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Constructing the "New Ethnicities": Media, Sexuality, and Diaspora Identity in the Lives of South Asian Immigrant Girls

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This paper posits that adolescence, as experienced by girls of immigrant diaspora groups, is complicated by issues of race, culture and nation that intersect with discourses of sex and gender. In terms of globalization theory, sexuality is conceptualized as a locus of cultural hybridization; media representations of sexuality often mark the global/local nexus for diaspora peoples. In this study, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with South Asian American girls in order to analyze the role of media in their sexual identity constructions. The focus group data revealed radical rearticulations of sexual identity from an "interstitial" audience position that involved oppositional readings of various media texts. These rearticulations can be seen as part of the project of forging new ethnicities in the diaspora context.

"Adolescence" and "diaspora" are terms that both invoke the metaphor of a journey: issues of border crossing, dislocations, time/space passages, and reorientation frame our understandings of both constructs. Adolescent struggles with identity can be compared with the identity questions experienced by transnational immigrants: in the liminal spaces between childhood and adulthood, or between one geopolitical state and another, the "Who am I?" question becomes imperative. The process of constructing a self that will bridge the gaps is the defining goal of these crucial life moments.

When adolescence and diaspora occur in tandem, identity formation becomes an

even more complex issue. The psychological transition of adolescence, already charged in terms of gender and sexuality, is then imbricated with the conundrums of the other transition—the diaspora identity that demands delicate negotiations of race/ethnicity, nation, class, language, culture and history. For children of immigrant diaspora groups, adolescence is a particularly complex juncture, calling for a sophisticated grasp of cross-cultural dialectics and the sociopolitical dimensions of Otherness that will mark their adult lives.

Stuart Hall (1996), building on Foucault, notes that identity must be conceptualized as the relationship between subjects and broader discursive practices. For adolescents, media and popular culture offer social discourses that play a key role in identity construction (Arnett, 1995; Brown, Dykers, Steele, & White, 1994; Currie, 1999; M. G. Durham, 1999; Strasburger, 1995). But do adolescents' engagements with popular culture enter into constructions of a *diaspora* identity? And if so, how? In particular, to what extent do diaspora adolescents' negotiations of nation and culture intersect with the struggles around gender and sexuality that are a hallmark of coming of age in America? In this paper, I seek an understanding of the role of media culture in the dual processes of coming of age and ethnocultural identification among first-generation South Asian immigrant teenage girls in the U.S.

By focusing on the cultural landscape of adolescent identity construction in the diaspora context, I seek to explore and extend recent theories of globalization that emphasize the links between symbolic small-scale local practices and broader global dynamics (cf. Bhabha, 1990, 1994; García-Canclini, 1989/1995, 1990; Kraidy, 1999; Martín-Barbero, 1993). For diaspora youth, the interior and psychological dimensions of gender and sexual identity formation are intimately connected with issues of transnational identity; these modes of identification emerge within a "mediascape" of popular images and texts that circulate locally and globally via electronic technologies easily accessible to contemporary teenagers. As Appadurai (1996) has noted, global citizens use media images to imagine their lives in complex ways; these media images offer "strips of reality" that are deeply implicated in the ways we understand ourselves and others. The idea that new forms of identification might emerge from these dynamics is akin to Stuart Hall's concept of "new ethnicities" that challenge and reinterpret the meaning of "nation" from a disaporic perspective (Hall, 1996). In general, theories of diaspora speak to this idea of emergent identities. Gilroy (1997) has noted that the concept of diaspora "puts emphasis on contingency, indeterminacy, and conflict" (p. 334), and diaspora identity must be understood as dynamic and contrapuntal, emerging from tensions across points of cultural difference.

To gain insight into how media narratives and images figure into the negotiation of diaspora adolescent sexuality, in this study I explored South Asian immigrant girls' experiences of coming of age among contemporary global mediascapes through a series of interviews that brought to the surface the dynamic intersections of body politics, culture-crossing, and myths of homeland. These issues emerged in a constant interplay with the narratives of gender and sexuality in contemporary consumer-oriented teen media. Because this study is situated in the context of recent

scholarship on adolescent sexuality, media, and global identity politics, I briefly review these literatures before offering an analysis of the qualitative interview data on which my findings are based.

Adolescents, Sexuality, and the Media

Current theories of adolescence not only support the view that adolescence is "a socially constructed and multiple identity whose relations to other social formations are constantly in flux" (Austin & Willard, 1998, p. 3), but that the media and popular culture play a key role in adolescent identity formation (for example, Arnett, 1995; Christensen & Roberts, 1998; Currie, 1999; Fisherkeller, 2002; Milkie, 1994). Concepts of gender and sexuality emerge as central themes in the research on the media and adolescent identity.

   This is unsurprising, as gender and sexuality to some degree determine our conception of adolescence. As Levy-Warren (1996) points out, "Middle adolescence brings with it a necessity for integrating one of the hallmarks of puberty: the change from a child's comparatively sexually ambiguous body to the adolescent's unmistakably gendered body shape" (p. xvii). Sexual activity and sexual identity formation are widely held to be an integral part of adolescent development, brought on by physiological as well as sociocultural factors (Bancroft, 1990; Bem, 1996; Blos, 1962; Chilman, 1983; Freud, 1968; Moran, 2000; Wyatt, 1990).

   Adolescents' engagements with sexuality have been of paramount public concern in the last century, because of rising rates of early sexual activity and corollary rises in pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (especially AIDS), and sexual violence among teenagers. Irvine (1991) notes that these trends have resulted in a "medicalization" of adolescent sexuality that constitutes it in terms of a problem or a crisis, thereby eliding "the complexity and vitality of teen sexuality" (p. 3). Moreover, she argues, this frame also gives rise to a monolithic and ahistorical view of adolescence and sexuality that fails to acknowledge the complexities of race, class, and culture as they variously impact adolescent sexual behavior. Irvine points out, "Research that ignores the salience of culture renders invisible the experiences of most adolescents" (1991, p. 7).

   As a corrective, Irvine offers nine domains through which sexuality is "scripted": gender relations, sexual identities, reproductive strategies and behaviors, sexual language and public discourse, the role of the family, nonreproductive sexuality, the purpose of sex and the role of pleasure, knowledge and meaning of the body, and sexual violence. She does not identify the mass media as a domain of sexual inscription, yet the media can be seen as operating through and with many of the nine areas she identifies, especially as a vehicle of public discourse, a source of knowledge and meaning of the body, and an agent of representation of family roles, gender relations, and sexual violence. The media have been identified as part of a social discourse of sexuality (Brooks, 1995; Craig, 1992; G. Durham, 1995). For adolescents, media discourses of sexuality are crucial to sexual development and sexual understanding.

In fact, it is virtually incontestable that adolescents rely heavily on the mass media for learning about sex. Surveys consistently indicate that the media rank just behind peers and parents as a source of information about sex and sexuality (Harris, 1987; Pearl, Bouthilet, & Lazar, 1982; Thornburg, 1981). One survey found that teenagers who watched more TV with sexual content were also more likely to have begun sexual intercourse (Brown & Newcomer, 1991). This relationship held regardless of perceived peer encouragement to engage in sex and across race and gender groups. It appears that teenagers also tend to selectively *choose* diets of highly sexualized media. Greenberg et al. (1993a, 1993b) found that the prime-time TV shows viewed most often by ninth and 10th graders contained just under three sexual references per hour, and that the movies they favored contained even more frequent and explicit sexual references. Similarly, analyses of print media read by teenaged girls demonstrate a heavy emphasis on sex and sexuality (Duffy & Gotcher, 1995; M. G. Durham, 1998).

Irvine (1991) points out that the public debates about teenage sexuality tend to focus on girls, perhaps because the social consequences of sexual activity are perceived as being more serious for girls. Girls' sexuality is constructed as dangerous, problematic, and a drain on public resources. A growing amount of literature documents adolescence as a crisis for girls, positing that girls' internalization of dominant sexual mores results in internal conflicts, low self-esteem and sometimes self-destructive behaviors (Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1994; Stern, 1991).

Some recent work has attempted to investigate how the consumption of sexually oriented media plays out in girls' lived experiences (Brown, White, & Nikopolou, 1993; M. G. Durham, 1999; Milkie, 1994; Peterson, Moore, & Furstenberg, 1991), but such research is still in its infancy. More complex questions of how decodings of mediated constructions of gender and sexuality intersect with other axes of identity, such as race, class, religion, or nation, represent unexplored territory on the research map. Some work along these lines has been attempted with regard to body image (Botta, 1999, 2000; Duke, 2000), but sexuality is dangerously undertheorized in the literature on media, adolescence, and race/ethnicity.

There is clearly a vital need for research in this area. Because of the ways in which girls' lives appear to be adversely affected by dominant ideologies of sexuality, it is important to understand how girls negotiate media representations of sexuality and whether such representations play a constitutive role in girls' identity constructions. Moreover, in an increasingly multicultural society, where racial and ethnocultural divisions are complicating the social picture, there is a great need for research that offers a contextually nuanced exploration of girls' sexual socialization and its potential outcomes.

Sex and the Subaltern Teen

Sexuality as an aspect of diaspora identity has begun to surface in the literature on immigrant adolescence. Historically, constructs of sexuality have been deployed to mark racial difference (Gilman, 1985; hooks, 1992)—the sexuality of subordinate (or

subaltern) groups is stereotyped by dominant groups as a way to sustain hegemonic relations of power (Collins, 1990; West, 2001; Yegenoglu, 1998). Women of color, in particular, have been sexually marked in ways that contribute to their denigration and difference in Western societies. Women of color "inhabit a sex/gender hierarchy in which relations of power have been sexualized" (Collins, 1990, p. 165). In addition, constructions of sexuality vis à vis women of color are fraught with terrible internal paradoxes: simultaneously cast as hypersexed objects of desire and wholly undesirable objects of revulsion, their presence is infused with both erotic desire and racist contempt (Bhabha, 1983).

In that sense, sexuality can be seen as a site of hybridization. In recent globalization theory, the notion of hybridization has been used to address the multiple discontinuities and meldings of global and local symbolic practices and their material implications. For diaspora women and girls, sexuality marks the locus at which competing discourses of embodiment and agency intersect, where global/local power relations play out. Deterritorialized women encounter drastic differences in the ways in which female sexuality is conceptualized and governed in different cultural contexts, and these differences have real-world physical and psychic consequences. Appadurai (1996) notes that the politics of gender and violence are deeply imbricated in global shifts and their attendant mediascapes: "as fantasies of gendered violence dominate the B-grade film industries that blanket the world … the honor of women becomes increasingly a surrogate for the identity of embattled communities of males" (p. 45), and female sexuality becomes an arena for power struggles.

Recent research on immigrant girls reveals that these relations of power play out in the sexual dynamics of diaspora families. For example, Espiritu (2001) found that immigrant Filipino American families exercised a great deal of control over their daughters' sexual activity, restricting it severely, and that this "policing" led to tensions and hierarchies within the families, especially because of the differential treatment of girls and boys. Ward and Taylor (1991) found that immigrant teenagers from Vietnamese, Haitian, Hispanic and Portuguese families could not talk with their parents about sex, and that girls would be punished for evidence of sexual activity (while boys would not). Maira (2002) similarly found "a gendered double standard that is more lenient on males than females" (p. 155) among parents of second-generation immigrant South Asian youth in New York. This curtailment of girls' sexuality is tied, Maira argues, to national ideologies in which women's bodies are seen as repositories of tradition and weapons of defense against cultural violations. Gillespie (1995) made the same point in an early study of South Asian immigrant teenagers in London, noting that in this diaspora group "family honour or izzat ultimately depends on the chastity of daughters" (p. 152).

As Goodenow and Espin (1993) have noted, "while males are often encouraged to Americanize rather quickly, females are more frequently expected by their families to maintain traditional roles and virtues. Conflict is particularly likely to arise with regard to issues of appropriate sex role behavior and sexuality" (p. 174). Several studies indicate that female immigrants to the U.S. adapt, in general, more quickly to American sex and gender roles than men (Ghaffarian, 1989; Robinson, Ziss,

Ganza, Katz, & Robinson, 1991; Tohidi, 1993); this differential adaptation tends to result in intra-familial conflict.

At the same time that immigrant families exercise rigid restraint over adolescent girls' sexuality, Western culture continues to hypersexualize girls and women of color (Parmar, 1993; Tajima, 1989; Yegenoglu, 1998). Western media promote certain displays of female sexuality—ones that call for body exposure and heterosexual voracity (McNair, 2002)—that may be in conflict with certain aspects of non-Western cultural conventions for women while resonating with the desire for sexual agency that contemporary young women seek. In this vein, Parameswaran (2002) notes that Western romance novels serve as modern manuals on sexuality that speak to "women's autonomy and notions of progress in postcolonial India" (p. 844), where a new generation of women use these texts as guides for re-configuring their gender roles. The notion of hybridization as an aspect of global society is one that can be productively employed to frame gender and sexuality in the context of diaspora.

This research seeks to understand more about how family expectations of girls' sexual behaviors work in relation to broader discourses of adolescent female sexuality, especially those in the media, and how these dynamics relate to the construction of adolescent diaspora identity.

Method

McRobbie (1994) suggests that ethnographic work is the best way to gain an understanding of "the social conditions and experiences which play a role in constituting [young people's] subjectivities and identities" (p. 193). Ethnography's focus on everyday life, and its potential for prioritizing multiple levels of experience, offers a way to sensitively chart the ways in which youth respond to cultural and social forms. Kotre (1984) argues that only qualitative research can adequately capture the complexity of human life without violating the integrity of that life or dehumanizing the "objects" of research.

My interest was in exploring the nuances of diaspora girls' negotiations of identity in relation to conflicting cultural discourses. But because of the very specific nature of my research questions, it would have been impossible to conduct a traditional ethnographic participant observation in the hope that conversations about the topic would occur. The multilayered conceptualization of diaspora adolescence outlined above pointed to the need for a research method that would allow for detailed and intricate discussion of the diaspora experience, sex and gender, culture and family. The research method would also have to allow the research subjects to feel safe in revealing emotions and talking about highly sensitive topics. Montell (1995) has argued that focus group interviews are particularly appropriate for studying issues of gender and sexuality; these topics, she notes, are ambiguous and highly charged, and the group interactions in a focus group process "can provide richer and more complex information … than individual interviews" (p. 4). The early work of Haug

(1987) also makes a strong case for group interviews when researching gender and sexuality.

Building on their work, I conducted a panel study of five South Asian immigrant girls between December 2001 and March 2002.[1] The study data are based on three focus group interviews followed by in-depth individual interviews and email correspondence. The girls were friends and had known each other for several years, thus constituting a natural peer group. The focus groups were conducted in the home of one of the girls. Each focus group session lasted approximately two hours. The individual interviews lasted between one and two hours each. Conducting the research over time increased the rapport between the interviewer and the study participants, and enhanced the girls' feelings of trust and safety. In addition, my own identity location as a second-generation South Asian American facilitated the establishment of common ground with the participants and helped me to gain the cooperation of their parents early in the study.

The participants were selected through "snowball" sampling: I made the initial contact with one family, whose teenage daughter suggested other likely participants. All the other families who were contacted agreed to participate in the study. Written consent was obtained from parents as well as children.

In this study, the small group size allowed for the accurate collection of data from interviews that were both lengthy and complicated. The group dynamic was fostered by the small size and the intimacy among the participants: the girls' familiarity with one another allowed them to speak freely and to disagree with each other and question one another's perceptions and formulations. The small group size thus allowed for shades and variations of experience and attitude to be fully developed; it also allowed for probe questions and clarifications that could not have been as easily pursued with a larger group. Because of the fact that there were only five participants, my rapport with them was achieved more easily than it might have been with a larger number of girls. As Myers (2000) notes:

> In many situations, a small sample size may be more useful in examining a situation in depth from various perspectives, whereas a large sample would be inconsequential. The goal of a study may be to focus on a selected contemporary phenomenon such as child abuse or addiction where in-depth descriptions would be an essential component of the process. In such situations, small qualitative studies can gain a more personal understanding of the phenomenon and the results can potentially contribute valuable knowledge to the community. (p. 1)

Most importantly, the small group size allowed for a degree of depth and complexity in the discussion that would not have been possible with a larger number of interviewees. Revisiting the issues that emerged in each session, examining them from different perspectives, and unraveling the tangled skeins of meaning contributed to a richer, more finely tuned interpretation than would have been possible with more subjects—the sort of "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) that is imperative to field work of this nature. Similarly, the follow-up interviews and email exchanges gave the girls opportunities to express themselves away from the constraints of the group forum.

Participants

The five focus group participants were all teenage girls whose parents were first-generation immigrants to the U.S. All were of South Asian Indian descent. All the girls had been born in India and brought to the U.S. as infants or toddlers; all were U.S. citizens. The girls will be identified here as Ria (15), Malini (15), Divya (15), Lekha (13) and Kiran (13).[2] The three 15-year-olds were in the same 10th-grade class, while the two 13-year-olds were classmates in the eighth grade. All were from upper middle class homes, with parents in white-collar professions. All were from a small Midwestern community that will be known as "Tiny Town" in this paper.

Interview Protocols

The focus group sessions began with general questions regarding birth dates, family background, siblings, immigration history, and other personal data. Then, a series of questions were asked to prompt discussion about the topic of the research, viz.:

- Are cultural and national identity important issues in your lives?
- Do you think your experiences are different from your parents'?
- What sorts of media do you enjoy?
- What sorts of identity issues have been subjects of discussion in your family settings? How did these discussions go?
- What sorts of identity issues have been subjects of discussion in your peer settings? How did these discussions go?
- Do you think the media are a factor in the ways that identity issues are constructed in these discussions?

As the conversations proceeded, follow-up and probe questions were asked. Although as the focus group moderator I guided the discussion, my participation in the conversations was minimal. The aim of these focus group discussions was to legitimize the voices of the participants and to elicit their constructions of meaning.

The individual interviews were follow-ups to the focus group sessions, and the questions were based on topics that had come up during those discussions.

Analytical Procedures

Both the focus group sessions and the individual interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The transcribed texts were then critically analyzed. Because the study foregrounds the experiences of adolescent girls, the method of textual analysis used is a feminist approach adapted from Frye's (1990) thoughts on interpreting women's experiences—an inductive approach in which significance is accorded to the ways in which shared experiences are voiced in discourse. As she notes:

> [E]ach woman's speech creating context for the other's, the data of our experience reveal patterns both within the experience of one woman and among the experiences of several women. The experiences of each woman and of the women collectively

> generate a new web of meaning. Our process has been one of discovering, recognizing, and creating patterns … [P]attern recognition/construction opens fields of meaning and generates new interpretive possibilities. Instead of drawing conclusions from observations, it generates observations. (p. 179)

Such an approach is key in a research situation where the goal is to develop insights into a relatively unstudied phenomenon and suggest new theoretical directions. In tracking the nascent themes and topics that emerged in the focus group discussions, the interviews, and the emails, close attention was paid to the patterns of experience that resonated among the five girls and recurred in the various exchanges.

From this base, the narrative analysis included analytical techniques suggested by Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Polkinghorne (1988). Polkinghorne's (1988) conception of "plot" in narrative was used as a guiding device to uncover the emergent patterns in the discourses. A plot, in Polkinghorne's formulation, is "an organizing theme that identifies the significance and the role of individual events" (p. 18); it marks relationships among perceptions. Thus,

> emplotment … is a dialectic process that takes place between the events themselves and a theme which discloses their significance and allows them to be grasped together as parts of one story. (p. 19)

In the analysis of the transcripts, I looked for plots that connected events to larger ideas or issues. In analyzing these plots, it was important to note consistencies and variations in the girls' narratives. As Potter and Wetherell (1987) emphasize, the analysis of discourses rests on "the reader's skill in identifying significant patterns of consistency and variation" (p. 169).

A combination of these techniques was employed to track the main elements of the girls' discussions of diaspora identity, gender, and the media.

Analysis

Issues of sexuality surfaced early on in the focus group sessions, and the role of the media entered as a subtext whose presence grew increasingly salient as the discourse developed. The following analysis tracks the trajectory of the discussions, with exemplars provided to illuminate the themes that emerged from the examination and breakdown of the transcripts according to the method described above.

The analysis revealed two main plots at the heart of the girls' constructions of their negotiations of identity: the notion of sexual transgression as cultural impasse, and mediated cultural "border crossings" which tied into the diaspora myth of return to an imaginary homeland. Each of these plots is discussed below.

Media and Sexual Transgressions

In answering the question about discussions of identity and cultural difference in the family setting, Ria spoke immediately of her parents' refusal to allow her to sleep

over at friends' houses, even for all-girl slumber parties or other supervised activities. All of the other girls described similar limitations, that is, parental restrictions over their physical mobility that translated in their minds to control of their bodies. As Lekha noted,

> It really pisses me off … because they have no reason to do it, they just do it to like … I feel like they do it to keep me from doing what I want to do and having fun … They don't trust me. They think I'm like the worst person in the world when it comes to sex.

Divya added, "My mom, she's like … if I say I'm going to go to the mall she's like 'Don't talk to boys!'"

All of the girls noted that their parents had either strict limits or actual prohibitions on dating and interactions with boys. These limits extended to restrictions over the girls' interactions with "American" (non-Indian) girl friends. The restrictions, the girls believed, had to do with parental fears of the possibility of sexual misbehaviors as well as other forms of delinquency such as drug abuse or drinking. These fears played out in the form of a "discipline of the body" that extended to clothing and demeanor and that was related to issues of sexuality.

> Malini: They won't let us wear, like, short skirts or tank tops …
> Kiran: I guess they think boys will look at us or something.

While tensions with parents are a common aspect of adolescence, not unique to the immigrant experience, these conflicts became more acute with regard to culturally specific issues. For example, all three 15-year-olds were involved in an ongoing debate with their parents about attending their school's junior prom the following year. The Indian parents had all forbidden their daughters to attend, because, the girls said, of their fears of an unfamiliar cultural ritual understood only through salacious media frames. As Divya noted, "I can't go to prom because of what they think might happen," a view supported by Ria.

> Ria: I know I'll go. I know I'm going to go. I know I'm going to go. With a boy. But my parents are like, I don't want you to go because of what's going to happen after the dance.
> Researcher: What do they think is going to happen after the prom?
> Ria: We're going to get all drunk and get a hotel room and have sex.
> Malini: That is such a teenage movie stereotype!
> Ria: I know! That's what's in all the movies about the prom but it isn't what everybody does!

Further discussion emphasized parental fears of sexual transgressions that were, the girls believed, based on media stereotypes.

> Divya: We are not allowed to go to dances because they're afraid of things that might happen. If a guy calls and my dad answers the phone and he asks to speak to me I will hear a whole series of questions—Who is that? What did he want? Why is he calling you?—Oh my god it's so crazy. And like dances … my mom I don't think she cares but my dad … they ask about them and find out what we did and they don't trust me, or, I don't know, they trust me but they think

I'll be tempted by drugs or alcohol and all that … They think that, oh my god, everybody's doing it and she's going to get hooked on it too.

All of the girls claimed that they were on the whole prohibited from attending parties and other social events with peers, even those organized by their schools. As Ria explained,

> My parents, they don't want me to go to dances. Because there's all these stories about robberies and guns and alcohol and stuff at like schools and like pot and stuff. My parents always ask me questions when I come home and before I go. They ask me stuff like, was anybody smoking? Was anybody doing drugs? Was anybody in the bathroom most of the time? Did anybody come out looking funny? Stuff like that. And I'm like, "No! Believe me! There was nothing like that!" and they go, "Do you hang out with anybody who does bad stuff?" And I'm like no, I don't hang out with people like that. I'll be like, mom, why does it matter?… and it really gets on my nerves. I feel like they don't trust me at all.

The girls chalked some of these restrictions up to cultural differences, but they also pinpointed the media as key factors in this parental dictum:

Malini: They never went to prom, they don't know about things here, and they believe what's in the movies …

Divya: Everybody knows that those movies are nothing like real life! High school is never like that! But I think our parents believe it.

In fact, the girls perceived their parents to rely on media characterizations of American high school life in the absence of first-hand experience of it. As they pointed out, their parents were unfamiliar with the realities of the U.S. secondary school experience and so obtained their information from largely mediated sources, which the girls dismissed as unrealistic and exaggerated.

Ria: In every single teen chick flick … in every single one it's like there's a girl and a guy and they fall in love and they like do all this crazy stuff and most of the time it's stereotypical … High school is nothing like they have it in the movies! I don't really know, I think my parents might understand that now, but like … the way people are portrayed in these movies, there's always like the hot cheerleader and the hot football player and there's all these segregated groups on there and school isn't really like that …

Malini: My parents, I think they still have the stereotypes about like the drugs and stuff like that.

Divya: Like Malini said, they believe all these dumb stereotypes about the drugs and the drinking and the sex and like all this stuff about "just say no" or whatever and having all these … I've never been asked so I've never had to say no!

Kiran: I don't think anyone in Tiny Town ever *will* ask me!

Media scripts of adolescent sexuality as a crisis were identified by the girls as being particularly influential in guiding parental restrictions over the girls' activities.

Lekha: Another thing is teen pregnancy. I mean, yeah, there's a really high teen pregnancy birth rate and like all that stuff, and yeah it's pathetic and I would never ever dream of doing that. But my parents like say, when they see commercials like that or TV shows about teens having sex, they're like, "Do

> you know anybody who does this? Do you do this?" and they like think I'm
> the worst person in the world when it comes to sex.
>
> Kiran: They think that everything on TV totally applies to you.

The girls' experiences were markedly similar when they discussed intergenera-
tional conflicts, which they saw in terms of cultural difference. For the girls, media
narratives of American high school life stood in contrast to their own experiences of
it; the media narratives of teen sexual excesses, illegal drug and alcohol use, and rigid
gender roles were fantastical and unreal. But to their parents, in the girls' view, "the
lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes [were] blurred" (Appadurai,
1996, p. 35). Their parents' distance from American adolescent culture in small-town
America induced them to construct "protonarratives of possible lives" (Appadurai,
1996, p. 36) drawn from the images and scripts of mainstream media. The girls
deeply resented the ways in which these visions translated into their lives—their
parents' "imagined world" of American adolescence led directly to severe restrictions
on their participation in its quotidian celebrations and rituals (proms, slumber
parties), thus reasserting a difference that the girls did not want to recognize. As
Appadurai (1996) observes, the media offer a furious flow of images and texts in
which reality and fantasy are mixed, and

> the farther away … audiences are from the direct experience of metropolitan life, the
> more likely they are to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even
> fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective …
> (p. 35)

In these scenarios, the girls' perspectives and experiences collided with their
parents' media-derived understandings of the world of the American teenager. Yet
the girls themselves consumed mainstream media; while they saw themselves as
more media-savvy and sophisticated than their parents, their consumption patterns
indicated a different kind of reliance on media scripts, particularly of gender and
sexual behavior.

Crossing Pop Culture Borders

Divya and Lekha self-defined as the heaviest users of mainstream media. Both
confessed to enjoying mainstream movies and television shows. Divya said she
listened to pop music, especially the Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync, but none of the
others shared those interests, which at the time of the interviews enjoyed enormous
popularity among teenagers.

The other girls said they did not watch television or movies, except for the TV
sitcom *Friends*, which all five girls watched regularly, participating in a fan culture
that they shared with "American" friends at school. They enjoyed the show so much
that they bought and exchanged DVDs of different episodes, but they consistently
characterized themselves as critical viewers:

> Ria: Last year I really got into the show *Friends*. Which I guess is unrealistic and
> I know is so stupid and stereotypical but I'm not really influenced by it, if you

> want to talk about media influences … but, I don't know, I just love watching it, I love like how fun they are and how much fun they have …
>
> Divya: Sometimes they're really stupid but it isn't as bad as *Dawson's Creek.*
> Malini: Like *Dawson's Creek* is so retarded. It's just about a bunch of teens and they do this typical teen stuff and none of it is real … And I guess we like watching the stupid chick flicks but not because we think it's real or we want to do it …
> Ria: We think it's funny and hopefully we're not influenced by it.
> Malini: We are not at all.

Again, the girls believed their own oppositional decoding of the television text was diametrically opposed to their parents' dominant reading; the latter, they felt, was unfairly transferred to their own reception of the texts.

> Ria: On *Friends* they're always sleeping with different guys and hopefully I'll never ever do that. I don't want to use that as an example of what a relationship should be.
> Divya: We own DVDs of *Friends* … But my parents are worried about it. They think, if they see me watching *Friends*, oh my God, she's watching this and she'll think they're role models and she's going to go do all these things … but it's, like, no.
> Kiran: Yeah I asked my mom to watch it with me once and it happened to be an episode all about like sexual stuff, and I guess it kind of revolved around sex, but not so much that that was all they talked about, and my mom was like, oh so you like watching this because it's all about sex … [Laughter]

A significant common theme that emerged in terms of media use was the girls' critique of and dissociation from what they declared to be "American" media, which seemed to translate as "white mainstream" popular culture. *Friends* was the only American television show they admitted to watching regularly; while they said they enjoyed the show because it was "fun," they were dubious about their own susceptibility to the ways of life it espoused, and their use of the show was partly a matter of communicatory utility: they watched it in order to be able to converse with non-Indian peers at school. As Ria explained, "At school, if you don't have anything else to talk about, it's like, oh, did you see this movie, or did you watch the Grammys or last night's *Friends*?"

On the other hand, the girls were avid consumers of Indian popular culture, which they actively imported into their lives in various ways. They rented Indian (usually Hindi-language) movies from local Indian grocery stores and restaurants, as well as acquiring them through social networks, they downloaded Indian pop music from the Internet, and they attended Indian movies at local showings. Music was an important arena of cultural consumption for all five of the girls; their musical tastes varied somewhat, as did the meanings they accorded to their listening practices. But all five girls expressed a predilection for Indian popular music, which was closely related to film watching.

> Malini: All the CDs I own are Indian CDs and that's all I ever listen to. All I ever listen to are Indian soundtracks and stuff and that's what I like. It has to have a good downbeat and the words have to make sense.
> Researcher: Where do you get it?
> Malini: We download it off the Internet.

Ria: I *love* Hindi film songs. I *love* Hindi films songs. Even though like I don't even know what they mean—I mean I can understand some things, but sometimes I'm like, um, I don't know what they're saying, but I like the beat and I always end up dancing to them and stuff like that. I don't know, they're just cool, they're just better than American songs. I love listening to them.

Researcher: Do you watch the movies, too, that the songs are from?

Girls: Yeah.

Lekha: All of our … like my mom's friends with all these Indian people … like they'll all get Indian movies and we share them …

Researcher: Do you get together and watch them?

Girls: Yeah, we do.

Divya: I love Indian movies.

The girls' embrace of "Bollywood" films and pop culture typifies contemporary trends. Indian films are currently enjoying burgeoning popularity in the West, but their global distribution has been great for many years, particularly in the Middle East and Europe; the Indian motion picture industry produces some 800 films a year, outstripping Hollywood in its productivity and destabilizing traditional notions of West-to-East cultural and monetary flows (Aftab, 2002; Chute, 2002; Cieko, 2001; La Ferla, 2002; Murphy, 2001; Passage from India, 2000). Aftab (2002) notes that the biggest audience for Indian pop culture has, of late, been so-called "NRIs" or nonresident Indians, loosely defined as anyone of Indian heritage living outside of India. He points out that even people born abroad to Indian parents self-identify as NRIs, which, he says, "suggests that the term Indian denotes a mental rather than a physical state, the community joined up not so much by geography as by a web of shared cultural influences" (Aftab, 2002, p. 92). In Kaleem's analysis, Indian cinema is a key factor in this identificatory cultural web. In this study, too, Indian cinema and its music ranked high as a source of cultural identification.

But the girls were clear that they did not see Indian movies as any more realistic than American ones; cinema texts, for them, offered social constructions that marked the fantastic extremes of the two cultures:

Ria: The movies are not about Indian culture. It's Indian people's fantasies. Because in the movies all those people are rich and they're all, like, they always wear clothes like we do, in fact they wear shorter clothes and more expensive, it's always like a fashion show—they don't really wear Indian clothes.

Malini: I think soon enough Indian movies and American movies are going to be identical.

Significantly, while the girls partly saw Indian films as having the same sort of communicatory utility as *Friends*, they also regarded them as connecting them with the Indian community. Ria said:

The movies give us something to talk about with other Indian people, I guess. They can make us feel more like part of an Indian community, the way Bal Vihar[3] does too.

Their valorization of Indian popular culture was a marker of their need to connect to an India that was, for them, an imaginary world, as distant and unfamiliar as their

American school experiences were to their parents. They were largely uncritical of Indian films and music, refusing to dismiss them as "stupid" or "retarded," as they had American cultural texts. In this, their orientation to a diasporic homeland was one of affirmation and longing. This stands in marked opposition to Kraidy's (1999) finding that Lebanese Maronite youth read Arab television programs and films in a neocolonial vein as representative of a backward and primitive culture. By contrast, these South Asian American teenagers openly admired and enjoyed Indian cultural programming and saw them as avenues to an Indian culture they wanted to embrace.

The girls saw a different role in their lives for the cinema of the South Asian diaspora. Familiar with such films as Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala*, Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham*, and Piyush Dinker Pandya's *American Desi*, they expressed an emotional connection with these films that was distinctly different from the ways in which they related to other media.

> Ria: If there's a film like that playing in town, I'll go see it before I go see anything else. It's like they're about us.
> Malini: Those kinds of movies are more real than any others … I mean, I know they're exaggerations, too, but they are familiar situations.
> Ria: They're sort of like inside jokes. We get them.

The girls all singled out the films' narratives of love and sex, referring specifically to the taboo relationships between Indian girls and men of different racial/cultural backgrounds in both *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Mississippi Masala*. They identified these story lines as salient to their interests. All five girls said they envisioned eventually falling in love with and marrying men—what Malini described as a "Western marriage"—and some of the girls were certain that such a move would precipitate conflicts with their parents, an extension of the frictions they were dealing with as teenagers. Yet in a sense, these diasporic media offered hope. The girls often watched these films with their parents, and sometimes the narratives opened up topics of discussion that eased the cultural chasms between them. "My dad hates *American Desi*," said Kiran. "He thinks we are laughing at him when we laugh at the Indian accents and everything. But my mom likes it and we've had a lot of good discussions about what Indian girls are supposed to be like and stuff like that." Lekha, on the other hand, found that these films further reinforced her parents' resistance to and fear of Western culture. "They think I'm about to fall in love with or sleep with every white guy who comes along. They really have no clue."

Conclusions: Media, Culture, and Difference

Overall, the girls saw themselves as outsiders to both of the spheres they inhabited; they did not self-identify as American, though all of them had been raised in the U.S. and held citizenship. They did classify themselves as Indian, but recognized that their Indianness differed from that of their parents. In fact, the issues of sexuality that marked the divisions between themselves and their parents also demarcated lines of

difference between themselves and their American peers. Their grappling with these issues of culture and difference vis à vis the media environment demanded the exercise of an imaginative agency in carving out a space of gender/sexual identity. As two of the girls observed:

> Ria: I'm figuring things out for myself. The way we have to think about this stuff is different. It's nothing like the relationships on TV where like the popular guy and the popular girl get together … never in my life would I imagine that the way things are on TV are real.
>
> Divya: When I talk to my friends about like certain things, I've even talked to guy friends about this, I've told them I think sex before marriage is wrong, and I don't want to drink, I don't want to do drugs, and they understand that, and some of them feel the same way, they accept it. And some of my other friends—I'm surprised that they can be so stupid when it comes to these things. But we, all of us here, we have to think about these things in a different way, because of Indian values and all that … We can talk to each other.

A number of scholars have commented on the complicated politics of race that position Indian American identities as being something between "near white" and "near black" (Maira, 1998; Mazumdar, 1989; Okihiro, 1994). Sunaina Maira's studies of second-generation Indian American youth and the New York club scene suggest that club "remix" music, which combines traditional Indian rhythms with rap, is an attempt by these youth "to mediate between the expectations of immigrant parents and those of mainstream American culture, by trying to integrate signs of belonging to both worlds" (1998, p. 360).

By contrast, the girls in this study saw both Indian and American popular culture as marking the boundaries of those two worlds, neither of which they claimed as their milieu. Rather than attempting to find a place in both cultural spheres, they recognized the need to assert a new identity position that, in a sense, rejected the options offered by Indian as well as American media texts. As consumers, therefore, their textual readings involve a radical questioning of the sexual mores instantiated by the television shows, films, and popular music they consumed.

Recognizing these texts as unrealistic because of the immense gap between the mediated representations and their own experiences, these girls were seeking an identity position that would take into account their encounters with sexuality as a key aspect of identity formation. The cultural constraints on their lives—both the real restrictions imposed by their parents and the subtler cultural cues that tie female chastity to family honor and the preservation of Indian traditions and heritage—worked to facilitate a critical reading that must be distinguished from the sort of unthinking refusal to recognize the ideological content of media texts interrogated by Rockler (1999) in her study of white female college students' readings of the TV show *Beverly Hills 90210*. Rockler argues that her subjects' perceptions of the "lack of realism" in the show prevented them from engaging in further critique of the show's political and social implications; they dismissed it as "entertainment" which was thus unworthy of further analysis; thus, concludes Rockler, the seemingly oppositional readings they proffer are in fact superficial and ultimately ineffectual.

In this study, too, the girls were aware of the lack of realism in the media they rejected; yet, by contrast, their rejection was borne not of a dismissal of these texts as "just entertainment," but of an acute recognition of the cultural differences and distances that separated their lives from the media portrayals. A number of studies indicate that viewers who are socially marginalized are better able to read media oppositionally than mainstream audiences (see Bobo, 1995; Cohen, 1991; Lind, 1996; Morley, 1992). Given this, it would be a mistake to dismiss the girls' critiques of the texts as naïve or unthinking: their recognition of the identity politics at play speaks to a different interpretation of their viewing positions. Current statistics indicate, for example, that very low percentages of Asian American teens are sexually active, in contrast to other racial groups (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2003); similarly, Asian American girls have a very low incidence of teenage pregnancy (SIECUS, 2002); these figures might corroborate the girls' emphatic assertions that their experiences are nothing like the media representations of teen life, which center on affluent white youth and may be a more accurate and sympathetic portrayal thereof. The girls' lives at home and at school are circumscribed and colored by the cross-cultural currents that traverse them, and their experiences in these "border zones" of youth culture are not represented in the mainstream media.

In contrast, the cinema of the diaspora, with its themes of interethnic love and romance within and outside of the family sphere, offered a framework that resonated with the girls. Perhaps this is because the diaspora films encapsulate and explore the themes of cultural hybridization that the girls are negotiating in their daily lives. If we think of hybridization in terms of the interlacing of the global and the local, a way of understanding the symbolic and material collisions and fusions that mark the new global landscape, then these cinematic representations offer a cultural form in which the seemingly irreconcilable differences between cultures are articulated and worked out. Monocultural forms, by contrast, as the girls observed, mark the poles and never engage in analyses of the complexities of cultural globalization. In representing sexuality, in particular, the micropolitics of cultural hybridity are invisible and therefore untenable.

While sexuality played out, in this study, in terms of intergenerational conflict, it is important not to reduce these tensions to narrow family narratives (as Lowe, 1991, reminds us). Looking at how larger social discourses manifested in media texts are articulated by these girls sheds light on the complicated racial, cultural, gendered, and sexual subjectivities at play in the contemporary U.S.

Hall (1996) offers the idea of "the ethnicity of the margins," an identity position predicated on difference and diversity, "and the consequences which this carries for the process of unsettling, recombination, hybridization and 'cut and mix'— in short, the process of cultural *diaspora-ization*" (p. 447, italics in original). The articulation of identity is an ongoing process that Hall (1996) terms "identification"; cultural discourses define the parameters within which such identifications take shape. Recognizing identity, then, as socially, culturally, and historically contingent, and thus always in flux and contested, is a de-essentializing

move that opens up the idea of change within the discursive possibilities of a specific moment.

For Hall, cultural production is a key part of this process of re-forming ethnic identity; commenting on the work of young black British filmmakers and musicians, he writes that the new cultural politics expressed in these art forms

> marks a real shift in the point of contestation … What is involved is the splitting of the notion of ethnicity between, on the one hand, the dominant notion which connects it to nation and "race," and on the other what I think is the beginning of a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery. (p. 447)

The girls in this study were drawing on media and cultural discourses to frame a sexual identity in a liminal space that invokes Bhabha's (1994) notion of the interstice. In his formulation, interstitial spaces are the borderlands that allow for new forms of consciousness. As he writes,

> What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, "opening out," remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference—be it class, gender or race. Such assignations of social differences—where difference is neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in between—find their agency in a form of the future where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. It is, if I may stretch a point, an interstitial future, that emerges in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 219)

For the girls in this study, sexual self-identification is a political project that is articulated to gender, race, and culture. Inherent in it is a critique of the dominant discourses of assimilation that would draw them into the culturally fetishized role of the hypersexual woman of color, and a concomitant critique of the essentialized, marginal sexual script of the Indian immigrant with its "fantasies of sexual purity and fears of polluting seductiveness [that] are part of a larger ideology of ethnic authenticity at work" in its popular culture forms (Maira, 1998, p. 361). In deploying these critiques, these adolescent girls create the potential for new sexual identities that have emancipatory possibilities for them as girls in-between, or girls embarking on the project of forging new ethnicities in the interstitial cultural spaces that allow for new imaginings of gender and sexuality.

Notes

[1]   The study participants and their parents signed informed consent and assent forms prior to participating in this study. The forms guaranteed them confidentiality and met the requirements of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Iowa Office of Human Subjects, which reviewed and approved this study.

[2]   Names of all participants have been changed to help ensure confidentiality. For the same reason, other personal data have been omitted.

[3]   Bal Vihar refers to the Hindu religious educational program that three of the girls (Ria, Kiran, and Divya) attended.

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