

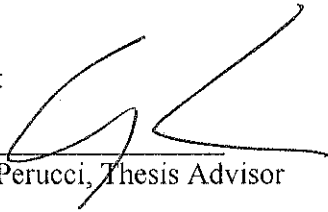
What's in a Home?:
The Liminal Culture of Asian Indian Americans

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Introduction

Indians began immigrating to the United States in the 1800s, but the last fifty years have seen a spike in immigration, particularly from Southeast Asian countries (Pavri). Immigrants from India are primarily those looking for better career and education opportunities; in fact, immigration laws rank professionals and students highest on the list of preferred visa recipients (LeMay). However, alongside professional and academic abilities, they bring their Indian culture, rooted in thousands of years of tradition and ancestry. Their Indian culture separates them from other Americans, who do not celebrate the same holidays, practice the same religion, or hold the same social views. For example, in India, it is not uncommon for friends to drop by at any moment, and it is the host's job to always be ready to serve tea and snacks. On the other hand, it is quite uncommon for a teenager to bring home a boyfriend or girlfriend for parents to meet and is, in fact, frowned upon by many Indian families.

In the late twentieth-century, enough Indian immigrants were arriving in the U.S. to form communities, through which Indian holidays could be celebrated and the ancestral culture could be continued. However, the children of these immigrants then grew up with a divided cultural lifestyle. Their home lives consisted of their parents' Indian culture, and their outside social lives, at school and with friends, were made up of American culture. I grew up in this way, separating my Indian friends from my American friends and playing different roles in different settings. Growing up, I would celebrate Indian holidays, watch Bollywood films, eat Indian food in the Indian community outside of my school, and I would go to school dances, read books written in English, and listen to American pop hits with my school friends. I did not question this duality or wonder where that placed me on the culture scale until I was in college.

My parents immigrated to the United States in the early 1990s, and I was born soon after, the first in the family to be born an American citizen. When I was a child, I carried that fact around with pride. I wanted to become President of the United States, if only because my older sister could not, since she was an Indian citizen like my parents. This lasted until my family moved to Wake County, North Carolina, where 6.1% of the total population is of the Asian race (“QuickFacts Beta”). My parents found a comfort here that they could not find in Edwardsville, Illinois, where they knew only two other Indian families. In North Carolina they joined a community of Indian immigrants who were not just from India, but from the same home state of Maharashtra. Being the first American citizen in my family was no longer special—most of my parents’ new friends had children, who were also American-born.

We formed a makeshift community of our own, these other second generation Indian American children like me. At first, we were forced together by our families, attending Sunday school to learn Marathi, our parents’ mother tongue, and religious services we did not understand. As we grew older, I came to realize that they were the only friends I had who understood this dual lifestyle. They, like me, hesitate when asked where they are from. They, like me, feel the same level of excitement for Diwali, the most important Indian holiday of the year, as they do for the Christmas season. Just as our parents were drawn together by alienation from American society, so were we—but we felt that alienation from our parents’ generation as well as American society. This alienation troubled me, because it excluded me from not just two cultures, but two countries, when, logically, I should feel an affinity toward both. Instead of feeling at home in both places, I felt like there was no place that could accommodate me. In India, relatives would often label me as “too American” while, in the U.S., I could never get away with answering the question “Where are you from?” with “I’m an American.”

I found that when people realize that my parents are from India, they immediately hold certain expectations for both them and me. At school, my peers expected me to be exceptionally gifted at math and science (and every other subject as well), but mediocre at sports. Receiving a high mark on an assignment would be dismissed with the explanation, “Well, she’s Indian,” as if that made it less impressive for me to do well, if only because it was expected of me. Where did these stereotypes come from? I knew that many TV shows had signature minority characters and some of the traits they displayed were the ones then imposed upon me. *The Simpsons* character Dr. Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, for example, owns a convenience store but was top in his graduating class at university. However, when it came to Indian culture, there was a whole other stereotype—the mystical, exotic, magical side that often pairs with Eastern cultures. I first recognized it as a stereotype in the 1995 film *A Little Princess*, in which an English girl, raised in India in the early 1900s, while it was still under the British Raj, moves to London. Her version of India is described solely through stories she tells from the *Ramayana*, an Indian epic fantasy that is rooted in hundreds of thousands of years of oral storytelling. The scenes that take place in India have a hazy, colorful, imaginary quality to them, almost as if they happen in an unreal location.

These stereotypes drove me to question my ‘Indian-ness.’ Everything I knew about India came from what my parents had taught me, my limited visits to India, and these stereotypes, as seen in media and accepted by my peers. Outwardly, my skin color prevented me from being accepted as American. I always had to justify my appearance with an explanation of where my parents were from. Because of this, I felt my cultural identity relied on others’ perceptions or my parents, when, in reality, I felt at home with neither. The people who understood that

predicament were those in the same predicament. Looking back on my childhood, the people I have stayed closest to are mostly second generation Indian Americans.

I was interested in digging deeper into the second generation community's culture. Is it a hybrid culture, made from pieces of the first generation and our American peers? Which practices inform this culture? Most importantly, how do we manage to find comfort in this country, where we do not fit in culturally or racially? My parents feel culturally tied to India. My generation has no ties to any physical location. Does this define us as a culturally-lost generation? I chose the word 'liminal' to describe my state because I am in-between cultures, but also in constant transition between the two—my home life and social life is planted firmly on either side. I wanted to fully realize what this liminal world looked like, because I felt what I truly wanted, as a second generation Indian American, was a physical location where I could find comfort.

Jhumpa Lahiri's writing speaks to this world and gives voice to this generation. Her stories are raw and honest; they bring to life the dual cultural lifestyle the second generation lives. She mixes the American landscape—both cultural and physical—with the Indian. For example, while her stories are almost always located in New England, they most often take place in suburban or urban neighborhoods that could be anywhere. The overarching idea is that these cultural dilemmas happen everywhere, within these common houses and families in the U.S. I chose to use her narratives as a way to investigate my own—as a way to answer some of the questions I have about growing up in this generation. Crafting a performance enabled me to engage with Jhumpa Lahiri's text while keeping the focus on my personal experiences. I would be the one on stage, breaking apart what I knew of Indian immigration and Lahiri's stories and filtering it through my own experiences in order to better understand my history and my identity

as an Indian American. I hoped to recognize how second generation Indian Americans reckon with the stereotypes and misrepresentations that come with growing up in a primarily white-American society as well as form a better understanding of my cultural identity, with particular regard to the history of Indian immigration in the U.S. and the cultural community of second generations that practice a dual Indian American culture.

Chapter 1: History of the Indian Immigrant

Many children of Asian Indian immigrants in the U.S. have never even been to India, and yet, that desire to feel connected—culturally, socially, emotionally—is strong. They hear stories from their parents, and they see bits and pieces of Indian heritage leaked into their American social culture (whether caricatured like in the TV show *The Simpsons*, exoticized like in the 1995 movie *A Little Princess*, or glazed over in high school World History classes, often under the heading “Imperialism”). These are the portrayals of India that second generation sees or hears about, none of which accurately reflect present-day Indian culture. However, they may be the only connection the second generation has to their ancestry. Kumarini Silva writes, “The desire to ‘go back’ to a space that has never been visited, but has been evoked via participation and imagery is a constant within this community. India is imagined as a very real and tangible place” (50). However, it is still very much *imagined*, as this is a generation of immigrants who have grown up in America with little exposure to Indian culture. They grow up in this liminal space, where they cannot identify with either the immigrant generation, which has a personal understanding of India as a homeland, or their American peers who have a deep connection to the well-established social culture of the U.S. The liminal quality of the second generation’s cultural identity creates internal and external confusion as they struggle to marry the two cultures into one coherent, authentic, bicultural existence.

I. The American Dream

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other

birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, **shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth.**

– Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Custom-House” (as cited in Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*)

Striking roots into unaccustomed earth may not be so easy, especially when the unaccustomed earth’s immigration laws explicitly restrict it. In 1917, the United States government enacted “the first widely restrictive immigration law. The uncertainty generated over national security during World War I made it possible for Congress to pass this Act,” which, among other things, “excluded from entry anyone born in a geographically defined ‘Asiatic Barred Zone’ except for Japanese and Filipinos” (“The Immigration Act of 1924”). Until that point, Asian Indian immigrants were working class people looking for better pay and better working conditions and opportunities. It did not take much to qualify any of those as “better”; many settled for working as farmhands and in shipyards (Harwood 9)—labor-intensive work that required little skill and offered little pay. Those immigrants who were already living in the U.S. were permitted to stay even after the 1917 Act but could not become naturalized citizens, which meant that their fate in the United States could drastically change if Congress decided to no longer allow any Asian immigrants to reside in the U.S. In a time when the word of influential people like Theodore Roosevelt and Rudyard Kipling advocated racial homogeneity, (Kipling in his 1899 poem “White Man’s Burden” and Roosevelt in his endorsement of it), simply being labeled as an Asian minority could lead to deportation. Until 1952, immigration laws were strict with regard to Asian immigrants. According to Roger Daniels and Otis Graham, “The executive branch broadened [the category of inadmissible aliens], first to keep out poor Asian Indians and Mexicans and then to keep out poor people generally...” (14). This racial animosity can be traced back to colonialism. The history of white people in India was fresh in the minds of

immigrants, as India had only won independence from England just a few years earlier, in 1947. Even though the U.S. became independent long before Indians began migrating here, there was clearly limited interaction between the U.S. and India, given the way American immigration laws mostly referred to Asian nations as one group (the “Asiatic Barred Zone”) with little regard to their racial, national, and cultural differences.

At this time, Congress also made the decision to exclude Hindus, among other groups, as public charges, and the Commissioner General of Immigration agreed with their stance. A public charge is defined by the National Immigration Law Center as “a term used by U.S. immigration officials to refer to a person who is considered primarily dependent on the government for subsistence, as demonstrated by either receipt of public cash assistance for income maintenance or institutionalization for long-term care at government expense” (“Public Charge”), and as Cheryl Shanks writes, “since Americans discriminated against Hindus, Hindus would not be able to find employment and therefore would [likely] be public charges” (69), in need of the government’s help. Through this decision to exclude Hindus from public charge rights, the government discouraged racial diversity in the country and based rights on skin color. In fact, it got to the point where, in 1923, “the U.S. Supreme Court rule[d] in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* that ‘white persons’ mean[t] those persons who appear and would commonly be viewed as white. Thus, East Asian Indians, although Caucasians, are not ‘white’ and are therefore not eligible for citizenship,” writes Michael LeMay (95). That immigration law needed this kind of clarification by the U.S. Supreme Court shows the open display of racism and exclusion that immigrants of the early 20th century experienced.

In 1952, Congress passed a law allowing the naturalization of Asian Indians (LeMay 5), which “ended Asian exclusion from immigrating to the United States” (“The Immigration and

Nationality Act of 1952”). The law also revised the quota system, which accorded a certain number of visas for immigrants from specific nations. This change in law stemmed from a debate over national security and its link to immigration and foreign policy. Those in favor of liberalizing the law expressed “concerns that the restrictive quota system heavily favored immigration from Northern and Western Europe and therefore created resentment against the United States in other parts of the world” (“The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952”). However, the law was still racially exclusive: 85% of the immigration quota per year was reserved for Northern and Eastern Europeans. That left only 15% for Asians and the rest of the world. Though the 1952 Act increased the immigrant’s chance to move to the U.S., it still discriminated against non-white races. It also “only allotted new Asian quotas based on race, instead of nationality. An individual with one or more Asian parents, born anywhere in the world and possessing the citizenship of any nation, would be counted under the national quota of the Asian nation of his or her ethnicity. Low quota numbers ensured that total Asian immigration after 1952 would remain very limited” (“The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952”).

In 1965, Congress passed the Immigration and Naturalization Act in an effort to streamline the process of deciding which immigrants could obtain visas. According to Michael LeMay, “It [amended] the [previous] act by ending the quota system, establishing a preference system emphasizing the reunification of families and the meeting of certain goals, standardizing admission procedures, and setting limits...” (100). This act changed Asian Indian immigration entirely because the status of immigrants reversed—now, instead of working class people with low incomes, professionals, students, and their families were given higher preference when granting visas to the U.S., completely changing the demographic of Asian Indian immigrants and as a result, the white American citizens’ views of Asian Indian immigrants. LeMay states,

“Immigration from India rose by more than 3,000 percent... The act’s third preference category, a provision for professionals, was especially important to opening up immigration from Asia.”

(5). Post-1965 immigration is from where the current Asian Indian stereotype hails. This stereotype views Asian Indian immigrants purely as “highly skilled foreign technicians and venture capitalists” (Daniels 67) and ‘model minorities’ who are “upwardly mobile...and raise academically high-achieving children” (Shankar 2). From then onward, only the wealthy or professionally-bound students, professionals and their families were permitted to enter the U.S. and gain citizenship—and thus, the full right to call the U.S. a home.

An immigrant’s concept of home becomes fluid once settled in a new land. Silva writes, “For many, the concept of home is very simple. It’s a place where no one questions your right to be; a place of belonging that points to your history, your past, an archive of sorts that metaphorically documents a lineage that marks you as non-alien” (694). Until 1952, non-alien was exactly what immigrants were waiting to be, or at least have the right to be. Until immigration law changed to include Asian Indians, the U.S. could not be turned into a true home, not when the government literally called immigrants ‘aliens,’ (note that green card holders today are still referred to as ‘aliens’). Many immigrants came to the U.S. in order to make a new home—for themselves, but primarily for their children. Immigration became a plausible option as the price of travel decreased, due to the increase in commercial international flights after World War II, and India was still building itself into a nation after spending nearly two hundred years under British influence. The education system was still in preliminary stages, while schools in the U.S. were established institutions with prestige (Harwood 8). However, can the feeling of home be preserved when there is no past tying the person to the place? Neither immigrants nor their children have a history in the U.S. Both know it as a place of discrimination and loneliness,

but for the children, it is also a place in which to grow up—but without the cultural or ancestral ties that normally hold others to their home countries.

Jennifer Harwood, who researched the identity crisis of Asian Indian Americans through case studies done in 1998-99, found that many of the children of immigrants preferred to be referred to as American, regardless of their ethnicities (2). This may be due to two reasons: one of the ‘American Dream’ myth and one of Asian Indian immigrants themselves. James Truslow Adams coined the term ‘American Dream’ in 1931 and defined it as the notion that “life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone...and [everyone should] be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (214-215). By this definition of the American Dream and gaining access to it, Asian Indians should be accepted simply as who they are: people of Indian origin, who are now residents of the U.S. However, the struggle of instead being discriminated against because of origin causes many Asian Indian youth to wholly reject their origins and identify as only American—an impossible task, given the reality of their ancestry. What’s more is that the discrimination against the Asian Indian youth is double-sided: in addition to being stereotyped by American society, they are also excluded from their Indian counterparts for being too American. The first stereotype is almost a direct result of the 1965 Immigration Act, which ensured that only professionals and students could obtain visas, thus creating the basis for the stereotype of being highly-academically gifted. A study done in California by Roger Daniels and Otis Graham in 2000 pointed out that:

...one-quarter of all Silicon Valley companies started over the past twenty years were created by recent immigrants, mostly people of Chinese and Indian origin, and...these companies [employ] 60,000 people...Never before in American history have so many well-educated immigrants come (67).

However, what Daniels and Graham do not stress as greatly is the relevance of the 1965 Act in the creation of this Asian American stereotype as a ‘model minority’ bent on high-achievement and success rates. On a ranked list of desirable immigrants, professionals and students are at the top. As a result, an astounding number of companies have been formed by a specific Asian American demographic—only a select few of that demographic are welcomed, creating a dense population of successful (or presumably success-bound) Asian Americans. As a result, it appears that all Asian Americans are successful. In youth culture, evidence from the National Spelling Bee shows nothing less. Tovia Smith writes, “Indian-Americans have won the past four contests, and 9 of the past 13 - even though they make up less than 1 percent of the [total] population” (“Why Indian-Americans Reign as Spelling Bee Champs”). She continues to say, “it’s important to these immigrant parents...who put great emphasis on learning... that their kids excel academically. But they are especially eager to do well in English,” (“Why Indian-Americans Reign as Spelling Bee Champs”) because mastering the art of the English language would be considered a mark of real acclimation to American society. As Shalini Shankar puts it in her book on Asian Indian teen culture, “Over the past few decades, [Asian Indian immigrants] have been widely heralded as ‘model minorities’ who are thought to be upwardly mobile and socially integrated and raise academically high-achieving children” (2). In some respects, it could be said that Asian Indians were considered a socially and economically valued demographic, and were thus welcomed to the U.S. in a way they had never been welcomed before: they were given the opportunity to plant roots, to make a home and call themselves American. What remained for the second generation was the cultural struggle.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection *Unaccustomed Earth* focuses on this very struggle of how to be American when a significant portion of life is heavily influenced by a separate ancestral

culture. According to Bharati Patnaik, children who are born “in America like a typical immigrant child, struggle [to relate] to either place. [They] have no idea of home as [their] parents have” (214). Their American Dream is to be fully at home in the U.S.—an impossible task, since a significant portion of their identity relies on India. Their very status as ‘American’ relies on the stereotype of Asian Indians as the ‘model minority,’ the stereotype that initially gained them acceptance into the country. Shalini Shankar writes, “Dynamics of race, class, language use, and gender intersect with immigration histories and local places to make being Desi [a term evolved from *desh*, the Hindi word for countryman; also, a term Asian Indian immigrants use to refer to themselves] an active negotiation...Unlike the American dream [for white Americans],” (3) this American Dream is more culturally complex. The struggle lies in becoming successful in one’s own right as an American citizen, separate from being an Asian Indian immigrant or the child of one.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* sketch out the immigrant’s experience with more focus and attention to the second generation than her previous short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*. Since the 1990s, South Asian writers have grown in popularity in the U.S., featured regularly in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and on NPR (Iyer). In 2000, Lahiri won a Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies*, which significantly increased the popularity of her work. As stated by Catherine Rendón, the success of Lahiri’s stories rests in her ability to marry “the experiences of these generally educated, ambitious, and upwardly mobile Bengalis with familiar and often successful symbols of the ‘American dream,’ [which serves as an] attractive backdrop to these portraits of individual struggles to find meaning and happiness” (Rendón). Placing the stories of immigrants within the context of American literature (the ‘American Dream’), particularly with classic backdrops of “prep schools and Ivy League

colleges, Roman cafés, libraries, and remote New England” (Rendón), grounds the stories to quintessential American locations, making it more relevant to anyone living in America. In her depiction of Asian Indian immigrant culture, Lahiri portrays “the usual intergenerational struggles of parents trying to keep their children in the fold of Bengali convention while at the same time negotiating the benefits of the possibilities offered by an American education” (Rendón) in combination with what Janice Nimura calls the children’s “struggle with the luxury of choice: how to be, what to be, who to be with” (Nimura). The story that encompasses both of these struggles is “Hell-Heaven,” told from the perspective of a girl who feels suffocated by the grasp of her Bengali mother, who, in turn, struggles continuously with feeling alone after moving away from the life she knows in India. It also touches on mixed marriages, “dicey [and] riddled with pitfalls of misunderstanding” (Nimura). N.P. Thompson, of *Northwest Asian Weekly*, describes the story as the one that “comes closest to having some of the novelistic intensity of *The Namesake*, Lahiri’s previous book...Lahiri demonstrates a masterly understanding of South Asian immigrants and their American-born offspring, of dreams of India lost in the shuffle of a new culture” (Thompson). She continues with the criticism that “No one struggles for material things in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Yet...maybe Lahiri aims to show her overachievers that ultimately acquisitions transcend nothing” (Thompson). This gets at the heart of Lahiri’s work—the truth that immigrating into a new country comes with its own set of struggles and that, regardless of a ‘model minority’ status, the feeling of being wholly different is there and cannot be ignored.

The issues of race, class, language, and gender, which Shankar mentioned as being a negotiation of identity, are present in the everyday lives of Asian Indians and affect their social status in, not only the society as a whole, but within their own Asian Indian communities as well.

Jhumpa Lahiri embeds these issues in various combinations throughout her stories.

Unaccustomed Earth includes stories about women dealing with their roles as wives in India versus in the U.S., children facing a language barrier between themselves and their relatives in India, and the misunderstandings that inevitably occur when people of different cultures interact, all in relation to life in America as an immigrant. As Silva says, “We’re caught between a desire to fit in...and wanting our ethnicity to flourish as we recreate from memory and myth” (695). The internal struggle of finding one culture to identify with lies at the root of the immigrant child’s American Dream.

II. Resisting the American

Unlike their children, Asian Indian immigrants do have a personal and resounding tie to their country of origin. Though their bodies have been displaced, their culture and childhood are still intertwined with India. Though this simplifies their cultural struggle—they are not so tied up as their children between the two worlds—it does create a divide between the generations that is wider than most other generation gaps. Not only is that gap defined by age, but it is also a question of East versus West, traditional versus modern, and past (family history, ancestry) versus future (building a home in a new country). Traditionally, Harwood states, “duty to family is central to Indian culture” (42), making it almost a given that Asian Indian American youth will stay true to the values and practices their family brought with them across the ocean. When Asian Indians began migrating to the U.S., they came here as poor working class people looking for any kind of employment. Energy and time were given to surviving the discriminatory circumstances, not to maintaining culture and language. As mentioned before, Asian Indians were permitted to remain in the U.S. even after the 1917 Act excluded further immigration, but, through the exclusion, the Act perpetuated discrimination and made finding work difficult. Post-

1965 immigrants, on the other hand, had enough other Asian Indian immigrants around them to form communities and because they came as professionals and success-bound students, had an easier time becoming firmly established, particularly financially. Thus, Harwood continues, they “can focus on cultural education” (50). However, this increased comfort of living also enables the second generation to begin exploring their own cultural beliefs and confronting the separate world in which they exist.

Second generation Indian Americans face some level of racial discrimination even today, but it is different from the experiences of the first generation. Looking back on the blatant discrimination in immigration law that existed before 1965, it is no wonder why Asian Indian immigrants might discourage their children from interacting too deeply with American culture. In 1945, while addressing the House of Representatives with regards to the question of whether or not to allow the naturalization of Asian Indians, Clare Boothe Luce, a representative from Connecticut, said:

Good citizenship does not necessarily depend upon the color of a man’s skin. But, there is no evidence to justify an optimistic conclusion that it will inevitably benefit this Nation for these people of alien cultures to come here. It is their ‘problems’ and ‘concepts,’ which have kept their nations of origin from being great countries, with benefits of liberty and prosperity for their citizens. (Luce).

The prejudice against minorities, whether racial or otherwise, made it difficult for Asian Indians to spend significant amounts of time with American-born Americans and, as a result, the tight-knit community of immigrants grew even tighter and warier of American culture. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami writes, “Hindu dharma values the family togetherness as a central virtue. By growing together, we avoid drifting apart” (45). In the case of immigration, family togetherness

functioned as more than just a central virtue, but a tactic to survive a discriminatory society. Drifting apart would mean becoming susceptible to discrimination without the benefit of a supportive community to come back to. The cultural divide forced most minority groups to rely on their own for comfort and a feeling of home. Asian Indian immigrants were given more reason to encourage their children to remain within the confines of the traditional Indian culture, to be wary of wandering and forming relationships outside of the community, particularly “emphasizing dating other Indians,” (Harwood 69) not white Americans or other ethnic groups.

However, when half of the second generation’s life occurs outside of the house, interacting with other minority groups and Americans, there’s no way to restrict their culture. According to Shankar, “The emergence of the category ‘Desi’ is a significant moment for South Asian diaspora studies, for it signals the shift from South Asians as immigrants longing to return to a homeland to public consumers and producers of distinctive, widely circulating cultural and linguistic forms” (4). The second generation’s role in the Asian Indian immigrant’s life outside of India was pivotal in that it solidified their existence in the U.S., not as just immigrants, but as residents. For immigrants, this might signify a new level of displacement from their motherland—perhaps perceived as a negative aspect—however, it also gives the Asian Indian youth a chance to stay rooted to a physical location. Revising their language to incorporate the word ‘Desi’ is a direct method of legitimizing the Asian Indian’s existence in the U.S. as more than just immigrants, as well as taking steps toward forming an identity within a larger context. The word ‘Desi’ gives the community a connection with respect to their new circumstances as U.S. citizens or residents, rather than simply being connected by their historical homes.

The divide between generations increases when considering that the children of Asian Indians qualify as citizens of the U.S., even when their parents do not, just because of their

birthplaces. Silva writes, "...birthright has become the locus of legitimacy – a hierarchy that speaks to one's right to belong and that lays the groundwork for questioning one's loyalties" (168). Already the parents have lost say in a significant area of their child's life and the U.S. has taken away something that the parent would have otherwise had in common with their child: citizenship. In many families, like my own, the children have U.S. citizenship years before their parents do, just because they were born here. This difference of citizenship only widens the generational divide. Asian Indian immigrants even coined the term ABCD ('American Born Confused Desi') to describe their children's situation. Shankar explains, "the term reflects Desi adults' characterizations of second generation youth as culturally and intergenerationally conflicted... Youth are 'American' at school, 'Indian' at home, and 'caught in limbo' between these two worlds" (5-6). Because their children are so surrounded by American culture in all other aspects, home life is dominated by Indian culture to compensate—religious and cultural rituals become huge community efforts by the first generation, in an attempt to keep the heritage alive. However, it is not the parents' culture that the youth want to be a part of—it's the culture of other second generation Indian Americans like themselves. Asian Indian youth build communities of their own, based around their own mixed culture. They have their own notions of what is and is not socially acceptable. For instance, a term Vincent Melomo came across in his studies of second generation Asian Indians was FOB ('Fresh Off the Boat'), which he defines as being "used to derogatorily refer to those more recent immigrants from India who are viewed as embodying the very stereotypes of Indian which the second generation struggles to avoid in making a claim to an American identity" (10). Generally these would be directly related to more recent, younger immigrants, associated with the parents, due to their experience living in India—a classic example of youth resistance to the older generation. In situations of culture, however,

resisting the parents can turn into resisting a whole family ancestry. Mina Sohail, a reporter from Jackson Heights, Queens, one of the more densely Asian Indian populated neighborhoods in the U.S., states:

When Desi children are raised in America, they are exposed to a different progressive media, and this fuels the perception gap between them and their parents. Anything too ‘American’ is inherently in conflict with something too Desi... Culturally, there exists a vast difference between America and South Asia. In the latter region, advertisements often depict women as cooking, cleaning and serving food to their husbands. ‘Good housewives’ are mostly shown covered from head to toe. Women are rarely shown working in the corporate world (Sohail).

Asian Indian youth receive conflicting messages, putting them in a position of feeling unacceptable in either their parents’ or their peers’ eyes. This perpetuates the union formed between Asian Indian youth.

The community of Asian Indian youth is bonded by their similar ancestry and corresponding culturally liminal position. However, after that, their specific second generation culture draws a lot from American society. The hip hop music scene provides inspiration for many Asian Indian fusion artists, who connect the strong rhythms of hip hop to Indian *bhangra*, a musical style from the Indian state of Punjab with a focus on beats and energy (“Bhangra, The Beat That Has the World Dancing”). The fusion of Indian musical styles and hip hop has captivated more than just the Asian Indian community—it began in underground clubs of London, but slowly gained popularity in big American cities, like New York and Los Angeles (“Bhangra, The Beat That Has the World Dancing”). The product is a genre called *urban desi*, and it represents a fused mish-mash of cultures. Anjula Achuria-Bath, creator of Desi Hits, a

website that keeps up with the Asian Indian fusion music industry, calls it “a kind of freedom - not having to choose between two worlds. ‘We needed to create something that defined us and was our identity but makes us feel really good about this bicultural life that we lead’” (“Urban Desi: A Genre on the Rise”). Urban desi music gives the Asian Indian youth a genre to call their own—it often mixes Bollywood film music, bhangra music, American hip hop, as well as music in other languages. In 2008, Snoop Dogg collaborated with film actor Akshay Kumar to create a song for the Bollywood film *Singh Is Kinng* (“Urban Desi: A Genre on the Rise”). As more and more hip hop artists, like Jay-Z and Missy Elliot, continue to sample classic Indian sounds, Asian Indian music culture may rise outside of its original social circle.

While new musical developments might make Asian Indian youth culture more popular with their American peers, the generational struggle continues in other areas. Take dating, for example. In this day and age, the parents of the Asian Indian youth were married in the eighties and nineties—many of these marriages most likely stemmed from the arranged marriage concept, whether it’s decided explicitly by their parents or by some other means (introduced by community friends or through a speed-dating-like system). The idea is that a person begins looking for a partner once they are in a good marrying state (post-college, steady income) and the parents are very much involved in the process (Sharma 65). However, for the second generation, Anjana Agnihotri Mishra explains, “dating is a part of the peer culture, and studies reveal that adolescents conform to peer culture as opposed to parental norms” (182). The whole relationship process is approached differently in the two cultures, giving the classic teenage rebellion a cultural weight as well as a generational one. When the parents of the second generation Asian Indians attempt to get a hold around their children, they show, unwittingly or not, resistance to, not only the child’s rebelliousness, but also to the American social culture the

child is trying to adhere to. As Meena Sharma writes in *Walking a Cultural Divide*:

...it is evident that second generation Asian Indians used dating as a way of accommodating and resisting American and Indian norms. As the second generation makes decisions about which set of cultural expectations they will follow, they are either pleasing or disappointing their parents... Through [this] process of resisting and accommodating norms of both cultures, they may be negotiating a space for themselves in both of their communities (66).

Resistance, when it comes in this context, is more than just rebellion: it is an attempt to assimilate, conform, fit in with the society in which the second generation grows up and will, eventually, live.

Since togetherness resonates so strongly with Indian culture and because culture is all that the immigrant has to stay connected with the ‘motherland,’ any gap in culture between the generations would be distressing for immigrants because it would imply that the second generation is losing any common ground with their parents’ homeland. In reality, according to Silva, “for many, the conditions of living in a country where they are not recognized as part of the majority results in a connection to a ‘motherland,’ whether it be real, mythic or constructed” (Silva 48). This connection varies by generation, but the result is similar: the creation of a community group that functions as a tie to the ‘motherland.’ Harwood writes that belonging to associations strengthens cultural ties and creates a sense of ethnic identity (1-2), which is why Asian Indian youths are so drawn to one another, despite that they attempt to fit into American culture. They form a cultural identity they can relate to as a whole—watching both Bollywood *and* Hollywood films, listening to hip hop *and* bhangra music (and a fusion of the two). Somewhere along the way, a wholly new social circle is formed—that of the second generation

Asian Indian, where there can be no discrimination between white Americans and first generation Indian Americans. Even within those groups there are status symbols, gossip circles, and hierarchies, and in a country where, as Vincent Melomo writes, “ethnicity and ethnic identities...have typically been used to mark a people as sub-dominant and as excluded from a more homogenous majority or powerful minority” (4), a community can function as a home in ways similar to a physical location.

III. Commodifying the Indian

Indian American youth struggle with finding a home within their ancestral culture, but the representation of Indian culture in their lives is often on either extreme side of a spectrum: one side is advocated by the older generation, the Indian culture they knew when they lived there and the other side is often misrepresented by Americanization. Asian Indian youth must navigate Indian culture as seen through American eyes, while knowing, from their experiences at home, that there is a stark difference between what their parents know and what is represented in the U.S. Unless they have personal ties back to India—through close relatives or family friends—there is no accurate representation of Indian culture in their lives. Shankar asserts, “Questions of authenticity surface routinely in the lives of Desi youth. Not only are teens faced with myriad cultural options, but they must also defend their choices in the face of static, orientalist expectations of school peers and faculty about what it means to be from the Indian subcontinent” (7). They are less likely to be accepted as Asian Indian Americans if their idea of Indian culture does not match up to their non-Indian peers’ expectations—meaning the pursuit ‘non-traditional’ activities. In school, this might mean being involved on sports teams instead of (or in addition to) participating in academic clubs, like the spelling bee. In academic situations particularly, they are expected to know and be able to explain Indian culture with certainty. Speaking from personal

experience, classes such as World History quickly become uncomfortable if an Asian Indian does not know the name of the busiest port or the longest river in India. Despite being born in a different country and often having never even visited India, second generation youth are forced into representing a culture they know nothing about and, to their peers, become a physical representation of India itself, rather than an American of Indian heritage.

Americanized Indian culture is dominated by generalized industries like Bollywood and the Miss India USA pageant, both of which are modeled directly off of American industries. These industries cannot hold up Indian culture alone, though, and the thousands of years of deep-rooted traditions are lost on Asian Indian immigrant youth. Bakirathi Mani did a case study on Andrew Lloyd Webber's 2002 musical flop *Bombay Dreams*, "a romance, a melodrama, and homage to Bollywood films" (208) that was viewed by critics as inauthentic. Mani says, "While the musical relied upon actors who appeared to be racially 'authentic,' the producers also quickly domesticated *Bombay Dreams* into yet another ethnic American musical... For non-South Asian viewers, the musical was an exotic journey to 'Somewhere You've Never Been Before'" (209). *Bombay Dreams* was altered to fit into American culture, to expand the viewership and further the profits of the musical itself. Mani does continue to discuss the benefits of having this representation of South Asian culture—it is better than nothing at all. But, with regard to the effect on Asian Indian youth, is an inauthentic representation better than nothing? In Americanizing a demographic's access point to a culture, there is more than just entertainment-value at stake. This issue of authenticity is the primary struggle of Asian Indian youth who are trying to couple their Indian roots with their American social upbringing. Shankar writes, "As Desi teens move among several different worlds, terms such as 'hybridity' and 'authenticity' speak to their experience but do not fully capture its complexity" (6), because there is no way to

be fully authentic to a culture that does not authentically exist in their social world. A term that captures, not just the conglomeration that forms Asian Indian youth culture, but the fluidity of the movement between home lives, social lives, and interactions with white American peers would serve as a better modifier to this separate cultural identity.

The culture that emerges is understood by only the Asian Indian youth who live in the “in-between” cultural state. They grapple with the task of forming a cultural identity when their ethnic culture is misrepresented and the social culture of Americans is discouraged by their Indian parents and community. They must craft their own culture within the boundaries of both of their societies, one that will also accommodate their “dualistic identity,” a phrase used by Jennifer Harwood to describe second generation Indian Americans (12). The result is a third society, one that comprises the second generation Asian Indians, who relate to each others’ cultural state. This, like any other social culture, comes with its own set of expectations from both the American peers and the immigrant society—issues of authenticity, as neither the white Americans nor the Indian immigrants will view this culture as authentic within those separate cultural contexts. However, the Asian Indian youth culture has its own perception of authenticity—in the music they listen to, movies they watch, celebrities they admire (a mixture of Indian influences, like Bollywood actors, and American stars). Shankar reveals, “Some Desi teens conveyed to me that they were not ‘authentic’ enough to be included [in the Asian Indian youth culture], as they did not kick it or spend time only with other Desis or speak their heritage language well” (19). The Asian Indian youth do value authenticity, even if they may not have direct access to it. To them, their third culture has its own commitment to being authentic to itself as an Indian American culture practiced by a generation of Asian Indian youth.

However, perhaps creating a new culture that accommodates the Asian Indian youth situation is not enough—should it then be accepted as a separate culture within the American society and among their non-Asian Indian peers? If not, does it risk being viewed as just another foreign culture, exotic in its own right? Minority cultures are subject to following direction from the majority culture, and Shalini Shankar found that there were limitations in creating this hybrid Indian American culture. Though sharing these limitations may weave Asian Indian youth more closely together, having cultural limitations at all is unsettling in the context of American society. Shankar explains it as follows:

Rather than having to downplay their culture and religion, Desi teens today are encouraged to express their cultural heritage and display their ethnicity, although in controlled ways. With the support of ideologies of multiculturalism, they celebrate aspects of their cultural background through food, dance, and costume and speak their heritage language in socially sanctioned places. Yet when they cross these lines by engaging in cultural or linguistic expression that challenges the hegemonic codes of their schools and communities, they cease to be model and their status becomes more ambiguous (14).

Stereotypically, Indian culture is regarded as being colorful, musical, mystical, and exotic—like Shankar says, food, dance, and costume are acceptable cultural aspects because they do not threaten the American society with religious or political contradictions. This suppression of culture encourages the Americanization of global cultures because those are the only aspects that are regarded as socially acceptable. The trouble with this is that it boils culture down to singular, controllable characteristics that are either positive or negative. For example, after the September 11 attacks of 2001, fear took over the general perception of South Asian culture and suddenly all

'brown people' became objects of terror. Silva breaks down the process of identification in terms of both September 11 and Bollywood with the following example: "a militant Muslim becomes an Arab, an Arab becomes a terrorist, an Indian Sikh an Arab, The Sikh becomes brown, and brown becomes terror. Similarly, Bollywood becomes India, India becomes South Asia, South Asia arrives at Target in the form of \$1 bindhi packs, and brown becomes a fashion statement and Disneyfied cultural commodity" (175). In both instances, Indian culture is metonymically represented by first, a color, which is then associated with a single emotion and second, a fashion accessory. Neither of these are representative of the culture as a whole, but suddenly Asian Indian culture can only be one of two things: negative to the point of committing acts of terrorism or positive to the point of a meaningless commodity. Neither of these bode well for the second generation Asian Indian, who is still trying to find a cultural identity that represents two deeply rooted cultures while upholding the expectations of both and without feeling like they have lost either of those cultural communities.

Chapter Two: Performance Methodology

The creation process for this piece began with Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, my experiences growing up as a second generation Indian American, and my questions about what it means to belong to a physical location. This performance was meant to serve as a way for me to investigate those questions and share them with an audience. Because these questions are relevant to American social culture in the U.S., which incorporates perhaps the largest number of minority groups of any country, the performance goal was to stimulate discussion and thought on issues of immigration, discrimination, and dual identity confusion. I drew from the performance theories of artists and theorists who were also interested in using performance as more than a method of escapism, but as a way to engage with and question the world around and to provide "real" representations of reality, abandoning the illusion of traditional theater. I found inspiration in sources that focused on the performer and their relationship to real space and time, like Anne Bogart's Viewpoints and Bertolt Brecht's epic theater. I worked on manipulating performance spaces using technical elements, like Robert Wilson does through his mastery of music and light. I also drew from Robert Breen, who worked on adaptation theory, and Charles Mee, who worked from a historical perspective. Combining the various techniques of these artists allowed me to craft a performance that served its specific purpose; I was able to stage my experiences as more than stories, but as methods through which to examine the state of Indian American culture in American society today.

I. Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht's concepts of epic theater, *verfremdungseffekt*, and his performance philosophy influenced how I approached this performance as more than just a staged adaptation.

The Brechtian style has some focus on the relationship between *telling* and *showing* a situation. Brecht concentrates on actively spurring the audience to action or thought through the method of performance. My performance, being so grounded in real social culture and true, personal experience, was asking for more than just a staged adaptation of a fictional story. There needed to be something to relate the narrative back to reality that provoked the audience into thinking about the content, not just sitting back and enjoying it. According to David Barnett, Enoch Brater, and Mark Taylor-Batty, “Brecht wants his spectators to be surprised by what they see on stage and actively to construct their own accounts of the characters’ actions and behaviours, based on their connections with the play’s social contexts” (30). Many of Brecht’s qualms about traditional theater come from the naturalism and realism that was popular in his younger years—these styles were bent on inspiring empathy and creating a world so seemingly real that an audience might forget they are watching a performance. Barnett, Brater, and Taylor-Batty continue, “Brecht’s ‘epic’ devices are more about making the reception of the theatrical event complex rather than banishing illusion. They invite an audience to compare different kinds of theatrical communication or to challenge them to process a scene in a different kind of way” (72). Naturalism is bent on the impossible task of creating an illusion so realistic that the audience forgets the performance context from which they watch the work, which epic theater embraces the theater as a place in present time and space. This harkens back to the Viewpoints notion of using the physical aspects of time and space to the performer’s advantage, as a common ground between the audience, the performers, and the theater. It would be much more productive to work with those ‘constraints’ rather than against them. Speaking with regard to naturalism specifically, Brecht himself writes:

...a particularly suggestive reproduction will lead spectators to immerse themselves instantly in the acting character and thus fail to ask the questions which they might potentially have asked...The spectators themselves succumb to anger or jealousy, and completely lose the ability to understand, as it were, why it is that people become angry or jealous. In this way they lose interest in the causal nexus of these ‘natural’ emotions which do not seem to call for any further examination (*Brecht on Performance* 34).

If the audience enters the performance space and is able to sit back, watch the performance, and feel a sense of conclusion and complete fulfillment, the performance has not stimulated thought in a way that might result in productive action. Brecht writes, “The theatre presents the spectator not only with solved problems but with unsolved ones too” (*Brecht on Performance* 45). In this way, the audience has some holes left to fill in themselves. If a performance is meant to invoke change or inspire thought, as my performance is, then the audience cannot be left with a final solution that leaves nothing wanting. Brecht continues, “Epic theatre confronts the audience with situations where it must make choices. The spectator can no longer sit passively consuming but has to make decisions for or against what he sees on stage. He becomes productive” (*Brecht for Beginners* 76), taking the experiences of the theater into real life and using them in interacting with others, particularly, in this case, with minority groups or second generations specifically. Creating a performance that deals with social issues benefits from a Brechtian approach because it leaves the audience with a question, so they can, in this case, leave the theater pondering over the struggle of immigration as a cultural experience.

Furthermore, in relation to naturalism’s goal of eliminating the auditorium, Brechtian theater seeks to highlight the performative quality of the space itself. As stated in *Brecht for Beginners*, “As far as Brecht is concerned sets are supposed to let the audience know they are in

the theatre rather than in Athens or Venice, for example. The best way to do this is to leave the workings of the set visible” (61). Rather than create a realistic—but still very obviously theatrical—setting, why not use the theater to further emphasize the themes within the performance? Set designer Caspar Neher said, “If a set doesn’t contribute to the production, it detracts from it” (*Brecht for Beginners* 62). Going with minimal staging does not make the performance less profound; in fact, it may highlight the profundity of the performance. There are no false distractions, no sentimental design elements. Instead of a traditional set design, I was interested in creating a set using primarily color and fabric, one that would heighten the theme of liminality without distracting from the primary purpose of the performance: to hone in on the internal struggle of the second generation. Working with minimal staging mirrored the second generation’s lack of grounding.

In the context of my performance, Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories act as an entry point into the piece. The narratives function as a connection between the audience and the personal, as a way to relate the audience to me without asking them to make a leap directly into my own experience. Without incorporating an exact plotline, we used moments in the story as jumping off points to create vivid, engaging movements on stage. In *Performance and Philosophy*, Brecht remarks, “...the gesture is precisely what can arouse interest. The interest comes in the wake of the gesture, not as a prior condition for it” (27). From this I gather that the performance as a gesture is the thing that can inspire further speculation into the social condition of the children of Indian immigrants. While Lahiri’s stories alone function more as naturalism might, as a method of escapism, linking them to my personal experience, and never disguising the personal experience as theatrical or constructed, could lead the audience to question the state of immigration today and certainly the ways in which other cultures are represented in society.

II. Anne Bogart's Viewpoints

Anne Bogart's Viewpoints are reminiscent of what it means to move through daily life: walking down the street dodging obstacles and turning corners, seeing people perform gestures and make shapes, speed up or slow down. This quality is what makes the Viewpoints ideal for examining social and cultural issues, which are so reliant on the relationship of the ensemble. Practicing Viewpoints can be one way the collaborators break down moments into elemental stages—slowing down a movement or speeding up and recognizing the effect it has on the performer and the audience. Mary Overlie's Six Viewpoints came from her experiences growing up in the flatlands of Montana as well as drawn from the postmodern attempt to question traditional artistic approaches and create new rules and structures within each performer or performance (Bogart and Landau 5). Overlie states, "The seed of the entire work of The Six Viewpoints is found in the simple act of standing in space...The information of space, the experience of time, the familiarity of shapes, the qualities and rules of kinetics in movement, the ways of logics, that stories are formed and the states of being and emotional exchanges that constitute the process of communication between living creatures" (Overlie). The Six Viewpoints (Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement, and Story) constitute the theater deconstructed and working with them can enable a performer to break apart a work, rather than put it together, in a performance (Overlie).

Anne Bogart's Viewpoints were developed along the same thread as Overlie's, but are expanded upon. Bogart and Tina Landau define the Viewpoints as "a philosophy translated into a technique for (1) training performers; (2) building ensemble; and (3) creating movement for the stage" (Bogart and Landau 7). In this performance, we will focus on the nine Physical Viewpoints: Spatial relationship, Kinesthetic response, Shape, Gesture, Repetition, Architecture,

Tempo, Duration, and Topography. They are designed to mirror the “natural principles of movement, time and space” (Bogart and Landau 7). Everything about the performance space and the performer’s body has been broken down into tools; in a way, this is a method of awareness: working with the Viewpoints in mind allows the performer to experiment with the physicality and temporality of the theater at a micro level. While working on crafting specific moments, some drawn from Lahiri’s stories, some a product of ensemble collaboration, we can examine those moments by breaking them down using Viewpoints and presenting them to the audience through a new perspective.

The collaborative nature of this performance, due to its social relevance and attempt to stage a social problem, welcomes all of these aspects of Viewpoints into each rehearsal. Working almost exclusively with the Physical Viewpoints, we aim to capture, moment by moment, the relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories. However, these relationships must relate back to the ensemble as performers, not just as characters, which is where Viewpoints becomes useful. Bogart and Landau write, “*Expressing* an event is staging how it impacted you, what it felt like through a subjective lens” (144). This performance is attempting to stage a very personal experience: how it feels and what it means to be an Indian American growing up in a complex dual society. Instead of approaching the audience through traditional narrative, Viewpoints helps the performer use what is shared between both them and the audience to express that experience; what is shared is the stage and the performer. It is not just *telling*, but very much *showing*, using familiar objects (the human body, for example) to express something unfamiliar to the audience. In a performance that so heavily relies on social culture, using personal perspective is illuminating and inclusive, as it helps prevent the audience from separating reality from the performance and helps solidify the reality of the social problem being presented.

Part of preventing the alienation of the audience comes from denying any semblance to traditional acting, where an actor plays the part of someone else entirely. In *Remaking American Theater*, Scott Cummings states, to this regard, “The actor plays, in effect, a version of himself who then plays a theatrical role. This approach satisfies, at least in principle, the paradoxical need...to make theater that is immediate and visceral, more *real* than realism, without succumbing to the noxious illusion that acting is anything more than role-playing” (40). This performance functions as a mouthpiece to voice my own experience as an Indian American immigrant’s child, and I want the reality of it to be clear. Part of what makes Viewpoints essential to this performance is its unabashed reconciliation with reality—like epic theater, like Chamber Theatre, it does not deny what *is* happening on stage. It encourages, and, in fact, calls for using the space as it is: incorporating the grid patterns on the floor or the creases in a curtain as part of the exercise, making it, as Cummings said, “more *real* than realism” (40). Realism uses a complexity of masks to give the illusion of reality, whereas here, we play up the actual reality of the location, the body, and the audience. The performers themselves are also not necessarily acting out specific characters, expecting the audience to see that character standing there instead of the actor. Each performer brings bias to their part in the performance and their ‘character’ is fluid in that they exist in the stage-world, but they are still the performer, bringing all their biases and capabilities to that stage-world with them. This style of performance does not ask the audience to see past the ‘reality’—that these are performers moving about in a performance space. In *The Viewpoints Book*, Bogart and Landau state, “Viewpoints helps us recognize the limitations we impose on ourselves and our art by presumably submitting to a presumed *absolute authority*... It frees us from the statement: ‘My character would never do that’” (19), because Viewpoints stresses the freedom to choose—for what happens next in the performance as well as

for the performer. According to Bogart and Landau, Viewpoints leads a performer to awareness, when then leads to “greater *choice*, which leads to greater *freedom*” (19). In creating a performance using Viewpoints, the focus is on the choice to choose what is and is not right for the work. Cummings states, “[Bogart’s] work revels in the contradictions of time and space and seeks the beauty of unbalanced harmony in its complex unity” (131). Part of what makes Viewpoints mesmerizing to watch is the decisiveness of each movement, leaving the viewer feeling that those specific movements could only be done in the way they were to fit in the piece—that is what Cummings is referring to with “unbalanced harmony in its complex unity” (131). An ensemble might isolate the experience of being stared at in a small town and turn it into a symphony of gazes, where all the motion on stage happens only with the eyes. Practicing Viewpoints would help hone in on details like this, which are both specific and impactful, particularly in their effect on the audience. This performance seeks to get to the heart of the Indian American experience through isolated moments, like the discomfort of being stared at, to create a piece that is both mesmerizing and memorable in its specificity and honesty.

In collaborating to create this piece, we have brought multiple perspectives to the topic we are examining through Viewpoints. Because the collaborators come from different backgrounds, we were able to highlight the different perspectives in the work. However, we were united in our knowledge of Viewpoints, having previously worked with them. This allowed us to work from a similar place of understanding and ensemble. Viewpoints acted as the language through which we could converse about the topic of immigration. Bogart and Landau discuss the importance of raising the stakes—having all of these perspectives asking for representation in the piece helps us raise the stakes of our performance. Not only that, but the performance itself is giving voice to Indian Americans, a minority group that does not often have the opportunity to

offer perspective. While creating the performance, Bogart and Landau stress the idea of having enough pressure to enter a state of “spontaneous play” (139), a concept of creation that arrives from being under “pressure of collaboration, of time, of putting all this stuff together” (as cited in Cummings, 2006, p. 128). Certainly we created the work under all of these pressures. Those pressures helped us work from a place of instinct, as we did not always have time to contemplate an idea before trying it. As the piece developed, we narrowed down which moments worked for the performance, which images, movements, or texts we found powerful. The ultimate question was whether or not that power would translate to the audience, as they would not have the same amount of time or background as us. We would use some motion or incorporate some text without first knowing why, knowing only that we wanted the performance to include it. As the performance progressed, we realized why it was imperative that we have it just so. Viewpoints are what enabled us to create a performance that was “undismissible” (Cummings 108). Bogart uses this word in *A Director Prepares* (2001) to describe the final goal of a Viewpoints-trained performer—to grasp the audience tightly enough that they cannot look away, but keep the grip loose so they are able to observe and think for themselves. In a performance such as this one, which hopes to spur awareness of a social problem experienced by a minority group, it is important to encourage the audience to continue contemplating the topic even after the performance is over, as it applies to social interactions.

III. The Play-World

A crucial ingredient to performance is crafting a world specific to the performance itself. Like a traditional theatrical play would have set pieces and use dialogue appropriate to the time period in which the performance takes place, the world of this performance must accommodate its structure. The work may not be narrative, may not have a specific setting, yet the pieces must

be believably connected. Bogart and Landau call this space ‘The Play-World’ and discuss it as something that must be carefully crafted alongside the performance. They define it as “the set of laws belonging to your piece and no other: the way time operates, the way people dress, the color palette, what constitutes good and evil, good manners or bad, what a certain gesture denotes, etc” (Bogart and Landau 167). This performance is based firmly in a specific realm—that is, the liminal space between Indian culture and U.S. culture. Since there is such a specific ‘space’ associated with the performance, I wanted to be sure the performance had fluidity and consistency in its aura. Whether that meant consistency in costume or gesture or specific locations on stage denoting some specified meaning, I wanted that to be clear to the audience. One of the themes of the performance deals with finding a physical location of belonging, so creating a space was crucial to its success. Anne Bogart advises to “Direct from a physical rather than a psychological point of view” (144), since the physical space plays a major role in molding the audience’s perception of the performance. Keeping in mind what will work well on stage and what works for the specific performance, we can create an environment that reflects the overarching theme of the performance. Perhaps we want to remain within a specific color scheme to highlight the black-and-white view of cultures or use recognizable Indian and American objects as props and set pieces (like holi powder or denim) to represent stereotype. In addition, if we designate from the start that the performance takes place, not in a distinct, known location, but in a perceived-place between Indian and American cultures, we can establish that physical location functions as a place to reveal and interpret internal experience.

In *Remaking American Theater*, Cummings notes that “Whatever the subject of a particular work, [Anne Bogart] never loses sight of the basic transaction between spectator and performer—the possibilities, mutual obligations, repercussions that derive therefrom” (37).

While making the Play-World of the performance, keeping the relationship between performer and audience is imperative because once the rules of the Play-World are clear to the performer, they must be communicated to the audience. In a performance like this one, where the performers exist in a particular internal world, finding ways to include the audience in that world is everything to their understanding of the performance. Establishing early on what the performance will be, (in this case, showing the various struggles an Indian American undergoes as a second generation), and finding ways to lend a hand to the audience throughout the piece. This can be accomplished by directly addressing the audience, which acknowledges their presence, making them feel included, and establishing movements or themes that are frequently repeated through the work, which provides grounding. Through the performers' practiced, deliberate movements and repetition, all performed with patience, the audience should sense a pattern of behavior or quality that distinguishes the performance space from the outside world. For this performance, stressing the 'outsider' effect would help the audience find an entry point. Finding a universally-experienced theme through which the audience can enter the performance makes the Play-World more accessible.

I find that crafting the Play-World comes easiest when done simultaneously to creating the performance, because it often presents creative obstacles for the performers to work around during rehearsal, which generates material for the final piece. We began with a series of Viewpoints sessions in which we designated specific areas of the stage to be locations, (which is an exercise in the Viewpoint of Topography). For example, during an initial rehearsal, we designated one corner of the performance space as the U.S., so the performers had to bear that in mind while moving—maybe that meant gravity is much stronger in that specific area or maybe time slowed down and every motion was done at snail's pace. Even if we ultimately left that rule

out, rehearsing with the rule generated interesting movements with the right context in mind.

Eventually, the performance grew, and we found certain consistencies emerging: when confronted with Indian culture, the performer always tried to wipe or wash it away, whether that meant literally scrubbing against skin or concealing an object representative of the culture.

Playing with these rules in rehearsal revealed where the performers felt most comfortable and what felt most natural to the performance, as well as helped us generate a list of ingredients we could use throughout the piece (Bogart and Landau 12).

In *The Viewpoints Book*, Bogart and Landau emphasize the importance of Source Work, which “asks the entire company to participate with its entire being in the process, rather than assume a prescribed or passive role. It asks each person to contribute, create and care, rather than wait to be told what the play is about or what their blocking should be” (164). The idea is to have every performer be familiar and attached to the source material to create a cavernous collection of images, sounds, quotes, gestures, and objects, any of which can become a jumping off point for creation. More than that, however, Source Work invites participation and ownership over the piece; it is, according to Bogart and Landau, “*an invitation to obsession...getting in touch with this original impulse behind the work, as well as the work itself*” (164). This performance focuses on a social issue; it is not the performance, but the question that drives it forward. Source Work is how we “wake up the *question* inside the piece” (Bogart and Landau 164), which is the true heart of the performance. Because I was the only performer in the ensemble to have the specific experience of growing up Indian American in the U.S., I hoped Source Work would help draw the ensemble into that experience. We grew familiar with Jhumpa Lahiri’s story “Hell-Heaven” and made connections from it to other objects and texts in order to form a web of materials. This web connected Lahiri’s story with poems, like “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver,

objects, like teacups, which connect to deep-rooted practices across several cultures, and music, particularly that of collaborative artists, like The Silk Road Ensemble. This performance deals with a real social issue and addresses a struggle faced by second generations across the country, so compiling as much Source Work as possible generated discussion and creation and formed a web of materials that tied back to the topic.

IV. Robert Wilson

Robert Wilson takes an image-based approach to composition. He sees every portion of the performance as part of a dance, every material—light, music, performer, text—a different body part that needs separate, detailed attention. His website describes his work as follows: “Through his signature use of light, his investigations into the structure of a simple movement, and the classical rigor of his scenic and furniture design, Wilson has continuously articulated the force and originality of his vision” (*Robert Wilson*). His work reaches into visual arts as much as it does the performative arts, as he works based on drawings, visualizations of his thoughts, in what he calls ‘visual books,’ from which the entirety of the performance is created, from sound to light to movement (Shevtsova). Wilson’s most influential and monumental work is *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), a contemporary opera created collaboratively with composer Philip Glass. The work reinvisioned opera with its nonlinear form and focus on image. According to his website, “Non-narrative in form, the work uses a series of powerful recurrent images as its main storytelling device shown in juxtaposition with abstract dance sequences” (“Einstein on the Beach”). Like with *Einstein on the Beach*, I wanted to draw from powerful images from my memory and experience and use them to drive the performance. I chose images over traditional narrative because I see images as having a greater capacity to fix in the minds of audience members, leaving striking imprints of single moments. I find narrative to be fixed within itself,

harder to pick apart into stand-out moments, while images can be easily separated and repeated. The more the images recur, the more memorable they are. In Maria Shevtsova's book *Robert Wilson*, she goes into detail about Wilson's method of construction and the ways in which he separates the performance into entities before compiling them together. Shevtsova writes, "The point of the work for him is in the doing, which is why he has a method, is methodical, and dislikes excessive discussion, particularly in rehearsals" (42). Thinking about his methodology involves separating entities—of light, music, shape as different tracks, as I mentioned before—which lends itself well to Viewpoints, as Viewpoints also allows performers and creators to concentrate on aspects of space and time. Developing these entities as separate tracks in combination with the Play-World concept elevates the performance to a place closer to the liminal space we are attempting to portray; it mirrors the separate and intertwining cultures Indian Americans (and the performers) grapples with.

Thinking about the details of the Play-World involved defining what makes a location. There are specific aural, olfactory, and textural qualities to locations, so we wanted to manipulate those qualities in our Play-World so they reflected the performance. It was important to me to create an environment that stimulated as many senses as possible, in order to give the liminal space as much of a physical presence as possible. Robert Wilson's work heavily relies on his ability to separate factors of performance into different tracks, which come together to make the performance. Shevtsova writes, "[He] treats the elements [music, lights, text] concerned as separate entities right from the start so that, in his words, 'they don't risk illustrating each other mutually, are not dependent on each other' ... Wilson accords them equal importance" (48). Two questions that struck me from Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's *The Viewpoints Book* were "How are light and color used to express the theme?" in relation to "What is the arena, the landscape or

the world of the play?” (Bogart and Landau 159). Color is so visually stimulating and stunning, I knew some work had to be done to bring lots of color into the space. I wanted to bring elements of the worlds thematically combined into the visual space—like using the colors associated with Indian culture as a method to create a physical representation of the internal chaos and commotion of the characters.

In using elements of Indian or American culture, we had to be careful not to caricature the culture. When Wilson drew from Eastern theater styles for some of his works, he fit their methods into his own without stressing them as exotic or unusual. Shevtsova states, “Wilson is not in the least interested in exoticism or appropriation. His goal is to establish a gestural language adequate to his productions” (43). Our goal was similar: to use Indian culture without exoticizing it, while also highlighting the ways in which it *is* exoticized in American social culture. Wilson teaches us that the trick is to seamlessly incorporate the culture without flamboyance. He draws from Japanese and Balinese classical theatre, which, in his piece, *I La Galigo*, “co-exist harmoniously with the hieratic positions and gestures typical of Wilson’s approach” (Shevtsova 43). The focus is always on what is appropriate for the performance. I was drawn to the idea of creating a language particular to the Play-World of colors and circular space we had already created, a language that exists as its own identity apart from the two cultures we would focus on in the performance. This third language would mirror the third culture formed by the second generation of Indian immigrants. Creating this third hybrid-like language would help us not fall into stereotypes and other traps that come from representing cultures, but instead to use the combined language to counteract the ways culture is misused and misrepresented. The best way to condone exoticization would be to show how culture can be incorporated without it. I was interested in finding a simple way to represent cultures without turning to stereotypes, and

this concept of “gestural language” got me thinking about borrowing small things—like colors and fabrics—from either Indian or American cultures to make up this liminal culture the performance would be portraying. Wilson is particularly attracted to color and the immediate reactions audiences have to specific colors. He focuses much attention on light and the effect of colored light on the audience. He believes light and color can manipulate an audience’s reaction and as such spends time creating a complex schema that combines and blends the two for the desired effect (Shevtsova 64-67). With this performance, using multiple colors could enhance the chaotic quality of the struggle, while various fabrics—maybe denim for American culture, synthetics for Indian—could call forth those specific cultures without explicitly stating them. Color can be used as a calming effect or a rousing one, depending on brightness, opacity, and shade. Thinking of color as an entity, inspires the creator to mold it as if it were a performer itself—thinking of it, as Wilson might, as a dancer that can move the audience through movement and shape. According to Shevtsova, “[Wilson] has never stopped thinking of his work as dance, the most corporeal, in-the-body art of them all...nothing is ever quite static, not even objects, let alone light” (46). The idea of constant movement sounds exhausting—for the audience to watch, for the performer to perform—but it applies to more than just the visual aspects of staging, but the performance itself as a representation of the movement between cultures.

Music, too, is a separate being in Wilson’s work, in that it is a living, breathing being that exists on its own without the visual performance. As Shevtsova writes, “There are various ways of thinking—by visual, musical, and other non-verbal means, with the body (especially the case of dancers), and in silence” (42). What is the aural soundscape of the piece? When are there silences? The progression of sound tells as much of a story on its own as the visual elements,

whether it's actual music played through speakers or the sound of an object falling or someone walking across the stage. In this performance, music acts as its own voice, as it often does for the Indian American, and can express the cultural struggle in a universal language. Shevtsova writes, "According to Wilson, the proscenium has the additional virtue of allowing people to *hear* better. The paradox of hearing better in a space of seeing makes sense when we realise that, for Wilson, seeing and hearing, although separate activities, reinforce each other" (53). Hearing a combination of American and Indian sounds would reinforce the performance itself. As discussed in the previous chapter, music has proved to be an essential medium through which Indian American children express their dual identities. Through music, and the rising popularity of international fusion music, we can tell the story of the second generation.

V. Chamber Theatre

Chamber Theatre can be a useful technique to begin with as a way of determining the style, point of view, and characterization of an adaptation. Robert Breen's *Chamber Theatre* offers a nearly step-by-step process to crafting a Chamber Theatre production, including examples to help master the various factors the creator must consider. Many written-to-staged works turn narration into dialogue and lose paragraphs of description or a character's interior thoughts. Chamber Theatre is a technique for translating literature to the stage without losing its distinct literary qualities. Rather than a creative approach, it is technical, offering methods for recreating, for example, a character's interior thoughts such that they are visible on the stage, all the while stressing the narrative aspect of literature. It primarily discusses the process of emphasizing the narrator's perspective in the staged production. It is not just about telling the story, but about telling the story through the voice of the narrator. While I was not turning

Lahiri's stories into a direct adaptation, I was interested in translating my story into a staged performance without losing my personal voice.

I found myself turning to Chamber Theatre near the end of the creative process as a way of harkening back to the heart of the matter: the clash of two cultures. I found the 'mirror effect' to be particularly useful as it exemplified the experience of dual identities. This method of bifurcation is a way to split one character into multiple parts, each representing a different aspect of the character, for example, the American side versus the Indian side. The bifurcations are played by separate actors, which further emphasizes the separate identities. They also enable the audience to receive an intimate view into the character's inner thoughts and workings through conversations between those two bifurcations or to clearly display a character's divided mind. Breen is adamant that the actors do not necessarily need to be aesthetically identical—in fact, the differences may be what offer insight into the character (14). Because this performance focuses on a character's dual identities—one American, the other Indian—we used the 'mirror effect' to portray the division of the one character and heighten the sense of confusion, as the character feels mentally split between the two cultures.

Chamber Theatre draws a lot of its theory from the concepts of epic theater, or Brechtian theater. Breen writes, "Chamber Theatre is not interested in the problems of transforming fiction into drama; it resists the temptation to delete narrative descriptions and rewrite summaries as dialogue. No effort is made in Chamber Theatre to eliminate the narrative point of view" (4). This puts Chamber Theatre hand-in-hand with the epic style, because it embraces the degree of separation between the present tense of the story and the present tense of the narrative as two distinct things. Breen discusses how the point of view and narrative style of the story can affect how close the audience feels to the performance. According to Breen, the audience "must view

the events on the stage from a certain distance that will eventually allow it to engage the events more deeply and with fuller understanding than if it indulged in slack-jawed wonder and sentimental identification” (45). This is precisely Brecht’s performance philosophy, and Chamber Theatre techniques work toward controlling that distance between the audience and the performers. For instance, a performer might play a character with his own bias as performer: meaning, the performer acknowledges that they are a performer playing a character. When the performer addresses the audience, the distance between the audience and the performer decreases, because the audience feels a more intimate connection to that performer and thus, to the character as well. The audience feels pulled into the world of the performance, because they have seen the performer as both performer and character. Breen states, “When the character addresses the audience, the system of relationships opens up to include the audience...when the actor returns to his closed system...the audience returns to the illusory world of the story with more assurance, more comfort, with a greater sense of belonging” (45). Since the audience now feels acquainted with the character and the performer, they can further enter the performance and feel like more than just spectators, while still remaining aware of the fact that they are watching a performance—because the performer does not break the fourth wall in an attempt to turn the audience into participants, but rather to increase their awareness of the performative quality and feel more actively engaged. Previously, traditional theater had set standards such that breaking the fourth wall became taboo. Breen writes, “Chamber Theatre is striking in its capacity to create distance and a sense of strangeness which alerts the audience to new values in an otherwise too familiar occasion” (44). Breaking the fourth wall is one method to achieving this strangeness and more actively involving the audience, which is necessary when the performance is a means to investigating a social and cultural experience or as a way to bring an unfamiliar experience to the

eyes and minds of the audience. An active engagement in the performance would inspire an audience to delve into the topic as more than just a method of escapism, (as traditional theater is often tied to entertainment), but an intellectual exercise—recognizing and understanding the existence of a social problem, as in this case, with the misrepresentation of Indian culture in American society and the cultural struggle of the Indian American youth.

Chamber Theatre takes the literary quality of a work into consideration when turning it into a staged production. For example, the specific diction informs the persona of the narrator. It offers more leeway than naturalism or realism, which both call for many alterations in order to turn the story into a performance that exists in the present-time. Chamber Theatre can stay truer to the text as a literary work; it allows for characters to speak about their own actions in the third person or to split into different actors who can then battle out a decision. As Breen states, “Chamber Theatre provides an opportunity for verbal and nonverbal expressions of the symbolic action which the literary text represents...The words of a literary text are more fully realized as gestures, and there is little danger of the narrative attitudes reverting to substitutes for action” (40-41). Taking this a step further would be to combine it with the techniques of Anne Bogart and Robert Wilson and allow these gestures and texts to split apart and be utilized as separate entities, which helps to further break down and analyze the text at its heart. Just as separating the character’s thoughts into different actors can turn an internal discussion into an on-stage, physical battle, so the actions and texts can also be separated. A repeated gesture or text while meaning one thing when performed simultaneously, can be separated and performed separately only to accommodate additional meanings and increase depth. More than one actor may say a text in unison, but only one actor performs the accompanying gesture. Thus, Chamber Theatre

becomes a technique to break apart a piece of literature in order to translate it into a different language—the language of performance.

VI. Charles L. Mee

Charles Mee’s approach to playwriting stems from an attempt to mirror life as he has experienced it. That is to say, his approach is not like naturalism, which attempts to recreate reality, but rather his plays reach toward the experience of what it feels like to be alive. He says:

Whatever else it may do, a play embodies a playwright's beliefs about how it is to be alive today, and what it is to be a human being - so that what a play is about, what people say and how things look onstage, and, even more deeply than that, how a play is structured, contain a vision of what it is to have a life on earth. If things happen suddenly and inexplicably, it's because a playwright believes that's how life is. If things unfold gradually and logically, that's an idea about [*sic*] how the world works” (Mee, “Wintertime”).

Mee was inspired by Greek theater, which, to him, never resolves a tragedy or allows a misunderstanding to be righted, and offers a “complexity and richness of form [that] reflected a complexity and richness of understanding of human character and human history”(Mee, “Wintertime”). As my performance is a direct reflection of life as I know it, I took Mee’s theories on performance as a perception of real life and used it to fuel the form of my performance. The world of my performance is chaotic and scenes shift from dialogue-heavy to movement-heavy in an effort to mirror my experience of flipping between American and Indian cultures.

While Charles Mee is known for his plays and theatrical compositions, he spent many years of his life as an historian, writing about American history and politics, taking stances against American imperialism, and campaigning for anti-war candidates during the Vietnam War. However, he came to realize that, as Scott Cummings states, "...it was not for me a satisfactory way of talking about the world...I really think the theater is more the place where I can write about the world and not pretend that my view is dispassionate" (14). Mee struggled with the predisposition that historians should be unbiased, presenting history in a factual, perhaps diplomatic, method. I felt this struggle as well in marrying my research with Lahiri's fiction and my personal experiences. I want everything in the performance, including Lahiri's story, to be filtered through my subjectivity. The performance is not meant to be a direct adaptation of Lahiri's work, but rather, how my experiences directly relate to the narratives of other second generation Indian Americans. According to Cummings, "[Charles Mee's] ultimate concern is to take the temperature of the body politic by filtering the culture of the past and the present through his own unabashed subjectivity" (14). He found that taking a political issue and examining it in a theatrical setting better satisfied his need to present his personal stance. I found performance to be the optimal setting for combining my bias with the history of Indian immigration, using my subjectivity as a way to present reality. I wanted the performance to be created through a subjective lens, not through Lahiri's work or through the historical context. While my work in the experience of second generation Indian Americans does not focus on their political trials, Mee's work with political issues can be translated to social culture. I might even argue that his methods lend themselves even better to social struggles because they are based so solidly on experience. Mee says, "...when I want to write something for myself and only for myself, to put down what matters most to me so it is clear and true and vivid and memorable, the

form it takes is the form of a play” (as cited in Cummings, 2006, p. 18). The only way I could make this performance “clear and true and vivid and memorable” (18) was to draw primarily from my own life. Performance can be a method of recording and examining history in a much more visceral and experiential way than the common history book. In the case of my research, it was instigated more so by my personal experience as a second generation Indian American than the written work of Jhumpa Lahiri, and I wanted to access those experiences through more than just written case studies done by historians, ethnographers, or book critics. To me, the biggest struggle of presenting social culture as a personal experience is turning it into something that is “clear and true and vivid and memorable” (Mee) for more people than just the creator. The history of immigration alone would not have enough emotional involvement. Adapting a Jhumpa Lahiri story would not be as historically grounded. My interest lay in linking Jhumpa Lahiri’s story as a representation of Indian Americans as a whole to my experience as a second generation, in order to ground the fiction in a realistic experience. Mee focuses on presenting through a subjective lens. I stepped away from staging an adaptation of Lahiri’s story to achieve subjectivity on my own terms, as well as stressing that the performance had a larger purpose than telling the story of an Indian immigrant. The goal of this performance was to use Lahiri’s stories as an entry point to investigate my own. Mee’s words on turning history into a subjective performance struck me as the right path for my project. Performance allows me to examine specific details of Lahiri’s stories, such as the cultural convention of tea as a social bond, by breaking them down into physical movements and applying them to my own experiences. I can use moments from Lahiri’s stories to establish the context of my personal story. I am also able to compile these details into a piece, which, when seen as a whole, brings to light aspects of cultural experience otherwise inaccessible through other methods of research, for instance the palpable

tension between a mother and daughter and the weight of their history that defines their relationship.

One of Chuck Mee's approaches to creating performance comes close to Anne Bogart's idea of "scavenging." Mee begins by making a list of every possible thing he can think of that he associates with the topic of the piece. He does this in his attempt to create something lifelike, mirroring the commotion of life, to, in his own words, "bring to the frame of the plays material from history, philosophy, insanity, inattention, distractedness, judicial theory, sudden violent passion, lyricisms, the *National Enquirer*, nostalgia, longing, aspiration, literary criticism, anguish, confusion, inability" (Mee). His work is a conglomeration of subjective thoughts and theories and are built nontraditionally, encouraging a chaos of ideas. The list could contain items that, at first glance, have no apparent meaning to the topic, like a Coke bottle or a dirty sock—but among these items could be a seed to build from and, ultimately, lead back to the subjective lens from which he works. These are just images and objects he thinks of when he reads or views the sources. I created a similar list while reading Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, one that connected the historical and personal contexts with the Lahiri story. Mee uses this list of items to construct a piece made of "shards, fragments, or fractured pieces" (Mee). Cummings discusses this fragmented method of creation in *Remaking American Theater*:

The image of shards, fragments, or fractured pieces of a once robust whole comes up again and again in Mee's work and in his discussions of it, as if to demonstrate a biographical imperative for his rejection of conventional forms. Such a psychological understanding would be critically simplistic, of course, but on a human level it adds a certain resonance to such elements of his plays as the preponderance of dance and

movement sequences, his cracking open of others' texts to extract pieces for his own use, and his rejection of shapely narrative structures (33)

Cummings noticed that Mee used his associative list as an entry point into the texts of others and as a way of introducing those texts to an audience, but through his personal lens. I, too, aim to construct my own lens through which to filter the Lahiri stories, one that I can then feed to an audience as a way to convey the social struggle of a specific group of people. Mee's rejection of conventional forms of presentation harmonizes with my rejection of a direct adaptation of Lahiri, in favor of creating a performance that offers more of my own complex relationship with the narratives. As Mee says, "I like plays that are not too neat, too finished, too presentable. My plays are broken, jagged, filled with sharp edges, filled with things that take sudden turns, careen into each other, smash up, veer off in sickening turns. That feels good to me. It feels like my life. It feels like the world" (Mee). My dual cultures often mirror this mayhem, so I am drawn to this method of taking bits and pieces from what I know and from what I find in Lahiri's stories, and tearing them up into pieces, making my own additions, and rearranging and reconnecting them. I have made a performance that "feels like my life" and the world in which I grew up.

Chapter 3: “To Strike Roots,” Performance Interpretation

The performance, entitled “To Strike Roots,” was organized into three parts: the first dealt with the relationship between first and second generation Indian Americans, the second portrayed the misrepresentation and exoticization of Indian culture within American society, and the third embodied the second generation’s struggle to internally unite the two cultures. The performance began with a short monologue on the nature of potatoes—a low-maintenance root vegetable that can grow almost anywhere in the world (“Potatoes”). This image of a root becomes crucial to the rest of the performance, and the potato returns at the end, continuing to represent the second generation’s search for a place to “plant roots.” The monologue transitions into an image drawn from Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Hell-Heaven,” told from the perspective of a teenage girl, in which the mother, a first generation Indian immigrant, has trouble easing the loneliness that comes with moving to a new country. She knows no one, does not speak the language well, and feels alienated by her teenage daughter and husband, who works long hours at the hospital. We used a teacup, (tea-drinking being a common social activity in Indian culture), as a representation of the life she missed. The daughter later enters with her own teacup, at which point both drop their teacups, shattering them, emphasizing the disconnect between the generations.

The misrepresentation and exoticization of Indian culture as a unified entity is shown through a movement-based scene in which three characters (performed by three white performers) surround and examine the fourth character (played by me) in an exaggerated, fascinated manner—stroking hair and skin and draping me with Indian fabrics. This continues into a cycle of breaking out of and falling back into the cage they form with their bodies. They attempt to force me to conform to their understanding of Indian culture, by draping me with

fabric and playing with my hair, which leads me to confusion, as I am simultaneously attempting to form my own cultural identity.

The third part brings back the potato and another monologue, mirroring the opening, in order to play up the change since the beginning. The monologue hones in on the importance of “roots,” but also the importance of the personal identity, not just ancestral. The performance focuses on the lack of grounding felt by second generation Indian Americans, who feel lost in three separate worlds: their parents’ India from before they moved to the U.S., their peers’ notions of India, and American society itself.

Anne Bogart talks about being a scavenger and beginning the creation of her pieces by compiling a cache of any and all things related to the topic. These things might not necessarily have any immediately apparent connection, but to have a list of everything the creators associate with the topic can be useful to come back to as they construct the work. I began this work in a similar fashion; I wanted to have an ongoing collection of quotes, gestures, songs, poems, and objects that my collaborators and I could easily pick up and drop as necessary. When reading through Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth*, I highlighted anything that I found intriguing or vivid—character descriptions, such as “a thick stem of vermillion powder in the center parting of her hair” (61), actions, “he didn’t know how to blow bubbles or hold his breath, as I had learned in swimming class” (63), or objects, which could be anything from “curried mackerel and rice” (61) to *Anne of Green Gables* (69). These moments could be used as spoken text, images, or as simple, repeatable gestures. They helped me create the Play-World of the second generation on the stage. The details of Lahiri’s stories could then be filtered through my own experiences, to get Charles Mee’s “subjective lens” effect.

The story that connected best to this research was “Hell-Heaven,” which follows a girl’s teenage years as she grows up in Boston with a traditional Bengali mother who feels true loneliness in America and a father who does not seem to feel much besides obligation to his wife and daughter. I found the clash between the mother and daughter to be telling of their separate struggles to keep up with two cultures. This clash was a narrative embodiment of the real-life second generation Indian American’s lack of connection with the first generation immigrant. I wanted to draw from this fictional narrative to give substance to the realistic relationship between generations—for example, in the story, the mother shows disapproval when her daughter engages in any “American” activities, like wearing American clothes to a Thanksgiving party attended by Indians or spending time with an American boy. Chamber Theatre would allow me to express both perspectives simultaneously, to highlight the difference in culture and heighten the dichotomy between them. The mother might be on one side of the stage and the daughter at the other, both expressing their frustrations, but not hearing the other because they are on different planes. The audience sees both and gets a representation of how the mother and daughter are on different wavelengths. In Lahiri’s story, the mother, longing for her known world back in Calcutta, battles to keep her daughter within the confines of Indian culture, despite the daughter’s American education and social upbringing. The daughter feels no familiarity with her mother’s culture and fights back at every opportunity, finding role models in the American women she meets. In the story, only when the daughter is much older, does the gap between them close slightly. When she goes to her mother for comfort after a bad heartbreak, her mother reveals to her daughter the desperate loneliness she felt once, too—to the point of almost attempting suicide. The dichotomy between the two generations is heart-breaking throughout the story, and the ending closes the gap ever so slightly, just enough to keep from losing all hope.

After researching the historical context of Indian American culture, Lahiri's stories helped me access that context in a personal setting that reached beyond my own. I thought using this story would allow me to further investigate the realistic application of the historical context. When translated into a performance, I could break down moments of the story, particularly by using Viewpoints, to hone in on the relationships experienced by the second generation—to the first generation and to her peers.

In the following sections, I will describe and breakdown four objects used in specific scenes and how they functioned as tools to break open the question of cultural identity for second generation Indian Americans.

I. The Teacup



The scene begins with Haley, one of the performers, sitting at a long table, elbows raised, holding a teacup. The table is covered in colorful fabrics, like a patchwork tablecloth. She sits

perfectly still, staring straight across. An empty chair draped in another fabric is at the other end of the table. She sits this way for about half a minute, before a recording is heard over the speaker. Two Indian women talk over tea, (the sounds of tea-sipping and stirring can be heard in the background), about the effects of moving to America—the spoiled, picky children, the distance from home. Haley inserts comments as if she is a part of the conversation, but there is no one around her. At the end of the conversation, it is revealed that Haley is moving to America; the recording is her memory of a conversation she had with her friends back in India before she moved. I enter at that moment with my own teacup. I approach Haley from behind, taking deliberate and pointed steps, and slowly reach to put a streak of red in her hair. I walk briskly to stand behind the chair opposite her, facing her and still holding my teacup. Virginia and Kara, also performers, enter, their voices growing from whispers to angry shouts. They approach Haley, ignoring me, and repeat the lines “Mixed marriages are a doomed enterprise,” “You left with the understanding you’d go back,” and “Is this what America does to people?” She and I grow more and more visibly distressed as their volume increases, though Haley is significantly more upset, her whole body shaking. When they have circled her, they abruptly push the table out from under her elbows. After a beat, Haley and I both drop our teacups. We look down to see if they have broken. I step on mine, whole or shattered, and approach Haley as she kneels down to put her teacup back together. I drag the empty chair away from her and exit.

Analysis

In the story, teacups were central to the Indian community. Scenes with the mother often involved her sitting with other Bengali women, gossiping over tea. One particularly memorable scene has the mother peering disapprovingly at the daughter over a cup of tea, almost as if the teacup were a barrier between them, or a reminder to the daughter of her heritage. The daughter

proceeds to ignore this blatant hint, rejecting completely her mother's wishes. Knowing the mother's experience is crucial to understanding the second generation. We know that Indian immigrants historically moved to the U.S. with almost nothing to their name. The rupee has little value here, so immigrants must build from the ground up. Because the second generation grows up here, they have little concept of their parents' lives in India. Lahiri writes, of one of her characters that moves to the U.S. from India: "He was from a wealthy family in Calcutta and had never had to do so much as pour himself a glass of water before moving to America... Life as a graduate student in Boston was a cruel shock" (62). He goes from riches to rags, prince to pauper. On top of that is the loneliness—with no acquaintances and a language barrier, remembering the Indian community back in the homeland can be painful. I wanted to recreate that sense of community that the mother feels when she's with her Bengali friends, and I wanted to find an object that could demonstrate that feeling with simplicity. The teacup sums up that social connection, not to mention the stark difference between gossiping with friends over tea versus consuming a solitary cup of it. I began with the image of Haley sitting at the table holding a cup of tea. An exercise in Viewpoints, where we played with feeling misplaced, brought us to the idea of stillness as a reaction to loneliness—this is a stillness that stems from being locked in memory, rather than being present in the moment. The stillness also emphasizes that she is alone—she is seated across from an empty chair, almost as if expecting a nonexistent person to speak. When someone does speak, it is a surprise, because the sound comes from the speaker. This was an idea I drew from Chamber Theatre—staging a character's inner thoughts in a concrete way. I had Haley speak aloud as if she were a part of the conversation, even though it's happening in her memory. This serves as a sort of bifurcation of one character across different times, so as to establish her as part of both the recording world in the past and the present world

with the empty chair. The teacup grounds the image to both the recording and the present—Haley and the teacup are the only things in common with the memory and the present, making the differences in company (or lack thereof) even more apparent.

To further the effect of Haley's solitude, Virginia and Kara pull the table out from under Haley's elbows, leaving her with just the chair, the teacup, and the empty chair across from her. This was a way of reckoning with the emptiness of the opposite chair—the mother's loneliness and longing for the family, friends, and homeland she left behind in India. The feeling of the teacup between her hands harkens back to days when she made tea for friends and family who came to visit her, but when the table—the thing connecting everyone sitting around it—is removed, she is left with emptiness. I could not stress that disconnect enough, and I wanted to put it into context with the daughter, who was the character the majority of the performance would focus on. For that reason, I entered as the daughter and stood behind the empty chair—very decidedly *not sitting* in the chair. This marked the deepening of the gap between the generations, while still emphasizing the emptiness and loneliness experienced by the mother. Drawing from Lahiri's story again, it was important that I was the one to mark Haley's hair with red, (the sign of a married woman), because the one connection between the mother and father is the daughter—otherwise, their relationship is isolating and cold, as the father does not ever really interact with either of them, which further deepens the mother's isolation.

The red coloring is a mark of a married woman, at least in traditional Bengali customs. I wanted a simple, repeatable gesture to represent the relationship between the mother and daughter. I loved the vibrant red color and action of smearing it along the center parting of the hair. What was interesting about that gesture in particular was that it applied to both forms of Anne Bogart's Viewpoint of gesture—behavioral gesture, which is a concrete, everyday gesture,

and expressive gesture, which is abstract and symbolic (Bogart and Landau 9-10). Because it is specific to Indian culture, anyone who does not know the gesture sees it as expressive. So, either it is understood as marking someone as married or it is simply the action of tracing over a hair parting. Either way, marking Haley is a way of establishing the daughter's recognition of her connection to the older generation. However, by rejecting the chair across from Haley—the community of the mother's ancestors—I am rejecting any cultural connection to her. I specifically wanted to enter after the recording stopped playing, because the daughter does not exist in that world. She has no memories of sitting around a table with cups of tea, gossiping about the neighbors. As Haley's memory fades, I enter as proof of the mother's decidedly American life. A daughter might look like her mother, but those similarities are only skin-deep. Taking this a step further, I played with our physical differences. Our skin colors reflect the life we, as characters, are rejecting: Haley as the mother, who rejects American culture, especially in relation to her daughter as a part of it, and me as the daughter, who wants to belong to the U.S., but cannot because of Indian ancestry.

The broken teacup further defines the relationship between mother and daughter. Once it breaks, I step directly on the pieces, showing little concern for the disconnect between myself and the mother, while Haley kneels down in distress and tries to join the pieces together, because, for her, the daughter is a significant reason for being in the U.S. at all. As said earlier, many immigrants came to the U.S. for the well-established and prestigious education system—to have her daughter reject her and their ancestral culture is a blow to the core, especially when the mother does not have anyone else. When discussing how to convincingly break the teacups on stage, I went back to Charles Mee's discussion of performance as a reflection of how the creator views or experiences life (Mee, "Wintertime"). While thinking about how to achieve spontaneity

and chance on stage, I remembered reading Stefan Brecht's interpretation of *chance* in images and as art, and I thought of improvisation as being a form of chance. A relationship between characters can be defined by an improvised act and the meaning of an action can change for the performers as well as the audience depending on how they progress. I wanted to find a way to ease in some improvisation as a way of realizing that not every cultural experience of this kind (a second generation Indian American growing up in a Bengali household) is exactly the same; the factors can vary significantly based on so many terms—the parents' relationship, the rate at which they accept their new American lifestyle, how they expose their children to Indian culture. In addition to the teacups representing the mother's life in India versus America, I decided to extend the teacup's influence on the characters by playing with its fragility. I liked the sound and surprise of it shattering, but the only way to achieve the full effect would be to have it surprise us as well. I realized that no matter how and whether or not the teacups broke; the moment would carry enough weight that it would not matter. The action of dropping them and that split-second pause where the audience (and the performers) wait for what happens next would be enough to have a strong effect. If the performers were also uncertain, it would suspend that moment between the drop and the shatter, which was exactly the effect I wanted to achieve. The striking aural quality of the shatter added to the irreversibility of the moment. The actual brokenness of their relationship had to be believable before the piece could continue from that point. This placed a lot of tension on the performers, which helped increase the tension in the audience and motivate them to continue following the struggle of the characters. This tension begins when Virginia and Haley begin yelling at Haley in another moment of bifurcation. They act as the voices in her head that beat down on her for leaving home; this is an internal tension that I chose to stage. In researching the second generation's experience, I have realized that the story of the

first generation is integral, not just for understanding the second generation's origins, but for understanding the second generation's perceptions of their parents' cultures. In the U.S., the second generation sees the first generation as isolated—forming communities with other first generations and not necessarily trying to join American culture or society—which increases the generational gap, since the second generation grows up in an American culture, and therefore cannot reject it, as their parents do.

II. Dirt and Potatoes



The performance opens with the four performers entering from the curtains and repeating the gesture of wiping something off of our skin and clothes. The gesture gets more frantic until we are all in synchronization. I pull a potato and a potato peeler out of my pocket and begin peeling the potato, while the other three place one hand each on my shoulders. After a few seconds, I begin speaking a monologue on potatoes. I focus on the idea of roots extending into the ground, far enough to emerge on the other side. I also bring in some facts about potatoes: their versatility, their soothing quality (the Latin word for potato translates to “soothing”), and their ability to grow in almost any kind of soil (“Potatoes”). By the time the monologue is complete, the potato is completely peeled. At this point we transition into the next scene, and the potato does not re-emerge until near the end of the performance. At that point, I have just watched Haley and Kara do an entrancing dance with colorful fabrics, so light that they seem to float. Once they exit, I find myself surrounded by these fabrics, which I violently stuff into a brown canvas knapsack and drag to center stage. I stand there, still, for almost a full minute. At this point, I am covered in colorful holi powder, my hair is disheveled, and I am breathing heavily. However, after prompted by a planted audience member to “Just keep going,” I reach into the bag of fabrics and pull out a potato. Virginia slides out a black box, which I sit on, all concentration on the potato. As I hold the potato, I begin to speak. The words are from a poem I wrote, and it expands on the idea of roots extending through the earth, tying one side of the earth to the other side. I speak briefly on the struggle of being tied to two sides of the world. I continue to recount the physical traits I’ve inherited from my grandmother and how those traits are unchangeable. Twice through the poem, I take pauses, unable to continue. Virginia enters with a pot of dirt each time and pours it over the potato in my hands and onto my feet at the foot of the box. She repeats the gesture of marking my hair (this time without the red color), and I continue

the poem. At its end, I take a moment to notice my feet buried in the dirt and then stand, still holding the potato, as the lights fade.

Analysis

The potato serves as a euphemistic metaphor for the condition of the second generation. As stated in the first chapter, the second generation struggles to find a cultural tie with either their location of ancestry or their location of growing up. They have no physical place to connect to their cultural identities, unlike the first generation, which still associates their culture to India. In discussing the potato throughout the performance, I stress its roots in two ways: one is that the roots plant the potato firmly to the ground and the other is that they extend deep into the earth, connecting it to the other side of the world as well. In addition, I stress the ability of the potato to grow almost anywhere—making it a versatile plant, capable of finding a “home” anywhere it is grown. This reflects the dual cultural life led by Indian Americans.

The potato began as part of an effort to create a convincing Play-World, as discussed in Anne Bogart and Tina Landau’s *The Viewpoints Book*. I wanted to create a unique environment for the performance, because one of the primary focuses was on the second generation’s search for a cultural home—I wanted the performance space to have its own aura to give the illusion that the performance was taking place in the second generation’s liminal cultural world. I talk about place having specific sensory qualities—not just visual, but aural and olfactory as well. How could I create a space that served as liminal, which, by definition, does not exist? I lit incense to give the air a hazy quality and a distinct smell. I discovered from my mother that people in India often use potatoes to hold incense sticks, and I thought the potato would be a good way to tie the liminal space down to something that was literally grounded. Everyone—and

I mean that with respect to the audience as well as the international community—understands potatoes. As I looked into facts on potatoes (how to grow them, the economics of buying/selling them), I found many relevant things: the top five exporters of potatoes are the U.S., Russia, India, China, and Poland. These countries cover a pretty wide range of the geographic world, which I found fascinating. Also, the Latin term for potatoes translates to the word “soothing,” which made particular sense when considering the American potato cuisine: baked potatoes, mashed potatoes, French fries—these are all comfort foods (“Potatoes”). Not to mention how it ties to being rooted to the ground. I realized that the potato could be the heart of the performance.

The monologue introducing the performance and the potato were drawn from Brecht’s idea of the performer as character. I felt that directly engaging with the audience while performing a behavioral gesture would point out my awareness of the performance—by acknowledging the performance to the audience, I ground the stage to reality, thus strengthening its connection to true experiences. The act itself of peeling the potato has a soothing effect; it’s a very mundane activity, associated with cooking, the kitchen, a certain hominess. I wanted it to feel welcoming, like we were inviting the audience into the piece before we really got into it. I felt approachable and open after speaking to the audience, a mirror of the effect I wanted to have on them. Like what I was trying to accomplish with the performance, peeling the potato was a way of undoing the layers and examining it hands-on and close-up. Beginning the performance by literally peeling the potato sets up the following scenes as layers of that potato—first we (the performers alongside the audience) peel the potato and then we lean into it. I found that the potato helped me to see experience as something to be opened up—it was the lens through which I viewed the rest of the performance.

Bookending the performance with these potato moments was a way to bring it full circle and see the changes that have been made to the potato moment since the beginning. At the beginning, the potato is slowly being peeled. At the end, the peel is back on the potato, as if it has been wrapped back up. For me, the importance of the potato was not necessarily in its unwrapping, but in its put back together. By investigating these experiences of second generations—the distress of being exoticized by peers and the confusion felt when the first generation rejects American society’s culture, which is what the second generation has grown up with—I was actually enabled to accept those experiences. From a personal perspective, those experiences are not easy to open up, and I have a tendency to avoid thinking about them. The final moment of reciting this poem, which lays bare the deep-rooted struggle of my experience as an immigrant, ends the performance in an intimate place. Whereas the opening moment was more conversational, including the audience in the performance, the end is lyrical and private, revealing how personal the struggle of finding identity can be. I was thinking of it as the character addressing herself about her identity in relation to the potato, as if it could not have ended any other way, but for her to finally confront it herself.

The dirt in combination with the potato literally and figuratively grounds the piece. It brings the performance full circle back to the beginning and back to the ground, which brings to mind the circle of growth and decay. The performance began with the potato’s roots and grew from there. Once it returns to the ground, by literally bringing dirt onto the stage, the aftermath of the performance can grow from the ground up as well. The dirt carries so much weight because it is burying me back into the ground, which can be taken to have many different meanings—one being that I am returning to the earth in a state of acceptance, which would mean that I am embracing my roots and nurturing them by planting them in the ground, another

signaling a state of rejection, which would mean I am burying the roots so I never have to confront them ever again. Realistically and personally, there is a little bit of both. It will always be easier not to think about the struggle, but also rewarding to do so, as reckoning with heritage is one of the steps to building a cultural identity. In this way, the dirt is both a comfort and a colossal weight. The true struggle for second generation Indian Americans is not that they are bombarded by two different cultures, but that they are faced with the task of building a new culture. The comfort is that there is a community that is willing to share the task and is already taking steps toward crafting an individual cultural identity—as identified in fusion music and writing, like Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories.

III. Holi Powder

After working toward representing the first generation experience, this scene serves to consider the exoticization and misrepresentation of Indian culture in American society. It begins with Haley, Virginia, and Kara on one side of the stage and me on the other. A *tabla* (an Indian drum used primarily in classical music) plays over the speakers, slowly escalating in speed and rhythm. Haley, Virginia, and Kara rock back and forth in unison, while I rock toward and away from them at varying speeds. The rocking becomes more and more exaggerated until we fall at the waist, arms dangling. We rise slowly and undo our hair—theirs falls loosely to their shoulders while mine separates into two braids. They advance toward me. Virginia and Kara, on either side of me, begin stroking the braids, fascinated by them. Haley stands behind me with a shiny, colorful fabric. I stand with my arms close to my chest, their attention making me visibly uncomfortable. After a few seconds, Virginia and Kara pull my arms out to the side, and Haley drapes me with the fabric. I rip it off and break through their hold. At the back of the stage is a line of colored piles of holi powder. As I come up to them, I have to go through them in order to

get past them, so I step through them, and they burst, sending the color flying into the air and across the floor. I am disturbed by the color's lasting imprint on my feet, and I try to get it off by wiping it away (mirroring the gesture we entered with at the very beginning), but it cannot be wiped away. As I come around the other side, I fall back into Virginia and Kara's hold, and they abruptly turn back to me and continue playing with the braids. They move slightly more frantically this time and pull my arms away more quickly. Haley drapes the cloth again, and I fling it away and run back to the holi powder trail. As I go through it again, I continue trying to wipe it off, only to spread it further, eventually covering the ground and my body with red, green, blue, and yellow stains. The motions continue escalating until we cannot move any faster, at which point, Haley, Virginia, and Kara exit, leaving me continuing the cycle of motions without them—holding my arms close before flinging them out, miming undraping the fabric, and running through the holi powder. The cycle ends with exhaustion when I skid from the holi powder into the table covered in fabrics.

Analysis

The scene escalates into a kind of unstoppable frenzy that ends only when I slide and fall into a physical object, which stops the cycle. This is the heart of the piece, because it acts as the last peak before the climax of the performance, where the audience gets to see, through physical struggle, the lifelong fight of figuring out where the character exists on the line between American and Indian cultures. When making the scene, we discussed the concept of the Venn diagram, where there are usually two overlapping circles, and the common middle ground is where the desired data lives. In this situation, however, the circles do not overlap, and the data (the second generation's cultural identity) is lost in empty space in between the two, unable to find footing in either circle. When the performers loosen their hair, the physical differences

between them become apparent. I am unable to shake my hair loose the way they can, because it has been intricately braided back in a way I cannot undo. Their somewhat ominous approach was pulled from how people of differing cultures sometimes react to one another—with fascination and little regard to the actual individual who is behind that culture.

This idea of exoticization of people of specific cultures—particularly when it comes to the divide between Western and Eastern culture—drives the scene. When Wilson pulls from Eastern theater traditions, he eases those techniques into his own work without calling attention to their diverse origins. This idea of seamlessly joining cultures was fascinating to me; I find it to be difficult in real life because of the misrepresentation of Indian culture around me. I am branded by how my ancestor's culture is portrayed in American society—metonymically, in particular, through colorful clothing and accessories, entertaining dance forms, and Bollywood films. As discussed earlier, Eastern cultures are often described as exotic in the West. The concentration may rest on specific cultural aspects—the mysticism of Hinduism's polytheistic beliefs, the exaggerated sexuality of the Kama Sutra, the colorful, decorative garments that are standard to Indian people. Haley uses this beautiful, but slightly flamboyant, shawl to drape over me. Under the lights, its shine is glaring and overwhelming. As Haley, Virginia, and Kara envelop me, they begin stroking and admiring my hair, even sometimes my skin, both so glaringly different from theirs. There is visible discomfort in my body—I'm holding my arms close to my chest, squirming away from them—as my differences, which I had previously been trying to suppress, are what make them so interested in me. The complexity lies in the quality of attention the culture receives—other cultures should not be overlooked, but they also cannot be fully represented by limited industries, like Bollywood. What is necessary is an outlet for sharing other cultural aspects, whether that's politics, history, religion, or a deeper understanding of

arts—particularly when considering that some dance and music forms in India are thousands of years old.

Part of what makes growing up between American and Indian cultures particularly difficult is the depiction of Indian culture. On the one hand, there is the mother, who has a traditional, old-fashioned view of how things should be. She holds biases that are older than her daughter and do not all hold true in the India of her daughter's generation. However, American views of Indian cultures are concluded from limited experience with Indian culture. As discussed before, the preference of professionally- or academically-gifted Indian immigrants grew into the stereotype that all Indians are professionally- or academically-gifted. The daughter knows there is much more to Indian culture than what she hears from American peers and through American media sources, because from her parents she hears about the India of their childhood—of the political battles, religious practices, and family history. However, she does not have the firsthand exposure or comfort with Indian culture, since she grew up in the U.S. Her mother also disapproves of many American social norms, especially dating, which alienates the two of them. In my experiences in American society, I have been asked pointedly stereotypical questions such as “Are you a feather Indian or a dot India?”, “Do you wear a rock on your forehead?”, or “Are all of your favorite actors from Bollywood?” These questions generally do not intend harm, but they reduce an entire culture to one trait, like the ‘dot,’ (called a *bindi* in Hindi and historically worn by married women). People are surprised to learn that I actually don't really watch Bollywood films, and that there's a lot more meaning behind the “dot on the forehead” than just decoration. However, I often have to justify why I don't watch Bollywood, like I'm doing something wrong by not acting in the way those people might expect me to act, just because I have Indian ancestry. Ideally, people in general would understand that just because I am not

white, does not mean I am not American (and vice versa for others). Using The Beatles' song "Within You Without You" was a way of addressing the issue of cultural knowledge. George Harrison used a mix of traditional Indian instruments in this and many of The Beatles' other tracks and fused the sounds, much like Wilson did with theater techniques. Layering this scene with this particular song juxtaposed the ways in which people interact with other cultures—on the stage there is disturbing fascination that exoticizes the culture and estranges the human behind it, while the song displays a more interesting fusion of Western and Eastern musical cultures and displays a deeper knowledge of Indian classical music.

My choice to use holi powder came from the desire to make something spectacular, unexpected, and lasting. In general, holi powder is something people know about or have at least heard about, but they know about it only in the context of the festival, a celebration of color. I thought it would be interesting to use it in a more frustrating context, so the idea that culture can be turned against a person would be apparent. Again, I was looking to engross the audience in this world, since the piece itself is so relevant to finding physical space. It was important that the Play-World itself felt merged, because that's as close as the performance would get to the liminal cultural existence of the second generation. The way the powder extended into the light and made everything appear hazy was exactly the effect I wanted. It also had a real effect on the air—the scent, the weight, the color, all of which linger and cling to skin, hair, and dust particles in the air. The idea was that, at the core, all four of us are the same—Americans, Indians, people, humans. Once I add the color, I distinguish myself from the rest: I alone am in this situation; I am no longer the same. I try and wipe the color away, attempting to become like them again, and I get more and more distressed as I realize that it is an impossible task. I keep trying to escape from the stereotypes they impose upon me with the fabric Haley drapes, but they continue and

escalate the exoticization, and it becomes a bitter circle of trying to escape from a stereotype that follows you everywhere. The movement sequence was inspired by Pina Bausch's 1978 piece called "Café Müller," which features a pair of lovers who are forced into a specific body shape by a third person. They proceed to fall out of the shape, after which he forces them back into the shape. This continues and escalates to an impossible speed. Working with Anne Bogart's Viewpoint of tempo, I focused on the delivery, feeling that having exact, deliberate movements, even at high speed, was key. This escalation has an interesting 'boiling-down' effect in that, as the movement sequence gets faster, some movements drop out, until there are three or four movements that we distinctly do—arms in, arms out, undrape, run, repeat. We had to lose some of the details, like curling my hands together in discomfort or the way Haley's draping motion becomes less elegant and more staccato. This is the effect of time pressure, but it also reveals something about how one culture might be viewed by another—for example, watching a number of modern Bollywood films and thinking that they reflect life in India. There is an effort to 'boil down' in order to better understand, however, this is a method that works well only if we go back and fill in the complexities.

IV. Fabric

Following the previous scene, in which I end by falling into this table covered in fabric, I fling two fabrics from the table and watch them slowly float down. Before the second one hits the ground, Haley runs across the stage, catches it, and exits. Kara runs across the stage with another fabric floating behind her. I begin flinging all of the fabrics from the table, one by one, and watching them float to the ground. Haley and Kara emerge, playing with the fabric in a kind of dance, throwing them up and playing with the speed of the fall. At this point, I am on the ground behind them, surrounded by the fabric from the table, watching them and the fabric.



Their dance is set to a song performed by The Silk Road Ensemble, in which drums from various cultures battle through music. A few times I try to throw up a fabric from around me, but eventually I am drawn to just watching them. When they exit, their fabric floats to the ground. I attempt to mimic their motions again before stuffing all of the fabrics into a knapsack and dragging it to center stage, where I stand for a full minute in silence, after which is final scene with the potato and the poem.

Analysis

The fabric sequence portrays differences in how Indian culture is perceived by second generation Indian Americans as opposed to their American peers. Creating that section came from Wilson's work with colored light, thinking about the effects of color, and how to bring color to stage in an active, engaging way—not as just a background, but as a moving part of the performance. I found fabric to be moldable and the varying textures and patterns to be visually

stunning, but even more than that, fabric is deeply connected to Indian culture. India has a long and rich history in the textile industry, primarily with the creation of quality dyes. Fabric has been among India's most sought-after exports for thousands of years ("Introduction to Indian Textiles"). Using fabric in the performance harkens back to that history in addition to the more contemporary associations that come with Indian fabrics—namely in the form of colorful saris, scarves, and other garments. The fabric used to cover the table had special significance to me because they were all fabrics that belonged to my mother. They go with specific Indian garments that I associate with special occasions. That, coupled with the fact that my mother's voice was the one used for the recording, gives personal definition to the fabrics, especially in the moment when Haley and Kara perform simultaneously with them. The fabrics are not just culturally significant, but an essential part of my life as a child growing up in an Indian household.

From my perspective, there is unrest in the moment: the flying fabric and Haley and Kara's leaps and runs show the inner turmoil of my perspective. However, since I am hidden behind them, what the audience sees is a lovely, graceful dance with the colorful fabric that so contrast the powder, which was heavy and hazy. I fall into the background, shielded behind the movements. The multi-perspective is portrayed exactly as it is realistically in that sometimes people are blinded by new culture—what they see are the things that become stereotypes (the big movements, the colors, the motion of the fabric), but those are the things that end up being overwhelming to me, as an Indian American who is trying to marry, not the stereotypes, but every other aspect of the culture with the American social culture I grew up in. I, who already have little understanding of true Indian culture, have to extract the misrepresented Indian culture on my own. It is all too easy to fall into Indian stereotypes, if only because those stereotypes are a significant part of my limited interaction with Indian culture. In this moment with the fabric, I

felt left out of the ease and carefree way in which Haley and Kara interact with the fabric. I realized that, as important as it is for non-Indians to be exposed to real Indian culture, it is even more so for the second generation. We, the second generation, are the ones who are most in need of understanding Indian culture—and we have more interest in learning about it than others do, because it is a part of our ancestry. What I appreciated most about this scene is the way in which I was able to create a mirror reflecting reality. Brecht talks about the degree of separation from the audience and making sure that the creator has control over that distance at all times. This scene kind of artificially creates an effect that closes that degree of separation. The foreground is so vivid and mesmerizing—Haley and Kara with the fabric—but the background is where the real struggle is happening for the second generation. This is exactly what happens to me, not only as the character in the piece, but also in reality, as I struggle to find my cultural identity without being swayed by the Indian stereotypes and out-of-date traditions I am presented with by American peers and my first generation relatives.

Following the fabric dance is the moment where I stuff all the fabrics into the knapsack. I originally thought of the moment as an attempt to suppress part of my inherited culture. After seeing Haley and Kara play with the fabric so casually, I knew I would never be able to interact with them as freely because, to me, they represent my childhood, growing up in an Indian household, and what little I know about India from my parents. The struggle becomes less about trying to combine two cultures, and more about trying to pick one and exclude the other entirely—which is impossible, as there is no denying that I grew up in two separate cultures, one in the home and one in society. However, I realized that the moment goes farther than to represent my efforts to deny one half of my cultural identity. Stuffing the fabric into the bag can also act as an acceptance—even if it's reluctant, at first. By gathering the fabric and carrying the

bag with me, I was embracing Indian culture as a part of my identity. It becomes a literal representation of my culture as a ‘baggage,’ which is how I seem to view culture throughout the performance—as something to be dragged along behind me forever. This is similar to the idea of the dirt being both a weight and a comfort—building an individual identity comes from an internal understanding of the self, not necessarily from the external factors imposed by family and society. This is the moment in which I take charge of the culture—here physically represented by the fabric—and actively reckon with them. I am not letting someone else thrust them upon me, but choosing to carry them for myself.

The division of the performance into the three sections helped me organize my research within the structure of performance. The organization of the performance reflects the way I conducted my research, by first looking at immigration history in terms of the first generation and then looking at the second generation’s experience through that historical lens. To the performance, however, I added Lahiri’s narrative and personal narrative, in order to examine the experience through a combination of lenses—historical, fictional, and realistic. This combination of media gave me a foundation of sources from which I could build a performance that incorporated elements from all three: immigration history, character relationships, and personal experience.

Conclusion

When beginning work on this project, I knew I wanted to study Indian American culture and use performance to engage with my experiences as one. I knew the performance would draw inspiration from Jhumpa Lahiri's characters and stories and touch on certain themes that emerged, primarily the importance of family heritage and the influence of how people stereotype cultures. However, what the performance dynamic would be and how I would compile the moments was foggy—such is the beauty of creating a work from scratch. Ideally, the final performance would do more than capture the multi-faceted and complex experience of juggling cultures; through it and the process of creating it, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of what it meant to have a dual culture. I wanted to answer questions about how Indian Americans contend with imposed stereotypes and, in particular, how they find home living in-between cultures, in a liminal world that is neither Indian nor American. What I found was that Indian Americans are building up a culture that is yet to be recognized as its own, but is still practiced via communities of second generations.

The creative process involved identifying focus points (the divide between generations or feeling rejected by both cultures) and then working with concrete images (a shattering teacup or braided hair) to investigate those points. The raw quality of the performance came from its unique place between reality and theatricality. The focus was on my experience, but those experiences were taken through various theatrical techniques in order to break them apart. Breaking those experiences apart enabled me to see them through an historical lens, to understand my experience in relation to Indian immigration as a whole, as well as my parents', the first generation's, lifestyles in the U.S. I was also able to hone in on certain aspects of forming the second generation's culture, such as using a literal interpretation of the word

‘exoticization’ to create a moment in which a stereotype is imposed upon me in a tangible way, through the hair stroking and fabric draping. The performance was grounded in text and images, which gave the bigger ideas of cultural chaos and confusion a tangible representation.

I began this project as an examination of my own cultural identity in reference to my personal experiences with living a dual cultural lifestyle. In my research, however, I realized the importance of the community to both the first and the second generations. Community is how the first generation was able to feel comfortable in the U.S. In Lahiri’s stories, the first generation has a network of friends, who speak the same Indian language and have the same cultural practices, which they share with one another. What I came to notice as a major difference between her stories and my life is the lack of a community for the second generation. My cultural identity has been formed over years within the context of a community made up specifically of second generation Indian Americans, while the characters in her stories have to find their way alone. This crucial difference marks an important distinction between the characters and myself that is worth noting. Our cultural backgrounds are similar, but our surrounding communities are vastly different. Should I pursue this project further, I would compare the differences between those who grow up within a community and those who do not. I wonder if cultural stereotypes take more of a toll on those who do not have a community to refute those stereotypes. Do second generation Indian Americans become more or less invested in the first generation community if they do not have a separate community of second generations? Because I do not have personal experience living this way, I would have to rely on more interviews and immersive experiences as research methods.

I used my personal experience as an Indian American to fuel my research and examination of the dual cultural lifestyle, but my overarching questions about stereotype,

exoticization, and first generation resistance apply to a vast population of minority groups. As more Indian Americans immigrate to the U.S. and the second generation population expands, these questions of cultural identity will rise in relevance to more than just the Indian American population, but to those living and interacting with Indian Americans and other minority groups as well. This project has deepened my understanding of the effects of stereotypes; they are more than just imposed and inaccurate expectations, but they add strain to those who already feel alienated from their ancestral cultures. The second generation finds some comfort in community, but the battle between Indian and American cultures fluctuates internally. While the worlds remain separated, the second generation will continue to exist in-between them, merging them together through various outlets—like film and music—attempting to come closer to forming their own cultural identity.

Appendix 1: To Strike Roots

[Stage is dark. The center spotlight fades up slowly. VIRGINIA, RENU, KARA, and HALEY enter from different panels in the curtain. They approach the spotlight as they do the gesture of wiping something off of their arms and legs. The gesture escalates and then slows to a gentle peeling motion. RENU steps back and the others close in. RENU pulls out a potato and a peeler. HALEY stops the motion, then KARA, then VIRGINIA. They turn stage left and walk around to reveal RENU, who is peeling a potato, letting the peels fall to the ground. VIRGINIA, KARA, and HALEY put their hands on her shoulders. After a moment, RENU begins speaking.]

RENU: *[continues peeling the potato]* If you've ever dug up a tree or a bush or even a flower, you've probably seen the millions of tiny strands of roots that—

ALL: Just keep going,

RENU: —holding the earth close, making it difficult to tug the plant away.

ALL: I imagine these roots—

RENU: —extending miles and miles into the earth, blooming and blossoming in someone else's backyard. Now, obviously that can't exactly happen. But here's an interesting thing about potatoes: no matter where you are—

HALEY: Russia,

VIRGINIA: China,

KARA: India,

RENU: ...the U.S.—it's warm and cozy enough underground to grow a potato. Isn't that amazing? You can uproot a potato on one side of the world and replant it in American soil and still get a healthy plant. Maybe that's why its scientific name—*Solanum tuberosum*—

ALL (except Renu): *(inhale audibly)* *Solanum tuberosum*—

RENU: ...is Latin for “soothing.” Because it can feel at home anywhere.

[VIRGINIA, KARA, and HALEY let go and move simultaneously. RENU stands still as the lights come up. VIRGINIA slides the stage left chair, which is draped with a colored cloth, as HALEY slides the stage right chair, draped with a shawl, and KARA rolls the table to center. The table is dressed with colorful scarves with one single teacup at one end. VIRGINIA and HALEY pick up the chairs and slam them down simultaneously. When they do, all four walk counter clockwise around the table. KARA walks to down left and VIRGINIA walks to down right, right next to the audience. RENU pockets the potato and the peeler, then unfolds the shawl as HALEY sits at the stage right chair and slowly lifts the teacup. RENU drapes the shawl over Haley's shoulders as she speaks. HALEY hunches over a little.]

RENU: Once, at the supermarket, someone tapped my mother on the shoulder and asked if she might be Bengali.

HALEY: *[looking at Renu]* Back in Calcutta...

KARA: ...this would not even be a question—thick stem of red in her hair, red and white bangles, round face, dark eyes—the question would be an insult.

[As HALEY speaks, she reaches for Renu's hand. RENU draws her hand away and exits.]

HALEY: Back in Calcutta...

VIRGINIA: ...the front door would be open to anyone who stopped by—friends, relatives, relatives of friends, friends of relatives of friends.

KARA: They appeared without warning, never phoning beforehand, but simply knocking on the door, knowing they'd be welcome inside.

ALL (except Renu): Back in Calcutta... ¹

[VIRGINIA and KARA move to the front corners of the room. HALEY sits motionless and in silence at the table. After a long moment, she looks at the teacup and looks up, triggering the "Memory Recording" to begin playing a conversation in which HALEY participates.]

¹ Adapted from Jhumpa Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven," *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008)

WOMAN #1: What time are you going to Pushpa's for Holika dahan? She and her daughter have just come back from America, and she's here only for a week.

WOMAN #2: I have to go early. They've invited the whole city for dinner, and I am bringing the big teapot and extra teacups for the party.

WOMAN #1: Her tea is always so watery.

HALEY: And there's never enough milk.

WOMAN #2: Maybe next time you should volunteer to make it, Jaya.

WOMAN #1: Not me! I'm already bringing samosas and chutney. I had to make them without peas, you know how much her daughter hates peas.

WOMAN #2: I made matar paneer for that party last year? I saw her pick all the peas right out, one by one! I would never let *my* daughter do that. The kids become so much pickier over there!

WOMAN #1: America has spoiled them. They get any vegetable at any time of the year. Carrots in summer, mangoes in winter...I can't believe you're moving to America, too.

HALEY: What will I do without you?

[Silence]

[RENU enters stage right, walking very pointedly, with a teacup of red holi powder in her palm. When she reaches Haley, she uses the red powder to make a red line down the center part of Haley's hair—a streak of vermilion that defines her as a married woman. Once she finishes, she pauses, turns to the audience, and then walks across the stage and stands at the curtains across from Haley.]

[At this point, VIRGINIA is standing next to the audience stage right and KARA stands to the left. They begin repeating the following lines, slowly building to create a cacophony, as they walk toward Haley and circle around her.]

VIRGINIA: Mixed marriages are a doomed enterprise.

HALEY: You left for America with the understanding that you'd go back.

VIRGINIA: Is this what happens to people in America?²

[As the cacophony increase, HALEY begins shaking and reacting. RENU reacts, but in a more subdued, confused manor. VIRGINIA and KARA circle until they are leaning over the table in mirror images, glaring at Haley. KARA says the last line—“YOU LEFT”—and they push the table backward from under Haley’s arms. HALEY leaves her arms holding the teacup, but shaking. VIRGINIA and KARA are standing still in the same mirrored stance, glaring at where HALEY would be. RENU and HALEY shake until they simultaneously drop their teacups onto the ground. They may or may not shatter. RENU looks down at the remains and then walks forward, stepping on the remains of the cup and stopping behind the empty chair. They pause for a moment before speaking.]

RENU AND HALEY: My mother tongue dissolves.

RENU: I speak in another.³

[RENU turns, drags the chair to the curtain, and exits. HALEY takes a pause before pushing the chair back and kneeling before the teacup, trying to put it back together / checking for chips. VIRGINIA enters stage left with a broom and sweeps Renu’s teacup away. She pauses in front of Haley, until HALEY looks up. VIRGINIA sweeps Haley’s teacup into the pile of potato peelings. VIRGINIA shakes out the broom, and HALEY stands up and swipes a hand over the red color in her hair, as if wiping it away.]

VIRGINIA AND HALEY: *[inhale audibly]* Solanum tuberosum.

[HALEY drags the stage right chair to the curtain, VIRGINIA sweeps the broom off stage right, and KARA enters to drag the table to the up stage right corner. RENU walks in, swept off to the right as well. Lights fade to two pools, one center left and one center right. RENU stands in the center left pool; VIRGINIA, KARA, and HALEY stand in a diagonal center right.]

VIRGINIA: Don’t think you’ll get away with marrying an American, the way your cousin did,

² Jhumpa Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven,” *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008)

³ Dilruba Ahmed, “Ghazal,” *Dhaka Dust* (2011)

RENU: ...my mother said. I was thirteen,

HALEY: ...the thought of marriage irrelevant to my life.

RENU: Still, the words upset me, and I felt a grip on me tighten.

KARA: My cousin's wife wore her long brass-colored hair center-parted, as my mother did, but...

VIRGINIA: ...there was no braid, no streak of red.

KARA: It spilled over her shoulders in a way my mother considered...

VIRGINIA: ...indecent.

KARA: But she knew about all the good books and could talk freely in English about Pippi Longstocking and Anne of Green Gables.

RENU: I fell in love with her...

HALEY: ...the way young girls often fall in love with women who are not their mothers.⁴

[“Sari Draping” begins playing. RENU begins turning to look toward them at varying intervals and slowly begins swaying from left to right as the music escalates. While she does this, VIRGINIA, KARA, and HALEY begin nodding and swaying front to back. The movements escalate until sitar comes in, and they drop. As the drums fade out and the sitar fades in, they rise, using one hand to undo their hair. Virginia, Kara, and Haley’s hair falls loose. Renu’s hair falls into two braids. VIRGINIA, KARA, and HALEY turn to look simultaneously at RENU, who reacts and becomes aware of the difference in hair. VIRGINIA, KARA, and HALEY begin walking toward Renu in the same pointed walk as she used before. VIRGINIA and KARA begin caressing the braids while HALEY retrieves the colored cloth from the chair and drapes it around Renu like a sari. RENU casts off the sari and flees backward to the line of holi powder. She hops through it, leaving a trail of holi powder footprints. RENU tries to rub the powder off of her feet, but only gets it on her clothing as she stumbles back to where she was before, where

⁴ Adapted from Jhumpa Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven,” *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008)

the same actions are repeated but slightly faster. This goes on until all the actions are at warp speed. The music fades as VIRGINIA, KARA, and HALEY exit stage left, and RENU goes through the motions without them and without the cloth three times. On the third time, she bumps into the table stage right, breaking the motions.]

[RENU contemplates the fabric on the table for a moment before stomping a foot and flinging the cloth away from the table. After a moment, she stomps and flings the second cloth up. Faint tabla music begins playing, slowly rising in volume. HALEY emerges from the curtains stage right and grabs the cloth as it falls. HALEY runs off stage left. KARA runs in with a cloth from stage left and exits stage right. RENU begins casting more fabric pieces off of the table, watching them flutter and then frantically casting the next one as the first one falls. When there are no more on the table, she falls to the ground and messes with the pile of fabric spread across the floor. When she looks up, HALEY emerges from stage left and KARA emerges from stage right. They spin their fabrics in various ways, making them billow and swirl, very dream-like. They run off stage as their fabrics flutter to the ground. Once they fall, RENU begins grabbing them all, except one, and balls them up. She spots the satchel hanging from the table, grabs it, and stuffs the fabrics inside. She spots the last one and grabs it but hesitates. She drags it and the satchel to center stage as the lights fade back to the up center spotlight. The fabric falls from her hands. The music stops abruptly. She stands for an uncomfortable amount of time.]

PLANT: Just keep going.

[Lights come up on center stage as KARA and HALEY draw back the curtains, revealing the shrine-like set-up with the flower pots of dirt and the incense. VIRGINIA pushes forward a block and then retreats back behind the curtain. RENU sits down cross-legged onto the block and opens the satchel. She pulls out a skinned potato and holds it in her hands.]

[Pause.]

RENU: I was born screaming—

 a declaration of presence—

But mostly just hoping my cry would linger

 long enough for Earth to circle halfway around itself,

deliver my declaration of presence

to the ground where the roots of my parents lie,
 where their parents before them lie
 alongside their roots.

[KARA and HALEY enter from opposite sides, cross each other, and then kneel on the ground and pick up each end of the last fabric on the ground. They begin parachuting it up and down lightly. VIRGINIA enters with a flowerpot of dirt, which she pours over the potato. She places the flowerpot down beside the block. She mirrors the gesture of putting the holi powder in the center part of Renu's hair and steps back.]

VIRGINIA: Relinquish your name.⁵

[As Renu continues speaking, VIRGINIA exits.]

RENU: From airplane windows, tiny blue threads stitch the earth together,
 mountains melt to rivers run to vast, vast oceans.

Fingers trace mountain passes and cross seas,
 spiral across the surface of the globe,
 building bridges, rafts,
 but roots—

hug the earth from inside,
 keep the pieces from disbanding.

The ones beneath my feet

bury,

bury,

bury

deep into the earth,

only to emerge on the other side,

only to hold fast to the sun-struck earth

that grows coconut trees and hibiscus flowers.

⁵ Dilruba Ahmed, "Evening in Mendocino," *Dhaka Dust* (2011)

[VIRGINIA enters again with another flowerpot of dirt, which she also pours over the potato. She places the flowerpot down beside the block on the other side. She mirrors the gesture of putting the holi powder in the center part of Renu's hair and steps back.]

VIRGINIA: Relinquish your story.⁶

[As Renu continues speaking, VIRGINIA exits.]

RENU: My grandmother—

her hands are my hands,
sixty years senior.

I can trace the veins in my arms with

the hitchhiker's thumb my grandmother gave me.
The blood in those veins was made by hands
that dye silk and curl around needles.

Blood that was blood of those hands courses

through my resting body,
the body I declare to be mine,
veins lie splayed against white sand,
woven in mismatched strands, crisscrossed,
interlocked, and spiraling.

[KARA lets go of the fabrics, which flutters to Haley. KARA and HALEY exit opposite sides. VIRGINIA enters again, empty-handed. She places her hands on Renu's shoulders.]

VIRGINIA AND RENU: Sink to the root of it.⁷

[VIRGINIA exits. RENU squelches her toes in the dirt for a moment and stands up. Lights fade to black.]

END.

⁶ Dilruba Ahmed, "Evening in Mendocino," *Dhaka Dust* (2011)

⁷ Dilruba Ahmed, "Evening in Mendocino," *Dhaka Dust* (2011)

Appendix 2: Video Recording

The performances of “To Strike Roots” were held on January 30, 2015 at 7:00pm and January 31, 2015 at 4:00pm in Bingham Hall, Room 203.

A video recording of “To Strike Roots” was taken on January 30 and is available upon request.

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