

Introduction

WELCOME TO DESI LAND

In 1981, when I was in grade school, I heard four words that changed my world: “I want my MTV.” Now, a quarter of a century later, MTV finally wants me. That is, MTV Desi wants me. This subscriber-based channel that launched in 2006, like a slew of other new products eager to capture the small but lucrative market share of the South Asian diaspora, caters to an emergent demographic: Desis. At first glance, the term *Desi*, the Hindi word for “countryman,” is simply the newest in a long line of names used to refer to South Asians living outside the Indian Subcontinent. Upon closer examination, however, *Desi* marks the inception of a particular type of diasporic, racially marked, generationally influenced consciousness at the beginning of the millennium. The emergence of the term signals a defining moment in the South Asian diaspora, during which a population that has steadily grown is emerging as a strong public presence. As a new generation of *Desi* teenagers comes of age, several questions arise: How do meanings of race, class, and immigration contribute to the emergence of this distinctive category? How are *Desi* teens of different socioeconomic backgrounds positioned in their neighborhoods and schools? In what cultural and linguistic ways is *Desi* teen culture signified and practiced, and how is it shared across generations? How do all these processes shape what it means to be *Desi* in different diasporic locations?

This ethnography examines these questions in Silicon Valley, California, during the high-tech boom of the late 1990s. At that time, *Desi* teens faced the mixed blessing of coming of age in a California marked by inflated narratives of success about Asian Americans and the economic

promise of the high-tech industry. Although they are all interested in success, how they define this term and the goals they pursue can vary significantly. Over the past few decades, Desis have been widely heralded as “model minorities” who are thought to be upwardly mobile and socially integrated and raise academically high-achieving children. Such a stereotype, however, obscures inequalities that are deepening with this generation.

The title *Desi Land* acknowledges these rifts as part of the visible and varied presence of Desis in Silicon Valley. *Desi Land* evokes two compelling yet dramatically different landscapes that both characterize Silicon Valley life. In one sense, *Desi Land* resembles Disneyland, a constructed space of imagination and wonder. During the high-tech boom when I conducted research, Silicon Valley projected a sense of awe and endless possibilities. The promise of technology dangled dreams of success within every person’s reach. An indefatigable spirit of entrepreneurship and prosperity emanated from this industry, and in this contained universe of dreams and venture capital, anything was possible. In this context, Desis established a strong presence in Silicon Valley by forming tightly knit communities, participating in public culture, and excelling in the high-tech industry.

On another level, *Desi Land* is reminiscent of Dixieland, a place of tremendous creativity and talent but also deep-seated racism and prejudice in the American South. This side of *Desi Land* harkens back to the early twentieth century, when immigrants from the Indian Subcontinent were lumped under the category “Hindoo” and denied citizenship, civil rights, and family reunification. By contrast, Desis in Silicon Valley have benefited greatly from postwar immigration laws that have actively recruited well-educated professionals. For these Desis, the model minority stereotype, which suggests that they have the social and moral character to excel in American society, makes their lives very different from their California predecessors’. Beneath this veneer of promise, however, lie dynamics of inequality that suggest that the racial and class standing of Desis is anything but equitable and secure.

Desi Land is located somewhere between Disneyland and Dixieland and is inflected both with a spirit of wonder and enthusiasm as well as immense obstacles of class and race for those who are not well positioned to realize their dreams. The types of expectations *Desi Land* places on teens

and their families, and the ways they are able to manage them, is a constant reminder that the land of opportunity is still one of inequality. In Desi Land, the “Amrikan Dream” stands in notable contrast to the color-blind, utopic American Dream and its promise of upward mobility. In Amrika, or “America” in Hindi/Urdu, cultural difference is fraught with tense intersections of power and positionality. Everyday dynamics of race, class, language use, and gender intersect with immigration histories and local places to make being Desi an active negotiation. Unlike the American dream in Silicon Valley, where every teenager can become a dot-com millionaire, the Amrikan dream underscores the complexity of such a promise for Desi teens whose parents work on assembly lines and as janitorial staff at the same companies where other Desis are thriving in upper management.

Such a predicament calls into question the very nature of success and what it means to succeed in Amrika. The ways Desi teens negotiate the race- and class-based politics at their schools, manage the social and academic expectations of being a model minority, and engage in particular types of language use and displays of materiality are valued alongside, and sometimes even instead of, success defined as economic mobility and academic achievement. While these latter aspects are widely used as benchmarks of success in immigration and diaspora studies, community-specific meanings of loyalty, reputation, style, and other signifiers that elude quantification also inform Desis’ own ideas of success. Socioeconomic background shapes how Desi teens form social cliques and engage in peer-exclusive as well as cross-generational cultural and linguistic practices. Everyday arenas of consumption, media, and language use as well as more formal spaces of multicultural performances, orientation toward school, and ideas about dating and marriage all contribute to what success means to Desi teens at the beginning of the millennium. The ways Desi teens relate to these narratives of success, how they craft their own meanings of what it means to be successful, and how they aim to achieve their goals in Silicon Valley are the core concerns of this book.

The future of Desi Land and whether it can and will continue as it is discussed here, lies in the hands of Desi youth. Their time in high school affects their lives afterward and leaves them differently able to manage the new socioeconomic dynamics of Silicon Valley as they enter adulthood after 9/11 and after the high-tech bubble. The opportunities offered by

their communities and Silicon Valley, as well as their loyalty to these people and places, shape their present and future. In what follows, I elaborate on these key issues, including the development of the category “Desi,” the distinctive nature of Desi teen culture, the configurations of class and community that shape it, and the broader historical and social context of race and the model minority stereotype.

DEFINING DESI IN THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA

The emergence of the category “Desi” is a significant moment for South Asian diaspora studies, for it signals the shift from South Asians as immigrants longing to return to a homeland to public consumers and producers of distinctive, widely circulating cultural and linguistic forms. “Desi” is an inclusive category that supersedes potentially divisive categories of nation, religion, caste, ethnicity, language, and numerous other differences (see Mukhi 2000). Although these important social markers are relevant in Silicon Valley, teenagers also participate in a more unified diasporic consciousness that at times transcends them. As “Desi” is a generationally specific term, teens tend to use it far more than their parents. “Desi” has come into wider usage in the past two decades, and I use this term to refer to anyone of South Asian descent even when I discuss adults or early immigrants because teens use this term.

Desi teens in Silicon Valley encompass a wide range of religious, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds, including Punjabi Sikhs, Pakistani Muslims, Gujarati Hindus, Indo-Fijian Hindus and Muslims, Bangladeshi Hindus and Muslims, and a handful of Tamil, Telegu, Malayalee, Khanada Hindus, Sri Lankans, and Nepalese. My inclusion of teens from all these groups poses different limits and possibilities than analysis of a smaller, more homogeneous sample would allow. Staying true to the definition of this term, I believe, has enabled a rich and varied ethnography that a narrower focus may have precluded.

For these Desis, Silicon Valley is more than a diasporic location; it is a home that has shaped the dreams and aspirations of adults and children alike. While these diasporic residents maintain ties with South Asia, Fiji, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other places, California resonates in their past, informs their present, and promises a desirable future. In this sense diaspora studies has called for a refocusing that underscores the

significance of space, place, and identity (Appadurai 1996; Axel 2004; Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc 1994; Brah 1996; Braziel and Mannur 2003; Chow 1993; Clifford 1994; Gilroy 1993; Grewal and Kaplan 1993; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; S. Hall 1990; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996; Ong 1993; Tololyan 1991). In this sense, South Asia is decentered as an idealized homeland and emphasis is instead placed on local places of settlement (Bhatia 2007; George 2005; Khandelwal 1995; Niranjana 2006; Raj 2003; Shukla 2003; van der Veer 1995; Vertovec 2000).

Desis today are making an impact on the Silicon Valley landscape in ways distinct from early post-1965 immigrants, who felt displaced and longed for their homeland (Conner 1986; Drew 1987; Safran 1991). Studies of early post-1965 South Asian immigrants in North America describe how these Desis settled into neighborhoods dominated by other racial and ethnic groups and had limited opportunities to be Desi in public (Jensen 1988). Although these Desis were financially successful, they nonetheless remained socially marginal (Gibson 1988; Helweg and Helweg 1990). Later studies of Desis chronicle the emergence of a more pronounced South Asian public presence in the form of parades, festivals, social organizations, places of worship, and ethnic grocery stores (Bacon 1996; Bhattacharjee 1992; Jacobsen and Kumar 2004; Joshi 2006; Karamcheti 1992; Mankekar 2002; Mukhi 2000). Although studies occasionally mentioned them beginning in the late 1980s (Agarwal 1991; Gibson 1988), Desi youth have now emerged as a site of focus in their own right. Much of the earlier work on diaspora understandably focused on the adult generation, but studies in the past two decades have turned their attention to a new generation beginning to come of age.

BEING AN AMRIKAN DESI TEENAGER

The complex social cliques and dynamics of style and success of Desi teens in Silicon Valley underscore the obsolescence of terms such as “ABCD,” or “American-Born Confused Desi.” This term, most often used by first-generation Desis to describe second-generation youth, is rarely used or even acknowledged by Desi teens in Silicon Valley.¹ The term reflects Desi adults’ characterizations of second-generation youth as culturally and intergenerationally conflicted (Bacon 1996; Helweg and Helweg 1990; Rangaswamy 2000; Rayaprol 1997). In these accounts, youth

are “American” at school, “Indian” at home, and “caught in limbo” between these two worlds (Rangaswamy 2000: 167; see also Agarwal 1991; Purkayastha 2005).

The feature film *American Desi* from 2001 epitomizes this common depiction of the Desi youth experience and offers a useful foil to my approach. The film examines what it means to be an ABCD, the acronym from which the film’s title is presumably derived. The film presents familiar narratives of ethnic identity formation as a process of losing and then finding one’s culture and connecting to one’s heritage through music, dance, and food. These tropes play out in the form of an upper-middle-class, ethnic coming-of-age story set in college, where a male protagonist embarks on a soul-searching journey to go from being American “Kris” to Desi “Krishna.” Instrumental in this transformation is the good Desi girl Nina, who disciplines Kris in all matters, ranging from the Hindi language to Indian food. Narrative resolution is reached with minimal struggle, and the film quickly restores the proper American immigrant cultural order: Krishna will remain Kris but has learned to incorporate select aspects of his Indian heritage into his life. Having resolved the contradictions that mildly plagued him, college-educated Kris can now have the best of all worlds, and may even succeed in winning over Nina, if he can execute what she has taught him.

Desi teens in Silicon Valley exhibit a far more nuanced consciousness about what it means to be Desi. Rather than finding their heritage while they are in college, they live it throughout high school. Their schools feature a mix of races, ethnicities, and languages; Desis are one of many racial groups rather than a lone minority in a White majority. Indeed, these Desi teens are “masters of code-switching” (Narayan 2004) and seamlessly move between Bollywood and hip-hop, high school and the *gurdwara* (Sikh temple). Moreover, they feel a sense of ownership and belonging in all these realms and are able to negotiate different cultural contexts and identities (see Ahmad 2003; K. Hall 2002; Maira 2002; Puwar 2003).

As Desi teens move among several different worlds, terms such as “hybridity” and “authenticity” speak to their experience but do not fully capture its complexity. For this reason, I use teen terminology for describing their worlds, which I discuss in detail below. My approach is certainly informed by insights about hybridity that address the complexity of cultural negotiation in diaspora. Homi Bhabha (1994) identifies a “third

space” that acknowledges that diasporic culture is different from both original and mainstream culture (see also Werbner and Modood 1997). Along these lines, Lisa Lowe (1996) notes the uneven dynamics of power in which immigrant communities must negotiate the state and society. She asserts, “Hybridity is not the ‘free’ oscillation between or among chosen identities” (82). The idea of hybridity is itself reliant on a series of polarities, in which marked aspects of Desi life stand in opposition to an unmarked American mainstream.

Questions of authenticity surface routinely in the lives of Desi youth. Not only are teens faced with myriad cultural options, but they must also defend their choices in the face of static, orientalist expectations of school peers and faculty about what it means to be from the Indian Subcontinent. R. Radhakrishnan (2003: 27) astutely asks, “If a minority group were left in peace with itself and not dominated or forced into a relationship with the dominant world or national order, would the group still find the term ‘authentic’ meaningful or necessary?” Authenticity draws attention to the unequal power dynamics of those who produce cultural representations and others who validate or critique them. Indeed, when White Americans or Europeans cross borders they are seldom considered hybrid, or if they are, they do not pose a threat to nationalism or a White hegemonic world order (Hutnyk 1999–2000; Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005). By contrast, Desis in the United States are subject to scrutiny and judgment about their cultural and linguistic choices.

Desi teens create styles that defy simple classification. In this ethnography, I use their terminology to describe their world. To differentiate what is fashionable from what is not, Desi teens use the terms “tight” and “FObby,” derived from “Fresh off the Boat,” respectively. FObby does not simply signal all things South Asian while tight signals everything American. Rather, Desi teens continually define these terms according to context. How they organize themselves into different types of cliques, create distinctive styles, and order and evaluate their world defies polarities of “American” and “South Asian” or even “first generation” and “second generation.” Desi teen culture in Silicon Valley is informed by social class, material culture, and modernity far more than it is by generational categories. A second-generation middle-class Desi teen from San Jose is not necessarily more hip than an upper-middle-class Desi teen who just arrived from cosmopolitan Bombay. California is marked by a strong Latino

and Asian American history and a wide range of local and global cultural forms. These teens have been raised on MTV, Bollywood films, and California culture. “Desi bling,” a distinctive diasporic style that I discuss in chapter 3, for example, draws on this wide range of elements.

In these ways, locally defined and deployed meanings of Desi terms such as “FOBby” are a lens through which to understand how class-coded values operate in a diasporic context. Desi teens use the term FOB to index their particular judgments and stances toward a class-based youth culture that transcends a simple East-West binary. Signifiers of tight—be they from Bollywood, California, or elsewhere in the world—all share the common attribute of being cosmopolitan and chic by youth standards. In contrast, what is FOBby could include that which is unhip, unattractive, and generally undesirable from India or elsewhere. Such contextually defined social categories underscore the importance of local places in defining youth culture. Indeed, even a small and seemingly homogeneous category such as Desi teens can vary from Desi youth of other ages as well as from Desi youth elsewhere.² The heterogeneity of this population is reflected in such social and aesthetic judgments.

Desi teens “kick it,” or spend time together in their cliques, for the majority of their school social time. At times, the type of clique they belong to is salient, and I refer to them as well-liked “populars,” studious “geeks,” or “FOBs,” who are marginalized for their lack of cultural and linguistic capital. In other instances, their middle-class or upper-middle-class status shapes their dispositions and tastes in significant ways. Also important are their religious, national, linguistic, and caste backgrounds, which surface in particular contexts. All of these groupings, however, transcend the binary of being American or being “other” and characterize the complex nature of Desi teen culture.

Such dynamics are magnified during high school. Desi teens are invested in staying in Silicon Valley and remaining connected to their communities. This time, marked by various types of peer-exclusive and intergenerational relationships, is notably different from life in college, away from home. Studies of upper-middle-class Desi youth in college, night clubs, or living independently show that they have far greater freedom to explore and express identity (Maira 2002, N. Sharma 2004). Desi teenagers in high school, however, generally have limited freedom and purchasing power and are subject to numerous forms of surveillance. Some

practices are cross-generational, others are peer-exclusive, and both of these together inform how diasporic identity and community are formed. What is shared, what is kept exclusive, and how this plays out in day-to-day life is integral to understanding Desi teen identities, as well as how diasporic communities are maintained and reproduced generationally.

While there is much confluence between generations, teenagers are rarely in complete agreement with the rules to which they are subject. In their everyday cultural and linguistic practices, they contest constraints and occasionally change them in the process. Such quotidian acts, or “micropractices,” as Michel de Certeau (1984: xiv–xv) calls them, underscore the significance of “the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in nets of ‘discipline.’” Micropractices are found nearly everywhere in Desi teen life. Although these less noticeable actions may not break rules or openly challenge authority, they are significant nonetheless. In these ways, Desi teens exercise agency that is circumscribed: their ability to transform their communities is within reach but bounded. How these teens orient themselves to the cultural and linguistic values of their communities, the narratives of progress that abound in Silicon Valley, as well as the popular culture in their lives all shape their ideals of what it means to be a Desi teen.

COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL CLASS IN DESI LAND

In Silicon Valley, constellations of community and class are particular to the high-tech economy at the end of the twentieth century. Desis there actively create and maintain communities that provide social support, linguistic continuity, and contexts for display, gossip, and value. To refer to the large population of South Asian Americans in the Bay Area, I use the term Desi Community with a capital “c.” Like Benedict Anderson’s (1991) “imagined” community, these residents acknowledge being part of this larger group whether or not they interact personally with one another. By contrast, community with a lowercase “c” acknowledges the multiple, smaller groups that make up the Desi community; this is the most meaningful unit in the everyday lives of teens and their families. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997a: 13) assert that such constructions are premised on forms of exclusion and constructions of otherness, and Desi

communities in Silicon Valley emphasize these boundaries among themselves as well as with other racial and ethnic groups. Desi communities are self-selected groups that organize around kinship, class, religion, nationality, spoken language, and ethnic group. Families who form these social groups consistently work to maintain the bonds that initially connected them. Such communities are significant because they are the arenas in which Desis define success, style, and other values and in which intergenerational change and aspects of social reproduction occur.

Social class has a tremendous impact on community as well as everyday life for Desi teens. The ways they orient themselves toward their schools, how they define their values and beliefs, and what they consider to be successful can vary significantly for Desi teens of different class backgrounds. Class is an important dynamic in shaping life in the South Asian diaspora in general, as there can be great disparity between Desis of different classes (Abraham 2000; Das Gupta 2006; Matthew 2004; Mohammad-Arif 2002; Rudrappa 2004; Visweswaran 1993). Such differences largely correlate with immigration history. Early post-1965 immigrants who answered America's call for highly skilled laborers tend to be more upwardly mobile than Desis who came with a mixed skill set as part of family reunification or other measures in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Khandelwal 2002; Lessinger 1996). In spite of these seemingly clear-cut distinctions, class categories are not simple to define. Sheba George's (2005) study of female nurses who immigrated from India before their husbands illustrates how class mobility must be understood according to specific occupations and conditions of migration. Although Desi families in Silicon Valley do not openly discuss class, the unending focus on homes, cars, jobs, and all other markers of wealth underscores the centrality of class in their communities.

In Silicon Valley, as in other regions, class is defined by local social and economic contexts (Devine and Savage 2005; Halle 1984; Liechty 2003; O'Dougherty 2002; Skeggs 2005). I identify Desi teens as either middle class or upper middle class according to the type of work their parents do, whether both parents work, and their parents' level of education, English proficiency, neighborhood, home, cars, and lifestyle. In Silicon Valley, upper-middle-class teens are usually the children of skilled professionals, especially engineers and doctors, while middle-class teens are the children of unskilled or semiskilled workers, most often assembly line workers, truck drivers, and custodial staff. Scholars of social class will likely balk at

my calling assembly line workers middle class, so please allow me to explain.

One of the unusual aspects of Silicon Valley life during the 1990s for this Desi community is the impact of high growth and opportunities during the high-tech boom, as well as the equity afforded by the rapid appreciation of homes they have owned since the late 1970s. Such conditions have inflated standard class categories and complicated trajectories of class mobility.³ During the late 1990s, Silicon Valley flaunted unending reserves of venture capital, job security, and property appreciation. Families of assembly line workers who bought homes for \$38,000 two decades earlier saw their homes soar in value to half a million dollars and more. I am aware that my usage of “middle class” is somewhat unconventional, but so too is the potential for class mobility in Silicon Valley. In any other economy, these Desis would be working class, and upper-middle-class Desis would perhaps not be as prosperous.⁴ That both middle- and upper-middle-class Desis purchased real estate and situated themselves in the high-tech industry well before the dot-com boom of the late 1990s, however, has enabled an unusually high degree of wealth and accumulation. This fateful confluence could be characterized as what Marshall Sahlins (1984) has called “the structure of the conjuncture.” Indeed, being in the right place at the right time has not only improved their assets, but also positioned them to take advantage of new opportunities presented by the high-tech industry. Jobs such as systems operators, network professionals, and other “grey-collar” positions require short stints of postsecondary training but can confer status and recognition in their communities that Desi teens’ parents could rarely attain through their assembly line jobs. Although the long-term promise of such positions is unknown, it nonetheless shapes how middle-class Desi teens relate to their schooling and how class reproduction between generations may unfold. Such opportunities underscore how economies of late capitalism can destabilize traditional trajectories to class mobility and create new opportunities that complicate existing class categories (Ortner 2003).

By the same token, wealth alone does not elevate one’s class status, as Pierre Bourdieu and others have argued. Bourdieu’s (1985) concept of cultural capital draws attention to the types of social knowledge and resources parents are able to instill in their children and how these affect children’s lives and outcomes as they enter adulthood. For Desi teens,

cultural capital is informed by their parents' educational background, occupations, English-language proficiency, and class status. Such factors shape how teens are able to form relationships in academic and school activities, how they conduct themselves linguistically, and the paths they pursue after high school.

Although class background informs cultural capital, the latter can never be reduced to class alone. Middle-class youth whose parents have profited from the high-tech industry rarely gain more cultural capital from this windfall, though the types of opportunities they can provide to their children may change as a result. Likewise, some middle-class youth are able to succeed in the educational system despite not having the same advantages as upper-middle-class youth. Thus, I use cultural capital as an illustrative but limited analytical tool that draws attention to how youth predispositions play out in school settings and beyond. Especially when their Silicon Valley high schools are overenrolled and fiercely competitive and the model minority stereotype suggests that all Desi teens should be stellar students, cultural capital contextualizes the plight of individual teens in the broader socioeconomic forces at work in their lives.

RACIALIZING DESIS IN AMRIKA

Desis have been able to integrate into upper-middle-class America in ways that they had previously been unable to earlier in the twentieth century (Prashad 2000). Upper-middle-class Desis have been able to take advantage of the model minority stereotype to settle into wealthy neighborhoods with Whites and other Asian Americans and send their children to high performing schools; in so doing, they have furthered the expectation that the next generation of Desi teens will do the same. While this could certainly be the case for upper-middle-class teens, middle-class teens contend with a different set of racialized, class-based options. Upper-middle-class and middle-class Desi teens are differently able to negotiate the cultural and linguistic dictates of their schools and accordingly find potentially different places for themselves in the racial order. Indeed, as class differences bifurcate this population, Desis' status as a model minority comes into question. Race and ethnicity are often reformulated at unstable moments in a capitalist economy, though they may otherwise appear to be static, bounded entities (Brodkin Sacks 1994; Ignatiev 1996;

Omi and Winant 1994; Sollors 1986). I use “race” to refer to broad classifications such as Asian American, African American, White, and Latino, and “ethnicity” to denote differences of nation, language, religion, and regional specificities within these groups. In California, as in other parts of the United States, racial and ethnic groups have had drastically different experiences with economic and political success depending on the time and conditions under which they emigrated (Leonard 1992) as well as the variety encompassed within ethnic groups (di Leonardo 1984).

Scholars note the racial ambiguity that surrounds the category of Asian Americans (Okiihiro 1994), and South Asians in particular (Kibria 1998; Prashad 2000; Visweswaran 1993). Much of this uncertainty arises from the dramatic recasting of Asian Americans during the twentieth century. Despite the rampant anti-Asian discrimination during the early part of the century and the atrocities of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, these prejudices have been redirected in the postwar era. Asian Americans were named a model minority in 1966 when both the *New York Times* and later *U.S. News and World Report* lauded Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans respectively for succeeding without government support, by relying on their families. By praising the success of some minorities, these reports indirectly blamed others for not advancing in what was touted as an open society. The racist dynamics that govern structures of opportunity were neither acknowledged nor taken into account (Prashad 2000).

Within the category “Asian American,” differences of race, class, and ethnicity are obscured by the model minority stereotype but are absolutely crucial to understanding the specific subjectivities that make this collective heading meaningful. Scholars have noted stratifications of race, class, and ethnicity contained within this group and how discourses of whitening and darkening have differently positioned those of varying social capital (Ong 1996). Indeed, the socioeconomic positioning of some Asian American refugees from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam can be far lower than that of professionals from China, Korea, and Japan. Youth especially bear the burden of managing a model minority stereotype that not only denies racism and class inequality, but also deters Asian American solidarity with other oppressed racial groups, such as Blacks and Latinos (S. Lee 1996, 2005; see also Omatsu 1994; Reyes 2006; Tuan 1998).

For Desi teens in Silicon Valley, the uncertainty of what it means to be of

South Asian decent is evident in how they align themselves with the culture of their school and with other racial groups, as well as how they are positioned in neighborhoods and communities. On the one hand, it is far more socially desirable to be Desi now than it was at the start of the twentieth century. Rather than having to downplay their culture and religion, Desi teens today are encouraged to express their cultural heritage and display their ethnicity, although in controlled ways. With the support of ideologies of multiculturalism, they celebrate aspects of their cultural background through food, dance, and costume and speak their heritage language in socially sanctioned spaces. Yet when they cross these lines by engaging in cultural or linguistic expression that challenges the hegemonic codes of their schools and communities, they cease to be model and their status becomes more ambiguous. What happens to these Desi teens in school socially, academically, and otherwise greatly impacts their transition into adulthood. The ways Desi teens use language, perform their ethnicity, and orient themselves to the school environment all shape their place in the Amrikan racial order.

All of these dynamics underpin identity politics and processes of racialization. Desis are no longer another ethnic group among many under the “American umbrella,” where differences are erased and all hyphenated identities are made to appear homogeneous and equal (Prashad 1998: 108; see also Purkayastha 2005; Radhakrishnan 2003). Arjun Appadurai (1993: 808) has commented that in the United States, the “right side of the hyphen can barely contain the unruliness of the left side.” Desis teens seek to live beyond the hyphen, be it literal or figurative. Whether they are creating cultural expressions that confound local expectations of authenticity or disregarding the unspoken high school dynamics of English monolingualism, Desi teens seek new parameters for cultural and linguistic expression. Indeed, as Desi teens come of age, visible class differences and racial ambiguity may pose a threat to the homogeneous depiction of the model minority.

In this defining moment, some Desis will continue to seek a place in upper-middle-class society alongside Whites and other upwardly mobile minorities, while others share more economic, academic, and professional similarities with working-class Latinos and Whites and with other working-class Asian Americans.⁵ Processes of racialization for Desis in the United States have been productively examined by studying encounters

between Desis and local populations of Whites, African Americans, and Latinos (Bhatia 2007; George 1997; Leonard 1992; Prashad 2002; Raphael-Hernandez and Steen 2006; Sharma 2004). In the ensuing chapters, examinations of Desi teens and how they negotiate school and community contexts offer a multilayered portrait of what it means to be Amrikan in a transforming Silicon Valley. I situate my analysis of teenage life within these broader parameters because identity means something only when it is connected to these larger social and economic forces. Although these Desi teens and their communities may seem insular, they are not unaffected by institutions such as schools and workplaces. Meanings about them are constructed through media and pervade their high schools and communities. Racial definitions are further complicated by the aftermath of 9/11, which has left some Desis even more invested in separating themselves from others who may be mistaken for enemies of the state. Although much has changed in the Silicon Valley economy since the high-tech bubble burst, the underlying narratives of progress that existed for Desi teens in high school continue to resonate into their young adult lives as they search for success in Desi Land.

ETHNOGRAPHY IN DIASPORAS

Ways of being a Desi teen are articulated through competing regimes of value, challenged through everyday practices, and reinstated by local institutions in the context of globalization. Such processes draw attention to dynamics of power that impact and position teenagers as they struggle with their own ideas about their lives and futures. I regard culture and language not as variables to be lost or retained, but as dynamics that are shaped and reshaped through practice. Stuart Hall (1996) argues that in diaspora as elsewhere, identity cannot simply be given or lost, but is actively constructed. When I discuss the Desi teen culture, I am interested not only in marked aspects of their cultural heritage, but in other elements that are equally important to them. Likewise, I am not simply concerned with whether they *can* speak their heritage language, but *how* they speak it, with whom, and in what contexts and the types of things they say. By contrast, many studies of immigrant youth examine aspects of culture and language in static, homogeneous ways through sociological models of assimilation and acculturation (De Wind and Kasinitz 1997; Levitt and

Waters 2002; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Zhou and Lee 2004). These studies focus primarily on second-generation and “1.5”-generation youth who immigrated during early childhood rather than looking at multigenerational peer groups. I found these analytical categories to be less relevant than the cliques and communities that youth themselves create.⁶

Race, class, gender, and community formation, as well as cultural and linguistic identity, are best examined through long-term, systematic observation in situ. While quantitative studies of migration and diaspora certainly offer some insight into these areas, they tend to distill the messiness of life into narrow lines of inquiry by using statistical methods and controlled selection of research participants. Indeed, they overlook the texture of everyday life in which such processes occur as well as what their findings actually mean to people in their studies. De Certeau (1984: xviii) insightfully notes that

Statistical investigation grasps the material of these practices, but not their form; it determines the elements used, but not the “phrasing” produced by the *bricolage* (the artisan-like inventiveness) and the discursiveness that combine these elements, which are all in general circulation and rather drab. Statistical inquiry, in breaking down these “efficacious meanderings” into units that it defines itself, in reorganizing the results of its analysis according to its own codes, “finds” only the homogenous. The power of its calculations lies in its ability to divide, but it is precisely through this analytical fragmentation that it loses sight of what it claims to seek and represent.

Drawing on this insight, I present a combination of ethnographic participant-observation, open-ended interviews, and an inclusive sample of teens by focusing on daily and longer-term aspects of diasporic life. By foregrounding their own stories and lives, this approach illustrates that being a Desi teen is as much about narratives of success that communities create and circulate as it is about actual material wealth individuals can accrue; it is as much about how teens express identity in highly specific and differentiated ways through their everyday cultural and linguistic practices as it is about how they are regarded by their community and society; finally, it is as much about how they articulate and pursue what they consider to be meaningful in their lives as it is about belonging to a racial and ethnic category renowned for its success.

The community settings and three high schools in which I conducted re-

search from September 1999 through August 2000 and February through May 2001 feature a truly diverse cross section of Desi teens. When I conceived of this project, I intended to use Mercer, Greene, and Waverley public high schools primarily as a starting point from which to meet a wide variety of Desi students. After daily spending time there with students, I realized that my investigations of language use, consumption, media, and, more broadly, success would be made much more complex by including time spent in school. I became especially interested in how schooling is not simply a neutral or external part of their identity in and attachment to their community; but rather, how it integrally shapes them. Especially in the case of diasporic youth, identifying with and being attached to their school may be opposed to family- or community-based agendas (Gibson 1988). When regarded as a place in conflict with family and community, schools can be overlooked as a site in which Desi youth build relationships and worldviews toward the formation of adult identities and relationships. As a space of seclusion from their families, this four-year prelude to adulthood is central to shaping how youth become adult members of their communities. I look at school and community together because they are interlinked; school success means little without community success, and much surveillance about dating and sexual activity occurs through extensive peer policing and impression management in school. Considered together, these school- and community-based cultural processes provide deeper perspectives on how teens become successful adults.

KICKIN' IT WITH DESI TEENS

“Why do you come to school if you don’t have to?” was the thoughtful query posed to me by one sophomore in the beginning of the 1999–2000 school year. At times, I absolutely dreaded meeting teens in this environment. Being an anthropologist offered little immunity from the insecurity and fear of rejection that circulate like airborne diseases in high schools. It was far less difficult than I had imagined to locate groups of Desi students kickin’ it together; it was far more intimidating to actually approach them. From a distance, I watched groups of vibrant teens engage in lively conversations. One by one, almost in slow motion, their conversations halted and activity ceased when they realized I was approaching, and they turned to stare at me walking toward them. Immediately I knew I had violated

some kind of code, for teens simply do not walk up to unknown cliques the way I did. But it was always too late to turn back. Facing a sea of expectant faces, I choked back major queasiness and began to spit out my introduction. Time and time again, I was pleasantly surprised and grateful that I had mistaken their cliquish nature for snobbishness and their wary countenance for antagonism. Once I settled into school, I never wanted to miss a day, because with high school, the second time is the charm.

Being a second-generation Desi not only eased my transition into social groups, but also provided a basic foundation for understanding the nature of Desi teen culture. While teens and their families were exceedingly kind and open in sharing their lives with me, I did not consider myself an insider to any group. Kirin Narayan (1993) insightfully cautions that “native” anthropologists still need to understand and be accepted by their communities, and I soon realized that Desi teens in Silicon Valley live in a world starkly different from my own. Aspects of my background, including growing up in New York and speaking Hindi, Tamil, and a little Punjabi most likely enhanced my ethnographic cachet. Because I was older than them and an outsider to the Bay Area it was easier for them to trust me, and because I am a Desi it was easier for them to share some experiences and viewpoints. My high school experience in the 1980s in a predominantly White middle-class high school in suburban New York with Jews, Italians, and Irish friends offered no comparison to their racially and linguistically diverse schools in an era of multicultural discourse. I had never seen schools with so many Asian American students, especially those in wealthy, suburban neighborhoods.

Some aspects of Silicon Valley community life were quite familiar to me, such as belonging to a South Asian community where families kept up with each other's lives, gathered for social events, and encouraged their children to socialize with one another. My home life in high school was similar to these teens', although I probably faced fewer constraints. I was raised in a media-saturated home, where my mother watched Bollywood films and my father occasionally glanced at them over his periodicals. As a spiritually minded, upper-middle-class Hindu, my mother routinely told me to be less fixated on material things, which no doubt contributed to my complete fascination with them.

Over the course of my fieldwork, several families warmly welcomed me as a daughter, and I called these adults Aunty and Uncle, a common

referential practice in Desi contexts. Aunties spared no discretion in telling me I should have already been married and had children. To uncles, I appeared a bit wayward in the career department, especially given the lucrative opportunities in the high-tech field.

Desi teens were quite curious as to why I chose to base my study in the Bay Area, why their school was selected, and how Desi teenagers here might be different from those in New York, where I lived. After a battery of questions about these topics and being assured that I was not a school faculty member in disguise, Desi teens were by and large very welcoming. Most settled on defining me as the college student from New York doing a report. I was permitted to move between cliques of kids that did not get along, and many teens shared confidential information without fear of my spreading gossip across groups. Some Desi teens conveyed to me that they were not “authentic” enough to be included, as they did not kick it or spend time only with other Desis or speak their heritage language well. Other Desi students told me that they disagreed with researching just one group, saying that such an approach was exclusive, discriminating, and singled them out. Likewise, several of the non-Desi kids I got to know well were puzzled as to why they were not asked to participate more substantially in my study. I found these to be valid criticisms for which I had no satisfactory answer. If anything, it increased my already abundant respect for teenagers because they rarely held back their probing, blunt questions. To borrow their lexicon, they kept it real and expected me to as well.

Although faculty at all three schools were exceedingly welcoming and offered to introduce me to students, I chose to approach students on my own to avoid being regarded as an authority figure, to gain their trust, and to ensure that they spoke to me out of their own will, rather than through the coercion of faculty or because they thought it might enhance their grades. Their not having to compete with me or fear me as a disciplinary figure placed me in an excellent position. I always put their academics, privacy, and safety first. I did not take students out of class to interview them, access their academic records, or discuss information they told me with their teachers, parents, or other students. Such practices limited my access to some types of information, but it enabled me to collect the type of data that most interested me: teenagers’ everyday opinions, activities, aspirations, and transgressions.

The general awkwardness endemic to adolescence made it far easier for

me to interact with girls than with boys. I got to know a number of boys well and even visited their homes when their parents were present, but did not spend the type of extended time alone with them that I was socially sanctioned to do with girls. I was nonetheless able to speak with and keep in close contact with numerous Desi boys. As I completed my fieldwork, one boy I had gotten to know well warmly told me that he and his friends would miss me, and exclaimed, “You were totally like one of us. Not that we’re much or anything. We’re crap, but you’re, like, the God of crap.” At that moment, I felt I truly belonged.

As fieldwork wore on, I sought to help teenagers in ways that might be beneficial to them. I offered to tutor teens in preparation for tests, SATS, and college applications. Only upper-middle-class teens availed themselves of my offer. In retrospect, I wish that I had been more proactive about helping middle-class teens academically. Despite my attempts, we only interacted socially. One possible reason is because middle-class Desi teens tended not to be assertive in asking for academic assistance or taking advantage of school resources and saw my offer in this vein. Another possibility is that they did not consider my academic help to be relevant or useful to their lives. In school, I occasionally helped teachers in classes I attended regularly, such as setting up lab tables, returning papers, or watching the classroom if the teachers had to step out. Some teachers asked me to present my research project to students and explain the process of getting a PhD. In one of the schools, the librarian routinely asked me to promote reading, books, and the library and to participate in book talks and talk about the significance of Asian Heritage Week. By and large, however, I simply sat with students as they sat in their classes, noting how they engaged with their studies and how they passed the time.

There were certainly challenging incidents during fieldwork. Teenagers can be quite unreliable when it comes to making and keeping appointments, executing plans, and giving accurate directions. A handful of students found my presence unwelcome and kept their distance from me during my school visits. Some of their friends informed me that they did not trust sharing their secrets in front of me, as I was there to write everything down and “expose” them. To this day, a few are convinced that I was an undercover FBI agent. One family I interviewed was highly wary of my questions and refused to be tape-recorded during their interview. Teens occasionally put me in awkward positions by asking me to call the

school in an Indian accent and pretend I was their mother to cover for their cutting school, forge notes for unexcused absences, get them out of class under the pretense of interviewing them, drive them places when they were cutting class, or buy them alcohol or drugs. I did none of these things, and in the end, I believe I earned the respect of some teens while frustrating others.

Despite such moments, I deeply enjoyed the time I spent with the youth you are about to meet. I felt their contagious excitement about life, laughed at their jokes, and took great pleasure in their company. I was struck by the overwhelming optimism with which they regarded the world and the boundlessness of their future plans. Not only did such observations enrich my life immeasurably, but they lend color and depth to the topics I discuss.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The chapters are organized around topics that emerged as significant in Desi teen life. True to the nature of the term “Desi,” you will meet Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and Sikh teens who have moved to Silicon Valley from Fiji, South Asia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Africa, and other diasporic locales. Although you will meet only a handful of the teens I got to know during my fieldwork, their words, actions, and lives will directly convey the ideas, frustrations, and hope that they embody. The words and stories of additional teens are presented throughout the ethnography. Family details are provided for teens I discuss frequently, names are used for those who appear more than once, and the rest remain unnamed for clarity’s sake. Pseudonyms are used throughout for all teens, families, schools, and school faculty, but San Jose, Fremont, and other California place-names are real.

Each chapter begins with a profile of a Desi teenager compiled from extensive participant observation and interview excerpts. Here especially, teens elaborate on the complicated nature of their social lives, the frustrating aspects of having cliques of Desi friends, and the difficulties of balancing all that is asked of them. In these reflections, Desi teens often express their exasperation at the insular, dramatic nature of Desi cliques and their desire to find more diverse groups of friends. Such viewpoints are especially telling because they indicate how Desi teens would like to see their social worlds and the intensive efforts they must engage in to form Desi

social alliances. Indeed, although Desi cliques seem homogeneous and natural, they are actually fraught with dynamics of social tension and belonging, making these alliances anything but easy. The types of negotiations that teens undergo with their Desi social circles are not unlike those that their parents perform in their communities. Such dynamics are quite telling of the efforts and concessions Desi teens make toward building a social world similar to that of their parents.

Desi families and teens have established a visible presence in Silicon Valley neighborhoods and schools. Chapter 1 chronicles how meanings of “Desi” have shifted over the past century and how current Desis arrived in Silicon Valley and created thriving communities for themselves in California at the start of the new millennium. This region has undergone tremendous shifts in population, landscape, and economy with the rise of the high-tech industry. The promise of technology, as I call it, has brought the American dream of making it big in the high-tech world into the Desi imagination and shapes goals and aspirations for adults and youth alike. Chapter 2 traces the emergence of a distinctive diasporic youth culture. I examine how this category has come into being, its hallmark characteristics, and its global and local influences. Style is defined through Desi teen culture and emerges in ways of dressing, speaking, and being. Desi teens use their own cultural logic of the world to create categories of evaluation, form social cliques, and kick it with one another. In these social worlds, Desi teens claim spaces in their school and manage the confluence of life across high school and communities. They use new media technologies to stay connected, especially when social constraints in their lives preclude them from interacting in person.

Desi teen cultural and linguistic practices signify identity, community, and success in a wide range of contexts. Chapter 3 examines the types of relationships individuals form with material objects, from how shopping and commodities are significant to teenagers to how verbally mediated relationships with objects enable particular types of status and display within communities. “Desi bling” is the ruling aesthetic of these style-making practices, and I discuss its significance in peer-exclusive as well as cross-generational contexts. Chapter 4 examines language use in diasporic contexts. Focusing on family-based as well as peer-based language use, I present ways in which language use is instrumental in social cliques and interactions within them. More than a way of communicating, lan-

guage use can be a basis of social judgment, both by peers and by school administrators. Different types of language practices, including those excerpted from spontaneously occurring conversations, are analyzed here. Chapter 5 situates Desis among other racial groups in high school. I analyze how dynamics of race, class, and gender are unmade and re-defined during school multicultural day performances and provide a behind-the-scenes look at the complex politics of negotiation that underlie seamless, celebratory performances. Questions of tradition, authenticity, representation, and identity are in active contestation in these forums, and Desi teens must manage competing expectations about the character and purpose of public expression.

Desi teen relationships with their school and community set the stage for adulthood. Chapter 6 draws attention to how discourses of success are constructed and circulated in high schools. Expectations of high performance place great pressures on upper-middle-class and middle-class Desi teens alike and push them to carefully consider their own goals and aspirations in relation to the standard accomplishments expected of them. While upper-middle-class teens manage this stereotype, middle-class teens have an exceedingly difficult time and often fall short of the expectations placed on them academically as well as socially. For these teens, being bilingual in their monolingual high school can bring about a spate of unforeseen consequences. I discuss how youth are positioned in high schools and the ways they conceive of success in their communities, especially in the context of the high-tech industry. Chapter 7 examines how Desi teens are subject to numerous social codes imposed by their families and communities. While these rules vary according to class and religion, most Desi teens are concerned with maintaining their family's reputation in their closely knit communities. Proscriptions are enforced through peer surveillance at school as well as in community settings, and youth who do not want to follow these rules do so on the "DL" or "down low" to avoid becoming the subject of unwelcome gossip. Their opinions about arranged marriage underscore their widespread interest in reproducing the types of communities in which they have been raised as they enter adulthood.

The final chapter returns to broader questions of race in a post-9/11 America, as well as class in a Silicon Valley no longer benefiting from the high-tech boom. I analyze how class differently encodes racial meaning for middle- and upper-middle-class Desis and trace the lives of several

Introduction

youth into this period. The book concludes with updates on the youth, their communities, and the perceived future of Desi Land.

Like most ethnographies, this one could continue indefinitely, with ongoing updates of youth as they enter adulthood. In a postscript, I note a few recent events and observations from my final visit in July 2007. I include these more recent details because so many ethnographies of youth seem to start and end with the teen years. While I am most interested in this time period, the way teens transition into adulthood and how they begin to integrate into and form new communities speak not only to Desi teen culture, but also to diasporic identity and community formation on a broader level. How they negotiate questions of race, class, and gender from youth to adulthood contextualizes insights about Desi Land and the nature of diasporic communities.