

BEING FOBULOUS ON MULTICULTURAL DAY

Tara has been looking forward to multicultural day since she started at Mercer. She met many of the girls in her popular clique as children in her Gujarati community. Tara lives in the maze of streets atop the Fremont hills. Her parents moved to Fremont from Gujarat via Chicago in 1981, when Silicon Valley was beginning to become world renowned for its technology work. For years, Tara and her friends have kicked it in their six-girl clique on a bench in the quad at lunch. Now that they are seniors, they meet in the parking lot to go out to lunch in the new cars they received for their sixteenth birthdays. Although some of her friends understand Gujarati and can speak it to each other, they do so only for gossip or jokes, like her friend Sheetal's "dead gai" joke, discussed in the previous chapter. Compared to the parents of the other girls in her clique, Tara's parents place the fewest restrictions on her social activities and allow her to stay out late and date boys—taboo activities for nearly all her friends. Tara knows how unique her relationship is with her parents. She explained, "Me and my parents are so close. Actually I am lucky to have them. They are so liberal, they let me do anything I want. I guess that's a good thing. I won't be doing things that they don't want me to be doing." Her father expressed his viewpoint on his daughter's social life: "I told Tara, 'Keep your eyes open, if you like someone, go for it! If they don't find someone by that time, we will try to find them. I have no problem, Black, White, Chinese.'" With her friends unable to party and with no boys worth dating at her school, Tara confides that there is seldom a worthwhile outlet for her freedom. Tara has been pouring her efforts into their multicultural day dance. All six girls are Hindi film fans and love to choreograph and perform dances based on Bollywood dance sequences. They have cinched top prizes with their amateur troupes at regional Desi dance contests.

Multicultural day performances like the one Tara and her friends are planning are carefully conceived and enthusiastically received by school audiences. Their choreography and music—painstakingly selected to incorporate a wide range of cultural forms—flow seamlessly together. What such short performances obscure, however, is a broad range of enduring inequalities of race and class that dominate the everyday lives of students. As the only sanctioned space for cultural expression in high school, multiculturalism draws attention to complicated issues of equality, participation, and who is responsible for upholding its tenets. Although multiculturalism's ideologies of equal rights and representation grew out of various civil rights and postcolonial struggles, they often lose their potency during implementation. Silicon Valley high schools have created annual events that reflect the egalitarian spirit of multiculturalism, but execute them in inconsistent ways that offer little support to ensure equal access. The rhetoric of these programs suggests that they are open to all, but little is done to include interested students.

In Silicon Valley high schools, multicultural initiatives overshadow historically produced systems of advantage and disadvantage among particular racial groups and obscure socioeconomic cleavages that exist within them. In this chapter I focus on two performances, the politics of representation that precede them, and the responses that follow them. The first discussion examines representation across racial groups at Mercer High School, and the second highlights tensions that can emerge within a racial group at Greene.¹ Both interrogate questions of rights, meanings, and representation for students. Moreover, they draw attention from the sanctioned emphasis on Culture with a capital C—which includes food, clothing, music, and dance—to the dynamics of inequality that underpin different racial and ethnic groups.

Despite all their flaws, multicultural programs are valued spaces of representation for Desi youth. Indeed, these spaces are rare and cherished opportunities for Desi teens to define themselves to their peers. Choices of music, costume, choreography, and other stylistic elements enable them to display Desi teen culture to their schools. Such choices are far more complex and nuanced than the reductive stereotypes of Desis in the media or in their curricular lessons about “Indian Culture.” Yet it is often this very essentialist notion of South Asian culture that their peers and school faculty expect to see during these programs. Indeed, the reductive charac-

ter of multiculturalism often lays to waste students' efforts as audiences anticipate cultural representations they consider to be authentic or traditional. Negotiations of what it means to be Desi come to a head in these programs, as do broader questions of race, class, and gender equity.

MULTICULTURALISM IN AMERICA

Multiculturalism emerged in the United States in the late twentieth century as a response to the European cultural hegemony that prevailed in American universities from the late nineteenth century onward (Goldberg 1994; Stam and Shohat 1994). This Eurocentric perspective was in harmony with prevailing policies and attitudes toward immigrants during that period, which included the eventual cessation of Asian immigration and denial of citizenship to Asian Americans. In contrast to the attempts to acknowledge and respect diversity that mark present-day constructs of multiculturalism, the late nineteenth century and early twentieth favored a "melting pot" model of assimilation (Glazer and Moynihan 1963) that required immigrants to relinquish any cultural values or language practices that conflicted with Anglo-European monoculturalism and English monolingualism. This pressure to assimilate came under increasing attack during the second half of the twentieth century, a period marked by emerging postcolonial nations worldwide and ardent civil rights movements in the United States, as well as a relaxation of U.S. anti-Asian immigration laws.

Although multiculturalism emerged out of movements for greater civil rights and freedom, its nature has been a site of contentious debate. Conservative critics oppose the idea outright and have railed against curricular reform, affirmative action, and political correctness. Dinesh D'Souza's (1998) *Illiberal Education* typifies this perspective. Others invested in furthering the call for substantive economic, political, and social reform have noted that multiculturalism is most often recognized in a purely celebratory manner through festivals, fairs, and other "ethnic" events. This critique acknowledges that multiculturalism focuses on how immigrants, people of color, and other minorities add diversity to American society without actually addressing the power relations that contribute to inequality between and within these groups (McLaren 1994; Takaki 2001; Taylor 1994; Wallace 1994). In any case, it is essential that multicultural efforts not challenge White hegemony (Frankenburg 1993; Lipsitz 2006; Perry 2002;

Winant 1997); indeed, diversity is tolerated in these contained displays insofar as it does not disrupt the racial order. This norm of Whiteness is one on which multiculturalism is premised—a point that is evident in how teenagers discuss the meaning of this term and align themselves with their high school’s multicultural initiatives.

MULTICULTURALISM IN SILICON VALLEY HIGH SCHOOLS

While the ethos of multiculturalism is about unity, equality, and cultural expression, its implementation can exacerbate and reinforce race-, class-, and gender-based divisions among students. Neither Mercer nor Greene High School offered any “formal” or politicized multicultural efforts in their curricula. While race and ethnicity are examined to some extent through class work or projects, multicultural programs stand alone as the designated space where racial difference within the student body receives public attention. Showcasing dance, music, food, and art, these carnival-like programs offer day- or weeklong displays of Culture for general consumption by students and faculty. When this type of public expression is quarantined to a single day or week of the entire school year, all “cultures” appear to exist in harmony next to one another and disparities between them are erased. Dance and song productions, along with ethnic food and music, are displayed as representative of entire countries, regions, and even continents, such as in “African Culture” or “Latin American Culture.” In actuality, such monikers barely even represent the diversity of students from these groups who attend the high school. Moreover, such parsing of time and attention overshadows historically produced systems of advantage and disadvantage between racial groups and ignores cleavages of class that exist within them at schools.

At Mercer High School, “Multicultural Week” began in the mid-1990s and evolved into its present format of a weeklong festival. Each of the first four days is dedicated to a different racial group—African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and European Americans—and students are encouraged to dress in corresponding ethnic clothing. Friday is Unity Day, when the week’s events culminate in an hour-long assembly of performances held in the gym and performed twice to accommodate the oversized student body. During an extended lunch period on Unity Day, student clubs are invited to play music and sell ethnic foods and crafts.

“Ethnic” food at Mercer means choosing between egg rolls and samosas instead of the “normal” fare of bagels and burritos. While eating a kabob, students can get a henna tattoo bearing the name of their favorite NSync band member or purchase woven goods from Central America. Similarly, at Greene efforts focus on food and dance but are condensed into an extended lunch period on a Friday. All “International Day” activities are staged in the quad, the least diverse area of the school campus.

At both schools, students believe that multicultural programs amount to little more than entertainment. Nonetheless, students of color at both schools describe these days as the only ones over which they feel a true sense of ownership. Compared to other school productions such as homecoming and school dances, which Desi teens usually refer to as “White” events, Multicultural Day can truly be theirs. Taahir, a geek boy who likes to wear his *sherwani* suit (a long, fitted coat) for Asian Day at Mercer, commented, “I think Multicultural Week is cool because we can express ourselves in another angle that people usually don’t see us through. . . . We’re able to dress up, it helps show who you are.” Likewise, José, a Latino boy, describes the vibrant character of the week and exclaimed, “I find it extremely interesting. Everyone is kinda representin’, like, this is what I am!”

For many students, securing a place in the schoolwide program is important precisely because of this scarcity of ongoing opportunities for public expression. Although Desi teens admit that these venues are primarily about displaying dance, music, and food, they nonetheless value them as one of the few spaces they can call their own in an otherwise White high school culture. Indeed, even though White students are a numerical minority at Mercer and Greene, events such as homecoming, rallies, school dances, and prom that Desi teens regard as White dominate the public space of school and rarely take into consideration the music or aesthetic choices of non-White groups.

By contrast, multicultural programs allow a space for Desi teens to carefully craft representations that reflect aspects of their heritage as well as their lives in California. These expressions differ from the static, timeless notions of South Asia that they may learn about in their classrooms and instead mark a more time- and place-specific way of being Asian American. Desi teens can use these spaces to convey more heterogeneous and potentially radical versions of themselves than they otherwise can in high schools, and than their peers would likely learn about in class.

While Multicultural Week may not appear contentious, in a teenage world it is fraught with multiple layers of political and social significance. Indeed, if high school is considered a microcosm of society, then multicultural programs provide a staging ground for rights and representation. “Cultural citizenship” draws attention to the political underpinnings of quotidian struggles; Renato Rosaldo and William Flores (1997: 57) define this concept as “the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one’s right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state’s democratic processes” (see also Ong 1996; Siu 2001). As one of their students’ only public forums, high schools necessarily serve as sites in which to examine the dynamic struggle for rights and representation (Kymlicka 1996; Werbner 1997). In this sense, organizing a dance for a multicultural performance is illustrative of broader dynamics that position as well as empower students to advocate for particular rights and viewpoints.

Although numerous teens want to participate in Multicultural Day and seek greater representation in schools, only some have the cultural capital to actualize their visions. Indeed, how students gain access to these programs and find their way onstage is reflective of the broader ways students of different racial and class backgrounds are able to use the school to meet their needs. Going backstage, so to speak, to examine the casting, creating, and rehearsing of these performances reveals how these expressions of racial and cultural identity are sites of negotiation and exclusion for many students. At Mercer this struggle occurred between various racial groups; at Greene it occurred among Desis themselves. Both cases are fraught with a similar twofold tension of students vying against one another for performance time while also attempting to challenge essentialized notions of cultural identity.

ASIAN AMERICAN DOMINANCE AT MERCER

Should students from all ethnic groups be included in Multicultural Week? The issue of whether the program should take to heart multicultural ideology about equal access and representation or instead prioritize the requests of the majority of the student body spawned debates and school newspaper editorials for months. The controversy began with the way the student committee in charge of the multiculturalism program handled

auditions, which were necessary to manage the overwhelming student interest in participating in the hour-long program. The planning committee appointed an entirely White panel of teachers to judge auditions scheduled three months prior to the April performance.² Chosen primarily based on their willingness to stay after school for the auditions, judges were asked to evaluate each act on content, choreography, and overall “entertainment value.” Although students were alerted about the audition in early November, little information was offered as to how to prepare.

From this early stage onward, differences in cultural capital among students became apparent. Hopeful participants Tara and her friends were able to draw on the experiences of friends and siblings who performed in previous assemblies as well as their own knowledge of school activities. Nonplussed by the school’s lack of directives on how to ready themselves, they asked the girls in their clique, some members of the FOBUlous Six, and a few other girls to join their dance. Having won several Desi community dance contests, they were no strangers to how dances are choreographed, rehearsed, and costumed. The hard part was choosing from the spate of popular Bollywood songs and dances currently en vogue. A dance popularized by beauty queen Aishwarya Rai was a must. Determined to make it into the program, the girls held regular practices at various homes after school, as well as during weekends and winter break, and ten girls slowly mastered the dance. As the audition drew closer, one of the experienced dancers in the group had her mother shop for matching tops at Ross Dress for Less specifically for the audition.

When asked how they knew to prepare so thoroughly, Tara explained that they had watched seniors in previous years go through this and that they had heard about how competitive the audition could be. She added, “We really want to get selected for the program. We have always wanted to do this during senior year. If our group gets in, we can make up the rest of the dance however we want.” Serious and focused, they even appointed me as an understudy since I had watched countless practices, in case they needed a last-minute replacement for the audition (thankfully, they did not). Motivated by the prospect of representing themselves to their school, they invested significant time and effort to procure what they knew would be a highly coveted spot. By January, Tara and her friends had successfully trained and costumed their fleet of ten girls into nearly flawless audition material.

Only some groups, however, were able to draw on the knowledge of

seniors and their own past performances. While some groups had the advantage of already being well versed in school events as well as having friends who schooled them about the ins and outs of this particular program, others approached it cold. On audition day, such differences were apparent in the auditions of the Asian American, African American, and Latino groups. In a lengthy affair in which ten groups vied for four places, a number of Asian American groups arrived with costumes and props alongside a smaller number of representatives from the Black Student Union (BSU) and the Latino student group MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán).³ These two groups together make up less than 7 percent of the school's population, and they sought to increase their visibility and presence in the school by representing themselves in this forum. Their audition was enthusiastic but without costumes and their full cast of performers. Unfortunately, it was passed over in favor of ten Desi girls in matching outfits, the Chinese girls who performed a traditional ribbon dance using props owned by their families, the Filipino boys and girls who did a dance with lit candles that they had performed at community shows, and a uniformed Japanese martial arts group doing a number based on karate. Additionally, two outside acts would be hired by the school to supplement student performances.

Issues of Inclusion • While generally accepting of an audition framework, some students, faculty, and parents were outraged that the school would hire outside performers and turn away interested students who were not represented in the program. This outcome evoked widespread discontent and frustration for African American and Latino students, who regarded the day as their only space for cultural expression in a school where they were vastly underrepresented. The BSU decided to take action against this decision. They called on their advisor, Monique Albert, a young African American math teacher, who spent much of her busy first year at Mercer helping them with this struggle. Quick to mention that she, along with another African American and an Asian American woman, were the only teachers of color at this school, Ms. Albert was forthcoming and articulate about the perceived inequities underlying this process.

On the day I spoke to her, she and the only other African American faculty member, who was also a young woman, were staying after school to compose a letter to the school newspaper outlining their grievances

with the multicultural audition and selection process. Their main critique was the lack of detailed information about the audition. Standing behind her colleague, who typed into the classroom computer, she looked over her shoulder at me and exclaimed, "I didn't know that it was a full-on audition! I was completely unfamiliar with the whole setup. We sent representatives to the meetings, but not enough info came out of them." Despite her frustration, Ms. Albert was somewhat accepting of this outcome, and graciously added, "The [BSU] leadership is all new, all young freshmen. So how could I really prepare them? I'm new too! We weren't prepared, and we accept that fact." Her protest, however, stemmed from MEChA not being chosen, despite four acts they had prepared. They were exasperated that despite their efforts and working hard for the audition, the Latino group was still excluded.

The African American and Latino students I spoke with were magnanimously supportive of the chosen performers and instead took issue with the school administration for not advocating on their behalf over professional adult performers, and for leaving the program in the hands of four Asian American students whose priorities were not inclusion of all interested parties. Students also expressed their frustration by writing letters to the editor of the school newspaper. Juanita, president of MEChA, submitted a provocative letter to the paper that summarized the student position on this situation. She argued that audition flyers did not call for costumes and polished pieces. She especially took issue with the vague concept of "entertainment value," asking why, if it was not an important criterion in other schoolwide programs, it was important for Multicultural Week. Was Multicultural Week inherently less interesting and in need of special efforts to make it more appealing? She emphatically concluded, "If students are proud of their heritage and are willing to share it with their fellow students, they should be allowed to."

After several letters to the school newspaper, MEChA requested to take the place of the professional Latin group and represent themselves. Juanita recounted in frustration that the committee told her they favored keeping "the Brazilian or Bolivian dance group." In a state with thousands of Chicano students, having a dance from South America barely seemed like representation, about which Juanita parenthetically wrote, "We are still not sure because the committee can't distinguish the two diverse countries." The administration's hands-off stance left the program entirely under the

jurisdiction of the activities coordinator and leadership students, whose priorities were different from those of the excluded students.

Despite their best efforts, the two young African American female teachers and their students were unable to overturn a decision that rested firmly in the hands of Mr. Watson, the young White male activities director who had worked at the school for several years. When I asked him about the controversy, Mr. Watson shrugged and said, “This is the first year we’ve ever had any complaints, and really those came from those groups that performed in the tryouts and weren’t chosen. Of course they were bitter about that. And they had a different viewpoint—their viewpoint was that we do a kind of quota-type thing, that you take people regardless of how well they perform, and you just put them in because you want to get all the ethnicities that you can. Again, there is no way we can possibly do that, nor is that our point.”

Mr. Watson’s comments echo a familiar hue and cry against affirmative action, which is that only those who achieve on their own should progress. His stance suggests that the school is in a postracial society where such differences have been erased and efforts toward inclusion are not necessary. Not only does his position do little to further equality, but it also confirms that access is actually not a cornerstone of an event that, by its very nature, is designed to be culturally inclusive and unifying. Mr. Watson silenced groups seeking representation and turned the school into a microcosm of familiar dynamics of exclusion and resentment about affirmative action that run rampant in colleges and in the workplace. Especially in California, where the UC system did away with affirmative action in their admissions policy in 1997, attitudes like Mr. Watson’s make multiculturalism’s inclusive agenda seem unimportant. With the school administration showing no indication of intervening and with no other teachers who wanted to advocate, the program went on as planned and Multicultural Week finally arrived.

Showtime at Mercer • On a sunny morning in April 2000, a gymnasium packed with eleven hundred students and their teachers rose as a student sang the “Star-Spangled Banner” with electric guitar accompaniment that fell a bit short of Jimi Hendrix but was respectable nonetheless. In the adjacent locker rooms, Desi girls fidgeted with their shiny golden head jewelry and generously applied makeup while Desi boys enacted Star Wars—

style fights with their *dhandiya*, the decorated sticks they would use in their dance. The national anthem ended and students settled onto the bleachers in noisy anticipation of the hour-long multicultural program that had replaced their third- and fourth-period classes that day. Elaborately costumed groups of enthusiastic students began to perform their well-rehearsed dances and martial arts routines. When the Indian student club was introduced, six Desi girls struck a pose in a circle at the center of the gym while a multiracial group of thirty-four other performers stood poised and ready to enter on cue. The inner circle of Desi girls began to dance gracefully to “Taal,” the title song from Aishwarya Rai’s Bollywood hit.⁴ Fourteen more girls in coordinated green and gold skirts joined in and were soon followed by their twenty male partners. The gym echoed with a reverberating bass and the howls of kids cheering for their friends while the performers enjoyed their moment in the spotlight. The music quickly segued from one lively Bollywood song to another, and the choreography toggled between bhangra and hip-hop-influenced moves and *filmi* flirting and courting rituals.⁵ The dance closed with a dramatic pose that sent the audience into wild cheering.

After watching the full show of Asian students and two professional acts of Chinese acrobats and Bolivian folk dancers, students expressed appreciation for the assembly. Although they enjoyed the performances, many could not discern if the assembly had a larger purpose. Rekha, a FOBUlous Six member who did not dance but liked watching her friends perform, remarked, “It’s a good opportunity to learn about other cultures.” My question of whether she had learned something elicited a long pause. She eventually replied, “Somewhat. We’ve had it every year. You don’t *really* learn anything, but you get to see what other cultures do. It’s fun to see that. A lot of people don’t really know about other cultures, so it’s a good chance to learn . . . I guess.” Rekha articulated the commonly held student viewpoint, which is that multicultural programs do not adequately convey knowledge about other cultures. Feroze, an active member of the Muslim Student Association, paused from selling kabobs for his club and remarked, “It’s all right. It could be better. Put more effort into it! Right now it’s food, that’s all we do. There isn’t any entertainment until Friday, when we actually *do* something. They don’t *do anything* throughout the week.” Other students who felt like spectators rather than participants in this program shared his sentiment.

Students noted that the groups chosen for the assembly closely mirror the racial composition of the school. About the Asian-dominated program, Stephanie, a White student who enjoyed the assembly, commented, “That’s about as multicultural as it’s going to get here. Even though it’s a relatively diverse school, there’s only a handful of different cultures. There isn’t exactly something representative from every part of the world. But for us, it’s a pretty good program.” Likewise, José, a Latino and a member of MEChA, asserted that there are hardly any African American and Latino students in the school, so it is not surprising that they are underrepresented in the program. Being in the minority, however, does not diminish a group’s desire to be included. Shaniqua, president of the BSU, admits that their group was “prepared but unorganized” at the audition, but also added, “I don’t think the rest of the students like us very much. This school is very different from other schools. We’ve just had a hard time. It’s not diverse, we don’t feel a lot of support.”

Shaniqua’s comment, as well as others, betray the lack of ownership African American students feel over the program. Along with Monique Albert, Alicia, a BSU member who had tried out for the program, is among the few who challenged the notion that having several Asian acts this year, as in years past, is not considered repetitive, whereas two years of African American acts would be. She generously commented, “I liked it this year, it was really good. But the only thing that kind of made me sad is that nothing was there to represent the African or African American culture, and when we proposed it and said, ‘Look, we’ll hire someone to come in, just like you hire people for other cultures,’ they said, ‘No, that would be *redundant* to have something from the African or African American cultures two years in a row.’ So I just really did not like that, especially because that’s what it’s all about, you know? But other than that, I thought it was great—the students, the acrobats, they were all great.” When I asked her how the problem could have been handled better, she reflected for a moment and then replied, “I think instead of having the Chinese acrobat people—because they didn’t represent anything for culture, it was more just a goofy side show—that’s where *we* could have . . . not *we* . . . *there* could have been an African or African American anything.” Alicia’s comment, especially her shift from “*we*” to “not *we*, *there*” underscores how little ownership African American and Latino students feel over school activities and functions.

Mercer High School's multicultural program served to reinforce existing race-based hierarchies in the school. Those groups historically under-represented at the school remained so, and Asian Americans, already the majority at the school, dominated the public display time at this program as well. By the same token, having an hour-long assembly serve as the year's primary public arena for cultural expression in a school with an Asian American majority is problematic in itself. This predicament is further complicated by the entertainment-centered character of this program, which leaves little room for deeper understanding of the very issues that caused this unequal situation. An analogous situation emerged during International Day at Greene that also challenges the premise of unity and understanding that underlie this day. Here, issues of class and gender among Desis manifest as obstacles for students who want to use this space for cultural expression.

FOB-FREE AT GREENE

Should students in the same ethnic group be assured equal access to multicultural programs? While Desi teens at Greene did not have to compete with other groups to secure a place, they did battle among themselves to perform on International Day. The events that unfolded received no school press coverage or parental intervention, but were problematic all the same. At Greene, there were no auditions. There was no policy against having two dances from the same ethnic group. In fact, there was not even a stipulation that groups had to be affiliated with a student club. In other words, there were no rules. A perplexing situation resulted from this seemingly open invitation: although there was plenty of room for all interested students to participate, only some were able to do so.

When the International Day program was announced, there was widespread interest among FOBS. Yet popular girls Jaspreet and Amanpreet announced their intentions to do a dance on behalf of the Indian Student Club before any other groups had properly mobilized. For these two popular sisters, International Day is yet another program in the endless roster of school activities they dominate. Though they are Sikh Punjabi like the majority of Desi teens at Green High School, they are notably different. Unlike their peers, these upper-middle-class girls live in a posh home in the hills and are avidly involved in school leadership, pep rallies, fashion

shows, proms, and other social events. They are even the self-appointed leaders of the Indian Student Club, an organization FOBS at the school know little about. Along with their clique, they occupy prime real estate on the grassy steps of the school's quad, a space they unquestioningly call their own. Jaspreet and Amanpreet are especially concerned that they not be mistaken for FOBS, which, to their dismay, has happened on occasion. Amanpreet recalled one such incident in which she and her clique were kicking it near the library rather than in their usual spot in the quad and someone called them "the Indians." She admitted, "We just forget and just think about ourselves as whatever, but not really Indians. . . . We are of a really different crowd that are not just Desi-oriented." Drawing on the cultural capital of their upbringing along with expertise in school events, Jaspreet and Amanpreet began to effortlessly organize their dance.

Meanwhile, several cliques of FOBS solidified their interest in performing as well. Yet they were perplexed by the general lack of information on how to participate. Janvi and others were reluctant to approach popular Desi teens or to visit the leadership office for information. Although Avinash, Charanpal, and other boys spoke enthusiastically about the possibility of doing a bhangra dance, no one took the initiative. In all, four different groups of FOBS expressed their intention to dance, but none was able to mobilize. It soon became clear that International Day was no different from the other school programs toward which FOBS felt general discomfort. In its present form, the program seemed more like an obstacle than an opportunity. With little cultural capital and even less clout in school, the FOBS' ability to plan a dance was limited from the outset.

Politics of Participation • While Jaspreet and Amanpreet had no logistical trouble, they encountered a different type of dilemma: in order to achieve their artistic vision, they needed more Desi girls in their dance than their exclusive popular clique afforded. With their original four, they needed several more, and quickly realized they would have to involve at least a few FOBS. Finding the prospect of visiting the back corner more awkward than they had expected, Amanpreet decided to ask some of the FOBBY girls she knew from her classes. Nidhi and her two close friends convinced one another to join. Gurinder, who kicked it with the FOBS but also enjoyed many school functions, decided to join as well. The rest of the FOBBY girls and boys shied away from the prospect of joining the dance.

Although Janvi kicked it with Nidhi, she still felt out of place and commented, “I wanted to join their dance, but they’re kind of snobby and live way up in the hills, so I don’t really want to do it with them.” Rather than forming a second group, interested FOulous youth resigned themselves to not participating because Jaspreet and Amanpreet were doing the dance. My gentle reminder that there could be more than one Desi dance was met with uneasy shrugs and mumblings about how it wouldn’t be tight to have two dances from the same country.

Problems soon arose that highlighted the socioeconomic differences between popular and FOulous girls in the dance. Although most of the girls are Sikh Punjabi, middle-class FOulous girls have far more restrictions on where they can go and what they can wear, and none of them owns a car. This made attending rehearsals, which the sisters decided to hold in their home rather than the easily accessible school grounds, a major hassle. To further complicate matters, the popular sisters choreographed and outfitted a dance that offended the sensibilities of FOulous girls and even some of their popular friends from more conservative families. Gurinder expressed her objection: “You have to do all this motioning across your chest and spread your legs. It’s like, some kind of seduction dance.” Other girls agreed, and to make matters worse, the “slut dance,” as it was quickly dubbed, was to feature what were considered excessively revealing outfits. Gurinder further remarked, “The lehengas have slits in them up to here [pointing to her mid thigh], the blouses have a hole cut out of them. I told my mom about these lehengas and she asked why they don’t just wear miniskirts.” With moves and costumes that they regarded as too sexually suggestive, several girls, including some of the popular girls in the dance, decided to drop out. Frustrated, the popular sisters decided to compromise rather than cancel the dance altogether. They would tone down the dance and let performers wear their own lehengas, which exposed as much as each girl deemed appropriate.

Showtime at Greene • On a warm spring day in April 2000, International Day finally arrived in the quad. The stage area was adorned with decorations, including a colorful banner naming the event, surrounded by hand-painted flags from various countries and an arc of helium balloons that stretched from one end of the concrete stage to the other. As the bell rang to signal the start of a lunch period specially extended for this event,

students packed onto the steps surrounding the quad and spilled over onto the grassy area facing the stage. Only a handful of FOBS came to watch the program—some to show support for the few friends who made it into the dance and the rest to keep those spectators company. “I heard the dance is gonna suck,” Umber proclaimed loudly, having earlier admitted that she had badly wanted to perform as part of her secret ambition to become a Bollywood actress. Avinash remarked that he came only to see his girlfriend and loaded film in his camera while I set my video camera on a tripod. One of Avinash’s friends scoffed that the Indian flag was all the way at the bottom and was not even painted accurately. Upon closer examination, we discovered that several of the flags were depicted incorrectly and others were altogether unidentifiable.

When the “Indian Club” was announced, eight Desi girls in colorful lehengas—some featuring more fabric than others—took their places with their backs facing the audience. As the bass from their remixed music reverberated through the quad, they gyrated and swayed to a popular remix of a song from the Bollywood film *Taal*. While Jaspreet and Amanpreet seemed to enjoy the appreciative cheering of the audience, especially when they spun around on the ground into a series of slithering, snake-like moves, the other girls appeared to be less at ease with these provocative undulations. When their five-minute dance ended dramatically, the girls exited the stage onto the grass and laced up their sneakers. They watched the remainder of the program while the FOBS beat a hasty retreat to their back corner.

Responses to International Day were decidedly mixed. Although friends of Jaspreet and Amanpreet were duly congratulatory, the few FOBS who saw the dance were critical and immediately offered their reviews to their friends. Several FOBS who claimed they were not interested in the performance jockeyed for position to watch it on the small LCD display of my video camera. As they huddled around the tiny screen, a barrage of critiques ensued: it was too slow; it contained slutty, hootchy moves; and it was not nearly as good as in past years. With a hint of smugness, Janvi remarked, “It would have been amazing if we had done bhangra.” Having just danced their best, Nidhi and her friends were hurt at overhearing their friends saying “It sucked.” Nidhi retorted, “What do they know, they didn’t even do anything!” Had the dance been more inclusive, perhaps the FOBS would have been less critical. Unfortunately, popular Jaspreet and

Amanpreet were far out of earshot and these scathing critiques fell on the FOBS who had struggled to be in the dance.

When I attended the performance the following year, only two FOBS joined the dance that Amanpreet had organized alone while Jaspreet was at college. No other Desi dances were planned. Janvi, who had vowed to be in the program for her senior year, admitted that she was not in the dance this year either. When I asked her why, she shrugged, “I don’t know. I didn’t feel comfortable. I didn’t know [Amanpreet] and I didn’t want to go to her house.” The same dynamics of class and cultural capital that marginalized Janvi and others in the previous year had once again edged them out.

That popular Desi teens continued to dominate this and other events even though they are far outnumbered by FOBS reveals that some students feel a sense of ownership and privilege over school resources while others remain excluded. Class differences between FOBS and populars are divisive at Greene but receive no public attention. While Mercer’s struggles were publicized and aired, Greene’s dramas took place under the radar and went widely unnoticed. Excluded students did not even consider approaching school faculty or administrators for help; such a move was thought to be intimidating or pointless. Their only recourse was to criticize their own friends who had the courage to participate.

REPRESENTING DESI TEEN CULTURE

Should multicultural programs be about performing something “traditional,” or should they reflect dynamic, locally constructed identities? Desi teens avowedly went with the latter but faced numerous criticisms as a result. Both Desi performances distinguished themselves by their original choreography and choice of music and costume. Unlike their Chinese American peers at Mercer who did a ribbon dance or those at Greene who did a tinkling dance from the Philippines, Desi teens shied away from known Desi dance styles such as garba and bhangra and chose instead to choreograph their own dance moves. Their music and steps were largely influenced by Bollywood but also included interludes from hip-hop and pop music. At Mercer, negotiation centered around outfits and performers. Tara and her friends created a medley incorporating three different songs and dance styles. Rather than wear typical South Asian outfits, the

girls wore a close-fitting black top of their choosing with either a green or gold piece of fabric tied to look like a lehenga. Tara explained that they wanted something pretty and cute that didn't look "FOBby" and that they could get for twenty girls. To accessorize, they crafted head jewelry from plastic bead curtains they tied together and spray-painted gold. Each girl paid \$10 for her costume and outfitted her partner in kurta-pyjama sets borrowed from male family members.⁶

While these style choices were acceptable to some participants, especially non-Desis, they drew sharp criticism from other Desi girls in the dance. The FOBUlous Six in particular took issue with these aesthetic selections. Shabana, who has her finger on the pulse of everything stylish, commented, "I don't know why they bought the material in the first place without asking everyone, 'Oh, is this nice?' You know? Why didn't they ask me?" Shabana's friend Rekha piped up in agreement: "They should have gotten red instead of those dull colors." Shabana added, "It was so drab," and went on to reveal that so many Desi girls in the dance criticized the outfits that Tara considered changing them the night before the performance. Notably, none of the participants from other races or ethnicities voiced any protest about their own costumes. In fact, many of them were so enamored with their outfits that they wore them for the rest of the school day. In the end, the girls kept the outfits as planned. The process of representing a group, however, was fraught with tension and debate about what would be the tightest Desi style.

Another contentious decision was whether to include students of other racial groups. While there were ample Desis at Mercer to take part in the dance, many popular Desi boys decided that dancing in school was FOBby and refused to join. Only a few popular Desi boys were willing to participate, even though many know how to dance from years of participating in community festivals. Only a select handful of Desi geeks were asked. Determined to have a coed dance despite their apathetic Desi male peers, the girls broke from the previous years' tradition and opened the dance to boys of any racial background as well as a handful of their non-Desi female friends. One of the Desi girls in the dance described the benefit of this approach: "Everybody feels connected to it. You know how, when sometimes people are dancing, it's just that group. But when they see people of their own race and ethnicity in it, they're like 'Oh wow, I can do it too!'" Her tall, stocky Latino partner with bright blue eyes and dyed red

hair confirmed his excitement about being included and relayed how he overcame his initial discomfort: “Basically I’m a fat guy who doesn’t know how to dance. At first when I heard the Indian song, I was like, ‘What is this?’ And we started doing the dance, and I was like, ‘This is crazy!’ But now I know all the steps and the song is actually really cool to me now.”

Even teens who would have preferred to perform something from their own cultural background but had no critical mass enjoyed participating in the Desi dance. One male participant explained, “I’m from Afghanistan. We have our own cultural dance. I would like to do an Afghani dance, you know, just to show my culture and what we do, but there’s hardly any Afghans in our school.” Being in the Indian dance was as close as he could get. Although the group was diverse in some ways, few African American and Latino students participated in the dance.

At Greene High School, gender-based notions of propriety became the point of tension in debates about style. When Jaspreet and Amanpreet began choreographing the dance, they alone made decisions about the music and moves. Here too Bollywood films were a prominent influence, and the sisters also chose to splice together a medley of popular film songs and choreograph a dance. Several of the girls in the dance had assumed they would choose bhangra since the two sisters were Sikh Punjabi. Although some FOBBY girls argued for the inclusion of a more traditional bhangra song, their love of Bollywood made filmi music an acceptable second choice. Even though the sisters were in charge of the dance, they had to engage in unexpected negotiations around gender. The sisters crafted a style of choreography and costume worthy of any Bollywood starlet but one that was too racy for the average Desi teen. Amanpreet explained, “We want to do something that represents our culture, but something tight—not something FOBBY and boring.” What the sisters regarded tight, however, drew sharp criticism from more conservative Desi teens who knew that Bollywood stars can gyrate in skimpy clothing in ways that mere mortals dare not consider. All these factors made the process of creating a tight dance far more challenging.

Gender is also significant here because girls undertook all of the program organizing. At Mercer, Desi boys were by and large uninterested in participating, let alone planning anything. This left interested Desi girls as well as female participants of other ethnicities on their own to search for partners for the dance. Unlike at Greene, however, rehearsals, dance

moves, and other aspects of the dance were not an issue. In fact, the rehearsals were a space of fun and socializing. As they were generally held at a Desi student's house, most Desi parents felt comfortable allowing their kids to attend on weekday nights because they had met the other teens' parents at school or community functions. At Greene, popular girls did not even attempt to make their dance coed, and boys did not take any initiative on their own. Holding the rehearsals at their home when the participants did not have cars and were not allowed to visit homes outside families in their communities only worsened these matters. While it would perhaps be too broad a statement to suggest that without girls, these performances of culture would not materialize, in the programs I witnessed this certainly appeared to be the case.

Managing Critiques of Authenticity • While Desi teens use these programs as an expressive space in school, faculty and other students consider the programs a space for learning about an “Indian Culture” that is pure and untouched by anything recognizably Western. Especially during multicultural programs, essentialized, timeless notions of culture triumph as authentic; such depictions reify cultural differences and bind them into homogeneous, separate units that erase their texture and difference (Turner 1994: 407).⁷ While audiences at Mercer High School certainly enjoyed the Desi dance, questions of authenticity were raised, including the decision to include non-Desi participants, using remixed music and a range of innovative dance steps, and wearing nontraditional costumes. One White boy in the dance expressed his doubt: “[The dance] seems a little whitewashed. The ending that they have now seems a little less cultural than I hoped. It seems like it's been dumbed-down, Whitified. I don't know if I know what I'm talking about, but that's what it seems like.”

Other youth similarly remarked that they had expected something more traditional but were unable to articulate specifically what they thought the dance was lacking or what it should have been instead. Tara and her friends were somewhat disappointed by these criticisms, but on the whole pleased that they had been able to do a tight dance that represented their style. Questions of authenticity also arose at Greene, but from other Desi students who would have preferred to do a bhangra number in outfits that covered more skin. As rumors about the dance circulated through FO

cliques, a prevailing sentiment arose that one FOBby girl summarized this way: “It’s, like, become an American dance. We want to do something *more Indian*, you know.” By calling the dance inauthentic for an entirely different set of reasons than Mercer’s students offered—that is, their own exclusion from the process of creating representations—they managed to claim some sense of ownership over how Desi teen culture should be conveyed.

FADE TO WHITE

Students’ negotiations of multicultural ideology reflect their local struggles with race, class, and gender. The school-based initiatives through which they are able to do so both constrain kids’ efforts as well as reveal multiculturalism’s fragmented implementation. I conclude with a discussion of the finale from the Mercer multicultural assembly to underscore the power dynamics exposed in these *laissez-faire* school programs. The final act was a “flag parade,” in which students walked around the gym holding flags from various countries while the emcee announced the corresponding country names. The parade included a random assortment of flags that students brought from home in hopes of being excused from class for both assemblies. As the finale to this procession, five White boys carried a giant U.S. flag accompanied by the song “God Bless the USA.”⁸ Rather than taking a customary round and standing with the other participants, they circled the gym a number of times and engaged in fist pumps and other victorious gestures. They were encouraged by wild cheering from the audience and remained oblivious to expressions of discomfort and disbelief from other participants.

Five White boys parading a supersized American flag as the last word created a hostile ending to what had already been an exclusive program. After the program, several students expressed their disapproval. The following is an excerpt of a conversation between José and Alicia:

ALICIA: The only part I think I hated was the whole USA flag part, where they ran around the [gym] three times, with that stupid “I’m a proud American” song. Aaaahh! It just aggravated me.

JOSÉ: That pissed me off too. I don’t know why . . .

ALICIA: I know why it pissed me off. It pissed me off because the whole point

is that even though we are different cultures and even though we're not all White, we're still Americans. So I think instead of having the big four White guys go up there and parade around with the damn flag . . . [laughs] Sorry! They should have had, like, maybe an Asian person . . . and José, or somebody!

JOSÉ: I ain't goin' up there!

ALICIA: [laughs] You know, someone to represent different races. I still think the whole flag parade is kind of dumb and I wish they'd cut it out.

JOSÉ: It's just supposed to represent unity, you know? Let's get everybody out there, walk around with the American flag, you know? Not just a bunch of hokey, sexist, sweaty men!

José, Alicia, and a number of other students felt that this finale undermined the other performers' efforts at cultural expression. As if to reclaim control of a space that had been temporarily surrendered to other groups, these White boys asserted what they considered rightfully theirs.

As the flag parade and other power struggles indicate, cultural citizenship remains a highly contested process. Teens engage in a wide spectrum of efforts, some more successful than others, to claim a space for themselves in the public sphere of their high schools. While the problematic nature of this finale and the program went unaddressed by the administration, the general discontent prompted a more equitable flag parade the following year. During this assembly, flags hung from the ceiling and the flag parade was more unified in response to complaints of the prior year's program, in which some students disrespected flags by clowning around with them or inattentively dragging them on the gym floor. Students carried in a limited number of flags and stood in a circle with them, and the U.S. flag was one among many. Two boys, one White and one Asian American, carried the American flag, and students cheered while "Imagine" by John Lennon played and flowers were given to performers. There were still no Latino or African American performances, but at least the program ended on the more positive note of "Imagine all the people, sharing all the world" rather than the jingoistic anthem of the previous year.

In these Silicon Valley high schools, multicultural programs do little to challenge or even draw overt attention to the socioeconomic structures that maintain inequalities between and within racial and ethnic groups. While it seems as though Asian Americans dominate in multicultural

programs, it is difficult to say what one hour out of an entire school year can accomplish by way of deeper understandings about race. Coupled with the reality that only popular teens make it into the program, the question is all the more salient. Although Desi girls at Mercer have the cultural capital to perform for the audition judges, the African American and Latino students are at a distinct disadvantage in this regard. Unlike these upper-middle-class Desi girls, they do not have inside information and resources easily available to them. Likewise, middle-class Desi teens at Greene are at an apparent disadvantage compared to their popular Desi peers. With very little knowledge about school activities, FOBBY girls are reliant on popular girls who already dominate school events.

Cultural celebrations of this sort rarely enable true transformations of the social order. They offer some empowerment, however, to participating youth. Desi teens are able to exercise their cultural citizenship and display a sense of ownership over public space. While their representations are subject to criticisms of being inauthentic, they are willing to fight for their versions of their culture. Indeed, to not do so would be to validate an orientalist gaze that seeks homogeneous representations of non-European cultures. That these schools rely on students to create cultural representations that will educate peers and faculty is not only wholly unreasonable, but encroaches on the one space in which Desi and other teens can freely craft their own versions of cultural expression. Indeed, such reception underscores the need for more substantive education about Desis and other diasporic populations in the United States, rather than about South Asia or other homelands alone. For these teens, being FOBUlous, not FOBBY, is central to shaping what it means to be Desi. In the next chapter I continue to examine how cultural capital positions teens differently as they manage cultural and linguistic expression in the face of the model minority stereotype.