South Asian Politics and the Politics of Being South Asian:
(Re)Conceptualizing South Asian Diasporic Organizing in the U.S.

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Introduction

In July of 2010, I called my mother to let her know that I was traveling to a conference in D.C. I informed her that I would be attending D.C. Desi Summer, a weekend-long conference for South Asian youth. In response, the first question my mother asked me was, “so why are you going?”

This simple question was undergirded by multiple levels of meaning. My parents are from Sri Lanka, a small island just South of India—and thus located squarely in the geographical space of South Asia. Nonetheless, I was not surprised by my mother’s question—South Asian was a term that I too had learned only recently. At the surface level, my mother was asking where I, and by extension we, fit in definitions of South Asian. ‘South Asian’ is a term that exists primarily in diaspora, as national and ethnic identifications typically take precedence on the Indian subcontinent itself. As such, my mother does not usually identify as South Asian—she describes herself as Sinhala and Sri Lankan, but not necessarily as South Asian.

The hidden subtext in my mother’s question was why I was involving myself in political work. D.C. Desi Summer (DCDS) is a political education conference intended to motivate young people to become involved in social justice work. The curriculum is designed to directly confront and make visible power structures in the U.S., while also providing avenues for young people to challenge these structures. From our upper middle-class position in the U.S., my mother was subtly asking me why I felt the need to engage in such ‘activist’ work. This is not to say that my mother is apathetic, nor that she is willing to turn a blind eye to injustice. Rather, from her own histories in Sri Lanka, where political activism is often literally deadly, my mother was quietly asking me what I was risking by attending this conference, and if the risk would be worth it.
This simple question—“so why are you going?”—makes visible two of the key themes from which this project was imagined. The first is a question of South Asian identity—what does it mean to identify as South Asian? Is South Asian merely a racial category in the U.S.? The second is a question of politics. How is South Asian tied to politics? Is South Asian a term invested with political meaning? What kinds of organizing happen under and through this term?

Through this thesis, I argue that South Asian identity in the U.S. cannot simply be understood as a racial category, but rather is a term with multiple meanings. I interrogate South Asian as a racial and political construct through the lens of self-identified progressive South Asian organizers—largely young, queer, non-male, and 1.5 and 2nd generation—and organizations. I focus on what it means for these organizers to belong—or to not belong—to South Asian spaces, as well as on the modalities of organizing that are engaged in these spaces.

I argue that progressive South Asian organizers challenge normative theories of racialization and of organizing. I claim that the South Asians I interviewed occupy a diasporic locality of displacement in the U.S., understanding themselves largely through an experience of not belonging, through identities that are deemed ‘impossible’ in hegemonic constructs of South Asian and through their political identification as progressive. This diasporic locality is not purely a racial position, but rather an experience of not belonging to a particular construct of South Asians as upwardly mobile and heterosexual immigrants. The dislocation of these organizers from normative understandings of South Asian has an impact on the political possibilities of the term South Asian. I argue that South Asian organizing is illegible in dominant paradigms of social movement theory, as South Asians do not comprise a singular community that can be easily mobilized. In response to their displacement, progressive South Asians inhabit a political locality, basing their sense of belonging in an imagined shared politics. Thus, for these
organizers, South Asian becomes re-signified as a necessarily political identity. I contend that this need to belong through a shared politics, and through a redefinition of the term South Asian, impacts the construction of ‘South Asian issues’ by these progressive organizers. These organizers name the internal dynamics of South Asian communities—such as Indo-centrism or the perpetuation of sexism—as ‘South Asian issues,’ since these are the issues that challenge their tenuous political locality. Lastly, I argue that this focus on internal issues results in queered modalities of organizing and movement, as South Asians focus on building community and developing a shared racial analysis as strategies of organizing.

**Researcher Positionality**

The social justice inclinations of the participants in this project are not representative of the inclinations of South Asians in the U.S. at large. Rather, the tendencies of the group of people whom I have interviewed for this project reflect my own entry point into the world of South Asian organizations.

The first South Asian conference that I attended was DCDS, as mentioned above. Through this conference, I became increasingly involved in South Asian organizations and organizing work, including presenting at and helping to coordinate Bay Area Solidarity Summer (BASS), the equivalent of DCDS in the Bay Area. DCDS and BASS focus on political education for South Asian youth, creating a space where young South Asian people can come together and engage in discussions about issues relating to South Asian identity in the U.S. These conferences base themselves in a progressive politics, challenging the racialization of South Asians as upwardly mobile and apolitical. Thus, my involvement in South Asian politics has always come from a commitment to progressive politics, with a personal and political interest in understanding
the ways in which South Asians both challenge and are complicit in the racial ideologies of the
U.S.

Given my own positionality as an organizer in progressive South Asian spaces, the stakes of
this project are for me both personal and political. I am invested in understanding the
dynamics and particularities of South Asian social justice work so that I can be a more effective
organizer and participant in such spaces. My understanding of this project, then, is as both an
academic undertaking—a contribution to the field of social movement theory and theories of
race and racialization—and also as a form of organizing and activism. I want to be explicit about
this political undertone, as my political commitments certainly undergird this project.

The Participants

In introducing each of the participants in this project, I will attempt to walk the fine line
between providing the information necessary to locate each of these individuals while also
protecting their anonymity to the best of my ability. For that reason, I am choosing not to specify
which of the political education conferences these participants were involved in, given that each
organizing team was fairly small. I am also avoiding describing what cities these participants are
from, with the exception of those who are involved with the Satrang youth group. (I am making
this distinction because knowing that the last four participants are involved in a recently formed
queer South Asian youth group is important context for understanding how their sexuality and
racial identifications intersect.) All of the participants have been given pseudonyms. Aside from
their names, however, all other information about them is accurate.

7 of the 11 participants in this project have been involved in some capacity in the South
Asian political education conferences mentioned above—whether as participants, as presenters,

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1 For a brief introduction to each of the participants, see Appendix A.
as organizers, or as facilitators. While these political education spaces may not be central to all of the participants’ conceptions of themselves and their work, their participation in these spaces is important, since both DCDS and BASS foreground a critique of what ‘South Asian’ can mean. These organizations focus on demystifying and denaturalizing the hegemonic construct of South Asians as necessarily and inherently upwardly mobile in the U.S.

Moreover, through my involvement in DCDS and BASS, I came to know each of the organizers interviewed for this project as acquaintances or friends. The participants in this project, then, are not random—these are the people with whom I connected, whether through shared identities, common political beliefs, or compatible personalities. Despite the limitations of interviewing only friends, I chose to interview only people with whom I was already acquainted in order to have a degree of trust and familiarity established so that we could delve as deeply as possible into personal questions and lives.

As I describe in Chapter 4, South Asian is a term invested with political meaning for these organizers. Thus, although they are from cities on either coast of the U.S., these organizers are all connected through a loose political network of South Asians engaged in similar progressive organizing work. They all know each other, or know of each other. Though many of these organizers have never met, they understand themselves to be part of a virtual and national progressive South Asian community.

I also want to note that a major lacuna in my positioning of these participants is an understanding of their class backgrounds. I asked participants to describe “how they identify” at the beginning of each interview. In order to keep the interview atmosphere as informal as possible, I did not create a laundry list of identity categories for participants to respond to—the only category that I asked each participant to define was ‘South Asian.’ With the exception of a
few participants, most individuals did not name their class background. Therefore, I am using
informal conversations to determine the class locations of participants where appropriate.

**Methodology**

This project is constructed primarily around semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted
approximately 1 hour. Questions were loosely based off of a pre-determined list, but changed
both as conversations progressed during interviews and as the project as a whole evolved. I
prioritized allowing participants to speak and asking follow-up questions based on what they
were saying, and typically only asked questions from my list when conversations came to a
close.

**Narrative Analysis**

Since I am analyzing the interviews I conducted for personal stories and analysis, I have
chosen to use the specific method of narrative analysis. I will be using a basic definition of
narrative, as a story that has “a beginning, middle, and end” and that follows “consequential
sequencing,” as events follow one another through time (Riessman 1993:17). In this definition,
each of the participants' interviews is a narrative in and of itself, as participants related
information to me through story-telling, with events in sequence.

In narrative analysis, the stories that participants tell cannot be understood as the
complete story—in answering every question, each participant chose to relate only the most
pertinent details of their stories and experiences, which is itself a subjective prioritization. In her
book *Narrative Analysis*, Catherine Reissman cautions that “we cannot give voice, but we do
hear voices that we record and interpret” (1993:8). Similarly, none of the participants in this
research are recounting complete recollections or understandings of experience; rather, they are
prioritizing aspects of their experiences and understandings in order to form a narrative, which I was then able to record (again, in an incomplete form).

This subjective relation of experience is exactly what I will be studying—I will be interrogating what the participants prioritize as they talk about their experiences and understandings:

How individuals recount their histories—what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience—all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned. (emphasis mine) (Riessman 1993:2)

With the understanding that speaking a narrative necessitates certain prioritizations of experience, I will literally be studying the “means by which identities are fashioned” through narrative. Thus, I will using narrative analysis to analyze how participants tell their own stories—how do participants describe their own processes of identifying, or not identifying, as South Asian? What are the meanings they assign to South Asian? How do their understandings of this term impact their work? Most importantly, in answering these questions, what experiences are participants choosing to relate—assuming that they cannot relate everything?

To clarify, I do not want this chapter to tell a narrative of how these organizers came to identify as South Asian, or of how they have come to ascribe meaning to this identity; rather, I want to explore what experiences the participants have prioritized in telling their narratives. I explicitly make this distinction because I want to be clear that I am not attempting to create a single, unitary master narrative of how people identify as South Asian, or of what this identity means.

**Defining Terms**
Before describing the layout of this project, I want to define a few terms that are used consistently throughout. First, the term ‘South Asian’ needs to be defined. Much of this project seeks to define what South Asian does and can mean; as a starting point, however, I will focus on the geographical space that South Asian represents. Given that I am using ‘South Asian’ primarily as an imagined political term, the countries believed to be encompassed under ‘South Asian’ differed in each of my interviews. All of the participants who sought to define the geographic space of South Asia included the following countries in their definition: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal. Burma, Bhutan, and the Maldives Islands were often accepted as part of South Asia, but were typically overlooked when participants were attempting to name all of the South Asian countries. Afghanistan was understood to be part of South Asia only in an organizing context, when the backlash in Muslim and South Asian communities post-9/11 was taken into account. When I say ‘South Asian,’ I am referring to a political construct that typically includes (at least nominally) the first five countries listed, and that may include or exclude the other countries named depending on the context.

I also want to loosely define the terms political and progressive, given that these are everyday words that take on different meanings in an organizing context. When I refer to something as political, I am referring to any engagement with power, whether state power or the power dynamics that emerge from interpersonal relationships. My understanding of the term progressive builds on my understanding of political. I argue that ‘progressive politics’ involve challenging dynamics of power—again, from interpersonal to state power. In this project in particular, I argue that progressive politics involves recognizing and contesting hegemonic power structures and systems, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. A progressive politics recognizes these systems as structural—that is to say, racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism,
etc. are understood as systematic and ingrained into the state and economy of the U.S., not simply as interpersonal microaggressions. While a perfect progressive politics would combat all of these institutions at once, I argue that progressive organizers are oftentimes complicit, intentionally or actively, with some of these institutions of systems while combating others.

On a different note, I use the word “space,” such as in the phrase “South Asian spaces,” to move beyond the term “place.” I use space to refer to both a physical place as well as the associations and assumptions mapped on to such a place. So, for example, a conference described as a “South Asian space” would entail not only the physical setting of the conference, but also the unique atmosphere of the gathering given that only South Asian people are present, or that South Asian-ness is assumed to be at the core of the conference.

Finally, I want to define the term organizing. Specifically, I want to differentiate between organizing and activism, since many of the participants in this project informed me that they are organizers and not activists. I will use the distinction made by Wasanti, Varuni, and Yasmin during their interviews. According to Varuni, “activism means simply being activated around something, around a particular issue. It could be in a political way, it could be in an apolitical way as well.” Organizing, on the other hand, is more action-oriented. As Wasanti explains, “organizers are the ones that are actually out here, strategizing and building up to an action, and really doing the ground and dirty work...I always considered activists as the ones who are out there that are just all talk, they’re less likely to get their hands dirty.” Yasmin also makes an important intervention into the differences between activism and organizing, saying that “it’s organizing...when [the leadership is] actually from within the group, if it’s from outside the group I wouldn’t necessarily call that organizing.” From these definitions, I will be using
"organizing" to refer to long-term, action-oriented forms of work (with "action" involving anything from dialogue to demonstrating) that are self-determined and member-led.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter 1, ""South Asians in the House": Racial Construction of South Asians in the U.S.," I begin by reviewing the dominant frameworks of racialization for Asian Americans and South Asians in the U.S. I argue that the particular immigration history of South Asians allows them to be constructed as a 'privileged minority.' Despite other tropes of South Asian racialization, the trope of 'privileged minority' becomes hegemonic due to the pressures of state-sponsored multiculturalism.

In Chapter 2, "Queering Locality: South Asian as a Diasporic Locality of Not Belonging," I argue for the theory of a diasporic locality based in displacement, or the experience of not belonging. Many of the South Asian organizers whom I interviewed felt displaced from South Asian communities, often including their own families. The focus on displacement reflects a queer understanding of locality, centering those deemed 'impossible' in normative South Asian communities, whether due to their identities or their politics.

In Chapter 3, "The Failure of 'Community': Barriers to a South Asian Social Movement," I claim that dominant paradigms of social movement theory cannot hold the complexity of South Asian organizing in the U.S. I argue that the diasporic locality of progressive South Asians, based in a feeling of displacement, precludes the formation of a singular South Asian community that could be 'mobilized' into a movement.

In Chapter 4, "Gazing Inwards and Reconceptualizing 'The Political': The Politics of Being and Belonging," I focus on how progressive South Asians do create an experience of belonging. Since progressive South Asians are displaced from normative understandings of the
term, I argue that these South Asians create a political locality of belonging, based in (re)creating a sense of family among organizers with a shared progressive politics. In basing their belonging on a shared politics, I argue that South Asian itself becomes imbued with political meaning. In redefining what South Asian can mean, as a political term, I argue that these organizers also redefine 'South Asian issues,' focusing on issues internal to South Asian communities that would challenge their tenuous political locality of belonging.

In Chapter 5, “Progressive (Im)Possibilities: Queering Modalities of South Asian Organizing,” I contend that these organizers’ focus on internal South Asian issues is rendered invisible in normative paradigms of movement. While normative paradigms of movement assume a singular community that can mobilize around a given issue, I argue that progressive South Asians focus on building community, thus queering normative modalities of organizing. Within these modalities of organizing focused on creating community, however, I argue that certain forms of issue-based organizing, such as organizing around labor violations, become rendered impossible.
CHAPTER 1

‘South Asians in the House’:
Racial Construction of South Asians in the U.S.

Introduction

In this chapter, I will outline some of the existing literature on Asian Americans and South Asians in the U.S. I will begin with literature situating Asian Americans in the U.S., since the racialization of South Asians builds from the tropes established through Asian migration. I will then outline the construction of South Asians as a ‘privileged minority,’ building on yet distinct from tropes of Asian Americans more broadly in the U.S. I will focus on the hegemonic construction of South Asians in this country, highlighting the organizing work of the Association of Indians in America, ultimately showing how this portrayal of ‘South Asian-ness’ becomes reified as authentic and hegemonic. Though this trope does not garner as much hegemonic power, I will also explore the trope of South Asians as ‘terrifying Muslims,’ particularly in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001.

Racial Formation and Racialization

Before describing the process of South Asian racialization in the U.S., it is necessary to briefly define the frameworks of racial formation and racialization within which I will be working. I am relying on the definitions proposed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986) in their now seminal text Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s. Omi and Winant define racial formation as “the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn
shaped by racial meanings” (1986:61). Racial formation, then, is a mutually constitutive process. It describes the ways in which race is made salient as a category, of both identification and organizing, as well as how the category of race impacts other social, economic and political forces.

Within this broad process, *racialization* represents racial formation as a historical process. Omi and Winant write, “we employ the term *racialization* to signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group. Racialization is an ideological process, an historically specific one (1986:64). Given my historical approach to the racial formation of South Asians in the U.S., I use the term ‘South Asian racialization’ to represent the ways in which ‘South Asian’ as a term came to have racial meaning in the U.S. I also use the term racialization to represent the multiple contestations of this historical process, as various segments of South Asian communities have proposed challenges to the definitions of ‘South Asian’ that have come to acquire hegemonic power. I focus on ‘racialization’ in this chapter in order to foreground the processes through which South Asians have defined and continue to define their own racial position in the U.S.

**Situating South Asians: Asian American Racialization in the U.S.**

Asian Americans, as a broad category, have been historically constructed as “in-between,” pushed to occupy a confusing position of neither white nor black on the polarizing racial binary of the U.S. As Gary Okihiro asks in *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*, the question of whether “yellow” is Black or white is a recurring one throughout American history:

Is yellow black or white? is a question of Asian American identity. Is yellow black or white? is a question of Third World identity, or the relationships among
people of color. Is yellow black or white? is a question of American identity, or the nature of America’s racial formation. (1994:33)

This question is consistently posed as if emulating blackness or whiteness are the only two options—as if “neither” cannot possibly be an answer to this question. In *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience*, Angelo Ancheta (1998) argues that in certain historical time periods, Asian Americans were considered “near Black.” He highlights specific court cases in which Asian Americans were denied rights accorded only to whites because they were understood to be far closer to Black Americans than to whiteness. A notable example is the case *Gong Lum v. Rice* in 1927—decided 27 years before the foundational case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. In this case, a court upheld the constitutionality of ‘separate but equal’ institutions for Asian Americans and white Americans. The court ruled that it could not “think that the question is any different or that any different result can be reached...where the issue is as between white pupils and the pupils of the yellow races,” when compared to the already established doctrine or ‘separate but equal’ between Black and white students (1998:5).

In the present day, in a reversal of the logic behind the 1927 *Gong Lum v. Rice* decision, Asian Americans are often labeled as “honorary whites,” supposedly able to access nearly all of the privileges of whiteness (Tuan 1998:30). This label erases the histories of anti-Asian discrimination—such as Japanese internment during World War II. Through the label of “honorary white,” Asian Americans are touted as successful immigrants, with high rates of educational achievement and matching upper-middle class incomes. Thus, in the U.S. imaginary, Asian Americans are “outwhiting white” and have overcome discrimination to be more successful than whites” (Lee 1996:5). It is essential to note that this definition of Asian Americans as “honorary whites” refers to a homogenized definition of Asian American identity, in which Chinese, Japanese, and sometimes Korean people are centered—and from which
Southeast Asian, South Asian, West Asian, and Pacific Islanders are consistently excluded. Moreover, the trope of “honorary whites” is not universally accurate, even within East Asian communities. This trope makes invisible the presence of working-class and undocumented Asian Americans, as well as other Asians who are not ‘succeeding’ in the heteronormative and limited imagining of ‘Asian success.’ Nonetheless, despite its numerous limitations, the trope of Asian Americans as ‘near white,’ and no longer ‘near Black,’ remains an important milestone in the racialization of Asians in the U.S.

**Model Minority Myth**

The theorizing of Asian Americans as “honorary whites” fits into the stereotype of the “model minority,” one of the two tropes that have come to homogenize and racialize Asians in the U.S. (The other trope is that of “perpetual foreigner,” which I will address shortly.) In a 1966 article titled “Success Story, Japanese-American Style,” sociologist William Petersen touted Japanese Americans as a model immigrant group, able to rise and succeed in American society despite “discrimination and the worst injustices.” Petersen again contrasted Japanese immigrants with the “self-defeating apathy” of African-Americans, in whom (presumably white) Americans “barely know how to repair the damage that the slave traders started.” In *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Vijay Prashad (2000) also notes the anti-Black racism that drives the model minority trope, arguing that this stereotype gained traction in the U.S. as a rhetorical strategy to counteract the burgeoning Civil Rights movement. Prashad argues that:

> as Watts burned Pearl Harbor receded, and the Asian appeared as the one ideological weapon against blacks. Look at the Asians, every black activist was told; they seem to make it on their own; what’s wrong with your people? Can’t they also make it?” (2000:168)

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1 Though I argue that the trope of Asians as racially ‘in-between’ is dominant in literature about Asian Americans, there have been authors who challenge that framework. While I will not address these texts directly, see Ong (1999) and Lowe (1996).
The model minority cast Asians as the “good immigrants” in contrast to the “bad African-Americans,” who continued to inappropriately ask for “hand-outs” instead of working their way out of poverty. Asian Americans are again positioned close, or “near,” one end of the U.S. racial binary, this time close enough to whiteness to become “honorary” members of that racialized category.

The idea of a model minority works to normalize and make invisible American racism. As Min Zhou argues in “Are Asians Becoming White?,” the model minority stereotype functions to “buttress the myth that the United States is devoid of racism and accords equal opportunity to all, and that those who lag behind do so because of their own poor choices and inferior culture” (2007:357). Thus Asian Americans are labeled as inherently smart and hard working, able to succeed because of their intellect, “cultural” propensity for hard work, and their willingness to be obedient (Wu 2002:45). The importance of immigration histories become lost in this explanation. The model minority trope fails to account for the class privilege that many post-1965 Asian migrants experienced in Asia, and that traveled with them (albeit in complicated ways) into the U.S. For example, many Asian Americans who have been able to ‘succeed’ in the U.S. entered the country in order to pursue higher education, or used a degree from their countries of origin to land a decently paying job in the States.

Perpetual Foreigners

At the opposite end of the spectrum of Asian American stereotypes lies the trope of being “perpetual foreigners,” or what Mia Tuan describes as an “assumption of foreignness” (1998:18). As Frank Wu (2002) explains in Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White, a daily manifestation of this trope is the seemingly innocuous question that Asian Americans are
consistently asked: “Where are you really from?” As Wu describes, this question informs him that “once again, [he has] been mistaken for a foreigner or told [he] cannot be a real American” (2002:80). In this statement, the “necessarily implication is that America is a white nation,” and that Asians cannot truly be American (2002:88). In *Strangers from a Different Shore*, Ronald Takaki (1989) describes the historical origin of this trope in immigration laws and patterns. He explains that Asians in the U.S. were seen as perpetually foreign because of the cyclical importation of Asian labor—when immigration from one Asian country was banned, employers would turn to another Asian country to replace that labor, building an understanding of all Asians as temporary workers. In Vijay Prashad’s words, the U.S. tells Asian Americans that “we want your labor, we don’t want your lives” (2000:81). Despite the long history of Asian Americans in the U.S., and despite the presence of even seventh-generation Asian Americans (such as the author Frank Chin), Asian Americans are assumed to be recent immigrants to the U.S., not truly a part of American history or an American nation, and instead seen as “perpetually foreign.”

**South Asian Racialization in the U.S.: Construction of a ‘Privileged Minority’**

In 1965, the U.S. passed a historic act of immigration reform, titled the Hart-Celler Act. This Act re-opened the U.S. border, which had been largely closed since 1924, to large numbers of Asian migrants, including many from South Asia. The U.S. government passed this monumental act of immigration reform in a very specific context, as a means of accomplishing its own goals around international image and the ongoing Cold War. As Vijay Prashad explains in *The Karma of Brown Folk*, the abolition of the national origins quota system was intended to help “end the prevailing belief that the United States was a racist nation” (2000:74). As the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. garnered national and international attention, highlighting the rampant anti-Black racism and the continuation of Jim Crow laws within the United States, the
U.S. government needed to maintain its post-World War II image as the “leader of the free world.” Opening American borders was one way for the U.S. to bolster that international image, combating claims of racism by permitting migrants outside of Western Europe to enter the U.S. in more significant numbers.

Moreover, the U.S. was also engaged in a “space race” with the USSR. As Prashad argues, “the story actually began in 1957,” the year that the USSR launched Sputnik I and Sputnik II (2000:72). The U.S. worried that it was falling behind the USSR in the race to develop superior technology, and decided to import the labor necessary to bolster America’s scientific prowess. Given the motivations of the U.S. for re-opening its borders, the 1965 Immigration Act created new preferences for “qualified immigrants who are members of the professions, or who because of their exceptional ability in the sciences or the arts will substantially benefit prospectively the national economy, cultural interests, or welfare of the United States” as well as “qualified immigrants who are capable of performing specified skilled or unskilled labor, not of a temporary or seasonal nature, for which a shortage of employable and willing persons exists in the United States” (1965 Immigration Act).

South Asian migrants, largely Indians in the late 1960s, entered the U.S. primarily through these preferences for highly educated and professional laborers. As Prashad explains, following India’s independence in 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru (independent India’s first prime minister) had dramatically expanded science education in the country in order to create “a free and self-reliant India” (2000:75). At the same time, Britain, traditionally a destination for Indian migrants because of India’s position as a British colony, had begun tightening its immigration laws and restricting Indian migrants. Thus, the U.S. emerged as an ideal destination for many professional and educated Indian migrants. This wave of migrants has come to be known as the
“brain drain,” as the educated elite of India (and later South Asia) left the subcontinent in order to pursue better opportunities for themselves and their families in the U.S.

The professional immigrants in this wave of migration were often class privileged in their countries of origin, allowing them access to the educational opportunities necessary for professional migration. These immigrants then often entered into well-paid occupations in the U.S. Moreover, many of the “brain drain” immigrants left South Asia in order to create more permanent lives in the U.S., moving into professional and longer-term jobs.

The Association of Indians in America

As Monisha Das Gupta (2006) describes in *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States*, the class position of these migrants often led them to organize around battles of cultural and racial classification in the U.S. Upon their arrival to the U.S., these immigrants sought to replicate their experiences of full citizenship in South Asia. An exemplary organization through which to view this moment of South Asian racialization is the Association of Indians in America (AIA). In the wake of 1960s civil rights legislation, “which explicitly tied group rights to racial categorization,” South Asians in the AIA sought access to legal and social institutions developed specifically for minorities while simultaneously avoiding being branded as ‘bad immigrants’ (2006:29). By entering into dialogue with the U.S. state about the topic of census categorization, members of the AIA attempted to negotiate their complicated racial position in the U.S. Within their claim to a group position of marginalization, however, the AIA themselves further marginalized South Asians in the U.S. who did not share their class position.

I argue that it was the diasporic position of these South Asian migrants that allowed them to inaccurately and convincingly represent themselves as constitutive of all South Asians in the
U.S. The specific conditions of displacement and migration dictated by U.S. immigration law created a diaspora dominated by class-privileged early immigrants. From their diasporic position, these immigrants were able to represent themselves as the norm. Their homogenizing of the multiplicity of South Asian experiences in the U.S., creating a racial category in which class assumptions were also embedded, was made possible through the idiosyncrasies of immigration law and the U.S. need for professional migrants.

In *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States*, Monisha Das Gupta tells the story of the AIA, focusing on the ways in which this organization was able to define South Asian identity and the issues facing South Asians in the eyes of the U.S. state. Das Gupta traces the AIA’s battle over census categorization in the 1970s. The AIA was galvanized into tackling their racial position in the U.S. upon finding out that South Asians had been designated as “white” on the 1970 census. In the context of recent civil rights legislation, the AIA decided to challenge this categorization, pushing for South Asians to be considered instead in a minority racial category (neither black nor white) that would reflect, and work to ameliorate, their experiences of discrimination in America (2006:29).

In the process of challenging this census category, however, the AIA played into the trope of the Asian, and now South Asian, model minority. In attempting to gain rights from the state, the AIA struggled to portray their communities as worthy of citizenship, pushing forward a homogenized depiction of a ‘good Indian migrant.’ Das Gupta argues that the Indians leading the AIA had “never had to examine their class, gender, and caste privilege...[and therefore] they represented themselves as the universal” in the South Asian immigrant community (2006:54). Tasked with defining the issues and classification of South Asians in the U.S., the members of the AIA normalized their particular experiences of migration, making invisible South Asians
who did not fit into their particular lived experiences, especially working-class South Asians. In a striking moment of homogenization, the AIA refused to acknowledge these working-class elements of South Asians in the U.S. while testifying before Congress in 1976. In their testimony, the AIA representatives claimed that miscategorization was the only issue facing their community:

At the testimony, black, Latino, and some other Asian American community leaders had cited as barriers to data collection such factors as illiteracy, language problems, isolation in inner cities, lack of census enumerators from the community, and immigration status (U.S. House of Representatives 1976). These problems, the AIA claimed, did not affect the (highly educated and well-to-do) Indian immigrants. Instead, the problem lay in the group’s miscategorization (2006:44).

In a position to define the experience of being South Asian in the U.S., the AIA chose to highlight simply the group’s miscategorization—ignoring the multiplicity of issues faced especially by working-class South Asian migrants in order to make their communities more palatable to the state.2

As diasporic subjects, the AIA could convincingly claim that South Asians were uniformly privileged, immune from the issues that plagued other minority groups in the U.S. While the homogenization of a group identity is not a uniquely diasporic phenomenon, the diasporic position of South Asians enabled the racial project of the AIA. Through their positionality, determined by U.S. immigration laws, the members of the AIA were able to construct ‘South Asian’ as a category of individuals who merely need ‘re-categorization,’ making invisible the multiplicity of social problems faced by South Asians in the U.S.

Hegemonic Construction of ‘South Asian’ within U.S. Multiculturalism

2 See Appendix B for more information about working-class South Asian migration post-1970 and the challenges faced by these immigrants.
Enabled by the diasporic position of South Asians in the U.S., the homogenized definition of ‘South Asian’ established early on by the AIA placed South Asians firmly within the model minority myth. In the case of South Asians (and Asian Americans more broadly), the model minority myth functions as a hegemonic device, reifying the existing racial structure of the U.S. This is made clear under Antonio Gramsci’s definition of hegemony, in which dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the ‘spontaneous consent’ of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups (Strinati 1995:165).

As a self-protective reaction to nativist racism, members of the AIA willingly molded the presentation of their communities to state conceptions of ‘good immigrants’ in order to gain access to state institutions and resources. Thus, the AIA ‘spontaneously consented’ to the hegemonic racial system in the U.S. in order to negotiate that system. In formulating ‘the South Asian community’ within the confines of the model minority myth, the AIA became complicit in a trope that was (and is) actively used to delegitimize claims of racism by African-Americans, other people of color, and even South Asians themselves.

This hegemonic construction of the term ‘South Asian,’ pushing out all those unable to fall under the constraints of the model minority myth, is facilitated by the specific spaces of racialization legitimized through the recent phenomenon of U.S. multiculturalism. In The Karma of Brown Folk, Prashad argues that U.S. multiculturalism provides an intentionally limited space for non-Western Europeans to maintain their own cultures and traditions, as long as their constructions of culture “do not clash in some fundamental way with the social contract of the state and its citizens” (2000:111). Moreover, the ‘cultures and traditions’ that are validated in this multiculturalism are expected to be static and consistent, defining culture as an object to be
preserved rather than as a “living set of social relations” or a “process” (2000:112-113). In order to become legitimized in this system, South Asians must propose an ‘authentic’ and homogenized version of South Asian ‘culture.’

In *Ethnic Routes to Becoming American*, Sharmila Rudrappa defines the concept of “authenticity” as something that “accurately and satisfyingly reproduces the essential features or a portrait, or in our case, the essential features of a culture” (2004:133). Through the early voice of the AlA, buffered by the pressures of U.S. multiculturalism, an “authentic” South Asian culture has come to be represented by class-privileged primarily Indian migrants. Within the confines of U.S. multiculturalism, this class-privileged South Asian identity becomes reified as authentic. As Rudrappa explains,

Multiculturalism gives us our corner of social space where we are the sole arbiters of the truth of matters we raise. Such developments, however, privilege ethnic authenticity... *Multicultural politics propels us to establish authenticity because it renders us more easily translatable. When we can be translated with lesser effort we gain greater acceptance in mainstream America.* (emphasis mine) (2004:145-146)

The exclusionary definition of South Asian proposed by class-privileged immigrants is “easily translatable” because it is able to find a comfortable home within the model minority myth and the expectations of U.S. multiculturalism. In these frameworks, ‘South Asian’ becomes constructed in opposition to non-normative identities, such as queer or working-class. This definition of “authentic” South Asian gains power as it becomes incorporated into multiculturalism, reifying racial hegemony in the U.S. because it fits into mainstream understandings and classifications of South Asian cultures.

**Competing Tropes of Racialization: ‘Terrifying Muslims’**
September 11th, 2001 has often been marked as a turning point by South Asian scholars and organizers in the U.S. Although the racialization of Muslims and the racism against South Asian, Arab, and Middle Eastern people in the U.S. is not new, the events of 9/11 certainly impacted the racial landscape of the U.S. South Asians have seen much backlash in their communities, both Muslim and of other religions, since then. While it is important to note this trend of South Asian racialization in the U.S., I argue that this trope is less powerful than that of a privileged minority, largely due to that trope’s cultural legibility and reification in state-sponsored multiculturalism.

In their report “American Backlash: Terrorists Bring War Home in More Ways Than One,” South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT, a leading non-profit South Asian American organization in Washington D.C.) documents the upsurge of hate crimes committed against people perceived to be of Middle Eastern and/or South Asian descent—including 645 crimes in the first week following 9/11 (2001:6). In those 645 incidents, South Asians were involved in 81, or 18% (2001:9). Of the South Asians targeted, over half belonged to Sikh—not Muslim—communities (2001:9). In fact, the first hate crime reported in the wake of 9/11 was the shooting and killing of a Sikh man—Balbir Singh Sodhi—at his gas station in Mesa, Arizona on September 15th. Ironically, Sodhi was shot while he was placing American flags in front of his station, presumably in a show of self-protective patriotism (South Asian Legal Defense and Education Fund 2011).

As Junaid Rana (2011) argues in Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora, Muslims have been increasingly racialized in the wake of 9/11. Rana argues that “the racialized Muslim is mobilized as a unitary figure,” ignoring the multiplicity of identities—including varying ethnicities, nationalities, and religious beliefs—that exist under the category of

Muslim’ (2011:9). Muslim identity, despite its origin as a religious signifier, has come to be understood as racialized identity, especially in the wake of 9/11. Through this racialization, South Asians have come to be read as Muslim, albeit in a multiplicity of ways (2011:75). Sikh men, in particular, have been targeted because of their turbans; South Asian women wearing burqas or hijabs are automatically read as Muslim threats; and Pakistani and Bangladeshi men have been targeted because of their connections to ‘Muslim nations.’ In Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire After 9/11, Sunaina Maira (2009) provides specific examples of this racialization: Maira documents the impact of the criminalization and racialization of Muslim identity on South Asian Muslim youth, demonstrating the emotional and psychological impact of this specific moment of U.S. imperialism.

The racialization of religion in the wake of 9/11 has continued to impact the South Asian community across the U.S., reifying an old trope of South Asians as ‘terrorists.’ For example, on March 6th 2011, almost a decade after 9/11, two elderly Sikh men were shot in a possible hate crime (Lewis 2012). The two men, Surinder Singh (67) and Gurmej Atwal (78), lived in Elk Grove, a wealthy suburb in California. Singh died shortly after the shooting, and Atwal died within the week (Hoang 2011). This tragic event highlights the continued impact of 9/11 across South Asian communities, as well as the impact of this event on South Asians as a broad category—while working-class South Asians have been more impacted than their class privileged counterparts, wealth has not been able to completely protect South Asians from the impact of 9/11-related hate crimes.

Conclusion

The racialization of South Asians in the U.S. builds off of the tropes established through Asian Americans. Upon their arrival to the U.S., particularly post-1965, South Asians also
ascribed to the trope of the model minority myth, while simultaneously being branded as “forever immigrants” (Prashad 2000:82). While the racialization of South Asians in the U.S. is distinct from that of Asian Americans, South Asians have built off the racialization of the broader category of Asian. Dominant narratives of South Asian racialization contend that South Asians join Asian Americans in a privileged and in-between position on a black-white binary. However, I want to expand the frameworks for understanding South/Asian Americans beyond either “near black” or “near white.” Instead, in the following chapter, I argue that for the progressive South Asians whom I interviewed, a queered theory of diasporic locality more accurately represents their understanding of their racial positionality in the U.S.
CHAPTER 2:

Queering Locality:
South Asian as a Diasporic Locality of Not Belonging

Introduction

I met Esha at a quaint, open-air teahouse in Los Angeles. It was a beautiful and warm L.A. night, and we settled into the crowded venue to conduct an interview. The conversation was informal and friendly—we both burst into laughter when a baby with a large mohawk was carried past our table, and when “You’ll Be in My Heart” unexpectedly began playing on the radio.

Esha and I had met just a couple times before, but I felt very comfortable around her, and assumed that the feeling was reciprocated. We quickly got into her personal story, and she spoke openly and honestly with me about her painful experience of being both queer and South Asian. Though she has done extensive work with Satrang, Esha explained that she had always had trouble bringing those two identities together in her life, and that she continued to struggle with accepting her own identity. When I asked her what strategies she had been able to employ to begin bringing those identities had come together in her life, she paused. She then replied, “I’m the sad queer. And probably will always be.” Though she laughed afterwards, the humor was subdued, and there was clearly more than a grain of truth in her words.

I rephrased my question to ask if those identities had begun to come together. She replied, “I’m going to be the sad queer for the rest of my life. Or the sad South Asian.” She then laughed, a little louder and more genuinely, and began to describe in more detail the struggles she faced with her family in particular. She explained that while these identities did feel opposing, she was
learning how to reconcile them, at least in her own body. Esha’s story around her family will be showcased in more detail later on. However, I open with an anecdote from her interview because it is this feeling of displacement that structures this chapter.

In this chapter, I complicate the history of Asian and South Asian racialization in the U.S. by demonstrating that the construction of ‘South Asian’ by progressive organizers becomes more than a singular racial category, as ‘South Asian’ comes to have multiple and conflicting meanings. For these organizers, I argue that a theory of diasporic locality is essential for understanding the construction of ‘South Asian’ as based in “not belonging” in other spaces and in multiple dislocations. I draw this focus on dislocation from the experiences and theories of queer South Asians, and specifically from the ‘impossibility’ of a queer sexuality in normative South Asian spaces. The term ‘diasporic locality’ operates on multiple registers, signifying not only displacement from the U.S. and South Asia, but also from the hegemonic construct of ‘South Asian’ described in the previous chapter. I argue that in responding to experiences of perceived alienation and displacement from normative notions of ‘South Asian,’ these organizers further homogenize the hegemonic construct of an upwardly mobile South Asian immigrant. I use diasporic locality to name this process of responding to alienation and displacement, since this particular hegemonic construct of South Asian is possible only within a position of diaspora.

Emerging Frameworks of Racialization: Inhabiting a South Asian Locality

In her book Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America, Bakirathi Mani (2012) applies the term “locality,” as defined by Arjun Appadurai (1996) in Modernity at Large, to South Asians in the U.S. Appadurai defines locality as a phenomenology that is “relational and contextual,” in contrast to neighborhoods, which he uses to represent “situated communities characterized by their actuality, whether spatial or virtual” (1996:178-179). He explains that
locality is a “context-generative” term, capable of moving beyond identities based solely in physical place (1996:186). Thus, locality is not confined to the singular space of neighborhoods—locality can be used to understand claims of belonging simultaneously across and within national borders.

In Aspiring to Home, Mani applies this definition of locality to South Asians in the U.S., using the term to define South Asian identity as not necessarily mapped onto a singular or physical geography of space. Mani writes that “identifying as South Asian is not necessarily the same as identifying with South Asia, the region or its people. Becoming South Asian is a form of locality that is produced through ideologies of racial and class mobility in the United States” (2012:16). Thus, ‘locality’ becomes a useful term in describing South Asians in the U.S. because it is “context-generative,” expressing a positionality that is simultaneously constituted by a multiplicity of identities and experiences—such as nation of origin, class, gender, sexuality, to name a few. Mani in particular uses locality to account for both global flows of capital through South Asia as well as discourses of multiculturalism in the U.S., arguing that South Asians are impacted by transnational flows of labor and capital. While South Asians are connected to the region of ‘South Asia,’ their positionality in the U.S. is not simply determined by the geographies of South Asia or the U.S. Rather, South Asians are constructing a locality of ‘South Asian’ that exists outside of national boundaries, and that incorporates other markers—such as markers of class or of sexuality—into the construction of a term typically thought to represent no more than racial heritage.

Locality also allows for a single racial term to hold multiple constructions and meanings in the U.S. In this case, understanding South Asian racialization in the U.S. through a theory of locality creates space for ‘South Asian’ to mean both a locality of upwardly mobile immigrants,
as well as a locality of progressive organizers, who are constructing their own positionality in contradiction to the idea of an upwardly mobile group of immigrants.

**Queering Locality: Centering Not Belonging**

The idea of a ‘queer politics’ has been intentionally centered in many of the progressive South Asian spaces frequented by the organizers I interviewed. Moreover, a majority of the people I interviewed for this project are queer, and many of them spoke about their specific experiences being both queer and South Asian. Thus, an understanding of South Asian spaces and racialization as also constructed through sexuality is imperative.

From these queer organizers, a sense of South Asian as a locality of *not* belonging became increasingly apparent. Many of these organizers described feelings of ‘living two lives,’ or of feeling like their queerness made them unable to be, or to belong to, South Asian. Sanjay, who currently works in an administrative position at an LGBT Center, seems to have integrated these identities flawlessly in his everyday life—he is part of a queer South Asian group, he has an expansive interest in and knowledge of the ways that Hinduism and queerness co-exist and intersect, and his very livelihood is based on his queer identity. Thus, I was surprised to hear about the acute struggles Sanjay described in bringing together his queer and South Asian identities. He described his identity as “bifurcated,” explaining that for him queerness and South Asian-ness were “mutually exclusive.” As he explained:

> For so long my sexual identity and my ethnic identity were often very bifurcated, and very much mutually exclusive. You know, I remember being in middle school and high school and just thinking that at home I have to be the good Indian son, you know the good South Asian person, and then at school I have to be the good queer. But I could never be both at the same time.

This sentiment was reflected in a majority of the interviews I conducted with queer South Asians, especially when sexuality was the topic of conversation. It is this feeling, that queer
South Asians "could never be both at the same time," that informs the idea of a diasporic, or displaced, locality.

Shreya, another young queer organizer, told me a similar story during an evening lull in an otherwise packed conference. Between workshops, I found myself sitting and making conversation with Shreya, chatting informally about our experiences as organizers. I had been impressed by her energy all weekend—Shreya was both a participant and a presenter at this conference, and when she spoke people listened. Shreya approached her work with fire, simultaneously telling personal stories and dropping political analysis.

As we got to know each other better, Shreya began to tell me stories about her coming out process, to herself, and the lack of resources she had necessarily confronted as both queer and South Asian. After realizing that she could only find resources based on a white queer experience, she searched the terms ‘queer’ and ‘South Asian’ on Google. At the time, she said, the first result was a book called Impossible Desires (2005). Upon reading the title, she had burst into tears. She was horrified that Google had confirmed what she already felt—that corralling these two disparate identities into one body, and bringing them to co-exist, was an impossible task.

As Shreya retold this story in the present, now steeped in queer and South Asian organizing and communities, she laughed. Later on, she said, she revisited this book and discovered that it was actually a great resource—and one that I will be using in this chapter. The full title of the book, by Gayatri Gopinath, is Impossible Desires: Queer Desires and South Asian Public Cultures. I will be using the theory of impossibility put forth by Gopinath to expand the theory of South Asian locality proposed by Mani.
As the title suggests, Gopinath explores the construction of queer diasporic South Asian subjects as ‘impossible,’ specifically as a result of the confines of nationalism in their ‘homelands.’ She proposes a useful framework for understanding the ways in which these identities are positioned as mutually opposing. Gopinath coins the “framework of a queer South Asian diaspora” as a challenge to dominant constructions of nation and nationalism in South Asia, foregrounding queer diasporic subjects in order to demonstrate that both queerness and diaspora destabilize normative ideas of nationhood. A queer framework inherently challenges the norms of nationalism in South Asia, as national subjects refuse to conform to heteronormative expectations of reproduction for the sake of building the nation—“this framework ‘queers’ the concept of diaspora by unmasking and undercutting its dependence on a genealogical, implicitly heteronormative reproductive logic” (2005:10). Gopinath argues that a queer diasporic framework furthers this challenge to nationalism by challenging the very idea of a nation—a diasporic framework makes apparent the ways in which the nation is a “nostalgic construction,” actually constituted in part by nationalism and by diaspora, and thus not a ‘natural’ or ‘obvious’ formation (2005:262).

Gopinath’s theory about “impossibility” within the “framework of a queer South Asian diaspora” is productive for understanding the ways in which queerness and South Asian-ness are deemed mutually incompatible, and this ‘impossibility’ demands an understanding of locality as not belonging.

Towards a Theory of ‘South Asian’ Diasporic Locality

In analyzing how progressive South Asian organizers understand their own identities, I center Gopinath’s framework of ‘impossibility.’ For both Appadurai and Mani, locality is a phenomenology based primarily in a feeling and affective experience of belonging—locality is a
useful framework because it focuses on the multiplicity of ways in which people belong, instead of narrowly focusing on just place-based constructions of national identity. I will return to this idea of belonging in Chapter 4. From my own interviews for this project, and with Gopinath’s framework of impossibility at the center, it is clear that, for these organizers, a feeling of not belonging is equally powerful. Thus, I use ‘diasporic locality’ to ‘queer’ Mani’s concept of locality, centering experiences of not belonging. I argue that the progressive South Asians whom I interviewed defined their communities through not belonging in ‘normative’ South Asian spaces, or spaces that they believe reflect the hegemonic construction of South Asian described in Chapter 1, thus placing themselves in what I will call a diasporic locality.

Especially since a majority of my informants are 1.5 and 2nd generation immigrants, many of whom have either never been to their family’s country of origin or have not returned in many years, I use the term ‘diaspora’ to foreground a multiplicity of displacements or dislocations. As Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur explain in Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader, the term diaspora refers to “displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration, or exile” (2003:1). More specifically, in the present context, diaspora has come to imply the “mass migrations and displacements of the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in reference to independence movements in formerly colonized areas, waves of refugees fleeing war-torn states, and fluxes of economic migration in the post-World War II era” (2003:4). For the participants in this project, many of whom are part of this twentieth century iteration of diaspora, a diasporic locality encompasses a positionality that is not only outside of any one geographic space, but that is necessarily displaced from multiple geographic spaces—in this

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4 I want to emphasize that a feeling of belonging is certainly present and important; in the following chapters, I will examine where and how progressive South Asians feel able to belong. In this chapter, however, I argue that a feeling of not belonging is just as important.
case, neither fully ‘South Asian’ (or more specifically, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Pakistani, etc.) nor fully ‘American.’ In the case of the progressive South Asians whom I interviewed, I argue that the notion of ‘diasporic locality’ as based in an experience of displacement extends to other forms of displacement as well—specifically displacement from a construction of ‘normative’ or ‘hegemonic’ South Asian communities.

I use the term ‘diasporic locality’ because I argue that these displacements are based in the homogenized image of an upwardly mobile South Asian immigrant, which is only possible in a diasporic position. The notion of ‘South Asian’ as a homogeneous imagined construct of upwardly mobile, straight, Indian, Hindu ‘good immigrants’ is possible only outside of South Asia itself. As Monisha Das Gupta explains, “denying the very existence of working class people, which would be absurd in a homeland context, becomes plausible in the U.S. immigrant context” (1999:172). The specific and selective immigration histories described in the previous chapter make this homogenization possible in the U.S. This sentiment applies to identities other than class. As shown through the voices of queer South Asians, the various sexualities—as well as religions and nationalities—held by the progressive organizers in this project are apparent in South Asia itself; however, in the context of migration to the U.S., these identities are elided as the hegemonic image of the ‘model minority’ South Asian emerges. Thus, this hegemonic construct of upwardly mobile South Asian communities, while certainly grounded in reality, also becomes an imagined construct. This construct is used to explain the dislocation of progressive organizers from being part of ‘normative’ South Asian communities—in this case, South Asian communities not based in a progressive politics.

I also use the term ‘diasporic’ to draw out and locate Gopinath’s theory of impossibility. In Impossible Desires, the basis for Gopinath’s positioning of queer and South Asian identities as
impossible is the strictures of nationalism, based on various independence struggles on the subcontinent. The contested sites of belonging are various South Asian nations—queer diasporic subjects are fighting to remain legible within constructs of nationalism in their homelands. As Annanya Bhattacharjee (1998) demonstrates in her essay, “The Habit of Ex-Nomination: Nation, Woman, and the Indian Immigrant Bourgeoisie,” these iterations of nationalism do not disappear when South Asians migrate from their home countries to the U.S., especially in the context of migrants who remain connected to or frequently return to their countries of origin.

However, the search for an integration of queer and South Asian identities in diaspora is a unique struggle. While the strictures of nationalism in South Asia certainly impact queer diasporic South Asians, nationalism is not necessarily the originary source of ‘impossibility’—in this transnational context, ideas of ‘impossibility’ often take on a diasporic origin. I argue that the impossibility of queer South Asians in diaspora, as expressed by the progressive organizers I interviewed, is based in the hegemonic construct of South Asian described in the previous chapter. The mere existence of queer South Asians challenges state-approved hegemonic notions of what ‘South Asian’ ought to mean. Therefore, for those looking to maintain their ‘model minority’ status in the U.S., queer South Asians need to be made invisible. In foregrounding this diasporic origin, I name the experience of displacement from normative understandings of South Asian, based in the experiences of progressive and queer South Asian organizers in the U.S., a ‘diasporic locality.’

As a concept situated in experiences of queerness and diaspora, I also emphasize a focus on family and community as the primary sites of this locality of not belonging. While not a uniquely diasporic phenomenon, this consistent focus on family as the most important site for the transmission of cultural norms and expectations takes on a particular shape in a South Asian
diasporic locality. As Sayantani DasGupta and Shamita Das Dasgupta explain, ‘culture’ in a
diasporic context often becomes “stripped of the dynamism, diversity, and local idiosyncrasies
present in the native land,” becoming essentialized into a nostalgic construction of what India (in
this case) looked like in the past (DasGupta, 1998: 114). Within this limited definition of culture,
as “the second generation of...Indians [come] of age, the task of passing on ‘culture’ has become
a priority with the original immigrants” (1998:115). In a diasporic locality, then, family often
becomes a particularly loaded site of cultural transmission, for both parents and children.

Finally, I also use the term ‘diasporic locality’ to argue that in responding to their own
feelings and experiences of alienation, that these progressive South Asian organizers actually
contribute to the homogenization of ‘South Asian’ into a single hegemonic (albeit consistently
contested) meaning in the U.S. This too is a diasporic phenomenon, specific to the situation of
organizers working in and through communities defined (and homogenized) by immigration
histories and policies. By arguing that their experiences of dislocation emerge from normative
South Asian communities, these organizers homogenize the demands made on them from
various sectors of their South Asian communities—from campus clubs, to family career
pressures, to demands around (hetero)sexuality—into a singular homogenous understanding of
‘South Asian’ against which their own understandings of South Asian are constructed.

Displacement from and Homogenization of ‘South Asian’

This feeling of not belonging, and of displacement from normative constructions of South
Asians, was most apparent in the experiences of queer South Asian organizers. Unlike
Gopinath’s framework of impossibility, however, I locate the displacement of these organizers in
the specifically diasporic construct of South Asian described in the previous chapter. In
responding to their own feelings of displacement, however, I argue that these organizers further homogenize straight and ‘non-progressive’ South Asian communities.

In a diasporic locality, the notion of ‘impossibility’ accounts for the displacement of queer South Asians from the possibility of belonging to this hegemonic construction—rendering them impossible at best, and threatening at worst. As Radha bluntly explained, when she first began to question her sexuality, she told herself “there’s no way I can be queer, there’s no way I can be South Asian and queer.” For Radha, identifying as queer signifies that

I’m not heterosexual, but I also don’t fit into heteronormativity, gender roles, a kind of patriarchal sense of what a... I usually say what a desi ladki has to be. Just to destabilize those notions and also to not conform, not out of resistance, but because I just don’t fit into that framework.

For her, then, queerness as an identity is incompatible with a particular iteration of South Asian—specifically expectations of “what a desi ladki has to be,” which represents the hegemonic construction of South Asian described earlier. Sanjay also explains his dislocation from this specific construction of South Asian, saying that “for a long time I just thought... something was broken cause I couldn’t, clearly I couldn’t be both. Because to me to be Indian was to get married, to have a wife and children, to fulfill the heteronormative norm that we talk about.” Similar to Radha, Sanjay is not arguing that South Asian-ness and queerness are incompatible in totality, but rather that the specific and hegemonic construction of South Asian in the U.S. is unable to hold expressions of queerness. However, for both Sanjay and Radha, the heteronormative iteration of South Asian remains un-interrogated, as the various identities subsumed in that category are homogenized and not disaggregated.

Esha also constructs her queerness in opposition to a particular notion of South Asian, though from a different angle—she explains that claiming queerness was a challenge for her because she did fit notions of the “desi ladkhi” described by Radha. Despite her deep
involvement in queer South Asian communities, Esha explains that she initially had a difficult
time claiming both of these identities. She explains that “a lot of that anxiety around claiming
queerness was because of my South Asian-ness,” as she feared the sense of dislocation
experienced by Sanjay. She continued to explain that her embodiment of the upwardly mobile
immigrant trope inhibited her ability to claim queerness, saying:

It took a little bit longer for me because in a lot of ways I fit the paradigm of what
is expected of ‘the good Indian girl.’ I mean I look the type, I will act the type by
helping out in the home, in the family, in the domestic realm, whatever else. I was
fortunate enough to know my home language, my heritage language, so a lot of
these things and the way that culture is held and propagated was on me.

Despite her embodiment of both queerness and “what is expected of ‘the good Indian girl,’
however, Esha posits queerness and South Asian-ness as mutually exclusive. Though she has
begun to integrate queerness into what she perceives as an embodiment that maintain some
aspects of a ‘normative’ South Asian experience, Esha still claims that there is no space for these
two identities to coincide, as she fears displacement from her own communities. In this
expression of fear, Esha also reinforces and consolidates normative South Asian-ness as an
identity that cannot hold queerness.

Towards the end of his interview, Sanjay did question the assumption that all members of
a ‘normative’ South Asian community would necessarily be homophobic. He began by
explaining that, although he is ‘out’ in most aspects of his life, Sanjay continues fear “losing
community” because of his sexuality. This fear informs the decisions he makes around his
sexuality, as he continues to voice hesitations around identifying with queerness, asking himself,
“do I really want to put myself in places where...I potentially could lose community?” However,
Sanjay also recognizes that, while his fear is very real, the reactions he fears may be more
tolerant than he imagines. He acknowledges that “that’s my own shit to deal with, because I’m
projecting my own past onto communities that I don’t even know. And yet that’s part of my process.” Thus, Sanjay recognizes that his non-queer South Asian communities may ultimately be more accepting than he imagines, while nonetheless acknowledging that responding to this fear is legitimate and “part of [his] process.”

Though based in the experience of dislocation through queerness, the idea of a diasporic locality extended to identities beyond sexuality. Every one of the organizers I spoke with identified themselves as outside of the South Asian model minority trope, due to identities such as class, ethnicity, or political commitments. Sanjay, a queer organizer with Satrang, stated this position most clearly. Sanjay studies histories of queerness within Hinduism, and seems to have built his life around studying aspects of South Asian cultures. Other Satrang organizers spoke about him as a resource for questions about Hinduism, whether related to queerness or not. Thus, it surprised me to hear Sanjay say that, growing up, he had never felt “South Asian enough.” As he explained, “I was never South Asian enough to be with the South Asians, you know who are usually the children of the doctors and engineers, and I was never not South Asian enough to hang out with other communities.” For Sanjay, though he identifies as middle class, his experience of his class position placed him outside the purview of ‘South Asian,’ understood to be only children of affluent immigrants in careers of great prestige. However, Sanjay constructs “the children of the doctors and engineers” as a singular category. In addition to their shared class position, Sanjay assumes that they are all part of a single construct of upwardly mobile South Asian immigrants, without asking what fractures—of national origin, of ethnicity, of sexuality, of gender—exist in that community as well.

This trend of homogenizing South Asian communities viewed as ‘apolitical’ and upwardly mobile was especially apparent when organizers spoke about organizations on their
school campuses. Given the importance of educational attainment in fulfilling the expectations of an upwardly mobile ‘South Asian’ trajectory, many of the participants focused on school clubs as a site where they understood themselves as dislocated from normative understandings of South Asian. Though an Indian club is not a ‘South Asian’ club—that is, the club is explicitly focused on the experiences of people with heritage in India, not South Asia—many of the organizers I spoke with equated campus Indian or ‘desi’ groups without an explicit political agenda to this upwardly mobile construct of South Asians as a whole.\(^5\)

For example, Shreya, a young, queer college student, described her sense of alienation from her campus’s Indian club. She explained that this alienation was exacerbated after she came into an awareness of her racial identity through “the race unit” in her high school. Shreya took part in a series of classes, limited to a select group of students in her high school’s magnet program, to discuss issues of race, gender, and other identity-based oppressions. For Shreya, this “race unit” allowed her to discover a new self-awareness. She explained that she “felt like, I don’t know, I had this headache my whole life, and I didn’t know why I had that headache until the race unit. It was like woah, okay...I’ve been missing out.” After the analysis that she developed through the race unit, Shreya began to organize a group on her campus to focus on the experiences of South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Arab women. Shreya explains that for the first time, this group allowed her to feel a sense of community with other South Asians. She says, “I was so used to being alienated by other South Asians, and this was the first time where I felt a little unified with other South Asians, in my group.” For Shreya, her growing self-awareness allowed her to form a new South Asian group, from which she did not feel “alienated;” I will speak more about this sense of belonging forged by South Asians in subsequent chapters.

\(^5\) For more on class and campus politics, see Shankar (2008).
In this chapter, my focus is on Shreya’s feeling of alienation. One of the groups from which Shreya felt alienated was her high school’s Indian club. She directly contrasted her newly formed group with the Indian club at her school. Though she does not describe the Indian club in detail, I argue that Shreya uses the Indian club to represent the aspirations of upwardly mobile South Asians. Describing the campus group she founded, Shreya explained:

It was a very marginalized space in some ways, because it wasn’t given much attention. It was very like okay, South Asians, what? Compared to Indian club, which got fame. It was like Indian Club! We get to, not party, but you know... we don’t have to think deeply about things, we don’t have to be politicized, we can just go and celebrate holidays without knowing what they mean, we can do a bunch of things. So we definitely got in some ways marginalized in that way, as far as attention from students.

Shreya positions the club she founded, with a progressive politics at the center, in opposition to the Indian club on her campus. She explains that this club “got fame” because participation in this club didn’t involve “thinking deeply about things,” but rather “celebrating holidays.” For Shreya, this perceived refusal to think about race as both a system and an identity, as the race unit allowed her to do, is a representation of the uncritical (according to her) aspirations of upwardly mobile South Asian immigrants that her club is organized against. Similar to Sanjay, Shreya does not complicate this homogenized construct of ‘South Asian’ as embodied by the “Indian club.” This refusal to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the “Indian club” happens on multiple levels. First, like Sanjay, Shreya does not acknowledge the differences in identities, such as class, religion, and perhaps even national origin (despite the club’s name) that are collapsed into this single group. Moreover, in her analysis of ‘the political’—for Shreya, talking about race in the manner of the race unit—Shreya does not acknowledge that “celebrating holidays,” even “without knowing what they mean,” can be a profoundly political act. Instead, the “Indian club” stands in as a homogenized and agentive construct, able to dislocate and
“alienate” Shreya from being fully South Asian, and pushing her to create a new ‘properly politicized’ group.

Radha, a queer South Asian organizer, also described her feeling of alienation from her campus “Indian club,” though she, like Shreya, identifies as Indian. As I will delve into later in this chapter, Radha’s positionality as a queer organizer further complicates her relationship to the term South Asian, and to South Asian spaces. Radha, along with other queer South Asian youth under 30 years of age, helped to organize the first Satrang youth group, formed in the summer of 2011. In her campus, however, Radha did not feel comfortable identifying with the Indian club. As she explained, “growing up I pretty much identified as an Indian American but I didn’t really understand what that fully meant yet. And I wasn’t really a part of the Indian club on campus, or whatever, they weren’t my people, I just never really fit in.” I find Radha’s assertion that the members of the Indian club “weren’t my people” particularly informative. Though she too comes from an upper middle-class immigrant family, Radha constructs the members of the Indian club as ‘not her people.’ I draw attention to this counter-identification not to call into question its validity, but rather to demonstrate that the construct of an upwardly mobile group of South Asian immigrants is positioned as not only homogenous, but also permanently outside the purview of progressive constructions of ‘South Asian.’ Radha is not only expressing her dislocation from hegemonic constructs of South Asian, but also positioning the “Indian club” at her school as inherently beyond the scope of progressive politics. As Shreya also demonstrated, though not explicitly, the “Indian club” is understood to be a space constructed in opposition to progressive politics, and thus a space with which she cannot identify.

Family as a Diasporic Site of Displacement
As a term centered in an experience of diaspora, and in the experiences of queer people, family and community become especially loaded sites of contestation and displacement. For many of the queer participants in this project, the sense of impossibility and of forced displacement was expressed primarily through their strained relationships with their families. Even though she has been able to start integrating these identities, Esha says that “I don’t know if I’ve really found a way for them [queerness and South Asian-ness] to come together fully, in the sense that I would feel comfortable.” Esha, like Radha, was one of the key forces behind starting the Satrang youth group, sending emails and helping to facilitate the first interest meeting. She is a 27-year old organizer from Southern California who has become a grounding presence in the South Asian queer youth community. One of the main reasons that Esha has been unable to fully integrate her identities as South Asian and queer in a “comfortable” way is her relationship with her family.

As Esha explained, as the oldest daughter, she felt an increased pressure to live up to her parents’ expectations of what a South Asian daughter should be. She explained that “I felt some of that...pressure, as the first foray into this immigrant American living...like I was the living example of whether [my parents] would succeed or fail.” For Esha, being queer was an example that her family had “failed,” and a signifier that she could not occupy space within normative understandings of South Asian, since she could not both be queer and live up to her family’s expectations. Her queerness symbolized her family’s inability to preserve and pass on their culture, and this failure is embodied in Esha herself.

Radha also describes her family as implicit and explicit gatekeepers of a ‘proper’ and normative definition South Asian. While she too describes unspoken expectations to conform to

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6 For further reading on family, community, and home as vexed constructs for queer South/Asian Americans, see Aguilar-San Juan (1998), Ratti (1993), Gopinath (2005), Eng (1997).
a heteronormative life, she also describes the painful and explicit ways in which her family poses queerness and South Asian-ness as mutually opposing. She explains that, “for my parents...their reaction to my possible queerness is...I didn’t raise you to be like this, which doesn’t make sense to me. I didn’t raise you to be like this, this is not my daughter.” As Radha’s parents enforce that queerness is incompatible with her South Asian culture, they argue that she actually cannot be their daughter, since they didn’t “raise [her] to be like this.” In Radha’s case, then, her potential queerness is so incompatible with her South Asian identity that this queerness explicitly threatens her very position as belonging in and to her family, not just in South Asian communities at large.

Deepak, a transman who is involved in queer South Asian youth work and queer people of color work more broadly, poignantly describes the ways he initially conformed to the expectations of ‘South Asian’ because of his experience of a cultural “collectivist identity,” where he understood his actions partly in terms of their impacts on others, especially his family. He says:

So, even from...like, my earliest moment of knowledge, or thing that I felt I knew, was that my mother wanted a daughter more than anything, she knew exactly what name she wanted to give that daughter when, since when she was a little girl, and so those were the kinds of things that I kind of took on and heard. I said my favorite color was yellow, not because it was, per say, but because I knew it was her favorite color to see me in. So I took on a lot of, I mean, in that already is, is like a lot of things, is a collectiv-, like, having a kind of a collectivist identity, which for me is a huge part of my South Asian identity, in like before, I mean when I was, before preschool, you know, like as a toddler, I had, I already had that kind of way of seeing myself and way of existing.

Deepak describes a different kind of pressure, coming from his family’s standards as well as from his own expectations for himself. He names not just his immediate family but also his entire extended “collectivist” community as sites from which he is displaced. His identities as
both transgender and queer signify that he cannot embody the hegemonic construction of 'South Asian.'

The importance of family as a site of displacement extended to issues beyond queerness. Despite their disavowal of the ‘model minority’ stereotype, many of these organizers claimed that their families do ascribe to this trope, whether through their lived experience as upper-class and upwardly mobile immigrants or through a desire for their children to achieve this trope. In constructing their understandings of South Asian in opposition to the understandings of their families, many of the organizers whom I interviewed used their families to represent hegemonic constructions of South Asian. They equated the aspirations and experiences of their families, in opposition to their own aspirations and experiences, with a homogenized and upwardly mobile group of South Asian immigrants.

Shreya focused specifically on the aspirations of her parents, explaining that she cannot easily integrate her political work with their desires. As she explained, her parents have a vastly different conception of the U.S. than she does:

I think it’s very different. We’re both placed into new settings but it’s different because they grew up in the motherland, coming here for a better life. They have more hope in this country, in the system, it has to do with the model minority. They don’t like to divide themselves, thinking about themselves as people of color, South Asian is almost a self-degrading idea, like why are you creating oppression for yourself? Whereas I think of myself as South Asian navigating white institutions, oppression, etc. I can take power and strength in that identity and talk about oppression. But it’s different for my parents, where it can be hurtful to talk about it in that way.

I find Shreya’s comment that talking about ‘South Asian’ as a political term, tied to “talk about oppression,” is “hurtful” to her parents particularly informative. For Shreya, then, her own politicization and insistence on reading South Asian as an oppressed racial category in the U.S. is pushing her away from normative South Asian communities, embodied not only by the Indian
club on her campus, but also by her own parents. In Shreya's understanding, her parents are unable to think about South Asian as a term at all, let alone as a political term. Her need to do so, for herself, actually alienates her from her family.

Yasmin, an organizer for one of the political education programs described in the introduction, also located her feeling of dislocation from normative South Asian spaces in her family. Yasmin has done a variety of organizing work, from South Asian political education conferences to environmental organizing. She explained that she needs a progressive South Asian community in order to support her career decisions, since these decisions place her outside the approval of her family and the purview of hegemonic South Asian communities. Yasmin explains:

It is really difficult to sustain the work that I want to do personally around, not just organizing in South Asian spaces, but organizing at large. Or not even organizing, but certainly trying to follow a career path which is not what my parents have set out for me to do without feeling like there are spaces in my South Asian community, Indian community, Gujarati community that would support that. And just to be clear it doesn’t have to be Gujarati Indian, whatever, but at the very least having other South Asians who can say yeah I totally get this...that is critical.

For Yasmin, her need for progressive South Asian community is in part because she feels alienated, or displaced, from her family, and from normative South Asian spaces. While Shreya links her parents to a homogenized, upwardly mobile construct of South Asians, Yasmin implicates her whole “South Asian community, Indian community, Gujarati community.” Yasmin homogenizes the desires of her entire community into a career path that she cannot follow. This feeling of displacement from her family, which Yasmin understands as part of a homogenized yet uniquely diasporic construct of upwardly mobile South Asians, is part of what constitutes Yasmin’s diasporic locality.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue that a ‘diasporic locality’ works on multiple registers, accounting for both the definition of diaspora proposed by Braziel and Mannur and the dislocations experienced by these South Asian organizers. I come to an understanding of a locality based in displacement and experiences of not belonging from the words and experiences of queer South Asians, who emphasize the ‘impossibility’ of their very lives. The term ‘diasporic locality’ represents the feeling of alienation experienced by these organizers from ‘normative’ South Asian spaces, and especially from their own families and communities. I claim that this feeling of alienation is specifically diasporic, as the hegemonic construction of ‘South Asian’ that these organizers implicate in their displacement is a possible construction only in a position of diaspora. Without invalidating this feeling of alienation, which is indeed a real and lived experience, I argue that these organizers are simultaneously homogenizing the specter of upwardly mobile South Asian immigrants, implicating entire communities without acknowledging the diversity within them. Though locality is often understood as a phenomenology of belonging, by centering frameworks based in queerness and diaspora, I argue that these progressive South Asian organizers understand themselves in community with each other in large part because of the experience of not belonging in other South Asian spaces.
CHAPTER 3:

The Failure of 'Community':
Barriers to a South Asian Social Movement

Introduction

On a dreary day in August, I met up with Varuni at her partner’s apartment. They both welcomed me in, and Varuni and I began to prepare for our interview. I had met Varuni at a South Asian conference about a year ago, and we had enjoyed hanging out and talking past the official conference hours. We had become friends, and I had often stayed at her place in New York when I came to visit. We set up in the living room, a quiet, spacious room that felt private and intimate. With both of us sitting cross-legged on the floor, the atmosphere felt far more like an informal conversation than an interview.

Initially, I followed the standard line of questions I was accustomed to asking during these interviews; however, Varuni’s answers challenged me to change tack. Varuni began to relate her experiences around finding her place in social justice work as a South Asian woman. Although she had worked at multiple South Asian youth organizations, Varuni explained that she often felt frustrated by the lack of analysis around race in API spaces, and that she thought a critical analysis of racial dynamics was often sidelined in these organizations. For Varuni, however, race was an essential component of any kind of social justice work. Thus, she often ended up traversing Black and Latino spaces, seeking out organizations that grounded their work in an analysis of race in the United States. Varuni also described the historical lack of an API movement on the east coast. Intrigued by her analysis, I asked Varuni for her thoughts about a specifically South Asian movement. Did she think a South Asian movement in the U.S. could
exist? Did exist? Had a South Asian (American) movement happened in the past, and could it happen in the future?

This interview sparked the questions that now inform this chapter. South Asian voices and stories are largely absent from movement narratives in the U.S. Since the first major wave of South Asian migration to the U.S. occurred in the late 1960s, South Asians were largely absent from the race- and ethnicity-based movements remembered in American history—such as the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, the Chicano movement, or the Asian American movement. Despite the nominal inclusion of South Asians in the Asian American movement, South Asians were largely outside of even that movement. This lack of movement narratives is a reflection of both the non-participation of South Asians in these movements, due to later immigration histories, as well as of an organizing history that exists but has been made invisible, such as the anti-colonial Ghadar Party in California.

Given the understanding of ‘movement’ as the culmination of race- or ethnicity-based organizing, I will ask in this chapter why there has not been a South Asian (American) movement in the U.S., despite South Asians being the fastest-growing ethnic minority group in the country (SAALT, 2012). I will begin by examining literature in the field of social movement theory, both general and specifically race- and ethnicity-based, to ask what constitutes a social movement, and to ask why a South Asian movement is deemed ‘impossible.’

Despite these organizers’ attempts to reconstitute the definition of South Asian in the U.S., I argue that the tropes described in Chapter 1 continue to hold power, challenging South Asians who wish to organize under this term—it is paradoxical to challenge the racial structure of the U.S. from a locality that reifies that same structure. I extend the theory of diasporic locality from the previous chapter to argue that these organizers implicate the same hegemonic
construct of an upwardly mobile immigrant group to explain the ‘impossibility’ of a South Asian movement. In a similar vein to Chapter 2, I will focus in this chapter on the barriers to a South Asian movement, highlighting the ways in which the diasporic construction of South Asians renders movement-building work impossible. While the implication of a hegemonic group of upwardly mobile immigrants is real, I also argue that implicating only this group of people both continues to homogenize them, and also does not account for the ways in which South Asians queer normative paradigms of organizing (Chapter 4), nor the limitations of organizing named as ‘progressive’ (Chapter 5). In the following chapter, I will demonstrate that the progressive organizing work that actually is occurring under the label ‘South Asian’ is also rendered invisible within normative constructs of movement.

What is a Social Movement?

In the introduction to The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts, Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper define a social movement as “a collective, organized, sustained, and noninstitutional challenge to authorities, powerholders, or cultural beliefs and practices” (2003:3). They expand on that definition to explain that:

Social movements are conscious, concerted, and sustained efforts by ordinary people to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means. They are more conscious and organized than fads and fashions. They last longer than a single protest or riot. There is more to them than formal organizations, although such organizations usually play a part. They are composed mainly of ordinary people as opposed to army officers, politicians, or economic elites. They need not be explicitly political, but many are. They are protesting against something, either explicitly as in antiwar movements or implicitly as in the back-to-the-land movement that is disgusted with modern urban and suburban life. (2003:3).

This is the definition of a social movement on which this chapter will rely, with the Civil Rights movement being the exemplary and most cited example of a movement in the U.S.
In *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing for Social Movements*, Bill Moyer broadens the definition of Goodwin and Jasper to propose eight specific stages of any social movement. He names these stages: normal times, prove the failure of official institutions, ripening conditions, take off, perception of failure, majority public opinion, success, and continuing the struggle (2001:44-45). In these stages, normal times represents the time before a social movement begins, when social problems a movement will later address are considered routine, and opposition to said problems is considered irrational. The next stage is to prove the failure of official institutions, in which early participants in what will grow into a movement must demonstrate that institutions are flawed. Stage three is ripening conditions, which includes “the necessary context of historic developments; a growing, discontented population of victims and their allies; and a budding, autonomous, grassroots opposition” (2001:51). This stage relies on both the historical evolution of conditions as well as the creation of conditions in which a social movement can take place. In the next stage, take-off, the social movement actually launches. This stage typically involves a “trigger event” that “dramatically reveals a critical social problem to the general public in a vivid way” (2001:54). This trigger event does not actually single-handedly spark a movement (although the mainstream narrative of a movement often tells such a story) but it does catapult a movement into national spotlight. Through this event, the work done to prove the failure of institutions and the conditions of the time coalesce into a movement, bringing in more people and greater energy. Assuming that this initial movement becomes a successful movement and maintains the momentum gained following a trigger event, stage five is the eventual perception of failure. In this stage, the initial success and energy of a movement is realized to be unrealistic, as social change does not occur overnight. Following this stage is majority public opinion, when a movement takes on longer-term plans.
and goals. This stage involves reaching out to win over public opinion while also changing away from protest tactics to longer-term institutional and programmatic tactics, such as consolidating energy into grassroots organizations. Stage seven is success, in which some of the goals of a movement are accomplished. This can be understood as a victory for a social movement, or this moment can be co-opted by powerholders, where success is credited to those with power and the role of grassroots organizers or the movement as a whole is elided. Finally, the last state is continuing the struggle. This stage emphasizes the need for social movements to maintain their power and their hold on public opinion in order to ensure that changes made are not reversed, as well as to continue pushing for more changes.7

Within these definitions of a social movement, race- and ethnicity-based movements comprise a special category. As Charlton McIlwain explains in his essay “Race-Based Social Movements,” race-based movements are defined as “movements aimed at changing—in part or whole—the manner in which societies formally or informally institutionalize the social and political relations among the disparate racial groups that live within a society” (2011:47). More specifically, he argues, these race-based movements “aim to change the primary manner in which societies have historically—through formal and informal means—racially framed the power relations among their people” (emphasis in original) (2011:48). Race-based social movements focus on race as both a means and a goal—these movements mobilize people based on racial analysis, often focusing on members of a specific race as their primary base, with the end goal of changing racially determined power dynamics.

**Barriers to a South Asian Social Movement**

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7 For examples of how these “stages” have been enacted in other race- and ethnicity-based movements, see Appendix C.
In his essay "Crafting Solidarities," Vijay Prashad argues that "'South Asian American' is a very recent category, a rubric for a social movement that is still in its early stages" (1998:112). I argue that South Asian organizing work has now moved beyond its "early stages," yet that this work still cannot be understood through the lens of a 'social movement. Though South Asians are the fastest growing minority ethnic group in the U.S., and despite the backlash suffered by many South Asians in the wake of 9/11, I argue that there has not yet been a 'South Asian movement' in the U.S. Much work has been done to "prove the failure of official institutions" and to "ripen conditions" for a movement; 9/11 also could have served as the "trigger event" for a "take off" moment. However, I argue that the stages proposed by Moyer do not actually encompass the complexity of South Asians' diasporic locality in the U.S., nor the complicated and competing tropes of South Asian racialization.

Moyer's ideas of a "trigger event" and a "take off" moment imply a coherent community that could respond to such events. In the previous chapter, I centered the experiences of queer progressive organizers to demonstrate that the organizers I interviewed for this project understand themselves in a diasporic locality, displaced from normative South Asian communities. Though they continue to organize under the same name, these organizers do not understand themselves to be in the same political community as other South Asians, which for many of these organizers includes their families. I argue that the process of recognizing the pressures of normative community while further homogenizing this community is an essential characteristic of not just a locality of displacement, but also of a progressive South Asian understanding of organizing work. As these progressive South Asians understand themselves to be displaced from normative constructs of the term, they also argue that the possibilities for organizing work under the term South Asian become limited. In this chapter, I argue that
although they are working to redefine the term South Asian, these organizers implicate the normative construction of South Asian as the barrier to a social movement, while also further homogenizing that construct in the process. Moreover, these organizers dismiss the organizing work of upwardly mobile immigrants, arguing that it is a ‘tendency’ as opposed to ‘legitimate’ political work. Thus, these organizers claim that the existing definition of South Asian cannot be used as the basis for a race-based social movement, as organizing under a term that reifies the current racial structure of the U.S. cannot attempt to change racially determined power dynamics.

Construction of ‘South Asian Community’

Given that this chapter is constructed around the interrogation of a South Asian race-based social movement (or lack thereof), it is not surprising that the racialization of South Asians was one of the primary factors that participants highlighted. Varuni, the organizer whose interview opened this chapter, acknowledged the inability of ‘South Asian’ to hold the multitude of experiences lumped under this single term. She asked:

So if there were to be a real movement those are some of the questions that we would have to contend with: whose politics are we...whose experiences are we centering, and is there really one South Asian experience, cause we all know that it’s not, that sort of thing. Which obviously is the problem with, oftentimes, identity politics-centered organizing or movement building, because there’s a million different experiences.

Though she acknowledges here that there are a “million different experiences,” Varuni continues to implicate the South Asian community at large for its inability to mobilize into a movement. She explains that “although we might have a similar racialized experience in this country...that experience isn’t powerful enough to have us join together.” While Varuni acknowledges that South Asian is a term used to hold a diversity of identities, she also implicates the ‘South Asian
community' as the barrier to a social movement, homogenizing this construct as a ‘community’ with a “similar racialized experience.”

I argue that South Asians actually do not necessarily have a similar racialized experience in the U.S., despite being classified within the same racial category. As discussed in the previous chapter, the diasporic locality inhabited by the progressive South Asian organizers whom I interviewed is a distinct space of racialization, constructed in opposition to normative South Asian communities. Through their emphasis on experiences of dislocation, these organizers clearly demonstrate that there is no single experience of South Asian racialization. Moreover, the idea of a “similar racialized experience” elides differences of class and migration history within South Asian communities. Varuni acknowledges the highly stratified class differences among South Asians in the U.S., saying “I think some people in our community live in constant economic and social insecurity, I think that that’s very real.” However, Varuni continues to say that

I don’t think our community’s been through...I don’t think the “community” has been shocked or moved in any way, which is interesting right, but sometimes I think it does take crisis or something to motivate a people, and that hasn’t really happened. Yeah, I think there are a lot of people in our community living in constant insecurity about many, many things. But the vast majority of South Asians in this country came here out of choice, so there’s a lot of mobility that that has afforded people.

While recognizing the diversity of experiences within South Asian communities, highlighting that there are South Asian “people...living in constant economic insecurity about many, many things,” Varuni again homogenizes South Asians into a single community, “our community,” that she claims is based in mobility and choice.

Varuni’s implication of this community of upwardly mobile South Asians, who came here largely through their own agentive decisions, in the lack of organizing work in South Asian
communities is valid. As Varuni explains, the hegemonic construct of South Asian as economically mobile and in the U.S. “out of choice” limits the possibilities of organizing under the term South Asian, as the racial privilege accorded to ‘model minorities’ is not challenged. As I argued in the previous chapter, progressive South Asian organizers in this project felt alienation from this group of immigrants in part because their progressive politics were viewed as ‘impossible’—organizers such as Shreya and Radha felt necessarily dislocated from normative South Asian spaces because of their politics. Varuni highlights this same process of ‘impossibility,’ as a progressive politics that actively challenges the hegemonic construction of South Asian endangers the possibility for state acceptance within multiculturalism.

Although there are real and material privileges that come from being able to make a decision about one’s own migration, however, I argue that ‘choice’ in this context also functions as a homogenizing term. The idea that most South Asians “came here out of choice” is far more complicated than Varuni’s comment suggests. While most upwardly mobile South Asians entered the U.S. following the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, many of these immigrants were pushed from their countries of origin, even if not forcefully evicted. My own family’s story of migration follows this trend. While my parents were not forced from Sri Lanka, they ‘chose’ to leave in the midst of civil war, fearing that it would be unsafe to raise a family on the island. Although leaving was an agentive act, and the privilege of making that decision should not be underestimated, ‘choice’ does not quite encompass the complexity of their decision.

Understanding South Asian migration to the U.S. as a choice elides the hard decisions that South Asian immigrants face, and the complicated ways in which privilege acts in such a circumstance.

Varuni continues this homogenization of South Asians into a singular construct when describing her perception of interactions between South Asian communities and other
communities of color, especially Black and Latino. Varuni claims that South Asians have failed to organize themselves because of anti-Black racism in South Asian communities, and the resulting unwillingness to build alliances with other racially marginalized peoples. She explains:

I also think that South Asian people have done a pretty shitty job of building relationships with other communities of color here in the United States, don’t have much of an interest in doing it. I mean, the day that taxi drivers will actively stop and pick up Black men in the streets to give them a ride home is when we might be having a different conversation. But that doesn’t happen, right, that’s not a reality. I think sometimes people in our community at large, I think the anti-Black and anti-Latino racism is so intense, and I think that’s why we fail to organize ourselves. Because organizing ourselves would mean that we have to align very actively with other communities in struggle, other communities that are heavily incarcerated, other communities that are in similar situations.

Varuni targets the anti-Black and anti-Latino racism that does exist in many South Asian communities, and implicates this racism as one reason why South Asians in the U.S. have not followed typical paradigms of organizing.

This racism is certainly real—as Vijay Prashad argues in his essay “Crafting Solidarities,” many South Asians have capitalized on the model minority trope in order to carve out success for themselves in the U.S. Prashad argues that although “the [model minority] stereotype emerges with special reference to East Asians...its import is quickly grasped by new South Asian migrants who use the term to their own strategic advantage. When South Asians adopted the term from the 1970s onwards, they did so with a sense of pride and without an awareness of the racist history that produced that stereotype” (1996:108-109). Varuni points out the continuing presence of anti-Black and anti-Latino racism in South Asian communities, emerging from an unwillingness to challenge the hegemonic position of South Asians in the U.S. Acknowledging this privilege would require a confrontation of the model minority trope, as this stereotype relies on assumptions about ‘inherent’ work ethic. South Asians would need to recognize the ways in which immigration histories, especially for the first wave of post-1965
immigrants, have impacted the hegemonic construction of South Asian, and in the process endangering that trope by revealing its spurious base. As such, many upwardly mobile South Asians—though certainly not all—are hesitant to confront and organize against such racist sentiments, as they want to preserve the basis of their privileged racial status.

Though she critiques the hegemonic construction of South Asian, Varuni does not question her definition of ‘the South Asian community.’ There are a multiplicity of histories of South Asian organizing in the U.S., as well as historical evidence of African-Asian collaboration. These histories however, in Varuni’s understanding of ‘South Asian,’ are consistently elided, made invisible by the near exclusive focus on the particular hegemonic image of upwardly mobile South Asians. In homogenizing this community, Varuni sidelines the organizing occurring in and through South Asian spaces into a ‘tendency.’ She explains:

It’s funny, Vijay Prashad was talking about this at [a South Asian youth conference] this year. It’s not a South Asian movement, it’s like a, what was it, there’s a South Asian tendency, I think that’s what [Prashad] said. Which was what I totally agree with. There’s this tendency of South Asians, which exactly nails it, who begin to come up with their identity in college, largely, cause that’s the place where we have both the language to come up with race politics, and there’s this tendency to do some things. And that’s what I think, there’s this tendency both in New York and the U.S. for some South Asian people who feel a particular way about race politics in general and also what’s going on in their community, and/or what’s going on with my family, [voice gets softer] how come there’s this very real glass ceiling, how come there’s this...you know, how come my family really, really needs what I consider therapy and will never seek that out, how come by brother got stopped by the cops for the third time in two months, how come these things are happening. Again, it’s a tendency, cause I don’t think its very real, cause it’s not what I would consider a movement at all.

In assuming that South Asian is a singular community, in line with hegemonic definitions of the term, Varuni recognizes some of the pressures that prevent progressive South Asian organizing while also re-homogenizing the term South Asian, leaving organizers such as herself squarely outside understandings of ‘South Asian community.’ As I will demonstrate in the following.

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8 See Prashad (2007).
chapters, while their work cannot be read in frameworks of ‘movement’ in the U.S., the idea of a South Asian organizing as merely a ‘tendency’ does not sufficiently encompass the organizing work that is occurring.

Re/collecting South Asian Histories

The lack of a coherent South Asian community is exacerbated by the various versions of ‘South Asian history’ claimed and rejected by South Asian organizers. When asked why South Asian organizing had not ever coalesced into the form of a social movement, Varuni and Yasmin both implicated the ‘selective memory’ of South Asians in the U.S. Varuni and Yasmin argued that South Asians in diaspora, and specifically upwardly mobile South Asians, actively and strategically erase their own histories once they arrive in this country. From their diasporic locality this strategic erasure of history is possible, allowing South Asians to recreate and rewrite their own histories in the U.S., leaving behind their histories of struggle in South Asia itself. As Varuni and Yasmin note, without a shared narrative of history, and specifically organizing history, the foundation for a coherent community and for a social movement is missing. Yasmin claims:

I think in many ways our communities have been spending the last 50 years presenting, meaning just sort of seeding themselves in the U.S. And even though South Asians have been here since the late 1800s, or maybe even before that, the 1700s even, as whole communities that self-identify as South Asian or some subset, right, it’s been I think a long, a long road to actually having a presence at all. And then, and that presence has been at least from my perspective, one of people aspiring to forget where they came from. Not from a cultural perspective, but certainly from an economic one. Right?

Yasmin criticizes South Asians who are “aspiring to forget” the economic situations they left behind on the subcontinent. The strategic forgetting of one’s own history is a trend in South Asian communities, as many upwardly mobile South Asians attempt to start a new life for
themselves in the U.S., complete with the trappings of middle or upper-middle class American life. Yasmin claims that South Asians in the U.S. have “this desire to really lift ourselves out of poverty and forget that other people are still in it,” whether people in their own families or in South Asia at large. She critiques this forgetting, arguing that South Asians must remember their histories in “Third World” countries of origin in order to maintain a sense of political commitment in the U.S.

As she criticizes the strategic forgetting of South Asians in the U.S., however, Yasmin is again homogenizing the vast diversity of South Asian experiences into a single group—“our communities.” More importantly, Yasmin is contributing to the homogenization of South Asian history that she critiques. First, not all upwardly mobile immigrants are aspiring to forget their own histories. While economically mobile first-generation immigrants are consistently a minority in the progressive organizing spaces I have been a part of, they are certainly present and vocal. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapter, many of the progressive organizers themselves come from upwardly mobile families. Thus, in her critique of ‘South Asian forgetting,’ Yasmin is occluding the work done by her colleagues.

Varuni builds on Yasmin’s argument by focusing specifically on the organizing histories of South Asians in South Asia, arguing that these too become erased in diaspora. Varuni says that

while there’s a history of struggle in the places that some of us might identify with over oceans...that history of struggle becomes forgotten or erased in the diaspora, and that’s something that we’ll need to work through.

In assuming that “the community” is comprised solely of upwardly mobile immigrants universally branded as ‘apolitical,’ despite the presence of first-generation organizers in progressive spaces, Varuni does not recognize that knowledge of struggle in South Asia does
enter the U.S. Meera, an organizer who has done significant work around labor issues and workers' rights, emphasizes the transference of knowledge from movements in South Asia into the U.S. Meera worked for many years with a workers' rights project in Southern California, focusing on the particular vulnerabilities and exploitation of low-income South Asian workers. She herself grew up working-class, and approaches these issues from an inextricably personal and political vantage point. From observations made through her work in the labor movement, Meera claims that

One thing that we've seen is that in certain communities, for example in the Nepali community, because of a lot of what's happened in Nepal, and then also in Bangladesh, because a lot of the changes in Bangladesh, it seems like there's more activism. Because people have gone through change in government, people have gone through a lot of those things, so maybe those ideas are more instilled in the community of organizing, taking action, coming together, and especially around the workers' struggles. So again I think for [my campaign], we've seen that the Nepali workers, it seems like they're more likely to get involved, like in attending meetings.

By acknowledging the diversity of communities that are subsumed under the term 'South Asian,' Meera is able to highlight the ways in which many Nepali and Bangladeshi workers bring their histories of political organizing in South Asia with them into the U.S. Meera demonstrates that, in opposition to the idea of 'strategic forgetting,' some South Asians are actively remembering their struggles in their countries of origin. Nonetheless, these transferred histories must challenge the strategic forgetting described earlier by Yasmin. With these competing versions of history, neither one can serve as the basis for wider-scale South Asian political or community action.

The dearth of South Asian history, however, is larger than a strategic forgetting on behalf of upwardly mobile immigrants. The vibrant organizing histories of South Asians in the U.S. are also occluded. For example, the Ghadar Party, an organization formed in California to organize around anti-colonial and independence movements in India, was often cited as an example of
early South Asian organizing in the progressive spaces I participated in. In 1912, Indian immigrants in the U.S. formed the Pacific Coast Hindustani Association, which became the revolutionary Ghadar Party in 1913. The Ghadar Party framed itself as a nationalist movement struggling against British colonialism in India, and asked Indians in the U.S. to pledge support to the fight of their motherland. The planned date for this revolution was February of 1915. However, the revolution was not successful, and many leaders of the Ghadar Party were subsequently tried in U.S. courts in 1917. Though this party was formed primarily by Punjabi Indian migrants, this history has been claimed as ‘South Asian.’ Although these stories are slowly becoming narratives in communities of South Asian organizers, they have yet to become household names even in these spaces.

Delegitimizing Upwardly Mobile Immigrants

During my interviews with Varuni, Yasmin, and other organizers, and as I have referenced throughout this chapter, the desires and organizing strategies of upwardly mobile immigrants were consistently belittled. While homogenizing ‘South Asian’ into a term representing an imagined community of upwardly mobile immigrants, the desires mapped onto this community were referenced as ‘apolitical.’ These organizers did not acknowledge that the struggle to maintain a hegemonic position in the U.S. is a political and agentive act, even if this struggle is rendered inappropriate and invisible in progressive organizing spaces. Yasmin best articulated this dismissal of these upwardly mobile immigrants, expressed by every person I interviewed, by referring to their desires as a ‘tendency to want to blend in’:

I don’t think it [a South Asian social movement] is there yet. Um, cause what I’m likening it to in my head is something like the Civil Rights Movement. Things that take national prominence, right, that really capture the national dialogue. We

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9 For more examples of early histories of organizing in the U.S. claimed as ‘South Asian organizing,’ see Appendix B.
don't, we're not at that point. And I don't know that we ever will be, given the
tendency, I think, of South Asians, tendency to want to blend in.

While the goal of South Asians looking to reinforce the hegemonic construct of the term might be to ‘blend in,’ as best as possible, it is important to remember that ‘blending in’ is itself a political act. The strategies employed by the AIA, as cited in Chapter 1, were political strategies, as the AIA attempted to negotiate nativism and racism in the U.S. Although I am politically aligned with the progressive sentiments of the organizers I interviewed for this project, I also emphasize the importance of recognizing that the maintenance of hegemonic constructs of South Asia is a political stance and oftentimes an organizing strategy. Homogenizing the term South Asian into an apolitical construct both takes away the agency of immigrants whose desires and organizing align with this hegemonic construct while simultaneously making invisible the organizing work of progressive South Asians.

Visible Fractures: South Asian Responses to 9/11

As I argued in the previous sections, Varuni often re-homogenized South Asians into a single community and construct, in order to critique the lack of political engagement in this community. However, Varuni also cited 9/11 as a moment when the diversity of identities and the many fractures in South Asian communities became apparent. Through her insights, I argue that the recent histories of fracture in South Asia are also a barrier to the possibility for a social movement, as their migration into the U.S. makes clear that South Asian as a coherent ‘community’ is an imagined construct. These fractures became most visible in the violence visited on South Asian communities during the backlash to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001.
In its recent postcolonial context, South Asia has been racked by wars since the end of the British presence in most of South Asia. To name just a few: the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan; the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965; the 1971 Independence War in Bangladesh; the 1983 Civil War in Sri Lanka. These recent divisions shatter the illusion that South Asians can uncomplicatedly comprise a single community, as differences of ethnicity, nationality, and religion remain fraught fractures, often recently drawn in blood. As Varuni explained, many South Asians continue to live “in fear...of each other, it’s a lot of that history of hate from back home, of very real experiences of war and torn countries, of colonialism, that’s very real.” I will highlight the response in South Asian communities to the events of 9/11 as a recent example that brought the still raw histories of recent fracture in South Asia to light in the U.S.

Although 9/11 was a “watershed moment” that impacted South Asians across the U.S., albeit not in equal ways, the backlash in South Asian communities following 9/11 did not prove to be a “take off” or “trigger” event for a South Asian movement. In the wake of 9/11, the fragmentation among South Asian communities became clear. For example, in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir K. Puar focuses specifically on responses from the Sikh community to the increased profiling and surveillance of South Asians post-9/11. Puar cites groups such as the Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force (SMART) that emphasized the distinctness of Sikhs and Muslims, asking other Americans to distinguish between Sikh turbans and Muslim turbans. Puar explains that “the cry of ‘mistaken identity’” became a rallying point for Sikh organizers, as they strove to point out “the differences between ‘those’ turbans and Sikh turbans” (2007:166). In doing so, Sikh organizers did not challenge the racialization and criminalization of *Muslim* South Asians, emphasizing instead their differences, drawing a firm dichotomy between
who Sikhs are (not terrorists but peace-loving good Americans, model minority immigrants, our turbans look like this) and who they are not (Muslims, terrorists, our turbans do not look like that). (2007:187-188)

This distancing of Sikh South Asians from Muslims undermines the potential for a South Asian movement, as Sikhs seek protection (and reasonably so) by emphasizing the differences among South Asian communities as opposed to commonalities and solidarities amongst them.

Varuni also highlighted the ways in which Sikh communities distanced themselves from Muslim communities to attempt to deflect the backlash from 9/11:

I mean the first thing that happened after 9/11 was that the Sikh community was standing outside saying ‘we're not Muslim, we’re not Muslim.’ So that’s why. So that’s like if that shit’s going to happen in our community, okay. I mean there’s so much internalized racism, religious superiority inferiority that’s so active. And that’s the problem, right, because we cannot identify one South Asian community. Not that we really need to, although we might have a similar racialized experience in this country, but that experience isn’t powerful enough to have us join together. But also I think it’s a function of people living in fear...of each other, it’s a lot of that history of hate from back home, of very real experiences of war and torn countries, of colonialism, that’s very real.

In Varuni’s analysis, the reflexive distancing of Sikhs from targeted Muslims is about more than just self-protection—this distancing also reveals the ways in which raw and recent histories of postcolonial violence in South Asia remain alive in the U.S. diaspora. The recent histories of fracture, partition, and conflict in the homelands of South Asian immigrants are not forgotten upon their arrival in the U.S. These histories complicate the possibility of a South Asian movement, as these divisions remain potent and present.

Conclusion

Towards the end of her interview, Varuni highlighted the ongoing NYPD surveillance of Muslim communities post-9/11, asking why the discovery of this surveillance did not cause widespread outrage among a broader array of South Asian communities. She asked:
This past week...the AP was reporting on heavy active NYPD surveillance of Muslim communities. If that shit isn’t enough to spark a movement, what is? ...It’s like what would it take to build a politics that puts fires under people’s asses to start to build together. I don’t know. Would it have to be something bigger than the backlash after 9/11? It’s possible Or not. Or that might not be a reality. You know?

Varuni leaves us with the question of why 9/11 wasn’t enough to spark a movement. In this chapter, I argue that the social movement terms proposed by Goodwin, Jasper, Moyer, and McIlwain rely on a ‘community’ that can be mobilized into the form of a movement. I claim that, given the diasporic locality and displacement of South Asian progressive organizers, this ‘community’ is largely imagined. Following the focus on displacement in the previous chapter, I demonstrate that there is no coherent community of South Asians in the U.S., and no base for a movement to occur.

Varuni also asks: if the backlash after 9/11 was not able to mobilize South Asian communities into a social movement, what could be? I argue that Varuni’s question is incomplete—the question is not simply ‘what is enough to spark a South Asian movement.’

South Asians are organizing in the U.S., and have been doing so for a long time. In the following chapters, I highlight the ways in which South Asians ‘queer’ normative models of not just racialization, but also of organizing. Thus, I suggest that a more pertinent question is in what ways are South Asians organizing, and why are models of social movement unable to recognize and make visible such organizing efforts?
CHAPTER 4

Gazing Inwards and Reconceptualizing ‘The Political’: The Politics of Being and Belonging

Introduction

In Chapter 2, I drew on the experiences of queer South Asians to foreground a diasporic locality of displacement, or an experience of not belonging in normative South Asian spaces. In this chapter, I return to the idea of locality as belonging, as proposed by Appadurai and Mani. Given the dislocation of South Asian organizers from normative South Asian communities, I claim that these organizers base their experience of belonging in a shared progressive politics and the need to redefine or re-signify what South Asian has come to mean in a way that can hold their full selves.

I contend that the South Asian organizers with whom I spoke create a locality, or an experience of belonging, based primarily in an imagined shared politics and a challenge to normative conceptions of South Asian. This political locality is based in belonging to queered, or redefined, constructs of home and community, and necessitates a redefinition and re-signification of South Asian as a term that can include those rendered ‘impossible’ in normative definitions. I argue that this internal focus on redefining South Asian in order to forge spaces of belonging leads to a redefinition of the internal issues of South Asian communities as the most pressing ‘South Asian issues.’ In the paradigms of movement described in the previous chapter, these internally focused issues are rendered invisible.

In claiming a ‘shared politics’ as the base of community, however, these organizers also homogenize ‘progressive politics’ into a single construct, defined in opposition to politics and
people deemed ‘apolitical’ or not sufficiently progressive. In the following chapter, I will focus on who is excluded from these self-named progressive spaces, as well as what issues become sidelined due to their exclusion.

**Political Locality: Queering Home and Family**

In the past two years, I have attended two South Asian political education conferences—D.C. Desi Summer and Bay Area Solidarity Summer—focused on creating space for young South Asian participants to explore and develop their own sense of political identity. In both of these spaces, by the end of the weekend, every participant spoke about finding a sense of home, and finding a community that could hold their full selves. Even the organizers of these conferences, who often worked in South Asian-related organizations, became emotional, describing fellow organizers and participants as family.

At the core of this sense of belonging was an assumption of a shared politics. As described in Chapter 2, the organizers I interviewed for this project all experienced a sense of dislocation from their own South Asian communities because of their identities, including their political commitments. For these organizers, family is re-created and chosen around a specific set of politics, and is not necessarily biological. I argue that these South Asian organizers queer notions of family and belonging by inhabiting a political locality, as they construct a sense of community and home in which they can exist through a set of shared politics, not blood.

I contend that this reconsideration of family and home emerges from a queer politics. As Karin Aguilar-San Juan argues in “Going Home: Enacting Justice in Queer Asian America,” “queer Asian America places home, the family, and community into question” (1998:34). She continues, “gestures toward home and family seem both necessary and impossible: necessary for a sense of completion, impossible because family requires heteronormativity...Precisely because
of the high price at which queer Asian America purchases a sense of home, our motivation
toward building community and enacting justice must be even stronger” (1998:38). As Aguilar-
San Juan explains, queer Asian Americans, and South Asians in the U.S., must build community
as an understanding of biological family as the only site of ‘home’ becomes impossible. I argue
that the South Asian organizers in this project, queer and not, embark on a project of building
home based in this queered understanding of (re)creating family, in this case through a shared
politics, as they are rendered impossible in normative and biological definitions of home.

At the very beginning of her interview, when I asked Varuni how she identified, she
replied, “I identify as a queer South Asian person, lady, woman, and I most closely identify with
my work. I’ve been doing youth work for a very long time, well long in my head, in NYC,
mostly with South Asian youth, but also experience as a labor organizer, a community
organizer.” Varuni’s work as a labor organizer and a community organizer, as well as her work
with South Asian youth, is political work. This work constitutes not only the organizational
spaces that she works in and belongs to, but also her very sense of self. Yasmin most clearly
explains the deep sense of belonging associated with political work. She explains:

In many ways, I can only get so much approval and accommodation around my
political work and my political identity from my family, from people who are
very close to me, who look like me, who’ve raised me. And there’s something
incredibly valuable in finding other people who look like me, are close to me
culturally, who can say this work is really important and this work is really
valued. So having that type of support, it’s like a pseudo-family. It is a family, is
what it ends up becoming. And as soon as you asked the question, the first thing
that popped into my head was a sense of home. Because I think the folks who care
about doing social justice work, organizing work, anything having to do with even
counter-cultural, and when I say counter-cultural I mean counter to the South
Asian conventional aspirations, for those folks I think that sense of finding
kindred spirit is invaluable.

For Yasmin, then, finding political community is “invaluable” because it allows her to
reconstitute South Asian as a sense of home and family, instead of as a space of displacement. It
is the progressive politics of fellow organizers, who give her “approval...around [her] political work,” that creates this home. Thus, Yasmin is redefining and queering the unit at the heart of the hegemonic South Asian construct, and the unit designated to pass on an understanding of culture, claiming that family is determined by politics, not by blood.

As I have mentioned before, however, processes of homogenization are still at play. In assuming that her newly constructed and chosen family has a shared politics, Yasmin is not questioning what divisions and disagreements may lie within her community. The pitfalls in assuming a homogenous shared politics under the title of ‘progressive’ were made clear by the queer organizers with whom I spoke. These organizers are all part of Satrang, which defines itself as a progressive organization—part of Satrang’s mission statement is to “build coalitions with the South Asian community, other people of color and progressive groups and the community at large in Southern California.” While a queer South Asian group does need to claim a type of progressive politics in order to combat the hegemonic ‘impossibility’ of queer South Asians, the diversity of progressive possibilities and beliefs is made most clear in these spaces.

These queer organizers most emphatically demarcated South Asian as a space built in a shared political identity—in this case, a politics that is both progressive and queer, and in which queer South Asians are made ‘possible.’ While I am not arguing that queerness is an inherently or universally political identity, I do contend that claiming to be both South Asian and queer is a political act for these organizers. Thus, finding home in and with other queer South Asians is a belonging based in both identity and political commitment.

In her interview, Radha described a sense of finding home by finding other queer South Asians. She explains:

...I turned and I was like ‘Oh my god!’ There were two South Asian queer people. And I knew they were queer because I’d actually stalked them on the internet and
I turned and I was like “Oh my god!” And the feeling that I got when I saw them was just, it literally felt like I was at home, not necessarily my home, my home, but you know that home feeling, I felt that...It was just crazy, and it just felt so good.

For Radha, simply finding other queer South Asians, other people who look like her and share her identities, is sufficient for her to feel at home. However, as Radha explained in Chapter 2, queerness for her is a political identity, built around destabilizing “what a desi ladki has to be.” Thus, Radha’s sense of ‘finding home’ in other queer South Asians is also a sense of finding political home.

Esha recognizes and highlights this same “home feeling.” She poetically describes the brief moments in which she can feel her queer and South identities coming together, through building community:

There are times where I see these little cracks and these openings and I’m like this is what it could look like. So when our friend hosted a Diwali dinner for some of his, basically his chosen family, a majority of the folks there were South Asian and queer. And it was the first time in a long time that I, and I think that this is probably something that a lot of folks felt, that I felt some kind of connection to that cultural and that spiritual aspect of what it means to be South Asian...But this Diwali party was really one moment where I saw a little bit of that crack of like this is what it could look like. This is what it could look like for me to feel South Asian and queer and feel comfortable with both, and for others to fully get it and own it as well, even though they weren’t South Asian or even if they weren’t queer.

In Esha’s case, the queering of a South Asian cultural event allowed her to feel a sense of home. I argue that this ‘queering’ of South Asian implies a certain political bent, specifically the progressive politics that Satrang claims to espouse, in demanding that Diwali be understood as a cultural event that can be ‘queered.’ For Esha, finding a community of queer South Asians that shares her queer and progressive politics enables her to find a home space that feels both culturally affirming and politically comfortable.
In this community formed built around the assumption of a shared politics, however, ‘progressive’ comes to have multiple meanings. In spaces and created ‘homes’ built on a shared set of politics, these multiple meanings often go unspoken. Deepak recognizes the rifts that emerge from the diversity of experiences and politics that co-exist within Satrang, despite Satrang’s claim to be a ‘progressive’ organization. Deepak explains:

Like, for example with Satrang, a lot of them are first generation, a lot of them are you know, are...there are some folks who are political and who are socially, like social justice oriented, but there are definitely a lot of them who are just like, they never had any community, and so it’s all just about, it is all just about parties, or they’re still trying to work through shit with their families and there’s a lot of whatever substance use or whatever other issues going on, but, and they say fucked up shit, and they say transphobic stuff, and they say like misogynistic stuff, and they say classist things.

In Satrang, a progressive stance around queer issues does not necessarily extend to a progressive understanding of other issues in the U.S.—from race, to class, and even to a politics with progressive ideas around gender and trans-identities.

That said, I also want to highlight Deepak’s comment that “a lot of them are first generation.” In the previous chapter, I argued that the desires and organizing strategies of upwardly mobile immigrants are delegitimized as ‘apolitical.’ Here, I extend that argument to contend that first generation immigrants are also painted as typically apolitical, classified as a homogenous group of immigrants universally unfit for entrance into progressive organizing spaces. As a participant observer in progressive South Asian organizing spaces, I can attest that this is a frequent trope—even when first-generation immigrants are present and active in groups such as DCDS and BASS, they are often painted as inherently not progressive.

Reconstituting South Asian: Claiming South Asian Identity as Political
As these South Asian organizers come to understand their belonging through a shared politics, in addition to a dislocation from normative South Asian spaces, 'South Asian' itself becomes a contested terrain, as progressive organizers struggle to make South Asian a term that can hold the families and communities they are creating. These organizers are claiming not only that South Asian is a term based in a political sense of belonging, but also that South Asian is a political term in and of itself, and that *being South Asian is a political act*. This reconstitution of South Asian becomes itself political, challenging the hegemonic construction of South Asian that opened this project.

Radha, Sanjay, and Deepak, all queer South Asian organizers, posited the most drastic redefinition of South Asian. In the face of being rendered invisible in normative understandings of South Asian because of their sexuality, these organizers argued that queerness was actually essential for their understanding of South Asian. They described how identifying as queer has actually allowed them to better understand their own South Asian identities. As I argued in the previous section, their insistence on carving out space for queerness within understandings of South Asian is a political act. For these organizers, then, South Asian is an embodied political identity, since the idea of queerness constituting South Asian imbues the term South Asian with a queer and progressive political meaning. This is a strident and political challenge to hegemonic constructions of South Asian because it constitutes a reversal. Instead of queerness and South Asian-ness being mutually “impossible,” Radha, Sanjay, and Deepak argue that their queerness actually informs their understandings of South Asian.

Radha recognizes the bizarre twist of logic that allows for queerness to become constitutive of ‘South Asian.’ As Radha says, she can’t actually explain how her queer identity, understood as transgressive, elucidates her South Asian identity. Nonetheless, she argues that
through bringing these two identities together she has actually been able to feel “more South Asian”:

But then, finally finding a South Asian community. It’s crazy because I felt more South Asian than I would have if I was still in normative society. I almost feel like being queer has made me more South Asian, which is so weird in that sense, but I really do. I don’t know how to explain that.

Similarly, Sanjay links his understanding of sexuality back to Hinduism, and therefore back to his culture. He claims that questioning and coming to terms with his sexuality has strengthened his spirituality, saying that “understanding my spirituality has been because of my sexuality. You know, I don’t think I would be as spiritual as a person as I am today had it not been for my sexuality” (emphasis mine). For both Radha and Sanjay, integrating their South Asian and queer identities has not only made it possible to identify as queer—but also to identify as South Asian.

In a similar vein, Deepak explains how his queerness and his South Asian-ness are “rooted in each other.” He explains that his approach to South Asian spaces is distinctly shaped by his queerness:

I’m...seeing how much they’re actually rooted in each other too. Like, what kind of man I am is very much linked into my South Asian identity, South Asian American identity. And how I enter South Asian spaces, or how I interact with other South Asian people is very queer. Even something as simple as talking to aunts and uncles, and mostly aunts, but talking to aunts and actually engaging them. Like [partner’s] mom, even talking to [partner’s] mom and engaging her and asking about her interests in a way that most other I think folks that she has interacted or like people wouldn’t necessarily do, other South Asian youth wouldn’t do, the ones that maybe who grow up with, are just kind of like oh hi auntie, oh this is really tasty.

Thus, it is his Deepak’s ‘deviant’ sexuality that actually allows him to better navigate South Asian spaces. Deepak’s identity as a queer man with a trans history allows him to break the gender divides in the homes of “aunties and uncles.” In a transgression at the supposed bastion of
‘South Asian culture,’ Deepak’s queerness actually enables him to navigate South Asian home spaces.

Finally, in a similar vein to finding his queerness and his South Asian-ness “rooted in each other,” Deepak insists that queer South Asians are “gifted,” because they have a “special” role to play in their communities. He explains:

We’re, we’re special... It’s a really important, it’s a very important path I think that we walk, that not everybody does. And that I think we have a lot of gifts and a lot of insight and knowledge about our communities, about the world that we interact with... I feel like we have a lot of insights and just able to see a lot. At least I feel that there are gifts in this dual identity, however difficult all of it is. It’s difficult because there’s gifts in it, because there’s... gifts. But yeah, I think that that’s really important, because honestly for me there’s so many moments that were like, I was like there’s no fucking way I can do this, there’s no way, there’s no way I can do this, there’s no way I can survive, there’s no reason I want to even. So I think that that’s really important to know, to realize how much power we have, how many gifts we have to offer, and that we have a lot, a lot more, a lot of strength.

In his explanation, Deepak insists that queer South Asians do belong in South Asian communities because of their queerness. Queer South Asians are uniquely positioned to combat the constructions of both of those identities, and thus ultimately tread “a very important path” that can be taken only by people at this very particular intersection of identities. Through combating the “impossibility” of queerness and South Asian-ness, queer South Asians are forced to do the work named by progressive South Asian organizers, of deconstructing the limiting nature of the term ‘South Asian.’ Though combating impossibility comes with challenges, walking such a “path” actually elucidates what it means to be South Asian, shedding an important introspective light on the construction of this term.

While these queer South Asian organizers embody a political South Asian identity by claiming that their South Asian-ness is actually constituted by queerness, Wasanti also describes her own identification with ‘South Asian’ as a form of personal and political resistance—in her
case, primarily as resistance to stereotypes and to being labeled as threatening. As a 32-year old organizer who has been working on political campaigns since her twenties, Wasanti provided an interesting perspective on South Asian as a political term. Wasanti has been deeply involved in South Asian electoral organizing, encouraging South Asian youth to vote. Thus, she explains that identifying as South Asian is “useful to gain political power,” and to make an impact on politics by building power in numbers.

Wasanti explains that she first identified as South Asian as a response to fear-based stereotyping. As a “brown person” in a post-9/11 world, she claimed a South Asian identity in order to combat the stereotyping directed at her. She began figuring out that it isn’t just about being a Muslim...it’s about people seeing my brown skin and just racially profiling anyone who’s brown-skinned. And I think that’s when I started building myself up as a South Asian American, cause it doesn’t matter really your heritage per se, in that kind of a political climate, you’re watered down to your skin tone, and you have to embrace that to gain that power back.

Thus, Wasanti chooses to forefront her identification as South Asian as a response to racial profiling—having realized that she is going to be subjected to racial profiling and prejudice based on her skin color, she decides to start “building [herself] up” as South Asian.

Wasanti then builds on this explanation, saying that she came to South Asian organizing in order to have a political voice. She says:

I realized that 9/11 had happened, and no one was doing anything for our community, our community meaning the brown community. I don’t think it was fair that I couldn’t fly, or that my phones were tapped, or that my mom had to talk to the FBI. But no one was protecting my rights as an American, my own civil rights.

In her narrative, Wasanti says that she understood South Asian communities to be invested in building power in order to combat these injustices, since these issues were otherwise invisible. Thus, part of Wasanti’s understanding of South Asian is that those identifying under the term are
also interested in building power. She explains, “it’s useful to gain political power, right? ...that’s the only reason why any of these terms are useful.”

In her story about coming to claim a South Asian identity, Wasanti also chooses to prioritize the potential for identifying as South Asian as an organizing strategy. Here, the mutually constitutive nature of personal and organizing definitions of ‘South Asian’ becomes clear. Building on her naming of racial profiling, Wasanti emphasizes the need to “embrace that [racial profiling and stereotyping] to gain that power back.” She tells a story about her participation in environmental organizing in a previous job, where she learned that “no matter what issue you’re voting on, you need the power of the vote and the power of politics to be by your side.” Thus, Wasanti highlights her strategic identification as South Asian in part because of numbers. According to her, if she were organizing under her own ethnicity, she would only be in community with “a few thousand people;” organizing under the “umbrella term” of South Asian, however, she has 2-3 million people in her community, and can mobilize “that kind of power” to “actually change things.” As she explains, “that’s where my construct of what it means to be South Asian came from, it was this whole trying to create a collective political voice to make people pay attention to this community.” Thus, Wasanti’s process of identifying as South Asian is based not only on a response to racial profiling, but also as a political strategy to build grassroots power. Her personal identity is informed by a political strategy—Wasanti is identifying as South Asian in order to gain power in her organizing work.

**Gazing Inwards: Re-Signifying ‘South Asian Issues’**

These organizers are invested in imbuing South Asian with a particular and political meaning, as a way of creating a locality of belonging (and not just displacement) that allows them to be ‘possible’ South Asians. I argue that, from this focus on redefining what South Asian
can mean, these organizers also redefine and reframe ‘South Asian issues.’ These organizers re-signify ‘South Asian issues’ as the internal dynamics of progressive spaces that challenge their tenuous sense of political belonging. They contend that the internal dynamics of progressive South Asian communities are South Asian issues, even if these issues are invisible in normative understandings of organizing and movement.

The definitions of social movement in the previous chapter imply an engagement by a community with an external ‘enemy’ force—typically the state. As a result of their diasporic locality and experience of displacement, I argue that progressive South Asians are involved in an internal struggle to define their own communities. As I explained in Chapter 3, the lack of a coherent South Asian community is one reason why existing paradigms of movement are insufficient for understanding South Asian organizing. In this chapter, I argue that the focus on redefining the term South Asian leads to an understanding of South Asian issues that centers an internal focus on the construction of South Asian communities. Thus, all of the organizers whom I spoke to named challenging the internal dynamics of ‘South Asian’ communities, and especially progressive South Asian communities, as itself a South Asian issue, such as challenging the focus on India or the particular restrictions placed on women.

Meera, who is a labor organizer with a South Asian organization in California, emphasized the complicated nature of the term ‘South Asian’ itself. Though she has done work in South Asian communities for over 10 years, Meera does not actually identify as South Asian. Meera directly challenged the construction of ‘South Asian’ that continues in progressive spaces, critiquing the term ‘South Asian’ because it excludes her experiences, and the experiences of many others, not allowing them to belong in progressive South Asian spaces.
Meera poses a critique of the term ‘South Asian’ as necessarily an *Americanized identity*. She argues that bringing the vastly different experiences of migrants from the subcontinent under a single umbrella term has the effect of homogenizing and “Americanizing an identity” or “clumping together things that should not necessarily be clumped together.” Meera describes “American as really being white. And speaking English, or identifying this country as really being your home, or having pride over this country, or adopting an identity of being American, feeling entitled to be here.” She continued to highlight specific aspects of this term that she finds exclusive, explaining that in her opinion ‘South Asian’ cannot reflect the experience of recent immigrants, because “recent immigrants, being here 5 years, or 10 years, or even being here for many, many years and not really feeling like this is somewhere still that they’re going to settle in, it really imposes an identity that maybe people want to be here or choose to be here.”

Meera’s emphasis on language acquisition and on the contestation of “choosing to be here” suggests that she is referring to the exclusion of working-class people from constructs of ‘South Asian.’ Many working-class immigrants may not have had access to English language education in their home countries, and have often been pushed out of their countries of origin by economic or political circumstances. Especially given Meera’s work as a labor organizer, I understand this critique to refer to working-class recent immigrants who oftentimes cannot see themselves within the construction of ‘South Asian.’ Meera poses an incredibly important critique of whose experiences are centered and whose are again marginalized within the term ‘South Asian,’ urging organizers to think about the full ramifications of this term before using it. In the following chapter, I will argue that this critique impacts not only feelings of belonging for working-class South Asians, but also modalities of organizing that continue to be marginalized in progressive spaces.
Each of the other organizers also spoke about homogenization in South Asian communities, although they focused on Indo-centrism as a South Asian issue. Part of the image of the homogenized, upwardly mobile South Asian includes an assumption of Indian heritage, given that Indian immigrants have always been the largest ethnic subcategory of South Asians in the U.S. The participants highlighted the importance of recognizing ‘South Asian’ as a term meant to encompass a broad group of people, with heritage in more countries than just India. However, as many of the organizers point out, ‘South Asian’ continues to become conflated with ‘Indian’ in progressive organizing circles. Wasanti, a Bangladeshi organizer, explains that the surface-level attempts of inclusion by Indian-dominated groups often comes across as tokenizing, without providing real space for her participation. Preeti, a Sri Lankan organizer, builds on that sentiment. Preeti has participated in a variety of South Asian youth spaces, first as a youth participant and then as an older mentor. As a fellow islander, Preeti and I have met up multiple times to share Sri Lankan food and voice our joint frustration at finding issues pertaining to Sri Lanka always pushed to the side in South Asian spaces—from the lack of recognition of Sinhala as a South Asian language to a complete disregard for the civil war that racked the island for nearly three decades, only ending in 2009. Despite her presence in the same South Asian youth organizations for many years, Preeti voiced her frustration at being consistently marginalized as Sri Lankan, saying:

I would like them to be more inclusive, because I think their understanding [of South Asian] sometimes is so...not intentionally maybe, but I don’t think they do a good job of recognizing that they focus on only certain countries. Like my experience has been its always Indian and Pakistani issues, and Indian and Pakistani students, and Hindi. These organizations always communicate in Hindi...I think its limited in their scope, intentionally or not, I don’t know.
This internal marginalization extends to other South Asian countries outside of India and Pakistan, such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan (when it is considered part of South Asia).

Meera provides a more specific example to illustrate the importance of remembering the diversity among South Asians, from her experience with organizing South Asian workers. She says:

Nepali workers who come from a certain kind of experience, you know, looking at the government in Nepal, and some of the movements that have happened in Nepal, versus if somebody’s from India or Goa...because of the political histories of the countries that people are coming from, the reasons that they came to the U.S., maybe they didn’t face similar barriers as to why they came here. Or language, speaking to somebody in Nepali versus Hindi, those are major...because of language and the political histories and the religious backgrounds of people.

Meera highlights the importance of deconstructing ‘South Asian’ to include the various histories of people from the subcontinent because understanding those histories is essential to organizing work. As a community organizer who works in the labor movement, Meera argues that Indo-centricism not only prevents people from identifying with ‘South Asian,’ but also prevents organizers from strategically engaging with the various histories of political strife and resistance in countries in South Asia. Building on the political history of Nepal, for example, is different than engaging with the legacies of Partition in India and Pakistan.

All of the organizers I spoke to also designated internal dynamics of gender and sexuality in South Asian communities as a key South Asian issue. Many of the organizers I spoke to designated this sexism within South Asian communities as a key South Asian issue. As Yasmin explained:

The issues that I find myself being the most concerned with are around gender in the South Asian community...within the South Asian community I’ve been much more concerned about gender than anything else. And the reason I say that is I feel like, I feel like that’s the one arena, and along with that is sexuality actually,
that's the one arena where I feel like we are not making progress. You know, just based on how I've seen, how I feel like young folks are being socialized around gender and sexuality, it just hasn't felt like a place where we are making societal progress.

Varuni seconded that sentiment, adding:

I'm thinking about a lot of gender issues as well, literally present with a lot of organizations run are having very powerful voices of men in their spaces and minimizing, well not intentionally, just minimizing the voices of women, a lot of straight men, very very loud in a lot of these organizations and women and queer people sort of quieted, intentionally or not.

Along with the other organizers, these two women defined issues around patriarchy, expressed through marginalization along axes of both gender and sexuality, as a key issue for South Asian communities. By “minimizing the voices of women” and queer people, progressive South Asian spaces challenge the experience of belonging for non-male identified people. Thus, these organizers insist on understanding issues of gender and sexuality as South Asian issues, so that they can belong to and work within progressive political spaces.

Patriarchy and sexism in South Asian societies reflect the broader trends of American (and Indian) society at large. Nonetheless, as these organizers also suggest, the pressures on South Asian women and queer people continue into progressive South Asian communities. For this reason, the organizers I spoke to all insist that issues of gender and sexuality also become South Asian issues.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue that progressive South Asian organizers queer notions of home and family by creating a sense of belonging through an imagined shared politics. By creating a political locality, or a sense of belonging through politics, these organizers redefine South Asian as a political term, imbued with a progressive queer politics. Similar to the processes of
homogenization in previous chapters, the idea of a ‘shared progressive politics’ also needs to be challenged, as progressive can hold a multiplicity of meanings. By centering belonging in my analysis, I contend that progressive South Asians also re-signify what should be considered ‘South Asian issues.’ These organizers highlight the dynamics of homogenization, Indo-centrism, and sexism that continue into progressive South Asian spaces. I argue that these become ‘South Asian issues’ because they challenge these organizers’ tenuous sense of political belonging.

In the following chapter, I will continue this thread of re-signified ‘South Asian issues,’ asking what modalities of organizing emerge from the struggle to belong. Moreover, I will ask who continues to be left out of this organizing because of the homogenizing framing of ‘progressive’ and ‘political.’
CHAPTER 5:

Progressive (Im)Possibilities:
Queering Modalities of South Asian Organizing

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that the focus on issues internal to South Asian communities as ‘South Asian issues’ emerged from the struggle of progressive South Asian organizers to create and belong to political communities. In this chapter, I contend that this focus on issues within South Asian communities leads to queer modalities of organizing, or modalities of organizing that are rendered invisible in normative paradigms of movement. While normative understandings of movement focus on a single community addressing external forces, typically the state, these organizers are focusing on creating and sustaining South Asian communities. I argue that, by addressing issues that stem from the struggle to belong within (re)definitions of South Asian, these organizers are queering normative modalities of organizing. More specifically, I argue that these South Asians are using queer modalities of organizing to create South Asian communities with a specific progressive political bent, creating a locality in which they can be ‘possible’ and belong. However, I also argue that the focus on creating specifically politicized South Asian communities renders certain people and certain issues invisible, even within these progressive spaces.

Queering Modalities of ‘South Asian’ Organizing: The Politics of Creating Community

As I argued in the previous chapter that renaming notions of family and home as based in politics and not blood was a queer undertaking, here I argue that building political communities
is a ‘queer’ modality of organizing. I refer back to Aguilar-San Juan’s contention that “queer Asian America places home, the family, and the community into question” (San Juan 1998:34). I claim that progressive South Asians focused on creating South Asian communities based in a specific progressive politics are queering typical modalities of organizing by challenging normative and biological notions of community. These organizers are creating communities in order to challenge and destabilize biological notions of family and community, and to then try and invest these sites with a progressive politics. I argue that this dynamic, of building political communities in order to challenge normative ones, emerges from the histories and realities of queer challenges to understandings of family and community, and is thus a queer modality.

Political Education: Building the ‘Next Generation’

The most present of these ‘queered’ modalities of organizing was political education. For the sake of this project, I define political education as education meant to make visible systems and dynamics of power that are typically obscured. In the U.S., examples of these “systems and dynamics” could be the ways in which race works, or the impact of the immigration system on South Asian racialization, as discussed earlier. Given that I have been involved in two different political education conferences (DCDS and BASS), and that I met most of the organizers I interviewed for this project in those spaces, it is not surprising that the organizers I spoke to highlighted political education as an important tool of organizing.

More than any of the other participants, Shreya prioritized the use of “talking” and “dialogue” as a political organizing strategy. In her previous work on her high school campus, creating an organization for South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Arab women, Shreya explained that she focused on trying to broaden “access to these discussions” about race and racialization. She argued that talking is organizing, saying that:
the silence, that we’re so used to, I feel like [we’re] so used to being silenced in the South Asian community, just to talk about, just to talk about race, talk about oppression is dangerous, because it’s...talking about problems, it gets rid of that model minority facade of perfection.

While leading workshops on stereotyping and gender, she would ask, “see, if we had more of these discussions, do you think we would be in a different place?” Shreya believed that talking and dialogue could “[get] rid of that model minority facade of perfection,” and begin to create South Asian communities with a progressive politics at their center.

I want to highlight the work of the two recent political education programs in the South Asian political sphere that I have been involved in: D.C. Desi Summer and Bay Area Solidarity Summer. These two organizations are explicitly focused on South Asian political education, and I argue that they are involved in the project of creating a specifically politicized South Asian community. South Asian organizations focused specifically on political education are an interesting case study because their primary goals often involve deconstructing and reframing the term ‘South Asian.’ These organizations are also interesting because they focus specifically on young people, intentionally training future generations of organizers to create new possibilities of South Asian identity and work. As Yasmin explains, these organizations are focused on creating “1st and 2nd generation South Asians who are learning a common vocabulary around social justice and [are] in solidarity, building solidarity, that is nascent. And really, really exciting.”

On the website for D.C. Desi Summer (DCDS), the initial outreach pitch asks South Asian youth:

Growing up Desi can be complex at times, we hear that! Do you often feel like you are the only one talking about radical issues to blank stares? Do you feel like you are alone in fighting for justice? Are you passionate about connecting not just to your Desi "roots" but also to a South Asian history of resistance to oppression?
Are you looking for a community of like-minded left individuals for one weekend?

This pitch continues to explain the history of DC Desi Summer itself:

What is DC Desi Summer? Inspired by Youth Solidarity Summer in New York, RadDesi Summer in Texas, Organizing Youth in California, South Asian Summer Solidarity for Youth in Boston, and Desh Pardesh in Toronto, DC Desi Summer is a weekend-long leadership and empowerment program.

This organization explicitly informs South Asian youth that one of the goals for the weekend-long conference is to make visible a history of South Asian resistance to oppression, creating a distinctly different definition of both the term 'South Asian' and of South Asian history. Unlike the amnesia described by Yasmin, this organization is looking to both disseminate an explicitly progressive and political history while also connecting DCDS to a history of South Asian progressive political education organizations.

Moreover, this organization is also explicitly committed to challenging young South Asians to think about the specific identities that have been discussed as excluded in dominant constructions of 'South Asian.' DCDS states that this organization seeks to involve South Asian young people in examining issues of "race, class, and gender identity," intentionally using workshops to highlight marginalized South Asian identities that are typically made invisible.

Similarly, Bay Area Solidarity Summer (BASS) in California seeks to reclaim a history of South Asian organizing and prioritize issues that are typically side-lined in South Asian communities. On their website, BASS describes their first conference, held last summer:

On July 22nd to July 25th, 2011 sixteen Desi teens from across California convened in Oakland for a camp where they learned about social justice issues affecting South Asians, how they intersected with anti-oppression frameworks, and how the legacy of South Asian activism is a part of their own history.

In the same vein as DCDS, BASS seeks to connect South Asian youth to their own histories of organizing in the U.S. The workshops highlighted on the BASS website also foreground exactly...
the issues and identities that have been historically marginalized and made invisible in South Asian communities, as described previously. BASS explains that:

The program will run through a series of workshops ranging from exploring identity to community building to specific political issues. Proposed topics include:

- gender and sexuality in the South Asian community
- labor & immigration as it affects South Asians and beyond
- profiling/surveillance and the military industrial complex
- South Asian American history, especially in the Bay Area

Through their focus on political education for South Asian youth, both DCDS and BASS are open about their intentions to create a new generation of South Asian organizers and activists who will critique the ways in which South Asian is constructed as an exclusionary term, thus forming communities of South Asians that are based in a locality of progressive politics.

**Coalition-Building: Creating Community Through Shared Race Analysis**

Emerging from the desire to re-signify ‘South Asian’ as a progressive and political term, Varuni repeatedly emphasizes the need to build coalitions with other people of color. The idea of coalition-building is based on forming alliances with other communities. However, I argue that for progressive South Asian organizers, coalition-building is also a queer modality of organizing. I contend that these organizers focus on building South Asian communities with a particular type of shared racial politics, in order to then align with other progressive organizations.

In her interview, Varuni notes that she is “critically thinking about race in a lot of the spaces she’s functioning in,” and that her activism is always “specifically surrounded by a radical set of politics that’s anti-capitalist and anti-racist and anti-sexist, and critical of hegemony as it stands.” However, Varuni argues that South Asians lack a “shared...race analysis,” and that this analysis is necessary to build progressive political communities. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, Varuni claims that “South Asian people have done a pretty shitty job of building relationships
with other communities of color here in the United States,” and “don’t have much of an interest in doing it.” She claims that this lack of a shared racial politic is “why we fail to organize ourselves. Because organizing ourselves would mean that we have to align very actively with other communities in struggle.” For Varuni, allying with other people of color organizations is a political priority—she explains that she frequently works in Black and Latino organizations because she is more comfortable with their analysis around race and solidarity. Thus, Varuni is focused on (re)constructing South Asian communities from a political locality that centers her own “anti-capitalist and anti-racist and anti-sexist” progressive politics.

An important example of this cross-racial coalition-building work is the South Asian Network (SAN) in Artesia, California. While neither Varuni nor Wasanti has worked there, SAN was well known among the organizers I spoke with as an organization committed to challenging and changing what ‘South Asian’ has come to mean in the U.S. I will use SAN as an example of an organization focused on building progressive South Asian communities in order to form coalitions with other people of color.

In their 2010 report, “From Displacement to Internment: A Report of Human Rights Violations Experienced by L.A.’s South Asian Immigrant Communities,” SAN emphasizes its focus on making visible the intersections that dominant notions of ‘South Asian’ seek to hide. As SAN explains, “early on in its development, SAN adopted an intersectional analysis after seeing that the oppression people [in this report, specifically South Asians in the U.S.] face based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, and other grounds all intersect” (2010:6). Through this intersectional analysis, SAN proposes a framework called “the changing faces of hate” in U.S. history, arguing that South Asians have come to represent “terrifying Muslims” in the wake of 9/11 (2010:30). Through its focus on making visible the most targeted and
marginalized segments of South Asian communities in the U.S., including the framework of “the changing faces of hate,” I argue that SAN is trying to create the “shared race analysis” that Varuni demands.

SAN ties this particular racialization of South Asians to the history of struggle in other communities of color. SAN explains that:

in the U.S.’s social, legal and cultural imagination, the idea of the ‘Other’ has historically had a particular ‘face’ attached to it. This ‘face,’ invariably defined on the basis of race, refers to a particular group that is painted in the public eye as not only being different but also as a group to be shunned, feared, and viewed with suspicion. (2010:30).

Through their coined framework, SAN attempts to tie the trope of ‘Muslim/South Asian terrorists’ to the historical tropes of the ‘native savage,’ the ‘criminal African-American,’ the ‘illegal Chicano,’ and the ‘disloyal Asian.’ I argue that by proposing and spreading this particular racial analysis, SAN is attempting to create South Asian communities based in a “shared race analysis,” in order to then build alliances with other people of color organizations.

With this understanding that the struggles of South Asian communities are inextricably tied to the struggles of other people of color, SAN has been able to ally itself with numerous other organizations. For example, over the years SAN has collaborated with a wide variety of organizations in its various projects, including the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR), Copwatch L.A., the UCLA Labor Center, the Western State Center, and the Human Rights Immigrant Community Action Network (HURRICANE). Despite the largely successful coalition-building of organizations such as SAN, however, Varuni also highlights the historical and present difficulties in this cross-cultural relationship building. She argues that

[South Asians] never had the backs of any other people of color before 9/11, and now all of a sudden 9/11 happens and even South Asian activists are looking for solidarity building between other communities of color. But its totally valid for

10 Personal conversation with SAN organizer.
people to be like f*ck you guys, you guys never, you perpetuate shit against us, and that’s, that’s the truth. So I wonder, sometimes I think there’s, I mean there is a lot of strength, but then I think there’s so much work to do.

Varuni, along with other organizers, insists that this cross- and multi-racial organizing is a necessary strategy and priority of South Asian organizing. In order for this coalition-based organizing to occur, however, Varuni and SAN must engage in a queered modality of organizing, based in building political South Asian communities around a shared and progressive “race analysis.”

**Responding to Islamaphobia: Building Community to Confront 9/11**

While the backlash to 9/11 was not seen as an internal issue (though Islamaphobia is certainly present in many South Asian communities), I highlight South Asian organizing in response to 9/11 to showcase building community as a strategy even in response to perceived outside threats. I argue that by defining ‘South Asian community’ as inclusive of Muslim South Asians, South Asian organizers are able to combat some of the divisions described in Chapter 3, understanding Islamaphobia as a South Asian issue pertinent to their communities.

In the previous chapter, 9/11 was discussed as a divisive issue, as non-Muslim South Asians attempted to distance themselves from post-9/11 backlash. Within dominant constructions of South Asian, the ‘Indian community’ is assumed to be Hindu, and is generalized to represent all South Asians. Thus, the displacement of post-9/11 American anxieties onto the figure of ‘deserving’ Muslim terrorists includes pushing this backlash out of dominant South Asian communities. By breaking down that dominant construction, South Asian organizers can address post-9/11 backlash, targeted at all people assumed to be Muslim, as a South Asian issue, without displacing the ‘blame’ for 9/11 out of ‘South Asian’ communities.

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All of the participants in this chapter named the backlash following 9/11 as a South Asian issue. As Shreya explains, in her definition of South Asian, Middle Easterners, Arabs, and South Asians all became “clumped together” into a single category after 9/11. These racial categories, including South Asians, became associated with “the stereotype that all Muslims are terrorists.” Through this clumping together, South Asians of all religions were ‘mistaken for Muslim’ and thus targeted by racially- and religiously-motivated profiling and hate crimes.

Highlighting the impact of racial profiling on South Asian communities, Wasanti cites the murder of two elderly men walking in Elk Grove, a suburb in California, who were shot and killed potentially because they were wearing turbans (Lewis 2012). Wasanti explains that racial profiling and hate crimes cases such as this one, which increased and intensified after 9/11, are absolutely a South Asian issue:

There are other issues, like racial profiling and hate crimes. Those are issues that are directly affecting the South Asian community... I mean those issues are South Asian, or rooted in South Asian, rooted in South Asian American communities. Like the two guys that were walking in Elk Grove that got murdered by the drive-by shooting in that perceived hate crimes, that wouldn’t happen to other communities. It was just cause these two guys were wearing turbans. I mean we don’t know, we’re still waiting for the murderers to be found and for that to be legit. But that’s an additional fear that we have as our hyphenated-American living here that other people don’t have. And I think it’s those issues that we need to be aware of.

By broadening the construction of ‘South Asian’ to include Muslims, hate crimes against people “mistaken for Muslim” become ‘South Asian issues,’ integral to the work of South Asian organizations. The strategies of this work, then, become addressing the racialization of South Asians as ‘terrorists,’ instead of distancing ‘safe’ and ‘model’ South Asians from ‘dangerous Muslims.’

In her interview, Preeti summarizes the intensified racialization of South Asians, and specifically South Asian youth, in the aftermath of 9/11 as a ‘South Asian issue.’ She explains
that “post-9/11 a white person is going to have a completely different experience than what a South Asian youth would have,” as a white youth would likely not need to deal with racial profiling and Islamaphobic sentiment, especially in school. Alongside the hostile racialization and profiling committed by ordinary citizens is the state-sponsored surveillance of South Asians, and specifically Muslim South Asians. Wasanti and Yasmin both cited their frustration around FBI surveillance of Muslim and/or South Asian communities, with Yasmin asking, “What is going on with the FBI? What is going on with the FBI regulations around surveillance and profiling?” As a queer Muslim, Fatimah experienced post-9/11 backlash in a very pointed fashion. In personal conversations, Fatimah has described how each of these identities have made them feel unsafe, from homophobic South Asian spaces to Islamaphobic queer spaces.12 Though she has done extensive organizing in South Asian spaces, especially around issues pertaining to housing, Fatimah explains that post-9/11, she feels that her community is “threatened and...persecuted for what you believe in and who you are and what your family’s traditions are.” As Muslim South Asians, both Fatimah and Wasanti tell very personal stories about the ways in which their lives and their families’ lives have shifted in response to the Islamaphobic backlash following 9/11. Wasanti explains that after 9/11:

I couldn’t fly anymore, and the FBI was coming to my parents’ store and I was hearing about it. So just everything really came at once...I don’t think that it was fair that I couldn’t fly, or that my phones were tapped, or that my mom had to talk to the FBI. But no one was protecting my rights as an American, my own civil rights.

In a broadened conception of who is ‘South Asian,’ these personal stories that Wasanti and Fatimah tell, about feeling unsafe post-9/11, become ‘South Asian issues,’ vital for any South Asian organization to address.

12Fatimah uses both she/her and they/their as gender pronouns. “They” is a gender neutral pronoun, often used by people who identify outside of a strict gender binary of male/female, and who instead identify their own gender as somewhere between ‘male’ and ‘female.'
Movement-Building as Community Formation

I argue that a queer modality of organizing, through building progressive political community, underlies even South Asian organizing framed as “movement-building.” I focus my analysis on the strategies of an up-and-coming organization called South Asians for Justice (SAJ), founded in 2011. In their interviews, both Varuni and Yasmin referenced SAJ as an organization in which they see the future of South Asian organizing. Yasmin explained that, for her, “the future of South Asian organizing is incredibly exciting right now, because of what’s going on with South Asians for Justice.”

South Asians for Justice (SAJ) defines itself as a movement-building organization, explicitly working to create a South Asian movement in the U.S. From the “about” section of their website, SAJ describes itself as follows:

SAJ is a national network of radical South Asians living in the US that serves as a community of support and operates as a base to sustain a movement for social justice rooted in the South Asian community in the US.

While SAJ is explicitly focused on “[sustaining] a movement for social justice,” its modality of organizing is to build a “national network,” including many of the organizers I interviewed for this project. This national network, or community, is based in a politics that is both “radical” and “queer.” As SAJ explains:

We identify as political radicals, because, as Angela Davis said, “radical simply means grasping things at the root. We are committed to an approach that begins at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression and a politic that is queer. For us, queerness reflects more than desire and romantic/sexual connections. It is both an acknowledgment that the structural and normative cultural conditions of our time are oppressive and a commitment to ending heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, ableism, ageism, racism, xenophobia and classism by transforming the conditions that sustain these forms of oppression, one step at a time.
For SAJ, queerness represents more than just a statement about sexual preference. Rather, queerness reflects Gopinath’s sense of the term, in which queerness “references an alternative hermeneutic, the particular interpretive strategies that are available to those who are deemed ‘impossible’ within hegemonic nationalist and diasporic discourses” (2005:22). Moreover, I argue that this “politic that is queer” also reflects SAJ’s movement-building strategies. This queer politic is also reflected in SAJ’s form of organizing, by building a community of South Asians based in a shared political locality.

In their purpose section, one of the first issues SAJ addresses is the rationale behind attempting to build a race-based movement in the U.S. SAJ explains:

Though we know identity politics are problematic and that building an organization based on identity politics alone will never lead to liberation, we also acknowledge that as a community, we face racialized oppression. Though race is a false construction, we are connected by this shared oppression. As long as this reality persists, it makes sense to use “South Asian” as a starting point for social justice organizing work.

Similar to SAN, SAJ is building community through the “shared race analysis” proposed by Varuni. SAJ is insisting that South Asians “are connected by this shared [racial] oppression,” building a political community based out of this shared oppression. Moreover, as part of this process of building solidarity, SAJ reflects on the positions of both marginalization and privilege that South Asians have experienced in various global contexts:

We trace our roots to the nations of the South Asian subcontinent and to diaspora communities worldwide, including the Caribbean, South America, Africa, Southeast Asia, Europe, and the South Pacific. We recognize the multiple paths that have led our people to the United States and the complex positions we have occupied as people facing oppression and experiencing privilege in various contexts worldwide.

In acknowledging this interplay between privilege and oppression, SAJ lays the groundwork to enter into coalition with other marginalized groups in the U.S. SAJ describes itself as aligned
with other people of color and marginalized people, professing to be “in solidarity with people worldwide struggling for self-determination and community rights,” and “building solidarity with groups with whom our struggles against oppression intersect.” Through building a political community based in a shared racial analysis, including a recognition of the complicated racial locality of South Asians in the U.S., SAJ is able to attempt to build a race-based movement.

**Progressive Impossibilities: Limitations to Building Political Community**

The progressive organizers I interviewed for this project, and the organizations I highlight above, aim to create spaces accessible to all South Asians, especially those who are rendered invisible in normative and hegemonic understandings of South Asian. These organizers seek to create a political locality of belonging in a shared progressive politics, and thus focus on internal ‘South Asian issues’ that challenge their belonging, even in progressive spaces. Moreover, this politics based in belonging leads to queered modalities of organizing, as progressive South Asians focus on building community, a task typically invisible in normative paradigms of movement.

In focusing on belonging and community building, however, I argue that these progressive spaces and organizations are not actually able to be a ‘home’ for all South Asian people, nor for all South Asian issues—even those considered ‘progressive.’ I will specifically highlight the continued marginalization of labor, class, and immigration issues in these spaces. While the organizers I spoke to challenge the class structure of the U.S., understanding themselves as in solidarity with working-class South Asians, I argue that organizing around issues of labor and class do not easily mesh with the particular type of community building politics addressed in this project.
I focus on two types of labor organizing: the first around the struggles of taxi workers, and the second around domestic violence (including domestic workers). Organizations such as Sakhi and Workers’ Awaaz that work around domestic violence reach out to specific segments of the South Asian population, while organizations such as the New York Taxi Workers’ Alliance (NYTW A) work primarily with South Asian drivers but frame their work through issues of labor. These organizations are framed around specific issues—their main objective is not to engage a broader South Asian community. Monisha Das Gupta explains that these specific issue-based organizations emerge as organizing loci because of the silences around working-class struggles and gender violence in normative South Asian spaces—she explains that “the issues identified by the organizations come directly out of the desire to break the silence imposed by the model minority myth around sexist and racist violence, labor exploitation, and homophobia” (1999:xxvi-xxvii). I claim that this “silence” often continues into progressive spaces as well.

I argue that the focus on building community and on dialogue cannot always encompass the need for campaigns and for issue-based confrontations. While I am not delegitimizing either form of organizing, I do contend that the limitations of self-named progressive spaces are not always explicit. While many of the organizers and participants in BASS and DCDS are working-class or come from working-class backgrounds, I argue that the focus of these spaces on community building does not always leave room for issue-based organizing.

**New York Taxi Workers’ Alliance**

One of the most frequently cited examples of organizing efforts led by South Asians in the U.S. is the New York Taxi Workers’ Alliance (NYTW A). While the NYTW A is not named as a South Asian organization, it is overwhelmingly comprised of South Asian workers—of the workforce organized by the NYTW A, 60% of the workers identify as South Asian (Das Gupta...
2006:231). The NYTWA has focused considerable energy on organizing across race, finding strength in building coalitions amongst drivers of different racial identities. Varuni, who spent a summer working with the NYTWA, explains that “organizing largely around workers’ rights,” not through a race-based or South Asian-based lens, “was the glue that brought a lot of people together and also helped to make the organization much, much stronger.”

Varuni thus situates the NYTWA firmly within the field of the labor movement, organizing primarily around workers’ rights, and outside of the realm of race- or South Asian-based identity organizing (with the caveat that the identity aspect of this work is nonetheless important). Race and identity were not central components in this organization’s work; rather, the focus was on the common class issues that brought workers together. According to Varuni, workers’ issues did not actually become ‘South Asian issues’:

It didn’t become...taxi worker issues then were not coded as South Asian issues necessarily, but immigrant issues, which I think was much more powerful for a lot of the organizers. I mean, if you’re talking about issues with the police, it was much more powerful to talk about these as immigrant issues, people of color issues in general, rather than South Asian issues specifically.

Varuni explains that the organizers focused on “immigrant issues” in order to build a bigger base of workers to mobilize. While there was a focus on community building, I argue that this modality of organizing was not primary—rather, a confrontation with the state of New York was the primary objective. I argue that taxi workers’ issues could not become coded as South Asian issues in the understanding put forth by the progressive organizers in this project. While this modality of organizing may fit more neatly into paradigms of movement, in this case the labor movement, the South Asian organizers and organizations I have focused on in this project are not able to incorporate “taxi worker issues” into their understanding of progressive South Asian issues and spaces as primarily loci of community building.
Despite the difficulty in making "taxi worker issues" into "South Asian issues," however, organizers in the NYTWA still insist that the intersection between identity- and issue-based organizing is essential. As one of the organizers of the Lease Drivers' Coalition (the precursor to the New York Taxi Workers' Alliance or NYTWA), explained:

An LDC organizer sketched out two ideal-type positions—one held by trade unionists and the other by community groups fighting racism. According to LDC, a labor organizer would recognize police brutality as an economic issue, but because of its own narrow definition of economic exploitation would not necessarily recognize the racism inherent in the position South Asian drivers occupy in the taxi-industry and the racism behind police brutality. In contrast, a community-based anti-racist response to the conditions of taxi drivers would give primacy to the fact that the drivers were facing race-based violence. Neither of these positions, according to the LDC, address the simultaneity of oppressions (Das Gupta 1999:248-249).

The LDC organizer quoted above explains why organizations such as the LDC/NYTWA are necessary. Without such organizations, issues of economic exploitation and of racism would be seen as separate, instead of as intersecting. While this organization works from within the labor movement, the LDC/NYTWA demands that a racial analysis be brought to this issue-based work.

Bhairavi Desai, the executive director of the New York Taxi Workers' Alliance, further explains why labor organizing needs to be part of South Asian work, asking:

How can a South Asian driver who is told, 'you shouldn't even be working here,' how the hell is he going to feel comfortable challenging the conditions of his work, if he's not even feeling comfortable being here? That's the other reason we are organizing a specific group. I think this also relates to anti-racist work (Das Gupta 1999:254).

While these organizations are not working specifically under a 'community building' or 'South Asian' rubric, they are demanding that race be understood as an important factor in the issues under which they organize. Desai is arguing that these labor issues ought to be understood as South Asian issues, given the particular experiences of drivers at the intersection of "raced" and...
“classed” experiences. These organizations are certainly contributing to and pushing South Asian organizing in the U.S., even if their organizing is not framed as based on race.

**Domestic Violence**

The second frequently cited example of South Asians organizing in the U.S. is in the field of domestic violence and domestic work. As Wasanti noted during her interview, there has been a proliferation of South Asian domestic violence organizations across the country—according to her, “every city has a South Asian domestic violence organization, which is kind of crazy when you think about it, that there’s this whole other parallel world of domestic violence life.” Though Wasanti is clearly exaggerating, there is a “parallel world” of work around issues of domestic violence and abuse.

The main difference between the domestic violence organizations and the NYTW A is that the domestic violence organizations often tend to serve exclusively ‘Asian’ or ‘South Asian’ women, since many of these organizations emerged to counter the lack of services for Asian/South Asian women in mainstream domestic violence organizations. Nonetheless, these organizations also often understand themselves as part of a labor movement—not necessarily part of a ‘South Asian’ movement. As Sushila Patil, an organizer with Workers’ Awaaz, notes:

> I think we are making significant and different kind of contribution to the working class movement...Working within the South Asian category, I don’t think that we are trying to presume this very narrow ethnic focus because that’s to our own detriment (Mathew 1999:191).

Organizers around issues of domestic violence and domestic work are not primarily focused on building South Asian communities around a shared progressive politic, nor are they limiting their organizing to only South Asians. For organizing work based in campaigns, with a need to leverage political power, a “narrow ethnic focus” is detrimental. Similar to the NYTW A,
building a base in the labor movement allows these organizers access to more people and to more power. As described in Chapter 3, since there is not a considerable “racialized community” of South Asians able and willing to be mobilized in support of domestic violence issues, an alignment of domestic workers within the labor movement at large is more strategic.

While organizers around domestic violence are foregrounding issues of race in their analysis of violence, similar to the workers in the NYTWA, they are still located within a labor movement. Since ‘South Asian’ has become a limiting definition in the U.S., organizations such as Workers’ Awaaz cannot limit themselves to a South Asian constituency. Moreover, these organizations are not focused on building a political community, but rather engaging in paradigms of organizing that actually do reflect the terms proposed by Moyer. The queer modalities of South Asian organizing that I focus on in this project cannot encompass the issue-based focus of domestic violence organizing.

**Immigration**

Many of the organizers in this project extensively discussed immigration, and specifically the immigration apparatus of the U.S., as a South Asian issue. Critiquing the U.S. immigration system becomes a fundamental task of South Asian organizing, as the legal dictates of this system are implicated in the re-signified ‘South Asian issues’ in the U.S.—such as homogenization, Indo-centrism and issues of gender violence. According to Varuni,

the vicious immigration system in this country is absolutely a South Asian issue, especially around detention, deportation...I mean, immigration’s definitely the first thing that comes up, and is something that even South Asian people are acting around but not fully, because people continue to think that undocumented people don’t exist in this country, but obviously that’s not the case.

Yasmin continued, saying:
Definitely. Yeah, definitely. I would say that immigration is one of them. And the funny thing is, it used to be at one point just about low-income working class immigration, and since 9/11 it turned into white-collar immigration as well was another issue. And now I think its calmed down again on the white-collar front and now its much more a working-class issue that is closely tied to and affected by Islamaphobia which affects all South Asians because of how people believe we are or what we believe. Or how people assume about what we believe and the nature of that belief.

Given her work with a largely recent immigrant South Asian population, Meera also named immigration as a key South Asian issue, from working around detention and deportation to doing policy work or “mobilizing the community” around immigration struggles.

Despite Yasmin’s naming of immigration as a South Asian concern, however, she explains that ASATA, a well-known South Asian organization that she works with in the Bay Area, is not equipped to deal effectively with immigration as an issue. According to Yasmin,

We don’t have any kind of real strategy around how we want to work around immigration. We don’t have a platform, we don’t have a framework, so going ad hoc to events like that won’t make sense, I think. Unless we know, unless we understand truly what the purpose is, what the impact is, why we’re fighting for it...One thing that I have to recognize [though] is that ASATA did go to, or did commit to helping combat SB1070 in Arizona, which was at the US Forum. And I’m not sure what we actually did, to be honest. I don’t know. All I know is that we signed up, or somebody at the forum had committed ASATA to doing actions against that. And that’s because they were at a forum where I think all the organizations were being called upon to support protests against SB1070. So I think that’s where we want to go, but I think we need to be very clear about why we’re doing it.

Yasmin explains that immigration is seen as a Latino issue. Though ASATA is in solidarity with Latinos organizing around immigration reform, ASATA is not assuming immigration as a South Asian issue. Thus, although Yasmin has identified immigration as an important concern for South Asians in the U.S., the organization that she works with is unprepared to incorporate immigration as one of its central concerns. Again, I argue that for South Asian organizations focused on forging a community based in a progressive political locality, addressing the
Oppressive immigration system in the U.S. is outside their capacity. While progressive South Asian spaces acknowledge the importance of the immigration in the U.S., and build a shared dialogue and political understanding of its impact, building community cannot sufficiently address or reform the system itself.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue that progressive South Asians queer normative modalities of organizing, by not only creating a political locality of South Asian belonging, but also by organizing through a modality of community building. I argue that community building as a means of organizing is rendered invisible in normative paradigms of movement, and yet constitutes an essential component of South Asian organizing. The progressive South Asian organizers whom I interviewed for this project understood their organizing through creating specific political communities, as a base from which to organize, ally with other communities of color, and eventually build a movement.

However, I also argue that the focus on creating specific types of political South Asian communities continues to render certain people and issues invisible. I contend that issue-based organizing—such as the work of the NYTWA, domestic violence organizations, and organizing around immigration—remains impossible to address within these queered modalities of organizing. While progressive South Asian spaces have a shared political understanding of why these issue are important, and while the organizers understand themselves to be in solidarity with issues of labor and immigration, these issues cannot sufficiently be addressed in self-designated progressive spaces. Building a shared analysis and creating community, while valid and important forms of organizing, cannot actually address issues such as labor violations, domestic violence, and immigration.
Conclusion

Through this project, I argue that the specific understandings of race and politics espoused by progressive South Asian organizers challenge normative theories of racialization and social movement theory more broadly. I begin with the theory of a diasporic locality of displacement. While a theory of locality challenges understandings of racialization, by foregrounding instead the affective experience of belonging, I focus on a diasporic locality, arguing that for progressive South Asians an experience of not belonging is just as powerful. This is a queering of locality, focusing on progressive South Asians’ experience of displacement from normative South Asian communities, often including their own families. This experience of displacement undergirds the illegibility of South Asian organizing in dominant paradigms of social movement theory. I argue that normative theories of social movement assume a coherent community that can be mobilized to address community issues. Given the fractures within South Asian communities, and the experience of displacement from South Asian experienced by many of the organizers I interviewed, I claim that this community does not exist.

The lack of a coherent racial community, while rendering South Asian organizing impossible in movement theory, does inform the ways in which progressive South Asians find ways of belonging and organizing. Given their displacement from normative understandings of South Asian, these progressive organizers create a political locality, or an experience of belonging based in an imagined shared politics. Moreover, these organizers re-signify the term South Asian as a political one, simultaneously embodying a racial and political identity. Through their focus on politics as a locality of belonging, these progressive organizers define South Asian issues as internally based, highlighting issues that challenge the construction of political community and belonging. This focus on internal issues results in queer modalities of
organizing, as progressive South Asians insist that creating a shared political analysis and building community are organizing tools. While these queered modalities of organizing are powerful and impactful, I argue that issue-based organizing, such as organizing around issues of labor, domestic violence, or immigration, often gets rendered invisible in these spaces.

I contend that this project demands an understanding of racialization and political identity as mutually constitutive. The political identities of progressive South Asians, though not the only source of their dislocation, contribute to their understandings of themselves as not belonging in normative South Asian spaces. I argue that these organizers are racialized differently than the normative South Asian communities they disassociate from—they have a different understanding of race, and a different racialized lived experience as South Asians. In order to belong, these South Asians form communities based in a shared progressive politics. In forming political communities, these organizers reconstitute the term South Asia as imbued with a specific set of progressive politics—so that political affiliations come to be embodied in racial identity. Moreover, I argue that this project demands an engagement with modalities of organizing typically rendered invisible. Modalities of organizing such as building community or developing political and racial analysis emerge from the internal focus of South Asian organizers on reconstituting ‘South Asian’ in a political manner.

Through this understanding of race and politics as inextricably intertwined, I am able to answer my mother’s question, posed at the opening of this thesis. Two years ago, when I informed my mother that I was attending DCDS, her response was simply, “so why are you going?” At the time, I had no clear answer. I knew that I was South Asian, but solely by virtue of my parents’ birthplace, Sri Lanka. I knew that I identified with the progressive political focus of the conference, as seen on their website. But I had no conception of how, or why, these two
facets of DCDS were tied together. What was special about a South Asian progressive space? What would I gain from attending such a conference? Two years ago, I attended mostly out of curiosity.

Through the process of writing this thesis, I finally have an answer. Why am I going? I attended DCDS, and continue to attend similar events, because my understanding of and identification with South Asian is deeply political. As someone who does experience a sense of dislocation from many South Asian spaces as a result of the politics that I hold, I understand the term ‘South Asian’ to be a political identity, not just a racial category, that I embody. My identification with South Asian is undergirded by a progressive politic, one that challenges the hegemonic constructions of South Asians in the U.S. As I also search for a political locality of belonging within this racial term, I participate in the queered modalities of organizing that I describe in this project, building political community and developing a shared racial analysis. As such, my racial identity as South Asian is constituted and shaped by my political commitments.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, I understand this project to be not just an academic enterprise, but also a political undertaking. I hope that this project contributes not only to a broadening of the fields of racialization and social movement theory, but also to South Asian organizers’ understanding of themselves. I want a theory of diasporic locality to make visible South Asian as an identity based in displacement, while also illuminating the role of politics in constituting belonging. While academia is often seen as impersonal and distant within South Asian political communities, theories such as a diasporic locality of displacement can actually help to illuminate ways of being and belonging that are deemed ‘impossible’ not just in academia, but also in lived experience. I hope that writing these theories, even in an academic forum, provides words and lenses for people to better understand their own experiences.
Similarly, I hope that an understanding of progressive South Asian organizing as a queer modality of organizing makes this work visible. Political work focused on ‘talking’ and ‘community building’ is not just invisible within normative paradigms of movement, but also criticized as ‘soft’ political work, pushed to a marginal position in comparison to the ‘real’ work of developing campaigns. In writing this thesis, I want to recognize that the supposedly ‘soft’ political work that dominates many progressive South Asian spaces is a modality of organizing, albeit a queer one.

As a participant in South Asian organizing, I also highlight the dynamics of homogenization that continue to emerge in spaces self-designated as progressive. While the South Asian organizers I spoke with provide an important critique of an upwardly mobile hegemonic construct of South Asian, I also warn that they contribute to this homogenization. By focusing on issues and modalities of organizing internal to progressive South Asian communities, the construct of upwardly mobile South Asian immigrants becomes further homogenized and delegitimized. While this project works to make visible the queered organizing work of progressive South Asians, I argue that this delegitimization of South Asian immigrants is a site that remains unexplored. The desires and organizing strategies of upwardly mobile South Asians, including groups such as the AIA, remain invisible as political desires and actions, or demonized as the embodiment of a ‘bad politics.’ I highlight this particular dynamic as a site of necessary self-reflection for progressive South Asian organizers as well as a potential area for further inquiry and study within academia.
Appendix A

The Participants

Shreya

Shreya is a sophomore in college. She identifies as a queer, Indian, Hindu woman. She is 2nd generation. In her interview, she also identifies herself as a woman of color and as a feminist. In informal interpersonal conversations, she has identified herself as middle class. Shreya has been involved in a variety of South Asian organizing work and in numerous queer organizations. On her campus, she has helped to create organizations and spaces that address the particular needs of queer South Asians. Shreya identifies herself as a community organizer, and she believes in centering the role of art and creativity in social justice work and movements.

Varuni

Varuni has worked with South Asian youth for many years. She is 23 years old and identifies as a queer, Indian, South Asian woman. Her family is Punjabi and Hindu, and she is the first generation born in the U.S. They are originally from what is now Pakistan, but have since migrated to North India. Varuni identifies “closely with her work.” She was an organizer for one of the youth conferences described above, and has done work with South Asian youth in other contexts. She also worked for the New York Taxi Workers’ Alliance. She explains that she has had experience as both a labor organizer and a community organizer. While she also did not name her class location, she described her parents as having “really struggled a lot financially, a lot.”

Wasanti
Wasanti describes herself as a Bangladeshi-American, Muslim-American, and South Asian American woman. She is 32 years old and 2nd generation. Wasanti played a leading role in one of the South Asian political education conferences listed above. She has also done extensive work around South Asian political engagement, primarily in the realm of South Asian voter turnout and education. Wasanti grew up working-class. She is also an active blogger and involved in certain progressive South Asian music scenes. Like Shreya, Wasanti also identifies herself as a community organizer, and insists that art and creativity have central roles to play in South Asian organizing.

Yasmin

Yasmin identifies as a Gujarati, Indian, South Asian woman. She is 34 years old, and migrated from Africa to the U.S. with her family when she was young. Yasmin also played a leading role in one of the conferences described above. She has been involved in a variety of cultural groups and environmental justice groups. Yasmin participated in Youth Solidarity Summer, one of the main precursors to DCDS and BASS. She is also a part of ASATA, the Alliance of South Asians Taking Action. From informal conversations outside of this project, Yasmin identifies as middle class.

Meera

Meera was the only one of the organizers I spoke to while doing research who did not identify as South Asian. Nonetheless, she has worked in South Asians spaces for over 10 years. Meera is 28 and is Fijian-Indian—her parents are from India, and she was born in Fiji. Meera migrated to the U.S. with her parents when she was young. She identifies as queer and as an activist and organizer. Meera also identifies strongly with her working-class background,
including her family’s history as undocumented immigrants. She explains that her own experiences with injustice led her to pursue organizing work.

**Preeti**

Preeti is 25 and identifies as a Tamil, Sri Lankan, South Asian woman. She is also involved in planning DCDS/BASS. Preeti was involved, as a youth participant, in a South Asian youth organization when she was growing up. Preeti identifies as middle class, again from conversations outside of the interviews done for this project. She remains involved in the Sri Lankan progressive community in the U.S., spreading awareness about issues that continue to emerge on the island in the wake of the recently ended Civil War.

**Fatimah**

Fatimah describes herself as queer, working-class, Muslim, and Pakistani. They use both “she/her” and “they/them” as gender pronouns. She is 24 years old. Fatimah was also involved in one of the political education conferences described above. They have done extensive work around housing issues in South Asian communities and around the danger of uncritically lumping Asian American and South Asian American data into a single pool.

**Radha**

Radha is 21 and identifies as queer. She is a part of Satrang, the umbrella group for queer South Asians in the Los Angeles area of California. She is currently a student, and has remained involved in the recently formed Satrang youth group (for queer South Asians 30 years old and under).

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13 “They” is a gender neutral pronoun, often used by people who identify outside of a strict gender binary of male/female, and who instead identify their own gender as somewhere between ‘male’ and ‘female.’
Sanjay

Sanjay is also an integral part of the recently formed Satrang youth group. He identifies as an “immigrant queer South Asian desi activist male-identified trouble-maker.” He is the only cisgendered male I interviewed for this project. Sanjay is 29 years old. He currently works in a leading position at a campus LGBT Center and is very involved in queer organizing and queer people of color work.

Deepak

Deepak is the only other male-identified participant in this project. He identifies as queer, trans, male, South Asian, upper-middle class, South Indian, and born in the U.S. He also identifies as “able-bodied and minded” and as “sometimes” Asian American. He is 26 years old. Deepak was one of the key moving forces behind forming the Satrang youth group. He has been involved in a wide variety of organizations that work around queer and trans issues, and specifically that center queer and trans people of color.

Esha

Esha is 27 years old and identifies as a queer woman of color, Asian American and South Asian, “2nd and a half generation Indian,” “a U.S. citizen,” “able-bodied and able-minded,” a Californian and an artist. She was also one of the key forces behind the Satrang youth group. Esha has been involved in the South Asian art scene in Los Angeles, and like Shreya and Wasanti, continues to insist that art be respected as part of South Asian movements.
Appendix B
History of South Asian Immigration and Organizing in the U.S.

A Note on Methodology

I want to note that one of my sources for this appendix is an archived website titled the “South Asian Forum.” The construction of the South Asian Forum was a project of the National South Asian Task Force from 2004-2006. Task Force created this website with the intention of “examining our [South Asian] history and determining our future as a community here in the United States as well as within the Diaspora” in order to better “understand our critical role in the local, national and international issues that favor on the side of a just and equitable world.”

I highlight this source in particular because the South Asian Forum website is an explicitly social justice oriented re-telling of South Asian history. While I am citing the Forum here, I am also continuing on and expanding their work. I also believe that South Asians need to know their own history in the U.S., with the hope that South Asians will then act on said history. Thus, the South Asian Forum and this appendix aim to tell some of the highlights of the history of South Asian organizing in the U.S.

Early Immigration and Anti-Colonial Organizing: Late 1800s – 1900s

Contrary to popular belief, South Asians have been in the U.S. since the 1600s, albeit in small numbers (Lal 2008: 13). In the earliest period of South Asian migration to the U.S., from the 1600s through the late 1800s, South Asians—people from the countries now known as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and sometimes including Bhutan, Myanmar, Tibet, and Afghanistan—entered the U.S. in fairly small increments.14 South Asians, usually Indians, were

14 It is worth noting that these countries were not yet unitary nation-states, and as such were not necessarily known by their present-day names.
brought to the States, then a British colony, as indentured servants and as maritime workers.

While not in response to Asian immigration, the 1790 Naturalization Act impacted the rights of South Asians in the U.S. during this early migration, as the Act barred all non-whites from potential citizenship in the U.S.

The first major period of South Asian immigration into the U.S. did not take place until the late 1800s. From the 1800s through 1924, Indian immigrants to the U.S. were known as the "tide of turbans," referencing the turbans worn by primarily Sikh migrants (Takaki 1989:295). This "tide" often reached U.S. shores by way of multiple migrations, as Indians often migrated first to Britain or Canada and then to the States. The beginning of this period was marked primarily, though not exclusively, by the migration of Sikh Punjabi men.

In *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*, Karen Leonard presents the often-forgotten history of this first wave of South Asian migration to California. As California agriculture shifted towards the cultivation of grain, and later fruits, "California gradually developed a corporate, capital-intensive form of agriculture, in contrast to the small family-farm tradition in the East and Midwest that supposedly sustained 'American' values" (1992:17). When demand for California's crops began to increase, the state's agricultural economy needed cheap labor. Moreover, in 1904 Canada, previously an immigration destination for Indians because of the country's status as a member of the British Commonwealth, became stricter in its immigration policies, increasing the likelihood that Indians looking to migrate would enter the U.S. instead. Thus, in the early 1900s, Indians increasingly came from both India and Canada into the States (Mathur 1970:14). Simultaneously, in the Punjab region of India, Indian peasants were struggling to maintain their land. In 1849, the British empire finally succeeded in annexing the Punjab region of India. As Ian Talbot explains in "The Punjab Under
Colonialism: Order and Transformation in British India," the return of political stability following this annexation, along with improved channels of transportation and communication within India, led to the rapidly increasing commercialization of crops from the Punjab. At the same time, the implementation of British systems of rule changed the laws around land debt and acquisition. As farmers’ profits increased, they began to borrow more money to increase their own consumption. However, “urban moneylenders used the British legal system to foreclose debts of mortgaged land,” so that land increasingly left the hands of farmers and was acquired by moneylenders (Talbot 5).

In response to rising levels of debt, farmers in the Punjab began looking for temporary migratory work in order to keep their lands. The agricultural fields of California were a strategic choice. With skills already developed as agricultural workers, the similar fields of California were a logical place for Punjabi migrants to attempt to earn enough money to keep their lands in India. As Leonard explains, the migrants in this first wave were overwhelmingly men. Nativist immigration enforcement, along with the men’s expectation that they would return to India, drastically skewed the sex ratios of Indian migrants to the U.S. 15 These men were coming to the U.S. primarily in order to earn enough money to recover their lands. Thus, the goal of these early migrants, accomplished by many, was to earn money in the U.S. and then return to the Punjab to continue their lives there.

This temporary migration, dictated through both the migration goals of Punjabi men and the dictates of U.S. labor laws, informed the multifaceted and multi-issue strategies through which South Asians organized in the U.S. Under the constraints of the 1790 Naturalization Act (and despite the extension of naturalization rights to people of African descent in 1870), early

15 See Leonard (1992:23) for a chart titled “Asian Immigrant Sex Ratios in California.”
Indian migrants could not become U.S. citizens. In 1913, California passed the Alien Land Law, preventing all people ineligible for citizenship from owning or leasing land (Leonard 1992:21). Given their status as “non-white” (and non-African) and therefore permanently non-citizen, the 1913 Alien Land Law in California threatened the livelihood of many Punjabi landowners. In response to this law, Punjabi immigrants organized themselves to find loopholes in the law. Many landowners put land in the names of their wives (whose ineligibility for citizenship after marriage to a non-citizen was often overlooked), white and citizenship-eligible friends (that often turned exploitative), or American-born children (1992:56-57).

The majority of Punjabi and South Asian organizing and movement-building during this time period however, seen in the mobilization of many members of the Indian community towards a similar goal, was centered around anti-colonial organizing pertaining to South Asia itself. For example, in 1914, Gurdit Singh chartered a ship called the Komagata Maru to bring 376 Indians, British subjects under colonization, to Canada, also a British territory. These immigrants argued that they should be able to enter a British territory as British subjects, despite Canada’s restrictive immigration laws. The ship remained stalled in Vancouver Harbor for two months, as Britain and Canada repeatedly refused to allow 352 of the Indian migrants into the country (Srikanth 2002:78). Indians in the U.S. and in Canada raised money to support the migrants stranded on the Komagata Maru for those two months, until the ship was conclusively denied entry to Canada and forced to depart (South Asian Forum). As Rajini Srikanth explains in her article “The Komagata Maru: Memory and Mobilization among the South Asian Diaspora in North America,” the Komagata Maru incident contributed to the radicalization of Indian revolutionary organizers in both Canada and the U.S. Srikanth writes that this “affair convinced many Indians of their second-class membership in the British Empire” and transformed them
into “committed revolutionaries in the fight to overthrow British rule in India” (Srikanth 2002:80).

Some of these recently radicalized Indian activists became active in Indian organizing in the U.S. (Srikanth 2002:80). Although the Ghadar Party is the most well known of the independence organizations from this time period, the Party emerged out of a vibrant history of Indians organizing in the U.S. around issues in their homeland. According to L. P. Mathur, author of *Indian Revolutionary Movement in the United States of America*, the U.S. was chosen as a strategic site from which to organize for Indian independence for three reasons: there was a large base of Indian migrants from Canada and India (as explained previously), the organizers believed they could tap into “anti-British sentiment in America,” and they believed in the U.S. as the “land of freedom and opportunity” (1970:17-18). Many of the key players in the Indian organizing scene in the U.S. were revolutionaries from India seeking asylum. When these organizers arrived in the States, they found that Indians were already organizing themselves, primarily in religious centers. These organizers—primarily “Sarangdhar Das, Sailendra Ghose, Basant Kumar Roy, Chandra Chakarvarty, Nanded Kar, and Lala Hardayal”—built on this established organizing tradition to create more formal organizations to pressure the British into leaving India (1970:19).

In the early 1900s, revolutionary Indian organizations began to form quickly. In 1908, the Hindustani Association was founded in Oakland; in 1911, the Hindustani Students Association emerged at Stanford; in 1912, the Hindustani Association of Astoria was created; in 1913, the Hindustani Association of the United States of America was born (1970:20-22). In 1912, the Hindu Association of the Pacific Coast was created. It was from this organization that the Ghadar Party emerged—the Hindu Association of the Pacific Coast began a paper titled ‘Ghadar’ in
1913, and the working committee assigned to producing said paper became known as the Ghadar Party (1970:22-24). As one of the leaders of the Hindu Association of the Pacific Coast, Hardayal, began to garner increasing attention across the nation through an aggressive propaganda campaign, “the inner circle of the [Association] came to be known as ‘Ghadar’ Party” (1970:54). As mentioned previously, this Association turned Party was designed to foment political revolution in India, the homeland of the largely Punjabi Indian immigrants. Thus, the Ghadar Party organized itself as a nationalist movement against British colonialism in India, asking Indians in the U.S. to support to the struggle for independence overseas.

The planned date for this revolution was February 21st, 1915 in the Punjab (1970:118). While the ‘Ghaderites’ managed to accomplish a variety of their planned activities, from gathering weapons to detonating bombs, their revolution was largely unsuccessful. The leaders of the Ghadar Party were arrested, and many were tried in 1917 in U.S. courts (1970:148; 155). Despite the political defeat, however, the organization of the Ghadar Party represented the first mass mobilization of Indians in the U.S. noted in the traditional historiography of South Asians in America. These immigrants fully intended to return to their motherland, and viewed their stay in the U.S. as utilitarian and necessary; thus, their organizing efforts also focused primarily on their homeland, and less frequently on their temporary stay in the U.S. (South Asian Forum).

**Exclusion and Citizenship: 1905 – 1946**

Early South Asian migration spurred on nativist resistance that had begun in response to Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigration. In 1882, Congress enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act, banning Chinese laborers from entering the U.S. (Takaki 1989:14). This was followed by the Page Law of 1875, which though designed to ban sex workers from entering the U.S. also effectively barred many Asian women. The Gentleman’s Agreement of 1908 followed suit,
barring entry to Japanese labor (Takaki 1989:40). In the early 1900s, white workers displaced mounting anxiety about wage depression and labor competition onto new waves of Asian immigrants. These workers began organizing to preserve these restrictive immigration laws, focusing specifically on the extension of the Chinese Exclusion Act set to expire in 1902.

From the organizing efforts of white workers, the Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL) was formed in 1905 in San Francisco, CA. (Takaki 1989:201). The AEL easily extended its anti-immigrant rhetoric to include Indian laborers in the U.S., saying that while Europeans (in this case referring to Americans of Western European descent) were historically related to “Hindus” (of supposedly Caucasian ancestry), these two disparate groups of people were no more than “cousins, far removed.” Moreover, while Europeans had “pressed to the west in the everlasting march of conquest, progress, and civilization,” the “forefathers of the Hindus went east and became enslaved, effeminate, caste-ridden and degraded” (Takaki 1989:298). Thus, Indian workers (homogenized under the religious term ‘Hindu’) were now unworthy of living and working in the U.S.

In an increasingly anti-immigrant climate, Indian workers were singled out and targeted in the Bellingham riots of 1907. In September, in an often forgotten moment of mass violence against South Asians in the U.S., hundreds of white workers descended upon the Indian community of Bellingham, Washington, “[driving] seven hundred Asian Indians across the border in to Canada” (Takaki 1989:297). According to the South Asian Forum, “by the end of the day of the Bellingham riot, all Indian worker and businessmen had been forced out of Bellingham” (South Asian Forum). Two months later in Everett, Washington, white workers again expelled Indian workers from their town, including many who had migrated to Everett after the Bellingham riots (Takaki 1989:297).
This early nativist resistance was followed by increasingly stringent immigration acts. First, the 1917 Immigration Act established an Asiatic Barred Zone, excluding immigrants “who are natives of any country, province, or dependency situate on the Continent of Asia” (1917 Immigration Act). This act instituted a literacy requirement for migrants entering the U.S., and acted as a precursor for the immigration laws of the 1920s that created national origins quotas to determine immigration. The Emergency Immigration Act of 1921 set up these national origins quotas, determining that “the number of aliens of any nationality who may be admitted under the immigration laws to the United States in any fiscal year shall be limited to 3 per centum of the number of foreign-born persons of such nationality resident in the United States as determined by the United States census of 1910” (Emergency Immigration Act of 1921). While this law set up the quota system that was to define Asian immigration through the 1900s, this law nonetheless continued the exclusion of any migration from the Asiatic Barred Zone. Finally, the National Origins Quota Act of 1924 entirely stemmed the flow of Asian immigration to the U.S. by blocking all migrants not eligible for citizenship (with the exception of those who somehow slipped through the cracks). Again, this act remains important because it solidified the national origins quota system, distinguishing between “quota immigrants” and “non-quota immigrants.” This Act also utilized the system of “family preferences,” allowing “the unmarried child under 18 years of age, or the wife, of a citizen of the United States” to be considered non-quota migrants, and giving preference to an immigrant “who is the unmarried child under 21 years of age, the father, the mother, the husband, or the wife, of a citizen of the United State who is 21 years of age or over” (Immigration Act of 1924).

In the 1920s and 1930s, in response to the blatantly racist tightening of the country’s borders, South Asians actively contested the immigration and citizenship laws of the U.S., often
through legal means. South Asians fought citizenship battles, one way of contesting their clear exclusion from entry and citizenship in the U.S. While this battle was also fought by organizations, such as the India Association and the India Welfare League, the most publicized of these was fought by Bhagat Singh Thind (South Asian Forum). Thind claimed that he was of Aryan descent and therefore Caucasian, and that this Caucasian ancestry legitimized his claim to citizenship. In a historic ruling, Associate Justice George Sutherland ruled that Thind was not in fact white—he argued that America’s forefathers only intended to confer citizenship upon those who could “quickly merge into the mass of our population and lose the distinctive hallmarks of their European origin” (U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind). Thind therefore could not classify as white in the understanding of the word in “common speech” despite his claims to Aryan heritage.

Moreover, Sutherland cited the recent anti-immigrant Acts and the Asiatic Barred Zone, saying:

> It is not without significance in this connection that Congress...has now excluded from admission into this country all natives of Asia within designated limits of latitude and longitude, including the whole of India. This not only constitutes conclusive evidence of the congressional attitude of opposition to Asiatic immigration generally, but is persuasive of a similar attitude toward Asiatic naturalization as well, since it is not likely that Congress would be willing to accept as citizens a class of persons whom it rejects as immigrants. (U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind)

Therefore, in part due to the recently passed Immigration Acts establishing Asians as unworthy of entrance into the U.S., Thind was located as outside of the category of “free white person” eligible for citizenship.

**Re-opening the Gates to Professional Immigration: 1946 – 1965s:**

South Asians also contested the unjust immigration quotas and subsequent bans that prevented their entry into the U.S. A handful of organizers, including “J. J. Singh [of the India League of America], Mubarak Ali Khan [of the India Welfare League], Anup Singh, Haridas
Muzumdar, Taraknath Das, and Dalip Singh Saund, led the national lobbying effort to bring larger-scale change to the U.S. immigration system (Singh 2010). These organizers lobbied Congress for immigration and citizenship rights until they finally convinced two members of Congress—Clare Booth Luce and Emanuel Cellar—to propose a bill in Congress that would allow Indian (and certain other Asian) immigrants back into the U.S. (Singh 2010). According to the South Asian Forum, Singh even “arranged for Clare Booth Luce’s trip to India,” convincing her that “Orientals” should again be permitted entry into the U.S. (South Asian Forum).

Through these lobbying efforts, the Luce-Celler Act passed into law in 1946. This Act represented the first crack in the U.S. immigration wall that had been solidified through the 1924 ban. The Luce-Celler Act lifted the ban on certain Asian immigration, allowing for a quota of 105 Chinese, 100 Pilipino, and 100 Indian immigrants to enter the U.S. While this Act allowed for only “a token number of immigrants” to re-enter the U.S., the Act did also grant naturalization rights for Chinese, Indian, and Pilipino migrants (Takaki 1989:417).

In 1952, the McCarran-Walter Act continued to liberalize immigration from Asia to the U.S. This act abolished the Asiatic barred zone, expanding the migration rights of the Luce-Celler Act to all South Asians. The McCarran-Walter Act also reversed the long-standing 1790 Naturalization Act, finally allowing naturalization rights for all Asian immigrants (Takaki 1989:413). Nevertheless, immigration from South Asia and Asia as a whole remained severely limited, with quotas expanded to only 100 immigrants per country in the “Asian-Pacific Triangle” while European countries continued to have their quotas determined by the 1924 Immigration Act (Takaki 1989:417-418). [Analysis of the impact of the Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965 can be found in Chapter 1.]

**Backlash and Working-Class Immigration: 1970s – 1980s:**
The 1970s and 1980s brought nativist backlash, yet again, to the 1965 Hart-Celler Act. In response to this backlash, the U.S. passed a series of Acts that limited the (already limited) opportunities opened in 1965. In 1976, the Health Professions Education Assistance Act dictated that highly-skilled medical professions, such as those of physician or surgeon, were no longer prioritized under the 1965 Act, slowing the migration of South Asian medical professionals. The 1977 Eilberg Act made workers responsible for their own certification from the Labor Department, again resulting in slower and reduced immigration. Finally, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, intended to discourage employers from hiring undocumented workers, actually reduced the hiring of Asian workers in general, since they were always seen as potentially foreign and therefore a business risk (Das Gupta 2006:99-100). In the context of an economic downturn in the U.S. during the 1970s, however, labor continued to flow into a restructuring U.S. economy, despite the increased sanctions on migration. Family members of the class-privileged 1965 immigrants continued to enter the States through the family preferences provisions of the Hart-Celler Act. Undocumented workers also continued to enter the U.S. from South Asia, often finding working-class jobs that needed to be filled in the U.S.

This decrease in ‘professional’ immigration and increase in immigration into working-class jobs was reflected in the organizing strategies employed by South Asians in the U.S. In increasing numbers beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, working-class South Asians immigrants have been instrumental in forming labor organizations and participating in the labor movement. One of the key organizations responding to this changing immigration pattern was the New York Taxi Workers’ Alliance (NYTWA). The NYTWA organized taxi drivers across race to demand better working conditions, especially after New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani proposed a seventeen-point reform package in 1998 that would have increased rules and fines on taxi drivers.
in New York, further straining their already small income. On May 13th, as part of Operation Refusal, taxi drivers through New York City coordinated a general strike, essentially shutting down cab service in the city in order to demand better treatment and respect from the city. This organizing around labor was and is a response to the needs of the increasing numbers of South Asians entering the U.S. and coming into working-class jobs, and often built on the migrants’ histories of political unrest and agitation in their home countries—as a Pakistani driver and organizer in the NYTWA explained, speaking specifically on the 1971 liberation struggle in Bangladesh, “Bangladeshis are more politically aware. They think, ‘If I do this, then things can be changed through political struggle’ because they got their independence through recent political struggle” (Das Gupta 2006:237).

Specifically in the 1980s, another type of organizing emerged from the South Asian community—organizing around domestic violence. This organizing accounted for partner violence, violence during domestic work, and other kinds of violence. As Das Gupta argues in Unruly Immigrants, the potential for an abuse of power and subsequent violence was actually enhanced by the structures of U.S. immigration law. In relationships structured as partnerships, women in particular were often made vulnerable by immigration laws. Under the family preferences of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, a woman entering the U.S. through dependence on a spouse is considered a beneficiary of her husband—thus, she is not able to work and sustain herself, and she moreover “does not exist in law as an autonomous person” (2006:84). In 1986, the Immigration Marriage Fraud Amendments, designed to ensure that immigrants entering the U.S. through marriage were actually in a committed relationship with their partner, extended the period in which a recent immigrant is dependent on their partner to two years, and dictated that the couple must petition Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) together. Again, this
placed power disproportionately in the hands of the sponsoring partner, typically male, as this partner’s affirmation was necessary for the more recent immigrant to remain legal in the U.S. Thus, women legally entering the U.S. through a (male) partner’s status were often made vulnerable by their gender and by their forced dependence on their partner.

This vulnerability is experienced in a different way by domestic workers, who have often responded with specific strategies of transnational organizing. Many domestic workers were hired in India and brought to the U.S. for the sole purpose of domestic work. Oftentimes, employers wield the fear around immigration status and lack of documentation against their employees, withholding workers’ passports or threatening to not file the necessary documents to continue a worker’s legal stay in the U.S. Again, this vulnerability and potential for domestic violence and abuse is greatly exacerbated by U.S. law—since these workers have fears around their legal status in the U.S., they are often hesitant to approach state agencies or the police to seek justice. Organizations like Sakhi, an anti-domestic violence organization in New York, have responded to this violence by using transnational tactics and respecting workers’ hesitancy to use legal recourse in the U.S. Sakhi has staged public demonstrations at the households of domestic workers’ employers, threatening to shame them in their diasporic and home communities if they refuse to treat their workers with dignity (Das Gupta 2006: 127-128).

In many ways, queer South Asian organizing also fits this model. Queer South Asian organizing blossomed in the 1980s, with Trikone in San Francisco as the first queer South Asian group founded in 1986. While this organizing was primarily to support queer South Asians in their everyday lives, the visible presence of such organizations also pushed back against the dominant cultural stereotype of ‘South Asian.’ As Gayatri Gopinath proposes in Impossible Desires: Queer Diaspora and South Asian Public Cultures, queer South Asians must actively
contest the idea of their own impossibility. She uses the “framework of a queer South Asian diaspora” to explain this contestation, arguing that the cultural essentialism produced in part by migration makes certain ideas of ‘South Asian’ impossible—such as queer people, working-class immigrants, or people who fall outside of gender norms or expectations. Thus, these organizations also worked to contest the Model Minority Myth and the cultural essentialist notions perpetuated by privileged South Asian migrants and by outside communities of what ‘South Asian’ means.

**Heightened Threat of Terrorism: 1990s – 2000s:**

In the late 1990s, changes in immigration law again affected the lives of South Asians in the U.S. and on the subcontinent. In response to the Oklahoma City federal-building bombing, the U.S. passed stringent antiterrorism acts, which often served to criminalize and marginalize immigrants in the States. These laws included the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, and Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act. In total, these acts worked together to more strictly enforce immigration and to criminalize immigrants, particularly poor immigrants, legally in the U.S. (South Asian Forum)

The events of September 11th, 2001 marked another important moment in South Asian history in the U.S., and in the ways in which South Asians have organized around issues concerning their communities. It is important to note that the backlash to this event was a *continuation* of the immigration laws enacted in 1996 and before, as well as a continuation of tropes of South Asian ‘terrorists,’ a label that taxi drivers, for example, have negotiated since at least the late 1990s, long before 9/11 (Zia 2000:202). In the wake of the attacks on the twin towers, South Asian communities, especially Muslims and Sikhs, were often faced with
retaliation, as their appearances led them to be blamed for the attacks. Hate crimes increased rapidly in South Asian and Arab communities, as Muslims and people “mistaken for Muslim,” along with mosques, gurudwara, and other places of worship were attacked in supposed retaliation for the events of 9/11.

State violence in response to these events was even greater. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was formed, bringing Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) under its purview. The USA Patriot Act was enacted, harshly limiting freedoms that supposedly defined America. The National Security Exit-Entry Registration Service (NSEERS) program blatantly targeted ‘Muslim countries,’ including many South Asians. This program demanded that men between the ages of 16 and 65 from a list of ‘suspect’ nations register with the federal government. While this program was not officially supposed to target or criminalize immigrants, this registration led to the detention and deportation of many immigrants, many of whom were in ongoing legal proceedings to obtain documentation. While the number of deportations are not known, Coney Island in New York is estimated to have “lost a full third of its Muslim population almost overnight” (Kennedy 2011). Moreover, many detainees lost contact with their families, as family members were not informed as to where their loved ones were being held, nor given information about how long they would be waiting for their release. In the documentary Lest We Forget, Jason DaSilva traces many of these stories, capturing the heartbreak and challenges faced by families torn apart despite having committed no ‘crime.’ Muslim and South Asian families in the U.S. were also targeted by the F.B.I., being interrogated, having their neighbors interrogated, or having their phones tapped, in the name of securing America’s safety.

In response to the violations of human rights, as well as the disruption and breaking of lives for many Muslims and South Asians in the U.S., South Asians organized in response to the
racial profiling of their communities post-9/11. There are countless examples of South Asian communities responding to the violent aftermath of 9/11, all over the U.S.; I will use the South Asian Network (SAN) in California as an example, demonstrating the need for a response from South Asians even as far as California, and highlighting a direct response from a long-standing organization to meet needs in the community exacerbated by the events and backlash of 9/11. SAN saw the need for South Asian community members to be able to respond to the increasing violence being visited on their communities, and also recognized the existing vulnerabilities and failures of the state in the primarily working-class ethnic suburb of Artesia, California’s “Little India.” Thus, post-9/11, SAN began to do hate crimes documentation and intake, connecting community members to legal services and recourse. SAN also held community town halls, including one ten years later in September 2011, to give community members the space speak about their grievances and their experiences, and to connect to other people with similar experiences. Later on, SAN further developed this work to address police brutality in the Artesia community, staging a campaign to call attention to the murder of Usman Chaudhry, and doing collaborative coalition-building work with other people of color-led, primarily Black and Latino, organizations working against police violence. Other organizations, notably the Sikh Coalition and ASATA, also had equally strong community responses to 9/11, often involving political education about racial stereotyping and profiling.
Appendix C
Previous Race- and Ethnicity-Based Social Movements in the U.S.

In order to understand the organizing of South Asians in the U.S. in a ‘movement’ framework, it is important to first acknowledge and examine the legacies of previous race- and ethnicity-based movements in the U.S. In order to work towards an understanding of the South Asian case, I am choosing to explore the history and development of three movements in the U.S.: the Civil Rights movement/Black Power movement; the Chicano Student movement, and the Asian American movement. These are all race- and ethnicity-based movements, as they mobilize with race as a means and a goal—each of these movements was organized around racial and ethnic identities with the intent to change racial inequalities in the U.S. I want to specifically examine these movements in the context of two of Moyer’s stages: ripening conditions and take off. I am interested in this moment of transition—what allowed these movements to evolve from highly localized networks and goals into national movements?

The Civil Rights movement is the archetypal social movement in the U.S.—Moyer’s book, for example, consistently cites the Civil Rights movement to provide examples of his eight stages. In *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, Charles M. Payne describes some of the conditions from which the Civil Rights Movement was able to emerge. He embarks on a political project to disrupt the standard narrative of the Civil Rights Movement—namely, that Rosa Parks sat in the white-only section of a bus because she was simply too tired to stand, and that the famous bus boycott following her arrest was the boiling over of spontaneous anger and frustration.

Payne disrupts this narrative by highlighting the “ripening conditions” out of which the Civil Rights Movement emerged. Payne first describes how changing economic conditions of the
time led to a decrease in the brutal violence regularly visited on Black people in the South. He emphasizes the decreasing prices of cotton, the mechanization of labor, and the increasing importance of big industry. As Payne argues, “the collapse of the cotton economy...led to less need to control Blacks...[although] there continued to be non-economic reasons” for maintaining white racial superiority (1995:19). The need to attract “big industry” to the South also led to a decrease in violence, since reports of successive lynchings were likely to scare away big business (1995:21). Payne also highlights the importance of World War II in the lead-up to the Civil Rights Movement. After returning from war, having defended ‘American democracy’ abroad, Black veterans were increasingly frustrated with the openly hypocritical promise of ‘freedom’ for Black people in the U.S. The decreasing need to control Black labor, the political inconvenience of violence for white people in the South, and the language espoused by the U.S. during WWII all contributed to the conditions from which a movement that foregrounded rights and freedoms could emerge.

Payne also centers people as creating the conditions out of which this movement could emerge. He names early activists who began organizing in the 1940s and 1950s, before the typical narrative of the Civil Rights Movement begins. Payne highlights the work of organizers such as Amzie Moore, Medgar Evers, Aaron Henry, Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and Myles Horton, people who enabled the later, better-known movement work of the 1960s, but whose names are rarely recognized or mentioned. He describes that these people acted as symbols—“Amzie Moore was a living symbol of resistance to people in the Delta,” and “Medgar Evers had the same meaning to Blacks across the state” (1995:47). They also acted as catalysts, passing down experiences, advice, and most importantly networks to later generations of organizers and activists.
It is in these “conditions” that the “trigger event” of the Montgomery Bus Boycott occurred. In 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. Payne emphasizes that Parks was deeply connected to the earlier activists and activist traditions mentioned above—she “had spent much of her adult life actively seeking levers of change, not waiting until the times were right,” and had in fact refused to obey bus segregation laws in the past (1995:416). Thus, the “take off” moment through which the Civil Rights Movement entered national scale was in fact deeply connected to the “ripening conditions” of changing economic structures, World War II, and previous generations of activists.

In *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement*, Carlos Muñoz, Jr.’s historical account of the Chicano movement rooted in his own experiences as an organizer at the time, Muñoz names the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power movement as part of the conditions that enabled the Chicano student movement. He explains that the student movement emerged out of both inspiration from the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, as well as frustration with the lack of attention given to Mexican-American youth in the Black Power movement (1989:66). He also cites students’ inspiration from other issue-based Mexican-American organizing: namely, “the dramatic emergence of the farmworkers struggle in California led by César Chávez, the land grant struggle in New Mexico led by Reies López Tijerina, and increasing discontent on the part of the Mexican American middle-class leadership with the Democratic Party and other dominant political institutions” (1989:69). Muñoz explains that through much of the 1960s, the Mexican-American student organizations were just that—organizations. They “did not yet represent a student movement in political terms” (1989:74). However, the organizing around them enabled these students to begin turning their organizations into a movement:

As they came into direct contact with community politics and learned more about the Chávez and Tijerina movements they came to represent a student movement.
in the making. By the end of 1967, the anti-war and Black Power movements had become other sources of growing militancy among some of the student leaders. The politics of the times were now characterized by mass protest, and the fact that the main protagonists in the unfolding drama were white and Black radical youth did not go unnoticed by the leadership of the Mexican American student organizations. (1989:74)

Thus, student organizations began to fill the void of Mexican American student leaders.

In Muñoz's account, the high school walkouts in East Los Angeles were the events that triggered a longer-term movement. In March of 1968, thousands of students walked out of six high schools, launching the Chicano student movement. Muñoz describes the impact, "overnight," of the student strikes:

> Overnight, student activism reached levels of intensity never before witnessed...The nature of these concerns and the momentum build up among Mexican American students—both in high school and on college campuses—broke the ideological bonds that characteristically kept student organizations, and students in general, from questioning the status quo...the strike moved student activism beyond the politics of accommodation and integration which had been shaped by the Mexican-American Generation and the community’s middle-class leadership. (1979:81)

In Muñoz's analysis, this strike was the catalyst for student organizations becoming more than simply individual entities on their school campuses. In the wake of the strike, in fact, students were encouraged by older leadership not only to continue being political catalysts in their own communities, but to begin to "think in terms of being part of a student movement" (1989:82).

Finally, William Wei's history titled *The Asian American Movement* also highlights the "ripe conditions" from which the Asian American movement was able to grow. As Muñoz did, Wei also remembers the role of the Black Power movement in creating space for an Asian American cultural consciousness to grow:

> By emphasizing racial pride and African American culture, the Black Power movement inspired Asian Americans, especially middle-class college students, to assert themselves as a people of color. As an ethnic-consciousness movement, the Black Power movement made Asian Americans realize that they too had been
defined by European American attitudes and dominated by an Eurocentric culture. (1993:42)

Wei also emphasizes the Vietnam War as both part of the conditions that made an Asian American movement possible as well as a trigger event. As Wei explains, many Asian Americans had their first taste of protest politics through the anti-war movement. Anti-war activists would often travel through the U.S., connecting with other Asian youth and organizers to form nation-wide networks. Their experiences in the antiwar movement convinced Asian organizers that they needed to band together to form a specifically Asian American movement:

Involvement in the antiwar movement convinced many campus and community activists that if they were ever to have a voice in this country, they would have to work together as a people—an Asian American people. In bringing Asian American activists together to participate in a common cause that transcended college campuses and Asian ethnic communities, the antiwar movement helped transform previously isolated instances of political activism into a social movement that was national in scope—the Asian American Movement. (1993:41)

Asian Americans realized that they needed to bring a particular racialized lens into the anti-war movement, and thus needed to work together.

Specifically, Wei implicates the idea of "gookism," an ideology promoted by the U.S. military in Vietnam to desensitize soldiers to killing their Vietnamese opposition (1993:38). In this ideology of "gookism," all Asians were understood to look the same. The mainstream anti-war movement did not address the ways in which the violence of war spilled over into the U.S. Although the war was being fought in Vietnam, people in the U.S., and especially veterans, became willing to enact violence on the 'local enemy'—since gookism taught that all Asians were the same, Asian Americans as a whole faced the fear of violence. For Asian Americans, it was this violence that served as a trigger for a movement. Despite the multiplicity of Asian identities in the U.S., the violence visited on Asian American communities irrespective of ethnicity pushed Asian Americans to band together to form a distinct movement.
Bibliography:


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