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Henna and Hip Hop: The Politics of Cultural Production and the Work of Cultural Studies

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"South Asian guys give more respect to African Americans than to whites because they think the style is cool. The guys look up to them because it's down."
—Sharmila, New York University undergraduate, 1997

"Look! She's wearing a sari! Even Indian fashion is in these days."
—Indian American woman pointing to the draped figure of the Statue of Liberty, in the film *Chutney Popcorn* (dir. Nisha Ganatra)

Introduction

India is "in" these days, appearing on the style map of trendspotters in fashion and music in the late 1990s in the U.S. and Europe. This turn-of-millennium fascination has produced a new Orientalization of India that recreates the countercultural appropriations of Indian styles from thirty years ago, through the consumption of imported goods that signify an exotic "cool." In its February 20, 2000 issue, the *New York Times* magazine, "Fashions of the Times," opened to a double-page advertisement for Liz Claiborne, featuring a blonde model in a silk sarong made from a gold-bordered pink sari and sporting a mehndi (henna) design on her foot. ¹ The caption reads, "Let the sun shine in." A sixties' "innocence" [End Page 329] oozes out of the image of the barefooted, white woman in a red barn-like room, the chiffon curtain billowing languorously in the window. Hippiedom meets haute couture, with the appropriation of Indian fabrics and motifs by American and European fashion houses and multinational design companies. The Macy's store in New York devoted its entire window display to Indo-chic in July 2000, with giant television screens running clips from "Bollywood" Hindi films, to the amazement of passersby on Broadway treated to this industry fashion trend as street spectacle.

The recent mainstreaming of Indian style provokes complex questions: what do young South Asians in the U.S. think of this explosion of Indo-chic? What does it mean for South Asian women to see Madonna sporting a bindi on MTV, or find mehndi ("temporary tattoo") kits and bindi packets ("body jewelry") on sale in Urban Outfitters? These [End Page 330] questions engage in the debates over what Andrew Ross calls "style tribalism": "Popular style, at its most socially articulate, appears at the point where commonality ends and communities begin, fractioned off into the geography of difference, even conflict." ² At certain moments, as when new style tribes emerge or the visual markers associated with one style subculture are taken on by another, these underlying "social values" come under scrutiny, or are simply absorbed into already existing "geographies of difference."

South Asian Americans are not only on the receiving, or rather giving, end of cultural appropriation; "we" borrow too. And in the 1990s, South Asian American youth, particularly in urban areas such as New York City, have drawn on the cultural idiom of black and Latino youth, consuming hip hop music and style to craft a uniquely second-generation subculture. This adoption of hip hop by South Asian American youth offers important insights into the racialization of Asian American youth in the 1990s, underscoring how their ethnic and national identification processes use cultural commodities in ways peculiar to the racial politics and late capitalistic economy of the U.S., and of New York City in particular. As with the consumption of Indian style by white American youth, the recreation of hip hop by Asian American youth suggests that as commodities cross cultural and national boundaries, the "deflections, rejections and subversions that can take place at each point in the economic cycle of production-exchange-consumption" have to be grounded in particular relationships between the "local" and "global," that is, in specific instances of cross-cultural consumption. ³

Youth cultural production and consumption is an important site where particular possibilities for crossing racial boundaries are imagined, but also rejected, and where ideologies of gender are performed. This approach draws on the insightful work of Daniel Miller, who views consumption as a "moral project" built on the possibilities that commodities offer to re-imagine cultural ideologies such as those of "self" and "other." Miller explains: "Consumption is simply a process of objectification--that is, a use of goods and services in which the object or activity becomes simultaneously a practice in the world and a form in which we construct our understandings in the world." ⁴ The comparative [End Page 331] analysis of hip hop-identified Indian American youth and henna-painted white youth allows us to understand the "social relations of consumption," the worlds imagined through consumption and the cultural categories validated or undermined. ⁵ David Howes points out that when commodities cross cultural and national boundaries, the cultural categories they reinforce might be different from the ones they originally invoked. ⁶ Furthermore, Arjun Appadurai argues that when objects are "diverted" from the path they customarily follow in their "social lives" as commodities, this is a "sign of creativity or crisis, whether aesthetic or economic," and one carrying a "risky or morally ambiguous aura"; ⁷ it is in this sense that I wish to link cultural and material consumption with the politics of cultural production. However, this line of analysis also leads to a questioning of what is, in fact, meant by "culture," and an understanding that cultures are not spatially or nationally circumscribed, discrete, and static, but dynamic, boundary-blurring, and transnationally constituted. ⁸ Juxtaposing hip hop-inflected Asian American youth subcultures with the rise of Indo-chic allows us to see the ways in which the traffic in culture necessarily occurs at busy intersections where images and ideologies of Other-ness swirl in contradictory and revealing ways. ⁹ A common approach in debates about so-called cultural "appropriation," and in some studies of cross-cultural consumption, is to focus on a single group of consumers defined by ethnicity, nationality, gender, or generation, and their use of a commodity associated with a different ethnic/national/gender/age group. ¹⁰ "Culture," then, also gets mapped onto pre-determined social categories that engage in commodity exchange, or alternatively is conceived of as emerging fuzzily from some kind of diffuse cultural free-for-all. ¹¹ This simplifies practices that are in reality often determined by multiple social categories and constrained by relationships of power; in the context of U.S. youth cultures, this approach reifies the black/white racial formation and the boundedness of race. Rather than framing my study only as a white/Asian crossing, or a black/Asian crossing, I decided to compare the implications of cultural production and relations of consumption in two different sites, exploring what it means for young South Asian Americans to identify with hip hop in Manhattan, and how young South Asian women in a small town in Massachusetts make sense [End Page 332] of the consumption of Indo-chic. The problem becomes then not just one of "cultural appropriation," but of the particular ways in which certain groups of Asian Americans are being inserted into the racial hierarchies and economic structures of the U.S. in an era of increasing labor migration to the U.S. from Asia. This approach rests on a dialectical analysis that moves between "the specificity of regions, groups, and particular commodity forms on the one hand, and the generality of global shifts in the political economy and contradictions of culture on the other." ¹² I first briefly discuss Indian American youth culture and hip hop, drawing on a study of second-generation Indian American college students that I did in 1996-98, ¹³ and then turn to a preliminary view of Indo-chic from Northampton, Massachusetts. ¹⁴

The Desi Remix Subculture

This study, in both its sites, focuses broadly on the politics of youth subcultures and cultural consumption, and uses an approach that draws on a tradition of critical cultural studies using feminist, materialist, and postcolonial analyses of youth cultural production. ¹⁵ The neo-Marxist cultural studies theorists of the Birmingham school, such as Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, laid the foundation for much of this work in arguing that the creation of a subculture is a response to the personal, political, and economic contradictions or crises that youth confront on the brink of adulthood. ¹⁶ The Birmingham theorists strategically chose to use the term "subculture," rather than "youth culture," because they argued that the latter descriptor obscured the links between the cultural construction of youth as a distinct category and the creation of a "teenage [consumer] market"; the concept of a "subculture," in their framework, was embedded in a deeper structural explanation of the dialectic between "youth" and youth industries; ¹⁷ it is this materialist analysis that I wish to reference by using the term "youth subculture."

Hip hop, as some cultural critics have argued, can readily be understood as a youth subculture, with all its attendant political and economic contradictions. Tricia Rose suggests that rituals of clothing and **[End Page 333]** the creation of a distinctive hip hop style show not only an "explicit focus on consumption" but offer an alternative means of attaining status for urban African American and Latino youth who face unemployment, racism, and marginalization in a post-industrial economy. ¹⁸ While interpretations of resistance and oppositionality have been problematized in contemporary youth culture studies, ¹⁹ the politics of hip hop as a social movement become apparent when juxtaposing the experiences of the youth Rose describes with those of the Indian American youth in this study. These second-generation youth occupy a very different class and racial location from most black and Latino youth in New York City, but they have adopted certain elements of hip hop in fashioning their own second-generation style, particularly the use of clothing, of dialect, and of musical bricolage. What does this particular performance of ethnic "cool" tell us about the consumption of black-ness by Asian American youth and, conversely, about the performance of exotic "cool" through the consumption of Indo-chic by white American youth?

The youth subculture created by South Asian American youth in New York City is based on remix music that was first created by British-born Asian youth in the 1980s and that layers the beats of bhangra, a folk music from the region of Punjab in Pakistan and North India, over the sounds of techno, reggae, jungle or drum 'n bass, and rap music. It mixes a particular reconstruction of South Asian music with American youth popular culture, allowing ideologies of cultural nostalgia to be expressed through the rituals of clubbing and dance music. Many second-generation Indian American youth find themselves trying to fulfill their parents' longings for--and the wider mainstream's fantasies of--an authentic Indian culture, often symbolized by particular forms of Indian music, dance, religion (sometimes influenced by Hindu nationalism), and "traditions" untainted by "Western" corruption. ²⁰ Remix music, like other musical events, "organizes collective memories" of another place but also invokes "notions of difference and social boundary," through the ideologies of ethnicity, pan-ethnicity, and nationalism that are produced by second-generation youth in this social space. ²¹ This remix subculture includes participants whose families originate from other countries of the sub-continent, such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, yet these events are often **[End Page 334]** coded by insiders as the "Indian party scene" or "desi scene," where the word "desi" signifies a pan-South Asian rubric that is increasingly emphasized in the second generation, and which literally means "of South Asia," especially in the context of the diaspora.

Every weekend, remix parties in Manhattan attract droves of desi youth from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and even Pennsylvania, areas that have large concentrations of Indian and South Asian immigrant families as well as South Asian American student populations. The party scene has created a social network of youth--many second-generation and some immigrant--who gather regularly at these events and know others on the party circuit in Manhattan. ²² The creation of this Indian American and South Asian American youth subculture in Manhattan has, in part, been made possible by the presence of a large local Indian immigrant community. New York City currently has the "largest concentration of Indians [of any metropolitan area] (about 10 percent of total 1990 population in the country)." ²³ While the earlier wave of Indian immigrants who arrived in the late 1960s and 1970s and spread to the suburbs of America were mainly professionals and graduate students, New York City and New Jersey have seen an influx of South Asian immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s who are less affluent and highly educated, and who own small businesses or work in service occupations. It is the children of both these waves of immigrants who have come of age in New York City at a moment when hip hop is one of the most pervasive youth culture signifiers, and who have used its rhythms and style codes in the production of the desi remix subculture.

The Turn to Hip Hop: Masculinity and Subcultural Capital

Hip hop is not just "the Black CNN," but has become the channel for youth culture information in general, as Peter Christenson and Donald Roberts point out: "Of all the current popular music styles, the rap/hip hop culture most defines the pop cultural cutting edge, thus providing adolescents concerned with 'coolness' and peer status much crucial information on subjects such as the latest slang and the most recent trends in dance and fashion." ²⁴ Dharmesh, a young man whose family lives in [End Page 335] New Jersey, remarked that Indian American youth who grew up with Blacks and Latinos, and even some who did not, often perform, or acquire "the style, and the attitude, and the walk" associated with these youth coming to college. A point to note is that while many desi youth identify with hip hop music and style, there are rarely any African American deejays spinning at "Indian parties," nor many African American or Latino youth attending these events, which are almost exclusively South Asian American. A full-page article on this remix youth culture in the *New York Times* in 1996 noted that often "the only Black people are the security guards." ²⁵

Debates over "cultural tourism" in hip hop inevitably invoke notions of cultural authenticity and engage with the politics of hybridity, as David Roediger, in his writing on "wiggers" or "white niggers," observes: "From minstrelsy through *Black Like Me*, . . . the superficial notion that Blackness could be put on and taken off at will has hounded hybridity." ²⁶ The question of hybridity is doubly complicated for desi youth in New York, for not only are they reworking hip hop into their own youth culture but into a *remix* youth culture, one that expresses the cultural imaginaries of second-generation youth from an immigrant community of color. Desi youth turn to hip hop, most fundamentally, because it is key to marking their belonging in the multi-ethnic, urban landscape of New York City. It may also connote a certain image of racialized hypermasculinity that is the ultimate definition of "cool." Ravi, who began going to Indian parties while in high school in California and has continued to do so in New York, reflected, "The hip hop culture has just really taken off. It's really appealed to the Indians, maybe just listening pleasure, the way it sounds, I guess. Maybe the toughness it exudes." Black style is viewed as the embodiment of a particular machismo, the object of racialized desire, and simultaneously, of racialized fear. Roediger argues that "in a society in which the imagination of Blackness so thoroughly frames both what attracts and repulses whites," American male youth often "identify with violence, scatology, and sexism in rap rather than with Black music and culture more broadly." ²⁷ This argument brings to light the ways in which "the authentic black subject in hip hop" is rendered hypermasculine in the context of wider racist constructions of black and Latino men as hypersexual or macho and Asian American men as historically [End Page 336] emasculated, representations that are not evenly resonant for Asian American men in hip hop as I have argued elsewhere. ²⁸ It is apparent that it is also the powerful appeal of hip hop music and youth style, not to mention the sheer pleasure of the music, that draw desi youth to hip hop, as is the case perhaps for many other American youth and youth worldwide--the resonance is "rhythmic" and not just "symbolic." ²⁹

"Hipness" is of premium value within this remix subculture and "being in the know" carries with it a certain status, or subcultural capital associated with being "cool." ³⁰ Subcultural capital, a refinement of Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, has the quality of appearing to be an innate possession acquired without effort or education, thus naturalizing social hierarchies. ³¹ The commodification of hip hop and of youth style in general has meant that brand-name "gear," such as jackets, shoes, and backpacks, are taken careful note of by youth who are in the know. In this desi youth subculture that includes upper-middle class as well as less affluent Indian American youth, there are in fact those who sport "real" labels and who notice others who do and those who do not.

It becomes apparent that this subculture is not only engaged with essentialized definitions of what it means to be truly Indian, but also layers this ideal with essentialized definitions of what it means to be "cool," and to be "young, urban, and black." ³² The production of cultural nostalgia through musical evocations of a distant but desired "homeland" may involve reified or romanticized understandings of ethnicity, but it is in dialectical relation with a cultural complex of ideas about being "young," "urban," and "hip" that is not without its own notions of authenticity. ³³ As Gary Indiana writes: "In its most exacerbated form, this sentimental tic of the white hipster locates all 'authenticity' in the black experience. To be really, really cool becomes the spiritual equivalent of blackness, and even superior to it." ³⁴

There are thus two discourses of authenticity operating in remix youth culture, the authenticity of subcultural cool and that of collective nostalgia, both of which are embedded in each other and that sometimes reinforce but also contradict each other as their "moral projects" lead youth to different understandings of how to be "Indian" at this particular moment in New York. There is no "authentic" reading of the consumption of hip [End Page 337] by desi youth, but there is indeed a politics of authenticity that has meaning in the lives of these youth, and that is constantly being negotiated with references to their positionings in a larger Indian diaspora and to global flows of culture. 35

The globalization of mass media, advertising, and commodity flows in the era of late capitalism has certainly resulted in the seeping of black-identified American popular culture and fashion into remote corners of the world, usually at huge profits to multinational corporations. 36 Indian youth living in rural areas can now listen to American rap or Indian remixes from the U.S., and children of the transnational Indian elite wear Nike shoes that are manufactured in sweatshops in East and Southeast Asia. 37 Analyses of the global consumption of American commodities can lead into "myths" that it leads to either "global homogenisation" or to "global heterogeneity," while perhaps it is more the case that "material culture is often the concrete means by which the contradictions held within general concepts such as the domestic or the global are in practice resolved in everyday life." 38 These contradictions also surface in the traffic in Indo-chic, where commodities flow from South Asia to the U.S. as will be discussed later.

Hip hop culture may in some instances be oppositional or subversive, but it is always engaged with the realm of commerce, as are other forms of popular culture that are marketed, distributed, and consumed. 39 Likewise, the desi party scene provides part-time, or sometimes even full-time employment, to deejays and party promoters who are young entrepreneurs savvy to the economics of popular culture. Indian American deejays in New York charge \$200-\$500 and up for spinning at a party for one night, and many are now organized in conglomerates headed by a single star deejay who draws other, younger deejays apprenticed in the art and business of turntablism. While hip hop has always been a hybrid form based on the sampling of sounds and words, and popular culture, by definition, is not private property, many of the Indian remixes are bootleg albums that do not respect copyright laws. 40 As bhangra and Indian film remixes move into the mainstream and Indian deejays consider the possibility of signing on to major record labels, as British Asian artist Bally Sagoo famously did with Sony, there might be greater pressure to [End Page 338] legalize this appropriation, but this does not necessarily translate into equitable acknowledgment or economic payback for artists given the white-dominated ownership of the record industry. 41 As performance artist Danny Hoch sums up in his brilliant analysis of the hip-hop culture industry, *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip Hop*: "We'll take your culture from you, soup it up, and then sell it back to you."

The Racial Politics of "Cool"

The meanings of this turn to style obviously have different implications for youth depending on the particular racial and class locations they occupy. 42 Codes of hip(hop)ness at work in Asian American youth subcultures are always in relationship to the racialization of Asians and the black-white binary in the U.S. 43 Gary Okihiro notes that Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos are classified as either "near whites" or "just like blacks" depending on the operation of model minority myths or their subordination as minorities, and argues that acceptance of this bipolar racial framework in the U.S. disciplines ethnic minorities and erases histories of alliances. 44 Yet like the notion of racial formation itself, this racial polarity is a system of representation that still plays a role in shaping social structures and individual experiences. 45

This racial binary exerts a pull on some second-generation Indian Americans who feel that they straddle the monochromatic racial boundaries of the U.S. Many of the youth I spoke to had not been drawn to articulations of Indian American-ness until they arrived at college and found a sizable community of ethnic peers and a racially segregated campus social life created in the context of the ethnic student organizations and ethnic identity politics prevalent in U.S. colleges and universities. 46 Remix youth culture's sampling of hip hop allows desi youth to hold both impulses--of ethnicization and also of participation in the U.S. racial formation--in a somewhat delicate balance, and as a racial project perhaps defers the question of "black or white" through the ambiguity of adopting black style in an ethnically exclusive space. In this desi youth subculture, it seemed that identification as "Indian

American" was generally not a political stance, let alone a position of solidarity with other youth of color. [47](#) [End Page 339]

Yet the emulation of urban African American style has more subtle connotations that must be situated in differentials of privilege and generational divides over racial politics. Some argue that the turn to hip hop among desi youth is explained in part by the alienation of second-generation youth from the model minority leanings of their parents, including its manifestations as anti-black racism, an argument that I have drawn out elsewhere. [48](#) George Lipsitz, commenting on white American artists who were drawn to African American and Latino musical traditions, suggests a more nuanced analysis:

Black music provided them with a powerful critique of mainstream middle-class Anglo-Saxon America as well as with an elaborate vocabulary for airing feelings of marginality and contestation. They engaged in what film critics Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan call "discursive transcoding"-indirect expression of alienations too threatening to express directly. [49](#)

For Indian American youth, the turn to hip hop is not always based on clearly articulated political dissent or moral outrage, but it may at least provide a discourse for coding an alienation from parents that is bound up with struggles over what it means to be Indian in the United States, racially and in terms of class aspirations. This analysis echoes the Birmingham theorists' vision of subcultures, but it, too, does not presume that the appropriation of black popular culture is an intervention with lasting social or material impact. As suggested by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's analysis of carnival, it is but "one instance of a general economy of transgression and of the recoding of high/low relations across the whole social structure." [50](#) If the production of "cool" symbolically crosses racial boundaries due to generational alienation, subcultural capital, or aesthetic interest, or some combination of these, it is still for some youth only a transitional flirtation with black popular culture.

Furthermore, desi youth are engaged in cultural productions that involve multiple racial crossings, not just Black/Asian, and are constantly negotiating projections of Indian-ness and notions of "cool" created in other cultural sites as well. The "hybrid" style created by young women at "Indian parties," reflecting the remixed sounds of the music, became a mainstream fashion trend in the late 1990s with the U.S. fashion industry's [End Page 340] appropriation of Indian fabrics and motifs. This new Orientalization has repackaged the nostalgia for the 1960s "hippie" aesthetic into a fin de siècle remystification of India as popular commodity from Indian (music) beats and "Bollywood kitsch" to Indian "body art." The consumption of desi cool in the mainstream becomes doubly complicated for Indian American youth at this moment, because it creates another layer of questions of cultural ownership and commodification--questions that I find often become laced with the anxiety of authenticity and the defense of cultural nationalism among desi youth. Juxtaposing the analysis of remix music and hip hop with a discussion of another instance of cross-cultural consumption helps demonstrate that youth cultural production cannot be considered in isolation, but must be analyzed in a wider frame where several, sometimes contradictory, popular cultural practices collide at any given moment.

1990s Indo-chic: "It's not a shop, it's a feeling."

So proclaims the centerfold of the *Bij* fashion catalog from the Netherlands, announcing in English that the feeling evoked by fantasies of India and the Indian objects advertised here as retro kitsch--T-shirts emblazoned with Hindi-film poster art and images of Hindu deities--is the 1960s gestalt: "Chill Out!" The 1990's version of "turn off, tune in, drop out" is crystallized in the "feeling" conjured up by specific, heavily marketed Indian signifiers in late-twentieth-century American and European youth popular culture. Somini Sengupta, in an article in the *New York Times*, distinguished what she called "the new Indo chic" from the Nehru jackets and Beatles-inspired trends of the 1960s, and linked it to the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of India and Pakistan's independence and the accompanying flurry of interest that year in South Asian writers and musicians. [51](#) Sengupta used the term "Indo chic" deliberately, noting that the spotlight did not fall as frequently on writers and artists of Pakistan's origin (with the exception of the late qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan), demonstrating the particular fascination with the

notion of "India" in the American public imagination and, perhaps, the implicit colonialist fantasy of a pre-independence, undivided Indian nation. 52 [End Page 341]

In the U.S., singer Gwen Stefani of the band No Doubt began sporting bridal-style bindis across her brow in the mid-1990s, and actress Liv Tyler rested dreamily on henna-adorned hands on the cover of a 1997 issue of *Vanity Fair*. 53 However, it was super-chameleon Madonna whose MTV performance in 1998 emblemized the ultimate cross-over spectacle for Indo-chic. In the video for the single, "Frozen," from her album *Ray of Light*, Madonna performed pseudo-Indian dance moves with henna-painted hands, and then proceeded to tour the U.S. and Europe wearing "temporary tattoo art." Supermodels, actresses, and fashion designers followed suit as they strutted across the global stage with hands and feet dyed with intricate designs. Madonna's hennaed hands were the work of an Indian American beauty salon owner based in Los Angeles, who later authored a lavishly illustrated book on mehndi with a quote from Madonna on the cover: "When Sumita [Batra] hennas my hands and feet, I am transported to another time and place. A world of magic, passion, and romance." 54 Henna, and other markers of Indo-chic, have become signifiers for a turn-of-the-millennium Orientalism, in Edward Said's words, "a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness . . . in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment." 55 Identifying some of the motifs emerging in this "late Orientalist" discourse and practice created through Indo-chic, and its meanings for South Asian youth, helps to understand the functions of this new Orientalism and the cultural fantasies and yearnings that it fulfills in the U.S. at this historical moment.

As Sumita Batra's book carefully notes, despite its hyper-Orientalized cover, henna is a practice done by and for women, particularly for wedding ceremonies in South Asia but also in North Africa (where it is used by Moroccan men as well), the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. In the U.S., henna has retained this association with women, for the most part, but has taken on new meanings reflecting the subcultures that have drawn it into their symbolic repertoire. Henna was introduced to the downtown set in New York City in 1996, when Loretta Roome, who had learned henna from an Indian woman, held a successful photographic exhibition featuring photographs and demonstrations of henna, an event that called [End Page 342] itself the Mehndi Project. 56 Now a booking agency for "henna artists," the Mehndi Project (despite its carefully euphemistic name; it is not Mehndi Inc.) is but one of several Indo-chic business ventures that have sprung up across the U.S. The fact that henna has to be applied to the body lends itself to entrepreneurial "body artists" who "perform" henna for a price. Henna is now available through the services of henna artists of diverse ethnic backgrounds in places as far-flung as Madison, Wisconsin, Tucson, Arizona, and Artesia, California, and from U.S. companies such as Mehndi Mania, Temptu, and Body Art, some of which have added do-it-yourself henna "kits" to their line of tattoo products. Messages posted on the Henna Page (<http://www.hennapage.com>) include queries and letters from mehndi fans in Denmark, Chile, and Pakistan, wanting to share their excitement about joining what seems to be one of the hottest new body art subcultures.

The marketing of henna as "temporary tattoos" is calculated to reconstruct mehndi as a painless, temporary alternative to tattoos while appealing to the current fascination with "body art." 57 Indo-chic is replete with the imagery and rhetoric of the new Orientalism, the trafficking in culture that moves with the late-twentieth-century currents of global capital, media, and labor. Packets of glittery "mehndi tattoos" bear the promise: "Mystical body art from the *Far East*" (emphases mine), demonstrating that "the Orient," like the concept of "the primitive," is "by nature and in effect inexact and composite." 58 Carine Fabius, a Haitian American who owns a mehndi gallery in Los Angeles, writes in her how-to henna book that "henna is a capricious, mysterious, and elusive substance"; 59 ironically, henna is about the least elusive South Asian commodity in U.S. popular culture now that it has become, for Fabius and others, the Orientalist trope par excellence in the late 1990s.

The *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* asked in 1999: "Do henna-decorated hands make you want to yawn? Bindis (self-adhesive gemstones) may be the answer to your adornment doldrums." 60 Bindis, the powder dots or adhesive felt and plastic designs worn by South Asian women between the eyebrows, are part of the fashion industry's campaign to offer another commodity to extend the fascination with Indo-chic. Marketed as "body jewelry" that can be worn not just on the forehead, but on the shoulder or [End Page 343] navel ("belly buttons"), iridescent bindis have been refashioned in the U.S. as a replacement for body glitter. Though often featured with henna in the same body art catalogs, "glitter bindis" have been marketed, in particular, to young clubbers seeking out styles that have a visible impact on the dance floor, especially at raves or all-night psychedelic-techno dance parties. 61 Pam, a young raver and party promoter in Amherst, Massachusetts, noted that "tribal ravers" favor what Simon Reynolds calls "ethnodelic trance" beats and fashion, including T-shirts with Japanese characters, henna stickers, and "power

bracelets." ⁶² She pointed out that the futuristic ethnic style of ravers resemble those of wide-eyed Japanese *anime* characters with glitter-bindis enhancing the large eyes of Ecstasy-tripping ravers who have dilated pupils. One offshoot of the largely white, trans-Atlantic rave culture, which is fueled by drugs such as Ecstasy, is Goa trance, which was created on the beaches of Goa on the west coast of India in the late 1980s and early 1990s. European raver-tourists and "spiritual seekers" recreated the hippie haven of the sixties with a new, electronic sound (acid house and psychedelic trance) and a new fantasy of Eastern mysticism, which then appeared at Goa trance parties from clubs in Israel to beaches in Costa Rica. ⁶³ DJ IndiaDrop, who spins Goa trance at a "Synthetic Sadhu" rave in New York organized by a French expatriate, says, "We try to recreate what it's like to be in India, which is the most spiritual place on the planet." ⁶⁴ Goa, as Naresh Fernandes reflected after this rave, "connotes a nongeographical destination that's everything the rational West isn't." ⁶⁵ In his analysis of the emergence of India in U.S. Orientalism, Vijay Prashad notes that the construction of the "spiritual East" was required to atone for the materialism of "the West"; in an era of global capitalism, this binary is complicated by the overt commodification of India's appearance in U.S. popular culture, but there is clearly still an excess of spirituality projected onto "the East."

The anxieties of appropriation, often surfacing in "first-time" henna stories and queries by white American users of henna, are rationalized by the "one world" credo among tribal ravers or New Age worshippers, who are deeply invested in the recasting of mehndi as a mystical practice or spiritual ritual, but one that is available to all. Henna seems to have been reinvented to fit within the parameters of popular American [End Page 344] traditions, whether as New Age ritual, feminist beauty practice, bridal shower, or sex toy. Roome suggests hosting a "henna party" to "turn your home into a healing, sanctuary," while Fabius proposes doing henna for women as an "alternative to traditional baby shower games." ⁶⁶ In Northampton, henna artist and herbalist, Joni, advertises her services with a flier that states: "Henna-Body art: Express yourself--ritual, healing, exotic, celebrate yourself, art, needle-less, natural, ancient." Joni, who is British Greek and moved to Northampton ten years ago, said, "I wanted it to be a ritual, I wanted people to come in and do a ceremony to do with some kind of commitment, some change in their life. . . . But people weren't into the commitment." Joni became discouraged when a man came into the salon and asked her to do a mehndi design of Tweety bird on his shoulder. ⁶⁷ One of the most layered performances of henna as reinvented ritual is in the film, *Chutney Popcorn*, where Reena, played by Nisha Ganatra (the director), is a lesbian Indian American henna artist who applies henna to her lover as a queerly erotic ritual and to her own belly when she becomes pregnant through artificial insemination. ⁶⁸

The third style commodity in this catalog of South Asian Orientalia ("bindis, body art, and borders") are the various fabrics and trimmings, from brocade sari borders and mirrorwork to highly priced pashmina wool shawls, that appeared in clothing stores and street fairs in New York City in 1997-99. I realized how Indo-chic had seeped beyond urban areas when I stopped in at a fabric store in Hadley, Massachusetts, a rural community sandwiched between the towns of Northampton and Amherst. A promotional brochure that featured an East Asian model in a mirrorwork-studded dress announced: "European and Asian influences are carrying fashion this spring. . . . Shisha mirrors [literally translated from Hindi: "mirror mirrors," as in "chai (tea) tea"] are the choice for day or night sparkle. Color cues: curry, red. . . ." Curry, a word that glosses an entire subcontinent's cuisine, has now become a fashion color cue. The Hadley experience brought home to me the ways in which urban style trends are re-signified in rural or small town contexts; I began thinking about the meanings of Indo-chic in an "off-center" context, placing it outside of large metropolitan centers but in a setting where the consumption of other ethnicities is equally pervasive and as vexed, although in different ways. [End Page 345]

NoHo: On the Trail of Henna

Northampton is a town where white liberalism, academics and affiliates of Smith and the other area colleges, and a visible lesbian community ("NoHo") have collided with older New Englanders ("Hamp") in a not-so-typical town/gown conflict over gentrification, lifestyles, and the commercial appeal designed to flow from the image of "Paradise City," [End Page 346] the hub of restaurants and stores that has developed in the town over the last ten years. ⁶⁹ Right now what flows are the dresses, the long batik gowns and the skirts fashioned from Indian saris, in the shop windows along Main Street. Northampton has a peculiar brand of what I would call "reflexive multiculturalism," partly the result of the "theory" breathing self-reflexively in academic conversations at the Moroccan bistro, and partly the anxiety of a town looking in on itself at a time of social and economic transition.

"NoHo" is a town where world music and New Age enterprises seem to find a certain niche market: the Calvin Theatre and the Iron Horse club host a steady stream of artists from all over the world, and fliers for yoga classes adorn the walls of vegetarian restaurants. Henna and bindis began to appear in stores about a year ago; less an adornment on actual bodies visible in everyday performance, these commodities are nonetheless viewed and consumed, and continue to be offered by clothing stores and beauty salons. One sidewalk flier advertising henna leads to the Gypsy Moon, a store where albums of Armenian wedding music cozy up to fliers for Indian gurus and New Age meditation programs. The henna artist who does mehndi, a white American woman, was away for the summer, but Tania, the voluble and welcoming owner, pointed out Loretta Roome's book on mehndi in the display counter. Tania has written a poem "Marketing the Goddess," and is perhaps a practitioner of reflexive multiculturalism herself. She noted: "Now things that were so hard to get are everywhere. Do you know [Baba] Ramdas? He said, 'If you like the '60s, you will love the '90s!' I think he said that because the kinds of things we used to search for before, now they're here." She has a point.

Northampton does not have a local South Asian American community of any size to speak of, but it does have in its midst the presence of South Asian and South Asian American women who attend Smith College, an elite all-women's liberal arts institution, as well as the less steady appearance of desi students attending the other area colleges, such as Amherst College and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, not to mention faculty and staff working at these institutions. The diffusion of Indo-chic into western Massachusetts raises the question: how do women of South Asian origin make meaning of this appropriation in the context [End Page 347] of a small, predominantly white town in the throes of gentrification? I began talking to young South Asian and South Asian American women attending Smith about their views on Indo-chic, and was drawn to two issues that complicate the picture of Indo-chic and cross-cultural consumption in youth culture: one is that as women who have grown up in different countries in the South Asian diaspora, including in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, some of these women bring prior knowledge of diasporic South Asian cultural production that complicates ideas of authenticity and ethnic nationalism. The second is the deep ambivalence the women felt about the conjoining of whiteness--particularly white femininity--with Indian/South Asian signifiers, which provided a counterpoint to the references to black masculinity in Indian American remix youth culture. These tensions illuminate the ways in which "the negotiation of cultural citizenship" plays out in "the interstices of formal and informal popular culture," particularly for groups that are marginally positioned within the nation-state, as May Joseph illustrates in her study of Tanzanian Asian youth and 1970s pan-African soul. 70

The Production of "Mehndi Night"

South Asian women at Smith College engage in cultural productions that reconstruct mehndi and Indo-chic for consumption, and participate actively in a commodification process about which they may still have ambivalent feelings. Beginning three years ago, before mehndi had actually emerged in Northampton, students of South Asian origin who belong to the organization, Ekta ("unity"), organized "Mehndi Night," an annual mehndi party-cum-Indian dinner that is now their biggest fundraiser and draws over four hundred students. South Asian women students offer mehndi painting for two dollars, as well as Indian food and dance performances, and the ballroom has been packed with Smith undergraduates and even students from the local high school. As Ameena, a student active in Ekta, remarked, "There are a lot of reasons that people come for Mehndi Night. They think, 'Hey, temporary tattoos, that's cool!'" Ameena also pointed out that the organizers were self-conscious about the cultural commodification built into the event: "We thought of [End Page 348] commercializing the event, so where we were selling the tickets, we had a tray of bindis and bangles, and people were saying, 'That's a third eye,' because I think bindis are being sold on a store on Green Street [in Northampton], and they sell them as the 'third eye.'"

Mehndi Night is a successful production, it seems to me, because it fulfills several kinds of desire at the same time, due to the strategic packaging of its organizers, and plays an important role in the multicultural economy of a liberal arts college such as Smith. It fulfills the desire of South Asian American and South Asian women to enact representations of national culture or ethnic ancestry for a non-South Asian audience; Shamita, the "Cultural Chair" in Ekta who helped organize the event, pointed out the interactive nature of this event has made it hugely popular. It seems that what Mehndi Night does that other events don't is to allow ethnic outsiders to not only consume the

culture of the "other" but to have the "other" literally imprinted on their bodies. This marking has a particular significance at Smith which is "gung ho about spreading diversity," according to Aameena, as are other colleges and universities in the wake of multiculturalist policies in higher education. Mary, a white American woman who is a senior at Smith College, said she feels "uncomfortable" about the popularity of mehndi but comments, "White girls go to Mehndi Night because they want to show they are pro-diversity, and because they support their friends." The organizers are strategic about understanding the ways in which their event could be marketed to meet the institution's multicultural agenda, for residence houses could use it to fulfill the college requirements for participation in cultural "diversity" programs. Clearly, these women entrepreneurs understand that multiculturalism in higher education is about the negotiation of resources and the performance of a certain liberal politics of cultural difference, and they have staged their re-appropriation of Indo-chic to their own (material) benefit. What the official performance of Mehndi Night does not address, but which some of its producers and participants acknowledge in private dissent, are the ways in which multicultural programming 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 [End Page 349] larger institution still fails to address the needs of populations of color." ⁷¹ Mehndi Night serves to promote a particular kind of "inclusion" on campus; for example, while Ekta has jointly organized parties with the Black Students' Association after Mehndi night, the event itself has apparently not drawn as many African American women as it has white American students; it is clear that Indo-chic is often seen as primarily as a South Asian/white American interchange, in the eyes of both South Asian and white youth. This is perhaps another way in which representations of Indo-chic intensify the politics of cultural appropriation, framing it as a white/Asian crossing, rather than understanding it as a many-forked circuit affecting different groups.

The South Asian women I spoke to remained deeply ambivalent about the implications of mehndi's mainstreaming, viewing "mainstream" popular culture as white, middle-class public culture in the U.S., and reflecting the general uneasiness I found among desi youth from different parts of the U.S. in response to Indo-chic. At workshops, conferences, and classroom discussions, I found that South Asian Americans, as well as youth who grew up in South Asia, were often angry about the commodification of Indo-chic, but this denunciation was also sometimes mixed with varying degrees of curiosity, pride, pleasure, guilt, and confusion. ⁷² On the one hand, there is, for many South Asian youth with whom I have spoken, a resentment of what they see as the unfair appropriation of cultural markers and practices that are rightfully theirs, and which hold a specific cultural meaning that is derived from their "proper" use. Shamita, who grew up in Calcutta, India, said emphatically:

For us it [mehndi] goes back many years, it's part of our culture. . . . Sometimes I feel annoyed because we're so used to seeing it in the proper context. . . . at home, you wear a sari, you have the proper jewelry, the proper makeup. . . . I also don't know where it's from, and the history, but we've just seen it around us, or we know the context, where it stands, but people not from South Asia wouldn't know where it stands.

The argument that mehndi should only be worn by those who understand its cultural significance is a common one, but is often contradicted by the kind of hesitation Shamita herself expressed in asserting knowledge of its "origins," reverting instead to an ambiguous and essentialized notion of [End Page 350] cultural "context." Shamita acknowledged that individuals can exist in multiple social contexts that define codes of propriety, and saw herself as "part of two very different worlds," but was also clear that for her these two worlds do not need to come together on the level of style. Reflecting on second-generation South Asian women and the meanings of their use of Indo-chic, Shamita commented:

Some South Asian American women are very traditional, some have gone back to India every year and learned classical Indian dance, they know where it's coming from. But a lot of Indian families here are more Americanized, they're more liberal, they don't really care about their traditions. I think South Asian American women from traditional families know about mehndi, but there are some others who say, "I don't know where it comes from." I may be confused, but they're more confused!

It is interesting to note that the use of Indo-chic has become a site for waging the contest of ethnic authenticity ("more Indian/less confused than thou"), where tradition, as in classical arts, is defined against hybridity, the disavowal of pure origins. ⁷³ The recovery of ethnic purity by the second generation (sometimes dismissed by

immigrant South Asians as ABCDs, or "American Born Confused Desis"), requires going "back" to India, where Shamita points out, "you . . . know where you're coming from."

Women who have grown up outside of South Asia sometimes participate in the contest of authenticity themselves. Surina is an undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts who made several trips to Bangladesh, where her parents are from, while living outside of South Asia; she observes:

There might be some South Asian Americans who hold on really tightly [to their "culture"], and some South Asian Americans may not compare the bindi craze to what's going on at home because they've never seen home. They don't even know what bindis look like. It might be bad because then they'll think this *is* South Asian culture. But it depends on the individual, on their upbringing, and on their values.

There seems to be an underlying fear here that Indo-chic might muddy the category of "real" South Asian culture, depending on the experience of the individual but also on the family sphere and on "values." As Miller [End Page 351] observes, consumption clearly becomes a "moral project" where selves can be imagined, but where alternative selves may also need to be reined in or surveilled. Consumption evokes anxiety because it crosses easily--sometimes too easily, according to its critics--across national borders and boundaries of cultural authenticity and ownership, but the boundaries crossed for desi youth in hip hop are different from those in Indo-chic's mainstreaming, and evoke different underlying tensions for South Asian American youth. Ideologies of nation, diaspora, and culture underlie the need some youth feel to define the appropriate geographical spaces for Indo-chic's consumption and generational categories of appropriate consumers. Consuming Indo-chic is kosher in South Asia, but not for those who have grown up in the diaspora, unless they have had the "right" upbringing. Consumption thus is embedded in this temporal and spatial web that is spun to bring together a dispersed and highly diverse population through the fiction of pure culture.

This web begins to unravel with other stories that suggest the complexities of the ideologies and social contexts, underlying the production of diasporic South Asian identities. Ameena, for example, has a very different narrative of remembering henna, having grown up in Oman, where henna is a local practice associated with Eid and weddings, much as it is in South Asian Muslim communities. Ameena is from an Indian Muslim family that is part of the wave of labor migration from the South Indian state of Kerala to the Middle East, and went to an international school in Muscat with European, Arab, and other South Asian children. Her first observation of mehndi being worn by a white person was, in fact, at a school event in Oman where "desi aunties" applied henna for Dutch and British students at a school fair. So for her, the crossing over of mehndi in the U.S. is not a new phenomenon, nor is it a practice that involves only relationships between South Asians and non-South Asians. Ameena remembers having her hands painted at midnight during Eid, when the beauty salons are open till the early hours of the morning, and seeing Gujarati immigrant women in the salons "fusing Indian and Omani designs." As she remarks, "Mehndi is not an exclusive thing to the South Asian population. . . . In fact, you're expected to wear mehndi for Eid in Oman. If you didn't wear mehndi, it was an awkward [End Page 352] thing." To wear mehndi, for Ameena, is to be Indian or South Asian as part of a larger diasporic community, to be Muslim, and to fit into the local Omani community, all at the same time.

So for Ameena, henna is hybridized from the very outset, or to use the stronger term suggested by Robin Kelley, it is "polycultural," a cultural practice that is always already complicated by its affiliations with multiple communities, rather than a product of two or more discrete, pure cultural strands. ⁷⁴ Ameena is clear about asserting her relationship to this polycultural practice as something she does not want to police or define for more than it is:

I personally don't think there's a meaning to it [mehndi], it's pretty, I have fond memories of it. If it's managed to cross oceans to reach this part of the world, they may not have the same attachments to it that I had because of my childhood, but they've made the effort to try it, that's a good thing. It's the commercialization I just feel uncomfortable about. ⁷⁵

Ameena's narrative is a critical one for it shows the ways in which henna can be simultaneously told as a story of multicultural market appropriation, of nationalist re-appropriation, and of polycultural experience, but significantly, the story that gets told in mainstream contexts or among South Asian American youth is often only the

multiculturalist or nationalist narrative. Aameena's matter-of-fact polycultural identity narrative is also one that is not widely heard, disrupting as it does the binaries of pure/inauthentic national cultures and memories.

Representation and Regimes of Appropriation

The Orientalization of Indo-chic is clearly a cause of uneasiness and resistance for desi youth, even while some respond with nationalistic assertions of authenticity and a few with polycultural re-tellings of a practice with complex histories. For a few, there is also the satisfaction, at certain moments, of seeing what were previously hidden markers of ethnicity or links to other "homes" enter the public sphere in the U.S. and make their South Asian-ness visible. ⁷⁶ As with British Asian women in the 1980s, the emergence of Indo-chic provides for some an expression **[End Page 353]** of a hybrid sensibility that they had long crafted themselves or of a style that was associated only with private, invisible spaces. ⁷⁷ For South Asian American women, there is the contradiction that henna marks non-South Asians as "trendy" or "cool," while until very recently, mehndi worn by South Asian women simply marked them as "traditional" or at best "exotic," and certainly always Other. ⁷⁸ On the other hand, a South Asian American friend of mine remarked wryly that she no longer feels that she can wear her Indian shawls and mirrorwork accoutrements in public because they no longer are her special preserve of difference; in becoming mainstream, Indo-chic has changed the meaning of the distinction it once lent to (at least young) South Asian American women.

Surina, who grew up in Bangladesh, Thailand, and the U.S., recalled that her initially proprietary feelings about seeing Indo-chic in American popular culture gave way to nationalistic pride when Madonna made an appearance (probably as part of her Ray of Light tour) dressed in "full sari and blouse, she was wearing it the right way, everything was perfect." She adds, "Now I'm really happy and proud to see South Asia represented. Of course, it's [Indo-chic] sold at a higher price And a lot of these things are not even made here." Surina's reading of Indo-chic as a positive moment of recognition and of cultural recuperation of South Asian authenticity is built on a critique that also contains within it an understanding of the political economy of "ethnic cool." When she "saw tons of bindis, tons of sari-border skirts, people wearing Kohlapuri [slippers]" at a rave in Schenectady, New York, she pointed out, "I couldn't believe they were wearing those slippers, those things are two rupees in Dhaka!" Surina's critique comes from her experience of having witnessed the uneven flow of capital from the U.S. to the Third World while living in Thailand, concluding:

If you are going to reproduce trends from another country, then you need to work with them. Why not have South Asian-owned stores? Why not sell South Asian products? Why can't you sell real artifacts? I don't think it's fair to go to a Third World country and get their goods and then mark up prices.

All the South Asian women I spoke to shared in this critique of the regime of flexible accumulation, ⁷⁹ a regime in which South Asians migrate to the **[End Page 354]** U.S. to work at low-skill jobs as the Indian market is opened to the U.S. with structural adjustment and economic liberalization policies. Shamita's response to the question of "why Indo-chic now?" was succinct: "I think it's globalization." Surina raises an additional issue that is especially relevant in the case of a commodity trend that is targeted to the American youth market:

And any American girl is not going to know the real thing, she's going to spend twenty dollars. So it's robbing money from young people, I know college students are always broke. That's why I was bitter in the beginning because I know my age group, and I know they can't really afford it. ⁸⁰

Discussions of market appropriation do not always observe that teenage consumers in the U.S. are being "robbed" of their disposable income by American corporations because they do not know, nor do they have access to, the "real" or "fairly priced" commodity. The issue of youth consumption is a complex one, but it is safe to at least point out here that Surina and Shamita--like other diasporic South Asian women--respond to Indo-chic on many levels, as women who are part of the South Asian diaspora, as Asians critical of American capital, and as youth consumers in the U.S., among other positions.

Clearly the question of visibility of South Asia in mainstream popular culture, the question of representation, is only one part of the equation of responses to appropriation by South Asian diasporic youth, and is balanced by their structural critiques. As Virinder Kalra and John Hutnyk suggest in their commentary on the rise of South Asian artists in British popular music: "In some ways perhaps the music contributes to a progressive visibility of 'Asianness' and Asians in Britain (and in other metropolitan export sites for these British products . . .) but we ask whether this visibility is a sufficient politics given the extent of the struggle required." ⁸¹ The politics of representation can be a limited framework for understanding the presence of South Asians in the public sphere, they argue, when juxtaposed with the politics of (South) Asian labor, anti-Asian violence, and human rights. Kalra and Hutnyk point out that it is important to focus not only on what is appropriated, but also to ask "what is not appropriated or what is considered digestible by the cannibalizing appetite of consumer capitalism." ⁸² The question then becomes, in the [End Page 355] case of Indo-chic's commodification and construction as a series of moral projects: what does not lend itself to appropriation by multinational corporations and entrepreneurs, and what is ignored or only implicit in these discussions as they are framed in terms of consumption and youth style?

Consuming Difference: Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Such questions help, in some measure, to address the larger question: why Indo-chic *now*? The question, *why* Indo-chic, is perhaps easier to answer given the almost luridly Orientalist framing of Indian signifiers, but certainly India occupies a somewhat different niche in the American cultural economy than it did in the 1960s and 1970s. India may still be used to connote the counter-cultural ethos of "chill out," but the fashion catalog credo, "It's not a shop, it's a feeling," gives away part of the answer. India is indeed not just a feeling, but a shop, in some instances a global sweatshop, where American multinationals browse for cheap labor, cheap goods, and profitable market trend ideas. With the opening up of India's economic market in the wake of economic restructuring and neo-liberalization policies, India has been drawn further into global movements of labor, goods, and capital. As the young desi women I spoke to pointed out, the marketing of Indo-chic in the U.S. rests on the extraction of huge margins of profit by American corporations and entrepreneurs, yet this issue is rarely brought to light in wider public discussions. Henna kits and "bindi body art kits" manufactured by U.S. or British producers sell for ten to twenty-five dollars, with "startup" kits for aspiring "professional henna artists"--which include guidebooks and henna from India or Indian silver bowls for an authenticating touch--ranging from 75 to 150 dollars. The exorbitant markup of materials that sell for nominal prices in South Asia is tied to the clever marketing concept of the "kit"; a packet of henna becomes transformed into a do-it-yourself hobby, if not a part-time occupation, by packaging it with applicators, stencils, and a book, in a brightly colored box. A fifty-cent packet of bindis is no less commodified in India, where it is also a product for a sale; but in the U.S., consumers must pay for the ethos of Indo-chic that is built into the product's very packaging. ⁸³ [End Page 356]

American "henna artists" charge many times what women in India are paid for their services, and their self-packaging is also an effective marketing strategy; for example, the self-conscious highlighting of henna's "ritual" nature to appeal to the "alternative lifestyle"/New Age followers in a town such as Northampton demonstrates the ways in which this new Orientalism meshes with very particular subcultural economies. South Asian Americans are no less likely to try to benefit from this trend; for example, an Indian American woman who is a sophomore at Harvard charges thirty-five dollars per hour for doing henna, tapping into both mainstream and ethnic markets. Yet non-South Asian American henna artists are frankly suspicious of products sold by Middle Eastern and South Asian merchants, which is ironic given that they were the only source of henna in the U.S. till it became a mainstream fashion trend. Roome, who does list Indian grocery stores in Manhattan's Little India, says bluntly, "Don't bother asking the people who work in the store [about what to buy]." ⁸⁴ Henna entrepreneurs, of course, have their own products to sell, and they effectively remain the cultural translators and product endorsers for "uninitiated" consumers. South Asian immigrant businesses seem to have been cut off from the profits flowing from this trend; the concern among henna fans about violating some kind of cultural "taboo" in appropriating henna does not seem to extend to a concern that consumers support South Asian American or Middle Eastern business entrepreneurs and help them make a living, which is probably more important to them than white women wearing henna on their bellies. The economics of Indo-chic and the vagaries of global capital are clearly one aspect of commodification that

is not "digestible" by the discourse of packaged ethnicity, and is left undiscussed in the mainstream media although clearly articulated by youth of South Asian descent.

A second major dimension of these suppressed material processes is the presence of South Asian immigrant workers in urban centers where Indo-chic has been most apparent. What is different about the 1990s is that there are new groups of South Asian Americans who have come primarily as labor migrants on family reunification visas or sometimes as undocumented immigrants beginning in the 1980s. ⁸⁵ Currently, in cities such as New York, it is taxi drivers, newsstand owners, and domestic **[End Page 357]** workers, who are the most visible South Asians in the public domain. What meaning does the presence of South Asian immigrant labor have for Indo-chic in the late 1990s? Does it help explain "why Indo chic now?" I argue that it does, that the indigestible fact of working-class and lower-middle-class South Asian Americans, who are not considered bearers of Indian mysticism or avatars of Indo-chic, is precisely the unassimilable contradiction with which we must grapple.

For one of the functions, I think, that Indo-chic performs is to domesticate difference, to extract not just profit, but the very signs of difference from South Asian immigrant workers and South Asian Americans at large. The visual signs of this ethnic difference, clothing and adornment, are recreated as signifiers not of South Asian bodies but of American "cool." The exotic becomes mainstream, and the superficial "otherness" of this growing Asian American group is incorporated into a repertoire of American subcultural practices, reinvented as New Age or feminist ritual, as rave or body art style. There are certainly South Asian Americans who continue to wear ethnic markers, but this now happens in a context where Whiteness, especially white femininity, can also bear the mark of the exotic. Ethnic difference, specifically difference coded as the essence of South Asian "culture," can be consumed and made safe, in a sense, its threatening foreignness now neutralized.

It is not coincidental, it seems to me, that this has occurred just as the national debates and anti-immigrant hysteria of the mid-1990s Republican regime, exemplified in legislative measures such as Proposition 187 in California, have ostensibly died down in public discourse and reappeared as specific, localized attacks on immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. In 1998, a young Indo-Trinidadian man, Rishi Maharaj, was beaten senseless by three white men in Queens, New York, who complained that Indians moving into the neighborhood were bringing it down, yelling: "This is never going to be a neighborhood until you leave." ⁸⁶ The assault catalyzed a coalitional protest that united different diasporic South Asian organizations in the city in a strategic alliance of peoples of South Asian origin. An incident from an earlier decade brings into even sharper relief the connections between attacks on South Asian immigrants and signs of ethnic difference. In 1987-88, a multi-ethnic **[End Page 358]** group of youth, the "Dotbusters," initiated a series of physical and verbal assaults on Indian Americans in Jersey City, New Jersey, leaving one man dead. Indian immigrants had begun to open successful small businesses in Jersey City and were perceived by local residents as economically threatening and culturally unassimilable "dotheads." ⁸⁷ The violence of this incident is even more painfully ironic given the fetishization of the bindi ten years later with all signs of brutality completely erased. ⁸⁸ Knowledge of the Dotbusters incident, or the Rishi Maharaj case is not evenly shared by first- and second-generation South Asian Americans, but many still resist the exoticization of Indo-chic because they know that their ethnic difference can be the source of harassment, if not racist violence. Indo-chic is not only about contests of authenticity and cultural appropriation, but also about discursive shifts and ideological strategies that accommodate difference in the face of changing patterns of immigration, labor, and citizenship.

Conclusion

A critique of commodification and appropriation in Asian American youth culture necessarily focuses upon the use of commodities and the implications this has for constructions of race, nation, gender, and sexuality, but it also has to look at processes that are left obscured and are crucial to the very conditions of cultural production. The emergence of Indo-chic has to be tied to a structural analysis of global capitalist production, immigration, and the contradictions of cultural citizenship, even as it is largely understood within the framework of ethnicity, nationality, and cultural ownership. Similarly, desi hip hop is as much about the insertion of (South) Asian Americans into U.S. race politics and the racialization of second-generation desi youth into a racialized labor economy, as it is about the politics of "cultural borrowing." A polycultural approach can be combined with a materialist or subcultural

framework for cultural consumption/production to destabilize notions of cultural essentialism, while paying attention to the relations of power and profit in which these practices are embedded and which are rationalized by Orientalizing discourses of mystic "cool." While Indian [End Page 359] Americans recreate hip hop in ways very different from the white feminist/New Age/rave consumers of Indo-chic, both instances are marked by searches for "authenticity and redemption," as Deborah Root observes of Whites who identify with Native Americans through style. ⁸⁹ Authenticity and redemption are the ideologies that link the new Orientalization of India with desis' turn to hip hop. The contests of authenticity that are waged in both sites, attempting to define essential "Indian-ness" and notions of black "cool," often obscure political struggles in other arenas. In the case of "keeping it real" in hip hop, Ross notes the cruel irony that the "authentic" group--young, black males--is itself vanishing, under attack from and incarcerated by the state. ⁹⁰ Black style travels more freely across racial and class borders than young black men do.

Both these instances of cultural production involving Asian American youth demonstrate specific ideological projects at work, projects that appear in some ways contradictory but that are tied to the positioning of Asian Americans vis-à-vis other ethnic and racial groups within the structures of the nation-state. Desi hip hop brings to light the ways in which identification with black and urban youth style fails to materialize a politics of alliance-building for some second-generation youth, who use hip hop more as a means to participate in an ethnically specific, urban popular culture, at a particular moment in their lives. Productions drawing on the appeal of Indo-chic by women who have grown up in different parts of the South Asian diaspora show that desi youth use the commodification of Indian artifacts in extremely diverse ways, to assert national authenticity, to reap the benefits of academic multiculturalism, or to bring to light a polycultural narrative. The kinds of communities imagined in each of these sites, desi parties in New York or Mehndi Night in Northampton, are created at the intersection of sometimes competing ideologies of what it means to be South Asian or Asian American at the turn of the century.

Clearly, neither of these instances supports an easy reading of populist resistance or of passive capitulation to mass culture, suggesting instead that there are spaces of ambiguity and of unresolved contradiction embedded in these practices of cultural production and consumption. ⁹¹ However, mediating the either/or of the subversion/conformity trap of [End Page 360] popular culture analyses need not be an easy theoretical escape. ⁹² An emphasis on ambiguity situated in the dialectics of cultural production and consumption does not necessarily imply a transcendence of the political and social struggles indexed by these practices; there remain conflicts, erasures, and silences that are deeply problematic, as the juxtaposition of the two instances suggests. There are still assertions of authenticity, of nationalism, of racial distancing, and of subcultural orthodoxies, as well as unassimilable contradictions of labor and citizenship that cannot be glossed over with an analytic sleight of hand.

The terrain of culture is always the site for negotiations of ideology and struggles for power, a premise that cultural anthropologists and cultural studies theorists have worked with for years, and that cultural critics in Asian American studies have begun to highlight as well, largely in the realm of theoretical and textual analysis. ⁹³ I argue that analyses of cultural production cannot lose sight of either relations of cultural production--what Lawrence Grossberg calls "radical contextualism"--or of the nuances of lived experience, combining both to produce a "materialist ethnography. ⁹⁴ A materialist ethnographic project hopefully addresses weaknesses in cultural studies approaches that Grossberg argues are a legacy of the historical location of American cultural studies in the field of communication, which has been primarily concerned with semiotic analyses of mass media "texts," or reception by audiences abstracted from their local contexts. ⁹⁵ This recreation of cultural studies on the opposite side of the ocean from Birmingham led to a reliance on the now "discredited, linear model of communication: sender, messenger, receiver." ⁹⁶ Mapping onto Stuart Hall's "encoding/decoding" model--analysis of processes of production, decoding of texts, and ethnographies of consumption in specific interpretive communities--the problem is not that these three aspects are not important to consider together, but that cultural studies analyses rarely did, according to Grossberg. Instead, this model served to leave intact the disciplinary division of labor between political economy, literary criticism, and cultural anthropology in the U.S. academy. Asian American studies, while inherently an interdisciplinary project, also sometimes rests on these disciplinary divisions due to the particular ways in which programs are housed in universities and curricula [End Page 361] are institutionalized. However, cultural studies is a project that is obviously aligned with the interests of many in Asian American studies. One can only hope that Asian Americanists can seize the potential fluidity of their disciplinary location and use it to strengthen a more radical cultural studies this side of the Atlantic.

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Notes

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1. Mehndi is the Hindi word for henna, a plant, and for henna painting which is done with a paste from crushed henna leaves and applied generally to the hands and feet where it dries to a reddish-brown color and gradually fades away.

2. Andrew Ross, "Tribalism in Effect," in *On Fashion*, edited by Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 289.

3. David Howes, "Introduction: Commodities and Cultural Borders," in *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities*, edited by David Howes (London: Routledge, 1996), 6.

4. Daniel Miller, "Consumption as the Vanguard of History," in *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies*, edited by Daniel Miller (London: Routledge, 1995), 30.

5. Howes, "Introduction," 2.

6. Ibid.

7. Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things*, edited by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 26-27.

8. Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); and Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999).

9. For a discussion of appropriation as a "multidirectional phenomenon," see Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, "Introduction to Cultural Appropriation: A Framework for Analysis," in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, edited by Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 5.

10. Maggie Andrews and Rosie Whorlow, "Girl Power and the Postmodern Fan: The 1996 Boyzone Concert Tour," in *All the World and Her Husband: Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture*, edited by Maggie Andrews and Rosie Whorlow (London: Cassell, 2000), 253-66; Carol Hendrickson, "Selling Guatemala: Maya Export Products in U.S. Mail-Order Catalogues," in Howes, *Cross-Cultural Consumption*, 106-21; and Deborah Root, "White Indians": Appropriation and the Politics of Display," in Ziff and Rao, *Borrowed Power*, 31-51.

11. Clearly, there are complex cases of cultural appropriation that involve legal questions and state policies of cultural ownership and property rights, privacy and representation, as in the many cases involving commodification of objects, images, and rituals of native peoples in the U.S. and Canada; cultural appropriation in these instances necessarily invokes boundaries between colonizer and colonized, but also shows how the notions of culture enshrined in the law may conflict sharply with the assumptions of those whose expressions are being commodified. David Howes, "Cultural Appropriation and Resistance in the American Southwest: Decommodifying 'Indianness,'" in Howes, *Cross-Cultural Consumption*, 138-60.

12. Miller, "Consumption," 34.

13. Sunaina Maira, "Chaste Identities, Ethnic Yearnings: Second-Generation Indian Americans In New York City," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1998; and "Identity Dub: The Paradoxes of an Indian American Subculture (New York Mix)," *Cultural Anthropology* 14:1 (1999): 29-60.

14. I use the term "second-generation" to refer to the children of immigrants who were born in the U.S. or who arrived here before the age of seven or eight years.

15. John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts, "Subcultures, Cultures, and Class," in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchinson, 1976), 9-74; Robin D. G. Kelley, "Looking to Get Paid: How Some Black Youth Put Culture to Work," in *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 43-77; Lauraine Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Angela McRobbie (ed.), *Back to Reality? Social Experience and Cultural Studies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1994); and Livio Sansone, "The Making of a Black Youth Culture: Lower-Class Young Men of Surinamese Origin in Amsterdam" in *Youth Cultures: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Vered Amit-Talai and Helena Wulff (London: Routledge, 1995).

16. Clarke et al., "Subcultures." The term "subculture" refers to a social group that is distinguished by age or generation, but theorists of youth subcultures also note that the category of "youth" is one that is socially and culturally constructed, and has often been the focus of debates over social control as well as a marketing principle for the music and fashion industries.

17. Ibid., 16.

18. Tricia Rose, "A Style Nobody Can Deal with: Politics, Style and the Postindustrial City in Hip Hop," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, edited by Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 71-88; and Rose, *Black Noise*, 82.

19. Stanley Cohen, "Symbols of trouble," in *The Subcultures Reader*, edited by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), 149-62; and Simon Frith, "The Cultural Study of Popular Music," in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 174-96. Angela McRobbie, in "New Times in Cultural Studies" in her *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 39, cautions against the "dangers of pursuing a kind of cultural populism to a point at which anything which is consumed and is popular is also seen as oppositional." Feminist critiques point out that the early studies of the Birmingham school de-emphasized, or even mis-interpreted, the role of women and girls, focusing instead on male, working-class youth and portraying females as more passive or identified with the "mainstream." See Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen* (London: Macmillan, 1991); and Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

20. For more on the politics of authenticity in the second generation, see Randolph Arguelles, "Alibata Tattoos: Filipino Americans and the Search for Indigenous Filipino Culture," paper presented at the Public Displays of Asianness Conference, New York University, November 1998; and Maira, "Chaste Identities."

21. Martin Stokes, "Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity, and Music," in *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music*, edited by Martin Stokes (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 3.

22. There are "Indian parties," held outside Manhattan as well, such as on campuses in New Jersey and Long Island where there are large South Asian student populations. Manhattan, however, provides a particular context for desi parties because of the presence of city clubs, such as the Madison or S.O.B.'s (Sounds of Brazil) that draw large droves of South Asian American youth, who get down to the beats of bhangra.

23. According to the 1990 Census, New York City had 94,590 Indian residents of a total of 815,447 in the U.S. Madhulika S. Khandelwal, "Indian Immigrants in Queens, New York City: Patterns of Spatial Concentration and Distribution, 1965-1990," in *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, edited by Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 180.
24. Peter Christenson and Donald Roberts, *It's Not Only Rock & Roll: Popular Music in the Lives of Adolescents* (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1998), 111.
25. Somini Sengupta, "To Be Young, Indian, and Hip: Hip-Hop Meets Hindi Pop as a New Generation of South Asians Finds Its Own Groove," *New York Times*, June 30 1996, section 13, p. 1.
26. On "cultural tourism," see Christenson and Roberts, *It's Not Only Rock & Roll*, 111; and David Roediger, "What to Make of Wiggers: A Work In Progress," in *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America*, edited by Joe Austin and Michael N. Willard (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 361-62.
27. Roediger, "What to Make of Wiggers," 359, 361.
28. Sunaina Maira, "Desis Reprazent: Bhangra Remix and Hip Hop in New York City," *Postcolonial Studies* 1:3 (1998): 357-70; and Oliver Wang, "Big Yellow Knuckles: The Cultural Politics of Asian American Hip Hop," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian American Studies, Seattle, 1997.
29. Christenson and Roberts, *It's Not Only Rock & Roll*, 111; Kelley, "How Some Black Youth"; and Rose, *Black Noise*.
30. Thornton, *Club Cultures*.
31. *Ibid.*, 10-12.
32. Koushik Banerjea and Partha Banerjea, "Psyche and Soul: A View from the 'South,'" in *Dis-orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*, edited by Sanjay Sharma, John Huntyk, and Ashwani Sharma (London: Zed Press, 1996), 105-24; and Stuart Hall, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996).
33. Maira, "Identity Dub."
34. Cited in Henry A. Giroux, "White Panic and the Racial Coding of Violence," in *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth*, edited by Henry Giroux (New York: Routledge, 1996), 27-54.
35. Maira, "Identity Dub."
36. Ian Skoggard, "Transnational Commodity Flows and the Global Phenomenon of the Brand," in *Consuming Fashion: Adorning the Transnational Body*, edited by Anne Brydon and Sandra Niessen (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 57-70.
37. Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).
38. Daniel Miller, "Consumption as the Vanguard of History," in *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies*, edited by Daniel Miller (London: Routledge, 1995), 21, 19.
39. Rose, *Black Noise*; Kelley, "How Some Black Youth"; and Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin, 1998).
40. Somini Sengupta, conversation with author, New York, 1997.

41. Hall, "What Is This 'Black'"; Perry A. Hall, "African American Music: Dynamics of Appropriation and Innovation" in Ziff and Rao, *Borrowed Power*, 31-51; and Steven Feld, "Notes on World Beat," *Public Culture Bulletin* 1:1 (Fall 1988): 31-37.
42. Christenson and Roberts, *It's Not Only Rock & Roll*; N. R. Kleinfeld, "Guarding the Borders of the Hip-Hop Nation," *New York Times*, July 6, 2000, A1.
43. Dorinne Kondo, "Bad Girls: Theater, Women of Color, and the Politics of Representation," in *Women Writing Culture*, edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 53.
44. Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 62.
45. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.
46. These ethnicizing moves reflect broader patterns of emphasizing ethnicity by some segments of the Indian American community, which are viewed by critics as attempts to position Indian Americans outside the racial classification in the U.S. and deflect identification with less privileged minority groups of color. See Rosemary Marangoly George, "From Expatriate Aristocrat to Immigrant Nobody': South Asian Racial Strategies in the Southern Californian Context," *Diaspora* 6:1 (Spring 1997): 31-60; Sucheta Mazumdar, "Racist Responses to Racism: The Aryan Myth and South Asians in the United States," *South Asia Bulletin* 9:1 (1989): 47-55; and Kamala Visweswaran, "Diaspora by Design: Flexible Citizenship and South Asians in U.S. Racial Formations," *Diaspora* 6:1 (Spring 1997): 5-29.
47. Maira, "Chaste Identities"; and "Identity Dub."
48. Amritjit Singh, "African Americans and the New Immigrants," in *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*, edited by Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 93-110; Maira, "Desis Reprazent"; and Sunaina Maira, "The Politics of 'Cool': Indian American Youth Culture in New York City," in *Encounters: People of Asian Descent in the Americas*, edited by Roshni Rustomji-Kerns (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 177-93.
49. George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London: Verso, 1994), 55.
50. Peter Stallybrass, and Allon White, *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 19.
51. Somini Sengupta, "The New Indo Chic," *New York Times*, August 30 1997, The Arts, 13, 19.
52. Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).
53. Bindis are decorative dots worn between the eyebrows; in contemporary India they are not "worn only by women of the Hindu faith who are not widowed" but by all women regardless of age and religion. Meenakshi G. Durham, "Effing the Ineffable: U.S. Media and Images of Asian Femininity," in *Asian Pacific American Genders and Sexualities*, edited by Thomas K. Nakayama (Tempe: Arizona State University, 1999), 77.
54. Sumita Batra, *The Art of Mehndi* (New York: Penguin Studio, 1999).
55. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 6.
56. I managed to contact Loretta Roome but she was unfortunately unavailable for an interview.
57. The American Museum of Natural History in New York opened an exhibit, "Body Art: Marks of Identity," in fall 1999 that featured a video of a "henna party" organized by the Mehndi Project in Greenwich Village. More

suggestively, the museum strategically arranged an area for the sale of henna kits and clothing with henna motifs (some under the label of the Museum itself). Clearly, this area demonstrated what the exhibit itself did not articulate as clearly in its U.S.-focused section, that body art in the U.S. is not just about subcultural "tribes," but about commercial and material practices that appeal to particular segments of the population in regionally, racially, gendered, and class-specific ways.

58. Marianna Torgovnick, cited in Hendrickson, "Selling Guatemala," 107.

59. Carine Fabius, *Mehndi: The Art of Henna Body Painting* (New York: Three Rivers, 1998), 32.

60. Staci Sturrock, "Glitter is So Yesterday: Bindi is Hot Fad Today," *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, December 9, 1999. This was followed by a list of bindi do's and don'ts ("don't wear bindis below the neck"), an instance of style "policing" that signifies that the trend has become mainstream and has produced yet another American fashion accessory.

61. Thornton, *Club Cultures*; and Simon Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

62. Simon Reynolds, "Trance International," *Spin*, June 2000, 106-12.

63. Naresh Fernandes, "Goa Trance," *Man's World*, June 2000; and Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 175-76. For a satirical take on Goa trance and transcendental tourism, see Raminder Kaur, "Parking the Snout in Goa," in *Travel Worlds: Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics*, edited by Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk (London: Zed Books, 1999), 155-72.

64. Cited in Fernandes, "Goa Trance."

65. *Ibid.*, 90.

66. Loretta Roome, *Mehndi: The Timeless Art of Henna Painting* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), 130; and Fabius, *Mehndi*, 34.

67. Joni [pseud.], interview by author, Northampton, Massachusetts, March 6, 2000.

68. While all the women who model henna for Reena seem to be White, it is Reena's gaze that frames the shots. The film also captures the contest of cultural authenticity waged through henna when Reena's older sister, presumably more "traditionally" Indian, corrects the Om symbol Reena is drawing on a customer's arm. The film humorously challenges notions of authentic Indian femininity, conventional family structures, and the desire of diasporic Indians to reproduce rituals for reassurance.

69. The population of Northampton was 30,898 in 1998. Annual City Census, Northampton Board of Registrars. According to the 1990 Federal Census, black residents constituted 1.8 percent of the total population, Native Americans 0.2 percent, Asian/Pacific Americans 2.9 percent, and Latinos 4.1 percent. Data courtesy of the Northampton Board of Registrars.

70. May Joseph, *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 129.

71. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 41.

72. The controversial photograph of the actor Mike Myers (of Austin Powers fame) in *Vanity Fair* (1999) dressed as a Hindu deity wearing a bindi, flaunting a mehndi-imprinted "Call My Agent" on his palm and a palm-pilot flashing "OM," sparked a similar eruption of criticism and ambivalence among South Asian Americans and members of the South Asian Journalists' Association. See Viji Sundaram, "Photographer Apologizes to SAJA for Vanity Fair Spread," *India West*, March 26, 1999. This incident followed on the heels of the protest of the use of Hindu religious imagery in the TV series, *Xena: Warrior Princess*; the confluence of critiques of capitalist appropriation with responses stemming from religious fundamentalist or nationalist positions made this a particularly fraught issue.

73. See Sunaina Maira, "Ideologies of Authenticity: Youth, Politics, and Diaspora" *Amerasia Journal* 25:3 (1999/2000): 139-49.

74. Robin D. G. Kelley, "People in Me," *ColorLines* 1:3 (Winter 1999): 5-7. I want to thank Vijay Prashad for suggesting this perspective to me, and for helping me think through some of the applications of polyculturalism. For a fascinating and incisive analysis of polyculturalism in African-Asian American popular culture, see Vijay Prashad, "Summer of Bruce" in *Screaming Monkeys*, edited by M. Evelina Galang (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, forthcoming).

75. Ameena [pseud.], interview by author, Amherst, Massachusetts, February 23, 2000.

76. The struggle of ethnic representation through style is depicted in a rather thoughtful children's story, *Nadia's Hands*, about a young Pakistani American girl who has mehndi painted on her hands for an aunt's wedding. Nadia is filled with dread "at the sight of those hands that she'd have to take to school on Monday--those hands that looked as if they belonged to someone else," a fear that is, of course, at heart the anxiety of having to reveal to her classmates that she is, at least at certain times in her life, "someone else," someone other. Karen English, *Nadia's Hands* (Honesdale, Pennsylvania: Boyds Mills Press, 1999). Henna, in this second-generation fable, has little to do with Indo-chic and more to do with a sign of multicultural difference and of traditions at risk of being suppressed.

77. Naseem Khan, "Asian Women's Dress: From Burqah to Bloggs-Changing Clothes for Changing Times," in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, edited by Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 61-74.

78. Durham, "Effing the Ineffable."

79. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1990), 171.

80. Surina [pseud.], interview by author, Amherst, Massachusetts, February 10, 2000.

81. Virinder Kalra and John Hutnyk, "Brimful of Agitation, Authenticity, and Appropriation: Madonna's 'Asian Kool,'" *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy* 1:3 (1998): 340.

82. *Ibid.*, 340.

83. Thanks to Tejaswini Ganti for this observation.

84. Roome, *Mehndi*, 70.

85. Johanna Lessinger, *From the Ganges to the Hudson: Indian Immigrants in New York City* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995).

86. Somini Sengupta, "United Ethnically, and by an Assault," *New York Times*, October 7, 1998, B1.

87. Deborah N. Misir, "The Murder of Navroze Mody: Race, Violence, and the Search for Order," *Amerasia Journal* 22:2 (1996): 55-75.

88. The history of the Dotbusters was powerfully conjoined to the re-emergence of the bindi as fashion item in "Dothead," a video installation by Swati Khurana and Shefali Mehta shown at the Diasporadics Festival, New York, 1999.

89. Deborah Root, "'White Indians': Appropriation and the Politics of Display," in Ziff and Rao, *Borrowed Power*, 22.

90. Ross, "Tribalism," 287.

91. Roger Lancaster, "Guto's Performance: Notes on the Transvestism of Everyday Life," in *The Gender/Sexuality Reader*, edited by Roger Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo (New York: Routledge, 1997), 559-74.

92. Thanks to Randall Knoper for provoking some of the ideas here.

93. For anthropological and cultural studies approaches, see Clarke et al., *Resistance through Rituals*; Nicholas Dirks, "Ritual and Resistance: Subversion as a Social Fact," in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, edited by Nicholas Dirks, Geoff Ely, and Sherry Ortner (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994): 483-503; Sherry Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties," in Dirks, Ely, and Ortner, *Culture/Power/History*, 372-411; Stallybrass and White, *Poetics*; and Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working-Class Kids Get Working-Class Jobs*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977). For literary approaches, see Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 29.

94. Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 50, quoted in Tony Kirschner, "Studying Rock: Towards a Materialist Ethnography," in *Mapping the Beat: Popular Music and Contemporary Theory*, edited by Thomas Swiss, John Sloop, and Andrew Herman (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998), 257.

95. Lawrence Grossberg, "Toward a Genealogy of the State of Cultural Studies: The Discipline of Communication and the Reception of Cultural Studies in the United States," in *Disciplinary and Dissent in Cultural Studies*, edited by Cary Nelson and Dilip P. Gaonkar (New York: Routledge, 1996), 141.

96. *Ibid.*, 140.

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_asian_american_studies/v003/3.3maira.html