borrowings, mimetic appropriations, exchanges and inventions ... At the same time, ... organic hybridization does not disrupt the sense of order and continuity: new images, words, objects, are integrated into language or culture unconsciously ... 'organic hybrids remain mute and opaque'" (1997, p. 5, citing Bakhtin). Hence organic hybridity creates the historical foundations on which aesthetic hybrids build to shock, challenge, revitalize, or disrupt. Second-generation Indian Americans may choose to enshrine classical dance and music and Hindi films as repositories of ethnic authenticity because they represent "illusions" of pure, discrete cultural traditions. These presumably organic hybrids are aspects of
culture that apparently do not represent a challenge that would compromise the authenticity of ethnic identity. Yet these cultural forms also help materialize an ideology of nostalgia that infuses a larger youth subculture that has its own conflicts of power and social hierarchies. The tension between notions of nostalgia and coolness is played out in a system of status distinctions in the social spaces created by ethnic student organizations.

Student Organizations and Campus Subcultures

Student organizations are the vehicles that second-generation college students most often use symbolically to affirm and perform ethnicity, and as such, these groups participated in the multicultural politics of difference in U.S. higher education in the 1990s. A fact that few students I interviewed chose to mention is that university administrations generally are the funders of ethnic student organizations, and the availability of material resources often funnels youth into these ethnically demarcated spaces of campus social life. College also offers the first opportunity many youth have to participate in ethnic or pan-ethnic organizations that are created and led solely by their peers, not by adults from their parents’ generation. New York University’s Shrutì had approximately 270 members in 1996–97. At Columbia University/Barnard College, the South Asian student organization was Club Zamana. (There was also a recently formed Organization of Pakistani Students at Columbia at the time.) Pace University’s student group, although called the Indo-American Society, included Pakistani, Nepali, and Bhutanese students among its 150 members in 1996–97, some of whom were students taking evening classes. According to the society’s president, many of the members were first-generation students from India, unlike Club Zamana and Shrutì, where the majority of members were second-generation Indian Americans. At Hunter College, students spoke of an Indian Club, but with little enthusiasm, and reported that there was also a Bengali Club for both Bangladeshi and Indian Bengali youth. Although the organization sponsored one or two cultural events and parties every year, no students were in their meeting space during the times I stopped by, unlike the other ethnic clubs on the same hallway, where students chatted and music blared. Among the youth I spoke to, involvement in student organizations ranged from active leadership roles to almost complete disengagement. (Membership at some campuses was assumed to be de facto for all students identified as ethnically South Asian, but only a fraction of these were generally actively involved.) Some students belonged to other kinds of Indian organizations, for example, the Hindu Students’ Council at Hunter College, sponsored by the VHP.

Pan–South Asian organizations are a more recent phenomenon on college campuses in the United States. They emerged as student groups realized the value in creating stronger coalitions and as the label “South Asian” gained greater currency as an umbrella category, uniting those whose families originated in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka (and, in much smaller numbers, in Nepal; even fewer trace family origins to Bhutan or the Maldives). This pan-ethnic identification, however, is somewhat different from the forging of Asian American coalitions in the 1960s, which were responses to shared experiences of political discrimination based on race (Espiritu 1992; Wei 1993). Today’s creation of South Asian organizations is also a politicized strategy but more often is a response to the partitioning of ethnic identity politics in academic institutions, where ethnicity and geography are the accepted boundaries of student organizations, academic study, and institutional funding. South Asian or Indian American organizations also constitute a site for students’ socialization into the fabric of U.S. society as ethnic subjects.

The creation of ethnic-based collectivities, however, has also given rise to tensions and fissures, for second-generation youth sometimes resist pan-ethnic alliances. Some students argued that this category erased important differences among immigrant groups from Asia, while others protested that the label “Asian American” is often used synonymously with “East Asian American” and so does not include South Asians. (See Gupta 1998 for a discussion of this issue at other colleges in the Northeast.) Yet some students I spoke with who were actively involved with Asian American organizations on their campuses, such as those at NYU and Columbia, believed that Asian Americans shared cultural and historical commonalities and that the need to build coalitions outweighed any differences. For them, as for other youth who identify with the coalitional label, identifying as Asian American is an expression of a particular vision of pan-ethnic solidarity (Lee 1996).

Indian American students on different campuses unanimously described the motivation for joining ethnic organizations as stemming from two major interests, social and cultural. The structure of student
organizations at the time, not coincidentally I think, tended to mirror this dual focus, with “social committees” and “cultural chairs” taking care of fulfilling these needs for both immigrant and second-generation youth. For most youth, the most widely shared expectation was that ethnic student organizations should engage in some sort of cultural education or in the promotion of certain aspects of “Indian culture.” The youth subculture that these organizations created seemed to bolster a politics of authenticity, tinged by cultural nationalism and a desire to reproduce the ethnic community created by middle-class and elite immigrant families. Yet the subculture that Indian American college students create is also shaped by the particular needs of second-generation youth and infused with specific cultural and political agendas.

Many students viewed ethnic organizations as providing a way to learn about or maintain a cultural identity as Indian or South Asian. The underlying belief seemed to be that culture could be practiced through programs that involved symbolic displays of ethnicity, such as celebration of Indian—generally Hindu—festivals, performances of classical or folk dances, and opportunities to wear traditional clothing. At Pace, for example, the president of the Indo-American Society said that the organization’s first public event, “Colors of Holi,” named after a North Indian spring festival, included three dances and a fashion show—“good stuff that shows Indian traditional wear and Indian traditional dances, and demonstrates an Indian wedding.” This kind of orchestrated performance reinforces symbolic ethnicity (Gans 1979) and also expresses collective nostalgia for tradition and an “authentic” past. Public, celebratory enactments of ethnicity are what some Indian American youth learned to associate with ethnic identity because these rituals were staged at the “Indian” community events they attended with their parents. Some of the young people I interviewed said these organizations provided a youth subculture where they felt at “home” and a sense of continuity with the social networks to which many had belonged before college. Nikhil emphasized that ethnic student organizations attempt to reproduce the symbolic functions of ethnic community organizations and the immigrant family’s “preservation” of ethnicity: “I’m in Zamana, I’m active in it, . . . not necessarily because I’m afraid I’m going to lose anything but I feel I haven’t had the chance to actually get really heavily involved, just because of the fact that there was never a need to throw a Diwali party because there was one at my parents’ house, whatever.”

Yet there were murmurs of dissent from the agendas of ethnic organizations among many students I spoke to, who felt frustrated with the vision of community and culture recreated by their generation; others attempted to negotiate a position within the Indian American subculture while resisting its essentializing codes of membership. A common complaint about Indian/South Asian student organizations at nearly all the campuses was that they were mainly “social” or “party” organizations that held dances and dinners but did not organize enough, or adequately focused, “cultural” activities. For example, Madhu’s initial motivation for joining Shruti was the possibility of socializing with other Indian Americans, in which she was partly prompted by her parents’ encouragement to “at least try to meet some Indian people,” perhaps in the hope that she would continue their own involvement with local Indian social networks and organizations. But Madhu became increasingly frustrated with Shruti’s emphasis on socialization, saying, “Especially recently I’ve felt more and more, that their organization, the only thing that it’s become part of, is parties, parties, parties, parties.” A small minority of students on each campus seemed concerned that the organizations did not focus on “political” issues or did not take a progressive stance on social concerns, and those who expressed this criticism generally felt marginalized and frustrated by the Indian American student community. Jay, who was a junior at NYU and had been teaching at a public school on the Lower East Side attended by Bangladeshi immigrant students, said, “A lot of people do stuff on their own, instead of having to find Shruti as a medium to go through to do certain things, like community service, or helping out the Indian community.” Some student activists tried to change the organization from within, while others left altogether and joined other, more politicized student groups, such as Asian American coalitions. (The criticism of political apathy was sometimes mentioned with regard to the larger Asian American student organizations as well.)

In addition to staking their claim in a multiethnic institutional context, ethnic student organizations create a youth subculture that has its own social hierarchies and codes of authenticity. Some students felt alienated from the student organizations because, in addition to emphasizing particular activities as appropriate expressions of ethnic identity, their implicit criteria for belonging rested on definitions of sub-
Manhattan and, indeed, in colleges across the country (Kibria 1999). At NYU, Indian American students who belonged to this subculture congregated in a particular area in the cafeteria in the Loeb Student Center. Biju, who was on the Executive Board of Shruti, observed that this clustering by ethnic tables was true of African American, Korean American, and Chinese American students as well and saw it as simply an expression of ethnic solidarity, saying, “I don’t think there’s anything really wrong with it, as long as like, it’s not like, you have a problem with the other group or whatever, I mean, you want to stay with your culture and these are your people.” Yet some students thought this clustering created social divides outside the cafeteria, erecting boundaries between Indian American students and other students of color as well as within the subculture. Manisha commented, “I’ve heard other Black and Latino friends say to me, ‘Wow! Those Indians hang really tight in Loeb, it seems like that you can’t even hang out with them.’ I was like, ‘Trust me, I know! I can’t.’”

Critics of this youth subculture have pointed to the ways in which the subcultural capital associated with status in these cliques is tied to both economic capital, or material resources, and social capital, or whom you know, to use Bourdieu’s framework of cultural distinctions at work in social stratification (as developed in Thornton 1996). Swapna, who was at Columbia, complained of that university’s South Asian student organization: “Zamana’s very cliquey . . . because these people have known each other for two more years and they’re all friends and it’s been established. But at the same time, there’s no effort to like open it up to other people without giving them a once over, and you know, how do you move? How do you dress? Can you dance? Can you be all coy and cute and whatever?” Style, participation in popular culture, and a certain kind of femininity or sexuality emerge as criteria for popularity in the exclusively Indian American subculture on campus. For some students, the cliques that form the core of the student subcultures are an extension of the social networks they had before college, especially at an institution such as NYU which attracts many local youth from the tristate area. Thus, while ethnic student organizations aim to help students find a sense of belonging and experience some kind of ethnic camaraderie, they marginalize those who do not conform to the subculture’s norms.

Cliqu es or social groups with rigid codes of acceptance are not unique to Indian American youth subcultures; they are part of the larger context of ethnic self-segregation visible on these campuses in cultural authenticity. Sujata reflected on Shruti’s activities: “I mean that’s cool, that’s fun, I go to those Shruti parties, but at the same time I’m not considered a Shruti person. Most of the Indians, like a lot of people from Shruti, they look at me, like, ‘Ohh, she’s not—’ because it’s very like, if you’re in Shruti, you need to be hard-core Shruti, you have to hang out with all the Indian kids and you have to be into, like, rap music, have to have your Tommy Hilfiger, pants down to [your knees]. That’s just my opinion on Shruti.” For Sujata, who was more interested in “alternative music” and who actually played in her own band, popular music allegiances were one aspect that set her apart as someone who was not “a Shruti person,” pointing to the ways in which many youth subcultures are built on local distinctions of taste (Bourdieu 1984; Thornton 1996). Hip-hop music and style constitute a visible badge of membership in an emerging Indian American youth subculture in New York City, particularly at NYU. Sujata also observed that this essentialized definition of membership—to be “hard-core Shruti”—involved socializing exclusively with other Indian Americans.

These criteria for membership in student organization subcultures create boundaries between those who possess subcultural capital and those who do not. Swapna, who was at Columbia, complained of that university’s South Asian student organization: “Zamana’s very cliquey . . . because these people have known each other for two more years and they’re all friends and it’s been established. But at the same time, there’s no effort to like open it up to other people without giving them a once over, and you know, how do you move? How do you dress? Can you dance? Can you be all coy and cute and whatever?” Style, participation in popular culture, and a certain kind of femininity or sexuality emerge as criteria for popularity in the exclusively Indian American cliques on campus. For some students, the cliques that form the core of the student subcultures are an extension of the social networks they had before college, especially at an institution such as NYU which attracts many local youth from the tristate area. Thus, while ethnic student organizations aim to help students find a sense of belonging and experience some kind of ethnic camaraderie, they marginalize those who do not conform to the subculture’s norms.
They may magically resolve certain socio-economic contradictions, but they also maintain them, even use them to their advantage” (1996, p. 114).

Ethnic Purity, Desire, and Dating

Culture shows and codes of subcultural membership perform the work of constructing and distinguishing between the often blurred but always charged categories of “Indian” and “American.” In the Indian American youth subculture on New York college campuses, being “more Indian” is desirable and intrinsically superior to somehow being “less Indian.” These standards of ethnic essentialism are potent because they carry a moral force. Sociologist Jean Bacon (1996, p. 60), in her study of first- and second-generation Indian Americans in Chicago, observes that discussions in Indian American public forums and the immigrant press reveal “a deep ambivalence within the Indian community concerning the status of Indians in America. Are Indians ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than the mainstream? ... [T]he debate about two worlds that pits Indian against American values and practices often places Indian values and practices on top, as clearly superior to the American alternatives.” Furthermore, Bacon writes that “anxiety” about “superior/inferior status” is associated with the development of clearly defined criteria for distinguishing one’s position in this hierarchy “in some absolute and definitive way” (1996, p. 65).

Ravi explicitly described a hierarchy of knowledge of cultural traditions, with the parental generation being “superior in knowledge” that was waning in the second generation, reproducing the trope of the second generation as culturally confused—as in the pejorative label “ABCD” (American Born Confused Desis). In Ravi’s view, ethnic authenticity is quantifiable, something that will diminish across generations: “I mean after parents have said so much ... the second generation has come out with whatever they’ve produced, but they in turn are going to produce something to a lesser degree for their own, third generation, and that’s what I fear that slowly it’s going to become less and less India-based. ... People are going to have a more Western mentality, so to speak.” The underlying idea is that two cultural poles are available to the second generation, “Indian” and “Western,” and that the former is clearly tied to a superior, truer ethnic identity. This cultural dichotomization of India and the West illustrates a “totemic attitude of selective perception” that promotes differentiation by seizing on incipient differences for their emblematic value and by emphasizing contrasting traits rather than similarities (Schwartz 1982). This symbolic contrast is often learned from immigrant parents as they attempt to reproduce ethnic identity in the second generation, as Baumann points out: “The very process of enculturating children entails the necessity of isolating elements, traits, and norms that stick out as distinctive and which are thought, in the widest sense, proper to a cultural ‘us’” (1996, p. 13). The binary classification of Indian (culturally superior) versus Western/American (culturally lacking) is perhaps an attempt to reverse the racial hierarchy imposed on immigrant communities of color by asserting a cultural nationalism in response, a defensive move to compensate for the degradations of racism. However, this subcultural orthodoxy is one that ultimately not only marginalizes and excludes some people but also perpetuates the Orientalist framework of a spiritually rich India or Asia holding on to its cultural riches and legacy of ancient civilizations despite the domination of the West, which, though materially wealthy, ultimately lacks spiritual enlightenment (Prashad 2000).

The reification, and perhaps self-Orientalization, of Indian culture in opposition to the invasions of “America” is very visible at the student culture shows and is also apparent in the use of the imagery of cultural dilution and ethnic contamination in this subculture. For example, Nikhil thought that second-generation identity—his own as well as that of other desi youth—was inherently “weak” or culturally “diluted,” a concern that was particularly acute for him because he was in a “serious” relationship with a White American woman at the time. He worried that marrying a non-Indian would result in a sullying of his children’s ethnic purity:

Just because I’m not living in India, I don’t know Hindi as fluently, I don’t know my culture, I’m not completely surrounded by, you know, the culture, twenty-four hours, and so I’m a bit watered down, and so, for me to even marry a second-generation Indian, my kids would be even more watered down, even if they’re still pure, even if they’re still one hundred percent, just because I’ve lived in America my whole life, they’ll already be more watered down, and if I just marry a White person, it would be even more drastic and not like it’s a bad thing, but they become more assimilated.

India is thus the site of cultural authenticity, and in order to remain potent, ethnic identity requires immersion in an authentic cultural
environment. Growing up in America or marrying an American inherently contaminates the purity of ethnic identity. This rhetorical resistance to Americanization among second-generation youth inverts nativist critiques of immigrant culture, reversing fears of immigrants sullied the essential national culture of the United States. Yet, ultimately, both ideologies of authenticity are based on a conception of culture as a chemical-like substance that is ideally uniform and contained, rather than porous and complex.

Perhaps this underlying view of culture expressed by Indian American youth is shaped by assimilationist sentiments in the United States, but it also, more immediately, seems influenced by the subcultural pressures and cultural orthodoxies of immigrant parents and ethnic peers. Crossing group boundaries to date a non-Indian American, according to Sujata, is construed as a betrayal of the ethnic community: “And then, at NYU, it’s very much, Indians want to date other Indians. [S: Really?] Like, they have huge Indian parties every weekend, you know, and it’s basically just a meat market [laughs] and you know, which is another reason why Shruti considers me a sellout, because I have a White boyfriend and all the Indians here know that. And I walk into the cafeteria and I have a White guy next to me. Whereas everyone else is sitting at tables, four or five Indian people.”

Straying from the fold can be construed as not just a betrayal but a moral flaw. Nikhil’s dilemma about his interracial relationship was exacerbated, or perhaps even precipitated, by his Indian American friends’ disapproval and suspicion of his “character.” Nikhil was critical of his friends’ judgments but also vulnerable to their moral evaluations because they played into his own fears that an interethnic relationship would be at odds with a “pure” ethnic identity. He was not the only one to succumb to the orthodoxy of pure culture and to use the imagery of cultural dilution; Purnima, who had dated an African American in high school only to break up with him under parental pressure, seemed to have internalized the ideology of ethnic authenticity with crusader-like fervor.

Resistance to the ideology of ethnic authenticity was not an easy matter for the Indian American youth I spoke with, and even dissenters rejected some tenets of the subcultural orthodoxy only to espouse others. After vehemently critiquing her Indian American peers’ policing of interracial relationships, Sujata invoked another marker of ethnic authenticity, her knowledge of Hindu prayers as a result of attending a VHP summer camp, in order to defend herself against accusations of ethnic betrayal: “They don’t consider me, like, Indian, because I have a White boyfriend, but you go ask any of these people for like, to repeat any Indian prayer or what type of cultural upbringing they’ve had, and they’re clueless, they’re really clueless.” The desire to prove one’s cultural worth according to the terms of the subculture is a social and emotional need that cannot be easily dismissed.

Biracial Indian Americans or youth of Indian descent who grew up in other parts of the diaspora encounter the orthodoxy of ethnic purity in particularly embodied ways. Madhu, for example, had a roommate at NYU who was half Indian and half Irish American and who felt that Indian American students “were turning away from her . . . just because she wasn’t fully Indian.” Madhu added that she herself had found it hard to gain entrance into Shruti’s tightly knit social networks, so being biracial may have only heightened the gatekeeping in this subculture. Indo-Caribbean Americans often seem to have an uneasy relationship with those who are “Indian from India” (as I am sometimes described by Indo-Trinidadians); Indian immigrants are not always accepting of those whose ancestors crossed the “kala pani” (black water) several generations ago to work as indentured laborers on colonial plantations in the Caribbean. Manisha’s comment about an Indo-Guyanese student in her high school illustrates how moral judgments are made of those whose genealogies are presumably diluted by murky waters: “I hung out with the badder Indian kids [we both laugh], . . . but actually, . . . they weren’t even that bad, they were just thought of bad, because actually one of the kids was Guyanese, he wasn’t really, well, pure Indian I guess, how they would say; none of the parents liked him, there was all that stuff, so that’s why they were considered the bad kids.” The politics of authenticity dividing Indo-Caribbean and Indian American communities in New York has sometimes been forced into public debate at moments of crisis. In 1998, after a brutal racist attack on an Indo-Trinidadian man in Queens by three young men who resented the “Indian” presence in their neighborhood, Somini Sen-gupta wrote, “East Indians from the Caribbean and the subcontinent have remained strangers at best in New York . . . rarely if ever, joining the same cultural or social networks. Many Indo-Caribbeans . . . have complained about being looked down upon as inauthentic Indians” (1998, p. B1). While the public admission of this internal hierarchy of authenticity provoked some unease among even progressive Indian
Americans, the incident provoked a strategic alliance of Indo-Caribbean and South Asian activists, who united to protest the assault and to demand legal justice.

Authenticity is an ideology shaped by complex historical and political processes within any subculture or community and is a difficult creature with which to do battle, as the sometimes contradictory discourses and performances of ethnic purity among second-generation youth suggest. The only Indian American youth I spoke to who explicitly rejected the fundamental idea of cultural authenticity, and also the hierarchy it creates, was Chandrika, a Columbia student, who said of another Indian American: “Like there’s this one guy I know . . . who I heard talking to many of his friends once, and he was like, ‘Yeah, ’cause she’s not really Indian, some of my White friends are more Indian than she is,’ and I was like, ‘What does that mean? And how are you defining that? And why are you imposing that definition of her? And who gives the right to deem her Indian or non-Indian?’ you know what I mean?” Chandrika pointed out that definitions of authentic Indianess are shaped by others’ perceptions of India and Indians. The image of India in the American public imagination, in the popular media and in literature, has been often been tinged with exoticism and colored by the mysticism associated with Orientalized visions of Asia, even as Indian immigrants in the United States were depicted as dirty “Hindoos.” Second-generation Indian Americans may not consciously be aware of these perceptions as they enact notions of ethnic authenticity, but there is clearly a performative dimension to symbolic ethnicity that has a ready audience among Americans fascinated by “exotic” cultures. Chandrika described a young Indian American at Columbia who was a fan of Indian remix music and would greet “random people” with his hands folded in a traditional Indian greeting of namaste, wearing “prayer beads,” to “project this image to non-South Asians that this is what it means to be Indian.” Chandrika firmly rejected the notion that authentic Indianess can be embodied and regulated: “I have to say that they have no clue of what it means to be Indian, because . . . that’s not something that one person can define.”

Though individual second-generation Indian Americans may challenge the imposition of ethnic essentialisms, it still appears that there is a convergence of views of what constitutes authentic “Indianess,” an orthodoxy of cultural knowledge to be performed, if not flaunted, by youth in this second-generation subculture. These definitions were not created by second-generation Indian Americans alone; they were shaped by immigrant parents’ own nostalgia, anxieties, and selective memory of India. In the 1990s, notions of ethnic authenticity in diasporic communities also have to be situated in the context of right-wing political movements in India, as religious fundamentalists waged a campaign to define the nation as Hindu and to capture the wallets of affluent NRIs and the hearts and minds of their children (Mathew and Prashad 1996; van der Veer, 1994).

**Religion, Language, and Nation**

Religion is an arena in which diasporic Indians’ quest for ethnic authenticity has met with highly organized institutional responses. Depending on the relationship they posit between religion and national identification, institutional programs often intensify the politics of authenticity by positing particular congruencies or slippages between “Hindu” and “Indian” identities. Transnational Hindu right-wing organizations have attempted to draw on local articulations of ethnic ideologies in immigrant communities in the United States and to fulfill the desires of second-generation youth to be “truly” Indian. This is accomplished by producing a packaged version of Indian diasporic nationalism that has no room for non-Hindus and keeps its political truths hidden from most second-generation youth. Religion is thus inevitably, though sometimes covertly, politicized when it enters the space of ethnic ideology. Religious nationalism also both co-opts and is undermined by the politics of multiculturalism in the U.S. academy. Campus ethnic organizations provide an institutional structure for performing cultural nostalgia, but the case of Hindu nationalist organizations in the United States provides an example of how the ideology of nostalgia has been harnessed to a political platform.

Indian immigrants of all political persuasions and of various faiths have established religious organizations to educate youth in response to the particular diasporic circumstances of the second generation, who do not automatically learn about Hinduism, Sikhism, or Islam as part of their daily lives (Lessinger 1995; Miller 1995). The youth programs that religious institutions have established seem to draw second-generation Indian Americans not solely because of interest in religion but also because they offer spaces to focus on the more general social and cultural concerns of that generation. This is evident from the experi-
ences of other second-generation Asian Americans as well, notably Chinese Americans and Korean Americans, some of whom who have turned to evangelical or fundamentalist Christian congregations in large numbers (Park 1999; Yang 1999). Upkar, a young man at Pace University, illustrated this mix of religious and secular concerns when he spoke of helping organize a youth group at the Swaminarayan temple in New Jersey, both to teach younger Indian Americans about this branch of Hinduism and to formalize mentorship of youth: “Not much attention’s paid to the younger kids, they get lost, especially at the temple, a lot of focus is put on doing things the right way, but it’s hard to do that, you know, I mean it’s difficult, especially with Indian parents, and these kids, they’re not going to their parents if they have their problems so we want to make sure that they know they have us.” Upkar’s youth group had eighty members and a Web-based newsletter that he edited, which underscores that these religious groups are highly organized spaces with the resources, technology, and programming to appeal to young people. Religious youth programs are also differentiated by the class base of different segments of the Indian American community. Camp Robin Hood, for example, a summer camp for Sikhs in Pennsylvania, is situated on sixty acres of land purchased by six Sikh doctors; the youth who attend these camps are the children of affluent Sikh Americans who were part of the early wave of post-1965 Indian immigration. The mission of the camp, as stated on the Web, is to wage a “battle against the armies of ignorance and hatred, and the lure of assimilation” (Goodstein 1998, p. A7). Ignorance and hatred are forces many brown-skinned immigrants in the United States have to contend with, especially Sikhs who choose to keep their turbans, only to be called “ragheads,” have their turbans torn off, or, in one infamous case, be denied entry to a New York restaurant.

Religion becomes a medium through which nonwhite immigrants mediate the vicissitudes of class and race, as is clear from other studies of Asian American youth (Park 1999; Yang 1999). Diana Eck, director of a study of world religions in the United States, notes that Hindu or Sikh summer camps mirror the programs created by Jewish immigrants for “consolidation of identity” (cited in Goodstein 1998 p. A7). But what is different for Indian immigrants is that not only are many of them non-Christian but most cannot pass for White. As Arvind Rajagopal writes of Indian immigrants drawn to Hindu nationalism, “As relatively well-educated but dark-skinned immigrants confronting their ambivalent class status, they choose a safe and familiar means of defining themselves. In the U.S., religious identity becomes a way of evading racial marginality. To be ‘Hindu’ is to bask in Orientalist visions of an ancient civilization and so compensate for its bygone glories today, while muting the stigma of racism” (1998, p. 15). The “ambivalence of class status” is elaborated on by Biju Mathew and Vijay Prashad, who observe that Hindu nationalist groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA), or “world Hindu council,” offer a “safe” space for expressions of nationalism and identity that have no place in corporate America and that are “continuously mediated by the NRI’s link to the American Dream” (1996, p. 40).

To attract second-generation Indian Americans, who have a different relationship to Indian nationalism and the American workforce than do their parents, the VHPA created the campus-based Hindu Student Council (HSC) in 1987, of which there were forty-five chapters across the United States and Canada in 1995. HSC chapters, which are increasingly led by second-generation Indian Americans, generally organize study groups in Hinduism, Hindu festival celebrations, conferences, and summer camps. In addition, the VHPA and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), or “national volunteer corps,” organize summer camps and classes in the United States for Hindu youth of all ages, offering religious education along with games and outdoor activities. The programs thus superficially resemble American summer camps for youth, a format familiar and inviting to many second-generation Indian Americans, who can go away to camp just like their friends and be introduced to religious nationalist ideology in the process. Sujata, who was sent to Hindu summer camps while she was in high school, included a VHPA camp in New Jersey, said, “The VHPA camp was not very religious, it was more a bunch of Indian people together at a camp doing American things. We did, like, woodshop... [Both of us laugh.] But then we also had to, like, pray and... we had to wake up at five o’clock in the morning and go to temple... [My sister can probably open a book and speak any single Sanskrit prayer... [It seemed a lot more cultural, you know, a lot like Indian people and we sat around and listened to stories about India.” Sujata recalled that the emphasis was on a Sanskritized approach to Hinduism and socialization with Indian American youth from North Indian Hindu families. She seemed unaware of the political context of the VHP or VHPA,
probably because this was strategically not alluded to during the camp, as part of the organizers' attempt to attract moderately religious middle-class Indian Americans eager to have someone teach their children about Hinduism and India.

This ignorance about the organizational link between youth programs such as summer camps and the HSC and VHPA seemed to be shared by nearly all the Indian American youth I spoke to, not just those interviewed for this study but other youth I have met who participated in the programs, including some whose parents were involved with VHPA activities. All of them were unaware that the VHP's ideology posits an essential Hindu identity for the Indian nation, asserts Hindu superiority over other religious groups, and supports caste privileges and patriarchal definitions of womanhood. Two young Indian American women I spoke to belonged to the then newly formed Hindu Students' Council (HSC) at Hunter, which cosponsored events such as visits to temples, with HSC chapters at NYU and Queens College. Malika, from Astoria, Queens, and Priya, who lives in Brooklyn, said the organization had twenty-five members in 1996-97; both women joined because they were "friends to begin with anyway" and the HSC allowed them to "do things together." This largely social motivation stands in contrast to the reported ideology of the HSC, which defines itself as an "international forum for education and promotion of Hindu culture and heritage" (Internet posting by MIT chapter, April 26, 1996). Malika, in fact, disclaimed the very idea of a "Hindu identity," proposing instead a nonsectarian, nonnationalist identity: "I mean, if you read the Geeta [Hindu scripture] and [in] the Geeta it does not say, like, you know, it does not even have the word Hindu in it, it does not have the word India in it, so if we think about ourselves, we're just human beings, you know, that's it."

Malika and Priya, who were the first members of their respective families to join a VHPA-sponsored organization, thought that Hinduism was the most important component of their Indian identity yet were hesitant to define Hinduism in national or cultural terms. Being Hindu was a very important part of being Indian for both women, but they were not ready to frame the equation in the reverse, that is, to posit that all Indians are necessarily Hindu. The separation of religious identity from national or ethnic identity was still an open, if ambiguous, question for them. Yet both commented, at various moments, on how religion remained a divide in their relationships with non-Hindu youth. Priya, who initially said that Hinduism was "not a specific thing," went on to speak of the importance of her Hindu friends in college, "[w]hereas junior high school, like, I was, I had a lot of good friends, but they don't see things my way, because of my religion. And over here, we can relate to one another." In contrast, Malika repeatedly emphasized that she did not claim a "Hindu" identity, and when asked if there was any important issue that she would want to put on the record, she stated, "I'd say that everyone has their different experience and that we each have different beliefs." Malika remarked, "I have friends, Bangladeshi friends, and they were in my high school too, they came here. The only thing, it would happen, is religion, 'cause they always bring it up. See, they don't understand, it's spiritual, we don't just look at any group and say, 'That's bad.'" It is possible that some Bangladeshi students were strident about Islam—Malika did not elaborate on the conflict—but it is important to place this remark in the context of South Asian organizational politics at Hunter. While the Indian Club seemed to be dormant, the HSC was technically open to Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists as well, which is consistent with the VHP's attempts to include these religions "as part of an all-embracing Hindu civilization"—excluding, of course, the "foreign" faiths of Muslim and Christian "intruders" (Van der Veer 1994, p. 658). At Hunter, according to Malika and Priya, the Muslim Club drew many Bangladeshi students (some of whom also joined the Bengali Club) and was larger than the relatively new HSC. In effect, then, Hunter had no active, secular, pan-Indian, let alone pan-South Asian, student organization to compete with these religious or regional-linguistic organizations.

The ambivalence and occasional self-contradiction the two women expressed about Hinduism's meaning—oscillating between a completely amorphous philosophy and a specific social identity—reveal the contradictory politics that second-generation youth must deal with in coming to grips with religious nationalism. Malika's ecumenical statement provides a window into the source of some of this contradiction, for, as Rajagopal points out, "new minorities craft religious identities within a sanctioned pluralism" (1998 p. 16). For second-generation youth in particular, the politics of multiculturalism in the United States sits in an uneasy relationship with the doctrine of religious nationalism. While groups such as the HSC offer a space in which to affirm ethnic pride, the exclusion of other religious groups from this Hindu nationalist project, even for those unaware of the VHP's platform of
“Hindutva,” runs counter to the multiculturalist discourse of pluralism and inclusiveness that allows these groups to be formed on campuses in the first place. Rajagopal argues that “contemporary Hindu nationalism articulates a genteel multiculturalist presence in the U.S. with militant supremacism in India” (1998, p. 20). Yet in the second generation, this articulation is somewhat tenuous. It is true that the “VHP trumpets Hindu culture as ... a contribution to America’s multiculturalist experiments,” as was evident in the programming for Women’s History Month at NYU the year after I completed my research. The organization sponsoring the largest number of programs was the Hindu Students Council, with their discussions on Hindu women ironically sharing the bill with programs on feminism and queer politics. Yet, for some Indian American youth, it becomes difficult to reconcile the projects of U.S. multiculturalism and Hindu religious nationalism, particularly as these young people attempt to negotiate their own relationship to the U.S. nation-state through idioms of secularism and cultural citizenship.

These dilemmas surface in the “politics of recognition” and representation played out in South Asian student organizations (Taylor 1992). The negotiation of multiculturalism and religious nationalism is complicated by the ways in which religion becomes a medium for Indian American youth to assert their cultural authenticity within their youth subculture, thus making religious assertion a banner in the crusade for ethnic purity. Second-generation youth are thus both drawn to religious nationalist organizations and hesitant about how to use their ideologies in the joint production of nostalgia and coolness. Commenting on the Hindu Students’ Organization at Columbia, Swapna says in a near lament, “HSO has a really small membership, like I feel like ... people aren’t interested in doing their religion in this big thing, they much prefer the Indian scene versus the Indian culture. Maybe individually it’s different for everybody, like they are very religious and spiritual but collectively ... people are just not interested.” Religion thus becomes conflated with culture and drawn into the contest of ethnic authenticity.

Most South Asian student organizations on Manhattan campuses are predominantly made up of Hindu Indian Americans, even though they attempt to offer pan-South Asian, religiously inclusive or secular programs and events. At NYU, however, Shruti sponsored celebrations only of Hindu and Jain festivals. Swapna observed that, at Columbia, many Muslim Indians and, most likely, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students join the Muslim Students’ Association. While Club Zamana does host a celebration of Eid-ul-Fitr, and notes this pointedly on the program for their cultural show, Swapna worried that this was only a “token effort” to appear inclusive to Muslim students. The students at Columbia I spoke to generally seemed more concerned with, or at least influenced by the rhetoric of, pluralism and secularism than those belonging to South Asian organizations at other colleges, yet some thought these emphases led to difficult choices in how authentically to represent Indianness in an institutional context. Nikhil recalled that he had created a flyer for Club Zamana’s Diwali celebration that was rejected by the club’s president because it had an image of the Hindu deity, Shiva. Nikhil acknowledged the validity of Zamana’s “concerted effort” to be inclusive of all South Asian religious groups, but he seemed ambivalent about having to use the image of a classical dancer to represent the event:

The president of Zamana would not allow me to use this flyer because she said that, even though it’s a religious celebration, the celebration itself, the party itself is going to be very nonreligious and we cannot have a flyer that has any religious thing on it. ... [W]hat she said, is that they’ve gotten into trouble with trying to promote a religious kind of thing. ... So even though there’s this tendency to embrace, you know, and open up to all, Muslims, Hindus, trying to keep things one, at the same time ... because they’re in a delicate environment, there’s the idea to compromise.

Being able to display his religious allegiance in a space marked as ethnic, in this case pan-ethnic, was for Nikhil legitimate, even desirable; frustration and disappointment characterized his account of the flyer’s rejection. For him, the “compromise” forced him to sacrifice on the altar of inclusive multiculturalism what he saw as an expression of his authenticity. But he did not reflect on how Muslim students might feel about their right to partake of this cultural authenticity. Evading the inherently politicized nature of this negotiation or the implicit concern over sponsoring secular events for fear of “trouble” (especially real in the case of a university-funded organization) only heightens the dilemma for second-generation youth who tend to frame their choices in the language of cultural authenticity. Yet secularism, too, can be imbued with its own authenticity—if one has to be persuasive within the terms set by the debate here—perhaps by pointing to long traditions of pluralism that can be claimed as Indian. The issues raised here are by
no means simple, but youth could perhaps look to other models of reworked cultural representation in the diaspora, such as the "Diwali against Communalism" celebrations created in England to address this very need (Grover 1996).

It is not always Hinduism per se that is considered an essential component of an authentic ethnic identity for second-generation Indian Americans; however, someone whose family is Christian or Muslim is more likely to be interrogated about their ethnic origins, and perhaps even authenticity, by other Indian Americans because his or her last name might be Hussain or Thomas. This approach obliterates the long histories that Islam and Christianity have had in India, histories that are often not included in college courses on South Asia or acknowledged by college student organizations. John, whose family is from the Malayalam-speaking Christian community in Kerala, where people commonly have last names such as Mathew or Alexander, was at NYU before he transferred to Pace University and recollected, "Before NYU, [the] majority of my friends were Malayalis, so you never knew the difference. . . . When I came to college, then you branch out and most of your friends are mostly diversified, either Gujarati, Punjabi, whatever, and then everyone's like, 'How's your last name Mathew?' I'm like, 'Why not?' And then they're like, they'll speak Hindi, and I'm like, . . . 'I don't speak Hindi, I don't know it.'" Sujata was more obviously angry about the exclusionary attitudes toward Indian religious minorities held by some of her Indian American peers at NYU:

It's very [close-minded], another example is like, last year, I met this Indian boy, we were talking, he was just like, totally, very like pompous, arrogant, he was talking, "Oh, I know, can you believe it? There's people here with names like John and," 'cause [there are] Indians who are Christian, and he was just like, dismissing them and saying all these things and I was just like, "That's, what's wrong with that?" He's just, like, "Well, they're not Indian." And I was, like, "Yes, they are Indian, they just have a different—India is not a Hindu country." And that's how close-minded people are.

For Sujata, national or ethnic identity was clearly distinct from religious identity; but this was not always acknowledged by other students, even as they were confronted with religious pluralism in India. The year that I was doing my fieldwork, the president of Shruti was herself a Keralite Christian, and Sujata commented, "A lot of people are weirded out at the fact that there's a president of Shruti's name is Mary. They're like, 'What?'" There is thus a rupture between religious iden-

ification and authentic ethnic identity for those whose families are not Hindu or, perhaps, Jain.

As John points out, non-Hindi speakers are also sometimes suspect in this construction of authentic Indianness as embodied by those who have origins in the Hindi-speaking regions of India (perhaps not entirely coincidentally, the Hindu fundamentalist base known as the "saffron belt" of North India). Ravi, whose family is Hindu, conjoined religious practice to language fluency as the necessary foundation for ethnic identity: "I think they really kept a really big Indian base on me from the beginning. My mom used to sit there with me from age two, three, upwards, and try to teach me Hindi. And I'm so lucky I can read, write Hindi. And she kept me into puja [worship], everything, prayer, mantras, everything. . . . I mean, we're not fundamental[ist] religious, you know, but we've kept that base, we've kept that base strong." The link between ethnic authenticity and the ancestral language in the second generation is a much-researched topic that merits a book of its own. Many second-generation Indian Americans, including several I spoke to, enroll in Indian language classes, both at college and on visits to India or semesters abroad at Indian universities. Courses in Indian languages are often a demand of students who lobby for South Asian studies, particularly within the area-studies approach of the U.S. academy. (See Visweswaran and Mir 1999/2000 for an analysis of the politics of South Asian studies programs, including Vedic Studies at Columbia.)

Language clearly symbolizes connections to nation and community in powerful ways, and, in addition to Indian music and dance and expressions of religious identification, becomes a way to perform ethnic authenticity (Heller 1987; also see Lee 1995 and Nunez 1995 for evocative fictional treatments of this issue). The role of English as a postcolonial Indian language was not always addressed by these children of largely English-educated, middle-class Indian immigrants. Interestingly, some youth observed that they were more anxious to learn their ancestral language than their parents were to teach it to them, a reversal of the common immigrant tale of parents speaking the native language at home to meet with replies from children in English. For Biju, speaking Malayalam is still very important even though his parents have reverted to using English at home. Although he cannot read or write Malayalam, he said he would like to marry a Keralite so that he could converse in Malayalam and retain his language fluency: "I
don't know how I picked it up, I just talked Malayalam and I can speak it very well, now. I mean, sometimes I'll lose it, but, I try to speak it if I can. I like that ... when I was young-young, they did teach it to me, but I just, it just stayed in my head, like I never lost it, I never lost it .... My parents speak English at home all the time now. Unless I speak something to them in Malayalam then they'll answer me back but otherwise they speak English." Echoing the preoccupation with "losing" this link to the place of origin, Manisha would urge her mother to speak Gujarati with her when at home: "I speak at home all the time, and even recently, I'll go home and I'll tell my mom, 'Mom, I'm losing my Gujarati, I'm not speaking it as well anymore because I'm not home, so make sure you speak to me in Gujarati, you know.' So, I want to make sure I know it, and I want to make sure I'm fluent in it." The fervor of Manisha's plea poignantly underscores how second-generation youth, in reviving their families' language of origin, sometimes come to feel that they are holding on to fragile identities in a "losing" battle to feel at "home."

An often unremarked but significant example of how ethnic authenticity is indexed by language fluency in the second generation is the pronunciation of names of Indian cities. For example, several Indian American youth used the technically correct Hindi pronunciation of "Dhil-hi" instead of the Anglicized "Delhi," which is still commonly used in India when speaking in English, or the Bengali "Kol-kotha" instead of "Calcutta." Yet, in another instance of diasporic irony, most middle-class, English-speaking Indians would probably not use the vernacular pronunciations. This effort to "get it right" highlights the ways in which second-generation Indian Americans cling to symbolic demonstrations of national authenticity more tenaciously than do their peers in India.

Conclusion

The nostalgia produced in this Indian American youth subculture is a multilayered structure of feeling—sometimes ambivalent, contradictory, and yet, ultimately, extremely potent. The notion of ethnic authenticity that it drives emerges in different sites and social practices in the second generation: the movement between cultural fields such as "home" and "school" or between temporal frames such as weekend and weekday; the ritualized travel "back" to the "homeland" and the "com-
City, the delicate and often conflictual relationship between structures of feeling such as coolness and nostalgia must be understood in the context of the particular social and material dilemmas of second-generation youth. I argue that the nostalgia felt and performed by Indian American youth in late adolescence is, in part, a response to the childhood framing of cultural fields as discrete and incommensurable. The degradations and exclusions of the school playground, where Indian American children learn that their cultural citizenship is in question, cannot be divorced from the intense need for an ethnic community in later adolescence, for a subculture to which they feel they finally belong. The cultural crusade for ethnic purity and the youth subculture that supports it can be understood as expressions of a desire for wholeness and belonging. These practices and structures of nostalgia, however, have created their own politics of belonging and exclude those who do not possess the requisite subcultural capital of ethnic authenticity. Yet second-generation youth are not dupes of nostalgic false consciousness; this is their attempt to make sense of, or at least to accommodate to, discourses of multiculturalism and racialization, and to respond to family narratives of class mobility and cultural displacement. Indian American youth fashion their symbolic ethnic identities deliberately and self-consciously and perform a nostalgia that is seemingly reflexive, their ability to orchestrate its production evident in stagings of culture shows on college campuses. Yet this reflexivity stops short, for many, of what could be a "critical nostalgia" (Clifford 1986a, p. 114, citing Raymond Williams).

While some second-generation youth were critical of the yardstick of ethnic authenticity, a dominant set of views about what constituted true Indianness seemed to hold sway within the subculture, with a surprising degree of consensus. While these opinions may not have coalesced as yet into a naturalized doxa that is self-evident and unquestioned (Bourdieu 1977/1994, p. 160), the moral force attached to the idea of ethnic superiority makes the notion of authenticity a powerful orthodoxy that demands adherence to a set of standards monitored or assessed by other youth in the subculture. The yearning for ethnic authenticity is definitely greater than the sum of these several elements, and its contradictions are often literally embodied in ways that mesh with other, more corporeal desires.

In the introduction to Nationalisms and Sexualities, the editors of the collection observe, "Whenever the power of nation is invoked . . . we are more likely than not to find it couched as a love of country: an eroticized nationalism" (Parker et al. 1992, p. 1). The ideology of ethnic authenticity that is recreated in the New York Indian American youth subculture, I found, is articulated through an eroticization of nostalgia for India, the nation and site of "true" culture that has been "lost" to diasporic communities. A study of the "Maya Queen" beauty pageant in Guatemala by Carlota McAllister demonstrates that this love of nation is often linked to displays of the body, especially female bodies: "Nationalism . . . is a structure of feeling . . . which, internalized by the subjects of political entities, fills them with ineffable love. The premises that produce and reproduce the sentiment of nationalism are economies of pleasure . . . Pageants, which project an idealized national femininity, directly engage these economies" (1996, p. 106). Ethnic culture shows, orchestrated to present "national culture," highlight these "economies of pleasure" in their rendering of flirtatious film dance sequences that stage heterosexual seductions. The classical dance performances by young women that are given pride of place at the opening of culture shows underscore the role women play in representing