

Introduction

How to Be South Asian in America investigates assimilation narratives concerned with the ambivalence engendered when accommodating a shifting (and thus elusive) national ideal. The title phrase “how to be” signals this study’s central goal of demystifying a purportedly authentic or unchanging American cultural identity. It must immediately be acknowledged that “South Asian” is also a category describing a dynamic “imagined community”¹ of multifarious peoples connected—as conditionally and as meaningfully as any other imagined community—to the Indian subcontinent, in symbolic ways as well as in relation to capital, technology, and movement back and forth. Over the past four decades, the population of diasporic South Asians in the United States, with historical origins in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, or Sri Lanka,² has grown beyond two million. Their communities have thus rather recently³ contributed to American traditions of narrating the nation, a process in which a variety of immigrant groups have participated, admittedly with varied claims to recognized authority. In this book, I look at distinct stories representing the diaspora in the United States which were produced in a shared chronological moment at the turn of the twenty-first century. One of the reasons why studies such as this one are crucial is therefore to update stories of America⁴ to acknowledge the contributions of those who have more recently immigrated and thereafter added unforeseen nuances to the national mythology. Reappraising assimilation in relation to this group of relatively new Asian immigrants

tells us a great deal about American identities in an age of self-conscious transnationality.

Reading interrelated but distinct narratives reveals that newcomers in America will find themselves confronting the stories of those who came before, both the heartening and the horrifying; in relation to such stories as well as those uniquely made available to or claimed by them in their particular time, immigrants navigate their own paths to belonging. In the future, these stories will be tested and may become familiar and beloved ones through repetition, existing alongside or displacing those that have been foundational in the past. For generations after immigration, these stories may seem more or less fitting for representing certain communities and will therefore undergo their own variations. Diversity among immigrants and differential national responses to them, relating to race-ethnicity,⁵ gender, class,⁶ diaspora and so forth, produce an array of possibilities for assimilation. The experience of (at least implicitly) having to identify one's narrative among these possibilities, rather than feeling as if one automatically or innately belongs, is perhaps the only characteristic shared by all American immigrants, across all of their many differences. Paradoxically, this commonality in difference replaces the ethnic sameness that has often been considered a necessary prerequisite for "nation."

The sense of renewal represented by repeated cycles of immigration and thus "Americanization" —as I discuss later in this chapter, a term which is used throughout the study to designate complex sets of phenomena rather than whole-scale assimilation—means that processes of belonging are ongoing rather than reaching a conclusion after which there is no more story to be told. The most useful way to read such narratives is not for an anticipated outcome or plot resolution but instead for the style in which they convey meaning. Most readers would probably agree that stories both reflect and shape our realities; tracing *how* such a process works in discrete contexts and with what implications is one of the main tasks of this book. Treating fictional as well as "factual" contexts emphasizes that there is a constant interplay between imagined and lived possibilities, as narratives of belonging concerning history, community, and subjectivity influence one another. How belonging is allocated both materially and imaginatively has serious consequences for individuals and entire communities. Probing the layers of meaning produced through these intersecting stories about contemporary affiliation results in an expanded vision of what it means to be American today. Given dominant symbolism of America, this effort implicates issues

such as freedom, democracy, and invention; since my focus on transnationalism complicates exceptionalist narratives of the United States, it has the potential to expose otherwise disguised motivations of power and capital, laying the groundwork for rethinking national assimilation as a more open-ended and therefore adequately flexible process. With these priorities, a study such as this is implicitly concerned with diversity as an important element of social justice. Another way in which this book attends to core American themes—for example, equal representation—is by focusing on a nonwhite immigrant community, whose stories have previously been rather marginal to the study of assimilation, as I describe later.

This approach exposes prominent paradoxes related to “belonging”—being a recognized part of something, being suitable, fitting—which are re-created by the more or less continuous surges of immigration from across the world to the United States dating back to the start of European colonization. Each racial, religious, or otherwise distinct group in the country has encountered and continues to encounter these paradoxes. Even as each community repeats some of the patterns for assimilating established by earlier groups, it nonetheless experiences the process as if new because of its own choices about, possibilities for, and limits to being included within existing national narratives. As immigrants engage with assimilation expectations, in both established and novel ways, they add their own versions to the overall story of the nation. Given a history of academic and other disagreement about the definition and import of assimilation, it remains a vital process to examine in American public culture⁷ precisely because it impacts every one of the diverse groups that have relocated to the United States. Across the demographic diversity of these groups, one commonality is each group’s confrontation with influential ideologies of belonging. These experiences, taken in comparative terms, make visible various “stories of America.”

What assimilation to the nation symbolizes, what and who constitutes it, shifts with each group and with the groups’ interactions with one another as well as their engagement with immigrant histories that already exist. There are also local and regional instantiations of becoming American, or Americanization. What stays the same is the structure of the process: an existing demographic of people into which a new group is trying—in response to their own unique, firsthand experiences—to become part of the nation. You have coexisting stories by “old timers,” often responses to newer stories, which reveal assumptions about what immigration and belonging should mean. These ideologically as well as

emotionally laden descriptions collectively cohere in a resulting narrative of America which cannot always be predicted, nor can differing visions always easily be reconciled. Americanization programs have discovered this in the past when they were unable to achieve measurable success in assimilating newcomers. Across variations in accounts of being American, the structural necessity of *having* a story maintains. What also remains the same is that the genre of assimilation narrative continues to serve as a reference point; there are certain aspects of Americanization which are consistent even as the details and the emphases change. As with coming-of-age stories, which can never be universal because of the diversity of human experience, there are nonetheless shared characteristics that make them of a type. Such is also true with stories about Americanization. New immigrants are inevitably responding to older stories in crafting their own and are thus participating in the intertextual evolution required for any genre to be viable into a changing future.

To analyze the genre of Americanization narratives, in this book, I closely read stories from published fiction, independent film, original ethnographic material, and contemporary scholarly theories. Throughout, I insist on a transnational framework for assimilation narratives in order to complicate ideologies of belonging that are too often taken for granted rather than being critically unpacked. I embed my original research and conclusions in intellectual discussions in a number of different disciplines that have addressed questions of belonging in relation to processes of immigration, assimilation, and diasporization. While each of these has been well studied in the humanities, the social sciences, or both, combined attention to them and their relation to one another is a rather new way to approach any of them, since analyses of immigration and assimilation have taken the nation (unsurprisingly but not inevitably) as the subject of most importance, while diaspora studies⁸ have tended to focus on a site of dispersal and the possibility of return. Arguing that narratives attendant to nationalisms are no less relevant to understanding transnationalism (and vice versa), as other scholars of cultural studies are also doing today, I work to shift the traditional focus of many previous examinations. This also represents an intervention in postcolonial and Asian American studies, through a simultaneous engagement with each, which historically have tended not to be brought together. In addition to the synthesis of theoretical discourses particularly germane to postcolonial, American, and gender studies, another unprecedented aspect of this book is its sustained attention to Guyanese people of Indian origin, whose informative histories as indentured laborers in the

British Empire have received scant scholarly attention. Adding ethnography to my literary analysis with the chapter on Guyanese Americans, I point out how reading varied cultural “texts” reflects a commitment to diversity at all levels, including in methodology.

Such an approach means that the format of this study is distinctive, even in the context of other scholarship with a similar focus on South Asians. Following prominent scholars such as Rajini Srikanth, who have contributed to the growing “visibility that South Asian American writing enjoys today” (5), it is useful to analyze fairly well-known South Asian literary texts in conjunction with diasporic assimilation narratives which have not received the same degree of attention as others. Therefore, looking variously at narratives which have benefited from scholarly analysis, nonnormative (e.g., queer) accounts, and an original ethnography which was produced through research for this book, *How to Be South Asian in America* synthesizes a number of different discourses to produce a distinctive new form that showcases how the stories take unprecedented shapes which nevertheless allude to repeated themes from the past. This perspective allows for a more expansive view of subjects which are often studied within a single disciplinary framework or have concerned past immigration but have not subsequently been reassessed. The multidisciplinary, multidimensional perspective represented by this study thereby works to deconstruct familiar narratives, names, and symbols in order to examine them anew, to measure their ongoing applicability, to question them; the ultimate goal is to describe what cultural work these narratives, names, and symbols perform as well as what this may mean for the people whose realities are shaped through them.

South Asian accounts of belonging represent another chapter in the ongoing American story, a chapter which is distinctive because, prior to the current self-consciousness about globalism, South Asians were already “global.” On the Indian subcontinent, longstanding cultural heterogeneity plus a host of colonial imports has meant that definitions of identity⁹ and citizenship were created, reinvented, tested, and challenged over several centuries. In the twentieth century, actual and symbolic transfigurations of boundaries—always dislocating and often accompanied by violence—led to the reorganization of millions of people, whose physical conditions, self-perceptions, and stories about themselves were inevitably changed. For South Asians in diaspora around the globe, often moving due to the machinery of the British Empire, dramatic reorderings of the subcontinent combined with their own migratory journeys consequently result in complicated matrices of identification and

affiliation. Even as people in the past were perhaps more global than we might commonly believe (as powerfully narrated in Amitav Ghosh's anthropological history, *In an Antique Land*), the sheer scope is impressive of the diaspora of South Asians migrating along the networks created by the British "Raj." This legacy is the reason why today there are substantial communities of South Asians throughout the world, from North America to Africa to the Caribbean, most often in former British colonies. The national and regional histories of far-flung sites of relocation also became part of South Asian stories, informing national assimilation narratives for those who may have subsequently migrated elsewhere and again. In the context of ever-evolving machineries of imperialisms, this means that dispersal from South Asia to the heart of empire itself (whether the former British or the "new" American one) continues to change the meaning of "the West." It should also not be underestimated the degree to which, previously, supposed citizenship in the British Empire and contemporary knowledge of the lingua franca (i.e., English) has made migration seem possible, in ways that are not as salient for groups other than South Asians.

As diasporans temporarily categorized according to the U.S. census as an "Asian" group,¹⁰ South Asian American stories are thus uniquely revealing of the ongoing, collective cultural work that produces meanings of Americanization and the nation. By including a relatively new immigrant group in traditions of Americanization stories, this study makes an important contribution to American literary history by allowing us to examine how representations of assimilation have persisted or changed over time and across communities. Throughout the country's history, attitudes about immigrant assimilability have been strongly shaped by prevailing ideologies of nationalism, internationalism, religion, gender, class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Every group (e.g., indigenous peoples, the first European colonists, and the latest immigrants arriving from all over the world) has had to negotiate the politics of their historical moment along with different communities across shared spaces. After the creation of an official nation-state, along with individual differences among immigrants, modifications to immigration policy based on particular cultural and material investments continued to result in new stories of national identification. Because of such ongoing processes and also as a result of South Asians' altering their own strategies for inclusion, they were differentially afforded Americanization at the end of the twentieth century than they were at the beginning, a trend toward variable assimilation that has also affected many other ethnic groups.

Among the latest in repeated waves of immigration, South Asian diasporans are no doubt “in the American grain,”¹¹ but their histories also result in specifically layered narratives of belonging which shape and are shaped by dominant interpretations of assimilation. These narratives are not only relevant in themselves but may well help to clarify the experiences of other immigrant groups, both verifying and challenging versions of American assimilating that have become influential. For example, South Asians re-present a dialectic that has existed since the United States was first invented. As Simon Schama writes in *The American Future: A History*, “the rumble of anxiety first expressed by the Founding Fathers, that the unwashed might overrun the purity of the political nation they had made, never really goes away. Every time the American economy hits a reef, the last on the boat are usually those whom nationalist politicians want to throw from the decks” (243). In tracing the American story, Schama points out that deep ambivalence about newcomers has always existed alongside narratives of the “social miracle by which the most oppressed peasant or laborer could be transformed in America into a free citizen.” Especially in the case of immigrants who seem exotic or unfamiliar to normative Anglo-European culture, repeated questioning about who is more or less acceptable undermines a vision of America’s “public image” as “one of the indiscriminate embrace of the unfortunate” (242).

Accordingly, the chapters of this book reflect continuity and divergences over time in the experiences of different American immigrant communities, suggesting shifting meanings for some of the most important personal and collective investments people hold. For instance, even as the familiar association of America with expanded economic opportunities is central to many assimilation stories—as was confirmed in my interviews with Indo-Guyanese Americans, discussed in chapter 4—it was not a primary theme in South Asian American literary and film texts. Another common element in the story of Americanization which is not discussed in the chapters is that of religion; the reason for this is that the stories themselves rarely highlighted it, and subtle references to it did not seem to result in striking patterns for close reading. This narrative gap is potentially worth further exploration but may provisionally be explained by an assumption that South Asian religions—often conflated with Hinduism, which is the religion from the subcontinent most represented in the United States—are “ways of life” rather than theology, as Vinay Lal describes (76). As compared to racist stereotypes associated with anti-Islamic attitudes on the rise since 9/11, some religions

have historically not invoked large-scale cultural conflict in the United States, perhaps because they are perceived to be reliably nonviolent and nonthreatening or because they are nonevangelical. As another possible explanation for the seeming lack of salience of religion in the selected South Asian narratives, dreams of religious freedom which may have lured earlier immigrants cannot be considered uniquely North American possibilities, based on ongoing (even if often failed) projects for secularism on the subcontinent and, even more strikingly, the thorough intermingling of religions in Guyana, both of which thwart assumptions of religious orthodoxy.

To connect South Asian American texts with those related to previous immigrant generations is therefore to provide a bridge for extending into the future the story of the United States, which is being (re)written every day. South Asian Americans have received growing attention within the academy only in the past two decades but have often popularly been credited with assimilatory success (usually meaning in a professional, educational, or economic sense). What is not necessarily part of the broader national consciousness is that—like any other immigrant group, in terms that are both localized and national—their population growth, monetary investments, cultural contributions, and political integration all reflect existing and evolving (im)possibilities for assimilation. To trace their contemporary politics of belonging is to deepen our awareness of how members of the national collective continue to contend with varied issues of legitimization (i.e., one's right and ability to belong) pursuant to immigrating. This awareness is no less important for Americans who are descendants of immigrants rather than immigrants themselves, because narratives of belonging implicate all groups in the nation, yoking them to one another even when the relationships are fraught with fears of Otherness rather than predicated on commonality.

Since scholars in multiple disciplines have demonstrated the relative invisibility of Asian immigration stories in U.S. public culture, more studies such as this are necessary and important. Two of Ronald Takaki's influential books which undertook to correct omissions of Asian history from immigration studies point to the type of intervention they represent in their very titles, namely *Strangers from a Different Shore* and *In a Different Mirror*. Contrasted with the "different" stories represented in Takaki's work, Americanization studies historically tended to take Anglo-Americans as the representative figures, which resulted in a poor fit (i.e., no place to belong) for Asian and other nonwhite immigrants. In the past decades, scholarly attention to East Asian American, especially

Chinese American, stories has grown. Contributing to this new tradition of expanding the frame of reference to include “different” stories of immigration and assimilation, *How to Be South Asian in America* provides a counterpoint to familiar narratives. It joins other contemporary assimilation scholarship which has the same goal, including comparative studies, examinations (rather than assumptions) of “whiteness,” and attention to Americans marginalized along other axes of belonging and identity in addition to race-ethnicity, religion, or class.

Bearing in mind such diversity, this study exposes how (popular perceptions notwithstanding) *no single narrative* can adequately represent belonging in—often interpreted as “assimilating to”—America. Instead, each immigrant group has had to struggle to identify an intelligible narrative among those available to them. For instance, neither “melting pot” nor any other popular descriptor has collectively been deemed adequate to represent centuries of newcomers affecting and being affected by the nation. The two epigraphs that open this book confirm the unreliability of nonetheless dominant stories about America, especially ones which focus on success, abounding freedom, and limitless agency. Neil Gaiman and Gish Jen both suggest that the “truths” implied by narratives signifying the American Dream require much more careful interpretation than is usual. In fact, by shaping, altering, and sustaining different versions of “Americanness,” the circulation of these stories dramatically affects how one interprets the national social order. Feminist critic Susan Stanford Friedman writes that narratives “constitute primary documents of cultural expressivity. Narrative is a window into, mirror, constructor, and symptom of culture. Cultural narratives encode and encrypt in story form the norms, values, and ideologies of the social order” (8–9). Polysemic narrations of nation can thus be read for their influence on identity discourses which, in turn, modify interpretations of Americanization and the narratives describing it. These shifting grounds mean that the import of stories like the American Dream, despite their pervasiveness in immigrant imagination and implicit assumptions to the contrary, cannot be definitively ascertained. Instead, these stories are constantly being rewritten, like any tale worth adapting for a new generation of reader-listeners.

Indeed, as much as immigration policy and attitudes have changed over time, so too has the meaning of the American Dream. Although it is a shared narrative that might seem self-explanatory, it is individually meaningful for people and there are also interpretations specific to different communities which have accrued to the notion. It has tended to

signify “better,” but “better” in what sense? For laborers across the world looking to expand their economic and work options, those looking to escape famine or conflict, “better” may represent financial stability and security. For refugees without a state—victims of natural disasters or wars—“better” has meant actual safety as well as a place in the world through relocation. For more elite professionals, “better” may have meant temporary sojourn, as has also been true for certain less economically or professionally privileged laborers; in such cases, the American Dream may simply have meant opportunity rather than a desire to become a person identified with a different nation or identity. For South Asian immigrants, the American Dream has been as inchoate as for any and every other group. It has represented expanded opportunities in educational, professional, and economic terms but also the recognition of affiliations which are complicated and layered. In second-generation South Asian stories which I examine, meanwhile, there is an implicit assumption that the American Dream has been achieved; the protagonists are Americans with a degree of financial privilege and with easy access to higher education, whose struggles with assimilation (to both the nation and to their immigrant communities) are most focused on what I call “anxieties of authenticity,” as developed in chapter 4. These anxieties are produced because, for the children of South Asian immigrants who are part of the diaspora, there is always another site of identification than the United States which plays a part in their negotiations of national belonging.

Contextualizing contemporary Asian American stories within histories of immigrant narrativity, this study also examines global relationships which coexist with national loyalties, thus adding something distinct to what has routinely been undertaken in studies of assimilation. Transnational analyses have historically been lacking in the way that assimilation was interpreted. As sociologist Monisha Das Gupta notes in *Unruly Immigrants*, similarly to most other immigrant historiography, “the story of South Asian immigration to the United States has not been framed transnationally until recently. It has been narrativized instead within a conventional and nationalist framework of assimilation and cultural pluralism,” which she believes has led to an “impoverished” theoretical framework and the posing of only “modest questions” (20). Like Das Gupta, I too am interested in shifting our focus to larger questions concerning ambivalence, capitalism, and (trans)nationalism rather than simply describing identity choices. By doing so, I am able to talk about specific ways that particular narratives of belonging have been transformed because of international, transnational, and globalization

ideologies which have pervaded American and other cultures in the past several decades. Such a methodology also allows for a more customized approach to the groups in question because the links that they themselves draw to other parts of the world are foregrounded rather than being either ignored or considered solely as problems for Americanization. For instance, since India was once the jewel in the crown of the empire and a major icon of colonization and imperialism, South Asian narratives are highly revealing about the way belonging and marginalization operated in the imaginary of the Raj, as a backdrop to the American imaginary. Also, tracing how a group of people shift from South Asia to North America, now sites of the two biggest democracies in the world, we find an emphatically (trans)national representation of Americanization.

Furthermore, implicated in “post-’s” including colonialism, modernism, communism—and, some scholars argue, nationalism—South Asians have settled in large numbers in the United States only since 1965, when globalization has often been interpreted as an immanent challenge to nation-bound affiliations. At the same time, global capital’s seeming hegemony elicits resistance and suspicion, meaning that globalization can, ironically, be read as shoring up certain models of “nation.” The interplay between such challenge and affirmation is worth closely examining, as it is a defining phenomenon in the lives of vastly differentiated people and, if in a largely symbolic sense, makes more porous the line between here and there, East and West, rich and poor, us and them, insider and outsider, and citizen and alien. South Asian communities, with their own internal diversity as well as their noticeable differences from the majority race in the United States, are exceptionally well positioned to represent such “post-”related border crossings. And diasporization itself is one important means for reading our contemporary global cultures and their various investments. Historically in the United States, policy, popular culture, and individuals themselves might have represented essential ethnic identities as a given, whereas now national assimilation has become conspicuously infused with variety because of all the cultural mixing that has reshaped it. It is no longer what it was, with new layers being added all the time; because the story does not end, it is necessary to record it at its moments of articulating and rewriting, looking at its reflection back to history and forward into the future—for the ways it may create new, different, perhaps better, and perhaps no better versions of belonging that are appropriate or adequate to experience, to desire, to practicality.

Instead of affirming American exceptionalist rhetoric, which many previous readings of assimilation seemed to do, this study theorizes that

Americanization is not a measurable or achievable goal but rather a process reflecting the evolving cultural and material investments of different constituencies. Furthermore, my reading strategies reveal that national assimilation is but one among a globalized set of processes representing how people negotiate being part of a collective, whether defined by nation, religion, race, diaspora, or something else. Thus, Americanization represents one of many discourses of authenticity, reflecting a relationship of proving loyalty to earn belonging. Based on these interpretations of assimilation, South Asian accounts of Americanization are best viewed as narrative performances according to which people are rendered legible within specific contexts and in certain moments. Their narratives about America represent (trans)national processes full of contradictions and challenges, with an overall implication that there is a continuing (sometimes urgent) need for diverse and evolving political projects toward cultural and social equality rather than an often celebrated assumption that we have achieved a utopian, new-world American Dream.

Studying assimilation and the American Dream by connecting varied stories, communities, and ideas, the following chapters are concerned with narratives as well as epistemologies of belonging. While the chapters historicize an Asian American group recently immigrating to the United States, they also trouble the possibility of definitively “naming” them. The dialectical tension between confident knowledge and dynamic unknowability is thus one of the important ones maintained throughout the chapter discussions. In addressing such conceptual binaries, I note the particular shape they have taken in narrative or history and ask how they invalidate or make possible different projects for belonging. For instance, the supposed incompatibility of nationalism and diasporic affiliation is very informative in understanding the negotiations required of immigrants attempting to find a role for themselves within narratives of the nation. Similarly, supposedly assimilated versus “ethnic” identities are telling about the assumptions which inform particular notions of Americanization. Paying close attention to the details of South Asian narratives of belonging is therefore a means of deconstructing multiple ideological oppositions and noticing the relationships between supposedly incompatible binary positions.

One of the most significant ways this study works toward its overall deconstructive strategy is by calling attention to pervasive themes that powerfully strain against easy categorical certainties. To start, recognizing that immigrant and diasporic identities are often presumed to be mutually incompatible, I instead consider how processes

of diasporization and assimilation are mutually informative rather than in conflict with (or somehow irrelevant to) one another. Related themes include mixing, hybridity, and code-switching: repeated imagery in all the narratives collectively works to gainsay politics of authenticity that limit the types and shapes of stories by which diverse experiences can be narrated. “Authenticity” is a topic implicitly referenced throughout this book which is interrogated in depth in chapter 4. Authenticity concerns about assimilating to both national and diasporic communities result in a thoroughgoing ambivalence, which need not be deemed paralyzing but can instead be interpreted as meaningfully productive because it is a continually negotiated synthesis of seeming opposites. Such motifs are furthermore part of a universal story concerning the ways in which all people necessarily exceed the boundaries of affiliative and other categories simply because there is no one standard configuration that can encompass an individual and his or her life. Instead, all people are only partially able to conform to any *one* category, such as American, Asian, woman, lesbian, or working class, because of all the axes by which people choose and are assigned names for themselves. In chapter 4 the final discussion of my primary texts, I tie together various threads from the preceding chapters in order to point out that it is only in acknowledging the limited fit of any singular narrative that Americans may best be able to recognize diverse stories of belonging, which are as much provisional and performed as they are nonetheless “real.”

In light of the often uneven and conflicting forms of these assimilation narratives, I argue that it is more useful to close read them collectively as accounts of “ambivalent Americanization” rather than as stories of total assimilation or ethnic separatism. This inadequate and polarized—albeit common—view of immigration fails to reflect the complexity with which immigrants and other minorities negotiate various affiliations along with those imagined in prevailing national cultures. As an alternative to such simplifications, my overarching interest lies in situating representations of ambivalent assimilation within a tradition of national stories and “narratives of identity” (Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 205) that define America. I examine commonly shared or contested contemporary visions of assimilation as stories that transform, as well as reflect, projects of national belonging. Debates about assimilation energize discussions among sociologists and historians and broadly across the social sciences, offering useful mediations on the subject of Americanization as expressed through art, politics, language, food, and culture. Still, literary studies strike me, with my admittedly biased perspective

within an English department, as a rewarding framework within which to analyze assimilation because, as cultural theorist Peter Hitchcock argues in *Imaginary States*, “a good deal of transgressive national critique occurs in the literary” (9). While I adopt strategies and consider insights from multiple academic disciplines, my overall argument is therefore grounded in practices developed within literary studies, even when the texts I read come from ethnographic sources or are stories told in films. The implications of such a study are not “merely” literary, however, as I stress throughout.

Indeed, South Asian narratives are best viewed as part of an ongoing series of opportunities for all Americans to reassess central stories of themselves and their continuing fitness for many (or any) individuals within the nation. Alluding to shared historical experiences on the subcontinent and in the United States, the narratives I discuss commonly pointed out paradoxes of supposed national inclusion versus ethnic exclusion, reflected multiple possibilities for choosing family and community, and highlighted the unpredictable influences of class and gender as well as race on assimilation experiences. As with many other immigrant and ethnic minority groups, South Asian Americanization routinely reflected disappointment in the reality of American “freedom,” even as its possibilities framed every story. In the interaction between text and context, individual and community, nation and diaspora, then, unique narratives develop which both define personhood and reshape the way we name things, including the locations in which we reside.

Strategic Readings

My analysis of ambivalent Americanization is an example of “Asian American postcolonial feminist cultural studies” because I integrate scholarly methodology associated particularly with these intersecting disciplinary areas. This interdisciplinary methodology is necessary for substantiating one of my central premises, that just as Americanization is usefully reconceived of as a process through which national belonging is negotiated, diasporization is most usefully approached as a coinciding and coterminous series of strategies for relating to inter-, sub-, or supranational communities. In the following chapters, my joint attention to these unpredictable and creative processes is often precariously maintained because of their dynamism, but I strive to work through the tensions thus revealed. This suits my conviction that responsible theorizing about issues of deep cultural significance means constantly subjecting

one's analysis to self-critique to prevent the creation of a new master narrative which will sediment itself and resist future reassessment. I hope to avoid this and related tendencies, such as overstating subversive possibilities suggested by certain important antiessentialist discourses, including hybridity, cosmopolitanism, and diaspora. Instead, by attending to multiple narrative arcs and academic threads which reflect contemporary thinking, I aim for a "thick description" developed from analyzing "densely textured facts."¹² In this specific case, the academic fields of postcolonial, Asian American, and gender studies are most relevant for my study of immigrant communities historically connected to the Indian subcontinent, men and women who are at the same time ethnic minorities in the United States and diasporans indelibly influenced by the former British Empire. Any description of such communities *must* take multiple concerns into account, which is why I synthesize findings from several disciplines.

Furthermore, although all the stories in this book concern South Asian Americanization, there are many significant differences among them, not the least of which are self-positioning, class politics, and hoped-for outcomes. Many of the South Asian stories represent large demographics within the diaspora, namely Indian and Pakistani, while the Indo-Guyanese American ethnographies are part of a less often visible and much less well-represented constituency, especially within published fiction or scholarship. I refuse to consider certain authors, filmmakers, or interviewees as "representative" of South Asians in general; they must be viewed instead as participants in a wide-ranging diasporic dialogue. The media and genres themselves give rise to different types of stories or different emphases within stories, whether because of material constraints, expected audiences, or other reasons, some of which I consider in specific chapters. In each case, I have chosen from available stories that focus on assimilation and that have seemed relatively influential, whether in local or other contexts. By pointing out that the narratives are shaped by multiple, often contradictory impulses—including personal agency,¹³ inequalities of gender, race, class, and the like, and conventions of societies as well as genres—I am able to reevaluate tendencies to normalize South Asian American or other experiences. Those tendencies lead to defining immigrants as either completely assimilated to or alienated from dominant culture.

As is common in cultural studies (CS),¹⁴ I examine narratives in different arenas of social production and different media, specifically by pairing literary criticism with readings of popular culture and contemporary

historiographies. The first chapter is an introduction to stories of Americanization, the second chapter analyzes quasi-official and personal accounts of recent immigration and assimilation, and the final two focus on fictional interpretations of the same processes. This interdisciplinary approach combines attention to the institutional effects of new types of belonging as well as the imaginative responses that they evoke. Such a methodology ideally allows for a reasonably full representation of communities in relation to ongoing issues of Americanization. This suits my intention of weaving different sets of stories together in a way that appropriately reflects the heterogeneity of South Asian America without settling on any single story as *the* defining one for this large and diverse immigrant and diasporic population.

Analogous types of cultural studies have evolved in multiple directions in the American academy from their Birmingham beginnings and the influence of scholars such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. Rather than considering culture to be innate or invariable, these strategies examine what Fredric Jameson defined as “a vehicle or a medium whereby the relationship between groups is transacted” (34). Across their variation, the proliferation of CS approaches have in common an interest in identifying a core set of issues to be approached through interdisciplinarity when no one discipline or approach seems to suffice. This approach ideally promotes collaborative theorizing and has the benefits of combining multiple perspectives on a singular subject of study in order to develop an understanding of broader cultural patterns.

However, certain aspects of CS and its historical practice have evoked criticism. For instance, interdisciplinary techniques can be a source of great anxiety and can arouse resistance even though the *idea* of them is often lauded in the American academy. Since this type of work occurs between or in the margins of traditional disciplines and often involves “a provocative set of critical interventions,” according to Hitchcock (8), CS has raised many questions over the past four decades about the possibility that such intellectual activity can actually satisfy conflicting expectations among academic fields. To engage in “creatively eclectic methodological strategies,” as Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson positively describe such a process in terms of ethnography (25), is also to cut across the boundaries between different disciplines without giving a supposedly complete account in terms of any one field, which may mean disappointing many readers rather than fully satisfying anyone. In addition to such anxieties, among earlier versions of CS, there was a tendency to assume a national (rather than global or “glocal”) framework,

which many critics believe has foreshortened otherwise useful analyses. Yet another criticism that is often levied against contemporary CS is that the central focus on Marxism that accompanied the genesis of the discipline has been lost, although I would argue that, to a greater or lesser extent, most serious efforts at CS retain an interest in “cultural materialism.”¹⁵ That is the case in *How to Be South Asian in America*, and parts of my analysis, particularly in chapter 2, are highly attuned to the ways in which interpretations of class influence other cultural outcomes, without my offering a Marxist analysis per se.

What, then, is the value of my cultural studies approach? The value lies in the structure provided for posing theoretical questions in specific moments and places, in relation to particular people. Ideally, the bigger picture (which has been envisioned variously by anthropologists as “collective existence,” “an ensemble of texts,”¹⁶ or a “cumulative text”¹⁷) comes into sharper focus through the answers gleaned in the process, such that cultural patterns become more easily discernible. Even if this process does not quite succeed as a researcher might wish, the cultural work accomplished in doing the analysis both documents and contributes to meaning making. Furthermore, CS befits this type of project because of priorities which have proven valuable across diverse types of scholarly activity, particularly what I consider a tendency to “pluritopic rather than monologic” argument making, as Françoise Lionnet puts it (31). This means investigating how a certain cultural phenomenon or discourse has been generally interpreted, followed by an interpretation of its effects in localized sites or circumstances, without a privileging of one dominant narrative. Interpretations of “culture”¹⁸ may vary in focusing on patterns of behavior, sets of beliefs or shared understandings, human intellectual and artistic work, the use of particular metaphors to describe human experiences, or what anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls “webs of significance” (“Thick Description” 5). In all these cases, CS offers sets of strategies for attending to non-totalizing systems by which humans understand the world around them. By examining how human activity is simultaneously lived *and* symbolic, CS methods have the possibility of doing justice to what Arjun Appadurai imagines are “fundamentally fractal” cultural forms which deconstruct “boundaries, structures, or regularities” (46), for instance, the traditional binary of “popular” versus “high” culture. The implications of such deconstruction are political, as well as literary and sociological, since the focus on localizations of broader patterns may prevent the type of false universalizing, essentializing, or overgeneralizing common to certain projects of the Enlightenment, Western modernity, and other forms of imperialism.

Thus, *How to Be South Asian in America* suggests interrelations between several forms concerned with a shared subject of representation (i.e., assimilation and diasporization) and my discussion moves between different cultural modalities. Unpacking cultural “texts” in “context,” adding the concrete, detailed, and precise to theoretical understandings of culture, this method allows for combined attention to the effects of globalizations¹⁹ as well as to particular histories within transnational circuits. With regard to reading literary as well as other texts, Jenny Sharpe for one has convincingly traced how novels represent “possible worlds rather than probable ones,” which “stage social contradictions and strive to resolve them” (*Allegories of Empire* 21–22), but obviously there are many things which literary works cannot deliver. Noting the distinct forms of cultural work performed in different types of documents, I call attention to the metaphors and symbols that cathect the idea of Americanization. But I am always conscious of what Ato Quayson calls the “mutual interdependency and antagonism” of the pull toward “discourse analysis” as compared to “the material, social and economic factors” (6) informing assimilation narratives. As demonstrated in debates within feminist, subaltern, postcolonial, Asian American, and cultural studies, these pulls remind us of vexed questions about praxis, or the “real-world” implications of our theories. Nonetheless, as Asian Americanist Anita Mannur usefully reminds, in the study *Culinary Fiction*, literary and material concerns are mutually informative; she writes, “To frame literary analyses anchored in literary theory—structural, post-structural, psychoanalytic—as inimical to the conventions of material analysis . . . is to perpetuate a false divide,” and she instead describes her version of literary critique as “an ethical-political project for it recognizes that Asian American literature is aesthetic and political” (16). Similarly, in this book, I view moving between different intellectual registers (e.g., ethical, aesthetic, political, identarian) as a way to acknowledge simultaneously both the metaphorical and the material affects of immigration.

Synthesizing theories developed through a variety of CS strategies, I nonetheless uniquely shift the focus to ambivalence and belonging, while maintaining a political commitment to understanding the materiality of culture. Certain contemporary applications of CS methods, especially in relation to feminisms, have been of notable relevance as I developed these analyses²⁰ and I find Jigna Desai’s discussion of the Indian film industry especially useful for contextualizing my readings of diasporization. Like Desai, I am intent on “forging a fractured and flawed methodology of theorizing transnational cultural politics through difference”

(*Beyond Bollywood* 22). I am also very sympathetic to Mannur's description of her methodology, such that "it is less about understanding what the literature tells us about how and what South Asians in diasporas eat, and more about how food serves as an idiom to imagine subjectivity" (18). Looking at the idioms of Americanization stories, I too see these as "merely one constellation of texts within a wider series of discursive formations that enable us to better negotiate the limits of the knowable, furthering our understanding of how material practices are written about in South Asian" works (Mannur 19). Through various threads highlighted in my argument, I theorize about diasporization and assimilation as a contribution to dialogues sustained by and also initiated in studies such as those described in this section.

(Trans)Nationalism: Reading Americanization and Diasporization

As revealed through my particular deployment of CS, South Asian Americanization narratives illuminate contemporary globalized anxieties about belonging and identity, (trans)nationality, and mechanisms of cultural interpenetration, a palimpsestic²¹ set of processes related to diasporization. "Diasporization" refers to the historical dispersal of South Asian Americans from one nation to another, as well as representing ongoing, in-process, extranational networks that connect South Asians across multiple (re)locations. My corresponding use of "(trans)national" both presences and distinguishes related processes. Analyzing the "cultural logics" of transnationality, anthropologist Aihwa Ong usefully elaborates that

trans denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something. Besides suggesting new relations between nation-states and capital, transnationality also alludes to the *trans*versal, the *trans*actional, the *trans*lational, and the *trans*-gressive aspects of contemporary behavior and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism. (4)

Similarly alluding to multiplicity and changeability within specific fields of power, (trans)national analyses in this book attend to intertwined discourses and, particularly, contradictory systems. For example, since South Asian communities are often perceived to be highly successful in

adapting to host cultures, they are labeled and thus treated in particular ways, including as an American “model minority.”²² However, they are also affiliated with a diaspora of peoples throughout the world that serves to prevent absolute or seamless assimilation, which is furthermore hampered by their racial-ethnic difference from their new nation’s majority. These are particularly salient aspects of South Asian Americanization that offer us useful insights into the nature of assimilation as a process in general, since they point to the variable and sometimes inconsistent ways in which immigrants have always come to “belong” (or not) in America.

Within the widely distributed—and often polarized—field of possibilities, it is particularly important to define how the terms “assimilation” and “Americanization” are deployed in this book. I reject the interpretation that cultural assimilation is a discrete enactment of homogenization by which one thing conforms to the preexisting character of another. Whereas some interpretations of minority assimilation assume a unidirectional transformation through which newcomers adopt the customs and attitudes of the prevailing culture as they become part of “the melting pot,”²³ my examination highlights multiple valences of immigrant identification. I argue that “becoming American” should be interpreted as a process in which there is always some aspect of volition, adaptation to the country combined with the maintenance of ethnic or other identifications predating immigration, and inevitable ambivalence about transformations that are engendered by migration.

With an emphasis on multiple directions of influence, Americanization, too, can be recuperated from a common association with the casting off of any previous allegiances, cultural practices, world views, or values. Especially as I approach the conclusion of this study, I use the term “accommodation” in order to emphasize how individuals reconcile themselves to their societies through alternative strategies as well as in conjunction with normative ideologies.²⁴ I am interested in how South Asians “imagine, how they represent themselves, figurally in the visual and literary field, how they position themselves in the narratives of self and society,” as theorist Stuart Hall put it in another context (“Living with Difference”). After reading their stories, I conceive of “assimilation” as the processes reflecting how newcomers respond to specific possibilities for belonging to a new community, in this case the nation-state represented by the United States. This opposes an interpretation of total assimilation as an end goal of immigration.

Another way in which studies of assimilation need to be reconceptualized is by focusing on the degree to which transnationalism has become

an obvious cultural and intellectual preoccupation, such that we must acknowledge how intertwined investments of nation *and* diasporization influence possibilities for belonging in America. Even though it is true that, as Ong writes, “migration studies has recently shifted its focus from assimilation to take into account the global context of border-crossing movements” (8), it is important to maintain a *simultaneous* focus on assimilation and transnationalism. This allows for continuing dialogues that have been ongoing since the start of European colonizing of America, while also nuancing them in light of contemporary narratives of nation and immigration. To read assimilation from this vantage is, perhaps counterintuitively, to decenter the nation as the proper framework and instead foreground shifting or porous borders.

This observation alludes to one of many academic debates about how most appropriately to parse belonging and identity in the contemporary age. For instance, predictions of a new, allegedly postnational, global order vie for supremacy with descriptions of the “willed merger[s] of nation and dynastic empire,” which is how Benedict Anderson glosses “official nationalism” (86). Along this spectrum have appeared conspicuous interventions, such as Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, which dramatically redirected academic inquiry in the 1980s and 1990s with its analysis of nation-building as “the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (3). Anderson’s arguments, based on reading the effects of print media, concern the substantial and continuing influence of the concept of nationality on political, economic, and social phenomena of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; his conclusions have by now been widely discussed and disseminated. According to some readings, the fierceness with which many people continue to defend their sense of national belonging, even when a nation is being “imagined” against material realities, is a defensive reaction to the increase in border crossings of many sorts that seem to accompany postmodernism and postcolonialism. This supports Anderson’s claim that official nationalisms are “*responses* by power groups” to historical contingencies rather than proactive assertions (109).²⁵ Conversely, from the perspective of those without power in a nation-state, many post-World War II strains of “cultural nationalisms,” which were often equated with anticolonial and/or minority activism, were projects for disrupting imperialist oppression.

Coexistent with versions of nationalism, diasporas seem to reflect a markedly different ordering of people, characterized as they are by

dispersals, sojourns, returns, and settlements of altered kinds in new places. These movements may be read in a variety of ways—as processes which problematically diffuse culture, as confusing rootlessness, as examples of cultural hybridity (whether read positively or negatively), as empowering examples of nomadism à la Deleuze and Guattari, as versions of world-citizen cosmopolitanism²⁶—but in every case, attention to transnational diasporas undermines the commitment of nationalisms to being “limited and sovereign” (Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 6). The concept of diaspora is not a new one, but there has been notably energetic intellectual and cultural engagement with it particularly in the past few decades. For instance, Édouard Glissant notes, “The cultures of the world have always maintained relations among themselves that were close or active to varying degrees, but it is only in modern times that some of the right conditions came together to speed up the nature of these connections” (26). Many observers agree that, with twentieth-century (trans)national transformations in technology, capital, and culture, the web which connects discrete and distant sites has been pulled tighter and become more conspicuous than before, even though there have always been migrations that brought diverse peoples into contact.

More recently named diasporas have thus been of central interest in relatively new international academic disciplines such as postcolonial studies, with only three decades of institutionalization, and have also been important in shifting renderings of transnationalism in American public culture. Sociopolitical developments in the United States and diverse global contexts jointly position immigrants in relation to nation, ethnicity, culture, and belonging in specific but dynamic ways. In consequence, diasporic and immigrant identities are often prominently inter-related for many recent arrivals in the United States, and the relationship between nationalism and transnationalism is much more conspicuous than it might have been for earlier theorists of Americanization.

Therefore, as I do with regard to interpretations of Americanization which have been strongly polarized, I challenge discourses of diasporization which focus on one of two major effects of dispersion rather than studying an array of related effects simultaneously. Bifurcated attention has usually been paid *either* to the homeland from which a diaspora is in exile *or* the (frequently troubled) relationship between diasporans and their current places of settlement. Currently, however, diaspora theorists challenge this paradigm by discussing how the transnationalism endemic to diasporization is not served by limited, nation-based investigations that are in clear contradistinction to the continuing *multinational*

realities of most dispersals. Ong argues for more careful attention to “complicated accommodations, alliances, and creative tensions between the nation-state and mobile capital, between diaspora and nationalism, or between the influx of immigrants and the multicultural state” (15). Such attention proves that, as a widespread discourse in the early twenty-first century, “diaspora” (which I discuss at length in chapter 1) invites striking metaphors for migratory processes which differentiate individuals or communities at the same time that they connect seemingly unrelated people, since they have in common an experience of self-identifying beyond one nation. A central paradox that is produced is that “to be different in a world of differences is irrevocably to belong,”²⁷ reflecting dialectics of sameness and difference that probably seem familiar to many contemporary individuals, whatever their responses to this reality.

How, then, does diasporization affect projects of assimilation and narratives of national belonging? In a classic statement, anthropologist James Clifford wrote, “Separate places become effectively a single community” through the continued flow of individuals, information, currency, and products, replacing definitively bounded national territoriality as the primary mapping of “place” such that “diasporic cultural forms can never, in practice, be exclusively nationalist” (303, 307). Diasporas may be more than nonexclusively nationalist and may actually pose “a serious challenge to host societies,” in William Safran’s view (97), because they can never fully be integrated into the dominant national narrative. To take it a step further, one might theorize that diasporization is *antinationalist*, a possibility which has invited any number of academic responses. Theoretical alternatives to nationalist assumptions and practices (which cannot claim that nation-states have somehow been transcended in actual time-space) have been imagined as “ethnoscapes,”²⁸ with narrative-cum-material effects, diffuse “locations of culture” rather than nationally bound ethnic identities and homogeneous communities,²⁹ and in relation to a number of other metaphors. What these alternative imaginaries share is attention to how transnationality deterritorializes the familiar landscapes of national narratives and nationalisms. Thus, when sociologist Avtar Brah argues that “dispersed across nation states, diasporic collectivities figure at the heart of the debate about national identity” (243), she spotlights communities which have historically been theorized as peripheral to the nation and also enacts a useful strategy of prioritizing diasporization as a key factor in shaping contemporary nationalisms.

Being similarly convinced that diasporas resituate certain epistemologies of human interaction because they transgress geographical and ideological borders, I am particularly interested in complicating our understandings of the relationships *between* communities here and elsewhere. In the contemporary American context, diasporas are a part of the history of immigration which represent the intermingling of waves of diverse newcomers with allegiances elsewhere. The relatively recent diasporic turn in Asian American studies represents intellectual attention to such contingencies.³⁰ Because of the ways in which racial stereotypes and hierarchies have impeded Asian American assimilation, one corrective that scholars can undertake is to aggressively disaggregate race and nation through a synchronized focus on extranational, as well as national, communities. However, I would argue against *assuming* that diasporization is radically antinationalist, because narratives of “diaspora” are as varied and shifting as national narratives. Nationality, ethnicity, culture, diaspora: each of these expectations of belonging may meet with conformity, as well as resistance, especially for people implicated in multiple narratives.

Reading Ambivalence

Accordingly, in this book, I engage *multiple layers of ambivalence* in South Asian American narratives of belonging, particularly in relation to nation, assimilation, diaspora, cultural identity, race-ethnicity, class, and gender. Maintaining a simultaneous focus on aspects of affiliation which historically have often been analyzed separately, I address questions of community and belonging while inspecting a spectrum of ideas about assimilation and diasporization. The concept of ambivalence emphasizes the range of possibilities available to individuals contending with both Americanization processes and transnationalism, as well as signaling the variability of stories. The concept is also quite appropriate for a book such as this, which offers a “reckoning” with the American Dream, which Jim Cullen concludes has long been marked by ambivalence, because “for much of our history, [Americans] could never quite decide whether we finally regarded immigrants as a blessing or a burden” and immigrants “themselves have been unsure about whether to stay” (7, 188).

Ambivalence—simultaneity paired with difference, having mixed responses, feeling genuinely torn between seemingly opposite choices—also seems the most suitable means to characterize issues which are hotly

debated and in which disagreements people invest so much. These issues concern the displacements of particular subjects and the often ambiguous ways that nations incorporate them in the collective imaginary, even when it is as outsiders. Attitudes toward assimilation implicitly raise questions about divided loyalties and the answers are so important because they get at the very heart of who “we” think we are and who we are *not*. Given these stakes, it is not surprising that major binaries—for example, assimilated/alienated, us/them, insider/outsider—persist. In this context, “ambivalence” is a vehicle for deconstructing binaries (following Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Spivak, in particular) and examining active interconnections between supposedly oppositional processes and realities.

I am certainly not the first scholar to argue that reading “ambivalence” suits poststructural practices which challenge master narratives. Many of the best-known contemporary theorists in both postcolonial and Asian American studies have invoked the concept. Homi Bhabha’s theories about contemporary migrations and “gatherings” (*The Location of Culture* 139) have been particularly suggestive; for example, he touches on specific themes also relevant to the present project when he writes that “the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*” (146). Bhabha here emphasizes that nation-states are constructed in engagement with theories of the ideal; furthermore, it is in discourse, through words and language, that national communities are most clearly realized. The ambivalence he locates in the process is produced by the contrasts between narratives of what the nation ought to be and how people within the nation live out their interpretations of what it *is*. In prominent discussions which also focus on ambivalence but offer other types of cultural interventions, Timothy Brennan critiques intellectual cosmopolitanism, Paul Gilroy interrogates exile and homecoming in *The Black Atlantic*, Lisa Lowe describes Asian unassimilability in *Immigrant Acts*, and Edward Said analyzes colonial discourse in *Orientalism*.³¹

A particularly important precedent for this book is *Ambivalent Anti-colonialism: The United States and the Genesis of West Indian Independence, 1940–1964*, a historical study by Cary Fraser which includes a discussion of South Asians. When Fraser argues that American goals for decolonization projects warred with Cold War imperatives for national power, the book’s title and his analysis both speak to processes which are inevitably mixed and can thus seem self-contradictory. In a similar fashion, I argue that even pluralistic imperatives for immigrant assimilation

clash with unacknowledged hierarchical global ideologies of race and gender. Just as post-“independence” colonial situations required reimagining the relationship of communities to one another, so do immigrant desires to belong in a new country resituate ethnic identifications. A historian, Fraser devotes two chapters to what was formerly British Guyana and thus contributes to a relatively small body of scholarship about Guyana; chapter 2 of this book likewise outlines some of the history of Indians in Guyana. Finally, unlike many other historians of the Caribbean, Fraser asks how American policies as well as British imperialism combined to shape the fate of certain postcolonial countries. He can thus draw connections between different (trans)national histories that are not always understood in relation to one another. His goal, like my own, seems to be to understand postcolonial communities in light of the mutual influence of national and international histories, and by looking at global contingencies that affect local possibilities.

With the prevalence of theoretical interest in the notion of ambivalence, rather than considering it a problem, I find it an invaluable tool for exploring cultural meanings. For theorizing “betweenness” as a scholarly metaphor, I am particularly indebted to Amy Ling’s recovery of Asian American writing “between worlds” and Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s notion of the “ambivalent American” in *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, as well as how Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva situated South Asians “between the lines,” or borders, of multiple identities. More recently, Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, in their introduction to *Minor Transnationalism*, usefully describe how the “minority and the immigrant are constitutive of the national in its status as the object of interior exclusion, integral to what the national means and how citizenship is defined,” and they also invoke “the ambivalence of identification” (12–13). Synthesizing various theoretical narratives like these has been a parallel process to my readings of fictional, ethnographic, and film texts concerned with the same important issues.

As a last point, ambivalence is a concept that suits certain themes presented in the following chapters—that is, mixing, hybridity, and code-switching—which prove to be as informative about texts as people. It was while completing my doctoral dissertation that I first confronted in practice the challenges of what Mikhail Bakhtin famously described in *The Dialogic Imagination* as heteroglossia,³² or the notion that there are always multiple voices in any kind of utterance. In an informal dissertation group, despite the different literary traditions with which we were individually engaged (e.g., Jewish, Irish, South Asian), each of us

discovered that authors whom we believed to be largely critiquing a certain type of representation nonetheless often reinforced it. For instance, if Gertrude Stein caricatured anti-Semitism in various moments in her writing, she seemed at other instances to negatively stereotype Jews. As we advised each other on dissertation revisions, we returned again and again to the challenge of providing clear-cut evidence for our claims about how authors made use of various tropes. What I learned in that situation about the more general phenomenon of heteroglossia was that our political investments in our academic writing made it difficult for us to acknowledge when stories, which seemed to offer what we believed to be progressive possibilities, were inconsistent and ambiguous. This was a good lesson for me in taking care to differentiate what a text implies from what I might wish it to transparently assert, due to a particular ideological interest of my own. As a result, rather than searching for proof of a singular reading, I instead work to identify and contend with the frequent equivocality of narratives concerning truly complex and dynamic aspects of human cultural activities.

Chapter Overview

In chapter 1, “Reading Assimilation and the American Dream as Transnational Narratives,” I describe the key discourses which inform my analyses of ethnography, film, and literature. My goal throughout the chapter is to examine how notions of nation, narration, and diasporization intersect in shaping the experiences of South Asian Americans. This discussion allows me to interrogate the ways in which diasporas alter our perceptions of the global and the local. Tracing how diasporic and immigrant positionalities might influence one another, I call attention to layered constructions of national identity, in particular by historicizing the concept “South Asian” and its implications for reading assimilation. Narrowing the focus from theories of nationhood and selfhood to the case of the United States in particular, I offer a broad discussion of Americanization as represented in dominant stories and influential ideologies, particularly the American Dream.

In chapter 2, “They Came on Buses: ‘Guyanese Opportunities’ as a Contemporary Americanization Program,” I engage in what can be considered “microethnography.”³³ I discuss an initiative through which people of Indo-Guyanese descent were recruited—by means of bus tours originating in Queens—to live in Schenectady, New York. My reading of the motivations underlying, and the impact of, this Americanization

project considers how assimilation processes relate to transformative migrations both within and beyond national borders. Adopting an ethnographic methodology which involves gaining “exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters” (Geertz, “Thick Description” 21), I examine local community and city officials’ responses to the increased presence of a South American (Caribbean) South Asian community in a small city in upstate New York. These perspectives are complemented by narratives from Guyanese Americans, who narrated their own interpretations of Americanization. What “Guyanese Opportunities” reveals is that expectations, particularly concerning class status, continue to create contested and unpredictable versions of assimilation, such that government and local efforts, immigrant choices, and informal reactions to immigration combine to evoke both belonging and exclusion simultaneously. In particular, the “racial economics” associated with Americanization complicate two dominant stories about the nation: both the utopian vision of America as legitimately a land of opportunity for any hardworking newcomer and the “melting” of Old World ethnicity into New World nationality.

Chapter 3, “Stretched over Dark Femaleness: Three South Asian Novels of Americanization,” discusses creative responses to assimilation processes. These South Asian American narratives engage with the same complicated questions concerning Americanization which are taken up in the first two chapters, but the published fictions develop literary metaphors of belonging and alienation that are often startlingly different from other stories. In novels which concentrate on assimilation, Meena Alexander, Bharati Mukherjee, and Bapsi Sidhwa tell distinct but related stories about South Asian women in diaspora immigrating to the United States. As represented by the “dark femaleness” described in Meena Alexander’s *Manhattan Music*, the narratives portray displaced and marginalized protagonists who eventually create unexpected families or communities based on other modalities for belonging than the expected ones. While situating them within novelistic traditions, especially American bildungsromane, I describe the authors’ unique literary projects: interpreting Americanization through activism, advocating for immigrants to be “maximalists” when responding to normative scripts, and learning about assimilation from the Parsee experience of a diaspora within diaspora.

Looking at a different medium, in chapter 4, “How to Be Indian: Independent Films about Second-Generation South Asian Americans,” I focus on a particular type of independent cinema and analyze the anxieties of authenticity which come into play when narratives of belonging are

grounds for contestation or confusion. Viewing selected films by and about South Asian Americans, I describe children of immigrants constructing a sense of both “Indianness” and “Americanness” through imagining diaspora and engaging popular culture, as particularly befits film narratives. In *Chutney Popcorn*, *ABCD*, *American Desi*, and *American Chai*, the stories highlight the dialectic of authenticity and “invention” rather than emphasizing the classic diasporic binary of homeland versus host country. Practices of performativity that are inherent to cinema make these films a useful site for examining Americanization within a (trans)national framework. Major themes discussed in this chapter include invented identities, code-switching, ethnic loyalty, and “drag” as a discourse of belonging.

The chapters collectively represent various processes of South Asian Americanization which implicate nationality, race-ethnicity, diasporization, and other politics of belonging. These narratives have an important place among the many stories of assimilation in the United States. Americans’ current levels of engagement with globalism and transnationalism—marked by the continuous transgression of national boundaries through militarism, refugee and migrant displacement, popular culture, big business, and political endeavors such as environmentalism—invite sustained dialogue about the relationship between national and global identifications. Furthermore, in increasingly “mixed” (with regard to discourses and cultures) sites across the planet, rife with discord as well as (trans)national promise, it is crucial to scrutinize processes of immigration and assimilation with an eye to how they contribute to contemporary affiliation possibilities. This book systematically confronts and adds to our understanding of these phenomena, offering insights into issues of concern to all people while, at the same time, investigating the immigrant experiences of a relatively new American community.

In each chapter, even as I approach this field of issues from a slightly different perspective in addition to looking at a different medium for narrativity and a sub-demographic of South Asians, the overarching concern is with the nature of “belonging.” To belong is to be a member of a group, to be suitable or fit to be part of something, usually described as a feeling or experience. To belong or not to belong has serious consequences for people’s abilities to enter or remain in certain places, to call on particular resources, to have a sustainable sense of home. Approaching these complexities through an intersectional analysis seems the most promising way both to better understand issues related to Americanization and diasporization and to acknowledge that my story in this book is but one among many still to be read and heard.