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FOBby or Tight? “Multicultural Day” and Other Struggles at Two Silicon Valley High Schools

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In a packed gymnasium at Mercer High School in Silicon Valley, California eleven hundred students and their teachers rise as a student sings the “Star Spangled Banner” with electric guitar accompaniment. In the adjacent locker room girls fidget with their shiny golden head jewelry and generously applied makeup while boys enact mock sword fights with their dhanda, or decorated sticks, which they will use shortly in their dance. The national anthem ends and students settle on the bleachers in noisy anticipation of the hour-long multicultural program that has replaced their third and fourth period classes today. Elaborately costumed groups of enthusiastic students begin to perform their prepared dances and martial arts routines.

When the Indian Student Club is introduced, six South Asian American (hereafter Desi) girls strike a pose in a circle at the center of the gym; thirty-four other performers—of South Asian, East Asian, Middle Eastern, and European descent—stand poised and ready to enter on cue. The inner circle of Desi girls begins dancing gracefully to Taal, the title song from a popular recent Hindi film. Fourteen more girls in coordinated green and gold skirts join in, soon followed by their twenty male partners. The gym echoes with reverberating bass and howls of kids cheering for their friends while the performers enjoy their moment in the limelight. The music quickly segues from one lively Hindi film song to another as the choreography includes bhangra and hip-hop influenced moves and filmy flirting and courting rituals. The dance closes with a dramatic pose that sends the audience into wild appreciation.

This celebratory seven-minute performance, like myriad other multicultural programs in U.S. high schools, is beautifully performed by students and audibly appreciated by audiences. The choreography and music—painstakingly selected by students to incorporate both international and local cultural forms—flow seamlessly together. What is obscured in these short performances, however, is a broad range of enduring inequalities of ethnicity and class that dominate the everyday lives of students.

Although multiculturalism’s ideologies of equal rights and representation grew out of various civil rights and postcolonial struggles, they often lose their potency when they are implemented. The schools’ initiatives reflect the egalitarian spirit of multiculturalism, but the inconsistent ways in which they are executed offer little support to ensure this outcome. The rhetoric that all students are able to participate in these programs and, more broadly, in the culture of high school itself masks the exclusion of many interested kids; moreover, it overshadows historically produced systems of advantage and disadvantage that favor particular ethnic groups and ignores socioeconomic cleavages that exist within them.

Yet, to consider these events as a predictable case of haves and have-nots would obscure another type of struggle enacted in these spaces—namely, a politics of representation. Ideologies of multiculturalism—especially the inclusion of non-European cultural expression—are important to Desi kids, as they are the only school forum dedicated to exploring cultural difference. Kids invest considerable time and energy in casting, choreographing, and outfitting these dances in order to define who they are to a broader audience. Their agency, however, is circumscribed in the reductive arena of multicultural programs, where tradition and authenticity are imagined in different ways by performers and audiences. While kids fashion performances according to their notions of “FOBby” (un-stylish) versus “tight” (cool, fashionable), this cultural logic often gets lost in translation for audiences of school peers and faculty in search of an idealized, authentic performance.

In this essay I focus on Desi students’ attempts to take part in multicultural programs at two different Silicon Valley high schools where students of color are the majority. By going backstage, so to speak, to examine the casting, creating, and rehearsing of these performances, I will illustrate how these celebrations are far less inclusive than they appear on stage. At Mercer High School struggles to participate occur between various ethnic groups; at Greene High School they take place among Desis themselves.
My interest in how kids develop a sense of ownership over their high schools grew out of an initial observation in my research—it seemed that most kids who did not participate in mainstream school programs such as multicultural celebrations were genuinely uninterested in these activities. As I tracked the preparation for these programs during daily fieldwork in these two schools, I soon realized the situation to be far more complex. Thus I became committed to investigating how and why some kids dominate school activities while others who are interested remain unable to do so. Relatively, I sought to better understand the nuanced meanings of kids’ attempts at self-expression and how they are received in school contexts. In this case, if kids are investing great care and effort to craft cultural identities for performance, what are some of the dynamics that contribute to their being so easily misunderstood by high school audiences?

The examples I present in this essay address these points. Both cases—fraught with a similar twofold tension of students vying against one another for performance time while being judged according to essentialized notions of cultural identity—illustrate local processes of ethnic formation. Moreover, we can better understand these struggles over public representation in the context of larger historical shifts and inequalities of ethnicity and class prevalent in this region of California.

**Transformations of the Category “South Asian”**

In California, as in other parts of the U.S., ethnic groups have had drastically different experiences with economic and political success depending on the time period and conditions under which they emigrated. Even within some ethnic populations these experiences have been anything but consistent (cf. Brodkin-Sachs 1994; Ignatiev 1995), emphasizing the fluidity of meanings around ethnicity (Sollors 1989). For example, what it means to be of South Asian descent has changed significantly in California over the past century. Early South Asian immigration consisted primarily of male farmers from Punjab during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Leonard 1992). These immigrants were portrayed in local newspapers as lacking morals, literacy skills, and personal hygiene. Proclaimed “the most undesirable immigrant in the state,” they were denied citizenship and landownership rights. Yet, in the present-day sociopolitical climate of Silicon Valley, Desis’ prestigious positions in the high-tech industry and elsewhere offers many of them access to land and wealth unimaginable a century ago. Rather than potential miscreants, the recent visibility of post-1965 professionals immigrants has earned Desis the honor of being considered “part of a solution” (Prashad 2000) in the public imagination as well as public policy. Such a drastic reversal of fortune highlights how local definitions of ethnicity are shaped by specific configurations of capital, opportunity structures, and socioeconomic backgrounds with which groups enter the American economy at different historical moments.

This positive casting can, however, obscure cleavages of class, educational level, and immigration background among Desis. Scholars of the South Asian diaspora emphasize the growing divide between early post-1965 immigrants and the often less skilled immigrants they have subsequently sponsored (Khandelwal 1995; Leonard 1998; Lessinger 1993). In Silicon Valley this population is further diversified not only by the slew of highly skilled, “body-shopped” computer programmer labor of the 1990s, but by a largely unacknowledged population of Punjabis whose relatives have lived in California since pre-1965. As all of these different types of Desis move to Silicon Valley seeking employment ranging from assembly-line work to white-collar jobs, ever deepening rifts of inequality have taken hold in this seemingly homogeneous community. These differences are especially salient for Desi kids in Silicon Valley high schools, where varying notions of entitlement, belonging, and influence create complex dynamics of inclusion and representation. They translate into various positions from which Desi kids approach multicultural programs.

**Multiculturalism in the U.S.: Ideologies and Initiatives**

Multiculturalism emerged in the U.S. in the late twentieth century as a response to “European monoculturalism” (Goldberg 1994:3) and Eurocentricism (c.f. Stam and Shohat 1994), an ideology pervasive in American universities from the late nineteenth century. Such European hegemony was in harmony with prevailing policies and attitudes toward immigrants during that period. Rather than the concerted attempts to acknowledge and respect diversity that mark present-day multiculturalism, immigrants were encouraged to relinquish any cultural values or language practices that conflicted with Anglo-European monoculturalism and English monolingualism (Silverstein 1996).
This “melting-pot” model of assimilation (Glazer and Moynihan 1963) came under increasing attack during the latter part of the twentieth century, a period marked by emerging postcolonial nations worldwide and ardent civil rights movements in the U.S. as well as a relaxation of U.S. anti-Asian immigration laws (Lowe 1996). Further, since the mid-1960s the now commonplace realities of globalization—ease of travel and communication and a proliferation of media and images (Appadurai 1996; Harvey 1990; Jameson 1991)—encouraged the commodification of cultural difference in previously unimagined ways.

No sooner had these agendas and aspirations been announced than they came under intense debate. Outright opponents of multiculturalism have thwarted the movement’s call for deeper economic, political, and social change with vilifying critiques of curricular reform, affirmative action, and other social changes (see Hu-DeHart 2001). More constructive critiques assert that the purely celebratory character of multicultural initiatives—such as festivals and fairs consisting of “ethnic” food, music, and performance—highlight the ways in which immigrants add color and diversity to an otherwise static American society while failing to address embedded power relations that contribute to inequality among these groups (McLaren 1994; Takaki 2001; Wallace 1994). Notably such celebrations are premised on the elision of whiteness as an ethnic category, wherein being “ethnic” is predicated on the existence of an unmarked white majority (Frankenburg 1993; Winant 1997; Waters 1999).

While multicultural agendas have been examined in colleges, less attention has been directed toward high schools, where there is less activism and organizing. Yet, students’ everyday struggles around rights and representation is an important arena of social justice. “Cultural citizenship” (Rosaldo and Flores 1997), or “the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one’s right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state’s democratic processes” (ibid. 57), offers a framework for understanding how kids attempt to participate in the public culture of their high schools—in other words, how they exercise agency. Agency—social actors’ ability and impetus to engage in acts that challenge dominant values and beliefs—is intricately linked to cultural citizenship. Although agency is seemingly boundless, it is also circumscribed within particular structures that govern thoughts and actions (Ahern 2001; Bourdieu 1977; de Certeau 1984; Giddens 1979). Indeed

the desire to participate in a multicultural program does not ensure inclusion; rather the very process of getting into the program requires sophisticated knowledge of the interworkings of school activities. I refer to this complex intersection of social class, educational background, and immigration history as “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1984). Kids who have cultural capital are better able to manipulate school systems to their advantage than kids who do not. For example, to gain entry into a multicultural program individuals as well as groups of kids have to feel comfortable asserting themselves in school activities, become familiar with the interworkings of this program, and be able to mobilize a group into practice and performance. While many kids may strive for greater cultural citizenship, only some have the cultural capital to fulfill their goals. As I will describe below for each school, some groups of students are far more successful at working the system than others.

**Multiculturalism in Two Silicon Valley High Schools**

Enrollment in Silicon Valley high schools has burgeoned over the past several decades. Such populations include kids of immigrants and refugees from South and East Asia as well as a significant Mexican/Chicano community. No longer characterized by one minority group in a white majority environment, these schools must balance complex dynamics among Asian, Latino, African American, and white students, as well as between students and teachers. The high-tech boom of the 1980s and nineties also contributed to a general overcrowding, and both high schools in this study are now enrolled 75–125 percent over capacity. School faculty and administrators—who are overwhelmingly white—have had an exceedingly challenging time dealing with the religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity of their students. Along with increased enrollment, this predicament has re prioritized administrators’ agendas and led them to focus on basic tasks such as maintaining disciplinary order and ensuring appropriate classes, desks, and books over initiatives such as multiculturalism.

Both Mercer and Greene High Schools lack “formal” multicultural efforts in their curricula. While discussing ethnicity through an occasional project, presentation, or report is an option, multicultural programs stand alone as the prescribed space where issues of racial difference receive pub-
lic attention. When public expression of difference is abbreviated to a single day or week, all “cultures” are presented as existing in harmony next to one another rather than as having to interact on an everyday level, in effect erasing large- and small-scale distinctions (c.f. Abercrombie 1991, Rogers 1999). These productions, along with ethnic food and music, are displayed as representative of entire countries and even continents (i.e. “African culture” or “Latin American culture”) when they barely represent the diversity of the students of that group in that school.

At Mercer High School multicultural initiatives consist of a week-long festival culminating in a final assembly during class time on Friday. Located in Fremont, it includes grades 9–12 of 2,250 with an ethnic breakdown of 54 percent Asian American (about one-third South Asian American), 41 percent white, 3 percent Latino, 1 percent African American, and less than 1 percent Native American. White, African American, and Latino families once dominated this area but have become increasingly marginalized by hundreds of Asian families who have flocked to the area to send their kids to this top-ranking public high school. Nearly all the Desi kids at this school are from upper-middle-class families, are relatively high achievers, and participate in a wide range of school activities.

One such activity, multicultural week, consists of four days, each of which is dedicated to a different racial group—African American, Asian American, Latino, and European American—and students are encouraged to dress in corresponding ethnic clothing. Friday is “Unity Day,” and the week’s events culminate in an hour-long assembly of performances held in the gym. During lunch, student clubs are invited to play music and sell ethnic foods and crafts. In this carnival-like atmosphere students can stroll around to different tables, snack on egg rolls and kabobs, and even get a “henna tattoo” at the Muslim Student Association.

In contrast, celebrating multiculturalism at Greenough High School is a one-day affair. Like Mercer, Greenough High School has also undergone a type of gentrification that has exacerbated inequalities. Located in East San Jose, Greenough High School has 2,648 students—53 percent Asian, 28 percent Latino, 12 percent white, 6 percent African American, and less than 1 percent Native American. Greenough High School has both Desi kids whose parents are high-tech professionals as well as a growing population of working- and middle-class kids whose parents relocated from other regions of the U.S., or directly from South Asia, to seek blue-collar employment during the economic growth of the mid to late 1990s. While wealthier South Asian students tend to participate in school activities and student leadership, middle- and working-class kids form their own groups and are less inclined to participate. To celebrate multiculturalism the school sponsors “International Day,” which features an extended lunch period for students to play music, sell ethnic food, and have staged student performances in the center of the quad.

At both schools students themselves are inclined to regard multicultural programs primarily as entertainment. Still, students of color at both schools described them as the one event they felt was their own and compared it to other school productions such as homecoming and school dances—often referred to as “white” events. As one Desi boy commented, “I think MC week is cool because we can express ourselves in another angle that people usually don’t see us through. . . We’re able to dress up—it helps show who you are.” In this sense cultural performance is linked to cultural citizenship—it is a means for groups of students to represent themselves in the public arena of their schools. The processes by which this happens raise challenging questions as to how to translate multicultural ideologies of access and representation for all into equitable programs for students; the following discussions explore two such examples.

INTERGROUP TENSIONS:
A CASE FROM MERCER HIGH SCHOOL

Should students from all ethnic groups be included in Multicultural Week? This issue—about whether the program should take to heart multicultural ideology about equal access and representation or instead prioritize pleasing the majority of the student body—spawned debates and newspaper editorials during the 1999–2000 Mercer High School year. The issue began with the way the student committee handled auditions for the multicultural program, which were necessary to manage the overwhelming student interest in participating in the hour-long program. The planning committee appointed an all-white panel of teachers to judge the auditions, scheduled three months before the performance. Chosen primarily based on their willingness to stay after school for the auditions, judges were asked to evaluate each act on content, choreography, and overall “entertainment value” of each group—equal representation of each interested ethnic group was not deemed an important criterion. Al-
though students were alerted about the audition in early November, they received little information about how to prepare.

From this early stage onward, differences in cultural capital among students began to surface. Some hopeful participants were able to draw on the preparation experiences of friends and siblings in past assemblies, community dance programs, and their overall involvement in a wide range of school activities. The group of Desi girls I followed—one of several at the audition—were nonplussed by the lack of directives on how to ready themselves. Tara and Meena, two close friends, asked several of their Desi female friends to join their dance. Having won several South Asian community dance contests, they were no strangers to how dances are choreographed, rehearsed, and costumed. This, coupled with their love of Hindi films, left Tara and Meena to choose from literally thousands of Bollywood dance sequences upon which to model their dance. Motivated by the prospect of representing themselves to their school, they invested significant time and effort to procure what they knew would be a highly coveted spot. They successfully trained and costumed ten girls into nearly flawless audition material.

Only some groups, however, were able to access such a wide range of experiences and skills. The relative lack of cultural capital of African American and Latino students became apparent on the day of the audition. During this lengthy event, in which ten groups vied for four places, a number of Asian groups arrived with costumes and props alongside a smaller number of representatives from the Black Student Union (BSU) and the Latino student group (MECHA). Their audition—earnest and creative but without costumes and their full cast of performers—was passed over in favor of ten Desi girls in matching outfits, the Chinese girls who performed a traditional ribbon dance using props owned by their families, the Filipino boys and girls who did a dance with lit candles that they had performed at community shows, and the uniformed Japanese Martial Arts group.

In contrast to the heightened visibility that many East and South Asians have experienced in recent decades in Silicon Valley, Latinos and African Americans have yet to be similarly acknowledged. What they lacked in cultural capital—the social knowledge, background, and experience to secure a place in the program—they sought to gain in their struggles for cultural citizenship. Although these African American and Latino groups were excluded, they still exercised agency and made their voices heard through writing to the school newspaper and trying to raise awareness about the exclusionary dynamic of the audition process. The BSU faculty adviser wrote a letter to the school newspaper arguing that although BSU was a relatively new student group and therefore unprepared, the exclusion of MECHA was inexcusable and signaled the declining rights of Latinos at the school—a predicament compounded by the absence of Latino teachers or faculty to advocate on students’ behalf. The all-Asian multicultural student planning committee (in a school that was 54 percent Asian), however, was unsympathetic to this plea, asserting the judges had chosen performers according to proscribed criteria. To add insult to injury, the committee proceeded with their plan to hire two troupes of professional adult performers—a move to enhance entertainment value. The student committee leader justified the decision to include a dance troupe from Bolivia and a Chinese Acrobat show by arguing that student-only performances “can’t hold the audience’s attention,” and the budget included funds to hire two outside acts.

The African American and Latino students I spoke with magnanimously supported the chosen performers. Yet they took issue with the school administration for not advocating on their behalf over professional adult performers and for leaving the program in the hands of four Asian students who did not prioritize inclusion of all interested student constituencies. The student president of MECHA submitted a provocative letter to the school paper, asserting that “if students are proud of their heritage and are willing to share it with their fellow students, they should be allowed to.” Both groups argued that audition flyers did not call for costumes and polished pieces and questioned the underlying assumption that multicultural week is inherently less interesting and requires entertainment value to make it more appealing.

What emerged from these events is that the very unity Multicultural Week is intended to foster was undermined by disagreement over its goals and poorly publicized expectations about performance and entertainment. When asked about the controversy, the student activities coordinator asserted that this was the first year he had received complaints and that they were primarily from excluded students. Defending his stance in support of the committee’s actions, he offered his interpretation: “Their viewpoint was that we do a quota type thing, that you take people regardless of how well they perform and put them in because you want to get all the ethnicities that you can. For us to be able to put every single group
in there is impossible.” The director’s reluctance to include “all ethnicities” resonates with many opponents of affirmative action who equate inclusion with compromise of quality and substance. Although African American and Latino students voiced their objections and exercised cultural citizenship through the means available to them, they were further marginalized by being denied a place in a program purported by the school principal to “unite the community.” Their unfortunate lack of cultural capital, coupled with larger contention about the underlying purpose of this multicultural initiative, ultimately denied these students a place in the program.

Multicultural Week proceeded on schedule, and although most were appreciative of the assembly (described in the opening of this article), many had mixed responses. Some found multicultural week entertaining but were unsure if it had a larger purpose. Jose, a member of MECHA, raised questions of fairness and equity: “There are hardly any black and Latino students in the school, so it isn’t surprising that they are underrepresented at the assembly . . . but they should still be allowed to perform.” Likewise, Shaniqua and Alicia, two students from the BSU, commented that being a minority does not diminish a group’s desire to represent itself. Alicia recounted that the leadership committee refused her plea to include an African American group, maintaining it would be “redundant” to have something from African American culture “two years in a row.” When asked how the problem could have been handled better, she reflected for a minute and replied, “I think instead of having the Chinese acrobat people—because they didn’t represent any culture, it was more just a goofy sideshow—that’s where we could have . . . not we . . . there could have been an African or African American anything.”

Alicia’s comment, especially her shift from “we” to “not we . . . there” is indicative of how little ownership African American and Latino students feel over school activities and functions.

Mercer High School’s multicultural program inadvertently reinforced existing race-based hierarchies in the school. Rather than attempt to include African American and Latino students—a minority at this high school, but a significant presence in American society and in California especially—the students in leadership chose to have the program correspond with current school composition. Since the administration did not intervene, representation became contingent on knowledge and resources available only to groups like the Desi kids, who were able to manipulate the system. In the next example, International Day at Greene High School presents related yet distinct issues that challenge established discourses of unity and multiculturalism.

**Intragroup Struggles: A Case from Greene High School**

Should members within an ethnic group be assured equal access to multicultural programs? While Desi kids at Greene High School did not face competition from other ethnic groups such as African Americans or Latinos, they did end up competing with one another to perform in International Day 2000. Although not raised publicly, this issue was problematic all the same. In this case there were no auditions, nor were there any restrictions against having two dances to represent the same ethnic group; in fact, performing groups did not necessarily have to be affiliated with a student club. Yet a perplexing situation resulted from this seemingly open invitation: although there was plenty of room for all interested students to participate, only some were able to do so. When the program was announced, there was widespread interest among Desi kids. Yet, it was two upper-middle-class sisters—Jaspreet and Amanpreet—who first announced that they were planning to do a Desi dance. Other groups of Desi kids, despite their interest, had nary a clue as to how to procure a program slot.

That Desi kids at the same school should have such vastly different experiences with their multicultural program points to larger dynamics of cultural capital that stem from class and immigration history. Jaspreet and Amanpreet, daughters of well-educated, professional immigrants, “kick it” (hang out, spend time with) in the quad—the center of the schoolyard dominated by popular kids involved in a variety of school activities. Drawing on the cultural capital of their upbringing along with expertise and experience from school performances past, the sisters easily began to organize a dance. In contrast, “back-corner” (my term) kids who kick it in the periphery of the schoolyard and are generally uneasy about many school activities found International Day to be no exception. These working- and middle-class Desi kids outnumber the handful of upper-middle-class Desi kids who kick it in the quad. Many are third- and fourth-generation Punjabi kids whose families moved to Silicon Valley from other parts of California (see Gibson 1988). For many of these kids school and its programs
just wear miniskirts.” With choreography and costumes they regarded as too sexually suggestive, several girls, including some of the sisters’ friends, decided to drop out. The sisters were frustrated yet felt strongly about being in the program. Rather than cancel the dance altogether, they compromised by toning down the dance and letting performers wear their own lehengas, leaving the choice up to each girl to cover or reveal as much as she pleased.

On a warm spring day in April the event at Greene High School proceeded as planned. The quad was adorned with a colorful banner that read “International Day 2000” surrounded by hand-painted flags from various countries and framed by an arc of balloons stretched across the concrete stage. As the bell rang to signal the start of a lunch period specially extended for this event, students packed onto the steps surrounding the quad and spilled over onto the grassy area facing the stage. After about half of the twenty-five hundred student body had assembled, students rose for the American national anthem, and for a brief minute the restless swarms of teens managed to stand relatively still. The Indian Club’s dance was announced, and eight Desi girls in uncoordinated but colorful lehengas took their places, their backs to the audience. As the bass from their remixed music reverberated, they demurely lifted their dupattas to uncover their faces and began to sway—some suggestively, others uneasily. The two sisters wore alluring outfits that would make any Bollywood costume designer proud and relished the enthusiastic audience cheers. Other back-corner dancers seemed less comfortable being the center of attention in the quad. The music quickly segued into a second Hindi song, and the girls spun around and slithered to the ground in a series of coiling, serpentine moves. Their five-minute dance ended dramatically, and the girls exited the stage onto the grass. Looking pleased and relieved, they sat and laced up their sneakers while watching the remainder of the program.

Responses to International Day were decidedly mixed. Although friends of Jaspreet and Amanpreet were extremely appreciative, only a handful of the back-corner Desi students even attended the program. Some came as a show of support for the few friends who made it into the dance. Others who skipped the performance crowded around the small LCD screen on my camera to watch the video I had just taped. A barrage of critiques ensued: it was too slow, it contained slutty, hootchy moves, and it was not nearly as good as past years. One back-corner girl announced, “It would have been amazing if we had done bhangra,” and
others nodded in agreement. The girls who participated were hurt when they overheard friends saying, “It sucked.” Had the dance been more inclusive, perhaps the back-corner Desi kids would have been less critical. Unfortunately, those responsible for the artistic content of the dance—Jaspreet and Amanpreet—were far out of earshot, leaving the scathing remarks of the excluded back-corner kids to fall on the ears of their own friends who had struggled to gain entry into the dance.

That the sisters and their friends—far outnumbered by back-corner kids—dominated the dance reveals the way in which some students feel a sense of ownership and privilege over school events while others shy away from this public arena, even as they would desire the option of inclusion. This struggle over cultural citizenship between Desi kids of different class backgrounds occurred without any public airing of issues. Unlike the disenfranchised students at Mercer High School, these excluded Desi kids did not feel confident or comfortable enough to approach school faculty to intervene on their behalf, and they had no experience to draw on. Their only recourse was to retaliate through gossip and criticism. This multicultural program, then, only deepened fissures of class among Desi kids. Rather than offering more inclusive opportunities, it reinforced existing hierarchies of power among these students. Both this and the earlier example from Mercer High School point to the broad range of differences among and within ethnic groups. This diversity not only complicates issues of equity but, as I will discuss in the next section, also questions of representation.

AGENCY, REPRESENTATION, AND RECEPTION

Should multicultural programs be about performing something “traditional,” or should they reflect dynamic, locally constructed ethnic identities? This thorny issue underscores ways that audience expectations can clash with performers’ agendas. In everyday school settings students and faculty rarely take the opportunity to examine what it means to be, for example, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Indian. Through multicultural performances, however, kids may challenge and potentially redefine dominant ideologies otherwise implicit in such overarching categories. By exercising agency, kids are able to disrupt the stability of seemingly fixed categories such as Desi, albeit in limited ways. As I will discuss below, kids innovate to create these meanings—a process seldom appreciated in the depiction of culture—and are accordingly constrained by one another as well as the audience.

Indeed, while kids use this program as an expressive space in school, faculty and other students perhaps still look to it as a way to learn about “Indian culture,” considered a monolithic category. Notions of what it means to be Desi from an outsider’s perspective—whether from a different ethnic group or even another generation—generally draw on clear-cut distinctions of “South Asian” and “American,” of “traditional” and “Westernized.” Especially during multicultural programs, essentialized, timeless notions of culture triumph as authentic—effectively bounding them into homogeneous, separate units that raze their texture and difference (Turner 1994:407). Often, larger audiences with expectations of how a multicultural performance should appear do not consider cultural expression that is meaningful to kids to be authentic.

For Desi kids at Mercer and Greenc High Schools an intricate cultural logic governs the process of crafting representations. This dynamic is captured by kids’ fluid use of the terms FOBby and tight. A self-reflexive and group-reflexive term, FOBby is the adjective form of FOB, which stands for “Fresh Off the Boat.” Tight is California slang for cool. FOBby and tight are kids’ terms, and provide a way of redefining the social category Desi. At first glance it might be easy to associate FOBby with things South Asian and tight with anything American. Yet, while FOBby generally refers to a set of cultural and linguistic practices associated with those who are recently arrived from South Asia, kids’ use of the term is quite specific. Their quickness to admire certain styles generated in South Asia and displayed in Bollywood movies or Desi clothes in their local store as tight or even hella tight (really cool), indicates that FOBby does not simply define anything South Asian. Likewise, tight does not blindly praise all things American. Desi kids draw on numerous sources in constructing identities (Maira 2002); in Silicon Valley these include both Bollywood films—their songs, actors, and narratives—as well as local television programming, Hollywood, and music such as hip-hop and pop.

In these ways kids have reclaimed FOB, a term that initially mocked immigrants, to make it a dimension of their identity and one they manipulate (cf. Butler 1993). While being FOBby is undesirable, being FOBulous is tight—a metacommentary on this larger semiotic system that indexes insider knowledge. The term FOBulous is generated out of this
a few were willing to participate, even though many knew how to dance from community festivals. Determined to have a co-ed dance despite these apathetic Desi boys, the girls broke from the previous years’ tradition and opened the dance to girls and boys of any racial background.

While the audience certainly enjoyed the dance, including participants of various ethnicities, using remixed music and a range of innovative dance steps, and wearing nontraditional costumes raised questions of authenticity. James, a participant in the dance, expressed this doubt: “[The dance] seems a little whitewashed. The ending that they have now seems a little less cultural than I hoped. It seems like it’s been dumbed-down, Whitified. I don’t know if I know what I’m talking about, but that’s what it seems like.” Interestingly, this ending typified male-female interaction and flirting in Bollywood movies, which borrow from a number of contemporary film genres, including Hollywood (Ganti 2000). Yet James and others expected something quite different, something “traditional,” without being able to articulate or imagine it specifically. Although they were somewhat disappointed with these critiques, the girls stood by their decisions to prioritize being tight over catering to their audiences, proving that one person’s authentic is another person’s FOBby.

At Greene High School gender-based notions of propriety surfaced as the main point of contention. When the two sisters began choreographing the dance, they alone made the choices about the types of music and the steps. Here, too, Hindi films were a prominent influence, and the sisters also chose to splice together a medley of Bollywood songs and choreograph a dance. Although some back-corner girls initially argued for the inclusion of a more traditional bhangra song, they gave in—in part out of their own love of Bollywood.

Even though the sisters were in charge of the dance, their agency was circumscribed by larger social codes about what is proper for Desi girls. Such notions are closely linked with class, wherein many upper-middle-class girls are often far less constrained by strict rules around dress and comportment than middle- and working-class girls. Desi girls who came from wealthy families (like the sisters) by and large had less restrictions placed on their movements and choices. Amanpreet explained, “We want to do something that represents our culture, but something cool—not something FOBby and boring.” The sisters’ version of tight, however, crossed a line for back-corner girls, who were raised to adhere to more rigid standards of propriety and found the dance slutty and inappropriate.
Here the wide socioeconomic gap between Desi kids made the process of agreeing on what is tight far more challenging.

Excluded Desi students seized upon this disjuncture in aesthetic vision as a means of critiquing the program from which they were excluded. Asserting that the risqué nature of the sisters’ dance made it altogether inauthentic, the performance became a source of amusing gossip for the back-corner Desi girls. They began to feel vindicated in their decision not to participate; as one girl smugly remarked, “It’s, like, become an American dance.” While there were countless things American that were highly valued by these Desi and used in representation, appearing “slutty” was not among them. Although the sisters regarded this degree of modesty FOBby, they were outnumbered by girls who were able to deflect this criticism at the sisters and their “slut” dance.

Considering their lack of access to the program, it is not surprising that back-corner kids would criticize it in any way possible—authenticity provides an accessible and meaningful trope. Had they the cultural capital to put together a performance of their own, they may have been more charitable in their review of the other dance. Being appreciated for being FOBulous, then, turned out to be far more challenging than simply being FOBby.

Returning to broader debates about cultural citizenship, I conclude with a discussion of the finale from the Mercer High School multicultural assembly. The final act was a “flag parade,” in which students paraded flags from various countries around the gym while the emcee announced the corresponding country names. The last flag stood in sharp contrast with the others carried by a diverse range of students. As the finale, five white boys carried a giant U.S. flag accompanied by the song “God Bless the USA.” This portion received both wild cheering from the general audience and visible waves of discomfort among many students of color.

These five white boys—serving as the unmarked majority—paraded the American flag as an authoritative end to what was already an exclusive program. As if to reclaim control of a space that had been temporarily surrendered to other groups, the boys asserted what they considered rightfully theirs. Many students felt this gesture undermined the entire program. As Alicia from the Black Student Union expressed, “It pissed me off because the whole point is that even though we are different cultures and even though we’re not all white, we’re still Americans. So I think instead of having the big four [sic] white guys go up there and parade around with the flag they should have had students to represent different races.” A number of other students also felt that this finale belittled other performers’ efforts at cultural expression.

As the flag parade and other examples I have discussed illustrate, cultural citizenship remains a highly contested process. Kids exert a wide spectrum of efforts—both successful and not—to claim a space for themselves in the public sphere of their high schools. The first example from Mercer High School underscores how ethnic groups in an advantageous position are able to operationalize their cultural capital to ensure their inclusion. Others who have fewer resources available were still able to publicly voice their discontent. Unfortunately, their actions did not achieve their goal of greater representation; in fact, African American and Latino students were even overlooked for the Desi dance, as participants mainly asked friends from their own cliques and seemed largely unaware of the absence of these other minorities. The second example, International Day at Greene High School, illustrates struggles among Desis that emerge from sharp differences of cultural capital due to differences in class and immigration history. Excluded kids did not even consider writing to the school paper—a forum that most found entirely off-limits. In both examples the ideology of multiculturalism based on unity, equality, and cultural understanding, in implementation, exasperated race, class, and gender-based divisions between students.

In this essay I focused on the preparation, presentation, and reception of five to seven minutes of allotted performance time. These quick snapshots provide a window into the dynamic interworkings of ethnicity, class, and gender and, relatedly, cultural capital through which kids develop a sense of ownership and entitlement over school time and resources. While it may seem coincidental that only some kids participate in these programs, the reasons are, in fact, deeply rooted in larger social processes such as immigration history, class, educational background, and the larger sociopolitical climate—all of which shape everyday processes of ethnic formation for kids.

Though somewhat rhetorical, the questions I raised earlier as to whether multiculturalism should offer equal opportunities to all interested groups as well as individuals are addressed by these problematic outcomes. The question whether tight or FOBby performances are more appropriate—that is, whether they are to reflect locally crafted ethnic
identities or depict a timeless, traditional culture—remains ambiguous. The unfavorable reception of these expressions by non-Desi peers and faculty, however, serves as a reminder that agency is circumscribed by audiences and contexts. In this active struggle categories such as South Asian reflect the lived experiences of those encompassed by such a grouping. It is precisely because of these daily struggles that a category such as Desi means anything at all and being FOBulous, rather than FOBby, matters.

**NOTES**

1. Desi means “countryman” and is a used by South Asians to refer to each other. Based on the way kids in my study use the term, it includes people originally from South Asia who have immigrated to the U.S. from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, as well as Africa, the Caribbean, Fiji, and Great Britain.

2. Released in 1999, *Taal* is a Bollywood movie about an aspiring dancer and was a popular choice for many performances. The word *taal* means “beat” or “rhythmic cycle.”

3. *Filmy* is a common adjective used by Hindi film viewers to describe a song, dance, or attribute resembling a Bollywood movie.

4. Borrowing from Omis and Winant’s (1994) process “racial formation,” I here use the term *ethnic formation* to discuss those cultural, religious, and linguistic differences that can contribute to local inequalities for Desi kids.

5. This examination is part of a larger project for which I conducted sixteen months of ethnographic and sociolinguistic research (from September 1999 to August 2000 and February through May 2001) in three high schools that serve different socioeconomic strata of Silicon Valley across school, family, and community settings.

6. This excerpt is part of a longer passage from the 2002 report of the California State Board of Control, quoted in Leonard 1992, p. 24.

7. Hundreds of laborers were literally “body-shopped,” from East and South Asia—i.e., brought over on H-1B visas for short-term work as programmers and engineers in Silicon Valley companies. See Mankekar 2002 for a discussion of the cultural politics and practices of these immigrants.

8. These schools also contained about 1 percent Native American students (about twenty students). They were seldom able to make their presence felt in these arenas.

9. Fremont has evolved into a bedroom community for Silicon Valley.

10. The faculty was nearly all White, so this selection was typical.

11. Mecha (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) is a movement of Chicano groups organizing on California campuses statewide. For a detailed discussion, see Rodrigues and Trueba 1998.

12. A *lehenga* is the skirt part of a coordinated women’s outfit and is mainly worn for festivals or special occasions.

13. A *dupatta* is a coordinated strip of cloth worn with various South Asian women’s outfits. As a garment of modesty, it is intended to cover the head, neck, and bust.

14. These terms were current during 1999–2001 when I conducted my fieldwork.

15. These are ethnic clothes from North India used both for daily wear and festivals.

16. A modern-day version of “God Bless America,” this song was released during Operation Desert Storm.

**WORKS CITED**


