



Introduction

The displacement of millions of migrant laborers, refugees, and professionals from the postcolonial Third World to the First World and the formation of numerous migrant “ethnic enclaves” were among the most important defining features of the twentieth century. Given that currently one-fifth, or 20 percent, of all children in the United States are immigrants (Hernandez 1999), questions related to acculturation and identity are central to the field of psychology. Furthermore, today, questions about migration and the construction of identity are paramount, as the number of immigrants in the United States rapidly increased in the 1990s to “nearly a million new immigrants per year” (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001, p. 55). These “new” immigrants present a dramatically different demographic picture from that of the previous great wave of immigration at the turn of the last century. In 1890, more than 90 percent of immigrants to the United States were European, whereas in 1990, only 25 percent of migrants were European, 25 percent were Asian, and 43 percent were from Latin America (Rong and Preissle 1998). This striking shift can be largely attributed to the changes in immigration laws in the 1960s, when several racially motivated “exclusion acts” were eliminated in order to meet the demands of the U.S. labor market (Mohanty 1991). These new immigrants often must struggle with

asymmetrical cultural positions, racially charged situations, and an oppressive political rhetoric.

In her memoir, Meena Alexander, a poet of South Asian origin, reflects on her ethnicity as an Indian American and states that she is a woman “cracked by multiple migrations,” with many selves born out of broken geographies (1993, p. 3). Her narrative foregrounds the struggles with self and identity that many middle-class professional immigrants face as they try to find a place in contemporary U.S. society. On one hand, historical conceptions of class, race, and ethnicity all intermingle in different ways to shape Indian American and South Asian identity in the United States (Bahri 1996). But on the other hand, Indian Americans have used a particular set of agentive “immigrant acts,” as Lisa Lowe (1996) termed them, to craft their own identities and build public discourses of how they want to be seen by the larger American public.

American Karma shows how the suburbs have become the site for reconstructing and negotiating one’s identity and personhood. In particular, I explore how first-generation, professional, middle-class Indians have been inserted into the racial dynamics of American society and transformed into “people of color.” Visweswaran argues that when talking about South Asian racial formation, we need to find out how Indian Americans construct an identity that goes beyond defining them as marginalized minorities or passive victims. For example, she observes that it is indeed accurate that Indian Americans have been assigned a racial category by the majority, but she also emphasizes that “South Asians have actively negotiated and sought to alter those designations over time. For where there is assignation, there is also assertion” (1997, p. 6). Both Koshy (1998) and Visweswaran (1997) believe that studies of Indian American racial and ethnic identity must examine the complexities, contradictions, and conflicts found in the space between the acts of deliberative assertion expressed by the Indian American community and the acts that position and situate them as having fixed racial identities.

This book describes how professional, middle-class Indians living in a northeastern suburb of the United States understand the racial and cultural labels created by their white neighbors and coworkers. On one level, I show how the larger, majority culture uses these terms, labels, and categories to define and frame the identity of the Indian migrants as other,

and I also examine how they counter these labels of otherness. On another level, I show how the terms and conditions under which issues related to diversity and difference are negotiated in the diaspora. The skin color, *bindis*, saris, food, gods and goddesses, and “thick accents” of the professional Indians in this book become the vehicles through which their sense of difference is articulated by their suburban neighbors and coworkers. How do the participants in my study reinterpret these markers of difference, such as brown skin, accent, *bindi*, or sari? How do they represent and package their sense of difference in the diaspora?

This book, *American Karma*, charts the journey of the post-1965 Indian migrants to the United States. In particular, I show that these middle-class migrants acquired their educational and linguistic capital in India and were remade and remanufactured as successful migrants in America. Although they earned their values, skills, and basic education in India, it was their tryst with America, or their “American Karma,” that put them on a pathway to becoming a “model minority.”

The participants deflected these narratives of otherness by repositioning their differences in the language of sameness and universal humanity. What are the competing cultural meanings that shape immigrants’ narrative of racial difference in the United States? How do these middle-class Indians move between those voices that assign them labels of difference and those that assert their own meanings? Despite the racism and discrimination, why do most middle-class Indians use categories of sameness, universality, and color-blind meritocracy to construct meanings for their racial identities? The acts of assignations and assertions that I examined show that many professional Indians deal with this contradiction by both acknowledging their racial and cultural differences and placing them in the background. How should we understand this contradiction? How do these professional, elite, transnational migrants understand their racial designation as nonwhite people or “people of color”? How do members of the Indian professional diaspora collectively represent their sense of identity? How does their status as “elite” professionals affect their understanding of being both privileged and marginalized minorities?

The strategic assertions of the participants in my study—whether called strategies of justification, denial, deflection, resistance, or acceptance—can be construed as deliberative acts of agency. By agency, I do not mean a person working from outside the system who acts on the

world with a free will and as a rational agent. Rather, agency here is acts of assertion played out in everyday cultural practices in which the agent is both enabled and constrained by the larger political and cultural forces. Through these and other strategies, the participants try to control how they, and others, view their differences.

Another equally important objective of this book is to contribute to the field of cultural psychology by showing how concepts such as diaspora and transnational migration have forced us to redefine the meaning of culture, identity, community, cultural difference, and development. In turn, these concepts have important implications for understanding how individuals reconstruct the meaning of their identities in the wake of migration, departures, homelessness, exile, and the formation of postcolonial diasporas.

We live in an age in which transnational immigration, border crossings, and global media are proliferating at an increasing rate. Discussions about the self—which are intensified by issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality—challenge the grand narratives of the stable, bounded, contained, and Cartesian self. This book provides a new theoretical framework for rethinking how postcolonial migrants maintain, resist, and reinvent their identities in the midst of enormous cultural change and conflict. Acquiring knowledge about issues of self and identity becomes critical in the face of the sweeping demographic changes in the United States and Europe where encounters with diverse histories, languages, religions, and ethnicities have become central to the daily lives of many urban, metropolitan cultural spaces.

In *American Karma*, the concept of diaspora falls within the vision of cultural psychology by offering new ways of thinking about and imagining the concept of culture and identity. I analyze ethnographic data from the Indian diaspora to show how otherness is reconstructed and revoiced in diverse cultural contexts. Drawing on ethnographic methods, I use participant observation and interviews to discover how diasporic families reinterpret the physical and emotional terrain of self, other, and home as they move back and forth between cultural locations. I asked open-ended questions during my interviews with the participants so as to gain insights into how the self moves among the various cultural and racial positions and how the participants negotiate their sense of being both accepted and marginalized by American society.

Methodology: Fieldwork and Interviews

I used ethnographic methods to collect and analyze my data. My ethnographic study was organized around two questions: (1) What kinds of racial and ethnic meanings were assigned to the middle-class diaspora, and (2) how did the Indian migrants make sense of those terms and labels assigned to them? I am a member of an Indian community of the suburbs of southeastern Connecticut and simultaneously have been doing the ethnography of the children and families of this local Indian diaspora. In one sense, my fieldwork is what Visweswaran (1994) calls “home work.” For instance, I was invited to the homes of my participants in order to socialize with them on weekends. But after interacting as a member of the community, I quickly got into an ethnographer’s mode, observing, conversing, and asking my participants questions about their experiences at work and in their everyday lives. I also asked their children about their experiences at school and in the community. On occasion, they responded to me by mimicking the Indian accent or sharing with me their racialized experiences as one of a few brown girls in a predominantly white school. Throughout the study, my roles as both a member of the community and an ethnographer were congenial, but on other occasions they seemed to raise concerns about my mode of inquiring about my very own people. My own self-reflexivity regarding these two roles was not just bound up with issues of power and representation but were also closely linked to ethical issues such as trust, friendship, self-disclosure, and vulnerability. For example, the community positioned me as a member of the Indian diaspora, and I was often invited to various local events such as Diwali dinners, Temple *pujas*,¹ family dinners, *desi* Christmas parties, children’s birthdays, and many other community events. Similarly, some caregivers in the community elevated my position to “our very own” Indian professional developmental psychologist, who is studying and analyzing issues related to “our” own children.

My fieldwork lasted for sixteen months, between February 2000 and June 2001. Then from August 2001 to January 2002, I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-eight first-generation Indian migrants. Most of my participants worked for the local ABC Computer Company and lived in the mostly white suburbs of East Lyme and Old Lyme, Connecticut. During my fieldwork, I socially interacted with my participants at

their homes and engaged in everyday practices of having dinner, talking, negotiating, arguing, teasing, and having ordinary conversations. I took notes and made mental observations, which I periodically recorded in a file. I recorded some of the detailed notes about the scenes of social interactions, and sometimes I made very brief comments and notes about people, their experiences, and my reactions to the events.

Being a member of the community in which I was conducting research meant that the boundaries of “home” and “field” intersected and became blurred (Amit 2000; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Knowles 2000; Okeley and Callaway 1992). Throughout the ethnography, I was very aware of my position as an “insider” and its implications when I interacted with the participants in my study. Critical perspectives on ethnography increasingly urge ethnographers to be aware of the various positions that they occupy in relation to their participants (see Bochner 1997; Conquergood 1991; Goodall 2000; Marcus 1998). Observing such critical and reflexive approaches, I show how the narratives and tales of the home/field were incorporated into the stories and identities of the researchers themselves. Such an approach rests on the belief that psychological knowledge about issues of identity, culture, and migration becomes more meaningful when viewed as a shared production between home and the field, the researcher and the researched, the transnational participant and the transnational researcher. There is now a good deal of literature in anthropology stressing the dilemmas of working in a field where home is situated in the field and the investigator’s social positioning and autobiography is intertwined with constructing boundaries with participants in the field (Amit 2000; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Raj 2003). The theorizing of the interconnections between home and abroad, home and field, and “bringing the field home” stem from the larger debate on issues of method and modes of inquiry in the social scientist.

This seven chapters of this book are as follows: Chapter 1, “American Karma: Race, Place, and Identity in the Indian Diaspora,” lays out the principles on which my book is based and describes the ways in which the Indian middle-class professional community speaks about their bodies, accents, cultures, and selves as being racialized and marked as different. Chapter 2, “Qualitative Inquiry and Psychology: Doing Ethnography in a Transnational Culture,” begins by locating this study in the contempo-

rary debates examining the role of qualitative methods in psychology and related disciplines. In particular, I explain the significance of using qualitative/interpretive methodologies to study the interface between culture and identity in transnational settings. I argue that there now are quite a few groups of researchers in psychology who do not work with the “brute data” approach but instead draw on qualitative methods to study the stipulatory, context-bound, historically grounded notion of the agent and the world.

This chapter documents the ethnographic tools that I used in this study. I explain how I formulated the research questions and how I made the first contact with the participants. I also explain how I used participant observation and in-depth interviews to examine how diasporic families and their children reinterpret the physical and emotional terrains of self, other, home, nation, and “Indian culture” as they move back and forth between multiple cultural locations. I map out the dilemmas of doing ethnography in one’s own community and show why such a methodological approach is deeply self-reflexive and contributes to the growing body of knowledge in the area of qualitative inquiry/methods. Open-ended, in-depth, narrative interviews with the participants provided insights into how the dialogical self moves between the various cultural positions and how it negotiates its sense of simultaneously being in two distinct cultural spaces.

In Chapter 3, “Des-Pardes in the American Suburbia: Narratives from the Suburban Indian Diaspora,” I use the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism to show how migration, travel, and the increasing contact zones between cultures and people have created transnational communities across the metropolitan suburbs of the United States. These suburban diasporic communities are part of the second wave of new, non-European migration to the United States and are important sites for studying personhood and identity. I show how members of the diaspora maintain an identification with home, build an imagined community in the new world, and reinvent traditions and identity as they move between conflicting cultural spaces. I specifically show how the Indian diaspora in the United States was created out of two incongruent histories.

The first wave of migration came when the Punjabi Sikhs made their home in California by working as farmers and low-wage laborers. I chart their journey from the villages of Punjab to California and show how

they evolved from a community of outcasts to a community of landowners and skillful businessmen. I also document the second wave of migration to the United States. This history begins with the arrival of the professional, well-educated, and highly skilled migrants who came to the United States after 1965. My accounts of these two divergent histories of Indian migrants show that the selfhood of migrant identity is intertwined with such sociocultural factors as colonialism, immigration, and the racialized, state-sponsored laws of the host society. These two histories of Indian migration show the contradictory and shifting meanings associated with identity, culture, and difference in the Indian community.

I use narrative and stories from the Indian diaspora to show how these immigrants' middle-class social positions at home, fluency in the English language, and a highly advanced education in postcolonial educational system in India prepared them for very successful professional careers in the United States. One of the aims of this chapter is to sketch the history of Indian migration in the United States to show how the Indian migrant's evolving conception of self is tied to America's discourse about the racial and multicultural "other." This history also illuminates the ways in which discourses of otherness shaped the path of Indian migration and citizenship.

In Chapter 4, "Saris, Chutney Sandwiches, and 'Thick Accents': Constructing Difference," I analyze the narratives of difference recounted in the Indian diaspora in a suburb of Connecticut. I examine how otherness is created by analyzing how the Indian community is assigned meanings of difference. In particular, I use a dialogical model of self to show how the voices of the larger majority culture help shape the racial and cultural identity of the Indian diaspora in the United States. I demonstrate that three types of dialogicality of otherness are created by the friends and co-workers of these Indian immigrants. These three forms of dialogicality—generic otherness, marked otherness, and disruptive otherness—are assigned to them by the larger majority culture. In this chapter, I analyze the stories of otherness and difference from the point of view of the Indian migrants.

In particular, I show how the "brown bodies" of Indian immigrants and cultural artifacts, such as saris, *bindis*, nose rings, gods, goddesses, "Indian culture," "Indian atmosphere," and their "thick accents" become the materials through which their otherness is constructed. The

participants suggested, for example, that questions by their colleagues or friends like “Where are you from?” and “When are you going back home?” act as a destabilizing force that questions their sense of home and their belongingness “here.” Furthermore, I show how the accents of the Indian participants are racialized in their everyday lives, and I examine the indirect pressures that they face from their employers to transform their “thick accents” into “thin accents.” In this chapter, I explore how parents become aware of their own sense of difference through their children’s experiences of disruptive, painful, and alienating forms of otherness. Children often are racialized at school when they are neglected by their teachers and subjected to racial slurs by their schoolmates on the playground or in the lunchroom. In this chapter, I also look at the story of how neighbors pressured an Indian family to leave a gated community by bringing legal charges against them.

Chapter 5, “Racism and Glass Ceilings: Repositioning Difference,” shows how the members of the Indian diaspora respond to their assignments of difference. In particular, I explain how the participants negotiate their status as “people of color” in the American multicultural society. This chapter examines the various types of dialogicality that the participants use to understand their difference. I describe how members of the privileged Indian diaspora deal with their status as “brown people”: How do they come to terms with their status as successful “others”? How do they negotiate their sense of difference at home and work? How do they reposition their markers of difference, such as their accents, *bindis*, and saris? What kind of discourse do they use to choose an identity for themselves? How do they repackage their racial and ethnic identity in the face of discrimination and intolerance?

In this chapter, I demonstrate that the participants of the local diaspora use three forms of dialogicality to reconstruct meanings about their otherness: (1) assertions of sameness, (2) assertions of individual merit, and (3) assertions of universality. I use narratives and stories from the Indian diaspora to show how these migrants use the language of universal humanity and human nature to talk about their racist experiences and barriers at work, such as glass ceilings and quotas. Instead of counteracting assignments of otherness by invoking language of structure, inequality and racism, they attempt to reposition their sense of self as equal to that of the white majority. Specifically, I illustrate how many Indian

participants invoke the rhetoric of color-blind meritocracy to support their careers and their belief that color, race, and class are extraneous to the construction of their identity. In my interviews, the participants gave specific examples of racism and discrimination in India and Europe to show that they are part of human nature and the participants are better off in America than any in other part of the world.

Chapter 6, “Analyzing Assignations and Assertions: The Enigma of Brown Privilege,” provides the conceptual and analytical framework to analyze the voices of assignations and assertions produced by the suburban Indian diaspora. Why do these participants invoke universal humanity and human nature to reject the assignations of racism and discrimination? I analyze these responses by locating them in the context of model minority discourse. I show how the professional, middle-class Indians have internalized their status as belonging to one of the most successful migrant communities in the United States. Their sense of self is tied to the public announcement of their model minority status and is equal to that of middle-class, white America.

This chapter shows how the participants use the model minority discourse to show that they possess cultural strategies to deal with the labels of otherness thrust upon them. This chapter uses incidences from the history of Indian migration to the United States to illustrate why the participants in the Indian diaspora are ambivalent about their racial identity, allowing them to be “separate but equal” to their white neighbors, co-workers, and friends. An essential part of the strategic identification with the model minority is that these Indian immigrants believe that their educational qualifications, material wealth, work ethic, and success at work not only can protect them from being different but also can grant them the same kinds of privileges that many whites enjoy in this society. Furthermore, I show that many Indian migrants want to be able to choose to invoke the type of symbolic ethnicity that Waters describes in her 1990 study on ethnic options.

This chapter uses a dialogical approach to understanding how Indian migrants living in diasporic locations negotiate their multiple and often conflicting cultural identities. I use the concept of voice to articulate the different forms of dialogicality in these transnational migrants’ acculturation experiences. In particular, I contend that it is important to think of

acculturation of these Indian migrants as essentially a contested, dynamic, and dialogical process.

Chapter 7, “Imagining Homes: Identity in Transnational Diasporas,” is my conclusion, in which I broaden the concept of culture in psychology by means of diaspora theory. I argue that psychology should be expanded by placing in its archive those issues related to the formation of diasporas, such as race, representation, and conflict. I show that the formation of transnational diasporic cultures have led to the creation of new forms of identity and community and that this theorizing of culture must pay attention to concepts of race, colonization, class, and power. To conclude, I show how the meaning of home in the Indian diaspora is embedded in dual cultures and spaces by drawing on such concepts as racial ambivalence, acculturation, culture, and development.