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Diasporic intersectionalities:
Exploring South Asian women's narratives of race, ethnicity, and gender
through a community-based performance project

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Abstract

Diasporic Intersectionalities: Exploring South Asian women's narratives of race, ethnicity, and gender through a community-based performance project

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Although South Asians constitute one of the largest, fastest growing Asian groups in the country, there is a paucity of U.S.-based social work literature about this community. Further, professional social work organizations and feminist social work scholars have called for the field to build paradigms and practices that address the intersections of oppressions facing individuals and communities, such as race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, in a global context. Drawing from intersectionality theorizing, transnational feminisms, diaspora studies, and theories of narrative identity, this study explores how a local group of South Asian women construct their experiences of race/ethnicity, gender, class, and diaspora. Thirty-one in-depth interviews were conducted with participants of a culturally-specific, community-based performance project, *Yoni Ki Baat (Talk of the Vagina)*. Thematic analyses, with attention to context and discourse, elucidated important similarities and differences across women's narratives.

While all participants communicated a high sense of agency in defining themselves in terms of race/ethnicity, first and second generation women's narratives diverged significantly in the following domains: use of racialized vs. ethnic constructs, nationality, significant life events impacting racial/ethnic identification, and ways women perceive race/ethnicity assigned to them

by others. In contrast, despite differences in age, generation, religion, and other life experiences, all participants narrated the centrality of marriage as a “cultural script” that produces ideal, middle-class, South Asian womanhood. Women’s narratives illustrate some everyday ways this cultural script is communicated, enforced, and negotiated within families and communities.

Overall, this study demonstrates the utility of narratives and cultural scripts for understanding meaning and self-making processes within diverse communities. Research findings herein also challenge traditional social work frameworks that often rely on essentialized representations of social groups, single-oppression analyses of inequality and identity, and/or U.S.-centric approaches to understanding oppression and experience. Analyses of South Asian women’s narratives point to the need to expand intersectionality theorizing and social work education to incorporate: context; temporality, age, and lifecourse; transnational experiences; concepts of diaspora; and relationships between experiences of privilege and marginalization. Fostering deeper understandings of intersecting oppressions and processes impacting transnational populations in these ways can contribute to more liberatory social work scholarship and practice.

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DEDICATION

For my parents:

Chandra Mohan Nath Mehrotra and Indra Rani Mehrotra

PROLOGUE

In reality, in more than 20 years in the U.S., I have routinely fallen through the cracks of gender, class, and race, of culture, nationality, and sexuality, all predicated largely on binary oppositions that continue to feel unsatisfactory and almost infantile long after I have come to understand them intellectually. My responses to being positioned and re-positioned, of turning my yearning one way and then another, tripping all over myself, experimenting demurely or equally without restraint, risking money, shelter, status, affection, pushing the envelope on all sides, and finally grappling with the immense fund of self-knowledge that now dogs me down every alleyway of action and reaction—all have transformed me into a thinker and writer situated on the intersection of various destabilizing fault lines. —Ginu Kamani (2000, p. 96)

bell hooks (1994) writes that we theorize from pain and struggle in order to “recover and remember ourselves” (p. 74). One of the biggest challenges of this work as a South Asian¹ scholar is the ways that the intellectual and personal experience come together and diverge in beautiful, complicated, difficult, and amazing ways. As a South Asian queer woman whose work is centered in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities of color and South Asian immigrant communities in the U.S., I write, in part, to make myself theoretically legible and to be able to better understand and empower my multiple and diverse communities. Puwar and Raghuram (2003) write that South Asian women academics have “...sought to make sense of their own lives, as well as those of the mothers, sisters, and grandmothers, and found the current frameworks patronizing, and/or unwieldy for discussion the pressures, joys, structures, and negotiations they want to develop a language for” (p. 6). This resonates with my personal, intellectual, and activist journey. I engage this work in part because

¹ Hussain (2005) writes that “South Asia” refers to an “imagined community” that consolidates people who trace their roots to the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka); however, many others also include Afghanistan, Bhutan, Myanmar and Tibet in their usage of “South Asia.” In this dissertation, I will use the most inclusive definition of South Asia which includes all of the above countries; however, it is important to note that “South Asian” is a constructed and contested term that is not used by all people who are from the above listed countries.

of the lack of available paradigms, methods, and discourses to articulate meaningful dimensions of U.S.-based South Asian women's lives with all of their contradictions, fragmentedness, intersections, ambivalence, strengths, challenges, and border-crossings. I have also taken up this work because I want to push the field and discipline of social work to think more critically and in more complex ways about experiences of gender, ethnicity, cultural competency, immigrant communities, and the intersections of identities and oppressions.

I also pursue this inquiry because of my investment in liberatory practice with multiply oppressed communities. In both social work practice and scholarship I have continually sought theoretical and creative ways to articulate multiplicity of oppressions and identities *within* communities, particularly in the lives of South Asian women and queer communities of color in transnational, diasporic contexts. For example, my work with diverse Asian American communities (including South Asian and queer API people) around issues of domestic violence has demonstrated that meeting the safety needs of these populations requires an understanding of how multiple and transnational identities significantly impact experiences of intimate and familial relationships, abuse dynamics, and perceived and actual access to services (Asian Women's Shelter, 2004; Chung & Lee, 1998). The difficulty of finding a way to adequately articulate fluid and hybrid experiences among women and queer people in these diasporic communities has contributed significantly to my motivation to take up the study presented here.

In addition, I have had the privilege in my own life to witness and participate in several arts-based activist projects (based in the South Asian community and in queer communities of color) that have focused on personal empowerment, storytelling regarding interlocking forms of oppression and identities, creative writing, performance, and community change. I have witnessed first-hand the transformative potential of these spaces for participants, audiences, and

the broader community. Such spaces have provided unique, collective avenues for consciousness-raising, healing, and education regarding social justice issues through the creative process and the public performance. While it is not the focus of my dissertation to specifically analyze the potential of these types of projects as intervention or prevention efforts, it is clear to me that such initiatives, and the intensive group process and culture that they foster, provide a rich narrative and social context for understanding multiple and intersecting identities and experiences. In addition, these spaces function as what Gubrium and Holstein (2008, 2009) call “narrative environments” as they create, shape, and reshape peoples’ self-making processes and the potential discourses that influence the stories that marginalized people can tell about ourselves and the social world.

More specifically, in the past 5 years in Seattle, I have seen the *Yoni Ki Baat*² (YKB) project as a powerful and evolving part of the South Asian community that continues to impact personal and community-level discourse regarding gender, sexuality, interpersonal violence, culture, and diaspora. In 2007, the first year that YKB was produced in Seattle, I was a participant in the project. As a second generation (U.S.-raised), out queer woman, I had a complicated and mixed experience in YKB. On one hand, it was powerful to develop and publicly perform a written piece about my own experiences of gender, migration, displacement, sexuality, oppression, and family. Yet, simultaneously, it was challenging to see, feel, and confront differences within the group of South Asian women participants. For example, as a group we came up against generational tensions (between immigrant and U.S.-raised women), homophobia and heterosexism, religious differences, and differences in racial politics and

² *Yoni Ki Baat*, which translates from Hindi to English as “Talk of the Vagina,” is a South Asian women’s version of Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues*—a writing and performance project aimed at bringing voice and visibility to South Asian women’s experiences of gender, sexuality, embodiment, gender-based oppression, and interpersonal violence.

perspectives. Thus, I have chosen the YKB project as a site for my research because of the way that this space functions as a narrative and social environment for South Asian women who participate in it, and because of the discursive and material significance of this bounded and unique context for thinking about the ways that South Asian women negotiate multiple identities, particularly in regard to race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and diaspora. This project along with other personal and practice experiences that have illustrated very powerfully for me the heterogeneity of diasporic South Asian women's experiences and the needs to continue to develop paradigms to understand and articulate the diversity of these experiences across borders, time, and communities. It is not my intention to continue the essentializing, reductionistic project of representing South Asian women, but rather, I aim to use my space in the academy and in knowledge building across disciplines to contribute to "...a new language through which the complex subjectivities of diasporic South Asian women may be grasped" (Puwar & Raghuram, 2003, p. 4).

It's been almost ten years I think, since I came out to my parents about the abuse. At the time, my father said he didn't believe me. I think he did. But he couldn't bear it, and I can understand that. Today, he asks for my forgiveness every time we talk. And it breaks my heart. He says –

Gita mein likha hai - Betiyan deviyan hoti hain. Jaane anjaane main hum sab se paap ho jaata hai. To phir, deviyan se maafi maangi chahiye naa? S_____, tune mujhe maaf kar diya?

[Translation– "It's written in the Gita - Daughters are goddesses. Knowingly and unknowingly we all commit sins. So we should ask goddesses for forgiveness right? S_____, do you forgive me?"]

Every time he uses my childhood name I remember where I come from. I forgive you Dad. Actually I never blamed you. I did question, at times, why me? But then, why not me, I don't wish it on someone else. And whether it was my "karm" or my "kismet," I found God on this path...

Now is the time for love

I know my story sounds unreal, bizarre, out of this world (it actually has crossed into the other realm more than once), maybe even crazier than Bollywood. But it's all true, and I know I'm not the only one trying to heal, surviving, trying to love, and most of all learning to trust.

***Now is the time to speak out,** and to risk being loved for who you really are.*

I promise, there are people who will hold you. The risk is really worth it – to be fully alive and seen.

*Today, I raise my head, square my shoulders, and lift my gaze to yours. **That's** what surviving feels like in my **body**.*

—excerpted from “Now is the Time to Speak Out” piece, written and performed by P18 (from YKB 2010; bolded text and italics from the original)

This piece closed the YKB performance in 2010. I knew when I heard this woman perform that the experiences of my community need to be documented, better understood—not only because of the “gap in the literature” but because of the needs, survival, and multidimensionality of our lives as South Asian women in diaspora. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, a South Asian activist and writer, says that for us, as marginalized people, theory saves us and, poetry is about telling our truths (personal communication, January 23, 2010). I believe that perhaps this research is important for the very same reasons.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation project aims to critically explore how South Asian women narrate and construct their identities and experiences, particularly in regards to race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and diaspora. The site for this inquiry is a local, community-based performance project *Yoni Ki Baat (Talk of the Vagina)*—a context in which South Asian women individually and collectively create and publicly perform creative writing pieces based on their embodied, culturally-specific experiences of gender and sexuality. This research has been conducted with the support of two local non-profit, community-based organizations: Chaya, a South Asian women’s organization, and Tasveer, a South Asian media arts organization. Findings from this project contribute to knowledge and theorizing regarding South Asian women and diasporic communities that have been traditionally underrepresented in U.S. social work and social science research. In addition, as a separate product (outside of this dissertation), from my data I will be producing a process evaluation of the YKB project for the above-mentioned collaborating organizations to help support future program and fund development efforts.

The *Yoni Ki Baat* Project

The site for this study is the *Yoni ki Baat* Project in Seattle, WA. The *Yoni ki Baat* project started in 2003 by South Asian Sisters, a diverse South Asian women’s collective in the San Francisco Bay Area (Makker, 2007). After seeing Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues*,³ a member of the South Asian Sisters, came back to the group and pondered, “What could it look like to have a South Asian version of this show?” The group contacted Eve Ensler to ask for permission to use her concept. Not only did Eve Ensler agree to let the South Asian Sisters use

³ A number of authors have critiqued the *Vagina Monologues* specifically around issues of racial, ethnic, national representation and gender politics. See for example: Basu, 2010, Njambi, 2009, Cooper, 2007, O’Rourke, 2009, Reiser, n.d.

the concept of the show, she actually met with the women in the group to help them to put together the first show that took place in Berkeley, California in 2003 (Makker, 2007).

According to Rita Mehrer, one of the founders and directors of Tasveer, a local South Asian film and media arts organization, in 2006, Tasveer, had an open mic to kick off their South Asian women's film festival. As part of the open mic performance, a South Asian woman from the community read a piece from Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*. In the days and weeks following the performance, Tasveer leaders got feedback from several community members complaining about the reading, saying it was inappropriate, and expressing their discontent that this gender-based, explicitly sexual piece had been a part of Tasveer's programming. This incident sparked something for Tasveer: they were clear that the community needed more education and exposure to issues related to South Asian women's experiences of gender and sexuality and they set out to create this space through YKB.

Soon following that incident, Tasveer contacted South Asian Sisters in San Francisco and began to explore the possibility of bringing YKB to Seattle. Tasveer got permission to use scripts from the South Asian Sisters' production of YKB at the end of 2006, put out a call to the community, and in Spring of 2007, the first YKB performance took place in Seattle. In that initial show, 3 women wrote their own monologues and 4 women performed pieces from the South Asian Sisters. The show was sold out (over 50 people were turned away from the door) and the response from the community was overwhelmingly positive.

Since 2007, the YKB project in Seattle has evolved significantly. Starting in 2008, the YKB project has had a director each year and groups of participants have ranged from 5-14 women per year. After the first year, most women in the group have written and workshopped their own monologues and then performed them. Women from the community also have the

option of writing pieces that can be performed by other YKB participants. Women come together for 3-6 months prior to the performance, meet weekly to do creative writing exercises, write and workshop their pieces, and the process culminates in a series of 3 performances that are part of *Aaina*, a South Asian women's film festival in Seattle. Topics covered in YKB pieces have included issues such as: domestic violence, incest, sexual assault, young women finding their sexuality, arranged marriage, masturbation, body image, intimate relationships, family relationships, son preference, queer issues, abortion, religion, and immigration. Women's writing ranges in tone from serious to humorous and pieces are typically performed as individual monologues. However, some performances have also included poetry, prose, personal narratives, and monologues with visual aids. Most works are performed in English, but women have integrated words, phrases, or pieces that include their native languages as well. The YKB performance is extremely well-attended and typically sells out all three shows every year. YKB has become a very well-known, popular community project that provides a unique space for South Asian women to explore their creativity, build relationships within a cohort, share experiences, and develop critical consciousness around issues related to culture, gender, sexuality, and interpersonal violence.

For this research, YKB serves as a kind of "container" for an exploration of how South Asian women narrate their multiple identities and experiences in large part because of its focus on issues of culture, migration, gender, and sexuality. The women who have been part of YKB have all been a part of a shared environment that has provided them with a space to explore issues that are fundamental to my inquiry. It also made sense as a research site because of its centrality in the community as a vibrant, South Asian women's project and because of the community's desire to begin to document and evaluate the YKB project.

When I entered this research, I intended to incorporate a more ethnographic approach to the YKB project in relationship to women's narrative accounts and to focus more on YKB as a community formation. However, the richness of the narrative interview data, the lack of published literature grounded in the lived lives of this population, and pragmatic constraints all contributed a shift in the project focus. In this project, YKB serves as a contextual environment more than a focal point of the research itself. However, the study here is foundational to future projects that may explore the use of cultural work and spaces like YKB as sites for community and individual change.

Study Aims and Research Questions

Issues of diversity and cultural competency are core components of social work as a profession and as an academic discipline. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2001), for example, has drafted standards that state that social workers have an “ethical responsibility” (p. 7) to be culturally competent given the charge and core values of the profession. In addition, NASW standards state that within the field, cultural competency has generally signified race/ethnicity; however, given the demographics of the U.S. and the larger mission of social justice, cultural competency in social work must be expanded to include other salient identities and social positionalities such as gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, and ability. In a list of suggested content areas that require culturally competent interventions for social workers, a number of areas highlighted by NASW (2001) focus directly on immigrant communities, such as interrelationship among social identities, immigration, acculturation, biculturalism, and reaching out to new populations of color. These content areas have particular relevance at a time when globalization is “a fact of everyday life for societies in the global

north...as well as the global south” (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010) and is of urgent concern in contemporary social work theory and practice.

In addition to the relevance of the aforementioned cultural competency issues to the larger profession, feminist social work has also noted the need to specifically address gender-based oppression in both scholarship and practice. In a recent call to the field, Samuels and Ross-Sheriff (2008) posited that it is no longer possible to attend to gender as an analytic construct separate from other oppressions and positionalities, including race, class, geography, and other environmental contexts. In light of these calls to the field, the justice-centered aims of our profession, and the global context that social work is operating in, being able to deepen social work practice and scholarship requires greater engagement with immigrant communities as well as the development of more theoretical tools to understand the multiple oppressions and issues impacting transnational populations.

Specifically, despite the growth and size of the South Asian community in the U.S., there have been very few studies that reflect an in-depth engagement with South Asian women’s life experiences, particularly across generations. This research project does not profess to represent all South Asian women or speak to the entire diversity of South Asian women in the diaspora. Rather, this inquiry aims to contribute to creating conceptual and practical space for thinking about gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity within the South Asian diaspora that is not constrained by the desire for and requirement of coherence, closure, or easy description. This is in contrast to Western, masculinist, and modernist sensibilities and representations of social groups often taken up in dominant social work discourse. As Puwar and Raghuram (2003) have articulated:

Rules of the academic genre contain and constrain the performances of South Asian academics.... As a result, the “production” and “consumption” of South

Asian women within academic discourses have occurred within a limited set of discourses. (p. 9)

While this project is, in many ways, an exploration of how South Asian women narrate their experiences, it is also an attempt to broaden the discourse about South Asian women as well as about race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, migration, and narrativity within the field of social work in particular.

Based on Freire's idea of "praxis" (1970) in which theory and practice have a dialogic and dynamic relationship, I approach this research with an intention to complicate and challenge how social workers think about the social world as a means to ultimately impact practice toward social justice. Thus, while this study has generated rich information about a particular diasporic community in a specific time and place, one of the goals of this project is also to contribute to social work theorizing, education, practice, and methodologies that can promote more critical thinking regarding diaspora, immigrant communities, intersectionality, and the role and potential of narratives as a means for understanding social life, identity, and experience.

Drawing from narrative methods and discursive psychology, this feminist, qualitative study examines how South Asian women talk about and interpret their experiences of gender, sexuality, diaspora and race/ethnicity. Methods used in this study include: in-depth, semi-structured interviews with South Asian women who are former and current participants of the YKB project (including project leaders) and participant observation at workshops/rehearsals and the performance for the YKB project (in 2011). Given my own positionality as a South Asian woman (and former YKB participant) and unique relationship to the population and project being studied, researcher reflexivity—in the form of field notes and self-narrative—have also been an integral part of the research methods employed.

The overarching goal of the research project is to explore and theorize how South Asian women interpret and narrate their experiences of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and diaspora through the community-based YKB performance project. An underlying assumption of the work is that considering gender, race, ethnicity, migration and how individuals construct their experiences has the potential to contribute to future feminist projects, culturally-specific projects, and community practice efforts focused on South Asian women in the U.S. The main aim and research questions of the proposed study are as follows:

Aim 1: to critically explore how South Asian women who have participated in the YKB project construct and narrate their identities & experiences particularly regarding gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and diaspora.

Research questions:

1. How do South Asian women construct their multiple and intersecting identities and oppressions, particularly gender, race/ethnicity, diaspora, and sexuality?
2. What are some of the dominant discourses that South Asian women draw upon to construct their narratives about these experiences and identities?
3. How does generation (whether immigrant or U.S. born/raised) influence the above?

Aim 2: to explore the role and potential of narratives as a means for deepening understandings of how people story their experiences and construct selfhood.

Overview of the Dissertation

In the chapter that follows (Chapter 2), I will provide an overview of the South Asian community in the U.S., including specific historical and contemporary context of South Asian migration to the U.S. and the Seattle area. I also offer a set of theoretical lenses that shape my

inquiry that draw upon intersectionality, transnational feminisms, and the concept of diaspora. I also present a theoretical framework of narrative identity as a means to consider self-making through language. In Chapter 3, I outline and discuss the methodology and methods employed in the study, including: my own positionality as the researcher, data collection methods, data analysis approach and process, human subjects considerations, and an overview of the study sample. In Chapter 4, I explore key differences in the ways that first and second generation women in the sample narrate ethnic/racial identity, with particular attention to how they talk about race and racialization, nationality, and shifts in how they think about race/ethnicity over the course of their lives. The second analytic chapter, Chapter 5, is a discussion of the ways that women in the sample talked about the ideal of middle-class South Asian womanhood as being inextricably linked to marriageability and marriage. This chapter traces some of the dominant messages women learned about this gendered ideal, how this “cultural script” (Appiah, 1994, 1996) is communicated and enforced at the levels of self, family, and community, and how women talk about deviating from this cultural script. Finally, in the last chapter, I synthesize research findings through discussion, highlight key implications of this research for social work theory, education, and practice, and propose directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

Issues of diversity, cultural competency, and social justice are core tenets of social work as a profession and academic discipline. The NASW (2001) has drafted standards that state that social workers have an “ethical responsibility” (p. 7) to be culturally competent given the charge and core values of the profession. In addition, recent Council on Social Work Education’s Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards directly assert that understanding issues of oppression and diversity is a core competency required of all social workers (CSWE, 2008). Specifically, these professional standards state:

The dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation. Social workers appreciate that, as a consequence of difference, a person’s life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalization, and alienation as well as privilege, power, and acclaim. (p. 5)

If social work is mandating these emphases on cultural competency and diversity from an intersectional perspective, it is imperative that social work continues to develop and engage with theory and scholarship that can support greater understandings of how interconnected systems of inequality operate on multiple levels to impact marginalized people.

In addition, NASW (2001) standards state that within the field, cultural competency in social work must be expanded beyond race/ethnicity to also include other salient identities and social positionalities such as gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, and ability. In a list of suggested content areas that require culturally competent interventions for social workers, a number of areas highlighted by NASW (2001) focus directly on immigrant communities, such as: interrelationship among social identities, immigration, acculturation, biculturalism, and reaching out to new populations of color. These content areas have particular relevance at a time

when globalization is “a fact of everyday life for societies in the global north...as well as the global south” (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010) and is of urgent concern to contemporary social work theory and practice.

Williams (2006) has argued that within social work, taking up a range of cultural competency paradigms with various epistemological underpinnings has the potential to further just practice with diverse communities. While a comprehensive review or critique of cultural competency in social work is beyond the scope of this discussion, it is important to note that a number of scholars from within the field have critiqued dominant discourses of culture, traditional approaches to cultural competency, and the ways that minoritized groups are represented within the field (e.g., Park, 2005; Tsang, 2001; Ronquillo, 2008, Williams, 2006). For instance, using Chinese people as an example, Tsang’s 2001 discourse analytic study investigated how ethnic minority groups are constructed and categorized in North American social work literature. Tsang’s work highlighted four major problematic patterns regarding ethnic categories and representation of Chinese (and other minoritized) people in the social work literature: 1) the trend for social work scholars to present ethnic identity groups as essential, neutral, and unproblematic social categories, 2) “otherizing” clients and adopting a “cultural literacy” approach wherein clients are seen as being members of homogenous and stable groups, 3) negative positioning of Chinese people, and 4) limited representation of Chinese people as scholars and researchers in professional social work literature and a research agenda that reflects the interests of the dominant culture.

The study presented here begins to intervene in some aspects of this problematic representation of ethnic/cultural groups. First and foremost, my research assumes that concepts such as ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality are not neutral, fixed, or natural categories but are

socially constructed notions that serve various social and political functions. In addition, attention to how women narrate their own identities and meaning regarding such social categories helps to elucidate the ways that individuals and communities themselves prioritize, activate, and negotiate their ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality, along with other identities, through language within varied contexts. This approach to considering narrative constructions of selfhood can also help to further new ways to imagine culture and multiple identities within the context of social work. Further, this project promotes a research agenda that is community-informed and conducted by a scholar located within the ethnic/cultural group being studied.

In addition to the relevance of the aforementioned cultural competency issues to the larger profession, feminists within the field have also specifically noted the need to address gender and gender-based oppression in social work research and practice from various theoretical perspectives (e.g., Dominelli, 2002; Sands & Nuccio, 1992). In a recent call to feminist social work scholars, Samuels and Ross-Sheriff (2008) asserted the necessity of attending to gender as an analytic construct in relationship to and interdependent with other oppressions and positionalities, including race, class, religion, and geography. Given the global context that feminist social work is currently working within, the range of intersectional paradigms that are developed and implemented must include the ability to elucidate the experience of diaspora, nationality, and migration as salient oppressions, identities, and processes in women's lives. Broader theorizing that is attentive to global processes and experiences also complicates the way these issues are conceptualized by destabilizing notions of "home" and "place," and contributing to new forms of racialization and identity (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010; Yeoh & Huang, 2000, Brah, 1996, Gopinath, 2005). This project aims to

demonstrate the importance of this approach as well as contributing to relevant theorizing and practice within diverse, transnational communities.

Theoretical Frameworks

A number of theoretical frameworks have influenced the approach to this project and shape a lens for the study. Given the vast and interdisciplinary nature of these theoretical domains, the purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive review of relevant literature, but rather to highlight some of the key components of these paradigms, particularly the aspects that most inform this research.

Intersectionality

As one of the most significant theoretical contributions of feminist studies, intersectionality has become the “gold standard multi-disciplinary approach for analyzing . . . identity and oppression” amongst women (Nash, 2008, p. 89). Though there have been a range of definitions of intersectionality, most consistently emerging from U.S.-based women of color feminisms, intersectionality theorizing is concerned with articulating women’s simultaneous experiences of gender, race, and class as interdependent identities and oppressions (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006).

Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) has been credited for coining the term “intersectionality” as a way to understand the diversity and multiplicity of women of color’s experiences in terms of identity, social location, and structural barriers based on multiple forms of oppression. Crenshaw’s work emphasizes the way in which identity politics does not attend to intragroup differences, leading to the marginalization of women of color’s experiences within both (white) feminist politics and racial justice movements. Grounded in African American women’s experiences, Patricia Hill-Collins (1990, 2000) has also been influential in developing

intersectional theorizing, particularly through a framework of “interlocking systems of oppression” which demonstrates how interdependent forms of social inequality operate together to oppress women of color on multiple levels from the micro level of individual identities to the macro level of social-structural forces.

Given the genealogy of intersectionality theorizing, it is not surprising that U.S.-based Black women have become the “prototypical intersectional subjects” (Nash, 2008, p. 8), or that prevailing intersectional paradigms emphasize the triumvirate of race, class, and gender oppressions. While the theoretical move to acknowledge these interdependent oppressions has been a critical intervention in naming the inequalities and lived realities of African American women, there are a number of subjectivities that are not adequately understood through this theorizing, including lived experiences of immigrant women of color as they intersect with ethnicity, race, nation, sexuality, class, religion, age, and ability.

Some scholars, such as Hancock (2007), posit that intersectionality is not only a theoretical argument but is also a flexible research paradigm that is applicable to a range of social science projects. Building on this position, Dhamoon (2011) argues that intersectionality has the potential to push against “...hegemonic disciplinary, epistemological, theoretical, and conceptual boundaries” and benefits social science scholarship as it “expands and deepens the tools available to conduct, catalogue, and interpret research” (p. 230). Much work coming from an intersectionality perspective is focused on documenting experiences of individuals who live at the intersections of multiple oppressions (such as women of color) through case studies or narratives (McCall, 2005). This work has been important in lifting up the embodied experiences and perspectives of traditionally marginalized groups and helped to contextualize and better understand oppression and resistance (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). However, commonly deployed

approaches to intersectionality can often still rely on essentialized understandings in which identity is still seen as categorical, fixed, and/or bounded. Even if multiple identities are acknowledged, for example, all identities or oppressions are still seen as fitting into normalized categorizations (Dhamoon, 2011). In contrast to this, Bedolla (2007) highlights that intersectionality theorizing and research can operate as mode of critique used to examine existing social categories and disrupt idea of social groups as natural constructs. It is in line with this approach that I take up intersectionality theorizing to guide this research.

Because of the specific socio-political history and positionality of the South Asian community in the U.S., and our contemporary global context, it is necessary to more expansively theorize the multiplicity of oppressions that women face beyond systems of race, class, and gender to encompass nation, diaspora, colonialism and other salient social processes. In order to augment the intersectionality theorizing discussed above, the proposed study will draw on insights from transnational feminisms and the concept of diaspora to further contextualize and theorize South Asian women's multiple and diverse diasporic experiences and positionalities.

Transnational Feminisms

Transnational and post-colonial feminisms have served as important theoretical interventions into both post-colonial studies as well as feminist perspectives. In particular, post-colonial feminism has been concerned with 1) disrupting essentializing paradigms and modernist approaches to knowledge and representations, 2) shifting attention to fragmented, partial, and situated knowledges, and 3) focusing on how racism, sexism, and colonialism shape experiences and representations (Kim, 2007). Further, post-colonial and transnational feminisms can be a useful approach in the context of social welfare scholarship as it is often committed to bridging

discursive and material analysis while attending to both material and cultural meanings and conditions that produce social inequalities (Kim, 2007; Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010).

In the western academy, transnational feminism has become prevalent as a descriptor within feminist studies and has emerged, in part, from post-colonial perspectives (Swarr & Nagar, 2010; Grewal & Kaplan 2000). Grewal and Kaplan (2001) assert five major areas in which the term and conceptualization of “transnational” has gained currency: 1) theorizing migration as a transnational process, 2) to signal the demise of the nation-state in the current phase of globalization, 3) as a synonym for diasporic, 4) to designate a form of post-colonialism, and 5) as an alternative to the problematic of global and international articulated primarily by western or white second wave feminists or corporations. Accordingly, postcolonial feminist critique and transnational feminisms have led to theoretical and practical interventions regarding modernity, transnational identities, and relationships between global and local (Swarr & Nagar, 2010). In their work, Swarr and Nagar (2010) posit that transnational feminisms can be defined as:

an intersectional set of understandings, tools, and practices that can: (a) attend to racialized, classed, masculinized, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies, and the multiple ways in which they (re) structure colonial and neocolonial relations of domination and subordination; (b) grapple with the complex and contradictory ways in which these processes both inform and are shaped by a range of subjectivities and understandings of individual and collective agency; and (c) interweave critiques, actions, and self-reflexivity so as to resist a-priori predictions of what might constitute feminist politics in a given place and time. (p. 5)

Moosa-Mitha and Ross-Sheriff (2010) argue that transnational feminism has much to offer to broadening the scope and thinking of social work scholarship and practice. In particular, transnational feminism’s commitment to working across boundaries of the nation-state, greater understanding of the links between local-level-social issues and global processes, and building

international coalitions can all bring important insights to social work practice. Transnational feminism can also promote more critical understandings of national boundaries and diasporic formations and histories so as to be able to more effectively understand the complexities of immigrant experiences. Lastly, these authors encourage social work to learn from transnational feminisms about how to work across "...multiplicities of social identities at a global level" (p. 108). The proposed study, then, aims to bring social work into deeper dialogue with contemporary, critical feminist theorizing through examination of South Asian women's lives through a transnational and intersectional feminist lens which also incorporates the construct of diaspora.

Diaspora

I began to think of the concept of diaspora as an interpretive frame for analysing the economic, political, and cultural modalities of historically specific forms of migrancy. The concept began to suggest fruitful ways of examining the relationality of these migrancies across fields of social relations, subjectivity, and identity. (Brah, 1996, p. 16)

Though the concept of diaspora has not been widely taken up in social work practice or scholarship, across many other disciplines, diaspora has been broadly used to signify and theorize movements of people from one geographic location to others within the historical and contemporary contexts of globalization, colonialism, and nationalism (Braziel & Mannur, 2003). Diaspora has also become a way to address issues of transnational migration, and the cultural, economic, and political formations of back-and-forth movement (Anthias, 1998). Historically, this term has been rooted in the idea of a "homeland" and migration patterns in which communities retain significant emotional, financial, national, and social ties to their home countries (Brah, 1996; Brubaker, 2005; Gopinath, 2005; Puar, 1998). Gilroy and Hall, foundational cultural studies theorists who have written on diaspora, posit that understanding the

home nation via diaspora allows for a reconsideration of identity and disruption of nationalisms (as cited in Brubaker, 2005, and in Gopinath, 2005). As the concept of diaspora has grown in theoretical popularity, its meaning has been contested, shifted, and expanded to serve various academic, political, and cultural interests. Several authors have also posited the urgent need to acknowledge the complex relationships between diaspora, globalization, colonial histories, and capitalist interests (e.g., Gopinath, 2005; Puar, 2007; Wekker, 2006).

In his critical exploration of the use of the concept of diaspora, Brubaker (2005) suggests that despite the semantic, political, and theoretical contestation of diaspora, three core assumptions remain relatively constant in its deployment: 1) dispersion of peoples across space and borders, 2) orientation to a real or imagined “homeland” as a source of identity and connection, and 3) maintaining identity and sense of community in order to preserve a distinctive identity in the host culture over time. Brubaker also asserts the utility of claiming “diaspora” not as a fixed term, but as an analytic and practical category that can “seek to remake the world” instead of simply describing it (p. 12). In this way, diaspora can be used as a means to “think about questions of home, belonging, continuity, and community in the context of dispersal and transnational networks of connection” and has become useful for signifying the “multi-locality, post-nationality, and non-linearity of both movement and time” (Fortier, 2001, p. 406). In her feminist work on diaspora, Brah (1996) also posits that “Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes” (p. 181). Given the contemporary, global, and transnational context in which we work and live, this conceptual paradigm may offer new insights and ways of understanding migrant populations who are dispersed around the globe, particularly within the field of social work which has not yet taken up this framework in its theorizing or applied practice.

Koshy (2008) defines the South Asian diaspora as a “neo-diaspora” as a way to differentiate South Asian experiences from other diaspora models that focus on migratory movements based on traumatic or involuntary dispersal. In particular, she points to the importance of understanding the temporality of “old” and “new” South Asian diasporas and the importance of varied forms of capitalism in determining modes of migration from South Asia over time. The new South Asian diaspora, she argues, has been “an increasingly bi-modal formation” defined by presence of wealthy elites as well as low wage workers. In the U.S., for example, prior to the 1980s, most of the South Asian migrants coming to the U.S. were professionals (such as engineers and doctors) and after the 1980s the community has diversified in terms of class to include a greater number of people working in the service sector, such as cab drivers and restaurant workers. It is important to note that the organizing rubric of “South Asian diaspora” uses a regional political identity that encompasses a range of diasporic formations that have not necessarily imagined themselves in these terms (Koshy, 2008). Considering the South Asian diaspora, however, provides a useful entry point for investigating questions of essentialism and nation-centeredness of prevailing models in ethnic and race studies, the role of the nation-state and transnational social formations within globalization, and issues of culture and community (Koshy, 2008).

Despite its potential as an analytic, Anthias (1998) also points out some of the shortcomings of diaspora as a paradigm as she writes:

The concept of diaspora, while focusing on transnational processes and commonalities, does so by deploying a notion of ethnicity which privileges the point of “origin” in constructing identity and solidarity. In the process it also fails to examine trans-ethnic commonalities and relations and does not adequately pay attention to differences of gender and class. (p. 558)

Related to this critique, a number of scholars have asked more specific questions of the relationship between gender and diaspora. For example, Camp and Thomas (2008) posit a number of critical questions to feminist scholars such as: what does it mean to theorize diaspora in an explicitly feminist frame? How do we continue to interrogate the masculinist assumptions embedded in thinking about diaspora and diasporic formations? How do we think about the external and internal power dynamics of diaspora—including racialization and gender? In its attention to how South Asian women understand and narrate their experiences and meanings regarding migration, gender and sexuality, the project here aims to contribute to thinking about these critical questions of gender and diaspora within the context of social work. Following the work of Bhatia (2007), I use the concept of diaspora as an “interpretive and heuristic device for analyzing concepts of identity, self, community, and belonging in an Indian migrant community” (p. 75). I also posit that the construct of diaspora has utility for expanding social work’s conceptualization of migrant groups within a contemporary and historical context. Much work on diaspora focuses on macro-level analyses. However, in this study, I assume the utility of personal narratives as a way to understand South Asian women’s diasporic and gendered self-making processes. I take the position that understanding diaspora and transnationalism involves not only the macro analysis of global capital, media, and technologies but also the “intimate”—the everyday lives and narratives of social relationships, lived experiences, and embodied practices that make up the lives of individuals and communities (Lamb, 2002).

Narrative Identity

Identity is no longer who am I? but when, where, how am I?: There is not real me to return to, no whole self that synthesizes the woman, the woman of color, and the writer; there are, instead, diverse recognitions of the self that through difference, and unfinished, contingent, arbitrary closures that make possible both politics and identity. —Minh-ha (1989, p. 157)

In recent years, following the “narrative turn” in the social sciences, across disciplines and various qualitative research approaches, the view that stories shape and constitute selves and identities is being widely taken up (e.g., Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Gubrium & Holstein, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Josselson & Lieblich, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1988; Reissman, 1993; Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Somers, 1994). Narrative practice most often shares a commitment to viewing self and identity not in essentialist terms, but as complex, multidimensional and embedded in social, historical, political and cultural contexts (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Gubrium & Holstein, 1998, 2008, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1988). Despite this shared view that stories, broadly speaking, are salient to the construction, expression, and/or constitution of plural selves and identities, it is important to note that within this realm there is a wide range of perspectives, often varying by disciplinary perspective and epistemology.

In a review of narrative perspectives on identity and construction of the self, Smith and Sparkes (2008) propose that the biggest differences between approaches to understanding the relationship between narrative, self, and identity center on the extent to which an approach focuses on the individual as opposed to the social-relational-structural aspects of identity. Based on their framework, for this study I take up what Smith and Sparkes (2008) term the “storied resource perspective” on self and identity. In this view, stories are not simply seen as cognitive experiences or transparent expressions of an internal self, but are understood as social actions that achieve particular goals in a given context. Identities, in this framework, are externally imposed by social structures while simultaneously contested and claimed by an individual. This approach emphasizes the ways that self and identity are socially situated and mediated by the social and cultural context in which they are performed.

With serious attention paid to the relational and social context, in this view, people are still seen to have some agency about which story gets told, and when and why stories are told. Gubrium & Holstein (1999, 2008, 2009; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) note that this perspective on narrative identity allows for a meeting of both agency and structure as it avoids the dichotomy of understanding personal narratives as either completely individually constructed (based on individual agency and inner world) or as solely reflections of the social structure. Gubrium and Holstein (1998) highlight that it is the discontinuities between the bigger cultural narratives and the way those storylines are narratively applied by the individual, that signal the moments when narrative, social structure and active storytellers meet. Vila (1997), in his work with narrative identity with Mexican migrants, for example, writes that classification systems, such as ethnic categories, become a cultural marker that are part of the larger set of discourses that individual storytellers have access to in constructing their self-narratives. In addition, Vila's (1997) writing elucidates the ways that each social position that someone occupies is a "space of struggle about the meaning of such a position" (p. 150).

Tsang's (2001) writing on ethnic identity representation in social work argues that the practice of representing identity and ethnic groups as essential, fixed, and stable—having unequivocal and universal meanings that transcend historical and cultural boundaries—is very common in dominant social work discourses. Taking up a narrative perspective on identity for the purposes of this project, then, provides an intervention into how social work considers identity and experience, which is most often from an internal or psychological perspective that is embedded in dominant discourses of identity. Further, narrative approaches to identity have the potential to contribute further to understanding how people negotiate multiple identities through their stories and how such narratives of the self are contextual social actions. Anthias (2002)

argues that identity, as it is generally examined, has limited heuristic value, as it focuses on identity as a something that is possessed by individuals as opposed to focusing on context, meaning, and practice. However, she asserts that a narrative account tells a story about how we place ourselves in terms of social life in relationship to gender, class, ethnicity, race, at a specific point in time and space, and, as such, narratives are valuable for understanding the stories that individuals tell about their collective sense of belonging and location (Anthias, 2002). Little work has been done to better understand the individual and/or collective narratives of social life of South Asians living in the U.S. This project, then, using the frameworks outlined above, is an exploration of how this particular diasporic community of women understands and narrates their selfhood that is a contribution to and intervention into social work research.

South Asian Immigrants in the U.S. and Seattle

Hussain (2005) writes that the term South Asia' refers to an "imagined community" that consolidates people who trace their roots to the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka); however, many others also include Afghanistan, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Tibet in their usage of "South Asia." For the purposes of this study, I use the most inclusive definition of South Asia which includes all of the above countries, largely because that is the framework of the YKB project—the "container" of my research sample. It is important to note, however, that "South Asian" is a constructed and contested term that is not used by all people who are from the above listed countries. In addition, the construct of "South Asian" has been critiqued as being a term that collapses the diversity and power issues within this regional grouping, particularly in regard to nationality, language, and religion (Islam, 1993). Hegemonic constructions of South Asian generally center Indian, Hindu, middle-class, higher caste, heterosexual people and communities. For the most part, the sample in this study represents this

dominant group of South Asians. However, given that this is the term that YKB (and affiliated community organizations) uses to define its scope, and that many of the women also utilized this signifier, I have used it as a primary definition in this work. In addition, Shukla (2001) underscores the potential of the construct of South Asian as she writes "...the grouping of South Asian itself...constructs a highly provisional language, creates a kind of theory itself, for seeing how people see themselves as part of broader social formations" and that the "...obvious constructedness itself of South Asian diasporas allows for interesting possibilities, for alliances and allegiances across national boundaries that help us create new conceptual models for the complex renderings of affect and experience" (p. 553).

Currently in the United States, South Asians, numbering approximately 3.4 million people, constitute one of the largest and fastest growing Asian populations in the U.S. Eighty percent of the South Asian population in the U.S. is of Indian descent, making them the 3rd largest Asian group in the country, followed by Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Nepalis, and Bhutanese people (South Asian Americans Leading Together [SAALT], 2012). The South Asian community is extremely heterogeneous in terms of religion, national origin, immigration history and generation, caste background, languages spoken, and a host of other factors. Over 75% of the South Asian population in the U.S. is estimated to have been born outside of the U.S., highlighting that a large percentage of this community consists of first generation (or immigrant) people in this country (SAALT, n.d.).

In terms of growth of South Asians in the U.S., Seattle has been one of the metro areas with the fastest and most significant population growth of South Asians. For example, according to the U.S. Census, it is estimated that the number of South Asians in King County increased 650% between 1990 and 2000 from about 5000 to 30,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990,

2000). From 2000 to 2010, the South Asian community grew by 173%, making it one of the U.S. cities with the most growth of South Asian population in the last decade (SAALT, 2012). Seattle, along with other west coast metropolitan areas (such as the San Francisco Bay Area) has experienced a particularly high migration of South Asians since the 1990s due to the technology boom. This wave of immigration has reflected the impacts of global capitalism, limited economic opportunities in post-colonial South Asia, and demand within the U.S. technology field for skilled immigrant workers (Bhatt, 2011). A large majority of such migrants have come to the Seattle area (and other U.S. locations) as temporary workers on up to 6-year visas to work at Microsoft, Amazon, or in other technology related sites.

To contextualize this recent migration trend in Seattle and King County (as well as nationally), it is important to understand the way that social policy has shaped and selected the South Asian population in the U.S. In 1965, Congress passed an immigration policy that reversed many long standing rules restricting permanent migration of non-whites to the U.S. The 1965 *Immigration and Nationality Act* marked an important shift in South Asian migration to the U.S.⁴ In order to meet migration requirements, individuals had to either have highly specific professional skills (that were in demand in the U.S.) or they had to be a family member of such migrants. Thus, between 1966 and 1977, 83% of the Indians who entered the country came under the category of “professional and technical workers” (including primarily scientists, engineers, and medical doctors) (Prashad, 2000). By 1976, the U.S. had tightened the 1965 restriction which slowed down the entry of professional South Asian immigrants but the entrance of earlier migrants’ family members who came through family reunification provisions continued. Thus, since the 1980s, the number of South Asian middle and working class migrants

⁴ For an overview of pre-1965 South Asian immigration to the U.S., see Leonard, 1994

has thus increased and these segments of the population have often occupied the service sector such as driving taxi cabs, running hotels, restaurant work, etc. As Prashad (2000) notes, in the 1980s, “The techno-migrants slowly cease to dominate the demography of South Asian America” (p. 80).

In 1990, however, the H1-B program came into effect with the *Immigration Act of 1990* which also has significantly shaped middle-class South Asian migration, especially in certain geographic regions such as Seattle and Silicon Valley in California. This program allows for companies to hire temporary guest workers with specialized skills (within certain parameters) on 3 year visas, with these workers potentially having the opportunity to renew their temporary work visas for an additional 3 years. This term of employment requires that employees work only for their sponsor during their tenure in the U.S., and the majority of such workers are employed in the tech industry or engineering related jobs (Rudrappa, 2008). Following the 6 year term, employers can sponsor workers for their green cards or workers will return to their home countries.⁵ Consistently since 1990, around ½ of the quota of temporary H1-B visas have been issued to South Asian migrants (Rudrappa, 2008). Prashad (2000) and Rudrappa (2008) have both considered these workers as “techno-braceros”—temporary workers who have been used to fulfill capitalist interests through immigration policy. While not all of the South Asians in the King County area are themselves “techno-braceros” a large percentage are. Other large South Asian groups in the Seattle area include: post-1965 migrants, adult children of post-1965 immigrants (some of whom have relocated to the Seattle area), working class Punjabi Sikhs (largely in the South King County area), and growing numbers of Bhutanese people. Given these trends of migration and the focus of this study, in the following section I will provide some

⁵ See Bhatt, 2011, for a more in-depth overview of the H1-B program as well as gendered experiences within this program in the context of neoliberalism.

context regarding the racial formation and positioning of South Asians in the U.S. This section is particularly relevant to the analysis in Chapter 4 regarding how South Asian women narrate race/ethnicity.

Racial Formation of South Asians in the U.S.

There is currently a very small body of literature regarding the historical and contemporary issues surrounding racial formation of South Asians in the United States. Much of this existing work has been written in literature and humanities and there is very little social science and/or empirical work on this topic (e.g., George, 1997; Kibria, 1996, 1998; Koshy 1994, 1998; Mazumdar, 1989; Prashad, 2000). Kibria (1998) asserts that as South Asian Americans grow in numbers and continue to have increasing economic, cultural, and political presence in the U.S., the need for more analysis and dialogue about South Asian identity and racial formation is more urgent than ever. Relatedly, while there has been a considerable amount of social, cultural, and political analysis of 9/11 and its impacts within various communities, there is a dearth of literature specifically about South Asian racial formation in the U.S. within a post-9/11 U.S. context.

Overall in the literature, the study of South Asian American racial identity is limited and has not been able to encompass the diversity of different migration histories and experiences of varied South Asian groups over time. Purkayastha (2005) highlights the complexity of understanding the various contradictions of South Asian experience within the U.S., stating that “structural integration *and* ethno/racial marginalization, economic affluence *and* social marginality have been facets of these immigrants experiences” (p. 1). Further, a number of authors have emphasized that South Asian racial formation and positionality in the U.S. has been marked by ambiguity, ambivalence, and change over time (e.g., George, 1997; Harpalani, 2003;

Koshy, 1998, 2001). This project then can contribute to the literature about South Asians and race/ethnicity within the U.S., with particular attention to generational differences and similarities in South Asian women's narratives within these realms.

In her writing about South Asians and racialization, Koshy (1998) posits that in the U.S., racial identity of South Asians has been constructed in two major ways. The first, which she states has been reproduced by many middle-class immigrants, emphasizes ethnicity and class and minimizes or denies the historical and contemporary salience of race. This position relies on discourses of "color-blind" meritocracy. The second position, that she claims is taken up more by scholars and activists, critiques the immigrant community for "denying its own blackness" and advocates for South Asians to align with a racialized minority identity. This perspective more closely resembles racialized understandings of South Asians in the UK and also advocates for building coalition with other people of color and marginalized groups. Koshy notes that both positions tend to construct racial identification as a choice which reproduces the "American ideology of self-making and possibility in discussing a social arena where it has been the least applicable" (p. 285). Central to Koshy's claim, as well as the perspective of other scholars such as George (1997), Kibria (1996, 1998), Mazumdar (1989), and Prashad (2000), is that South Asian racialization has been marked by a high level of ambiguity and perceived sense of personal agency both historically and in the present. In particular, given that a fundamental dynamic of the U.S. racial system is the dichotomous racial division of people into "white" and "nonwhite" based on skin color, South Asians are clearly non-whites in this scheme.

Due to specific histories, the ways constructions of South Asians have developed and circulated in the U.S. and class privilege relative to many other minority groups, South Asians have been and continue to be marked by a status of racial ambiguity (Kibria, 1996, 1998; Koshy,

1998). However, Kibria (1996) states: “The racial ambiguity of South Asians does not then stem from the question of whether or not they are white or nonwhite, but rather, who exactly they are as nonwhites” (p. 79). For example, studies of racial attitudes in the U.S. show that South Asians are clearly perceived to be racially distinct from white people; however, there is confusion about the race of South Asians who are often categorized by majority populations as member of a number of different racial groups (Kibria, 1998). One historical account, for example, reflects that Punjabi immigrants seeking marriage licenses in California in the early 1900s were sometimes documented as racially “black,” “brown,” or “white” depending on the applicant’s skin coloring and the county where they were (Leonard, 1994).

Even within the South Asian community there is a lack of consensus about racial categorization. In an early study of first generation Asian Indians in New York City, Fisher (1980) found that when asked, Indian participants suggested a range of possible racial categories for themselves, including Aryan, Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, Indian, and Asian. While this study is somewhat dated, it does point to the ambiguity of South Asian racial understandings even within the community. Fisher (1980) also suggests that skin color and race are separate domains for South Asians. Within the context of the U.S., skin color is how racial identity is most commonly read. However, in a South Asian context, while being light-skinned is privileged, particularly in relationship to caste, class, region, and standards of beauty and marriageability for women, it doesn’t translate into a direct desire for racialized whiteness in the U.S. or in South Asia (George, 1997).

Historically, South Asians have also had an ambiguous relationship to race in the U.S. in relationship to the State. Similar to other non-white immigrant groups in the early 1900s, South Asians sought citizenship as Whites in the U.S. In the well-known 1923 *U.S. vs. Bhagat Singh*

Thind Supreme Court Case, South Asians were ruled non-white and thus ineligible for naturalization and the political, economic, and social benefits associated with naturalization. In Mazumdar's (1989) frequently cited essay exploring Asian Indians early claims to citizenship from 1900-1923, she argues that South Asians' claims to whiteness in this time period reflect the racist attitudes of South Asians, many of whom believed their racial genealogy could be traced to the Aryans (and thus could be viewed as racially Caucasian). In the *Thind* decision, the court stated:

It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today.
(*United States vs. Thind*, 209 as cited in Koshy, 2001)

This attempt to claim an Aryan race was a different argument than the approach taken by other ethnic minority immigrants seeking citizenship, such as another Supreme Court case involving a Japanese man, who sought naturalization on the basis of actual (white/light) skin color. Also notable in Mazumdar's (1989) historical tracing is that Indians in this time were very clearly seeking racial categorization as whites in order to obtain political power and benefits such as the ability to own land.

From their first appearance on the U.S. census in 1910, South Asians have never been considered "white" on the census form, except for one time—in 1970—following civil rights legislation when they were considered white in order to be denied minority status by the state. From 1910-1970, South Asians were categorized as "Hindus," "Asiatic Indians," or "Other Non-Whites" on government forms. Following the 1970 census, South Asians lobbied for minority status and by 1980 were categorized as "Asian Indian." Since 1990, South Asians have been included in the Asian and Pacific Islander category as Asian Indian. These changes produced by federal agencies, like the early rulings on naturalization, "highlights the imprecisions and

contradictions that have dogged state efforts to fix the boundary between whiteness and (South) Asianness, the incoherence that has marked the emergence of whiteness as a category, and the flexibility of the boundary between the two groups” (Koshy, 2001, p. 181).

Visweswaran (1997) characterizes South Asian racial formation over time as “shuttling” between white and Asian identities. Particularly since the post-1965 waves of South Asian immigration and prior to 9/11, “model minority” status has come to define how South Asians have been racialized in the U.S. A number of writers have begun to explore and theorize about this as an “intermediary” racial location used to stereotype Asian and South Asian Americans as well as to pit Asian “success stories” against circumstances facing Black Americans (Koshy, 2001; Prashad, 2000; Visweswaran, 1997). Visweswaran (1997) writes that that since post-1965, a particular “(post)-colonial history has shaped the South Asian’s current mediating position between primarily Black/Latino communities in the post-1965 period” (p. 23). Other scholars have also documented how the model minority positioning of South Asians has become an important discursive and material mechanism for articulating differences and relationships between whiteness, blackness, and Asianness (Koshy, 2001; Prashad, 2000). Central to this positionality of South Asians is the role of state and capital interests (in the U.S. as well as in South Asia). As Prashad (2000) writes in his analysis of how South Asians are used by the state to reproduce anti-black racism, South Asians in the U.S. are here because of deliberate state selection (via immigration policy) that has shaped the community as middle-class and providing temporary labor in the U.S. Despite the intentional shaping of this community by the state, 9/11 has had significant impact on the racialization and social positionality of South Asians in the U.S.

Racialization of South Asians in the U.S. Post- 9/11

A number of scholars have begun to document the significant impacts of 9/11 on South Asian, Arab, and Muslim communities in the U.S., in particular the ways that post 9/11 violence and government-driven profiling regimes created a new racial construct of “Muslim-looking people” (Ahmad, 2004). Volpp (2002) notes that:

September 11th facilitated a consolidation of a new identity category that groups together persons who appear Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim whereby members of this group are identified as terrorists and disidentified as citizens. (p. 1576)

Significant to this new racial construction is the fact that this racial category is informed by characteristics such as skin color, phenotype, name, national origin, and dress that in fact encompass a broad range of racial and ethnic communities. Though often expressed in religious terms and concerned with “terrorists,” the construct of “Muslim-looking people” has a predominant racial content based on phenotype. This racialized dimension means that it captures a range of communities—not only Arab Muslims—based on how closely they physically resemble the racial stereotype (Volpp, 2002). It is notable, for example, that a number of people who were murdered following 9/11 were actually South Asian Sikh men.

Ahmad (2004) explicates that two forms of racialized violence took place in the U.S. post-9/11 that both reinforce a shared racist ideology: 1) “private” violence—such as individual acts of violence and harassment against Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians (or those appearing to be Muslim), and 2) government policies such as: airport profiling, secret arrests, race-based immigration policies, and selective enforcement of immigration laws of general applicability. These racialized forms of violence have been used as a means for racial differentiation—a way to draw lines between citizens and non-citizens in racialized terms (Ahmad, 2004; Naber, 2008; Volpp, 2002). Members of this racialized grouping are seen as “foreigners” and their patriotism

and national loyalty to the U.S. is under scrutiny. Naber (2008), in her ethnographic work with Arab Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area post 9/11, uses the term “nation-based racism” to refer to the construction of certain immigrant groups post 9/11 as different and inferior to whites based on the idea that they are “foreign” and thus have the potential for criminality and immorality. Maira (2008) further elaborates that the racialized violence upon “Muslim-looking people” post- 9/11 calls in to question their belonging to the U.S. nation-state as they become “categorically ineligible” to be seen as citizens. This construct applies to South Asians as a racialized group that has been constructed as the Other in a particular way post-9/11. Ahmad (2004) also notes that hate violence against South Asians in this time has instilled racial meaning into South Asian identity. Volpp (2002) also importantly points out that while recent theorizing about diasporic or transnational lives has been productive, it has also at times minimized the continued salience of the nation-state, both in terms of shaping identity and in the form of governmental control. The racialization of “Muslim-looking” migrants in the U.S. post-9/11 is such an example. Thus, considering the multiplicity of oppressions and experiences of South Asian women in a post 9/11 moment requires attention to the political processes that undergird their racialization in the U.S. Understanding racial formation processes in relationship to social and political events and environments more broadly is also useful in social work’s engagement with issues of community formation, oppression, and practice needs.

South Asians and Social Work

Very little U.S.-based social work research has focused on South Asian communities or issues facing these communities. Perception of South Asians as a “model minority” as well as global migration policies, politics, and processes that have meant that a large percentage of South Asians in the U.S. are middle-class, and internal community and cultural norms regarding help-

seeking and social problems, have contributed to the absence of South Asians in social work literature and practice settings.

A review of the U.S. social work literature shows that much of the research and practice efforts in the South community have focused on violence against women, particularly domestic violence (e.g., Abraham, 2000; Dasgupta, 2007a; Merchant, 2000; Raj & Silverman, 2003). Consistent with the social work literature's focus on domestic violence as a primary issue in the South Asian community, it is significant that almost every major metropolitan area in the U.S. has a South Asian women's organization (SAWO) that focuses on providing domestic violence services—even in areas with newer, smaller South Asian immigrant communities (e.g., Alabama, Oregon, Arizona, New Hampshire) (Mehrotra & Munshi, 2011). While they vary in size, scope, political orientation, and range of programs, SAWOs are the most visible and institutionalized form of formal social work practice and activism that is currently happening in the South Asian community across the U.S. Although cities with the largest South Asian populations (such as New York and Chicago) now house a few more culturally-specific initiatives, such as immigrant rights work, hate crimes advocacy, youth services, housing, and mental health services, especially post-9/11, it is notable that approximately half of the organizations in the National Coalition of South Asian Organizations, formed in 2008, state that providing some form of support services to women experiencing domestic violence is one of their main activities (SAALT, n.d.). Many of the other organizations in the coalition do not provide any direct social services but instead focus on other activities such as community education, organizing, or cultural events.

So, despite the relative absence of South Asians in formal social work practice or (U.S.-based) scholarship, it is evident that the community has identified gender oppression and

violence against women as critical issues that need to be addressed within the community (Sahota, 2006). The most commonly cited study (by practitioners and scholars alike) conducted in 2003 by Raj and Silverman found that South Asian women were at high risk of intimate partner violence (IPV). Approximately 40% of the women in their East Coast sample reported experiencing IPV and the lack of family and social support in the U.S., which led to greater isolation, was seen as a major barrier for women being abused. An informal survey conducted of U.S. newspaper reports from 1990-2006 also revealed a high number of domestic violence fatalities and near fatalities—nearly 150—including 115 murders and murder/suicides (Dasgupta, 2007b). In addition, a number of people have written about the cultural values and vulnerabilities caused by immigration that impact the experience and needs of South Asian IPV survivors (e.g., Dasgupta, 2007; Dasgupta & Warriar, 1996; Abraham, 2000). Shamita Dasgupta, one of the founders of the South Asian anti-violence movement in the U.S., also mirrors the narrative of many other activists as she notes that the culturally and linguistically specific needs of this population has necessitated the development of community-based and culturally relevant IPV services. It is also relevant that many SAWOS have been able to garner institutional and financial support through existing “mainstream” IPV service and funding systems which has contributed to their growth and proliferation over the past 25 years.

While the proposed study is not focused specifically on domestic violence, given the prevalence of IPV, the presence SAWOs within the community, and the limited scholarship and research on gender in the South Asian community in the U.S., understanding more about South Asian women’s lives within the context of diaspora is highly relevant to improving and expanding feminist domestic violence-related within the South Asian community in the future. Considering gender, race, ethnicity, migration, and how individuals construct their experiences

has the potential to contribute to other future feminist projects and community-based practice efforts focused on South Asians living in the U.S.

Chapter Summary

I continue to seek conceptual frameworks that can make South Asian women legible in all of our complexities and can intervene into some of the limitations of social work's reliance on essentialized constructions of marginalized groups. Given social work's commitment to practice and social justice, in order to adequately meet the needs of diverse groups and to work toward justice, we need to continue to expand the paradigms that we have to be able to think about these lived experiences both materially and analytically. In my practice and scholarly work I have found resonance with theories of intersectionality, transnational feminisms, diaspora studies and have seen the potentials of narrative and discursive approaches to understanding self-making. However, I have not seen examples of social work scholarship that attempt to bring together these strands as an analytic lens to explore personal narratives. Thus, interpreting aspects of South Asian women's narratives through such a lens offers an important and unique viewpoint that can illuminate meaning making in women's lives as well as offer another model for thinking about diversity within a diasporic community of color in the U.S.

In talking to a South Asian colleague recently, we were lamenting how few interesting studies there about our community that are based in peoples' lived lives and the stories that they tell about themselves. While there have been a few ethnographic accounts of second generation South Asian experience in North America (e.g., Handa, 2003; Maira, 2002; Purkayastha, 2005), first generation, middle class South Asian communities in the U.S. (e.g., Bhatia, 2007; Khandelwal, 2002; Rangaswamy, 2000), and writings about U.S.-based South Asian and religious experience (e.g., Joshi, 2006; Narayan & Purkayastha, 2008) there is a paucity of

perspectives about the experiences of South Asian women in the U.S.—particularly in social work and in contexts outside of New York, Chicago, or other East Coast cities. It is my intention to contribute greater insights into how South Asian women narrate and negotiate their lives while also contributing to expanding the ways that we think about the complexity of communities with which we work.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This study is guided by a qualitative, feminist methodological perspective that includes a personal and political commitment to the community (and project) that I have been studying, anti-oppressive values, and a dedication to ongoing reflexivity and reflection on my role and power as a researcher. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist researchers made significant interventions into mainstream research with their critiques of positivism. In particular, their interventions focused on: interrupting the positivist assumption of “objectivity,” making visible women’s experiences and ways of knowing in research (and subsequently opening up new areas of inquiry), centering women’s epistemological standpoint, challenging hierarchical power dynamics between researchers and those being “researched,” recognition of knowledges as partial and constructed, and a commitment to addressing sexism by linking inquiry with feminist politics “on the ground” (e.g., Harding, 1993; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Reinharz, 1992). Other emancipatory and critical perspectives have furthered similar goals by challenging research practices that replicate colonial and other oppressive power relationships (e.g., Smith, 2005). With the goal of creating transformative knowledge that can contribute to social change, feminist and scholars working from other liberatory frameworks have emphasized the integration of practices such as: engagement with researcher positionality and reflexivity, ways of involving participants in the research process, and creative writing and representation such as multi-vocal perspectives in the text, an explicit acknowledgement of the links between power and knowledge, and conducting research that can contribute to community-based social change efforts (Swarr & Nagar, 2010). Though these practices have been critiqued (e.g., Swarr & Nagar, 2010), within social work research I would argue that such moves continue to be an important intervention into traditional, positivist assumptions underlying most research in the discipline.

Given the exploratory nature as well as the epistemological underpinnings and goals of the proposed study, I have used a qualitative approach to this research. Specifically, I have utilized in-depth interviews and participant observation as sources of data, with analyses based in thematic analysis of narratives, and concepts from discursive psychology. Narrative analysis is used as a critical tool for understanding how women construct meaning about their lives and experiences both individually and within a broader social context. I also understand the space created by the YKB project (i.e., the group, rehearsals, etc.) as part of the narrative environment that affects women's storying process (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, 2009) particularly in regard to gender, sexuality, diaspora, and race/ethnicity. Toward this end, the particular focus of my analysis is not only on the individual stories being told, but I am also interested in the larger cultural and social discourses that women draw upon to construct their own narratives about their lives. Ethnographic approaches, namely in-depth interviewing and participant observation, are ideal for exploring language, culture, context, and meaning-making within a "contained" community (such as the YKB project) and can be understood as being in dynamic relationship to individual narratives (Gubrium & Holstein, 1999, 2008, 2009).

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry refers very broadly to the examination of stories, accounts, and conversations. While the practice of narrative research has become popular in the social sciences over the past 20 years, its meaning as a methodological framework is incoherent—often contested, ambiguous, or defined specifically by the disciplinary location of the research itself. Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou (2008) write that for those of us who frame our work as "narrative" do so "...because we believe that by doing so we are able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other,

and to understand more about individual and social change” (p. 1). In general, narrative research has been concerned with some combination of the structure, the content and/or the context of the story being told (Andrews et al., 2008). Riessman (2008) also asserts that narrative analysis can be particularly useful when the interest is in how and why a story is constructed in the way that it is and what it accomplishes based on the audience who is receiving the message.

For the purposes of my project, I see narrative inquiry as a methodology more than as a method being employed. I am interested in the co-construction and performance of narratives as sites for social action, identity achievement, and sense-making. However, in my analysis I am not centrally concerned with the structure, plot, characters, or metaphors of the ways women’s story their lives. Instead, I am utilizing thematic analysis and concepts from discursive psychology to guide my analysis. The primary focus of this research study is to consider how South Asian women “story” themselves into the social world through their narratives, in order to shed light on how they make meaning of multiple oppressions, gender, sexuality migration, and their experience of the YKB project. I have utilized aspects of narrative ethnography, a hybrid methodological approach to look at not only the content of stories but the conditions and larger context in which they are told (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, 2009).

Narrative ethnography, an emergent method, is fundamentally concerned with the way that narratives comprise the “interplay between experience, storying practices, descriptive resources, purposes at hand, audiences, and the environments that condition storytelling” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 250). While much narrative analysis in social research focuses most on the internal organization of stories such as their structure, and linguistic components, narrative ethnography emphasizes the “contexts, conditions, and resources of the storying process” (p. 262). By utilizing data collection tools from ethnography—particularly participant

observation and interviewing—narrative ethnography aims to focus simultaneously on the story being told as well as the process, constraints, consequences, and context of the storytelling. In this case, it also includes the perspective that the YKB project itself is an integral part of the context and process of these women’s stories about themselves. While the preliminary analysis presented in this dissertation is less explicitly linking the YKB project to women’s individual narratives, the context of the YKB project is important to why and how the women shape their stories the way that they do. Further, taking this contextual view also opens up spaces for different kinds of analysis of interview data in future work.

As mentioned above, Gubrium and Holstein’s work on narrative ethnography (2008, 2009) points to the importance of the contexts in which narratives are initiated, produced, and communicated. While there are numerous “contexts, conditions, and resources” that women in my sample draw upon to story their experiences, it is salient that the women share the space of the YKB project as an important and collective narrative environment in which they have explicitly talked about and explored issues of gender, sexuality, culture, migration, and other topics relevant to the research questions driving this study. This shared environment, then, is part of what they draw on as narrative resources in constructing their stories about themselves. In addition, the context of the interview is a performative one that does not necessarily mirror “naturally occurring” talk in everyday life. As a second generation South Asian woman who has been in community with a number of the women in the sample, I am also aware that how women responded to my questions (given who we both were) is contextual and their narratives could be constructed very differently in a different setting and/or with a different person. Also important to reiterate is that this analysis is focused on the women who were in the sample—women who had already self-selected to participate in the YKB project in Seattle—and does not necessarily

aim to reflect a larger “truth” or generalization regarding how South Asian women more broadly may narrate their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or other life experiences.

In addition to a particular focus on understanding stories in their narrative environment, Gubrium and Holstein (1999, 2008, 2009) assert that providing an ethnographic lens on storytelling processes helps to balance the idea that subjects produce their own singular story that is unaffected by the context in which it is embedded while simultaneously challenging us not to understand stories as only reflections of the social structure. Narrative ethnography is thus consistent with my theoretical approach to understanding the narrative construction of identity in which individual narratives are shaped and mediated by larger cultural and structural discourses as well as being social actions. This view is also very much reflected in discursive psychology, an emergent strand of psychology that is concerned with how people use language to construct and account for their identities and attitudes.

Discursive Psychology

The concept of discourse analysis has been used to refer to a broad range of types of qualitative approaches that have emerged as a response to the “linguistic turn” in the social sciences. This realm of research involves methods and methodologies that are focused on language and often allied with social constructionism, social/political critiques, and post-structuralist views of language. Broadly, discourse analytic research is the study of language in use and of human meaning-making (Wetherell, Yates, & Taylor, 2001) and many discourse analytic approaches share a critical view of language. In particular such perspectives often center a critique of a realist view of language as reflective of a given or internal reality (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). However, depending on the disciplinary location and epistemological approach to the discourse research, this type of investigation can focus on micro-level issues, at

the level of individual interaction, to macro-level issues such as institutional power and social inequality. The study of discourse is generally focused on texts which could include interview transcripts, written documents such as policy statements or documents from historical archives, or transcripts of recorded conversations (Wetherell et al., 2001). Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000), also write that discourse analysis of all kinds share several underlying assumptions: language is constructed and constructive, language is used for a variety of functions and has different consequences, the same phenomenon can be described in different ways, and that the ways language is used can itself be a subject of study.

One kind of discourse research that has been evolving over the past several decades is discursive psychology. Discursive psychology is a discourse analytic approach out of psychology that is focused on how people use talk to accomplish certain actions (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 2003; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). As written by Edwards (2004), discursive psychology can be defined “as the application of principals and methods of discourse and conversation analysis to psychological themes” (p. 258). Potter and Wetherell (1987), central writers in discursive psychology, add that this strand of psychology is focused on application of discourse analysis to social psychological topics in particular, such as attitudes and identity. In this view, instead of people having cognitive processes such as attitudes, identity, or memory that they then report on in an interview context, people are actually formulating the events and their accountabilities through the way that they talk about them (Edwards, 2004).

Discursive psychology draws largely on social constructivist assumptions that talk constructs rather than reflects social reality, social constructionist views that meanings of language are connected to their utility in social relationships, and traditions of conversational

analysis (Wells, 2011). As such, this approach is based on three primary assumptions (Wiggins & Potter, 2008):

1. Discourse is comprised of language such as words, metaphors, and social categories and these constitute social reality.
2. Discourse is action-oriented—talking has a purpose and is social action. Talking is used to accomplish things such as blaming, justifying, explaining, etc.
3. Discourse is situated rhetorically, sequentially, and institutionally (Wells, 2011).

Further, in this view, people are actively engaged in creating accounts based on previously existing resources, speakers are continually involved with selecting and rejecting linguistic resources available to them, and chosen constructions of meanings have social and political consequences (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000).

Often in discursive psychology, the text being considered is interactional talk, including people's everyday interactions, however, interview based texts are also often analyzed. Wiggins and Potter (2008) importantly observe that discursive psychology is often more defined by its approach, assumptions, and focus than by its method. Thus, analysis will often entail immersion in the transcripts, identifying relevant portions of the text, and examining how speakers talk about the issue being investigated. Other approaches may be more similar to conversational analysis and focus on turn-taking or how individuals manage stakes of a conversation (Wells, 2011). While the approach I have taken in this research is not solely a discourse analysis, some of the underlying assumptions of discursive psychology guide my analysis and thinking in regard to the work that women's narratives do. For example, in Chapter 4, especially, where I explore women's ethnic/racial identification processes, I draw on discursive psychological concepts to

elucidate my findings through looking at the ways that people talk about race/ethnicity and the work that their ethnic/racial identifications do, not simply the “content” of their talk.

Situating Myself as the Researcher: Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

Jordan-Zachery (2007) expresses that for women of color, one of the biggest challenges of studying our own experiences of multiple oppressions is the way that the intellectual work and the personal experience come together in complex and sometimes unsettling ways. This means finding both the positive experiences of being able to articulate issues that impact our lived realities and the frustrations of not being able to adequately or “acceptably” intellectualize experiences because of the way they are lived and viscerally felt in our own lives. As a U.S.-raised, middle class, highly educated South Asian queer woman who has volunteered with Chaya and participated in the YKB project as a participant (2007), project consultant (2010), and audience member (2003 in San Francisco, and 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012 in Seattle), I am emotionally, politically, and intellectually embedded in the community, project, and organizational spaces that I have been studying in this research. In addition, it is certainly my engagement with these spaces that has sparked my desire to analyze, document, and understand the research questions proposed in this project. I also know that doing research within this space has been a complex, shifting, fluid, and unique process that has required flexibility, intentionality, clear communication, and reflection throughout this study.

A number of feminist scholars and scholars of color doing work in their own communities have interrogated their positionalities in relationship to the people they are conducting research with, including the complexity of doing research with communities you are a part of or being a “native” researcher (Narayan, 1993). Kanuha (2000) points out that social work has been “surprisingly deficient in questioning the hegemony of the subject-object

relationship in research” (p. 440). However the feminist and anti-oppressive values that I bring to this work require me to be in dialogue with my own positionality and how it impacts the research. Hesse-Biber & Piatelli (2007) also underscore that engagement with reflexivity is also an important challenge to the positivist, masculinist framework of objectivity, detachment and value-neutrality in research.

In her insights about race and interviewing, Rodriguez asserts that sharing racial/ethnic identity with participants can strengthen one’s perspective on the research being conducted (Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2002). She posits that the reflexive interplay between background knowledge gained experientially (and through “informal” ethnography) and the narratives generated by interviews can build a richer and more nuanced context for understanding research data. In addition, participants may be more trusting or it can be easier to build rapport due to similarities in cultural norms, identities, and/or experience. For example, when I recently attended a community meeting about YKB 2011 in which I talked to former participants about my project, the women were excited and many directly and indirectly expressed that they were trusting of me as the researcher because I am part of the community and am already familiar with the YKB project.

At the same time, it is important to be cautious about falling into an overly simplistic binary of insider/outsider roles in research process as these positions are not fixed or binary concepts but are constantly shifting and subject to negotiation and interpretation in the research setting (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007; Mohammed, 2001; Narayan, 1993; Visweswaran, 1994). It has been an ongoing challenge for me to continue to ensure that in this process I don’t take my insider role for granted or make premature or false assumptions which could lead to missing important insights or delving deeper into the investigation at hand (Kanuha, 2000; Coffey, 1999;

Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). I have done this primarily through conversation with other scholars and mentors and through self-reflective journaling. As I was wisely reminded by another South Asian colleague who is also doing work in the South Asian community: “you want to stay open to being surprised by your data” (A. Bhatt, personal communication, July 2010). This mirrors Kanuha’s (2000) advice to remember that the researcher’s experience is only one possible perspective but cannot necessarily be assumed as applicable to the whole group being studied.

Data Collection

Data sources for this project were: in-depth, semi-structured interviews with South Asian women who had been participants in the YKB project from 2007-2011 and participant observation of YKB rehearsal/workshop spaces and performance(s). Researcher field notes and reflexive journaling were also kept throughout the process.

Recruitment of Participants

For the project, I recruited adult, South Asian women who had been participants of the YKB project from 2007-2011 to be interviewed. Going into the study, I paid particular attention to recruitment and participation of queer identified participants, Muslim women, immigrant and older women as they have been under-represented in the YKB project.

Interviewees were recruited via an email announcement to the *Yoni Ki Baat* email listserv that includes everyone who has been involved with the YKB project from its inception, including participants and project leaders/directors. In the recruitment email, potential participants were given general information regarding the research project and asked to contact me via email or phone if they were interested in participating in the study (see Appendix A).

They were also told that they would receive a \$25 gift certificate for Diya Spa⁶ as an honorarium for their time and participation. Participants outside of the Seattle metro area were given the option to participate via Skype or phone and were provided with a \$25 Amazon gift card. Of approximately 40 women on the YKB email list, 33 women responded and 31 women were interviewed, all of whom had participated in YKB from 2007-2011. This was an excellent response rate and, in fact, because of the overwhelmingly positive response to the recruitment email, I ended up conducting about 10 interviews more than I had originally intended.

Once women contacted me expressing interest in being part of the study, we arranged a mutually convenient time for the interview and I asked participants to choose a quiet and private location for the interview that was convenient and preferable for them. Most women chose to be interviewed in their own homes. Of the 31 women interviewed, 2 women opted to meet in a coffee shop, 4 women were interviewed in a private room at a local University, 1 woman came to my home, 1 woman was interviewed at her office, and 1 woman was interviewed in a private room in a local public library. In addition, 2 interviews were conducted by phone, and 2 interviews were conducted via Skype. The remaining 18 interviews took place in women's homes.

Interviews

Thirty-one in-depth, semi-structured interviews were completed between late April and August 2011. Interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 4 hours, the average being approximately 1.5 hours. Each interviewee was told about the study, risks and benefits associated with the

⁶ Diya Spa is a local women's spa/beauty salon run by a South Asian woman who is also a former YKB participant. This honorarium was chosen as a way to support a South Asian woman-run small business in addition to providing a gift to participants for their time and participation in the study.

project, and each woman signed and received a copy of the informed consent form. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent.

While the actual interview length averaged 1.5 hours, most of the interviews, particularly those conducted in women's homes, involved many hours of spending time together before and after the interview. Typically, I would arrive at a woman's home and we would visit for some time prior to starting the interview—this often included women asking me about my family background, connection to South Asia, and experience of participating in YKB. Some women also asked questions about the study itself. Usually women would serve me chai, and in many cases they fed me lunch or dinner following the interview. As is often the case in qualitative, community-based research, while the structured interview may have only been 1.5 hours in length, the richness of the conversations and sharing before and after the “official” interview provided connection and context for the interview itself.

Researcher Interview

Interviewer: ...Is there anything else you want to share as part of your reflections on this project?

Interviewee: I think doing this project has made me think a lot about, a lot of times in research, people talk a lot about being an insider to a community or being an outsider to a community, people also talk about that in community organizing. I just think it's not that simple. There are moments in an interview with somebody that I can feel like, I'm totally having an insider conversation, when they'll be telling me some story, and they'll be like, “oh yeah you know how it is,” or they'll shift to Hindi because they know I can understand it or whatever. And then there will be moments in the interview where I'll be like, I'm an outsider to this community, my family didn't come in the '90s, I don't make a million dollars, I'm not straight, nothing about this is my experience. So it's definitely illuminated for me the problematics of simplifying it to that level of being an insider or an outsider to the community, that it's just way more complicated. It's reminded, or re-inspired me, around the power of people's stories, which I've always believed in—but I've been disconnected from, having such a clear opportunity to connect with that in terms of the interview process has been really good.

Given my feminist stance and trying to disrupt the myth of the objective researcher, I decided to play with methods by asking one of my interviewees to interview me. Technically, I am eligible for my own study—I am an adult South Asian woman who participated in the YKB project in 2007. I approached one of the interviewees who is someone that I knew prior to the study as I knew she is a graduate of the MSW program at University of Washington and has interviewing knowledge and experience. I asked her if she would be willing to interview me using the interview guide I used with all of the women. I wanted to have the experience of being interviewed as well as a space to further explore some of the ways I see my experience and perspectives as both similar to and different from the study participants. I also was interested in the experience of the interview—what is it like to be asked these questions? How do I construct a narrative about these complicated topics on the spot? How do I relate to the interviewer? I participated in this interview at the end of my data collection period—after all of the other interviews had been conducted. By then I was so familiar with the interview questions (and had been thinking about them so much), that I already had ideas about how I might answer them. This was different from the participants who knew the general theme of the interview but didn't know the questions until they were asked them on the spot. To try to capture some aspect of this part of the interview experience, I asked the interviewer to craft 2-3 questions for me on the theme of “how it had been for me to conduct this research.” Thus, for at least a few of the questions I had the experience of having to construct my responses in the moment much like the participants had done in their interviews. For the analysis, I included my transcript as one of the participants (30 were interviews I conducted, plus 1 that was my interview), though I did not use any of my quotes in this dissertation. I plan to further develop an analysis of this aspect of my project in the future.

Participant Observation

In order to further contextualize the women's interview narratives and to become familiar with the narrative resources and environment created by the YKB rehearsal and performance space, I observed three rehearsal sessions during the 2011 YKB project, each at a different point in the process—two rehearsals in which women were work-shopping their writing and practicing their pieces and the dress rehearsal the week before the performance (end of March 2011). I also attended the YKB performance in April 2011 and April 2012. All participants were told a little bit about my project ahead of time by the director (who I had gotten permission from to attend rehearsals) and were aware of the days and times I was coming to observe rehearsal sessions. The first time I attended the rehearsal, we did introductions and I spoke a bit about my project with the group. I also asked again for verbal consent to be there for the rehearsals and encouraged the women to ask any questions they had about my project or let me know if they were uncomfortable with my presence in any way in the process. During the time that I was the rehearsal, I took notes on general observations about the space, group process, and about the pieces women were writing/performing, I found that I was also focused on how women were interacting—both in terms of the formal rehearsal structure and the informal interactions between them—and ways that gender, sexuality, culture, and women's experiences were talked about in the space both formally and informally. Several women approached me after I attended the first rehearsal to ask more questions about my research and/or to let me know they would be willing to be interviewed in the future.

The participant observation aspect of the data collection was also important for relationship building with participants. I was able to meet some participants I didn't know and with those I had met previously, I was able to establish myself in the community as a researcher.

Those workshop/rehearsal sessions and performances also helped to further contextualize my project in general and helped inform some of the interview guide development.

Field Notes and Self-Reflective Journaling

Spent the day on the eastside today doing interviews. OMG. I feel like I am from a different planet. It is so hard not to get caught up in weird authenticity stuff about being *desi*.⁷ Just spending the afternoon at _____'s house really made me think about how different our experience was than these women's lives...I also kept wondering what kinds of judgments these women must be having of me. Many of the eastside women from the 2011 group know I'm queer thanks to S_____ outing me at rehearsal...I think they are also fascinated that I'm a social worker...—from research journal, April 2011

Following each interview, I spent time either writing or audio-recording impressions and reflections from the interview process (such as the entry above). In addition, throughout and after participant observation sessions, I took notes on my observations, biases, and experiences of being part of the rehearsal space. In reflecting back on some of the notes taken through this process, I noticed that many of my reflections focused on highlighting places of connection and disconnection from participants based on identity and experience as well as noting some of the things that stood out from each particular interview. Over the course of the study, I have also played with writing some reflections in more of a narrative, auto-ethnographic form and other creative approaches to presenting narrative text such as poetry (e.g., Anderson, 2006, Richardson, 2002).

Human Subjects Considerations

I worked with the University of Washington Human Subjects division to ensure that participants would be adequately protected and treated with the utmost respect and care. After

⁷ *desi*, translates literally to “of/from the nation or country.” It’s used by South Asians in the diaspora to refer to someone or something from the Indian subcontinent and diaspora. The word is most commonly used amongst second generation South Asians as a slang or informal term.

going through full committee review, I received Human Subjects approval in April 2012. In order to ensure confidentiality for participants, I gave them the opportunity to use pseudonyms for themselves or any other people they referred to in their interview. All transcripts and audio recorded interviews were kept on a password-protected computer as well as on an external hard drive. Paper files were created for each interviewee which were kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home.

There were no significant risks to interviewees in participating in this study, but the interview did ask questions that required sharing of personal information which could have brought up feelings of mild discomfort, such as embarrassment or anxiety. In addition, some women did discuss experiences of interpersonal violence or other significant life events that did evoke difficult emotions. As a trained domestic violence advocate and social worker, I was comfortable to address such issues as they came up in the interview process and was able to ask questions, take breaks as needed, and offer support in the interview process. Each participant was provided with resource information—the contact information for Chaya, a local South Asian domestic violence program—in case they needed additional support or referrals following the interview. I also sent follow up emails to participants the day after the interview which included a reminder to utilize this resource if needed. Prior to the study, I also contacted Chaya advocates and let them know about the project and that I was providing participants with their phone number. Chaya also wrote a letter of support for my IRB application indicating that they were providing this support if needed and also were in general support of this project as one of the organizations involved with YKB.

Throughout the process, participants were assured confidentiality and reminded that they could skip any interview questions and/or choose to withdraw from the study at any time with no

negative consequences. They were also assured that their participation in this research will not affect their relationship with the YKB project or collaborating organizations in any way.

Community Relationships

As I talked about in the introduction to this dissertation, I entered into this project as a member of the community where I was conducting my research. I am a second generation/U.S.-raised South Asian woman and I had participated in YKB in 2007 (the first year of the project). In addition, I have a familiarity and involvement with the two supporting organizations—Tasveer and Chaya—as a volunteer and community member, and personally know or at least have met many of the women who have been part of the YKB project over the past 5 years. Many of the women in the YKB community know that I am queer-identified because of my YKB performance piece (that was also published in a local zine produced by Chaya in 2009), my visible affiliation with Trikone, a South Asian LGBTQ group, and my involvement with doing anti-homophobia work within Chaya.

In Fall 2010, during the time I was working on my dissertation proposal, Tasveer called a community meeting to discuss the YKB project and plans for the project for 2011. This meeting was led by the director of Tasveer and facilitated by the community mobilization coordinator at Chaya at that time. The meeting was open to all women who had participated in YKB in previous years as performers or directors, and several other community leaders were also invited. I attended that meeting and used it as an opportunity to begin my connection with the community in a researcher capacity and I also asked for time on the agenda to talk about my project. I gave the women a very brief overview of the project and there was a great deal of enthusiasm for it! In particular, the group felt that some evaluative component of YKB would be very useful to better understand what is working about the project, what could be improved, and how

participants have experienced YKB overall. Following this meeting, I began to draft an interview guide that incorporated both evaluative questions about YKB and questions focused on South Asian women's life experiences and identities.

When I met with the women for their interviews, I let them know that there would be a community forum following the completion of my dissertation to share with participants (and other community members) a summary of the findings, and particularly a discussion of key themes from the YKB evaluation portion of the interviews. This forum is tentatively scheduled for October 2012. Participants were generally very enthusiastic about this idea and had a lot of curiosity about what other women had to say in their interviews. Several women also indicated that part of what would be nice about such a forum is that it would give them an opportunity to meet women from other YKB cohorts as there has never been a specific attempt to bring together women from across all of the years of YKB in Seattle.

In the interviews that I conducted and even in the recruitment process, I was clear with women that there were no direct benefits to their participating in this study aside from the \$25 gift card that I provided to them. However, overwhelmingly, women were excited to participate largely because of their commitment to the YKB project. It is also important to note that the class privilege of the sample also meant that this group did not face many structural barriers to their participation in the interview process. For example, most of the women had the time, family support, and transportation (if needed) to participate in the interview. In addition, some women specifically stated they were looking forward to the opportunity to share about their experiences and some had interest in the research process itself. Hutchinson and colleagues (1994) discuss some of the intangible benefits to participants who are part of interview research. They highlight the ways that storytelling and disclosure through the interview process can

contribute to sense-making, healing, empowerment, catharsis, and self-awareness. Many women reflected to me that their interview with me had provided many of these benefits. For example, one participant sent me an email following our meeting:

Thanks for yesterday. Yes I know it's your research project, but it is also a chance for people to talk about and thereby process their lives—a mini therapy session I would say :) (P16)

Another interview responded enthusiastically to my call for participation by saying:

I would really like to participate in this project. It's very relevant to my life experience and I feel a need to share! (P25)

Following the interview, the same participant emailed me thanking me profusely for giving her the opportunity to talk about these issues and stated: “I really appreciated the time to speak about these things on my mind” (P25).

Many of the women in the YKB project maintain close relationships with other women from their cohort, thus, throughout the data collection phase of the project, participants were clearly communicating with one another about the process of being interviewed by me. For instance, often when I would meet with a woman she would tell me that she had heard that another woman had recently had her interview with me, that she had heard something about the interview questions, or that one of her YKB friends had reminded her to contact me for the interview. Relatedly, one participant shared with me that the interview process sparked some conversation amongst the women, particularly around issues of gender and race. She shared with me that she had been out to dinner with two other YKB participants and they had found themselves having a conversation about their interview experiences, and in particular were comparing notes about how they had each answered some of the questions. The woman reflected to me that they were particularly struck by how I asked them about their gender identity and none of them had ever thought about it before. She reported that they then proceeded to

have a lengthy dinner conversation about what gender meant to them. I also know from several women that they continued to be thinking about the interview questions following our meeting together and found the questions thought-provoking.

Overall I felt very trusted by study participants to do this research. While I do not want to oversimplify my positionality or imply that having shared identity with the women made everything pure or easy, I did find that women expressed that they were happy to be talking with another South Asian woman, someone who was part of the local community, and a fellow “YKB sister.” Often either before or after the interviews, women would ask me questions about my YKB experience and/or about my family background as well to better understand my perspective and a couple of women specifically shared with me that they felt glad that another South Asian woman was doing this research. In addition, because the feedback at the initial community meeting was so overwhelmingly positive, I felt that I had the community’s blessing to move forward with the project. Another participant, P22, who was someone I knew fairly well prior to the research sent a text message after her interview stating: “I feel full knowing that you are bringing so much to our community. This project is important in so many ways.”

During the course of the research study, I was not involved as an active volunteer with Chaya, Tasveer, or the YKB project so as to keep my researcher role as separate and clear as possible. However, as a way to build trust and relationships with participants and YKB organizers and leaders and to garner interest in my study, I did attend two open community planning meetings that were held between September and December 2011 and, early on in the project development, met with a staff person from Chaya to discuss my dissertation project. I have also been in contact with the director of Tasveer to garner her support for the community forum I will hold about my research in the Fall. I was also in consistent communication with the

YKB director in 2011 to coordinate my participant observation sessions. In 2011, I was invited by the director to facilitate the Q & A following one of the YKB sessions which was a small way I could give something back to the cohort and the project given they had provided me access to their rehearsal space for my study.

Data Analysis

Audio Recording and Transcription

As mentioned above, all of the interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. By chance, I found a South Asian transcriptionist (based in New York) who was familiar with the *Yoni Ki Baat* project. She and her team transcribed all of the interviews verbatim, including most filler words such as "like" or "um." It was helpful to have a transcriptionist who herself was South Asian and familiar and comfortable with interview content, particularly in ensuring accuracy of South Asian references (such as city or regional names, Hindi words sprinkled in to women's interviews, etc.). I cleaned each transcript which entailed listening to the interview while reading along with the transcript and removing identifiable information, paying particular attention to removing names of other YKB participants that women may have referenced in their interviews. Cleaned transcripts were sent back to each participant to give her the opportunity to review her interview, make any changes or additions necessary as well as to provide an update on the status of the study. One woman asked that I remove one story she shared (that she felt was too personal to be included in the study) and one woman provided a few minor revisions to her transcript. Overwhelmingly when I sent back the transcripts, women responded that they were happy to participate in the project, enjoyed the interview process, and also really liked seeing their interview in written/transcript form.

Analytic Process

Mauthner and Doucet (1998) write that data analysis is not a discrete part of the research process that begins when we start to analyze our transcripts but rather that analysis is a dynamic, evolving process that continues throughout all stages of a qualitative research project. In addition, while most formal data analysis is based on the interview transcripts, the information gathered in participant observations, informal conversations with participants, and non-verbal aspects of the interview process all are contextual aspects of what goes into our analysis though often not in the “formal” aspects of the analysis. Despite the limitations of this commonly deployed, discrete view of data analysis, I will focus here on providing a brief overview of how I approached the actual analysis of interview transcripts.

To begin the data analysis, I completely immersed myself in the interview transcripts. After re-listening to the audio recordings, cleaning transcripts, and sending them back to the women, I uploaded all of the transcripts into Atlas ti software. The cleaning process was focused on reviewing the transcriptions for accuracy, translating any of the Hindi words used in the interview, and removing identifying information, particularly names of other YKB participants or community leaders.

To guide my data immersion and analysis process, I utilized an adaptation of Mauthner and Doucet’s (1998) voice-centered relational analytic approach. Their approach, which is derived from Gilligan’s listening method of data analysis, is a feminist practice that espouses a relational ontology—namely a central notion that human beings are embedded in a complex web of larger social relations and that people are interdependent (Gilligan, 1982). Important to this ontological perspective is that it serves as a direct challenge to liberal, Western, masculinist approaches that view the self as autonomous and wholly independent. Central to Mauthner and Doucet’s data analysis approach is a practice of reading the transcripts multiple times with a

focus on exploring narratives in terms of women's relationships to themselves and to the people around them, and their relationships to the broader social, structural and cultural contexts within which they live. In their framework, the first reading is focused on the overall plot and response to the narrative; the second reading is searching for the voice of the "I"—attending to how and when women talk about themselves and use personal pronouns; the third reading focuses on relationships that women have in their lives, and the fourth reading emphasizes reviewing the narrative in order to understand how people are located within their cultural and social context. I adapted their model and focused on what they consider in the first, third, and fourth readings.

Reading One: Reading for the Overall Plot and for Researcher Responses to the Narrative.

Consistent with Mauthner and Doucet's model, in the first reading of the transcript, I was focused on getting a global sense of the interview as well as paying attention to my initial impressions of the interview. In this stage, I re-listened to each interview to check for accuracy and to clean the transcripts and emphasized getting a sense of the overall storyline of the participant's narrative. Similar to other methods of data analysis (such as narrative analysis, and grounded theory), at this stage there was an emphasis of getting a sense of the main events, characters, images and metaphors in the narrative. The second element of this first reading is what Mauthner and Doucet call the "reader-response" element—where the researcher reads for herself in the text—specifically things about her own relationship to the woman's story and her own personal, emotional, and intellectual response to the narrative. This was very much part of my process both during the interview process and during the first re-listening. Following this reading of the transcript, I drafted a brief summary of the interview—noting some of the key themes from that particular narrative, things that stood out to me, or things I wanted to remember.

Brown (1994, as cited in Mauthner & Doucet 1998) highlights that during this reading (or listening) that the researcher should be particularly attentive to “her interests, biases and limitations that arise from such critical dimensions of social location as race, class, gender and sexual orientation, as well as to track her own feelings in response to what she hears - particularly those feelings that do not resonate with the speaker’s experience” (p. 392). In doing this, I was able to add an intentionally reflexive component to my reading at this stage. Alongside this first reading, I also reviewed my notes from the interview itself to remember the setting, context, and other impressions from the interview itself.

Reading Two: Reading for Relationships.

In this second reading, I deviated from Mauthner and Doucet’s (1998) model in that their second reading process was not resonant with my approach to the analysis. Thus, what I did in the second reading was what they actually propose for the third reading: reviewing the transcripts with attention to how women talk about their interpersonal relationships. In my interviews, this included relationships with family in the U.S. and abroad, friend/peer networks, relationships with non-South Asians, relationships with partners/spouses/boyfriends, and relationships within the YKB project. During this read I paid particular attention to the way women talked about their relationships and how this may have been related to how they talked about themselves as well. Important in Mauthner and Doucet’s (1998) model is the importance of theoretical reflexivity in which we as researchers pay attention not only to our positionality and emotional response but also go into the reading with an understanding of our theoretical positions and ideas and how this impacts how we read. I would expand this point even further to say that in addition to an awareness of theoretical commitments, during this read I also was trying to read from my epistemological perspective: in particular, noticing the ways that women were talking about their

relationships as an action and as a constructed narrative (as opposed to being focused only on women's relationships themselves).

Reading Three: Placing People within Cultural and Structural Contexts.

Mauthner and Doucet's final reading stage emphasizes reading for the ways that women's stories are embedded in cultural and structural contexts. Given my central research question about how South Asian women narrate their experiences and positionalities, with an emphasis on race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and migration, this read was very focused on my research questions and beginning to understand how women were narrating their experience within cultural and structural contexts. I was also becoming more aware in this read of some of the larger cultural/socio-political narratives that women were drawing on to shape their own stories about themselves. For instance in one woman's interview, I documented that much of her discussion of gender seemed to draw on White western feminist discourse or in another case I observed that the woman seemed to take up "model minority" discourse in talking about herself in relationship to her non-South Asian colleagues.

Coding of Transcripts

All transcripts were entered into Atlas ti after they were cleaned in order to organize the data. After doing the above readings, I had a deep familiarity with each woman's transcript and some of the major themes of her interview. I developed a set of codes based on my initial research question and began to code broadly in categories such as race/ethnicity, migration, gender, sexuality. Within Atlas, I was able to pull out themes based on my coding to look at all responses related to one given topic together. I then put these into a Word document for ease of being able to cut and paste and/or move quotes around or highlight them during the deeper analytic process. Given my analytic chapter foci of how women talk about ethnicity/race and

how they narrated gender/sexuality messages, I was able to pull quotes related to these topical areas specifically and then do more in-depth reading and analysis of each of these domains. Within each domain, then, I read for general themes across them (sub-themes) as well as larger patterns or trends I noticed across the quotes. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) strategies for thematic analysis, I continually reflected on their suggested questions: "What does this theme mean? What are the assumptions underpinning it? What are the implications of this theme? What conditions are likely to have given rise to it? Why do people talk about this thing in this particular way (as opposed to other ways)? What is the overall story the different themes reveal about the topic" (p. 24)? I also paid close attention to language utilized given my interest in discursive analyses.

Braun and Clarke (2006) write that while many scholars view thematic analysis as a "foundational method for qualitative analysis" (p. 4) they also argue that thematic analysis should be viewed as a method in its own right, especially given its theoretical freedom and compatibility with various epistemological positions. Given that I see this project as a largely an exploratory and descriptive account utilizing conceptual/thematic description of the data (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003), thematic analysis provides an excellent initial analysis for understanding the data that I can build on in future work.

Lastly, in terms of the presentation of the analyses, the presentation of the data in Chapters 4 and 5 are written up a little bit differently. In Chapter 4, I have integrated relevant literature with excerpts from the women's narratives throughout the chapter. In Chapter 5 I have taken a slightly different approach. In this chapter, I utilize the interview data as a primary text, primarily because there is a lack of other literature to draw upon and because, in a sense, I am

using the narratives as a data source on their own terms to illustrate a set of ideas that have not been documented in the published literature.

Reflections regarding Interpretive Authority

Mauthner and Doucet (1998) write:

The particular issue which strikes us as central, yet overlooked, in qualitative data analysis processes and accounts is that of how to keep respondents' voices and perspectives alive, while at the same time recognizing the researcher's role in shaping the research process and product. (p. 1)

This quote resonates with an ongoing tension that I have had in this process. As someone who has been immersed in feminist theorizing and activism over time (and politicized via second wave feminism), there is a part of me that is genuinely invested in women's stories as embodied experiences. Simultaneously, as I have been influenced by later waves of feminism, queer theory, social constructionism, and "the posts," I also see the impossibility of listening to or representing women's stories in any kind of way that is "pure" and I also don't think it is possible for women's voices to "speak for themselves." In addition, as I have discussed above, I am interested in the potential of more critical views of language and narrative that see the interview and the stories women tell as situated, contextual, performative, and constitutive of experience (vs. simply reflective of it). I take the position that as researchers, we are constantly making choices, at every stage of the research process about interpretation, evidence, representation, and truth claims. As is true of any interpretive project in my view, what is presented here is a partial, fragmented, and completely subjective interpretation of the narratives of the women I spoke with.

Consistent with Mauthner and Doucet's standpoint on negotiating a desire to hear women's stories and also the power and presence of the researcher in interpretation and representation, I have engaged in an ongoing "balancing act" between three different and

sometimes conflicting points of view: 1) the voices, stories, and perspectives of the women I interviewed, 2) my voice and perspective shaped by my politics, investments, social positionalities and as a researcher based in social work, and 3) the assumptions and perspectives represented within theory, frameworks, and academic literature that I draw from. This has also come up for me in terms of considering the epistemological and political difference that I have from many of my participants. While women were narrating their experiences and/or their identities, I am fundamentally challenging how to think about these constructs through a narrative lens, taking up a different view of language in some ways than my participants are most likely operating from. Also, I know that in terms of my analytic areas of focus gender/sexuality and race/ethnicity—I have a different positionality and different political perspectives than many of the interviewees. Thus, my analysis inevitably reflects much of my standpoint in these ways.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Given the feminist, narrative, constructivist approach I have taken in this project, I acknowledge fully that my perspective is present throughout all stages of the research process, including the analysis. My intention is not to prove that I have discovered any kind of factual “Truth” in my work, but rather to ensure that participants’ multiple subjective realities are revealed. Guba and Lincoln (1994) have posited that the ways of understanding rigor in constructivist qualitative work should be based on credibility and authenticity. While qualitative findings may not be “generalizable” in the positivist/post-positivist sense, constructing and communicating about the research in a way that allows for a similar approach to be applied in other situations or contexts allows for a measure of “transferability” of the research. For the proposed study, then, a “thick description” of the research context, setting, population, and approach is

presented in a way that readers of the research may be able to ascertain the transferability of the research to other settings or communities.

Plack (2005) also works within Guba and Lincoln's (1994) paradigm as she asserts that for constructivist work, "dependability" is of utmost importance. Specifically, she notes that dependability is "the extent to which the researcher has taken into account the expected instability of the phenomenon in question as well as the potential change that may have resulted from the study design itself" (p. 231). The process of this project has been iterative and the interview and analytic process reflects fragmentedness, instability, fluidity, and evolution of the women's experiences and narratives as well as of my own interpretations. A number of research practices have been proposed in feminist and constructivist research to adhere to such standards of rigor, credibility and trustworthiness. Several such practices have been employed in this dissertation study, particularly triangulation, debriefing, member checks, and researcher reflexivity.

Triangulation

Triangulation in this study has entailed looking at more than one data source in order to better understand the women's experiences as well as the social and narrative context that the YKB project provides. While some positivist approaches view triangulation as being about validity or eliminating bias, I view triangulation in this study as the use of more than one data source to ensure that the account presented here is contextualized, textured, and more fully developed. In particular, as I was working on the analysis of the interviews, I also cross-checked my thematic analysis with my field notes and from my own researcher journal and notes to more deeply consider different aspects of my research questions and interpretations. I also considered narrative findings in relationship to other relevant studies and literature. Further, given my

methodological approach, gathering both interview data and contextual data (from participant observation) has been critical to understanding the stories and the narrative resources that the women are drawing upon. For example, some of the views of gender that are reflected in my analysis in Chapter 5 were also part of the informal environment that I observed when doing participant observations at rehearsals.

Member Checks

In this project, all interviewees have had the opportunity to review their transcripts after the interview to ensure that they are comfortable with what has been communicated. They were given the chance to also delete sections or modify their interview transcript if necessary. After sending them their transcripts, I did check in with several participants to ensure that they felt that their perspectives have been communicated in a way that adequately represents their story in the way that they want it shared. In addition, following the completion of the dissertation, I will share findings with the whole group of participants which will provide an additional opportunity for respondents to give individual and collective feedback and input on project findings as well as representation (this forum is slated for Fall 2012). Relatedly, respondents were asked along the way to give feedback about how the process of participating in the research has been for them, representing what Guba and Lincoln (1994) call “authenticity”—a desire to create a process that is fair, empowering, and useful for participants themselves. I also ensured throughout the process that women were given ample opportunities to ask me any questions they had about the interview process, about me, or about the study overall.

Peer Debriefing

Throughout the data collection and analysis project, I have debriefed regularly with my advisors to discuss interviews, observations, and emergent ideas in regard to the interviews and

observations. In addition, I have specifically talked with Dr. Chandan Reddy (GSR from the English department at the University of Washington), Amy Bhatt (who was a doctoral candidate in Women's Studies at the University of Washington during the earlier phases of the project and now Assistant Professor of Gender and Women's Studies, University of Maryland), and Soniya Munshi (doctoral candidate in Sociology at City University of New York, Graduate Center) to debrief some of the culturally- and community-specific issues related to the interviews, my experience of conducting the research, and emergent findings.

Overview of the Sample

The sample consisted of thirty-one South Asian women (ages 20 to 45) who had been participants in the YKB project from 2007–2011. The sample reflects the South Asian community in Seattle/King county in terms of demographics, including that this was by and large a middle-class sample (one woman explicitly identified herself as working class and two women talked about being raised lower middle class). It also reflects what is common in South Asian spaces in the U.S.: the dominance of people from India, Hindus, middle-class people, and heterosexuals. While I did not ask specific questions about current income or socioeconomic status, through information provided by women about employment, educational attainment, migration history, and family background in India, it was clear that the majority of the women were middle or upper middle class. All of the women were at least college educated and more than half have a Master's degree or above (i.e., PhD or other professional degrees). Five participants were also enrolled in graduate school programs at the time of the interviews (either MA or PhD programs).

In contrast, there was a good generational distribution within the sample—nearly half of the sample is U.S.-raised women and half are immigrant women. This is one aspect of the YKB

project that a number of women noted in their interviews as being positive and meaningful—many women appreciated the opportunity to build relationships with South Asian women across generational differences.

Table 1: Sample Overview

Demographic/identity characteristic	Number of participants
National origin	India: 29 Pakistan: 2
Born and raised in South Asia (first generation/immigrant)	14*
Emigrated to the U.S. as a young person (one and a half/1.5 generation)	3
Born and raised in the U.S. (second generation)	14
Raised Muslim	6
Raised Hindu	20
Raised Sikh	2
Raised Christian	2
Raised Jain	1
LGBTQ identified	5 (self-identified as queer or bisexual)
Age	Range from 20-45; average age, 32 Under 25—2 Over 40—3
Married (Heterosexual)	12
Single	19**
Has a BA degree	14 (includes 4 people in Master’s or PhD programs)
Has a Master’s degree	13 (includes 1 person in PhD program)
Has professional degree or PhD	4

* One woman was born/raised in the Middle East, not South Asia, and is of Indian descent. She is strongly immigrant identified.

** Of these women, at the time of interviews 6 said they were “in a relationship” which also included queer and casual dating relationships.

Shukla (2003) asserts that generation is “one way of thinking through the new lives of diaspora” (p. 214). Generation has also been a slippery term in scholarship as it can often refer to age cohort as well as immigrant status. Scholarship and practice in immigrant communities generally refer to generation as being related to phases of development of ethnic groups through differentiating those who have immigrated vs. those who were born/raised in the host country. For the purposes of this project, then, I am using the language of “generation” to refer to where the person was born/raised and their relationship to living in the U.S. as opposed to their age group. Thus, there may have been first and second generation women in the sample who are close to one another in age.

Given the small and tight-knit nature of the community, I have provided the sample overview here in an aggregated form to help protect some degree of anonymity. When women provided consent for participating in the research, I assured them that I would not be using names in any of the writing that came out of the dissertation given the aforementioned concern about people being fairly identifiable in the context of a small community. Providing anonymity to research participants through the use of pseudonyms is a taken-for-granted approach in most qualitative studies, though it has also been noted that there are political implications to such choices made by researchers (Guenther, 2009). In this study, I decided against using pseudonyms, particularly given that names (especially in a South Asian context) are often signifiers of family background, caste, region, age/generation, etc. and I didn't want to misrepresent any of these positionalities by my choice of pseudonyms. Instead, I use participant numbers to refer to interviewees in an anonymous way when sharing their quotes here. I have also made efforts to remove identifiable information from any quotes I have extracted to use in this dissertation.

CHAPTER 4: “IN INDIA YOU DIDN’T HAVE TO DEFINE THE INDIANNESS IN YOU”: FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION WOMEN NARRATE RACE AND ETHNICITY

In the call for performers for the YKB project, the announcement reads as open to all “South Asian women.” This project, as well as other community based projects, is based on an identity-based model that assumes that the grouping “South Asian women” is a coherent, unitary, and natural ethnic identity category. This assumption, of a shared experience of ethnic identification is a strong component of how this project, and many other community-based efforts, have been historically and currently framed as “culturally-specific” initiatives.

Given the framing of YKB as a culturally-specific women’s project in the South Asian community, and dominant, normalizing discourses of “culture” and “ethnic groups” as monolithic and stable, I entered this project with an idea that the South Asian women’s narratives would cohere in the sample in terms of how ethnic/racial identity was articulated by participants. In contrast, I expected that women would narrate greater variance in terms of how they talk about their gendered experience. However, women’s narratives actually reflected the opposite: the way that women talked about ethnic/racial identity was diverse and reflected a range of themes in how women accounted for their identities and how they constructed their identities through their talk. In particular, there were notable differences between how first and second generation women narrated ethnic/racial identities that point to important diversities within the community as well as challenging the stable, essential understanding of “South Asian” (or “Indian”) as an ethnic/racial category. The differences in the ways that women narrate their ethnic/racial identities and the discourses they draw upon also elucidate differences in meaning-making around race/ethnicity as well as the impacts of very different socialization processes and contexts that shape first and second generation women’s narrative self-making.

In culturally-specific practice settings I have been a part of, immigration status and generational differences have been present as a salient marker of difference of identity, experience, meaning-making, and power, and yet very little explicit conversation or work has directly addressed these issues. On some level, within these organizational and community spaces, there is often an acceptance of a kind of “strategic essentialism” in which differences within the ethnic/cultural community are subsumed or glossed over in order to reach the perceived larger goal of programs, services, or organizing within a framework of shared ethnic/cultural identity. Or, there may be some degree of acknowledgement of difference articulated in a simplistic, dichotomous, or superficial way. While a comprehensive review of the pros and cons of identity politics-based approaches or culturally-specific programming is beyond the scope of my current discussion, the project I have undertaken here raises important issues in regard to the diversity within a racialized group in terms of how ethnic identity is understood, taken up by individuals, and the meanings attached to it—particularly as narrated differently across generations within an immigrant community. In addition, understanding these divergent perspectives continues to challenge social work to consider issues of race/ethnicity in different and more complex ways.

While ethnic, racial, and cultural identity have been widely studied across a range of disciplines, most approaches have focused on issues of assimilation and acculturation (e.g., Berry, 1997; Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993) and/or developmental perspectives of ethnic identity (e.g., Phinney, 1989). Others, particularly from sociological or anthropological perspectives have provided more community-specific accounts of South Asian diasporic experiences and cultural identity formations in the U.S. (e.g., Bhatia, 2007; Khandelwal, 2002;; Rudrappa, 2004), or second generation youth experiences (e.g., Maira, 2002; Purkayastha, 2005).

While these works have all provided some important articulations of ethnic identity and experience within the South Asian diaspora in the U.S., only one published study that I located has specifically explored discourse and language in shaping how South Asians narrate their identities (Malhi, Boon, & Rogers, 2009). This study, based in Canada, focused on immigrant women's articulations of South Asianness and Canadianness in describing themselves. In addition, none of the aforementioned literature that was focused either on first or second generation South Asians in the U.S., looked at both groups together or at generational differences explicitly.

Sunil Bhatia (2007), in his ethnographic account of race, culture, and identity in the Indian diaspora, focuses his analysis on the experiences of middle-class Indian immigrants in a U.S. city on the East Coast. In his analysis of ethnic and racial identity within his sample, Bhatia writes that "discourses of racial identity in the Indian diaspora suggest that we need to rethink traditional notions of immigrant adaptation and acculturation in cross-cultural psychology" (p. 185). He goes further to note that while existing work has been important to starting to address issues of identity within immigrant communities, most scholarship has relied on developing universal models and linear trajectories that rely on "fixed states and stages" that does not account for "culturally distinct, politically entrenched experiences" (p. 185). I would also add that such scholarship has not looked at narratives or the ways people enact narrative self-making processes in varied contexts.

In line with Bhatia's critique, Verkuyten (2005) also writes that in psychological studies, ethnic minority identifications are seen as relatively stable and internal states that are often not seen as adequately flexible or contextual. Based on such critiques, discursive psychologists such as Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Edwards (2004) have taken up an analysis of discourse and

people's language to understand social psychological phenomenon such as self-concept and identity. Instead of focusing on cognitive experience, identities and attitudes are viewed through a framework of discursive actions in which people's linguistic identifications are not simply reflections of inner worlds but are instead discursively constructed social actions that take place through peoples' talk. Verkuyten (2005) also asserts that attention to the structural and cultural conditions that produce identity options is extremely important to considerations of ethnic identity.

A number of empirical studies have emphasized discourse as a way to consider how people narrate themselves in relationship to race/ethnicity as well as highlighting the importance of this approach to language in considering issues of cultural/racial identification. In particular, a few studies have looked at immigrant communities to gain insight on the unique aspects of how ethnic identity is understood through the language used by members of these communities (e.g., Malhi et al., 2009; Merino & Tileaga, 2011; Verkuyten & de Wolf, 2002a, 2002b). In contrast to more common social scientific approaches to looking at ethnic/racial/cultural identity, I draw upon a discursive psychological approach to ethnic identity to investigate how South Asian women talk about race/ethnicity through their narratives.

Guiding this analysis are a few central theoretical underpinnings from discursive psychology put forth by a number of scholars such as, Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Edwards (2004). First is the assumption that ethnic/racial/cultural identity is socially constructed. In contrast to more positivist perspectives on ethnic identity or acculturation, this view focuses on the variability of ethnic identity construction, the importance of context in shaping how such identities get constructed, and how such identities may be formed given larger social, political, and historical conditions. Discursive psychological views on ethnic identification also stress that

talk is a social activity and thus self-definition is constructed through interaction. As Verkuyten (2005) posits, “ethnic self-definitions can be seen as something people do instead of being the result of perception” (p. 196). Taking this view, then, while ethnic identity can be seen as a social category or perception of social categorization, I am interested in how race/ethnicity is actively constructed by the women through their self-reporting as well as what larger stories about South Asianness and race/ethnicity are narrated across women’s accounts.

In addition, I view ethnic/cultural identity, as expressed by the women, as a set of meanings and practices that women construct through their talk. Similar to Reynolds and Wetherell’s (2003) perspective on single women’s narrative identity construction, I propose that ethnic identity can be viewed as a set of personal narratives and subject positions. In particular, I take the view that social history, practices, language, and ideologies around South Asianness and ethnic/cultural identity construct a “cultural slot and a set of identity possibilities” for individuals (p. 493) and within this, at a personal level, people develop narrative accounts of themselves by drawing on available discursive resources. Thus, I am interested in how women make sense of their subjectivities through talk, and in particular, will focus here on the differences between how first and second generation participants account for ethnic identity in their narratives.

Useful in analyzing how South Asian women narrate their ethnic/cultural/racial identities is the concept of “interpretive repertoires” (Edley, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Interpretive repertoires, a central construct in discursive psychology, is a “lexicon” or “register of terms and metaphors” drawn upon to evaluate actions and events (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 138). Edley (2001), points to their utility as building blocks for conversation, a range of resources that can be drawn upon interactions, and terms that create a shared social understanding. Edley draws on the metaphor of a library wherein interpretive repertoires are books that narrators have available for

borrowing—so when people talk about things they do so in already existing terms. Drawing on Gee’s concept of discourse models, I use the concept of “interpretive repertoires” to reference the “storylines” that members of a group share (Gee, 2005, p. 95). I also assume that such “storylines” exist within specific discourses or are shared across discourses. Also important to the exploration of “interpretive repertoires” is that they are, in essence, ideological tropes that individuals draw upon in their self-making through narrative. Therefore, looking at the interpretive repertoires that South Asian women take up in constructing their accounts of race/ethnicity, helps to illuminate some of the larger ideological positions regarding South Asians in the U.S. more broadly. Central to the approach taken here is the assumption that social identities are constructed (rather than given) from varied interpretive repertoires available to people (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

“Being,” “Feeling,” and “Doing” Ethnicity

In their 2002 study, Verkuyten and de Wolf utilized a discursive psychological approach to analyze self-reporting about ethnic identity from Chinese youth living in the Netherlands. Since they take the stance that ethnic self-definitions are social practices, they look at people’s talk to study how ethnic identities are defined and accounted for by Chinese young people in their sample. Central to their approach is an assumption that ethnic identity is not self-evident but, rather, is justified in talk and raises issues of belonging and difference. In their study, Verkuyten and de Wolf identify three different ways that youth account for their ethnic identities: “being,” “feeling,” and “doing” Chinese (2002b, p. 379). “Being” discourses were taken up when individuals saw their ethnic identities as more biologically determined. For example, being a member of an ethnic group was highly associated with more biologically-oriented explanations—such as being born Chinese or appearing Chinese and this being a

relatively fixed state. Taking up discourses of “feeling” Chinese and/or Dutch was also used as a way to report on ethnic identity. “Feeling” discourses reflected less determinism than the “being” discourses. Instead, “feeling” discourses reflected often an internal self-perception or private emotional connection to ethnic identity. This was often explained by talking about how one was raised or socialized. “Doing” Chinese was also a way that youth accounted for ethnic identity by talking about “doing” cultural activities or practices associated with group membership (e.g., language, holidays, etc.) as central to being able to claim a Chinese vs. Dutch identity.

In the following analysis, I draw upon Verkuyten and de Wolf’s (2002a) framework of “being,” “feeling,” and “doing” as a heuristic to further enhance my analysis of accounts of ethnic identity taken up by South Asian women in my sample. In particular, I’m interested in how Verkuyten and de Wolf’s analysis of “being,” “feeling,” and “doing” can be used to understand differential accounts of racial/ethnic/cultural identity from first and second generation women. I describe how women talk differently about their identities with particular attention to how women differentially utilize these discourses of “being, doing, and feeling” (Verkuyten & de Wolf, 2002a) in their self-descriptions, differences in how women talk about race, and significant life events that women report having shifted something about how they see their racial/ethnic identity. The approach I am taking here is a hybrid one—to some extent a content analysis of the narratives while also looking at the language women use and how this is central to their self-making processes. The application of the “being, feeling, and doing” paradigm is embedded in the thematic analysis that follows.

While all participants knew coming into the study that I was interested in the life experiences, identities, and YKB experiences of “South Asian women,” I was also aware that

this was language that externally organized the YKB project (and other community-based efforts) but may or may not reflect how women self-identify and that this language may have different meaning to individuals. Thus, early on in each interview, I asked participants “How do you identify in terms of your race, ethnicity, and/or culture?” The framing of the question was intentionally left quite open and incorporated the signifiers “race, ethnicity, and culture” as various ways that one might identify themselves across these dimensions. I also asked this question as one of the opening questions in the interview and to the extent possible, I carried the language they used to respond in the interview questions that followed. For example if someone stated they identified as “Indian American,” I would then later use this language in a question about gender, such as: “What did you learn growing up about what it meant to be an Indian American woman?”

Accounting for Ethnic Identity

In the field of discursive psychology, a number of scholars have written about the importance of “accounts” or, the ways that people describe themselves, as social actions. For instance, accounts do work such as explanation, justification, or blaming (Antaki, 1994). In taking up discursive view of how people talk about their identities, I was interested in how women talked about their ethnic/racial identity and experience and the extent to which they seemed to “account” for these claimed positions through their talk.

One of the things most evident in my sample was the extent to which women felt compelled to account for their ethnic identities or not. Overall, when asked about how they identified in terms of race, ethnicity, and/or culture, first generation women most often provided fairly extensive accounts about their self-making processes. In some cases, women did not even directly answer the question, but rather accounted for the difficulty they had in answering the

question or narrated a lengthy account of why and how they have come to identify how they do over time. For several women, their answer to that question was followed by pages of response in the interview transcript. What was striking about this was that most of the immigrant women did not see ethnic/racial identity as something that was self-evident or easy to respond to. Instead they saw it as deeply contextual, something that changed over time, and something that needed to be described and explained.

In contrast to the first generation women, the second generation women tended to account for their ethnic/racial identities considerably less. For many of these women, this question did not seem to be difficult to answer and they were much more likely to answer with a direct reporting of identity terms, such as “I am South Asian American” and would expand more when probed. What this suggests to me is that second generation women in the sample were more likely than the first generation women to view ethnic/racial identification as self-evident or given. It is also possible that given their experience of growing up as minorities in a (white) majority U.S. culture, the second generation women displayed a greater comfort level and familiarity with having to claim and articulate a racial/ethnic identity than the first generation women who grew up being racially the majority in South Asia. It was also clear from this difference in accounting that for second generation women, ethnic/racial identification was less contested and more “clear cut” than for the first generation women. In addition, across the sample, women who had had a more contested or complicated relationship to their racial ethnic identity over their lives would account for their identification more through explanations or arguments. For example, P6 a one and a half generation woman (who came to the U.S. when she was in elementary school) talks about all of the various family identities and experience that

figure in to how she thinks about her own ethnicity/race/culture (note: this is a very excerpted piece of her much longer narrative response to this one question):

It's really strange because I was born in Pakistan and my two eldest sisters were born in Pakistan and there's like a very strong like nationalist discourse, so I feel like very passionately sometimes about being Pakistani. But then my dad was born in India and moved when he was three to Pakistan.... And then my mom was born in East Africa, but she's South Asian. So three generations were from Kenya, but originally from Gujarat.... So I sort of have a mixed identity. And then religiously I identify as Muslim, Shia, Nizari Ismaili. So I think in different spaces I identify differently depending on like who's there and the purpose of the space.

Similar to P6's closing sentence above, across interviews, it was very common for women to point out that how they would identify themselves racially, ethnically, or culturally would depend on where they were, who they were around, and who was asking. This highlights one of the ways that women across the sample indicated feeling a sense of agency in regard to racial/ethnic identification and conscious awareness around asserting their identities differently across contexts. For example, if within Indian or South Asian circles, many women expressed that they would be more likely to claim a regional identity such as being South Indian or Bengali or identify with their religion more than their ethnic/racial group. P17, a second generation woman, explains how she might identify differently with different people that she interacts with:

I feel like—oftentimes when I'm talking to older generations of South Asians, I clarify that I'm Indian or that I'm Hindu. Sometimes with my generation as well—or not my generation. Sometimes with folks that are first-generation that are around my age, they'll often ask, it's like “Where you from? Are you from India?” or something like that and then I'll be like “Yeah, I am.” And I'm not like “Oh, I'm South Asian, actually.” But I feel like if I'm asked, generally, I'll say South Asian-American unless it's like a South Asian person.

The majority of women in the sample drew upon discourses of “feeling” in their accounts as well—many used language such as “I think of myself as...,” or “I feel like I am...,” indicating

that their sense of identification was very internally driven, or something they saw themselves as having agency to choose to assert in various ways or at various times.

P6, who is quoted above, suggests the conscious importance of ethnic identity “talk” as a social action. In her narrative she recounts how she might claim a more Pakistani identity in a South Asian space that is majority Indian while in a Pakistani space her identity as a minority Muslim may be more salient. She also points out that she may choose to express these identities in these other spaces specifically because she is minoritized within them. Relatedly, another participant, P20, points out the importance of context in highlighting the identity that differentiates her from those she is around:

If it’s a professional circle, I define myself as a linguist. If it’s a, you know, male-dominated circle, I define myself as a woman. Or whichever just differentiates myself as one. So I could use myself as Indian, but if you say, you know, “What is your identity?” depends on the context, really.

Findings

Across interviews, a number of consistent themes emerged around how women identified themselves: the importance of context, ethnic identity as something that has changed over time and life course, family and place/geography of origin as part of how women talk about ethnic identity, and salience of gender, class, and religion as aspects of ethnic/cultural/racial identification. The majority of the women expressed some consciousness about what identity they asserted and when, which also underscores their sense of agency and the way that identity talk performs certain social actions in varied contexts. However, there was variance between first and second generation women in relationship to how they accounted for racial identity, the dominant “interpretive repertoires” they employed to construct their subject positions in relationship to race, ethnicity, and culture, the ways they utilized “being, feeling, and doing”

discourses in talking about race/ethnicity, and life events that shaped their understandings of ethnic/racial difference. Overall, the dominant differences within first and second generation women's narratives centered around their relationship to racial and ethnic identification and what life events had figured significantly in their understandings of themselves as ethnic/racialized subjects.

In this study, the ways that women in the sample talked about racial/ethnic identification was consistent with this ambiguity about race South Asians have historically had within the context of the U.S. (see Chapter 2 for overview). How women saw themselves and narrated their identities in relationship to race was a significant realm in which there were differences across generational experience. First and second generation women in the sample took up different discourses to talk about their ethnic/racial identities and accounted for their identifications differently.

First Generation Women's Narratives

I am continually struck by how much the immigrant women do not see themselves as people of color, or if they do, this is not at all central to how they talk about themselves. Sometimes it makes me feel crazy, especially since so much about my socialization growing up and my experience has been racialized. It does make me think about how different it must be to grow up in a place where everyone essentially looks like you and where race is not necessarily the salient axis of social stratification and difference. How does that shape you? What does difference feel like in your body when it is not along the dimension of race? I really cannot imagine what that is like.

And that kind of socialization combined with other privilege around migration must contribute to these different ways that first gen women see themselves. It really is interesting how much this is emerging as a difference across first and second gen women. It makes sense, I suppose, that when you grow up in the context of the U.S., race means something different to you. I mean, it has to, really.... —From research journal, December 2011

The ethnicity paradigm.

Congruent with Koshy's (1998) analysis of dominant ways that South Asians have constructed racial identification in the U.S., within the sample, the immigrant women tended to reflect one of the approaches that Koshy articulates—an emphasis on ethnicity and class, a reliance on discourses of “color-blind” meritocracy, and a lack of engagement with racialization or the salience of race within a U.S. context. When describing their ethnic, racial, or cultural identity, first generation women's narratives emphasized country of origin (i.e., being from India), cultural practices (such as food and language), and regional and linguistic affiliations. Omi and Winant (1994) note that this “ethnicity paradigm,” in which ethnicity/culture is used to account for race, continues to be popular with immigrant groups who consider themselves as unmarked by racialization in the U.S. They also argue that this perspective can emphasize cultural arguments and individual merit while rendering class, color, and racism as inconsequential. Cornell and Hartmann (2007) also assert that traditional conceptualizations of “ethnicity” have focused on shared culture, national origin, and descent as well as shared historical experience and kinship patterns.

P03, a first generation woman who has been in the U.S. for nearly 20 years, shares about her ethnicity and racial identity:

Race is Indian. Ethnicity is South Asian. Culture is very truly—I really feel like an Indian person, you know. And if you are ask—when it comes to Indian I really—even though I was—my father is from Karnataka, like Konkani-speaking. My mother is a Maharashtran, raised in Maharashtra. But I truly feel like a Bombay-ite, you know, it's that very proud to be one and I'm an obnoxious Bombay-ite!
(P03)

Using discourses of “feeling,” P03 calls her race and culture “Indian”—which is actually an ethnic signifier (as opposed to a racial one) in the context of the U.S. Like many of the other women, her ethnic/cultural identity is also linked in her narrative to her family's

regional/geographic background, language affiliation, and relationship to the city where she grew up. This also points to a broader interpretive repertoire of ethnicity as centrally linked to national origin. Her association with region and language also underscore the ways that these figure as salient markers of difference within India. Interestingly, she takes up the term “South Asian” to account for ethnicity, though South Asian is actually a racialized construct in the context of the U.S. Similarly, P19, a recent immigrant to the U.S., when asked about her racial, ethnic, or cultural background says:

...it would be Indian. And culture, it's like, it's—I am a very traditional Indian girl, you know? When it comes to living, when it comes to—and I am not into a lot of going to temples and things like that. I believe in God but I can go to any place for that, you know. I really don't like people who are very, you know, what do you call them, like, too Muslim or too Brahmin or too much of anything, you know. I don't like that in anyone, so, I'm an Indian and I like it that way. I love India. I love the culture there. And, you know, my heart, my soul, everything is Indian, very much.

P19 also draws on the “ethnicity paradigm” (Omi & Winant, 1994) in describing herself in ethnic/racial terms as Indian. She also heavily utilizes discourses of “being” as her “heart and soul” are Indian. As was true in many of the first generation women’s narratives, in her self-identification, she references both religion and caste as part of her thinking about this aspect of herself—again highlighting the importance of these axes of diversity and identity within South Asia.

The majority of first generation women did not utilize the term “South Asian” for themselves except for in relationship to community-based projects or organizations that used this language and instead drew on descriptors of ethnicity and specific national origin. For example, one woman stated that she only used the term “South Asian” when she was facilitating or leading a project in the community (such as YKB) because that was the language community organizations used, but that she did not use that language for herself in her own life. Another

woman called herself “Southeast Asian” in our conversation, indicating the lack of familiarity with the construct of “South Asia” (as Southeast Asian refers to a different region within Asia that does not include India).

Congruent with what emerged in first generation women’s interviews, a number of scholars have asserted that middle-class first generation South Asians (who were born and raised in South Asia) are less likely to claim racial identities and see themselves as raced, but rather hold onto identities through claiming ethnicity and culture (Badruddoja, 2009; Bhatia, 2007; George, 1997; Kibria, 1996). Relatedly, Cornell and Hartmann (2007) emphasize that ethnicity (in contrast to race) often originates with self-assertion as opposed to assignation of group membership from the dominant culture. P14 relates how she sees her ethnic/racial experience as she narrates her ethnicity in relationship to her class status:

I think of myself as a very typical, professional Indian. I mean, woman of course, but somebody who was brought up with a lot of freedom, and so I didn’t feel very constricted growing up. Yes, there were a few decisions that were forced on me, but in general I had a pretty good upbringing. And I feel very comfortable as, you know, being an Indian in America.

Consistent with many of the participants (both first and second generation women), in responding to a question about race/ethnicity also references her class positionality (as a “professional”), gender, as well as gesturing toward the importance of her family upbringing in how she views herself. She also draws upon discourses of “feeling” and asserts her agency around self-making as she states she “feels comfortable” being an Indian in America and “thinks of herself” as a typical, professional Indian. Her use of the word “typical” also connotes that she has in her mind an image of a “normal” professional Indian that she perceives herself to represent.

Bhatia (2007) notes in his study of middle class Indian immigrants that while taking up the discourse of the universal human condition, South Asians are also simultaneously preoccupied with creation and maintenance of a symbolic cultural identity. This concept was developed to refer to the ethnic self and community-identification practices of white ethnics who could participate in cultural practice while maintaining white privilege (Waters, 1990). However, with South Asians, it does not actually apply in the same way because they are racialized subjects in the U.S. social structure. However, middle-class Indians do reflect that they would like to be able to participate in cultural practices in traditions without the consequences of racism or the social costs associated with being Indian or people of color (Bhatia, 2007). George (1997) also writes:

The professional class of South Asians in the U.S. has to negotiate between this desire to pass unnoticed and the desire to control the ways in which one's ethnicity and skin color are read. Upper class and upper-caste Indians in the U.S. do not want to pass for white or to escape blackness as much as they wish to move unconsciously and unobstructed through the public sphere as they do in India. This desired invisibility is forever thwarted by the fact that one's racial difference is visible and open to classification and misclassification. (p. 48)

In the interviews I conducted, this was narrated most often by women taking up “doing” discourses in which women emphasized “doing” ethnic/cultural identity through South Asian food, clothing, religious holidays, and building community with other South Asians. P08 who accounted for her ethnic identity extensively in her interview through explanation and historical context emphasizes her “great culture”:

I don't closely identify with being Telugu or being Muslim or you know I—yeah, I just feel like I can relate to anybody of any culture, so that doesn't define me. I love it. I love that I have this great culture and I'm trying to, you know, teach my sons like—we celebrate Diwali every year, for example. And whatever little—but I love the clothes or, you know, things like that.

Through both the ethnicity paradigm—linking ethnic identification with regional, linguistic, familial backgrounds and through discourses of “doing” culture, first generation women narrated ethnic identity in neutral, descriptive terms. They rarely spoke about discrimination based on these identifications in their accounts or how they saw power or social dynamics involved with claiming these identities. This is consistent with Cornell and Hartmann’s position that the links between power and ethnicity are more context dependent than are those between power and race and that power may or may not be an aspect of ethnicity. This is also congruent with the desire to take up “symbolic ethnicity” without the costs associated with racism or social marginalization.

Bhatia (2007) asserts that first generation South Asians want to be able to make a choice about backgrounding/foregrounding Indian identity—specifically they are not trying to erase their ethnicity but to do not necessarily want to attach racialized meanings to their identities. P13 narrates her ethnic identity in a unique way in regard to “backgrounding and foregrounding” of her Indianness. When asked how being an Indian woman is different for her in different contexts, P13 responds:

I think if I’m in (neighborhood where she works)...I don’t consider being an—like it’s not part of my identity. If I work in (another city), it is, because there are a lot of patients that are from India, and so that part of me comes out in terms of speaking with a child in say, Gujarati or Marathi or Hindi or some other language that they might be comfortable in. So when I’m in (city name), that Indian identity comes out just because there are other Indians that are my patients. When I’m in India, again, it’s not a big deal. Everybody’s Indian. So I think the only time that the Indian-ness comes out is when I’m surrounded outside India, why it is. That’s the only time. Like, if I’m not with Indians here, it doesn’t come out, and if I’m within India with other Indians, it doesn’t come out.

Maira (2002) states that the use of ethnic identification by Indians is a way to position Indian ethnic identity outside of the racial structure of the U.S. and to deflect identity with less privileged minority groups. Relatedly, several scholars assert that, in fact, South Asians in the

U.S. avoid race by instead stressing their ethnic/cultural identity and class privilege. Because a significant percentage of South Asian Americans are positioned within the middle class and often employed in professional, white collar jobs, they can be seen as “proof” of a color blind meritocracy or “American Dream” success stories (Bhatia, 2007; George, 1997; Koshy, 2001).

Koshy (1998) writes:

The seduction of the rhetoric of a meritocracy is that it affirms the value of their achievements while simultaneously coding these successes as quintessentially American. Of necessity, such a rhetoric positions their achievements against those of other minorities. (p. 306)

This is also consistent with Prashad’s (2000) analysis of the ways that the state (and corporate interests) participate in creating the structural conditions that allow for South Asians to occupy a privileged position in the U.S. racial and economic order which further perpetuates anti-black racism.

Bhatia’s (2007) ethnographic work also confirmed the ways that first generation South Asians in professional jobs saw their race/ethnicity as separate from their merit and were able to do so because of the privilege of being in a dominant, powerful social position. As Bhatia accurately documents, “paradoxically many Indians do not recognize that they are already speaking from a position of privilege when they cast their identities in terms of the universal human condition” (p. 203) or when they are able to construct individual self-definition that is based on individual merit.

Discourses of “universal humanity” and an essential self.

Related to the discourse of meritocracy that Koshy and Bhatia describe, a number of first generation women in the sample took up discourses of universal humanity to discuss racial/ethnic identification of themselves as well as their connection to others of different ethnic backgrounds. This interpretive repertoire encompassed two primary ideas: 1) the idea that we

are all “human beings” first and foremost and that this transcends race, ethnicity, nation, or culture, and 2) the belief in an internal, essential, and bounded self that is free of race, ethnicity or culture. This allowed women to see themselves as having an essential self that does not have “race” or “ethnicity” but rather that race/ethnicity are “layers” on this internal self and thus can be put on or shed as needed. For example P24 accounts for her racial identity first by considering herself visibly “brown” but then going on to posit that she, in fact, sees identity as unimportant to her and something she can take on and off:

I mean, race is—I just like to say I’m brown. I mean, I don’t have any other label for it, because that’s the obvious thing you see, but I really don’t actually. And for the longest time I said, I’d said Indian-American...and even that I rarely use anymore. I feel very connected to human beings across those—I mean, I know lots of people do, but more and more I feel so much more that I see my identity as a piece of clothing, that I could wear or take off. And I understand that I’m wearing a piece of clothing, and you look at me and evaluate me by that, so I can tell you, “Yes, I’m wearing Indian-American,” but I understand what’s behind that is just my naked self, and that doesn’t have an identity.

P24’s comments here construct the body as having a race (being “brown”) that is visible to others, but she sees herself as able to transcend this and instead evokes the discourse of universal humanity in explaining her connection to human beings generally. As she continues, her analogy of “identity as a piece of clothing” also illustrates a construction of an internal, authentic self that is unmarked by race, culture, and ethnicity but that can be “dressed up” by these social identities. P24’s perspective again demonstrates a high level of sense of agency around asserting her identity as she is able to decide not to use a particular term for herself any longer and to “not see” identity labels.

P02, in her lengthy account of her racial/ethnic identification specifically contrasts her experience of ethnicity in the U.S. versus what she experienced in India:

I think in India, I think it was, you know, you didn't have to define the Indianness in you. You were just who you are. So all you have to do is focus on the work that

you did or, you know, just be out there and do the things, like live a normal life. I think here, you have that added layer of you are an Indian, you're expected to be—you dress a certain way, act a certain way, cook food a certain way. And then you're trying to define your, you know, your career or your whatever your interests are. And so I find that, you know, being here, I'm more Indian than would be if I were in India.

As P02 narrates her ethnic/racial identification, while she does reflect a sense of agency in regard to self-making, she also begins to point to the idea of her ethnic identity as being assigned by the culture here in the U.S. that expects her to perform Indianness in a particular way. This reflects a tension facing immigrant groups of color who may assert a particular identity or see themselves in a certain way but are assigned identity and difference by the dominant culture once they arrived and become minoritized racially and ethnically in the U.S. (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Rudrappa, 2004).

P02's self-making narrative centers on how she feels that as an Indian living in the U.S. there are certain expectations of how she should behave and perform cultural practices such as food and dress. P02 also draws on the discourse of "being"—the essential unmarked self that she could be in India but that here, she has to add the layer of "doing" Indianness. Similar to P24, P02 uses the image of a "layer" of culture/ethnicity as a something that is put on to an essential, unmarked, self.

Part of drawing on the universal humanity repertoire also included women emphasizing their sameness to Americans or people of various other ethnic/cultural backgrounds. For instance, P20, when relating how her sense of being an Indian woman changed when coming to the U.S. reports that it made her see more in common across people, especially between people in India and in the U.S.:

In fact, what I realized, one big thing I realized, was when I came here was people are the same, actually, everywhere. It doesn't matter, you know? You find the same kind of wonderful people. You find the same kind of assholes you find—you

know, everyone is—you know, it's pretty much a given set if you go anywhere, you know.

Similarly, when talking about her own ethnic/cultural identity, P10 draws on scientific discourse to accentuate her perspective about how she now sees more commonalities between herself and other people of different cultural backgrounds:

As I start asking these questions and then you read a whole lot of things that are out there and so yeah, human genes, separated, or the DNA between people it's—the difference is 0.001% or some small thing like that, and—but it's fascinating what gets expressed and what gets held back, you know. So as you see and read all these things and especially I think in America you going to school here, having friends from different cultures and races, and how they deal with problems and dating and relationships, sex, marriage, whatever else, and you talk to them, it's like, “Okay, you know, my story is not so different, how is that.” You know. So what is that that makes me, me, or what is that that makes anybody them?

Being a world citizen or belonging to multiple nation-states.

In addition to drawing on nationality as a central descriptor of ethnicity through Indian identity, a number of women also find other ways to talk about their experience of diaspora in relationship to nationality. Purkayastha (2005) writes that the nation-state as seen as the primary “container” for ethnic identity construction as many models of considering ethnicity focus on relationships between host and home countries that are assumed to be markedly separate. In contrast to this binary understanding of host and home countries, a number of first generation women in the sample narrate themselves as not belonging to any nation-state or belonging to multiple nationalities which is consistent with the work of many diaspora scholars and transnational and globalization theorizing regarding the shifting role of the nation-state (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Mishra, 1998). This also underscores the centrality of nationality and national belonging in the interpretive repertoires that women draw upon to construct their sense of their ethnic/racial identification. In addition, draws attention to the diasporic aspects of women's identities as they have multiple homes, maintain significant ties to family in South Asia and have

varied geographic points of connection. In particular, several women drew on language of being a “world citizen” or a “global citizen” to signify this way of transcending identification with specific nation-state formations. For instance, P23 and P10, when asked to talk about their ethnic/racial/cultural experiences respond:

“where I’m from” is no longer an easy question.... This was—yeah, you know, ultimately it’s a jumble of genes is where I’m from. And yeah, a world citizen....
(P10)

So I’m sort of a mix of everything that I’ve been so far which is, you know, all the places that I’ve lived in India, the North, South, West, as well as California and Seattle. There’s a part of me that is still an LA girl in some sense....So I really think of myself as a sort of a global citizen at this point. Also because I travel a lot for pleasure, so, and I’m very comfortable traveling in another countries and but from my ethnicity standpoint, I think of myself as an evolved Indian. (P23)

P23’s narrative exemplifies the sense of self as belonging to and being comfortable in different countries, while still drawing on the “ethnicity paradigm” as Indian. Her use of the word “evolved” is also interesting here as she is marking herself as being particularly developed or advanced as an Indian person, presumably because of her “global citizen” identification.

P14 accounts for her sense of belonging to multiple nation-states through a culturally-specific metaphor of marriage and joint families:

...The analogy that I keep coming to my head is like immigrating is like marriage. So when you come, just like when you get married, you are really attached to your mother’s home. You’re kind of wary of your in-laws. And then slowly you see—you start identifying with your in-laws as well and you start seeing the good and bad points. And you’re not so—the umbilical cord is not so tightly tied to your home. And then you identify with both the families and you’re part of both the families, and that’s how I see immigration.

Significance of migration.

Across the sample, all of the women indicated that how they identified themselves in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture had changed over time. For the first generation women, immigration to the U.S. figured prominently as a factor in first generation women’s ethnic

identity. Clearly, migration has significant implications for how South Asians view their identity across contexts and in relationship to nationality, ethnicity, and race. Shukla (2003) writes that “...the affective dimension of being Indian is changed by the diaspora and by being located in and through the processes of racialization, ethnicization, and nationalization” (p. 10).

Critical to understanding South Asian racial and ethnic identity in the U.S. is the reality that South Asian Americans view issues of identity in ways that are deeply informed by conceptualizations and experiences of social stratification and difference that are carried with them from their countries of origin. Kibria (1996) and Purkayastha (2010) both posit that this may be even more salient for South Asians given that as a group they tend to maintain strong transnational relationships and ties to their home country. As Koshy (1998) points out, the racial positioning of South Asians in the U.S. is complex and contradictory and that “prevailing constructions of South Asian American racial identity tend to simplify the complex hierarchies of color, class, and caste immigrants bring with them from their homeland by collapsing it with the historical patterns of race in the host country (p. 287). While in the U.S., race is a “commonsense aspect of reality” that serves as a “basic frame of reference by which to order and interpret social relationships” (Kibria, 1996, p. 78), race/ethnicity doesn’t have the same resonance or role in social relations in South Asia where first generation women were born and raised. Rudrappa (2002), a first generation South Asian scholar writes:

Indians like myself arrive from India with no conception of ourselves in racial terms instead, our caste/class is crucial. Religion matters. Gender and region of origin within India are significant to the ways we conceive of our self. Upon arrival in the United States we postcolonial immigrants suddenly become racialized. We have to rethink ourselves in different ways than we did in the past to negotiate the racial hierarchies that structure American society. From being persons with no tangible race—for we do not think of ourselves in racial terms in India—we become people of color in this society. (p. 85)

Much like Rudrappa has articulated, first generation women also talked about how their sense of racialized and ethnic difference emerged after coming to the U.S. While I did not inquire specifically about the experience the immigrant women had in growing up somewhere where they were racially/ethnically similar to the majority of people around them, many of the first generation women often articulated that they didn't have to think about issues of race, ethnicity, or culture when they were in South Asia but that they now thought about these things differently as a result of being in the U.S. Though women throughout their narratives had a strong sense of being able to assert their identities, in talking about how their ethnic/racial identifications changed after coming to the U.S., many women talked about the ways that identities were put on them—or assigned to them by others—when they got here. This was narrated in terms of different expectations women felt that people had of them in the U.S. as South Asian immigrant women.

For example, P10 talks about how her sense of ethnic identification shifted after being in the U.S:

(In India)...I guess you didn't pay too much attention because everybody else around you looked—and had the same kind of habits, and you know, ate the same thing, there might have been a few differences, but you were more curious about you know, that meant was probably just the Muslims and Christians or somebody from this part of India does things a certain way, and so on. So it was, it—I don't know how I process it, it didn't—you know, only in America, when you come and you're constantly asked about your Indianness is when it's like, “Okay, yeah I'm Indian.” I need to become better at that. This is what makes me different and so on.

In her narrative, she reiterates an important point about social stratification in South Asia: the salience of religion and region were the markers of difference that she might have been more aware of in that context when everyone looked like her and had similar cultural practices (i.e., habits and food). Interestingly, and consistent with other first generation women's narratives,

P10 also points to the assignation of difference and ethnicity that has felt since coming to the U.S. as she is being “constantly asked about her Indianness.” P10 also implies that it is the assignation of difference that made her realize her own Indianness in some way. She also says “I need to become better at that,” implying, also a sense of there being a “correct” or “good” way to perform Indianness as difference in the U.S. This was also reflected in P02’s narrative:

And so I find that, you know, being here, I’m more Indian than I would be if I were in India. Like I, you know, we celebrate everything with more rigor than we used to do back at home. Because there, it just used to happen. And you didn’t have a choice, if it was Diwali, you’d went out and did Diwali things...But here you have to make a conscious effort. And I also find, like, you know, when I was growing up, henna, you know the mehndi thing was like, we weren’t allowed to do it at school because, you know, it was a Catholic school...And even when growing up, it was something that that if you were a modern forward-thinking girl, you wouldn’t do it...And so I was not at all into it. And here, I go to my kids’ school, I have a cultural night and that’s all I’m doing. Because that means it’s Indian. So, if I look at it from different lens, it’s almost like regressing in my view. But then I’m expected to do that, you know. I’m expected to cook curries, or you know, whatever it is. Yeah. And expected to behave a certain way, just because I’m an Indian. So I find the Indianness kind of is more focused here, than who I am.

P02 draws upon discourses of “doing” as she feels the externally imposed expectation to perform Indianness through food, cultural practices (such as mehndi). She also notes a shift from “being” Indian in India to “doing” Indianness in the U.S. as she differentiates “who she is” from “Indianness”—also furthering the understanding of having an essential self that Indianness is put onto through “doing” culture/ethnicity. Again, this is an assigned identity that requires a particular performance of difference through cultural practices.

Similar to P02’s construction of “doing” Indianness, other women also focused on cultural practices, or “food, fabrics, and festivals”⁸ as markers of difference that they feel in the

⁸ I borrow this phrase “food, fabrics, and festivals,” from scott winn. He uses this concept of “food, fabrics, and festivals” to teach about liberal multiculturalism, particularly its attention to performing and celebrating ethnicity/culture as opposed to understanding issues of oppression and diversity through a power and race-based analyses.

U.S. specifically. For example, several women talked about celebrating holidays or religious festivals that are not recognized or celebrated in the U.S., including a different sense of needing to hold on to these traditions within the context of the U.S. P13 talks about “doing” Indianness through food, clothing, and holidays in the U.S. as she states:

Obviously music was something I identified with and food. I've always worn salwar kameezes as in when I felt like over here, I've never—mostly I wear Western clothes....so the clothing part has been okay, the food, I love South Asian—Indian food...I think I like the cultural aspects, but over time, my relationship with festivals has sort of loosened. I don't—I think the only festival I really anymore acknowledge is Diwali. And Durga puja because being Bengali, our main festival is Durga puja, it's not really Diwali.... Those are about the two festivals—and I had a struggle letting go of Holi and things like that, but I find more and more people now, they do some Holi stuff. Like, when I first came, there was nothing. And it was hard to hold on to a tradition when everything around you just went on like it was just another day. But then I realized if it's important to me, I have to make it happen...

Another aspect of assignation of difference that several first generation women talked about was once they came to the U.S., feeling the pressure to speak for all Indians. For instance, P13 says:

I'm Indian is what I would say, and when they ask me more, it's difficult to explain it because there's so many different answers to the same question, like, I feel like I have to answer for India, not for me, when I am asked a question about, oh does everybody have long last names, or does everyone's—everyone take their dad's first name as their last name, and these are generalizations that people in my office—my (neighborhood) office make based on other families that come in that may be Indian, and I'm expected to know the answer to that, and I'm just like, I know as much as you do, you know. I know a little bit more because I had people who did that around me growing up, but I really—I could only answer for myself. I can't answer for my whole kind. So, you know. I guess it's just—and people don't do it with any bad intentions. They assume that you know because that's where you grew up...

P07, one of the few first generation women who talked about race in constructing her narrative about herself also describes a shift in her identity as a result of migration to the U.S. and evolution of her identities over time. Noticeable in her narrative is that her gender identity was always salient to her, in part because even in the context of South Asia, she had an

awareness of gender-based difference and oppression. Her other identities evolved as she came into the U.S. and had varied experiences:

I always put myself as my gender first. I've always thought of myself as a woman first. I've become conscious of my race when I came to the United States, of course, because I—it was in opposition to the majority race. So I found—and privileges that come with being a majority race that I hadn't really processed while I was living in India. Sort of issues of oppression, of victimization, or just facing, even in (*her work setting*), some forms of discrimination. So then began to develop sort of a racial identity. It is the move to—it is—after my marriage and my kids were born, that we decided that, you know, there was a community... Where little kids played with each other and couples hung out, that my ethnic identity evolved. I started thinking myself more of—more on ethnic lights. So it was gender first, racial identity, and then ethnic. And of course, now I'm a hodgepodge of every one of those....

Second generation women in the sample took up very different discourses in their narratives, particularly in how they talked about race.

Second Generation Women's Narratives

Being South Asian American.

Koshy (1998) posits that one of the positions taken up by South Asian scholars and activists around race is to emphasize South Asian as a racialized minority identity. This perspective also advocates for building coalition with other people of color and marginalized groups. This approach to racial formation was considerably more present in second generation women's narrative in the sample. It is important to note that in Koshy's analysis, within the historical context of South Asian racialization being ambiguous, both approaches to racial identification that she outlines are focused on agency and a sense of having an active "choice" to assert racial/ethnic identity.

One of the most significant differences between first and second generation women's accounts of ethnic/racial identity is the extent to which second generation women, in contrast to the immigrant women, used racialized language and terms to describe themselves. Purkayastha

(2005) in her study of second generation, middle class South Asians posits that even though this population had grown up middle-class in the U.S., that (racial) phenotype and religious background had figured significantly in their sense of themselves. Thus, she points to the need to “consider racialization as a critical grid for understanding ethnicity” (p. xi) within this population. Consistent with Purkayastha’s study (2005), nearly all of the second generation women in the sample used the term “South Asian” (or South Asian American) to identify themselves which fits into a U.S. racial identity category of “Asian.” In addition, second generation women often used language of being “people of color” or “brown” to narrate their identities.

For instance, P22, when talking about how she thinks of her racial, ethnic, and/or cultural identity, says:

I identify myself as a woman of color, South Asian, Malayali to some extent. But I think the first two are strong parts of my identity and South Asian American. That combination which, for being born and raised here, yeah, it just has become a part of who I am.

In her discourse, she emphasized being a woman of color and South Asian as “strong” parts of her identity that she also links to being born and raised in the U.S. Her regional and linguistic identity, Malayali, is somewhat secondary as an ethnic marker that she claims “to some extent.” While many of the first generation women in the sample had more of a sense of belonging to multiple nation states or saw themselves as “world citizens,” the vast majority of the second generation women narrated some part of their identification as American, signaling an identification with where they were raised as well as a different relationship to a transnational or diasporic identity than the immigrant women who had been raised in South Asia.

P26 also identifies as a person of color, but situates it amongst other identity markers of religion, nationality/citizenship, and gender:

Yeah so as a Sikh, it's primarily that... And then Punjabi which includes Pakistan, so that sort of Punjab. And then American is really where I go next. So being an American citizen and as a women in this sort of place, like with my brown skin and as a person of color, these are all the buzz words that I think of as myself when I'm like, oh that's me. Oh that's me. And these are the things that I attach myself with.

While second generation women, like first generation women in the sample had an explicit sense of agency around asserting racial/ethnic identity and a strong consciousness about when and how they were doing this, they also reflected a much stronger sense of an assigned identity around race—specifically the understanding that others (and the dominant U.S. society) perceive them as people of color or “brown.” The second generation women’s discussion around this pulls significantly from an interpretive repertoire around South Asians as racialized “Other” as well as an assumed understanding that having brown skin is a racialized experience within the socio-political context of the U.S.

Race as assigned.

In their work differentiating between race and ethnicity, Cornell and Hartmann (2007) emphasize the way that race typically has its origins in assignment by others—specifically classifications assigned by a dominant social group to a less powerful social group. The majority of the participants talked in some ways about the negotiation of asserted identity and ethnic/racial identity that is assigned to them by others, specifically by the dominant culture. In the first generation women’s narratives, this assignation was often tied to pressure to “do” or “represent” Indianness through cultural practices such as food or holidays or speaking for all Indians. Second generation women’s narration of assigned identity, however, focused on being “raced” by others. Thus, while first generation women were assigned to “doing” culture or Indianness through ethnic practices, second generation women describe being assigned to

“being” people of color, South Asian, brown, or racially different. P01 talks about her racial and ethnic identity in both internal and external terms:

I mean I think now I’m really adamant about, you know, saying “other” and then writing “South Asian.” But, I’ve been thinking a lot about this and I feel sometimes like a “coconut,” right? Like brown on the outside, white on the inside because the more I read about all this theory about Western Feminism the more I see myself being a Western Feminist. And then, I really wonder how close I am to my mother and her roots and the kind of generation gap and things like that, but yeah.

In her response, P01 immediately draws upon an image of needing to assert her identity in relationship to an institutional expectation as she draws upon discourse of social categorization—describing needing to fill out census or other form in which she has to categorize her race/ethnicity. This points to the ongoing ambiguity of South Asians in relationship to race—while she sees herself as South Asian, she doesn’t assume that this will fit into the racial categories available to her on a form. She further elaborates on how she views her racial identity as she talks about feeling like a “coconut”—brown on the outside, white on the inside. In doing this, she takes up both “being” and “feeling” discourse in which she is racially brown (a state of “being”) but internally “feels” white. P01 also seems to attribute her “feeling” white on the inside as linked to not being sure how connected she is to her mother’s roots, meaning Indian cultural heritage. Thus, P01 illustrates a comfort in a racial identification as “brown” but less sure about an internal or ethnic identity as Indian. She also names the “generation gap” as being part of how she thinks about herself, again highlighting how being U.S. raised she has a different identity than her immigrant mother. P01 narrative about ethnic/racial identity also incorporates questions about her gender identity and politics as a “Western Feminist” here pointing to an internalized perception that associating her views with Western Feminism is “white.”

P01 further elaborates on how she came to identify as South Asian through being assigned that categorization by another person who she viewed as an authority figure:

Well, I was in seventh grade in my algebra in class and I was like, “Yeah, I’m Asian.” And my Asian teacher like pointed out and she’s like, “No, you’re not. You’re not part of Asia.” ...and I was like, “Oh, but you know India is in Asia.” And she’s like, “No, it’s South Asia,”—like you’re different. And it was clear like, “Okay, now I know where to mark the lines and where to check the boxes.” But yeah, that’s when I was like there it is. You know, I guess I’m South Asian, you know?

Again using imagery of knowing “where to check the boxes” P01 describes taking up a South Asian identity that was assigned to her by another Asian person who marked P01’s difference from her. P01 then took up this identity for herself. She goes on to describe more about how her racial identity was further assigned to her through misclassification as Mexican and Muslim:⁹

...I think growing up in California a lot of people just thought I was Mexican, which I, like, “Whatever,” I didn’t really care. Or I know one of my teachers used to call me Muslim a lot just to make me upset because I was so, like, “No, I’m not Muslim. My mom’s a Sikh and my dad is Hindu. Like, I’m clearly not Muslim.” And he would just say it over and over and over again. And I was like, “Okay, like what can I say to you? You’re my teacher.” You know?

George (1997) and Harpalani (2009) both write about the ways that first generation South Asians are often mistaken for Mexican or other racial groups in the U.S. and how that may challenge their own assertions and articulations of race and racialization. In the case of P01 and other second generation women I interviewed, this kind of assignation of identity (through mistaken or even “accurate” racial categorization) was common, and consistent with women’s own understandings of themselves as a racialized Other.

Several second generation women also talked about assignation and assertion of ethnic/racial and national identity when they were travelling outside of the U.S. and South Asia.

⁹ While Muslim is technically a religious identity, a number of scholars and activists have articulated the ways that Muslim as well as Hindu and other non-Christian religions have become racialized categories (see for example, Joshi, 2006 and Volpp, 2002)

For example, P21 in talking about the importance of context on how she thinks of her ethnicity and race notes:

P021: I found it, like, especially traveling that a lot of times people will actually identify *me* as Indian before they'll even ask where I'm from. And then even when I say, originally, like, I'm American. They're like, "Oh yeah, okay. But where, you know, where are you from?"

Interviewer: Where are you *really* from?

Interviewee: Right. They just, you know, obviously, know that there's more to it than that.

While P021 is asserting an American identity in this context, her brown skin marks her as "Other" and thus prompts the question of national origin and ethnicity from those doing the asking. In this case, it is ethnicity, not racial identity, being assigned based on her physical appearance and skin color within a global context.

South Asians as Asian Americans.

For some second generation women, taking up a racial/ethnic identity of South Asian was also about being connected to a broader Asian American community or movement. Shankar and Srikanth (1998), in their anthology about South Asians in Asian American identity and politics, emphasize that one aspect of the "racial ambiguity" of South Asians has been their uncertain relationship to Asian American identity in the context of the U.S. despite shared geographic origins in Asia. In particular several authors cite physical dissimilarity, differences in migration history, and religious differences as significant to the marginalization of South Asians within the broader rubric of "Asian American" (Dave, Dhingra, Maira, & Mazumdar, 2000; Kibria, 1998). However, the growing numbers of South Asians in the U.S. as well as the influx of South Asian Americans in academia have meant that South Asians have increasingly become a part of a pan-Asian ethnic and political identity (Dave et al., 2000). Shankar (1998) also underscores the importance of racial naming for marginalized groups and the potential political utility of South

Asians being considered Asian Americans. Further, Shankar and Srikanth (1998) point to the importance of Asian American as a “felt identity” or “consciousness” beyond simply geographic affiliation. Despite this uncertain status of South Asians in relationship to Asian American identity and politics, there have been a number of examples South Asians building effective coalitions and political movement efforts with other Asian groups in the U.S. across a range of social issues and increasingly South Asians are becoming visible in Asian American Studies, politics, and spaces (Dave et al., 2000; Kibria, 1998). This is reflected in some of the second generation women’s narratives. For instance, P26 talked about how she shifted to a South Asian identity in college through Asian American political work:

But I think being part of this larger community, especially within America and how we’re clumped at times became this kind of empowering like, identifier for me. And it was during college where I was doing work around Asian American politics and kind of defining where I was within that niche helped me to understand, oh yeah, there’s a South Asian part to that too. Because I think I was around a lot of East Asian folks who were East, like Asian American, and I was trying to discover, wait where’s our niche too. Because I’m not seeing that as much in literature, and folks, and that kind of opened my eyes.

In P26’s narrative, it is evident that she was trying to find her “niche” as a South Asian racialized subject within the construct of Asian American which is politically legible as a racial category in the U.S. Another interviewee is in process around taking up the term South Asian to describe herself, but talks about her relationship to other Asians when she was younger:

Then like I had a lot of friends who were Asian in high school. So I grew up in the east side...It’s a lot of, you know, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and they’d always say things like, “Oh Asian, you know, you’re”—you know, “we’re all Asian.” And I’d always be like, “Wait, but am I?” Like Asian was never really quite right either. So I’d always just be Indian. And then they’d say, “Oh, but you’re Asian too.” I’d be like, “Okay, but”—you know? So then it wasn’t until I was in college and started hearing other terms where I was like, “Okay, this makes a little bit more sense.” I’m still not 100% committed to the term... (P09)

P09's ambivalence also reflects the ambiguity of Indian identity within the racial construct of Asian in the U.S. However, as Shankar and Srikanth (1998) write, that often Asian American identity is shaped by a categorization through shared geography and/or political alliance even if the identity is not felt by all members of this constructed racial category.

Identity as political.

While first generation women in the sample accounted for ethnic/racial identity in ways that emphasized national origin, cultural practices, and neutral description, the second generation women in the sample most often made intentional decisions about how they identified, the terms they used in different contexts, and saw their identities as political. While a couple of second generation women did use South Asian and Indian synonymously, others used the term because they felt it accomplished something and signified a broader community politic. This term has also often been taken up by academics (via area studies, for example). As a signifier of identity, the term "South Asian" is contested and has been critiqued for masking deep divisions of nationality, culture, religion, and language (Islam, 1993). However, within the socio-political context of the U.S., South Asian people are not distinguished from each other in racial terms. Thus, many community based efforts have strategically employed this language to build broader and intentional political and cultural alliances (SAALT, 2005). Many community organizations and activists in North America, for example, have strategically used the broader umbrella of "South Asian" to encompass people from the Indian sub-continent who presumably have some shared experience, racial classification, and/or political goals within the context of the diaspora.

P12 talks about coming to an intentional decision to use the term South Asian as an identity because of (progressive) politics that were not reflected in Indian-American organizing:

There's, like, South Asian Awareness Network which is a conference, and then like South Asian Progressive Alliance, which I was involved in starting. And then

Indian American Student Association which seemed to be really corporate and dominant and, like, really heteronormative and just, like, a bunch of things that were really alienating for me. Then, like, Bangladesh Association, Pakistanis, I mean, all of these different things, and I quickly saw that the organizations that framed their—themselves, or their work, as South Asian specific as opposed to, like, more country or regionally specific or, like, ethnic specific, engaged a broader audience....they seemed to be more politically active. And with that politically I mean, progressive, more towards—leaning towards the left.

In addition, both P12 and P17 narrate the decision to use the terms South Asian because of and the ways that term can contribute to disrupting dominance and oppression within the community:

...And I was also processing India, like, what does India mean. Indo-centric and Hindu-centric. And yeah, especially with Indo-centricism, I realized that being, like, India being the dominant identification or the dominant, like, presence under the category of South Asian really invisibilized a lot of different groups. And growing up, I felt invisibilized as someone who strongly identifies with Assamese within the Indian or Indian American community. So it spoke to me on that level. (P12)

It's more of a political choice. I don't think I was introduced to the idea until really I started working in South Asian social justice organization... And then as I started working for an organization that was working with the whole community, I really started to like see for myself that I needed to politicize myself a little bit more around it and kind of felt like just for the sense of unity and—I don't know. I guess marking my privilege in the community in a certain way makes me want to identify myself a little bit more broadly so that I can remind myself to be more inclusive. (P017)

P26 who is an activist with Punjabi Sikh youth on the West Coast claims being Sikh as an intentional identity signifier that is linked to the politics around her community globally:

Yeah so as a Sikh, it's primarily that. A lot for like political reasons especially because of both national and international human rights violations. And also in terms of you know, identity development for the people that I work with, for me to have that strong sort of attachment is really important for me.

For many second generation women, taking up the language of South Asian to describe themselves was also linked to politics that they developed post-9/11 or through educational experiences, most often educational experiences that specifically politicized them around South Asian identity and/or race in the U.S.

Significance of 9/11 and education.

While first generation women often narrated migration as significant to a shift in their identities, second generation women often talked about 9/11 (and post-9/11 community work) and education as important to shifting in the way they identified themselves. As I have outlined in Chapter 2, 9/11 was a significant moment in terms of the racialization of South Asians, Arabs, and Muslims, or what Volpp (2002) has named as the construction of a category of “Muslim-looking people” in the U.S. In response to hate crimes and bias against “Muslim-looking people” following 9/11, a great deal of community organizing, coalition-building, and activism emerged within South Asian, Muslim, and Arab communities in the U.S. A number of second generation women who had participated in post 9/11 community work also claimed varied identities as acts of resistance and/or solidarity in this changed socio-political climate.

P26, who narrates an intentional political identity above, also talks about the importance of claiming a Sikh identity after 9/11 because of the impact 9/11 had on her communities:

Interviewer: Have you always identified yourself as Sikh or do you feel like you claimed that identity at a particular time in your life?

P26: I consciously claimed it after 9/11. So I was a junior in high school and that's really when like the large turning point was when my community activism started, and that's really shaped where I've gone and what I've done. But I think also more recently, I think I reclaim it every time I say it...And so, so yeah, but that would be like the strong turning point where like, oh this is who I am, this is really what I want to be associated with, yeah.

Another participant, P25, a one and a half (1.5) generation woman (as she came to the U.S. at age 8) talks about reclaiming her Muslim and American identities deliberately post 9/11:

So then after—when 9/11 happened not that much after that, you know, because that was 2001, that I realized that the Muslim—while I'd stepped away from being Muslim—because that also meant letting go of a lot of stuff if you let go of Muslim. Like how you dress and who you talk to, how you relate...So I was—like, had dropped that. So suddenly, like, the Muslim identity came more forward, like thinking about that. And I kind of took that back in and became—and also

became more taking the American back in. So since September 11th my identity was South Asian Muslim American.

Similar to P25, P15 asserts an American identity as a response to oppression post 9/11:

I am also very adamant about saying that I'm American but that's more as a reaction to sort of the otherizing of South Asians post-9/11, I think, more than anything.

She goes on to talk about how post 9/11 community work influenced her racial identification:

I've been at—post 9/11 particularly, really engaged around immigrant issues, and sort of see myself as a brown person now, and identify in that way as part of the progressive movement and also I think, you know, and the—being South Asian has become more culturally relevant, but also being a person of color is more the—in terms of my work and outlook on social issues and things like that.

For the one and a half and second generation women quoted above, claiming various identities—such as Sikh, Muslim, American, and South Asian, was seen as doing important political work.

In particular, these identifications were important to them as acts of resistance in the face of the increasing surveillance and racism against them and members of their communities. The intentional use of “American” by the women emphasizes the need to prove oneself as American in a time when South Asians are often constructed as a racialized other, foreigner, and non-citizen. In some cases, for example, P25, who reclaims a Muslim identity during the post-9/11 period or P26 who asserted a Sikh identity during this time these identities become a way to resist and “talk back” to the dominant discourses of South Asians and Muslim-looking people as terrorist Others.

In addition to the importance of 9/11, second generation women also cited college and/or education as important to them shifting from an ethnic identity of Indian to a broader, racialized identity of South Asian. For some it was becoming politicized around race, gender, and other issues that led to this shift:

It was definitely through going to (school name) and being at a college that taught me a lot about political identity and how, you know, I think in high school I would have said I'm Indian. And I say that sometimes still too, *desi*. But I think being part of this larger community, especially within America and how we're clumped at times became this kind of empowering like, identifier for me. (P22)

It's really more academic, really, and more social, as I came to that, as I came to understand what is South Asian. It just felt less lonely.... A bigger network. It also felt more true to my understanding of when I look back and when I say, "Yes, my family is from this place." Culturally, it spreads across so much more. And I just had far more in common in terms of my interests and my politics with folks from all over, like, of South Asian descent, than I did of folks like within my very specific community to which my parents said I belonged to. And a lot of reading, a more—a lot of just sort of feminist readings.... (P28)

P15, who spoke above about post 9/11 impacts on the way she identifies, also found academic discourse to be formative to her use of the term South Asian:

Yeah. I don't—you know, I think I started using it in college because I think I took South Asian studies. I don't know if I used it before that.... But you know, that was what the class—they were called, "South Asian Studies," and then—and there were—I—you know, and I also do think it was a post-9/11 sort of shift. And I don't know if it was a conscious thing but there was a sense, at least for me, of wanting to identify more broadly as a people—you know, as the people who are being impacted by the immigration policies and all of those sort of things.

Chapter Summary

Ambiguity and ambivalence have been central to South Asian's racial formation, racial/ethnic positioning, and identities in the U.S. This ambivalence was reflected in women's interviews and in the interpretive repertoires that women utilized to construct their racial/ethnic identifications. Despite the allure of seeing the category of "South Asian" as fixed or natural, or understanding it as a coherent signifier, South Asian women's narratives in this local, U.S.-based sample elucidate significant differences in how first and second generation women construct their race/ethnicity. All of the women across the sample communicated a high sense of agency in their ability to assert their ethnic/racial identities and tended to utilize discourses of "feeling" and "thinking of themselves as..." which signaled a sense of being able to internally produce and

assert identity. Women also reported that they had a fairly clear sense of the importance of context in impacting their identity discourse. South Asian women's narratives of race/ethnicity and self-making reflected significant divergences across generation in the following domains:

Race vs. Ethnicity

First generation women in the sample overwhelmingly drew on discourses of ethnicity to identify themselves. This included naming themselves "Indian," talking about South Asian regional or linguistic identity, and narrating family and national background. This also included attributing ethnic identification with "food, fabrics, and festivals" as important markers of their Indianness—the "doing" of cultural practices were central to their understanding of themselves as ethnically-marked subjects. In contrast, second generation women were much more likely to utilize language of "South Asian" and/or race discourse such as being women of color. Further, their sense of racial difference was most often connected to discourses of "being" South Asian as an essential core of themselves vs. something they performed. Some second generation women also saw themselves as part of a larger rubric of "Asian American," again reflecting a racialized self-concept in the context of U.S. race relations.

Nationality

Because of their migration history, first generation women were likely to see themselves as belonging to multiple locations or belonging to no particular nation. Some women took up language of "world citizen" or "global citizen" to talk about this. In contrast, all of the U.S.-raised women in some way named themselves as "American" and included that as a signifier when asked about racial/ethnic identity.

Significant Life Events

While all women narrated a sense of their ethnic/racial identification changing over the course of their lives, what women narrated as significant events that led to these changes in racial/ethnic identities were different. First generation women most often talked about the salience of coming to the U.S. and understanding themselves as “different” for the first time on the basis of race/ethnicity. For second generation participants, 9/11, education, and growth of political consciousness were all salient to changing how women thought about themselves. Many second generation women claimed different identities intentionally as political acts later in their lives while first generation women viewed their ethnic identifications in much more descriptive terms.

Assertion vs. Assignment

All of the participants had a sense of being able to assert their racial/ethnic identifications and had a fairly high level of consciousness about the importance of context and how they asserted varying identities in different environments. Relatedly, across generation, women reflected that they were conscious of the ways that race/ethnicity was assigned to them in the context of the U.S. For first generation women, they saw this as being assigned to perform or “do” Indianness, through performance of ethnic practices or being able to speak about India or Indianness. Second generation women were more likely to see themselves as racialized Others in the context of the U.S. They talked about this in various ways specifically highlighting that “being” Indian or South Asian was assigned to them by others and the dominant society because of racial difference.

CHAPTER 5: NARRATIVES OF A CULTURAL SCRIPT— TO BE A SOUTH ASIAN WOMAN IS TO BE MARRIED

The research questions in this study are concerned with how South Asian women construct their multiple identities and experiences, particularly gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity within the context of migration to the U.S. In this chapter, I focus on how participants narrate a diasporic and intersectional experience of gender, looking in particular at how participants describe marriageability and marriage as central to what it means to be a good South Asian woman. I assume that the way the women talk about themselves in relationship to gender, marriage, and sexuality is produced by and within dominant discourses of what ideal South Asian womanhood is—the “cultural script” (Appiah, 1994, 1996) of marriageability and marriage—as well as ways that this script is intertwined with other positionalities and experiences such as race/ethnicity, migration, class, and generation in the U.S.

While Chapter 4 focuses on differences between first and second generation South Asian women’s narrative constructions of racial/ethnic identification, this chapter centers on a significant *similarity* across the sample: the way that women talk about South Asian womanhood as inextricably tied to marriageability and marriage. This dominant “storyline,” or what I term a “cultural script” (Appiah, 1994, 1996) that women shared about what they have learned about what it means to be a South Asian woman was consistently discussed as related to marriage across all of the women’s interviews despite differences in age, marital status, sexual orientation, generation, length of time in the U.S., religion, and other experiences and identities. While the central organizing theme around this cultural script is marriage/ability, my focus here is not ultimately a discussion about marriage, but rather the ways that marriage becomes the script for narrating and producing ideal gender, sexuality, kinship, family, and community experiences,

amongst this group of middle-class South Asian women. Further, I argue that adherence to this cultural script is what renders South Asian women legible as South Asian female subjects at the level of self, family, and community.

In the interview, I asked several direct questions regarding gender and sexuality, such as “What did you learn growing up about what it meant to be a South Asian¹⁰ woman/girl?” Or, for unmarried women, “Do you feel an expectation from your family now about getting married?” (see Appendix C). These questions elicited responses about childhood meanings, gender socialization, and current-day messages and negotiations that women have experienced in regard to their gender and sexual identities. Gender-related themes also emerged in response to other questions that were not directly asking about gender issues per se. The key themes I describe here emerged directly from women’s narratives and are not meant to be comprehensive or encompass all experiences. Rather, what I pull out here is ways that women’s narratives all elucidate shared meanings about a hegemonic construction of South Asian womanhood as linked to marriage and how these messages are communicated, learned, and taught via family and community relationships.

Participants reflected the most coalescence across the sample in regard to the ways they narrated culturally-based gender messages, gender role expectations, the centrality of marriage, and the negotiations of these issues within their varied contexts. It is important to underscore here that I am not claiming that this group of women necessarily have the same lived experience(s) of gender, sexuality, or even actual marriage, but rather that the *cultural script* (Appiah, 1994, 1996) they have learned of South Asian womanhood, as related to marriage, was

¹⁰ I used the language here that they had used for themselves in identity questions asked early on in the interview, so this question may have been “what did you learn growing up about what it meant to be a ____ woman/girl? with the identifier being regional (i.e., Punjabi, Assamese, South Asian, etc.), religious (Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, etc.), or national-origin based (i.e., Pakistani, Indian, etc.).

shared across the sample. I am most interested in understanding how the dominant discourse of South Asian womanhood—namely marriage and marriageability—is narrated by women as a kind of hegemonic construction or cultural script of being a (“good”) South Asian (middle-class) woman and how this script then shapes their gendered relationships to self, family, and community.

It is also important to recognize that the structures of heterosexism and patriarchy that are foundational to the gender and marriage mandates for women are not a culturally-exclusive phenomenon—that aspects of this cultural script can and do exist for non-South Asian women. Thus, the point is not to argue that this is a cultural script that only plays out solely in the South Asian community. However, because of the sample of the women I talked with and the similarity of these narratives along dimensions of gender and marriage, it became salient to look at this construction within a culturally-specific framework.

Existing Research on South Asian Women and Marriage

On a more macro level, a number of scholars have charted the ways that South Asian womanhood is linked to nation-building and nationalisms (e.g., Chatterjee, 1993), womanhood as a symbol of cultural tradition and preservation (Bhattacharjee, 1992; Mani, 1993) and Hindu ideologies that determine women’s lives via expectations of wifhood (e.g., Goel, 2005). In exploring South Asian womanhood in diaspora, a similar body of scholarship looks at how women become symbolic of home (in addition to nation) (e.g., Bhattacharjee, 1992; Rudrappa, 2002) and the roles of women as cultural carriers and reproducers in the diaspora (e.g., Handa, 2003; Shukla, 2003). Shukla (2003), for example, highlights that marriage is not only a commitment to a partner but is also a practice seen to maintain and reproduce culture, language, caste, and religion in the diaspora. Rudrappa (2002) also asserts that central to ethnic discourse

about “Indianness” in the U.S. are “notions of Indian womanhood and sexuality, leading to the curtailment of Indian women’s sexual autonomy for the stability of the good, immigrant family” (p. 86).

On a more mezzo and micro level, a few social science scholars have more broadly looked at women’s experiences within the South Asian community in North America (e.g., Badruddoja, 2009; Dasgupta, 1998; Handa, 2003), though little work has been done that focuses on the salience of marriage for South Asian women or the experiences of unmarried women. Existing scholarship on gender and marriage in the South Asian diaspora has often centered issues of intergenerational conflict or perspectives in regards to dating and/or arranged marriage amongst second generation youth (e.g., Dwyer, 2000; Gupta, 1999; Handa, 2003; Leonard, 1999; Maira, 2002) or issues of interpersonal violence (e.g., Abraham, 2000; Dasgupta, 2007a).

A few unpublished North American dissertations have specifically looked at issues of marriage in the South Asian community in the U.S.: one qualitative study exploring single Indian women’s experiences and perspectives on marriage (Rathor, 2011), another highlighting South Asian women’s negotiation of desire (Deepak, 2004), and a study exploring the production of identity in the North American diaspora vis-à-vis South Asian online matrimonial sites (Sharma, 2006). All of these unpublished studies reiterate the centrality of marriage as producing South Asian womanhood in the diaspora. Rathor’s (2011), for example, also highlights some of the tensions in family and friend relationships that emerge for unmarried women as well as the lack of models of unmarried South Asian life.

Much, if not all, of this work is built on a direct or indirect assumption that South Asian women are performing heterosexual marriage, family formation, and sexuality and that this is an important part of gender expectations and collective kinship structures. Most authors simply

posit that marriage is important in the South Asian community and an expectation in terms of women's roles in their families and communities, without explicating more about what this expectation is, what it looks like, or the social privileges and costs associated with it, particularly at the individual, family, and community level. In Sharma's (2006) study on matrimonial websites, she points to the cultural importance of marriage by citing census data that demonstrates high rates of marriage and two-parent households in the South Asian community as well as describing common South Asian marriage practices (such as arranged or semi-arranged marriages). However, she does not go any further in describing how marriage works to produce and regulate gendered experience within diasporic communities. Rudrappa (2002) also points to the way that Indian ethnicity in the U.S. is inextricably linked to the creation and maintenance of ethnic family formation through normative sexuality as she writes: "the Indian immigrant family and normative sexuality are mutually constitutive...the immigrant home so essential for expressing ethnicity, is based on disciplinary sexuality" (p. 96).

Though the areas of scholarship noted above provide context to my reading of South Asian women's narratives, there is no existing published work that specifically looks at the ways marriageability and expectations of marriage function as cultural scripts to produce gender, kinship, and women's sexuality in the context of the South Asian diaspora. Further, there is no literature (aside from unpublished works I have listed above) that looks at the everyday experiences of South Asian women in relationship to this cultural script, especially in terms of how this script is communicated and enforced on the level of self, family, and community. The analysis presented, here, then, is based significantly on my reading of the women's narratives as sources of knowledge. As Stivers (1993) writes,

...personal narrative symbolizes the liberation of feminist social science from (sometimes unconscious) reliance on the form of knowledge that cancels out

experience. We must be brave enough to “see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than as beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately”¹¹ (p. 425)

It is in this vein that I draw primarily from the women’s narratives in the findings presented here.

“Cultural Script” as an Analytic Framework

To guide this analysis, I appropriate Appiah’s (1994, 1996) notion of a “cultural script” as an analytic framework to explicate the way that women narrate ideal South Asian womanhood as produced by marriage. Central to Appiah’s cultural script framework is the idea that we construct ourselves from a “tool kit” made available by culture and society, and that scripts become a way of “coming into being” for members of shared identity groups. Appiah asserts:

The large collective identities that call for recognition come with notions of how a proper person of that kind behaves: it is not that there is *one* way that gay people or blacks should behave, but that there are gay and black modes of behavior. These notions provide loose norms or models, which play a role in shaping the life-plans of those who make these collective identities central to their individual identities. Collective identities, in short, provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories. (p. 24)

Similarly, in her post-structuralist exploration of gender in educational settings, Jones (1993) posits that girls cannot be understood as simply socialized into gender roles, but rather, girls “become” girls by participating within available sets of meanings and practices—discourses that define them as girls. Jeffries (2011), explicating Appiah’s cultural script construct, also points out that as certain narratives become stronger and more developed, they grow to become “truths” about the group and part of group members’ individual and self-definition (p. 68). Thus, a relatively small number of cultural “stories” are used as shortcuts to categorization, definition, and legibility by group members as well as outsiders.

¹¹ The quotation within Stiver’s quote comes from Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 378.

In this chapter, I map the ways that women in this study narrate their experiences with the cultural script of South Asian womanhood as linked to marriageability and marriage. This cultural script produces South Asian womanhood—it creates the possibility of “being” South Asian and gendered female. In particular, I look at how women talk about their understanding of this cultural script (i.e., what it entails), ways that they have learned the script, ways the script is enforced (particularly within family and community spaces), and how women narrate their negotiation of this dominant cultural storyline, especially when their lives are outside of the scripted ideal.

The Cultural Script(s) of South Asian Womanhood: The Centrality of Marriageability and Marriage

Interviewer: What did you learn growing up about what it meant to be South Asian-American woman?

Interviewee: That I was going to get married, whether it was arranged or not. Probably in my early to mid-20s. I was going to—I wasn't necessarily going to be like a homemaker, but I'd be like respected if I was. I was going to have kids. My own kids, like from my body or whatever. I was going to wear saris.

The response from P17 above reflects the central cultural script about South Asian (and South Asian American) womanhood that was continually talked about in various ways by the participants: *To be a South Asian woman is to be marriageable and to get married.* What is striking about this message is that the question that I posed is fundamentally about gender (what it means to be a South Asian woman) and yet the response is centered on sexuality (heterosexuality) and kinship formation (marriage and a particular configuration of family). In much feminist work and queer organizing, there has been an emphasis on separating out gender and sexuality/sexual orientation as distinct constructs. While I agree wholeheartedly with the need to disentangle gender and sexuality and the utility of such work, the cultural script

repeatedly articulated by South Asian women points to a need to understand the relationship and entwinement of gender and sexuality within this cultural context, particularly because women reflected that heterosexual marriage was central to producing (hegemonic) South Asian womanhood. What emerged clearly from the interviews is that the primary cultural script that South Asian women have access to in order to story their lives is that of heterosexual marriage. Further, women consistently narrated that the family—nuclear and extended—were the primary communicators and enforcers of this cultural script; thus relationships with family (and, in some cases, community) was the site of struggle if/when scripted expectations were not met. It is significant that women did not cite religion, science, or even society-at-large as sites where they saw the script originating—thus highlighting the social and political aspects of script production and enforcement. In the following section I draw on women’s narratives to map out some of the key features of this script.

“It was like this inevitable thing...”: Getting married at a certain age

Women in the sample overwhelmingly understood that a critical component of script adherence was to be married by a certain age. P06’s comment above, “It was like this inevitable thing...,” was shared by most of the women as they voiced that they grew up with an understanding that marriage was “inevitable” or expected, and would happen by a certain age. This message was most often communicated to them by family members (directly or indirectly), though some women also talked about marriage messages in their interactions with peers, especially in high school or college. P27, a woman in her early 20s, shares that the expectation of marriage was instilled in her by the community (in her case her faith community and Indians in her family’s social circle) more generally:

I just assumed, I think always, up until maybe age, like, 19, 20, that I would have to get married- have to, like it was something that was something just inevitable,

it was going to happen. And it was not a happy thought, and I just didn't even—I couldn't even conceive of what that even looked like, or—and it wasn't really like pressure from my parents, it wasn't like they said anything about it that I can remember, but it was just for whatever reason, I don't know why that was the expectation. Maybe, just like holistically from the whole community.

Participants often expressed that they had grown up with similar expectations as their brothers around doing well in school, but that they were additionally expected to do household chores and/or had more social rules (such as curfew) than their brothers or male cousins. In addition, women named marriage expectations as a marked difference in their gendered experience within their family once they reached a certain age. Interviewees specifically talked about ways that the expectation of marriage was couched in a dominant narrative of marriage as a stage in one's life trajectory. Thus, gender intersects with age, which then emerges as a salient social category, though often not explicitly named, as girls are expected to get married, at a certain point in their life, in order to perform appropriate South Asian womanhood.

As P30 states:

But it was kind of the expectation of, oh by the time that you are the ripe old age of 25, you will be married. Yeah, and have kids and all that comes with that...

Another woman talks about how she herself internalized the idea that she needed to get married by a certain age:

I had just turned 22 I think was when I got engaged...and then I was dating N_____ too...during that time I felt a lot of pressure from myself thinking that, "Oh my gosh, I'm getting old. When am I going to get married?" Again, the whole Bollywood thing of, you know, you're married as soon as you finished college and you get married. You have kids. I was like, "When am I going to have kids? When am I?" So I think I put a lot of pressure on myself and N_____.

A number of women talked about the ways that they experienced a shift within their families when they reached a certain (marriageable) age—usually in their early 20s. For instance, a few women specifically used the language of how a "flip switched" at a certain age at

which point marriage expectations started to be communicated to them directly by their families.

P22, narrates how the conversations about marriage started after college:

.... So, yeah, and then up through college it was still like, don't worry about dating and don't put that pressure and we're not thinking about that. And as soon as I got to over 21 there started to be more conversation around, like okay, so like, when you finish, and you have a job now and now you can start to think about meeting people.

In addition, some women talked specifically about how they saw gender expectations shift or that they experienced "mixed messages" within their families when they got to marriageable age:

...I also got a lot of messages of, like, possibly needing to get married young. Which was a little confusing for me growing up because I know at 19, my parents brought a proposal in, I was confused, I was angry, but I was also confused. I was like, "Wait, I'm not even done with my college and you're talking about proposals, so you raised me to say education's important, but now suddenly you're saying it's not. (P16)

Like P16, P19 reflects on a change within her progressive family when she got to a certain age:

You know, you have to study also and you have to learn to how to cook also, you have to be a perfect girl. So there was a lot of pressure after what I remember of my teens. It was a lot of pressure in being a perfect girl in every sense... So it was very confusing that when you are born and brought up in a very progressive family. You know, all of a sudden, when you're getting married, they expect you to become very traditional and very conservative... actually about a lot of things.... And now that you're getting married, it is expected that, "We have given you, you know, all kind of things, you know, you have had all fun in life. Now you better face the reality!" So there was a lot of pressure. Lots and lots of pressure.

As she approached a marriageable age, then, P19 felt pressure to be both a "perfect girl" and excel in school. In addition, P19 parents enforce the cultural script through their communication to her that now she has to "face the reality" of marriage.

Another woman, also taking up the discourse of "pressure" talks about how the marriage expectation she got from her family is less now that she is almost 30 and past the "peak age" for getting married—again, reinforcing the age aspect of the cultural script:

Okay, honestly, I think there is this peak age. I'm about 29 and a half years old. And I felt the maximum pressure between when I was 26 and let's say 28. I won't really say that my family has given up hope but in a way, I think they feel defeated. Now they feel it's—there's no point talking about it.

These key components of the gendered cultural script—"the inevitability of marriage" and the expectation to get married at a certain age—were not only expressed to women throughout their lives, but also become central resources that women draw upon in constructing their gendered experience. Being a certain age is one of the key criteria that was narrated as important to women's marriageability. In addition, women talked about other aspects of what it means to story themselves through this cultural script.

Who You Marry Matters

Across interviews, women talked about the importance of who you marry as one component of the cultural script related to gender and marriage. While the majority of the second generation women in the sample didn't feel the expectation to have an arranged marriage, they still often felt that there was an assumption that who you married mattered. All women, regardless of generation, learned from their families and community that marrying someone of the same ethnic/regional background and religion was important. Sharma (2006) reiterates the link between marrying within your community and being able to exist within the bounds of Indianness:

For most Indians, it is in the domestic or private spheres that one negotiates notions of Indianness and what being at home means. Marrying outside ethnic, cultural, and/or caste communities is often seen as transgressing Indianness. (p. 26)

P26, a Sikh woman in her mid-twenties who is beginning to think about her marriage, talks about the expectation from her family and community to marry a Sikh man:

There's an expectation absolutely that it's going to be a Sikh. Absolutely. And I've dated Muslims and Sikhs and Christians and people from all around the world and

the community doesn't know about that. And that's made me grow. That's also damaged me a lot, just being secretive in that sort of way. But there's no doubt about it that it'll be a Sikh man, right.

Though she talks about having meaningful relationships with non-Sikh men that her family and community didn't know about, she definitely feels the expectation to marry within her ethno-religious community. She also goes on to reflect on some of the reasons she, herself, would prefer to marry a Sikh man because of her high level of involvement with the community:

...and for me, I mean, from my experience too, I'm more inclined just because one, I find that attractive. Two, the way I want to live my life includes that and that's a really important part of also like, social capital for me as well in a way that it's like, I want someone who can move through the communities with me just as easily and not have that be a point of contention, right. Because there's so many other things that are like, that go on this world and I wouldn't want that to be something that would come between my partner and I.

P28, who ended up marrying the partner of her choice, initially felt that her parents wanted to arrange her marriage, even though she met someone who was Indian and shared some language background with her family, he was not an ideal match from her parents' perspective:

...I was 22, and I did tell my parents, "Yeah, I kind of have a boyfriend, or I kind of met this guy.... You'll be happy to know that he's Indian. And mom, I think his dad's Bengali, you should be happy about that too." 'Cause mom grew—my mom and dad grew up in Bihar, and they lived in the Bengali colony actually, so they knew everybody—they actually speak Bengali, a little bit. And so they were, you know, really excited about that. And they're like, "Oh, really?" and they thought, "Oh she may actually be finding somebody. So we need to be like, on it, to find somebody else for her."

She goes on to describe that in addition to not being of the same regional and caste background as her family, her potential husband did not meet class expectations of her family:

Because then when they came to meet him, they're like, "What are these earrings, what is this hair, what is this tattoo, what is—you're a cook? You're a what? You're a cook? You make like eight dollars? Like, in a bar? You know? In a pool bar? Like, who are you?... What are you getting into?" And then, you know, as much as dad said, "No one's going to take care of you, you got to take care of yourself," he was still like "Holy shit, what's this guy going to do?" So

they were like not happy. Not, not happy at all. And they really didn't want us to marry.

P11, an unmarried Muslim woman in the sample who comes from a middle-class background, also reiterated the importance of the potential husband's class status:

But they do have some expectations that the person has met certain financial standards, or certain ability to provide. And that his family comes from a similar class of mine...if the class is not the same as my family, they expect the boy to be doing substantially better. But let's say the boy was doing okay and he came from the same class of family, that's fine. But if they're a lower-class family, they expect the boy to be fantastic. Like he better be worth it to marry outside of your class...as a Muslim, we don't have castes, necessarily. So class, it really is defined as money, education, and social connection.

Several of the second generation women who felt free to choose their own partners, or have a "love-match," often talked about a racial/ethnic "hierarchy" of who they should marry.

P21, who currently has a white boyfriend who she plans to marry, describes this ranking of race preference that she says "exists in a lot of Indian communities":

...they weren't too specific, like, you have to marry an Indian, you have to marry a Catholic guy. But they're—I think they're—and it's—the thing that exists in a lot of Indian communities, there's sort of this like hierarchy of acceptable races in your husband.... Number one would be an Indian from the same part of India as my family is. You know, but born and raised here like me. Totally acceptable, but definitely Indian is number one. Number two would be white. Or Asians. So like, two and three, white or Asian kind of, you know, same-ish category, I guess. And then I think the thing they were always like, "No, we wouldn't be that okay with this is if I dated an African American.

Several women who discussed this issue in their narratives also pointed to a racial hierarchy in who would be most-to-least desirable to marry in the eyes of their families. Another issue related to who to marry is the importance of one sibling's marriage choices (and timing) on others, especially sisters, in the family. P11 shares about some of the additional pressures related to being the oldest unmarried daughter in her family:

So the pressure's to not only on me to get married, but also to marry the type of person that it will not hurt my sister's chances of getting married. And my mom is

very, like, you know, I want to start looking for your sister. But I don't know if that's appropriate because you are not married and it will look bad if the kids get married out of order. So there's definitely, you know, that pressure as well.

While the messages about who to marry were significant to women, they also had a real sense that given the critical importance attached to getting married, that there were circumstances in which who you marry became less important. In particular, women talked about "pressure to compromise" when they got older if they were still unmarried—which also meant that there were fewer expectations of who a woman married once she got past a certain age. Two women explained how this was communicated to them in their families:

And then there's also a lot of pressure to compromise as you get older. So as we get older my family says, you know, "You should consider somebody who's been previously married. Maybe you should consider somebody who's had kids before." Because as you get older, those are kind of like the options that are left. (P11)

And at the point where, I don't know, I think Indian parents think, well wow, you're not married, so like, you know, there's not a lot of people left so you better just like pick the bottom of the barrel. (P22)

Similar to the pressure to "pick the bottom of the barrel," P14, who was not considered physically beautiful when she was growing up, felt the pressure to get married because a proposal came to her parents and her family was concerned she may not have other marriage options:

...Starting in third year of engineering school, a couple of times somebody would send a marriage proposal to my parents. And my parents would be like, "Oh, you know, it's okay. It's too early." But some of my aunts would say, "Hey, she's getting a good proposal and, you know, check that out. You might as well say yes. You don't know what else will come."

Even when she didn't want to get married because she was young and not especially interested in the guy, P14 she goes on to share how she felt pressure to marry him because she was not perceived as physically attractive and because he was highly educated and wealthy:

Then finally when the marriage proposal came for which I finally ended up marrying the person, you know, I said, “Well, I don’t really relate to this guy. He’s too much older than me. He’s not particularly good looking. And what’s the big hurry? I’m only 21. Why should I get married?” I was told, “Well, excuse me, count your blessings. You know, he’s an IT educated person. He’s from a rich family. What more would you get? And who are you to talk about his looks? Have you checked yourself in the mirror? I mean, this is the best you can get.”

P17, a queer woman, talks about feeling like the pressure about who to marry changed over time. In our exchange, she talks about dating a white man at one point in her life, which was not her parents’ preference. However, now that she is out to them as queer, her parents’ have shifted their expectations:

P17: And now I feel like they want that white boy more than like any of these women I could—you know like— (laughing)...I think they were open to me having a love match. I think they have preferences for Indian, Hindu. My mom probably had a preference for Telugu, you know? She probably still does, really. But it’s not a big deal. Now it’s a different story.

Interviewer: Now they’re like, “Any man will do”?

P17: Yeah. Yeah! And I will also say like my dad had actually said things to me like, “If you want to be with a Muslim person, like if you want to be with a Christian person, that’s cool with me.”

Being Marriageable

In the women’s narratives there is simultaneously the assumption that girls should be married, and as P14 articulates, “that there are certain criteria you have to satisfy in order to be nicely eligible to be marriageable” as a South Asian woman.

“She’s not beautiful so who will marry her?”

This sentiment expressed by P19 was a message she received throughout her life. Similarly, across interviews, women consistently narrated the importance of physical beauty in making them marriageable. The beauty standard communicated directly and/or indirectly to women was most often centered on needing to be thin and being “fair” or lighter skinned.

As P14 recounts being told as a young child:

...I got many messages about growing up and getting married. So my mom is a very beautiful person...I was a pretty ugly child. So I remember being told repeatedly that, oh boy, this is trouble. You're so bad looking, so who is going to marry you? And how come such a beautiful woman gave birth to such an ugly child? Then I had a younger sister who was very beautiful right from her birth. And so I was repeatedly told—well, my parents were repeatedly told in my presence by my aunts, well, the younger one was the more beautiful one. She's okay, don't worry too much about her...

This message, that being pretty is necessary to getting a good husband, was repeated in various ways by different family members. Much like P14, P19 also discusses physical appearance as a central tension around her marriageability as she approached a certain age. She shares an exchange she had with her cousin-brother as a teenager:

In my teens, I started becoming very dark and I started gaining weight...I would hear it from everyone that she's the ugliest child of her family. So that was a big pressure and, they'd say, "she is fat, she is black/dark, how will she get married?" (translated from Hindi)... And so it was very traumatic sometimes. That I remember when I was in college, and there was a lot of pressure...they started thinking that I have to get married. So my cousin, elder brother,...he said, "_____, you know, any friend of mine can become my brother in law" (translated from Hindi) But my sister is so ugly that I can't even introduce them to her.

P06 learned a lot about marriage and beauty expectations from watching the pressure put on her sister by her mom:

I think a little bit from my parents, yeah. From my mom. And a lot of that pressure was also tied to weight. Like if you can lose a little bit of weight, then you know, you can meet someone because you know guys...guys are also only interested in like skinny women too....Not so much that like you have to meet a guy today, but like you need to start dieting so that when you—when it's time, and that guy perfect comes along, like he's like ready to see you.

If you do not meet these expectations of physical beauty, women learned that it is then especially necessary to be good at school or work endeavors. P14 relays her experience as someone who was not considered physically beautiful. She starts by sharing what her aunt told her parents:

...you better make her a doctor and an engineer so that she can get a good mate because, otherwise, based on just looks, she isn't getting anybody half-decent.

And she goes on to share more about how she was told she needed to become a professional to make herself more marriageable:

Almost once a week I was told by one of my aunts, who visited us weekly, so ever since I was in elementary school, I remember being told, "You better study well. You better become a professional in order to get a good husband." I remember that. Then I remember a lot of times me being told about other girls who were fair or pretty, saying, "Well, no problem. She's going to get married. It's no problem at all."

Many participants narrated having high expectations from family around school performance, though many women also talked about having pressure to perform household tasks, especially in order to perform the role of the daughter-in-law.

Being a Good Daughter-in-Law

Being able to perform traditional household tasks such as cleaning, cooking, etc. was part of women's socialization to some extent. Because of the class status of the sample, many women talked about having domestic help in South Asia and/or having more expectation around school performance than household work. However, in some ways, domesticity was still valued as part of being marriageable. P17 talks about learning to do household work early on with an implicit assumption it would be for her husband's household in the future:

I would say I learned how to cook and clean and laundry and like all the housework chores pretty early on, but it's not like the message was reinforced like because you're going to do this for your husband one day, I think it was more like my mom just had a lot of influence on me, and I think that was the underlying assumption...

When asked about what she learned growing up about being a South Asian woman, P18 recounts the importance of being trained to be a daughter in law. In her narrative, being good at cleaning was equated with what it meant to be a good daughter in law:

I was in my twenties and I was scrubbing my bathroom...I was like doing it for like a couple of hours and like cleaning, cleaning, cleaning, my mom was like, you know, “thank god you’re my daughter and not my daughter-in-law.” I was like, “why?” And she’s like, “because for how long you took to wash that bathroom, I’d have been pissed if you were my daughter-in-law!”... So I feel like that was a really consistent message that I got growing up, that I was in this lifelong training to be a daughter-in-law. That it wasn’t even about being actually a wife or a good wife...it was about how the adult female figures of the other family that I would inevitably marry into would treat me...

P18’s narrative also draws attention to another aspect of the script—marriage as inextricably linked to family roles, such as being a daughter-in-law.

Relatedly, P13 narrates a central challenge that she sees to being an Indian woman living in the U.S.:

I think it's only living up to expectations of in-laws. When they come in, they're expecting you to be the Indian daughter-in-law when they visit. I don't know if they expect it or not, but I feel like they expect it, yeah, right, because that's their preconceived whatever....Even if they don't express it, there's a guilt that I should be, or they're expecting me to when I'm not living up to that...

Notable here is the way that while she is asked about being an Indian woman, her response is about being a daughter-in-law (married with in-laws). Her response reflects the reality of how her gendered experience is also embedded in the context of diaspora—while she is in the U.S., she feels that her in-laws visiting from India have expectations of her to be an “Indian daughter-in-law,” which positions her as seeing herself differently from that construction given her location in the U.S. Again, in both of the above narratives, the importance of marriage is clearly understood as part of women’s roles in the collective kinship structure.

Family as Primary Site for Script Communication and Enforcement

In women’s narratives of the hegemonic construction of South Asian womanhood that they have learned, participants articulated the family as the primary space where this cultural script is taught and enforced. While community perceptions were also mentioned by some

women, interviewees view their families, often parents, as the ones who most ensure the maintenance of hegemonic womanhood for South Asian women. Rathor's (2011) study investigating unmarried South Asian women's perspectives on marriage also found that women reported tensions and ruptures in family and social relationships if they were not meeting socially and culturally-sanctioned marriage expectations. P02 who has been married for over 13 years, shares about her decision to have an arranged marriage to please her parents:

So my parents had never explicitly said, but I always wanted to have an arranged marriage...I think it's probably comes from a place of trying to please my parents, because, you know, being the only child I always sought their approval. And so, I couldn't think of not, you know, or marrying somebody who they didn't approve of. So that's why arranged was like, oh they would choose somebody for me, and I would just—and I think this is a—this was just very subconsciously done. I don't think it was deliberate.

While P02 did not consciously choose an arranged marriage, she “subconsciously” knew that doing so was a way to gain their approval. Thus, she had gotten the message that having an arranged marriage (at a certain time in her life—which she reflects on later in her narrative) was a way to please her family by meeting their expectations.

Messages about the cultural script are communicated both directly and indirectly to women in their family spaces and relationships. P11 talked about some of the indirect ways she learned growing up about the importance of her marriage, and how critical that was in her mother's life decisions:

Even if, like, the utilities were turned off and we have no water, we maintained the facade, and that also meant never discussing what was happening at home because that helped maintain this facade of we were doing well. Because my mother never wanted to hurt my chances of getting married down the road. In fact, I would say pretty much all of my mother's decisions have always been based around will this impact—how will this impact my daughters' chances of getting married.

She goes on to share that even though her parents had been separated due to domestic violence, her mother's decision to divorce was ultimately driven by her desire to ensure her daughters' marriageability:

I felt like my mom would not—they were separated, my mom only took the step of divorce because my dad really went crazy. And she said, “You know what, if I keep this guy around in this picture, such a crazy father figure, my daughters will never get married.” So even though everyone had been telling her, “Get a divorce, get a divorce, get a divorce,” she really didn't feel comfortable with it until my dad really went nuts. And then—and even then, the driving factor was, “I have to get my girls away from this man. They'll never get married with this man around.”

P30, a middle-class, heterosexual woman in her early 30s who talks about feeling pressure to get married describes what that looks like:

...every time I see my grandmother she cries because I'm not “settled” in her mind, though I have a good job and I own a house and I have a car, and you know. I have everything—like, with the exception of having a husband or a baby, I have everything else that is typically defined as being “settled,” so. But—and so it just trickles down into other members of the family. And then it is on every conceivable side of my family, whether my mom's side, my dad's side, my stepdad's side, I am the eldest unmarried by years, so yeah.

P30's narrative also illustrates her class status (represented by her talking about owning a house and car and having a good job), which she feels should give her some credibility with her family, however they do not see her as “settled” without the markers of marriage and heteronormative nuclear family formation. She also alludes to the salience of birth order in considering the importance of her marriage. Given that traditionally daughters should get married in birth order (oldest to youngest), in her family it is significant that her younger sister is engaged and she is the “eldest unmarried by years.”

P10, who was nearly 40 when she got married, describes how she dealt with some of the marriage pressures from her family. While still living in India, she was meeting potential

partners. In this process, she found that it was easier to communicate with guys she met as opposed to any of the parents, the guardians of the script:

And so I guess you learn to deal with it by taking on the guys. You know, instead of the parents or the parents of the boy, you know. I think it was easier talking to the guys or boys themselves, so they could stand here, I could explain myself or see why it's not going to work, you know. You think of life and this sort of a box and if that's what you're expecting, I'm not the person. So it was, it was far easier just starting to deal with them than dealing with parents.

Indirect Communication of the Cultural Script: Witnessing Other Women's Experiences

Many women talked about internalizing messages about marriage by witnessing the gender and marriage-related experiences of their sisters and older female cousins. By watching these experiences they became aware, indirectly, of the expectations of them around marriage.

For example, P06 shares about her older sister:

...But she felt a lot, I mean a lot of pressure and she got married when she was—like two years ago. So she got married when she was like 31, which is not that old. But she felt a lot of pressure. And there was a lot of pressure.

P06's discourse of pressure—a term that she uses repeatedly in this piece of text—alludes to the intensity of the messages that her older sister was getting. Her sister was also 31. Though P06 says that “is not that old,” in many families and instances is considered past the ideal age for a woman to get married.

P18 talks about being “tracked” into getting married, while having watched her sister had a lot of marriage proposals and involvement of family in looking for a match for her:

So my sister, when we were growing up, she's really beautiful and everybody was always like, “oh my God she's so gorgeous.” People were like, our families and the community and distant community were like, kind of sending offers and proposals from the time she was 15, 16, you know, to be like, “Bookmark, we want her. When it's time, we want her.”...And so for me, I was always like, how come there's no offers for me?... But my parents actually ended up doing a lot of arranged marriage looking for my sister, like hardcore. Like on websites, and

putting stuff out here, and talking to families, and exchanging bio-datas and stuff like that.

Similarly, P17 witnessed her sister getting an arranged marriage and how her dad acted toward her sister. Like P06 above, she fervently expresses the “pressure” her sister was under in the marriage process:

I watched my sister’s process, when my sister got an arranged marriage. I watched the inquiring process happen, you know, like my dad would talk to somebody...my sister would meet him... And my sister wanted it and at the same time was also really like, “This is crazy,” you know?... And my dad—I watched my dad become really crazy, like really impatient and mean, and saying things to my sister like, “I wanted you to be married like yesterday,”...I saw a lot of pressure put on my sister, basically. Like a lot of pressure...

I asked P25 if she had gotten the message growing up that she needed to have an arranged marriage, to which she responded:

Yeah, it was assumed. And actually my sister is schizophrenic, you know, now. And it totally came from the oppression from my family as well as from the— from being in the U.S.... She had a lot of pressure...our dad arranged her marriage without consulting her, without her even being present when he went back to India and arranged it. And she didn’t do it. And it really messed up her mind, like the amount of pressure from the family for that. And she had a lot of problems. And she—and then eventually ended up in mental illness from all the pressure from the family and her being the oldest...

The Discourse of “Pressure”

Almost all of the women in the sample used the discourse of “pressure” when talking about their experiences around marriage and the enforcement of the cultural script in their families. Given that the average age of the sample was 32 years old, many study participants were relatively close to marriageable age which could have also impacted their sense of feeling pressure to get married. Dictionary definitions of “pressure” include: “the burden of mental and physical distress,” “the application of force,” or “the constraint of circumstance: the weight of social or economic imposition” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pressure>).

Synonyms include: stress, strain, tension, and “the use of power to impose one’s will on another” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/pressure>). Thinking about the prevalence and meaning of the discourse of “pressure” in women’s narratives is useful in considering communication and enforcement of the cultural script—particularly as it emphasizes power, burden of distress, constraint, and tension. This highlights the difficult aspects of “pressure” around marriage as it is experienced by the women in these social and familial processes.

While some women talked about how it was “just assumed” they would get married or that marriage was “inevitable,” many women talked about different ways that they experienced explicit pressure to get married. Some women talked about actually responding to this pressure and getting married earlier than they wanted to, while younger unmarried women often recounted the ways they were currently struggling with this with their parents. These experiences also underscore the role of the family in communicating and enforcing the cultural script of marriage. One woman who chose to have an arranged marriage reflects on her experience:

I mean in retrospect, I do feel a little pressured by my father especially to get married. Not that he—I don’t think he meant it in a bad way, but it was, for him, it was just like he didn’t want me to get old and not married, so. Yeah. But I’ve been married almost 13 years now. (P02)

Another woman emphasizes that her parents did not pressure her, but rather that the marriage pressure was communicated to her from extended family members when she was in her late teens:

People were confused at the fact that they felt that my parents pressurized me. But it was more of the other—you know, my uncles and aunts, or you know, his cousins, my dad’s because we are a very close-knit family. And they were the ones who were like, “Oh, you have to get her married. You have to get her married.” And my father’s like, “She has to get a job. In this society I don’t want my job—girl not independent. I need her—,” that was his—he was very, you know, very, very particular about that. But I had a lot of pressure from my relatives, like

since I was 18, 19. Get her married, get her married.... But it's like "she can study afterwards."

Pressure to meet people online.

Sharma's (2006) study of two North American South Asian matrimonial sites reveals their importance to diasporic communities as well as the ways they become sites for hegemonic practices around gender and culture. Several women talked about participating in online matrimonial sites (such as www.shaadi.com) either by their own choice or often due to family pressure. P15 talks about her mom's active involvement (and their related tension) with trying to find her a potential husband online:

And now what it means is that my mom sends me profiles from various sites almost on a daily basis, she signed me up on all sorts of sites without my permission. She doesn't have a picture of me but she, you know, pretty routinely sends me these profiles and then tells me that I should respond, and then recently some father—last week, some father called my mom at her office about the profile—one of these profiles, and she—I didn't reply to her email, she was like, "You should call him, you'll be calling the father," and I was like, "I'm not going to do it,"...I've tried explaining my point of view and she just doesn't get it.

P09 also talks about getting an online profile—in her case it was a compromise with her parents. She had stopped talking to them because of the marriage pressure but then cooperated with them to make a profile:

I have an online profile.... There was a couple of months where I wasn't talking to my parents because they were like—you know, they wanted to do something about it.... Like, you know, if this—because it was like I had never really like not talked to my parents or, you know, it was the first time we had really kind of like reached an impasse.... So that's when I realized too, like, my parents they just wanted to do something. So I realized if I let them have some piece of this, then they might be more willing be more lenient otherwise....

Pressure to get married if dating someone.

Participants talked generally about getting pressure to get married, often as they reached a particular age. Specifically, if they started dating someone, they felt that there was definitely an

expectation that they would get married to that person. One woman, P15, who talked extensively in her narrative about marriage pressure from her family, recounts her experience of introducing her (white) boyfriend to her parents:

So this person, _____, and I were dating, and I think he met my parents almost a year into the relationship, we waited that long because I knew that there would be pressure, and then it—my mom basically said to him on that first time that she had met him, “Well, we would be happy to have you stay—you know, be part of our family,” or something like that. And I think he—he hadn’t even told me that he loved me at that point—like, I was not ready to discuss marriage with him.

She goes on to describe how the pressure played out in her interactions with her mother afterward:

And then from there, like, my mom, pretty much it was like constant emails to me all the time, like, “What’s your decision? Have you made a decision? Are you talking about marriage? Blah blah blah,” at one point she even emailed _____ directly and—you know, so there was just like an on-going kind of barrage throughout that three-year relationship. (P15)

Other women talked about getting married sooner than they had potentially wanted to because of the pressure from their families once they had a boyfriend:

And I think I might have gotten engaged because of that pressure too. I’m thankful for it now, but when I was in it, I think I pushed ahead of my time. If I had—if it had been left to me, I might not have gotten engaged as quickly as I did. I think I would have taken some more time. But because of that pressure of, oh, you’re dating him for a while, what’s going on, what’s going on? Are you guys getting married or what? I think that kind of pushed me closer to a decision than I normally would have. (P13)

The reason I ended up getting married so soon was because he was my first boyfriend and in India, there’s no question of just dating forever, at least back then in the early '90s. You know, if there’s a guy in the picture, you just get them married and that’s the only way it is. And so that’s the reason why I ended up getting married. (P23)

Deviating from the Script

Regardless of their positionality in relationship to the script, all women shared an understanding of the hegemonic construction of South Asian womanhood as linked to marriage that they articulated it directly or indirectly in their narratives. Within the sample, however, there were some women who deviated in different ways from the script and reflected this in their narration about their life experiences, some of which have been shared above. As noted by Jeffries (2011): “group members who do not fit the cultural script are often isolated and defined as “suspects and deviants” both by those within and outside of their community” (p. 68). Scholars who have started to explore issues of marriage in the South Asian diaspora in North America have also found that there is “little or no sense of individual life of a single person” (Sharma, 2006, p. 26) and that women who are unmarried do “not have a narrative for what their lives would look like if they remained single” (Rathor, 2011, p. 40). Roy (2008) in his discussion of LGBTQ South Asians also notes that culturally, South Asians are not seen as adults until they get married. P22 who has a 38 year old unmarried sister, shared about the stigma her sister is facing as a single woman in her family and community. P22 specifically suggests that perhaps her sister doesn’t need to get married to be happy:

Where’s it’s like, you know what? Maybe I don’t want that in my life, so, like, lay off, you know. And so, that’s a—I think they just can’t see why you might find happiness in something else. In a career and you know, joys and friendships, and I don’t know. But, that’s out of their paradigm.

Rathor’s comment about the lack of a narrative for unmarried single women’s lives, point to the illegibility of their subjectivity: How can you come into “being” as a South Asian woman if there is not a narrative to script such an existence? Borneman (1996) in his critical tracing of marriage within anthropological discourse writes:

At the same time that marriage is desired or experienced as a completion necessary for life, a making fully human or a whole of previous halves or parts, it also signals the security of a death to all possibilities for an unexpected history, an end to all histories outside the marriage, as if history thereafter were containable within the consanguinal and affinal relations of the kinship chart. . . . But this ideological enclosure also produces a domain of practical abjection, an exclusion of all specters (e.g., the unmarried, the divorced, the homosexual) and their embodied counterparts. . . . And, as part of its operation, this process of abjection—whereby the social is identified, defined, and delimited—is consistently disavowed (see Butler 1993:232-243). (p. 229)

What is critically important about Borneman's point, that is informed by Butler's work, is the disavowal of the "specters"—the unmarried, divorced, homosexual—as outside the "ideological enclosure" of marriage. Further, his perspective—though focused on all of the "specters"—highlights what Gopinath (2005) calls the "impossibility" or unthinkability of a queer female subject within diasporic discourses. Both Borneman and Gopinath's notions of "impossibility" within discourses and within kinship structures are useful in considering the consequence of departing from the cultural script of marriage. Though few women actually talked about their negotiation of the cultural script in elaborate ways, the consequences of not fitting into the cultural script are significant and were narrated to some degree by a few participants.

The women in the sample who deviated from the cultural script in regard to marriage were queer identified women, unmarried (heterosexual) women who were of marriageable age, and divorced women. While there are certainly some important similarities in the cultural and social oppression all of these women face, there are also some important differences. While all of these woman can be seen as "impossible subjects" (Gopinath, 2005) in various ways, not all of them have the same relationship to the cultural script nor do they experience the same consequences for departing from it.

Divorced women, for example, have been a part of this dominant construction of gender at some point, though have dropped out of it as a result of ending their marriages. Sharma

(2006) notes that while divorce and widowhood are considered taboo in South Asian communities, women often use internet matrimonial sites as a way to overcome this stigma. Her observation confirms that widows and divorcees may have certain options for escaping the taboo of not being married and making themselves legible once again as viable gendered subjects. Unmarried heterosexual women may be deviating from the script in terms of age of marriage or preferred criteria for who they want to marry, for instance, but may have varied levels of buy-in to the script, different ways of relating to it, and may shift in their relationship to it over time. Queer subjects, who are not in heterosexual relationships may, in some circumstances, have the least access to “being” within the hegemonic construction of South Asian womanhood.

Perhaps because of the questions I asked, the number of women in the sample who directly narrated current experiences of being outside of this cultural script was small, though many of the extracts of narratives I have utilized above demonstrate that differing ways of negotiating the script is or has been a part of women’s lives. It is arguable that all women are engaged in ongoing negotiations of this hegemonic script in big and small ways in their lives, though a discussion of what that looks like is beyond the scope of this current study. Overall, as can already be seen from narratives shared above, deviations from the cultural script were marked by tensions, splits, and negotiation in family and community relationships. Further, some women, as I will show below, communicated a sense of invisibility within family and community spaces if they were not living in ways that were consistent with the script. This also led, in some cases, to active choices to be less connected to family members or community spaces that were perceived as enforcing the script. Interestingly, several women talked about their divergence from the hegemonic construction of South Asian womanhood as being linked to

discrimination they felt from within the South Asian community—specifically how it was for them to navigate community spaces.

“You Don’t Belong in Certain Spaces”

When I asked a general question to P16, a divorced woman, about experiences of discrimination she had had amongst South Asians, she responded:

Well, you know, being unmarried. Being childless. Being not in the technology field. You know, it’s—there’s—I wouldn’t say it’s overt discrimination, but it’s just the sense of you don’t belong in certain spaces. There are a lot of South Asian spaces over here that I’m not comfortable being in. I’m just not.

P23, a 36 year old divorcee, also answered the same question by talking about feeling some judgment from other Indian people as well as feeling “ignored” as a single woman in the community:

Yes, as a single person, yeah, you end up getting—I don’t know if it’s—it’s probably natural and inadvertent, I don’t know, but a single person is it’s easier to ignore a single person because couples date couples. So even if you have some really good friends, if they’re coupled up, they’re going to look for other couples to hang out with... And with the passage of time, their understanding of your of life only decreases. So I don’t know if that’s discrimination, it is sort of discrimination in some way. So yes. However liberal and open-minded any of the Indian people claim to be, there is a certain judgment associated with somebody who’s divorced and single and, you know, not following the book in a way.

P23 goes on to talk about feeling judged by Indian people when they learn she is divorced:

There are pockets of people that treat—that are representative of those Indians in India who have a stigma against divorce. So there are those pockets of people here as well. And they’re uncomfortable with the word divorce or when they hear the word “divorce” or dealing with a divorced person, they just sort of paralyze and they don’t know what to do about it. So pretty soon, you know to avoid those people, you know.... But initially, there is always a sort of a judgment. Whether—it is a little invisible, but I can perceive it. Initially, they’re always is.

She later also talks about negotiating relationships in community with mostly married people in her age cohort:

And it's really about just making them feel comfortable because if you want them in your life, because they are good people in other ways and they're simply not learned enough to appreciate your situation, then it's just about just navigating it a little bit and then over time that changes and that's because there are so many married people here. It's very hard to find single people, you know, here. Or at least I don't run into single people very often who are my contemporaries and my age group. Sure there's like 22- and 24-year-olds...

Both P16's and P23's narratives about their experience in the South Asian community emphasize a sense of not being comfortable in some community spaces, some experience of judgment, and navigating relationships which points to a consequence on the community-level of not being part of the scripted expectation of South Asian womanhood. P23's response also highlights the sense of judgment she feels as someone "not following the book"—or, someone deviating from the script.

“Their Understanding of Your Life Only Decreases”

P23's comment above about how “their understanding of your life only decreases”—specifically talking about her friends in couples—is also a sentiment shared by other participants. P18, a queer-identified woman, talks about how it is harder to talk about her life with her family because it does not fit into expected frameworks:

...there's a way in which I feel like my life is just so different and there's not easy ways to just talk about my life. Because in the regular kind of heteronormative frameworks, it's all so like, how's your job, how's your sweetie, how's your promotion, or things like that you know, like. How's your kids. And those questions don't really lead to answers in my life, but what's exciting and amazing about my life, like you have to kind of make up the questions, you know. And so, but I feel like I just have kind of to do more of that work to make that visible...

P17 also talks about facing invisibility in her family since she came out to them:

Well, nobody really engages with it with me and I feel pretty shut down when I'm with my family. Like my sister has kids and she's married, and my cousin, who we're also really close to, like they have kids. And so like when our families get together, basically it's just like focus on the kids and cook and whatever. And nobody really asks me anything, and they don't even really ask me anymore as much about—like they used to ask me about like boys and like getting married

and all of that, and I feel like—in some ways, I feel like their understanding of me as a queer person is more solid now because they don't even ask me about that.

P9, who talked extensively about marriage pressure throughout her interview, also expressed the way that her interaction with her family in India was significantly affected by her unmarried status. Specifically, on her most recent trip there, she stopped talking to her family as a result of them not acknowledging other aspects of her life and simply focusing on her need to get married:

I was in India for three weeks and we were attending a wedding there and, you know, let's just say by the end of it I was not speaking to my family. I was like just so fed up with them and all because I hadn't seen them in six years and all they had asked was if I was getting married, when I was getting married, if I was seeing anyone, why I wasn't seeing anyone, you know, how I should lose some weight and I was like, "I've—let's see, graduated college, got a Master's degree, got a job, left a job, got a new job, moved into a house." Nobody really wanted to know anything about me really. So by the end of it I was like all right, you got nothing to say to me. I got nothing to say to you.

“Being single and trying to live by myself in Bangalore was tougher...”

P10, who got married when she was close to 40 (which is considered significantly past ideal marrying age) talks about her choice to come to the U.S. because it would be easier for her as an unmarried woman and potentially easier on her family. This sentiment was shared by several first generation women in the sample who were either divorced or older and unmarried.

P10 shares:

And I didn't, I didn't, like I said, get married till I was close to 40. So that was a big deal and that's probably one of the contentious issues between me and my dad. You know, even when I had gone back to India, I was single and I guess that was probably tough for him to have to explain how he doesn't have a daughter married, you know. And so all of that played into why I decided to come back because it was being single and trying to live by myself in Bangalore was tougher than doing it in the U.S.

Throughout P10's narrative, she talks about some of the ways that she perceives it to be easier to be single in the U.S. than in India. She reiterates the role of her father as enforcer of the cultural

script as she notes it is harder for him to have an unmarried daughter. This also reflects the cultural understanding that fathers' responsibility is to get their daughters married. P10 goes on to share about her friends back home who are unmarried and are gradually doing okay, even though she maintains that it is easier for her than for them:

But it's interesting, because I have two high school friends from—you know, that are still living in India, and both of them are career girls and unmarried.... I think to some extent, they probably have a tougher time than me, and it's amazing. Things are changing. And that's when—I think they have acceptance, you know, even if it's a bit grudging or whatever, that they've—their parents have stepped back and let them do their career or live their lives kind of thing.

She goes on to discuss her decision to come back to the U.S., specifically because if she was here, she would have more agency and find it easier to negotiate family pressure:

Yeah, it was easier I guess, you know, being in the U.S. because, while it was there, you didn't have a choice. And somebody at home, out of your doorstep, and then it's a lot of pressure because of what's being looked at as your family, family background, or whatever, so you better behave...

P10's narrative reflects how not being married significantly contributed to her decision to come to the U.S. because of her perception of it being "tougher" to be in Bangalore and be single. She also draws from the interpretive repertoire that the U.S. is a land of opportunity and options where she has unlimited personal agency. As she says, it is easier in the U.S. because while there (in India) "you didn't have a choice" about marriage. She also frames performing womanhood in this way as having the imperative "you better behave," alluding to a disciplinary aspect of the expectations of marriage.

When asked about what was best about being an Indian woman living in the U.S., P23 talks about feeling safer in the U.S. as a single divorced woman than she expects she would in India:

The freedom, the fact that I can, you know, be alone and feel completely safe. That is what is the best part of it.... I haven't been single in India except for when I was living with my parents as a kid. I believe that India has really expanded to accommodate, I mean culturally speaking, socially speaking, accommodate 30-plus single woman and there are many people who do that. But then there's also that section that says that it's difficult being a 30-plus-year-old single woman in India. So I have not had any firsthand experience there, so I don't really know to compare, but I'm guessing it won't be as safe.

Several things that are notable about P23's response to this question. First, is her immediate response is to talk about the "freedom" she feels in the U.S. Implicit in this response is that living in the U.S. she can be "free" while in India it would be more socially confining, thus reflecting another trope of the U.S. being a site of freedom in contrast to the implication of oppression faced back in India. In addition, she uses the language of "accommodate," which positions the 30 plus single woman as one who needs to be contained, gotten used to, or adapted to, which further illustrates that such a subject position is outside of the "norm." Also noticeable in her narration is the use of the word "safe" to describe the potential difference between her as a single woman in the U.S. vs. in India. Not only is she highlighting the difficulty of being who she is in that context but she further implies that it could feel unsafe to be deviating from the culturally-normed gender expectation as a 30-something Indian woman. While these woman all talk about having an easier time in the U.S., which could be read as a colonial trope of India as more oppressive to women or "backward" than the U.S., what is also implicit in the women's narratives is that being away from family, a central site for script enforcement, also contributes to their greater sense of ease in the U.S.

Chapter Summary

Despite their diverse life experiences, study participants consistently narrated the presence of a cultural script (Appiah, 1994, 1996) that defined ideal, middle-class, South Asian

womanhood as produced by marriage and marriageability. Women narratives revealed that marriage and marriageability not only produce gendered subjectivity, but also shaped women's lives and self-making narratives, and impacted family and community relationships. The script focused on marriage is a script that produces South Asianness, gender normativity, sexuality, and kinship in the diaspora. Some of the key components of this cultural script narrated by women included: the inevitability of marriage, expectation of marriage by a certain age, the importance of who one marries, physical beauty as central to being marriageable, and the significance of being a good daughter in law.

Across the sample, women described their families as the primary site for script communication and enforcement. Many participants took up the discourse of "pressure" when talking about their experiences within their families and communities regarding marriage. Women described witnessing other women's experiences, such as their sisters', as how they learned and were socialized into the script. Further, participants shared various ways their families became enforcers of the script and deviating from the script often caused tensions in relationships.

Within the sample, there were some women who talked about the experience and consequences of deviating from this cultural script. In particular, queer women, divorced women, and unmarried women (of "marriageable" age), narrated ways that their lives were impacted because of not adhering to the cultural script that deems them legible as South Asian female subjects. Thus, it is evident that the dominance and normalizing feature of the cultural script renders certain South Asian female subjectivities illegible or "impossible" within family and community settings. Women who deviate from the script, however, experience varied

relationships to the cultural script and, thus, narrated different levels and conditions of “unthinkability” or “impossibility” in a cultural context.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This dissertation explores the complexity of South Asian women's lives and how they narrate their multiple social positionalities and life experiences. Given the generational diversity of this local sample, analyses focused on understanding some of the key similarities and differences between first and second generation South Asian women's talk about themselves in regard to race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, migration, and diaspora. Analyses of interview narratives were inductive and iterative, and contextualized through the YKB project—a shared, culturally-specific community formation that all participants had been a part of.

The ambiguity and ambivalence that have been central to South Asians' racial formation, racial/ethnic positioning, and identities in the U.S. over time (Kibria, 1996, 1998; Koshy, 1998) was reflected in women's narratives and in the interpretive repertoires that women utilized to construct their racial/ethnic identifications. Chapter 4 shows some of the ways that women's narratives differed around race/ethnicity across generation. While all of women communicated a high sense of agency to define themselves in ethnic/racial terms, first and second generation women's narratives of race/ethnicity and self-making reflected significant differences in the following domains: race vs. ethnicity, the role of the nation-state, significant life events that have shifted women's racial/ethnic identification, and the ways they perceived race/ethnicity as assigned to them by others.

In contrast to the analysis in Chapter 4, which focused on differences in between first and second immigrant generation women's narratives, findings in Chapter 5 center on a similarity that emerged clearly across all of the interviews: the centrality of marriageability and marriage as a cultural script for defining ideal South Asian womanhood. Despite differences of age, generation, regional background, and religion, women's narratives consistently reiterated the

gendered messages and socialization they had received from their families, particularly in regard to marriage. By utilizing the notion of a “cultural script” (Appiah, 1994, 1996) as a heuristic for thinking about ideal South Asian womanhood, participants’ narratives demonstrate some of the everyday ways that this cultural script constructed, communicated, enforced, and negotiated by women themselves, their families, and their communities. The findings from both Chapter 4 and 5 have important implications for social work in working with diverse, diasporic communities and for considering issues of cultural competency, oppression, and intersectionality in the field more broadly.

There is a paucity of U.S.-based published work focused on the life experiences of South Asian women and a limited scope of how these experiences have been explored. In her tracing of the academic construction of South Asian women in the UK, Puwar (2003) outlines the ways that these subjects have been represented differently over time. She maps four dominant “moments” in the representation of South Asian women’s subjectivity: 1) representation of the poor, downtrodden third world woman who needs to be saved, 2) the “caught between two cultures” paradigm in which South Asian women are conflicted between the liberatory freedom of the west and the “backwardness” of traditional values, 3) understanding South Asian women through a lens of globalized political economy (i.e., in the UK as sweatshop workers, domestic workers, development, etc.), 4) a celebratory view of young second generation women as the “archetypal global subject” with hybrid, ambiguous, multicultural identities. Within these limited academic representations of South Asian women in the diaspora, little scholarship has drawn on individual narratives as a primary source of data. Even less work has been conducted with this community within the field of social work. The study here, then, contributes to existing social work and social science literature in a number of ways, including sample, study context,

methodological approach, and analyses. Use of personal narratives in this study allows for a more complex understanding of how agency and structure operate through language to construct South Asian women's lives and self-making processes.

Many existing studies focused on the South Asian community or South Asian women in the U.S. are based primarily in New York or other East Coast locations (e.g., Abraham, 2000; Bhatia, 2007; Gupta, 2006; Khandelwal, 2002; Maira, 2002, 2008 Purkayastha, 2005) or Chicago (e.g., Rangaswamy, 2000; Rudrappa, 2004). It is also notable that much of the current social science literature on South Asians in the U.S. was published or researched in the 1990s. Even in some relevant social science projects that were published in the 2000s (e.g., Bhatia, 2007; Gupta, 2006; Rudrappa, 2004), most if not all of the fieldwork took place in the late 1990s. There is little qualitative work that has been produced post 9/11 which was a significant social and political moment for South Asian communities in the U.S. This study is an addition to the social work (and social science) literature as it provides a post 9/11 perspective of South Asian women's narratives about their life experiences in the local context of Seattle—one of the U.S. cities with the fastest growing South Asian community (SAALT, n.d.).

In addition, The *Yoni Ki Baat* project in Seattle, though not the focus of the current analysis, was a useful context to contain my study given its role as a local South Asian community formation that has gained popularity as a space for South Asian women to develop and share their narratives related to issues of gender, sexuality, and culture. In addition, the YKB project is a rich site for considering the utility of arts, creativity, and cultural work as vehicle for intervention, prevention, and social change within diverse communities. Interviewing YKB participants also met a community need for an evaluation of this project, which I will be compiling as a separate product following the completion of the dissertation.

Also, given the concentration of South Asian women's organizations (SAWOs) in the U.S., it was fruitful to look at a South Asian women's community group specifically as a "container" for my project. The YKB project in Seattle is also distinctive as an intergenerational, gendered, South Asian space and a project focused on cultural work. Most of the YKB participants have been middle class, Indian, Hindu, heterosexual women thus making YKB a community formation that reflects many of the strengths and limitations of the majority of South Asian women's organizing in the U.S., particularly projects coming out of middle-class immigrant communities.

An important aspect of my research sample (and the YKB project) was that it was a fairly evenly distributed mixed-generation group of South Asian women (see Chapter 3 for sample overview). Interviewees included first generation women who had come to the U.S. in the last 20 years as well as second generation women who were largely the children of post-1965 immigrants (i.e., immigrant parents who came to the U.S. between approximately 1965-1980) along with a small number of women who identified as one and a half generation (women who had come to the U.S. as children or teens). This represents different waves of South Asian migration to the U.S. and to the Seattle metropolitan area. The vast majority of the sample was middle or upper-middle class, and all participants had a college degree (or beyond) which is reflective of one significant segment of the South Asian diasporic population in the U.S. and specifically represents the largest group of South Asians in the Seattle area. The generational distribution in this sample provided a unique opportunity to look at differences and similarities across first and second generation women's narratives which has not been done in other research within South Asian communities.

Most existing scholarship about South Asian women has assumed the centrality of marriage and heteronormative family formation but has not looked at how heterosexism and gender norms play out at the micro and mezzo levels of self, family, and community in the diaspora. In addition, no published work has specifically looked at how gender, (hetero)sexuality, marriage, kinship and South Asianness get scripted and reproduced among first and second generation South Asian women. This study reveals some of the everyday practices of how this cultural script is communicated and internalized by women, family and community roles and relationships to the script, and ways that women make sense of their subjectivities when they deviate in various ways from the cultural script they have available to them. The narratives presented here and the exploratory nature of this initial analysis point to the importance of further research to elucidate these themes in more detail.

While the use of individual narratives is not a new practice in social work scholarship, I am using such narratives from a particular epistemological standpoint. Specifically, in this work, I take a constitutive view of language—that women use language to construct their selfhood through narrative and do certain work through their language. This is in contrast to viewing narratives as transparent or reflective of an internal reality. Relatedly, then, I “...recognize the complex social and historical processes involved in the construction of the individual self.” (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008, p. 16). As is reflected by many feminist scholars, I also see narrativity as a way to make visible the experiences and counternarratives of a marginalized group. At the same time, personal narrative analysis is a valuable way to more deeply understand the linkages between the micro and the macro, or the individual and the social.

Implications for Social Work

A number of scholars, including Finn and Jacobson (2003) in their discussion of “just practice,” have posited that we need more ways to promote social work as an emancipatory project in our current, global world. Finn and Jacobson (2003) call for: “...approaches to thought and action that challenge our certainties, acknowledge our partial and positioned perspectives and enable engagement with radically different ways of interpreting and acting in the world (p. 58). Toward that end, one of my goals in this project is to contribute to social work theorizing, education/pedagogy, methods, and practice. Given the importance of diversity issues, social justice, and cultural competency as tenets of our field and professional education, I see it as our charge as feminist social work scholars to continue to grow and expand existing paradigms for thinking about these critical topics and concerns and to contribute to knowledge building that furthers our mandate to work toward social justice. I view the empirical data presented here as illustrative of the lived complexity of issues such as identity, intersectionality, diaspora, gender, and race/ethnicity, within a transnational context that can contribute to relevant social work theorizing, education, and practice.

Theorizing

In this study, I work from an assumption that theory and lived experience have a dynamic relationship with one another. Thus, I see the women’s stories here as contributing to theory-building as much as theory shapes my understandings of their narrative experience. As I have written previously, it is my position that social work needs to continue to develop new and diverse ways of theorizing the multiplicity and interconnectedness of identities and oppressions in women’s lives (Mehrotra, 2010). Expanding theorizing in these ways has the potential to contribute to feminist, transnational, and social work paradigms and practices. Findings from

this study underscore the importance of the following interrelated considerations in regard to intersectionality and cultural competency-related theorizing.

Explicit incorporation of context.

Within the diasporic population in my sample, women overwhelmingly reflected the importance of their context in how they saw themselves, identified themselves, and negotiated their multiple positionalities. One aspect of this is place or geography. For many women, they have, and are, traversing multiple geographies in which they occupy very different positionalities. For example, the first generation women repeatedly articulated that race is not a salient positionality for them in the context of South Asia though it is (or can be) in the context of the U.S. Thus also a consideration of how identities get foregrounded and backgrounded in varied contexts as well as how context impacts assigned vs. asserted identities is also useful to consider in future intersectionality frameworks.

Considering temporality, lifecourse, and age.

Across their narratives, women talked about how their lives and how they think about themselves have changed over time. In considering marriage, age was a critical component of the gendered cultural script. In addition, all women, regardless of generation, articulated that various life events had impacted their life narratives and self-making processes. In both first and second generation women's accounts of racial/ethnic identification in this research, women highlighted how their identity had changed over time and how significant personal and political events (i.e., migration, 9/11) had meaningful impact on how they thought about their racial/ethnic identification and/or their sense of themselves as "good" Indian women. This points to the utility of theorizing intersectionality and narrative identity over time and lifecourse—not necessarily in a linear, stage oriented model like many existing ethnic identity

constructs—but more so by considering the salience of various life events, as well as socio-political events (such as 9/11 or migration) as critical in shaping how people narrate their experiences around social positionalities such as race/ethnicity. For example, understanding more about how significant life events impact one's self-making processes over time could help to uncover what types of life changes or turning points are salient to people's ethnic/racial self-making processes in varied contexts.

Incorporating transnationality.

Related to context and place, Purkayastha (2010), based on her recent work with middle-class South Asians in U.S., suggests the need to deepen conceptualizations of intersectionality to apply to transnational lives and contexts where individuals may be part of majority and minority groups *simultaneously* across borders. Because South Asians in the U.S. often maintain family ties and kinship networks across multiple nation-states, which was certainly the case in my sample, it is even more salient for this population to develop intersectional frameworks that can better hold the complexity of differing positionalities and experiences based on multiple geographic and political contexts, particularly in a contemporary era in which transnational travel and connection are frequent and social relationships exist in multiple fields, including the internet (Purkayastha, 2010).

Further, though race is often a primary vantage point for U.S.-based understandings of social oppression, it is important to also find ways to continue to incorporate other axes of difference that may also have more salience for diasporic populations so as to understand the social stratification frameworks and meanings that immigrant communities may be operating from. Women in the sample, for instance, often reflected issues of religion, caste, class, and region as important to thinking about their positionalities and sense of self growing up in South

Asia as well as in their community interactions in the U.S. For example, one Muslim identified woman talked extensively about how her community growing up was actually a multi-ethnic faith based community and that it was new for her as an adult to be connecting to South Asian community as a primary identity-based space. Narayan and Purkayastha's (2008) recent anthology on South Asian women's personal experiences with religion and Joshi's (2006) work looking at the links between religion, race, and ethnicity in the Indian community in the U.S., also highlight the importance of understanding gender and religion in the context of the South Asian diasporic community in the U.S. from the perspective of lived lives. Their work is also attentive to the fact that non-Christian religions in particular (such as Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam) have become markers of race in the U.S. This also points to the importance of increased attention to theorizing religion and race in addition to gender when interrogating South Asian women's lives in a contemporary post-9/11 context.

Considering intersections and relationships between privilege(s) and oppression(s).

Related to the need to grow theorizing in relationship to transnational formations, I further suggest that exploring the narratives of this group of privileged, transnational South Asian women (particularly who have class, heterosexual, able-bodied privilege in both the U.S. and South Asia, and often also religious and/or caste privilege in a South Asian context) underscores to the need to develop theorizing that can better encapsulate the simultaneity and complexities of privilege and oppression at work in communities. Most intersectionality theorizing tends to be focused on intersections of oppressions, though some frameworks are beginning to also considered the importance of privilege. As Purkayastha (2010) articulates:

We begin to see constellations of privilege and marginalisation that simultaneously shape peoples' experiences, but these privileges and marginalisations might emanate from very different sets of processes, that work at

local, regional, national and transnational contexts, in ways that coalesce and clash simultaneously. (p. 42)

How can we better develop and apply frameworks of intersectionality that can incorporate axes of privilege in addition to multiple oppressions? How does privilege (such as class or heterosexual privilege) mediate oppression in women's lives in different contexts?

In addition, this study highlights the impact of socialization in how one understands their social location and experience of oppression and privilege. Most of the first generation women in the sample were socialized in a place where they were often the majority racially, and also often privileged in terms of class, caste, and/or religious positionality. How does this socialization shape, for example, women's ability to take up discourses of universal humanity? How they perceive themselves in a new (racialized) context? In first and second generation women's narratives, the impacts of socialization in two different social environments with very different histories and social stratification systems, is reflected in how women construct their lives and their stories.

Utilizing diaspora and queer diaspora as analytic lenses for social work.

This study also elucidates the importance of the concept of diaspora as an analytic lens for considering transnational experience in a social work context. Though diaspora is a standard trope in a range of other disciplines, this lens has not been taken up in social work; however, I posit that it offers useful ways to think about migrant experiences of home, transnational networks, and individual and collective identities. Given social work's long-standing commitment to understanding people in their environment(s), it is necessary to understand that for many communities, such as South Asians living in the U.S., the concept of "environment" can be broad and shifting, and that people may be a part of multiple environments simultaneously. An understanding of diaspora as a construct also allows for critical examination

of the role of the nation-state in peoples' lives as it both declines and increases in significance in the face of globalization. Consideration of diaspora can also help to illuminate some of the ways that people conceptualize community and home, both constructs important to social work values and practice.

To disrupt the heteronormative and masculinist aspects of diaspora, transnational feminists and queer diasporic scholars have offered different analytics to consider transnational experiences. Queer diaspora scholars insist on the mutually constitutive nature of colonial histories, migration, sexuality, gender, race, and class and assert that queer immigrant locations provide a unique site from which to theorize (Eng, Halberstam, & Munoz, 2005; Gopinath, 2005; Manalansan, 2003). These scholars assert that queer diasporic critique creates a space for interrogating the ways in which migrant communities are racialized, gendered, and sexualized, as well as to articulate how queer subjectivities are formed and negotiated across transnational experiences (Eng et al., 2005; Gopinath, 2005). The findings in Chapter 5 contribute to thinking about how such a paradigm could be useful to Social Work with diverse populations of women and LGBTQ people in particular. These perspectives are in line with Social Work's commitments to social justice, meeting the needs of diverse and marginalized populations, and promoting a more global perspective.

Working with “cultural scripts” and narratives.

Social work practice is, in many ways, based on narrative interactions—between clients and practitioners, amongst communities, in organizing and policy arenas; yet in research and pedagogical models often do not realize the potential of narratives as a site for furthering social work scholarship and knowledge. This study demonstrated several ways that narrativity can be powerful in understanding individual and collective experience. First, individual narratives of the

women helped to illustrate the constructedness of racial/ethnic categories, the complexities of meaning-making around race/ethnicity across generations, and the differences in discourses that the women took up. Around gender, across the sample, it was stories about marriage and families that most helped to reveal aspects of the “cultural script” that produces “good” or “ideal” South Asian womanhood. This was a unique way to explore the relationship between gender, sexuality, and ethnic identity at the micro-level of individual and family life. I would also contend that the concept of a “cultural script” has utility for thinking about issues of agency and social structure as well as the relationships between individual and collective identities across a range of populations and settings. The framework of a cultural script also points to the often unspoken understandings and ideal-types that can significantly impact individual and communities’ behaviors, decisions, and relationships as seen in the findings documented Chapter 5.

Social Work Education and Pedagogy

Given our professional and political mandate to address issues of diversity, oppression, and culture and to work toward social justice, several key implications for social work education and pedagogy emerge from this study. In particular, work from this project can contribute to interdisciplinary social work education and pedagogy in regard to issues of diversity, cultural competency, and race and racism; content on globalization; and content related to gender and sexuality.

Narratives of South Asian women in this study illustrate the diversity of self-making and meaning around ethnic identification within a diasporic community in the U.S. This diversity disrupts the idea that an ethnic group, such as South Asian (or even Indian) is a fixed category or a monolithic entity and instead points to within group heterogeneity in terms of experience,

positionalities, and meaning-making. Narratives reflected not only diversity within the group in terms of actual life experiences, but also in the ways that women understand and construct and make-meaning around race/ethnicity. Issues of race and racism can often be presented in Social Work education as one (U.S. based) narrative. We need to continue to think about more ways to teach about race that both critically communicates its significance in the U.S. (and globally) without reinscribing the idea that people develop ethnic/racial identity in just one particular or fixed way (Kedell, 2009). Continuing to learn more about how people with diverse ethnic/racial/cultural backgrounds construct their identities drawing from a range of interpretive repertoires can ultimately help us to better think through issues of culture and oppression within the field. Inquiries such as this can also contribute to new ways of considering traditional concepts in the immigrant acculturation literature through considerations of meaning-making, narrative identity, significant life events, and changes over time (that are non-linear), for example. Further, historical perspectives about race and racialization processes in the U.S. can also contribute to deeper understandings about the social constructedness of race while simultaneously contextualizing the contemporary and material realities of racism for various groups. More explicit discussions about the ways that race/ethnicity are not experienced or understood in the same way both within and across minoritized groups would be useful in framing issues of race and racism in social work education. In addition, deepening social work's analyses about the role of race and racism on a global scale could expand anti-oppression content in contemporary Social Work curriculum. Vijay Prashad (2012), in his recent social commentary about South Asians in American post 9/11 writes: "It is my contention that race in the United States after 9/11 has to be seen on a global scale, because planetary events lean upon the social construction and reconfiguration of identity within the United States" (p. 63).

We also need to continue to grow our cultural competency approaches across an epistemological continuum that can reflect the necessary flexibility needed to meet the needs of diverse constituencies in the field (Williams, 2006). Similarly, cultural competency approaches should take up a range of intersectionality approaches that can illuminate diversities within communities, disrupt simple Us/Them or privilege/oppression dichotomies, and think about culture in more complicated ways. Further work to articulate issues of marginalization, hegemony, and power within ethnic/racial groups can help to elucidate important inequalities and dynamics within communities. For instance, this study helped to demonstrate diversity within one ethnic community in regard to generation, while also demonstrating the shared dominant discourse and practices that shape a shared gendered experience. Often in U.S.-based Social Work education and discourse, issues of race, culture, and ethnicity get collapsed under a rubric of “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” or “cultural competency.” This study shows the importance of elaborating on what is meant by these constructs while also critically thinking through the relationships between intersecting axes of diversity that impact the lives of individuals and communities in a global context.

The methodology employed in this project also demonstrates the potential of narratives to illuminate some of the ways that people understand their experiences of race, class, gender, sexuality, migration, and culture. Utilizing narrative forms beyond even personal narratives, such as film, essays, fiction, memoirs, and storytelling as tools in social work coursework can help foster deeper understandings of transnational experience, identity, and intersectionality. For example, there has been a proliferation of South Asian diasporic literature and film that could be utilized as teaching resources in social work classrooms.

Social Work Practice

From 2003-2005, I worked on a national technical assistance project funded by the Office on Violence Against Women that provided funding to Asian Women's Shelter in San Francisco to offer program and organizational development training and consultation to other Asian community-based groups around the country who were doing anti-domestic violence work. One of the needs that emerged from this process was that many agencies, particularly those in the South Asian community, approached us for help addressing issues of sexual orientation and same-sex domestic violence within their organizations and communities. Over the course of 2 years, another colleague and I did site visits, trainings, and organizational development work to support efforts of approximately 8 different South Asian programs around the country around these issues. The focus of this work was to help build these organizations' capacity to address homophobia and heterosexism within their organizations and communities in order to be able to meet the needs of LGBTQ survivors of intimate partner violence. As a part of this process, we worked to articulate an analysis of domestic violence that would link homophobia and sexism in order to help organizations understand why they, as anti-violence advocates, needed to address queer issues within their South Asian communities. Toward this end, we created training curriculum that attempted to address homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism within these culturally-specific organizations. These efforts yielded mixed results. While the programs we worked with seemed to gain some fluency in LGBTQ vocabulary and beginning to think through homophobia and heterosexism on an organizational level, over time we saw that they did not shift significantly in their analyses or their relationships with LGBTQ communities or survivors of violence. The findings from Chapter 5 have the potential to be very helpful to this work in the future. The concept of a cultural script around ideal South Asian womanhood would provide a framework for helping organizations think through the centrality of marriage and its relationship

to gender, sexuality, and kinship within the community. Further, because these organizations have already done some work around some women who have deviated from the script (i.e., women who are getting divorced because of an abusive relationship), those efforts may provide an entry point to expand their understanding of how queer women drop out of “being” if they are off of the cultural script available to them.

The analysis about racial/ethnic narratives in Chapter 4 also provides some insights that have the potential to be useful to South Asian women’s organizations. First, many organizations have multiple constituencies—people seeking services, community members, board, staff, volunteers, donors—that are a mix of first and second generation people. Within some organizations, such as Apna Ghar in Chicago, the advocates or social workers in the organization are likely to be second generation, middle class women while the women seeking services are more likely to be first generation women (Rudrappa, 2004). Understanding more about how these women narrate themselves in racial/ethnic terms has the potential to be helpful in thinking about what it means to provide culturally-specific services, how women may be understanding their own positionalities, and what kinds of strategies may be useful in meeting the needs of women seeking services and support.

In addition, in many practice settings, generational differences are glossed over in the name of “culturally-specific” programming or a desire to highlight the importance of a culturally-exclusive space. However, the findings here highlight the significant differences between first and second generation women’s self-making narratives. While conversations about generational differences in community settings can often focus on a “tradition/modernity” or “East/West” culture clash paradigm, the women’s narratives here point, rather, to a difference in meaning-making that can deepen understandings about how women understand their social

locations in a local context. For example, within a practice setting, thinking through the differences in the constructs first and second generation women draw upon to talk about themselves could be useful in designing outreach strategies. Specifically, strategically considering what language to use in materials or where or how to focus outreach approaches could be a way to more effectively reach different subgroups within the South Asian community. Insights from this study may also be useful in guiding discussions about intergenerational families and parenting that are increasingly being held within the community, often via SAWOs. It is salient, for instance, that first generation women may be raising children in a different sociopolitical context than how they grew up which then shapes both generations self-making processes in divergent ways. Understanding and discussion of this could help both parents and children understand some of the deeper roots of “culture clashes” that may be happening within immigrant families and communities.

Munshi (2011) in her essay regarding the role of South Asian women’s organization post-9/11 posits the political importance of such organizations shifting their work away from cultural frameworks and move toward work that centers an analysis of racism. In particular, she traces the way that culturally-specific domestic violence organizations have generally attributed their origin and their purpose as being about meeting the culturally and linguistically specific needs of South Asian immigrant women who are experiencing violence. She argues that the discourse of cultural difference encourages a focus on interpersonal dynamics (at the level of family and community, for example) while “obscuring connections between structural forces and violence in the interpersonal realm” (p. 424). It is interesting to consider Munshi’s argument in relationship to the narratives of first generation women in my sample in regard to race/ethnicity. Overwhelmingly, this middle-class group of women (who are also of the demographic that have

spearheaded many SAWOs around the country) narrate their experience around race/ethnicity as “doing” Indianness through cultural practices, and largely describe their experiences in ethnic/cultural terms vs. racialized terms. Further, they understand the racial/ethnic position assigned to them in the U.S. as being largely about the performance of Indian culture that is ascribed onto them. If we consider, then, that this group of women (who have a high level of privilege within South Asian communities) have been central to these South Asian women’s organizations, it makes sense that their initial community work in SAWOs centered a framework of cultural difference that then has prevented the development of an analysis of structural oppression given that race-based oppression is not the lens of these women in understanding themselves and their communities. In contrast, Munshi (2011) offers that groups doing work from the “margins” of the South Asian community (such as Muslims, LGBTQ folks, and Bangladeshis) incorporate very different kinds of analysis and strategies. I do not want to simplify the relationship between individual identity discourses, and social change organizations’ analyses and strategies, however, Munshi’s (2011) arguments along with my findings in Chapter 4 encourage further investigation between how communities narrate themselves in relationship to social structures and what this means for the approaches they take in community and/or social service work.

Finally, given the prevalence of SAWOs as an institutionalized form of activism and social work practice in the U.S., it is useful to continue to grow understandings of issues of gender and multiple forms of oppression in order to be able to effectively address interpersonal, gender-based violence within these communities. While this study was not focused on experiences of DV, understanding more about the social, political, and cultural contexts and conditions of South Asian women’s lives is useful in thinking about their intervention and

prevention needs. While some studies have focused on the experiences of South Asian domestic violence survivors (e.g., Abraham, 2000; Dasgupta & Warriar, 1996), knowing more about women's lives when they are not in crisis can help to inform program development, understandings of barriers and challenges facing these women when crisis does occur, and some of the multidimensionality of their experiences of oppression, community, and self-making that may provide insights into how to approach service provision or community interventions.

Reflections on Researcher Positionality

Articulating a feminist standpoint from my diasporic South Asian perspective serves as a form of resistance to hegemonic discourses in academia which marginalize the interests of minoritized scholars as being culturally relevant but lacking in “generalizability” (i.e., not useful for understanding mainstream populations) (Bhuyan, 2006, p. 162).

Throughout this project, I have reflected considerably on my role as a researcher who is also personally connected to the community that I have done research with. Related to Bhuyan's quote above, I have personally, politically, and intellectually pondered what a diasporic South Asian perspective is, what it means, and whether or not I believe in such a “standpoint” epistemologically. I suppose where I have landed is in a “both/and” position—an understanding that there are ways that my positionalities have given me unique perspective, insights, and challenges, yet epistemologically I do not necessarily privilege my own standpoint as exclusively “authentic” or superior. Simultaneously, however, as a researcher who has made active choices to interpret women's narratives and represent them in a particular way, clearly I must own the interpretive authority I have had within this project at all stages of the study.

I entered this study being what many would consider “insider” status with the local South Asian women's community. I am a U.S.-raised South Asian woman who is connected to local

community-based organizations, I have been a participant in the YKB project, and know many of the women who have been connected to the YKB project over the years. It also felt significant for me that many women in my study know that I identify as queer. Some women know this from my work and activism, some from the community grapevine, and some from my being outed by the 2011 YKB director prior to me coming to observe rehearsals. I noticed that many women when asked a question about sexual orientation or gender would qualify their answers or try to make it clear that they are LGTQ-friendly even though they are straight-identified.

Participants also did narrative work that positioned me as “insider” or “outsider” within our interviews. For instance, women would say things like “you know how it is...” or lapse into Hindi phrases assuming that I would understand them. In other moments, women might differentiate themselves from me by pointing out how their experience was unique from mine because they grew up in India or they would ask if I understood Hindi since they assumed a U.S. raised person might not speak or understand Hindi.

There were also some ways that my “insider” status was a challenge at times. Similar to Kanuha’s (2000) reflections about some of the limitations of her role as an insider doing research within communities she was a part of, upon reviewing interview transcripts, there were instances within some interviews where I could have probed further, encouraged elaboration, or even asked for clarification but I didn’t as I assumed familiarity with the content being shared. In cautioning against essentializing the role of the “insider” researcher, Kanuha (2000) writes:

One must not assume that being an insider to a cultural group necessarily means that a researcher has intimate knowledge of the particular and situated experiences of the group or that generalizations can or should be made about the knowledge the researcher holds about her own culture. (p. 443)

Given some of the salient differences I have in positionality and experience from many of the women I interviewed, it has been important not to assume my pre-existing knowledge of

participant's experiences based on our presumed shared identities. There were definitely times that I felt stark differences from my participants—particularly in regard to class, current ties to South Asia, sexual orientation and political views. As I discussed in Chapter 3, one approach I took to considering my role in the research was to actually be interviewed by a participant. Seeing my own responses to interview questions was one way to think about similarities and differences between myself and the women I interviewed. This will, I hope, be the basis for further work regarding the role of the researcher and disrupting the insider/outsider dichotomy in conceptualizing community research.

The Affective Labor of the Research

Although social researchers often seek to communicate their methods to other researchers for the sake of transparency, it is not always easy or acceptable – for a variety of different and often competing reasons – to discuss what it is ‘really like’ in the field of collection and production, as an embodied being. The smells, the sounds, the spatial confines, the tensions and the emotional demands are not readily laid out on the academic table. Yet these are the affective properties of research labour. (Fraser & Puwar, 2008, p. 4)

Some qualitative scholars are beginning to explore the emotional and personal aspects of conducting qualitative research. Tillmann-Healy and Kiesinger (2001), for instance, write that they have come to view “...field work and field relationships as mirrors, as ways of seeing both others and ourselves” (p. 82). In their deeply ethnographic and auto-ethnographic accounts, these authors demonstrate that in exploring the complexities of others’ lives, especially when components of those lives mirror our own as researchers, we are faced with “the joys and horrors of *our* experience” (p. 101). This was, at times, true about my experience of this research especially given my relationship to the subject matter being narrated by interviewees. In addition, in terms of some of the differences I had from other women, there were definitely instances of “microaggressions” based on sexual orientation, class, generation, cultural

authenticity that I experienced in interactions with women. For instance, many women asked why I wasn't married, offered weight loss tips (unsolicited), or talked to me about their class privilege in very unreflective ways. As I wrote in my research journal at one time during the data collection phase (July 2011):

Sometimes I feel exhausted by the privilege in these women's lives and narratives. their class privilege, their heteronormativity, their apparent simplicity in understanding who they are. I was weirdly kind of a relief when _____ (P18) said today that what was most challenging about being a South Asian woman living in the US was dealing with oppression like racism and sexism. Obviously it's not that I want people to have these negative experiences...but maybe it makes me feel less crazy. _____ (P25) and I had a good 'offline' conversation today about the privilege in the South Asian community here, too (mostly around class). She suggested I should research some writing about "studying up"...but it's weird to think about how to define "up." It's more like a non-linear sense of sameness and difference and oppression and privilege in lots of ways happening all the time in this process."

In her article, *Everywhere to go but home: On (re)(dis)(un)location*, about the experiences of diasporic Chinese migrants in Scotland, Ang-Lygate (1996) writes about her process of coming to produce this particular piece:

In retrospect I realize it was not simply a lack of time that prevented me from progressing my notes into a more developed stage of writing. Rather, my unconscious Self seemed to know that I was not yet ready at that time to deal with what turned out to be a highly personal and potentially painful subject matter. (p. 376)

Her words resonated significantly with me. There have been a number of challenges to writing this dissertation, particularly Chapter 5, including: lack of relevant published literature, the epistemological challenge of trying to navigate what kinds of meaning to attribute to women's words (and my own difficulty trusting the work that the narratives do), the constraints inherent in the genre of the dissertation...the list could go on. At the same time, however, I think it is significant to name, as part of the work developed here, what Ang-Lygate has articulated above—the impact of developing scholarship that is about deeply personal and emotionally

difficult subjects may mean that this scholarship takes a different kind of time and process. In addition to being intellectually challenging, this work has been emotionally and psychically taxing for me as a South Asian queer woman who has lived and negotiated these hegemonic constructions and their material consequences for all of my adult life, including during the time of working on this project. Kofoed (2008) importantly observes that “the point of view of the inappropriate/d confirms the existence and content of the hegemonic narrative, at the same time as it challenges the demands to conform” (p. 421). In many ways, in terms of the cultural script of South Asian womanhood, as a South Asian queer female subject, I am “the inappropriate/d,” and my perspective does confirm the cultural script, or the hegemonic narrative, of South Asian womanhood in a particular way.

Further affirming the importance of this perspective, Gopinath (2005) posits that South Asian female queer subjects are uniquely positioned to destabilize such heterosexual, nationalist discourses of nation, home, and diaspora. While much queer diasporic critique written by South Asians has been textual in nature and/or humanities based, I believe that the work started here has the potential to contribute to larger conversations about heteronormativity and gender normativity in the context of the South Asian diaspora from such a perspective. Further scholarship on methodologies could also contribute to more thinking about the affective labor of conducting research and writing from such a perspective.

Limitations, Tensions, and Ongoing Questions

Given the anti-positivist, feminist stance of this research, I see the work presented here as partial, contextual, evolving, and subjective based on my interpretations. I also realize that given the “crisis of representation” and the inability to escape the discourse, power dynamics, and institutional context that this work is embedded in, this project and the representations within it

are inevitably limited, complicated, and imperfect. It is not my goal for this to be generalizable to other populations or even necessarily to other groups of South Asian women in the U.S., but rather, to begin to explore the narratives of this under-researched group in a local context. This study was based in a specific geographic environment—the YKB project in Seattle, WA—and in women’s interview narratives they were able to draw upon the discursive resources that they gained access to and created in the YKB process. This could be seen, in some ways, as a limitation as this was a group of women who were presumably more familiar with the topics of my interview and/or may have already done some preliminary exploring of related themes through the YKB process. This was also a self-selected group who had explicit interests and commitments to issues of gender and culture—topics in the interview—thus, may have engaged differently than a different group of South Asian women.

Given who the South Asian community is, largely, in the Seattle Area and who is currently the constituency participating in the YKB project, this sample was a group of women who represent a very privileged group within the South Asian community. As I have alluded to already, the majority of the women in my sample were middle and upper middle class, Indian, raised Hindu, highly educated, able-bodied, English-fluent, and heterosexual. Though I did not ask explicitly about legal status, based on their migration narratives, most women also seemed to have documented status in the U.S. The dominance of this demographic group within the South Asian community has been of concern to activists and scholars alike who have called for more examination of power dynamics, marginalization, and privilege within diverse South Asian communities (e.g., Islam, 1993). Relatedly, even in my analysis of generational differences, I did not take into consideration some more specific aspects of generational experience such as what age women were when they migrated, how long they had been in the U.S., or for second

generation women, where they grew up or when their parents' came to the U.S. In retrospect, gaining more information about women's class experiences, even prior to migration, could have helped to elucidate more about the role of socioeconomic status and class privilege in these women's lives.

Methodologically, the strength of this project was the richness of the data and the relational and community-based nature of the interview process. However, the analysis may have been strengthened by having additional people (such as other researchers or community members) review transcripts and potentially work on coding together—not so much because I was concerned about “bias” or finding a singular “truth,” but there were times when I questioned if my immersion in the data (academically and personally) was preventing me from seeing or further exploring any aspects of the narratives. I also felt that while observing the YKB project rehearsals was helpful to gaining some access to the narrative environment that women were immersed in, deeper ethnographic work (i.e., more participant observation sessions at more varied points in the process, or observing the whole process from start to performance, etc.) may have allowed for me to more specifically link individual and collective narratives.

Though my activist and practice commitment have been most centered on mezzo and macro-centered concerns, in this project I focused on individual experiences. While I do not necessarily think of this as a “limitation” of the work in the traditional positivist sense, I do see it as a political and intellectual limitation in some ways. Ultimately, I am interested in what micro-level work, particularly personal narratives, can tell us about larger social, political, and cultural constructs. I have not focused on articulating those links in this current analysis, however, I continue to be interested in how women's everyday experiences and self-narratives can serve as important sites for knowledge production on their own terms as well as in conversation with

critical perspectives on larger social and political forces. This project gestures towards these questions and provides a foundation for future analysis in regard to some of these linkages, particularly in regard to racial formation in the U.S., work around heterosexism and homophobia, experiences of diaspora, and transnational feminisms and sexualities.

One other significant limitation of this work is the way that I have unquestioningly used the category of “woman” to talk about participants and the project. While this project has done some important work in disrupting the essentialized, naturalized, and categorical understanding of the ethnic/racial category of “South Asian,” I have not done that same analytical work around gender. The YKB project uses the language of being a “women’s” project which also assumes a static, fixed, knowable category of “woman.” To use the term “woman” in this way does not feel resonant with my own feminist commitment, or my personal or political view of gender. Therefore, future iterations of this work will take up a more complex view of gender that disrupts “woman” as a singular, biologically-defined, bounded category.

Future Research

Because of the richness of the data, I hope to conduct further analysis of the narratives from this study. I would like to continue to look at the data in relationships to other aspects of my initial research questions that have I did not explore in this preliminary work. First, as I have mentioned, I will be utilizing data that I collected as part of this study to compile a program evaluation for Tasveer, the organization that currently houses the YKB project. This evaluation will be process-oriented in nature and will focus on: best parts of the experience or “highlights” of YKB for participants, challenges, and core tensions in the project overall. I will be presenting the overview of the evaluation as well as some of the results from my dissertation analysis at a community forum tentatively planned for October 2012.

I also would like to look specifically at some of the subgroups within the sample. While I did look at differences in first and second generation women's experiences in this analysis, as well as the unmarried women's narratives, there are many other ways to look at the data in relationship to minority statuses within South Asian communities. In particular, I would like to look at the narratives of the religious minority women (Muslim, Sikh, and Christian women), queer-identified women, women under 30, and working class women to explore some of the potentially unique aspects of how these women narrate their experiences and negotiations of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion in the diaspora as they represent non-hegemonic positions within this regional construction of "South Asian."

I would also like to do more writing across "levels" of analysis (and practice)—specifically considering the more micro/everyday experiences that are reflected in U.S.-based, South Asian women's narratives to larger social/political processes such as globalization, immigration policy, constructs of citizenship, and transnational family formation. I also asked women in their interviews about significant life events and turning points in their lives. In most cases, their responses were linked to migration, gender, and family issues. Looking at these questions may also provide insights into these aforementioned macro level processes.

The process and findings from this study also open up other lines of related inquiry. The historical and contemporary complexity of South Asian's racial positioning in the U.S. and the transnational nature of this community make this group a rich site for understanding collective and individual experiences of race/ethnicity and culture. Looking at this community also requires a unique dialogue between racial/ethnic studies perspectives that tend to be nation/U.S.-based and South Asia area/regional studies. The themes that emerged in Chapter 4 regarding racial/ethnic self-making across generations provide a useful starting point for considering some

of these issues. However, it is also important to keep in mind the specificity of this sample when considering these findings. Overall, this was a middle and upper middle-class sample that was majority Indian and Hindu (both dominant social locations within the community). How might working-class, non-Indian women narrate ethnic/racial identity, for instance? What does ethnic identity and/or racialization look like for other formations of South Asian communities in the U.S. such as Indians who were raised other places in the diaspora (such as East Africa or the Caribbean) and then came to the U.S.? As this community ages in the U.S.—both in terms of generation and in terms of chronological age—how will this impact racial/ethnic understandings and experiences? Many post-1965 immigrants who came from the late 1960s-1980s are now aging after having raised children in the U.S. What are the unique experiences of these early migrants who have transnational lives but may have lived more than half their lives in the U.S. and raised their families here?

Given the construct of a gendered “cultural script” that developed out of women’s narratives in this project, I am interested in the potential of a qualitative study with women who deviate from this script—queer women, unmarried women of marriageable age, divorced women, widows—to expand the analytic work started here. Drawing from a queer diasporic critique, I would like to expand an understanding of how these women become “impossible subjects” (Gopinath, 2005) within their families and communities and gain a more nuanced understanding of how these negotiations play out. Further, I would like to better understand some of the unique aspects of these different subgroups of women who deviate from the “cultural script.” For instance, how similar or different are the experiences of queer women and divorced women in terms of how their “deviance” or “unthinkability” is experienced or perceived? In addition, I am interested in more exploration of resistance and revising of the

script. How do women who are “off the script” navigate this in their everyday practices? Within their families and communities? How, if at all, do they revise the script? What are the strategies they employ to make themselves legible? What kinds of alternative spaces and approaches get created as a response to not being part of the “cultural script”? What kinds of new formations, relationships, and scripts get created as part of their deviance from the dominant “cultural script”? Further explication of the links between heteronormativity, diasporic experience, and kinship formation would be useful as an analytic lens for such work. Lastly, given the current political climate regarding marriage equality, future work could look more at how gay marriage functions within South Asian queer communities and families as well as how gay marriage plays out in potentially distinctive ways for South Asian queer people.

Another line of inquiry from this project is specifically around projects such as YKB, other South Asian women’s community projects or organizations, and other creativity or arts-based initiatives. Yoni Ki Baat has grown in the past 10 years into a popular community event in a range of locations (aside from Seattle), including the San Francisco Bay Area, University of Michigan, Rutgers University, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington DC (<http://southasiansisters.org/events/ykb/ykb.html>). Considering the differences in these environments geographically, and in terms of participant demographics (for example in University-based vs. community based projects), future research could work to better understand similarities and differences between YKB projects in different locales. Conducting more in-depth ethnographic research within the Seattle YKB project, and possibly other sites, could help to elucidate more about YKB as a meaningful community space, including the mechanisms and processes by which the project fosters relationships, community-building, creative development and change for both participants and audiences. I am also interested in how YKB, as a

cultural/creative process also serves as a kind of non-professionalized community intervention/prevention project and what kinds of short and long terms impacts it has on participants as well as audiences.

Case and Hunter (2012) have articulated the concept of a “counterspace”—a setting that promotes the well-being of oppressed people through relational transactions and narrative identity work. In their framework, a counterspace functions as an alternative space that challenges oppressive societal narratives about marginalized people’s identity through the creation of alternative narrative identity resources, relationship building, interaction between individuals and their context, and spaces which allow marginalized people to “act out their resistance narratives and reimagined identities” (Case & Hunter, 2012, p. 9). Case and Hunter propose counterspaces as units of analysis for thinking critically about and investigating how such settings function as spaces that can promote the wellness of marginalized individuals and groups. This is an excellent paradigm for thinking about the YKB project or SAWOs in terms of individual and community-level impact. Preliminary evaluative data collected in this project already show that women do see and experience the YKB project, as well as Chaya, as counterspaces in which they build deeply meaningful relationships, reimagine their identities and gendered experiences, and create alternate narratives about themselves. In such an investigation of YKB as a counterspace, I am also interested in better understanding the limits of YKB (and/or any counterspace) in terms of what kind of disciplining function such a space can (inadvertently) play, and some of the ways that dominances within communities can be replicated in such spaces. Extending the notion of a cultural script in such an investigation could also be useful. For example, building on my work in Chapter 5, to what degree does YKB as a counterspace actually disrupt or attempt to reimagine the cultural script of South Asian womanhood as linked

to marriage? To what extent does this script get reinscribed even in an “alternative” narrative space? What kind of, and whose, narrative identities are privileged, even in these reimaginings? How do SAWOs also function as counterspaces as alternative South Asian communities outside of faith-based and cultural/regional organizations, particularly in geographies like the Pacific Northwest (that do not have a proliferation of other alternative South Asian spaces)?

Another aspect of YKB that I would potentially like to explore in the future is its specificity as a space that centers creativity and cultural work as avenues for social and individual transformation. Munshi (2011) posits a question to South Asian women’s organizations: “...another question is whether the work can move beyond traditional service/support paradigms to incorporate tools such as art and cultural production to engage healing from, and dialogue about, violence” (p. 433). Given the prevalence of domestic violence organizing within the South Asian community in the U.S., the goals and focus of the YKB project, and the extent to which women can and do talk about issues of violence within the project, Munshi’s question is relevant to future research centered on YKB. To what extent is and can YKB function as a space to engage healing and promote dialogue about issues of gender-based violence, specifically? How do arts, performance, and cultural work create unique spaces for social change, healing, and community building? Further, how are audiences impacted by seeing the YKB performance and how does it influence community-level understandings of gender, sexuality, and interpersonal violence within this diasporic community?

The findings from this study point to the need for much more research focused on this social work and allied scholarship and practice. Future work on counterspaces, on other segments of the South Asian population (such as queers, religious minorities, elders, and non-Indians), South Asian anti-violence organizations and community projects, cultural/arts-based

projects, and larger macro questions around issues such as transnational family formation and political economy of South Asian migration to the U.S. can provide deeper analytic and pragmatic understandings of some of the issues I've started to explore here.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

I am currently a PhD student at the University of Washington, School of Social Work. I am currently working on my dissertation project—a study that aims to understand South Asian women’s life experiences through looking at the *Yoni Ki Baat* (YKB) project in Seattle. I am especially interested in how South Asian women talk about and make sense of their multiple identities and life experiences related to gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, migration, significant life events and the YKB project.

I have been part of YKB in the past as both a performer (in 2007) and volunteer (in 2010), and have been involved with anti-violence and social justice work for over 15 years. It has been these experiences, along with my academic work that have led me to this research interest. For this study, I will be talking with women who have participated in YKB in Seattle over the past 5 years.

Since you are a South Asian woman who has been in the YKB project, I am reaching out to you to see if you would be willing and interested in participating in this study. For this research, I will be conducting confidential, individual interviews lasting about 1-2 hours. If you live in Seattle, I would prefer to meet you in person for the interview in a quiet, safe location (such as your home, my home, office, etc.). If you are currently not living in Seattle, we can arrange to conduct the interview by telephone or Skype if needed.

I am able to offer you a \$25 gift certificate for Diya Spa for your participation in this project (or an equivalent if you do not live in Seattle).

If you are interested in participating, have questions, and/or would like more information about this research project, please contact me by email at gitarani@u.washington.edu or by phone at [415.699.3438](tel:415.699.3438).

Thank you for your time and consideration! I hope to hear from you soon!

**Please note that we cannot guarantee the confidentiality of information sent by e-mail.*

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON CONSENT FORM

Researcher: Gita Mehrotra, MSW (Doctoral Student)
University of Washington, School of Social Work
gitarani@u.washington.edu

Dr. Karina Walters (Advisor)
University of Washington, School of Social Work
kw5@u.washington.edu

Researchers' statement

I am asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When I have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called “informed consent.” I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The goal of this study is to learn more about how South Asian women make sense of their life experiences and identities and to better understand the local *Yoni Ki Baat* (YKB) project. The aim of this research is to document and better understand South Asian women’s experiences of immigration and living in the U.S., how they think about themselves, and how they have experienced their participation in the YKB project.

Gita Mehrotra, a PhD student in Social Work, is carrying out this research. Gita is a South Asian woman who has been doing domestic violence social justice work for the past 15 years. She was also a participant in Seattle’s first YKB in 2007 and a project volunteer in 2010.

I will be interviewing 25 YKB participants for this study. I am doing this research as my dissertation project. The study results will be shared with participants and South Asian community-based organizations when it is completed.

PROCEDURES

I am asking you to participate in an interview that will be about 1 1/2-2 hours long. The interview will be held in person or on the phone. During the interview, I will ask you questions about your identity and life experiences. I will also ask you about the YKB project. For example, some questions you might be asked include: “How do you identify your race, ethnicity, or culture?” “What have been significant turning points in your life that have impacted how you see yourself as a South Asian woman?” “What was best about participating in the YKB project?” “What was challenging about it?”, etc. You can refuse to answer any questions. You can withdraw from the study at any time.

With your permission, I will audio record the interview. All interviews will be transcribed. You will have the opportunity to review your interview transcripts if you desire.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

There are no physical health risks to participating in this study. However, I will ask you questions that include sharing of personal information. This could bring up feelings of mild discomfort, such as embarrassment or anxiety. I will provide you with local resource information in case you would like to seek support services after the interview.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

You will not benefit directly from being in this study. But, you might enjoy sharing your experiences as a South Asian woman and YKB participant. You may also appreciate being part of research focused on the South Asian community and YKB. This project will also contribute to greater knowledge about South Asian women’s experiences which can help to inform culturally-relevant social services, programs, and the YKB project in the future.

OTHER INFORMATION

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. Your connection with this project will not affect your relationship with the YKB Project, Chaya, or Tasveer in any way now or in the future.

All of your information will be kept confidential. However, if you tell me about current child abuse, elder abuse, or that you are at risk of harming yourself or someone else, I will have to report this information. Each interview will be assigned a participant number which will be kept separate from your name and audio file. I will destroy audio files and list of interviewees’ identifiers after the study is completed or within 5 years.

If you have any questions about this research at any time, you can contact Gita Mehrotra at [415.699.3438](tel:415.699.3438) or via email at: gitarani@u.washington.edu. Also, if you have questions about your

rights as a research subject, you can call the Human Subjects Division at the University of Washington at (206) 543-0098. You will get a copy of this consent form for your records.

Printed name of study staff obtaining consent _____ Signature _____ Date _____

PARTICIPANT STATEMENT

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, I can ask the researcher listed above. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at the University of Washington. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

I give my permission for the researcher to audiotape my interview.
 I do NOT give my permission for the researcher to audiotape my interview.

Printed name of participant _____ Signature of participant _____ Date _____

Copies to:
Investigator's file
Participant

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

To start with, I am going to ask you some questions about your identity and life experiences:

1. Please share a little bit about yourself – where you are from, where you live, what you are doing in your life now, etc.

2. How do you identify in terms of your race, ethnicity, and/or culture?

Probes:

- How did you come to identify this way?
- Are there (or have there been) situations or times in your life when you identify yourself differently?

3. How do you identify in terms of your gender?

Probes:

- How did you come to identify this way?
- What did you learn growing up about gender? Being a _____(racial/ethnic id) woman? From where/whom/how did you learn it?

4. How do you identify in terms of your sexual orientation?

Probes:

- If queer/lesbian/bisexual/gay/trans/queer- identified: How “out” do you consider yourself to be? in general? in the South Asian community? within your family?
- Are you in a relationship currently? How, if at all, does this affect how you think about your sexual orientation?

5. Are there any other identities that are important to who you are? (consider: religion, caste, age, etc.) Why?

6. How/why did you and/or your family come to the U.S.?

Probes:

- Have you or your family lived in other places in the South Asian diaspora? (i.e., UK, Canada, Africa, etc.)
- Where does the rest of your family currently live?

7. How would you describe your current ties to South Asia and/or other country(s) of origin?

Probes:

- Do you still have family in South Asia? Other places in the diaspora? What kind of relationships/contact do you have with them?
- How often do you go back to South Asia? (and/or other places in the diaspora?) What are these visits like?
- How is it if/when your family visits you in the U.S.?

8. How is being a South Asian woman (use race/gender identifiers that she uses) different from you in different environments (for example, whether you are in the U.S. or in your country of origin, within your family, etc.)
- What do you think is best about being a South Asian woman living in the U.S.? What do you think is most challenging?
9. What have been 3 “significant moments” or turning points in your life that have impacted your life and how you see yourself as a South Asian woman?
10. I am interested in knowing more about how South Asian women experience community and/or multiple communities. As a South Asian woman living in the U.S., you may have ties to different communities. I would like to understand how you relate to different communities that you are a part of (i.e., South Asian communities, religious communities, LGBTQ communities, etc.)

Probes:

- How do you know you are a part of a particular community/ies? (*reference communities/identities that participants named in initial questions*)
- Are there any specific community events that you generally take part in?
- How have you been received in different spaces/communities you are a part of?
- What kinds of discrimination have you experienced in different spaces/communities you are a part of?
- Have you experienced discrimination *within* the South Asian community?

Now I am going to ask you some questions that are specifically about your experience of participating in the Yoni Ki Baat project. I am going to ask you questions both about the rehearsal/workshop process and about the performance itself.

7. Please tell me about your experience of participating in Yoni Ki Baat

Probes:

- Why did you decide to participate in YKB?
- What were highlights/best parts of the experience for you?
- What was most challenging/difficult about participating in YKB?
- What did you write your piece about? What made you decide to write about this?
- What did you learn from being part of the YKB rehearsal/workshop process?
- How was it to perform your piece?
- How do you think you were changed by the experience of performing in YKB?
- How did your friends/family/community respond to your participation in YKB? to the show in general? Were the responses positive? Negative? How did you respond to feedback about the show?
- How did participating in YKB rehearsals/workshops impact how you see yourself as a South Asian woman (*use self-descriptor provided by participant*)? As a survivor of violence (*if participant has indicated that they identify as such*)? How did it impact how you think about your gender, sexuality, culture, other identities?
- How do you think you were changed by this experience? How do you see this experience now (*for those who are former participants*)?

9. What have you done in your life as a result of your participation of YKB? How has your life been different since you participated in YKB?

10. Are there any other stories or experiences about your experience of YKB that you would like to share before we close?

Probes:

- Is there anything else I should have asked you but didn't?
- Is there anything you would like to add to what we already talked about?

11. Do you have any questions for me?

- How was it for you to participate in this interview?

Closing the interview:

- Complete demographic questions.
- Turn off the recorder.
- Make sure the person is doing okay emotionally. Provide Chaya contact information for additional support.
- Make sure participant understands that she will receive a copy of the transcript (and confirm delivery email/address).
- Let her know she can contact me with questions/concerns following the interview if necessary.
- Give her the gift card for her participation.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEWEE DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

Age	
Current City of Residence	
South Asian Country of Origin and/or other Countries of Origin (include region here and/or city)	
Generation + length of time in U.S. (When did you/your family come to the U.S.?)	
Sexual Orientation	
Gender identity	
Religion	
Caste (if applicable)	
Highest level of education completed	
Languages spoken	
What year(s) did you participate in YKB?	

VITA

Gita Rani Mehrotra is a second generation South Asian woman who has lived and worked in Minnesota, California, and Washington State. She earned her BA in Psychology and Sociology from Macalester College, her MSW from the University of Minnesota, and her PhD from the University of Washington. She has over 15 years of experience in the field of domestic violence with an emphasis on South Asian and Asian immigrant communities and LGBTQ communities of color. Gita's research and teaching interests include social justice education, domestic violence in marginalized communities, intersectionality theorizing, feminist social work, and qualitative and interpretive research methods.