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“I LIKE GOING PLACES:” THE EVERYDAY AND POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF
SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANT YOUTH IN NEW YORK CITY

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	vi
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Introduction.....	1
○ South Asian youth in America.....	4
○ Brief history of South Asian youth spaces in the United States.....	7
○ Research questions.....	11
○ Structure of the dissertation.....	15
Chapter One: Conceptual framework and literature review.....	19
○ Children’s geographies.....	19
▪ Children’s mobility and control of their place.....	22
▪ Third spaces.....	23
▪ Political geographies.....	26
○ Globalization, glocalization, and transnationalism.....	31
○ Immigration, ethnicity, and youth culture.....	36
Chapter Two: Methodology.....	41
○ Research design.....	41
○ Research site selection.....	42

○ Research participants.....	47
○ Tools for data collection.....	49
▪ Multi-sited ethnography.....	50
▪ Discourse analysis.....	55
○ Analysis.....	56
○ Power and Positionality: Conducting reflexive research.....	57
○ “Down with the youth:” Negotiating my own personality for youth research.....	62
▪ “She’s always right in the midst of the youth:” Youth as equals and practices of food.....	63
▪ Jokes, games, and language.....	71
▪ Familial and supportive bonds.....	74
○ Researcher’s responsibility: Where do childhood studies scholars go from here?.....	76
 Chapter Three: Mapping young lives and the youth center they attend.....	80
○ Introduction.....	80
○ Mapping young lives.....	81
▪ First impressions.....	81
▪ Family life.....	84
▪ City life and neighborhoods.....	90
○ Mapping YOSAI: Safe space discourses.....	100
▪ Physical “indoor” safety.....	101

- Emotional and affective safety..... 105
 - Political safety..... 110
- Conclusion..... 116

Chapter Four: Encounters with “third space.” Socio-political geographies of South Asian teenagers..... 120

- Navigating social class..... 124
- “We’re all Brown here:” Culture, community, and connectedness... 136
- Choosing relationships: Inter-generational and cross-generational networks..... 142
- Romantic relationships..... 147
- “I like going places:” Escape, exploration, and experiences..... 158
- Social justice and political workshops..... 168
- Conclusion..... 175

Chapter Five: Performative politics: South Asian teen cultures in “third space”.... 177

- Introduction..... 177
- Bollywood, slang, and swag: Consuming and reproducing language and dialogues..... 178
- Lungi style flash mob..... 188
- Lungi as belonging and otherness..... 195
- Responding to Islamophobia through embodied practices..... 200
- Inscribing language and marking bodies..... 201

○ Conclusion.....	196
Conclusion.....	205
○ Implications about third spaces: Physical and symbolic.....	209
○ Youthful political geographies.....	212
○ Significant contributions and future directions.....	214
Appendices.....	217
○ Appendix I: Interview protocol for youth.....	217
○ Appendix II: Interview protocol for staff.....	219
○ Appendix III: Guideline for photo project for youth.....	222
○ Appendix IV: List of key participants.....	225
Bibliography.....	228
Curriculum Vitae.....	248

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

“I LIKE GOING PLACES:” THE EVERYDAY AND POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANT YOUTH IN NEW YORK CITY

By ANANDINI DAR

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Dr. Daniel T. Cook and Dr. Charles Watters

This dissertation examines how ethnic youth centers and other sites between the home and the school inform the everyday and political geographies of working class South Asian immigrant youth growing up in a post 9/11 New York. Caught between no longer being young children and not yet adults, the teens of this study spend much of their time in liminal spaces of youth centers, streets, malls, which I refer to as third spaces. Based on a multi-sited ethnography at one youth center for South Asian youth in Queens, New York between 2010 and 2012, I accompanied teens attending this center to other places where they hang out, such as, rallies and social justice and political workshops in NYC and other neighboring northeastern cities, malls, parks, subways, and online sites. Additionally, I analyze discourses of the mission, philosophy and ideologies of the youth center programs.

After the 9/11 attacks on the world trade center in New York, ethnic and religious identities, that is, being South Asian and Muslim, have become racialized and politicized categories wrongfully associated with terrorism, resulting in racial bullying and hate

crimes affecting South Asian youth and families. Unlike literature on youth centers, this research highlights how, in this era, ethnically-based youth centers address these socio-political and cultural difficulties youth face everyday and help them connect with and negotiate their socio-political realities without insulating or “islanding” young people.

I argue that it is in third spaces that youth’s political identities and engagement with politics begin to take shape as they attend social justice workshops and rallies to fight against racial crimes, and aspire to “go places,” socially and politically. Further, I argue that youth’s political agency manifests in their cultural and performative practices, offering new ways through which to understand young people’s political lives. This dissertation highlights the connections between context, young people, representations, and politics, as it situates the constructions of racial and ethnic identity as intersecting dynamics to understanding youth’s political geographies. This multi-disciplinary study contributes to South Asian studies, political geographies, ethnic studies and children and youth studies scholarship.

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achievements. Your honest interactions and rapport with me showed me how resilient one can be when they have a community that supports them. I dedicate this dissertation to the Desi teenagers of New York.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the everyday and political geographies of South Asian immigrant youth growing up in the post 9/11 New York (i.e., after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2011). It is based on a multi-sited ethnography at an ethnic youth center for South Asian youth in Queens, New York, conducted between 2010 and 2012. During these years, I also followed the youth subjects, aged 15-19 years, attending this Center to other in-between sites they frequented, such as, the subways, malls, street corners, workshops, rallies, and online spaces. After following the South Asian teens around in informal and third spaces – sites in-between the home and the school – I am able to analyze how race and place are intimately connected to re-conceptualized notions of the self, sense of belonging, and possibilities for socio-political expressions for young immigrants.

Geographers and sociologists have explored the ways in which children and youth's everyday lives are informed by the third spaces they occupy: after school youth centers, streets, and online spaces. All these place have been studied as sites that support formal education (Irby et al., 2003; Noam et al., 2002; Wong, 2010), enable identity formation (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Wilson & White, 2003), protect children from risks in public spaces (Valentine, 1997; Matthews et al., 2000a), and can insulate them from their social realities (Zeihner, 2001). In my study, I expand on such works to argue that third spaces are physical and symbolic resources, which offer both constraints and possibilities to immigrant youth to navigate their socio-political conditions. Third spaces function as more than educational support services: they often enable teens to connect

with their lived social realities. The political agency of youth also manifests in these sites, which is oftentimes suppressed both at home and at school.

Third spaces do not shelter immigrant youth from questions of identity. Instead, they are places where youth must negotiate constructions of race and ethnicity. Constructions of race and ethnicity must be understood as assembled both through social structures and common ideologies, and through our own understandings of the self (Omi & Winant, 1986). For instance, the South Asian community in America adopted a new ethnic identity of being Desi,¹ as a form of self-identification (Shankar, 2008). However, the particular context of growing up in a post 9/11 New York complicates the everyday and political geographies of Desi youth. Since ethnic and religious identity – that is, being South Asian, Muslim, or Arab – has been transformed into a racialized and politicized category associated with terrorism, fostering a dramatic increase in the hate crimes and racial bullying directed at Desi youth and families (Maira, 2008; Prasad, 2012). The post 9/11 era has also resulted in the creation of new investigative arms of the government, such as, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and policies such as “Stop and Frisk,” which have led to racial profiling and systematic marginalization of a variety of peoples of color (Racial Discrimination in Stop and Frisk, 2013). Non-white youth spaces in this era must be studied with reference to these changes. As my research will demonstrate, the non-profit programs and workshops for immigrant youth in New York have been reshaped to address these realities and often politically mobilize them to participate in organizing and advocacy work.

¹ Desi is a colloquial term adopted by the South Asian diasporic communities for self-identification. The term has roots in Sanskrit and Devanagari scripts and literally means a local in a foreign land. It refers to all immigrants irrespective of their citizenship and resident status, and has come to represent a self-constructed ethnic categorization of South Asians.

“I Like Going Places” is also about the ways young people aspire to move – socially, physically, culturally, and politically – in their daily lives, and use creative, performative, and embodied ways to claim place for themselves in a global landscape through local practices as Desi, young, and American, all at once. Most of the participants in my study reported that by going places they have not traversed, or explored before because of their age and cultural and racial constraints, they were able to learn about their neighborhood and city, and lay claim to new “real world experiences.” Going places such as the ethnic youth center they attend also helps them mediate cultural differences with their parents’ through inter-generational support from staff members at the youth center. It also provides possibilities for them to negotiate “adult hegemonic control” (Valentine, 2004) to their mobility in public spaces, such as streets. And finally, going to places where youth attend workshops and rallies related to fights against racial discrimination and social inequality, helps them learn how to make change in their communities and for their communities, which many engage with, and thus, can be read as teens’ political agency.

This dissertation documents the “everyday...that does not surface” and the “tactics” Desi teens used to “make do” with larger social structures and realities--to draw on Michel de Certeau (1994). The ethnography offers a reflective study of the lives of young working class South Asian teens who are experiencing growing up as first and second generation immigrants in new conditions of discriminations and documents how they find new forms of support to respond to these conditions. Caught in the liminal stage of not being young children and not-yet adults, the teens in this study spend much of their time in liminal third spaces where they find belonging and express socio-political agency.

Unlike previous studies on immigrant youth cultures, which focus on “culture-clash,” or “hybrid identities,” as a central areas of study, this dissertation discusses how Desi youth identities are intimately linked to their racial, place-based, and socio-political context, where local and global forces interact to shape their daily and political geographies and, wherein, this moment of 9/11 has also resulted in the politicization of immigrant childhoods.

In the remainder of my introduction, I will supply a brief description of the background to South Asian youth in America and the youth spaces they have occupied since their arrival. This background highlights how different socio-political contexts have resulted in the increasing prominence of third spaces for Desi youth, which have yet to be fully examined. I contend that the post 9/11 moment affecting teens in my study must be studied separately, and I situate their lives within the context of the preceding socio-political Desi youth spaces in America. I will describe the research questions of the dissertation next, and then conclude the introduction by providing an outline of the forthcoming chapters.

SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH IN AMERICA

Young people who represent South Asia in America include immigrants as well as second and third generation immigrants from the Indian subcontinent. They include persons with heritage ties to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bhutan, Maldives, and Tibet. South Asian immigrants also include those from the diaspora of these countries, including Guyana, Trinidad, and other nations where persons from the subcontinent settled and re-migrated later to the United States. Starting as early

as 1885, many of the youth from these countries migrated to the United States independently to pursue college degrees (Drexel, 2013), while others came to find jobs on farms in California shortly thereafter (Leonard, 1994). During the 1900s and 1910s Desi farm workers in California married Mexican women, resulting in a generation of Mexican-Indian children and youth (Leonard, 1994, p. 10). Despite these family ties, the Desi presence in early twentieth century America is reported in local papers as the “Hindoo invasion,” reflecting the tensions between these workers and the white settlers (Hess, 1976). The Asiatic Exclusion League, a California-based group, argued successfully with the immigration officials that these Hindus are “enslaved, effeminate, caste-ridden and degraded,” a sentiment also present in the U.S. States Immigration Commission survey of Indian Immigrants in California (Hess, 1976, p. 162; Daniels, 1989). As a result, Indians were also restricted from migrating to the United States in 1917, when US officials began categorizing the country in the “Asiatic barred zone” (Maira, 2002). This ban on immigration of South Asians into the United States lasted until 1946, and was followed by a period in which South Asian immigration was restricted to the entry of only 100 persons per year between 1946 – 65.

Post 1965, however, the U.S. immigration policy altered. The Hart and Cellar Immigration Act of 1965 encouraged many skilled laborers from India, particularly doctors, lawyers, engineers, and higher education aspiring students to emigrate to the United States. They constituted what many migration scholars have called the second wave of South Asian immigrants (Khandelwal, 1995, 2002; Maira, 2002; Shankar, 2008). The post-1965 migrants were largely skilled and educated professionals, with fluent English language skills. As a result, they were able to acquire middle- to upper-middle

class status in a relatively short period (Agarwal, 1991; Hing, 1993; Maira, 2002). Many migrated with infants, or reproduced shortly after arriving, creating a new generation of South Asian youth in America who grew up with community services that helped maintain their cultures and traditions, but also encouraged assimilation into white America.

Many twenty-first century young migrants from South Asia are children of Bangladeshis, who arrived in the United States as a result of the Diversity Immigration Visa Act of 1990, which is popularly known as the “Green Card Lottery”² (Kibria, 2011, p. 23). The number of Bangladeshis in America rose rapidly in the 1980s, and from 21,749 in 1990 to 92,237, by 2000 (Kibria, 2007). Their families, along with other Green Card Lottery immigrants from South Asia, often live below the poverty line, or are employed in under-paid and exploitative work in New York, a city in which South Asians constitute the second largest immigrant group currently (Kibria, 2011; Desis Rising Up and Moving, 2014). In each generation and with each wave of migration, the migrants’ experiences of arrival and stay vary based on class, time and place of migration, and city of residence. However, in each wave of migration, adult immigrants are always deeply concerned about their children’s futures – as linked with their American Dream success story. Youth organizations are one product of these concerns. Designed to foster success among the community’s children, various support organizations have been constructed either by adults or youth themselves to serve the needs of the different generations of young South Asians in America across generations.

² This Act enables people from particular countries to migrate to the United States, if those nations have sent fewer than 50,000 immigrants to the US in the past five years. ‘According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services (US-INS) admission data from 1996-2001, about 30.5 percent of Bangladeshi’s in America were admitted on the Diversity Program.’ See: Kibria, 2007.

BRIEF HISTORY OF SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH SPACES IN THE UNITED STATES

The varying forms of South Asian youth clubs, groups, and organizations that have existed in the United States reflect the changing historical and political climates of both the nation and the subcontinent. Early twentieth century Indian students formed organizations that issued newsletters discussing the events in the subcontinent regarding the rule of the British Raj. The Hindustan Gadar Party, a youth organization whose members were largely in their late 20s and early 30s,³ supported the independence of India from the British through various transnational initiatives. It ran two independent publications, The United States of India: A monthly review of political, economic, social, and intellectual independence of India, and The Independent Hindustan out of San Francisco, California (SAADA, 2011a; 2012). These publications included various revolutionary writings by young freedom fighters and by the editors, who encouraged young people to get involved with the Indian freedom struggle even from afar.⁴

During this early migration period many national and religious student college-based organizations were also set up. These organizations promoted cultural, political, and civic awareness issues emerging in America among young people. One of the first students' associations for Indians in America that engaged in such activities was the The Hindusthan Association of America (HAA), which was founded in Chicago at the University of Illinois in 1914 and subsequently moved to University of California, Berkeley (SAADA, 2011b; 2013). The Hindusthanee Student, a publication discussing student issues in America, emerged in 1915 from the activities of HAA, and was run

³ The director of South Asian American Digital Archives informed me during an interview with him.

⁴ See examples: Karr, 1920; Karr, 1921; Singh, 1920.

entirely by youth. This publication was closely tied to the International Hindustanee Students' Convention held for young Indian students (SAADA, 2011c).

Because of the complete ban on entry of Asians, including Indians, between 1917-46 and restricted entry regulation between 1946-65, the presence of South Asian youth and their various groups and organizations for the community are minimally present or recorded for during those decades. This soon changed after the enactment of the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965. Around the 1980s many Indian parents, who came to the United States as skilled professionals, had children who were now growing up as teenagers in America. The families were concerned about the loss of traditional cultural practices as their children grew up with and worried about the influence that American youth cultural practices would have on them. As a result of globalization, many western youth practices were already having a significant influence on children growing up in the subcontinent. But many of the families who migrated to the U.S. had not witnessed first-hand this change within their homelands and therefore had different expectations from their children in the diaspora (Maira, 2002). Instead, they created Temple organizations, Gurdwara's, Islamic schools, and other religious institutions designed to instruct Asian youth in traditional languages, music, dances, and religions. Large non-profit organizations, such as, Bal Vihar, supported a generation's interest in passing on "Asian Indian heritage" to their children. Different chapters of Bal Vihar can be found across the nation in various states. One of the first Bal Vihar's was opened in Plymouth, Pennsylvania, as early as 1987 (Plymouth Bal Vihar, 2012). The other Bal Vihar's were either run independently by middle class Indian Hindu women or supported by Indian

Cultural Association, or by Hindu religious organizations like the Chinmaya Mission. These still exist today (Chinmaya Mission West, 2006).

Likewise, many of the Muslim youth and families who arrived in the 1960s from South Asia participated in similar activities, which included forming new student organizations, such as the Muslim Student Association of America (MSA). The MSA, which began in 1993, continues to grow with several chapters in colleges as well as in high schools across the nation. Each year youth meet in new locations for their annual competition that includes debates, poetry competitions, and so forth. MSA encourages learning about Islam and reading the Koran. Young children and older teens attend such religious text readings, language, music, dance, and instrument learning classes in suburban and urban areas, which aims to help build a religious and pan-ethnic community.

At the same time, however, young people were encouraged to assimilate into American life in the recent decades. Evidence of such messages to youth can be found in late twentieth century news articles of papers such as, India Abroad or Pakistan Link that circulate in America and among the South Asian diaspora.⁵ Many of the Indian American or Bangladeshi American youth themselves felt the need to belong or stay tied to their traditional roots and cultures and started forming and joining ethnic clubs on college campuses. Such clubs allow young people to build peer networks based on their ethnicity and work collectively to face struggles of their generation, opportunities especially welcome among youth who have not had any chance to develop such a collective ethnic youth social network during their early school years (Handa, 2003). These “brown

⁵ India Abroad is considered the oldest Asian Indian publication in North American which was established in 1970 and in 2001 was bought over by an online company Rediff.com (India Abroad, 2013). Pakistan Link is the largest USA based weekly newspaper about Pakistan and its diaspora (Faruqui, 2004).

spaces,” as Amita Handa (2003) calls them, enable, at the least, a sense of community and engagement, and often offer possibilities for re-making their youth cultures. For instance, Sunaina Maira (2002) shows that Indian American youth participating in college clubs for Indian Americans often end up listening to Indian as well as western forms of music and then go on to re-create what they hear in performances at different college events or in ethnic dance parties in clubs, such as, Basement Bhangra in NYC. Such social spaces are significant for immigrant youth as they enable them to express racial and class ideologies as well as their everyday cultural experiences.

The twentieth and early twenty-first century has witnessed the rise of more politicized South Asian youth groups and organizations, which focus on social justice issues, and racial equality. This shift has taken place in the aftermath of post 9/11 Islamophobia, which has fostered hate crimes and other forms of discrimination against young people and their families from South Asia (Kibria, 2008; Maira, 2009; Sirin & Fine, 2007). Many of these organizations are in larger immigrant populated cities like Chicago, DC, and San Francisco, with the largest number identifiable in New York City. Some New York based organizations that focus on the welfare and concerns of the local South Asian youth community include, Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), South Asian Youth Action! (SAYA), and South Asian American Voting Youth (SAAVY), to name a few. These organizations were founded in the early and mid 1990s by politically active young and aspiring persons from the South Asian community. Primarily New York based, they reach out to South Asian children and youth and offer assistance with basic education, as well as support for youth to navigate family issues related to finances, as well as broader issues of adjustment and assimilation. These organizations also focus on

helping youth with future college applications, job placements, and social justice issues ranging from housing equality to racial, sexual, and class equality. Some of the noteworthy politically active organizations that support gender equality and create a space for LGBTQ South Asian youth include Trikone, South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA), SATRANG, and KhushDC.

Other small youth organizing groups include informal groups of South Asian youth activists who run workshops focusing on social justice issues for their peers and also for younger high school and college students. These multiple day workshops, such as Youth Solidarity Summer (YSS), DC Desi Summer (DCDS), and Bay Area Solidarity Summer (BASS) are held in urban cities like DC, New York, San Francisco, and have existed since 1993. They encourage young people to participate in socio-political rallies, forge solidarity across communities of color, and question racial and class based injustices. The focus of these organizations has shifted to recognizing and supporting the needs of youth in the aftermath of 9/11, which involves addressing issues of identity, self-esteem, feelings of belonging, and dangers and threats of deportation and imprisonment due to racial profiling legitimized by law and policies of the new state regime. This dissertation explores some of these post 9/11 effects on youth and youth spaces by conducting an ethnography at one such ethnic youth center in New York.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This dissertation seeks to answer two key questions: What is the impact of urban ethnic youth centers on the lives and cultures of South Asian youth in contemporary

United States? And how do the young people who make use of such centers come to experience, negotiate, and/or transform these and other in-between sites?

I conducted my ethnography at an ethnic youth center, I call, Youth Organization for South Asian Immigrants (YOSAI), in Queens, New York, where these questions are answered (see more about research site, subjects, and methods in Chapter Two). In the section below I describe how I address my two main questions as detailed researchable questions that guide my data collection process. The following guided my project:

1. Physical and Ideological Geographies of Youth Center:

What kinds of programs are offered for youth at YOSAI? Are the programs exclusively designed for South Asian youth? Who is invited and who participates at the center? What role does race, ethnicity, class, and gender play in access of the Center? What are the physical and built characteristics of the center space? What kinds of racial, ethnic, and gendered messages are inherent in the built environment, and in programs and workshops teenagers participate in, if any? How do these programs get advertised and what do these advertising posters represent about youth and the Center?

2. Teens' Motivations and Beliefs About Hanging Out in "Brown Spaces:"

Where do the teenagers hang out mostly? What are teenagers' emotional and experiential reasons for spending time at the Center? When and why do youth participate in the programs organized by the Center, both within and outside of this place? Given that YOSAI's programs are designed to speak to youth's racial and ethnic positions in the United States, what are the youth's ideas about their community, race, and cultural and ethnic heritage? How do youth communicate about these constructions?

3. Racial and Ethnic Reflections of South Asian Youth:

What cultural exchanges take place at the YOSAI center? How do teenagers make meaning of race, ethnicity, and urban life as persons growing up participating in “brown spaces?” In what ways are the cultural practices of South Asian teenagers in in-between places distinct from those of other teens? What are these and how can one understand these? How closely connected are these ethnic youth cultural practices to performances of resistance and activism? What form do these practices of activism take? To what extent are these practices racialized, ethnically, and transnationally motivated? And do these youth practices inform their immediate and later college and life decisions?

4. Social and Cultural Networks of Support Produced Through the Center:

Finally, given that South Asian youth grow up connecting with urban youth places and participating in programs offered at the Center, I ask, what kinds of social and cultural networks do these teenagers produce as a result of their interactions in these places? Do the networks produced at the Center offer any support for youth? What is the role of adults, both parents as well as center staff members’, in such networks for teenagers? What role do fellow teenagers play in each other’s lives, both within and beyond the site of this Center? Also, do these teenagers at YOSAI maintain or develop any transnational networks through this place? And what form do these take?

By examining the specific interactions that take place in the programs and at the center, such as who accesses it, who gets notified about the workshops, and what mission the youth center along with its partner organizations maintain, my first set of questions explore the ideologies that govern contemporary ethnic and immigrant youth centers. A detailed assessment of the physical characteristics of the center, along with the descriptions of the programs and workshops, can help explain if youth centers represent

insular or political geographies of childhood. By considering racial, ethnic, and gendered manifestations of these programs for the teenagers, I wish to examine the complex ways in which youth centers affect the social lives of South Asian teenagers and those who attend the programs.

The second and third sets of questions essentially explore the motivations and reasons why young people participate in these centers, and what form of geographies they navigate in doing so. By studying physical geographies they traverse alongside the cultural meanings of race, ethnicity, politics, and transnationalism, by means of the programs that youth participate in and the places they hang out at, I hope to uncover how these places influence the cultural and symbolic practices of South Asian teenagers. A closer exploration of their role as participants in programs for activism and advocacy for community issues, offers insight into the politicized nature of contemporary childhoods and children's spaces. I have been especially interested in examining the degree to which the practices of the Center isolate or connect children to varied public places, and how these interactions shape youth cultural practices.

The final set of questions essentially explores how, why, and from whom South Asian teenagers seek support and maintain daily rapport. Through exploring the relationships that these teenagers build and the social and cultural places in which they dwell, I hope to uncover their preoccupations and understand the ways in which they struggle with and manage them. As inherently transnational subjects these youth must negotiate notions of belonging, community, and exclusion in very particular ways, as can be seen in the fact that they attend an ethnic youth center in a predominantly South Asian neighborhood. A closer exploration of their relationships and the networks to which they

belong, can offer some insights into how they mediate these aspects of their lives, and produce unique cultural practices, which are shaped by growing up in youth spaces in post 9/11 America.

When I began my research, I did not overtly seek to explore the political geographies of teenagers. However, ethnographic fieldwork is a constant process of reflection and analysis, which can also inform the research questions (Emerson et al., 2005). My research questions about Desi teens' political geographies and agency took shape during and after the fieldwork. As I took detailed accounts of the various political workshops and rallies teenagers also attended through the YOSAI Center, I began to ask questions about how teens respond to and engage with these issues of politics and civic engagement.

STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter One contextualizes this study within the literature and theoretical orientations that can help answer the research questions that inform this dissertation. I draw on the literature from the interdisciplinary fields of children's geographies, migration studies, ethnic studies and youth cultural studies. Homi Bhabha's (1994) theories of "third space" and Michel de Certeau's (1984) theory on "tactics" and the "practices of everyday life" are also discussed in this section as my dissertation conceptually engages with these orientations and pushes them further.

In Chapter Two, I discuss in detail the methodology of this dissertation: a multi-sited ethnography. I describe the sites where this study is conducted, and provide a rationale for my choice of these particular sites. I also offer a detailed account of the

research participants and my role – as an insider and outsider – during my research fieldwork process. I describe this study as a reflexive multi-sited ethnography, wherein I struggle to equalize the power relations between the young child subjects and the adult ethnographer. I also discuss the significance of self-critical and conscious research with young people, and explain why I believe that adopting the role of an equal, rather than a “least-adult” role in research with young people is a more productive approach to research that values young people as social actors. Using data from my fieldnotes, I also discuss the multiple roles I play in the field as a volunteer, staff member, researcher, mentor, and sister, and how they relate to my race, ethnicity, gender, and age. The chapter closes by questioning the responsibility of multi-disciplinary childhood studies ethnographers towards informing praxis and using their ethnographic expertise to inform children related policy. I do not offer any conclusive answers here but return to the question about researcher’s responsibilities in the Conclusion of this dissertation.

Chapter Three of this dissertation draws on detailed narrative accounts from the teens who participated in this study to map their everyday lives. I analyze their first impressions of arriving in the United States and the dynamics of their immigrant family life, which includes informal systems of community support such as “following” young South Asian newcomers as they navigate immigrant life. I also detail how a variety of South Asian teens experience their neighborhoods and their city. Through spoken word poetry, as well as accounts in interviews with me, teens describe racial discrimination they experience in their city corners and other public spaces in New York. While at the same time, some of the teens find the diverse and ethnically strong character of their neighborhoods as productive sites for belonging. This chapter also discusses the

discourses of safety constructed by the youth center, YOSAI, that the teens of this study attend and where I first met them. I map these discourses so as to simultaneously show how needs of the everyday – to counter racial discrimination and sense of being “othered” – are being met by the Center. I analyze how the framework through which the Center attempts to meet teenagers’ needs can be read through three discourses of safety: physical indoor safety, emotional and affective safety, and political safety. I arrive at this analysis by conducting a discourse analysis of YOSAI’s documents, brochures, flyers, and website materials that describe its philosophy, mission, and programs. I also draw on interviews conducted with the program staff members, and the founding and current executive director of the organization for this section. Overall, this chapter sets up youth’s voices against the discourses of the Center constructed for their needs, which then sets up the context for analysis of teenagers’ political geographies I discuss in the forthcoming chapters.

Chapter Four discusses Desi teenagers’ encounters with “third spaces”: which include both YOSAI and the public places they go from there. Drawing on my fieldnotes and interviews with the teens this chapter discusses what brings teens to the youth center, and what makes them return to participate in the various programs daily. In examining these questions, I find that teens are attracted to third spaces because they are able to forge inter-generational and cross-generational ties based on their ethnic identity and at the same time find some ways in which to negotiate their parents’ traditional boundaries and expectations around dating, physical mobility, and safety. I also analyze the ways in which “brown spaces” enable a sense of belonging for teens in the discriminatory post 9/11 environment. The YOSAI programs help youth mediate their social class positions

as well as their political beliefs, providing them opportunities to understand and negotiate their place in their communities and in their society at large in this post 9/11 moment.

Finally, in Chapter Five I discuss the performative politics of Desi teens in the contemporary period. I draw on Judith Butler's (1990; 1997) theory of performativity and examine how Desi teens' performative and embodied cultural practices reflect their new ways of being Desi. They draw on global forms of music and Bollywood to re-construct their position in New York as Desi and American; shifting the understanding of immigrant identities to go beyond notions of binary or "hybrid" identities. A flash mob in the streets of Queens led by Desi teens of this study, I argue, can be read as an act of claiming public space, which might otherwise be considered dangerous for all young people or especially hazardous because of their racialized bodies. Furthermore, Desi youth's embodied practices of fashion, clothes, and tattoos, reveal how their cultural practices enable them to respond to the racial discriminations they and their communities experience in post 9/11 New York, and express their socio-political stand points, situating them as political agents.

CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I review the literature and theoretical orientations that frame this study. I discuss conceptions of everyday and political geographies of childhood, theories of globalization, and ethnic youth cultures. This chapter sets up the context for the findings of my research study that are discussed in Chapters Three, Four, and Five. I will return to some of the seminal literature in the forthcoming chapters, however, a more complete discussion of the fields I draw on and aim to contribute to: children's geographies, migration and globalization studies, and youth cultural studies, are discussed in the sections below.

CHILDREN'S GEOGRAPHIES

SPACE, PLACE, AND EVERYDAY GEOGRAPHIES

Scholars of space and place, such as Edward Relph (1976), Henry Lefebvre (1991), and Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), emphasize the distinction between space and place in somewhat similar ways. While space is recognized as abstract and a site where social reproduction must be possible, place is theorized as intimate and that which can be experienced and made use of. Recent scholars of children's geographies and city planning, Jon Anderson and Katie Jones (2009), explain this more explicitly: "Spaces, following Lefebvre, are 'empty abstractions' (1991, p. 12), whilst places are 'drenched in cultural meaning' (Preston 2003, p. 74). Spaces are scientific, open and detached, whilst

places are intimate, peopled, and emotive. Place then is the counterpoint of space: places are politicised and cultured; they are humanised versions of space” (p. 293). Deducing from this, in one sense, this dissertation explores the humanized, and particularly child versions of space that are under examined in research on space and place, and in studies of mobile and immigrant children. These child versions of space can be studied by examining the everyday geographies of children – “intimate,” “emotive,” “politicized” and “cultured” sites – existing amidst and informed by the counterpoint of the “abstract” spaces such as those from where children may have migrated.

Some children’s geography scholars, such as Roger Hart (1979) and Kim Rasmussen (2004), discuss these “intimate” meanings of place in their respective work with children. Drawing on the definitions of place versus space, Hart (1979) argues that children’s places are those places that children make meaning of, use, and experience in daily life. Drawing from this, Rasmussen expands that, “it should come as no surprise that ‘children’s places’ are located mainly in and around the areas where children live” (p. 165); making the study of children’s places about the immediate and intimate sites they occupy, use and make some meaning of, rather than the detached spaces. Rasmussen describes these ‘children’s places’ to differentiate them from ‘places for children,’ which he argues are sites that have been constructed by adults, lacking in basic intimacy or meaning that children construct for themselves, unless children begin to use those adult sites and give meaning to them through their experiences in everyday situations. Some of these places Rasmussen discusses are children’s recreation and educational centers constructed by adults as places for children, but wherein children can make emotive connections to the site in their own terms, transforming it into a ‘children’s place.’ Here,

the basic association between a place and children becomes children's ability to connect to and transform one particular site in some way.

It may not be surprising to note that much literature on children's geographies focuses on the everyday life of children and the entanglements made with everyday places of interaction. Children are seen as profoundly embedded in their everyday geographies, which has been in part attributed to findings of the new social theory of childhood studies wherein children are considered as social actors (Prout & James, 1997), resulting in several studies on how young people perceive, use, and engage in the world around them, in different geographical and local settings, by children's geographers (Ansell, 2009, p. 191). This turn towards studying everyday geographies that focused primarily on the local, while now critiqued for its lack of emphasis on the global (Ansell, 2009), was a necessary shift because human geography had largely excluded the daily life and interactions of children with their spatial dynamics. Sarah James, hence, asked a critical question in 1990 about this: "Is there a 'place' for children in geography?" Many children's geographers hence, moved from discussions on differences between space and place to understanding the everyday practices in various geographies.

I find Michel de Certeau's work on the practices of everyday life particularly useful in understanding everyday geographies and its influence on such work, though geographers have not always made this linkage overt. In his conceptualization of the "everyday," de Certeau (1994) does not as such focus on distinctions between the local and the global but, rather, reveals how people "make do" in daily life. He argues that "the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface... outlining itself against the visible. Within this ensemble I shall try and locate the practices that are foreign to the

“geometrical” or “geographical” space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions” (1994, p. 93). In that, the significance of examining everyday geographies lies in the importance of closely studying the practices that take place in geographies not usually visible or those which are under examined or perceivably “powerless.” My research focuses on this particular aspect of children’s everyday geographies, wherein the practices that are foreign – of immigrant South Asian teens in a youth center, on streets, and so forth – in the everyday are examined. I seek to reveal how people live in local and global scales and offer descriptive details of the “tactics” they employ to negotiate their everyday, which is extremely important to understand as it informs and cuts across scales and geographies.

CHILDREN’S MOBILITY AND CONTROL OF THEIR PLACE

While geographers of children and youth were able to secure a place for young people in their studies, the social and physical place for them is still considerably minimal (Qvortrup, 2005). The studies that have examined the everyday lives of children reveal that the young lives are spatially confined to the home, school, or other private spaces in western discourses (Holloway & Valentine, 2000a). Drawing on Chris Jenks’ (1996) discussion of the two contrasting narratives that dominate how society and adults think of children: as “angels” and “devils,” has resulted in what Valentine (1996; 2004) suggests as a strict control and monitoring of children and young people in public places. On one hand, children are either kept away from public spaces for fear of their safety; and on the other hand, they are monitored because they may cause harm to others in the public space. Many argue that increasing confinement of young people to schools

(Adams & Van Slyck, 2004), reduction in funding for playgrounds and public spaces for recreation (Katz, 1998; 2004), and further institutionalization of children (Rasmussen, 2004; Zieher, 2001) has ensued. “Even where children’s presence in public spaces persists... they are commonly seen as illegitimate occupiers in adult environments” (Ansell, 2009, p. 193). Furthermore, adult acts of restricting children’s mobility can be understood as a form of adult “spatial hegemony” in public spaces (Qvortrup, 1994), disguised as an act of protection of children as though considering what is in “the best interest of children” (Valentine, 2004, p. 96).

Some geographers have argued that children’s mobility restrictions are based also on age and range of distance they are allowed to travel from home (Valentine, 2005). For instance, in Roger Hart’s (1979) study, he suggests that children in a northeastern city of the United States are able to travel significantly further away from their home at age 10 than they were allowed to when they were younger. He also points out that boys are allowed more freedom in mobility than girls, as parents are concerned much more about safety when it comes to girls (see also Valentine, 2004). However, little attention has been paid to differences based on how race and ethnicity inform experiences of mobility restrictions. In my study I find that because of the post 9/11 context of hate crimes experienced by South Asians, both Desi boys and girls face restrictions from their parents on travelling alone in the city or on going too far from home alone and hang around in the streets. In the forthcoming chapters I pay more attention to the restrictions teens reported than the gendered differences.

THIRD SPACES

The moralizing discourses on “safe space” and the anxieties over keeping children and youth off the city streets (Adams & Van Slick, 2004; Cahill, 1990; Valentine, 1996) has resulted in situating children into indoor recreation, and adult-monitored built environments of learning (McLaughlin, 1993; Wilson & White, 2003; Zeiher, 2001; 2003). Scholars studying youth centers discuss how youth recreation centers and community based organizations are safe alternatives to life on the streets for inner city and urban youth that enables new identity development and prospects for future growth (McLaughlin et al., 2001). Those who study youth centers from an urban education perspective argue that these organizations are beneficial in providing the support that schools lack and are settings of learning and engagement that schools ought to work with (Davis & Farbman, 2002; Irby et al., 2003; Noam et al., 2002). Furthermore, ethnic youth centers, which often function as intermediaries between immigrant parents and their children, provide youth with social capital “that facilitates the capacity of these [immigrant] youth to succeed in the dominant culture” (Wong, 2008, p. 181).

Evidence from these above studies records the benefits urban native and immigrant kids receive from the youth center services and programs. As these spaces serve alternative support not found at the home and the school, these youth centers have been identified as “third institutions” on the institutional triangle of society (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 156-57). According to Rasmussen (2004) the home, school, and recreation centers, each represent a corner of a triangle, wherein young people move along strict lines to each corner in a day and other places are marked off. Implied in this discussion of youth centers is the notion that young people’s lives exist in separate distinct islands, where there may be some interaction between these three, but none beyond these.

Sociologist Helga Zeiher (2001) calls this physical separation of children's spaces as a form of "islanding of children and childhood," from other avenues of social and adult life. In her later work, she writes, "children's individual life spaces can be seen as characterized by insularisation" (emphasis author's 2003, p. 67). That is, children are living in insulated life spaces – of schools, homes, and youth centers.

Despite these forms of institutionalizations and "spatial separateness" of childhood (Smith & Barker, 2000), children's geographers have argued how youth are able to negotiate the boundaries between different institutions and spaces of everyday geographies. Drawing from this, youth centers can be understood as "third spaces" of negotiations. Third spaces are not only physical spaces such as that of youth centers, but also neighborhoods (Tomanovic & Petrovic, 2010; Van der Burgt, 2008), in-between sites such as street corners or public squares (Beazley, 2008; Travalou et al., 2008) and public shopping malls (Matthews et al., 2000a; Muga & Erkip, 2009). Here, third spaces are considered transformative, not as sites that help "succeed in the dominant culture," like youth center educational studies identify; rather, they are productive sites for contestation and negotiation of new identities as well as of space itself where new boundaries are constructed not by adults but by young people themselves. Just as third spaces are considered "in-between" spaces, the youth discussed in these studies about third spaces too are, "set between the freedom and autonomy of adulthood and constraints and dependency of infancy, neither adult nor child, 'angel nor devil,' situated in imagined communities (located in thirdspace)" (Matthews, Limb, & Taylor, 2000b, p. 65). In both cases – of adolescence and third spaces – Matthews et al. (2000a), discuss these liminal sites as "dynamic zone[s] of tension and discontinuity where the newness of hybrid

identities can be articulated” (p. 282).

This conceptualization of third space likens to the explanation of “third space” in context of post-colonial identities explained by Homi Bhabha. Bhabha conceives of third space as a symbolic space where new identities – termed hybrid – take shape that enable the possibilities of contesting boundaries and restrictions. Bhabha (1994) writes, “The importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerge, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom” (p. 211). While it is useful to think of “third space” and “hybridity” as enabling “other positions to emerge,” or as an inclusive space for youth in adult dominated spaces, the notion that this space can also displace the histories that constitute the very beings of disadvantaged groups (by race, or class, or gender) in societies becomes problematic in Bhabha’s celebratory account of “third space.” Bhabha remains intangible in his description of the possibility of “new political initiatives” and “new structures of authority” as well as remains ambiguous as to how histories are displaced for this important project of hybridity. However, it highlights the political act of hybridity that gives third space its’ meaning. To further understand the connections between youth geographies and politics I turn to the next section.

POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES

What do political geographies mean? What do political geographies of children and young people look like? What does a child’s political act look like? These are some

immediate questions that arise when thinking about connections between everyday geographies and emergence of new putative sites that are transformative. These questions are not completely answerable by the field of children's geographies, but are being addressed by several geographers now. In many ways this is because political geographies of young people and children is still "establishing, expanding and elucidating its theoretical, conceptual and empirical field" (Skelton, 2013, p. 124). That is, very much like childhood studies and the field of children's geographies, the sub-field of children's political geographies is in a state of construction. For the intent of my research, however, I map recent literature in this new field that has existed for only a decade (Skelton, 2013), wherein the starting point has been considered by many as being the guest editorial by Chris Philo and Fiona Smith in 2003 in *Space and Polity* (Robeson et al., 2013), which examines the "political geographies of children and young people." In this editorial Philo and Smith debate the distinctions between micro-level "politics" and the macro-level "Politics" that affect and inform children's everyday lives. They warn the readers of the dangers of collapsing the personal with the Political, and urge scholars to examine both the scales of p/Politics in their unique ways. Such an approach may be somewhat too limiting in research on political geographies of young people wherein the intersection of the political with the Political is unavoidable in a globalizing world context where global informs the local and vice versa.

A decade later, Krisi Paulina Kallio and Jouni Halki (2013), offer a more tangible explanation of the linkages between geography and politics. They write, "Spatially it means that the political has the potential to actualise practically anywhere and that the power relations generating and upholding political struggles may work through various

types of channels and connections” (p. 8). In suggesting that politics is locatable “anywhere” Kallio and Halki mitigate the binary of Political/ political and the global/ local, purporting the political in dynamics of power relations, networks, and the everyday. In many ways, this notion resembles what Nicola Ansell (2009) proposes for the future of children’s geography: an approach that consists of networked imaginings – or a “flat ontology” – wherein flows, connections, and circulations give light to what is political. While examining these flows reveals what is political, they do not highlight who can be political. In fact, these circulations may obscure what “doing” politics (Bosco, 2010) or “being political” (Isin, 2002) for young people looks like. At the outset, it remains clear that to “do” politics requires a subject to enact the verb. Since “childhood is not seen as a political stage of life” (Kallio & Hakli, 2013), the very notion of children’s political geographies has remained murky. Scholars from children’s geography and related disciplines of childhood studies are dismantling the idea that children are not political agents (Barker, 2003; Cockburn, 1998; O’Toole, 2003; Percy-Smith, 2010), just as sociologists argued for their social agency. There are manifold representations of children’s political agency, traversing different levels and scales of political action, or participation, or citizenship. One might argue that the focus of governments’, children’s organizations, and researcher’s on children’s political voice “are in part inspired by Article 12 of the CRC [Convention on the Rights of the Child], which affirms children’s right to ‘express [one’s] views freely’ and ‘be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceeding affecting the child’” (Wall & Dar, 2011, p. 2). The various ways in which children are “doing politics” includes participation in several committees, councils, and platforms where children’s opinions about policies and politics

can be heard and included. For instance, children's participation in parliamentary hearings and public debates has now been made possible in South Africa (Jamieson & Mukoma, 2010). The Israeli Knesset also invites young people to participate in its child-related committees (Ben-Arieh & Boyer, 2005, p. 50). Furthermore, at present, at least thirty countries have some kind of non-adult parliament structure, whether nationally or in cities, villages, or schools (Cabannes, 2005; Conrad, 2009; Austin, 2010; Children's United Parliament of the World, 2009; McCrummen, 2007; Williams, 2004, 21-22; Mutseyekwa, 2009; Sarkar & Mendoxa, 2005; Sridhar, 2004; Neighborhood Community Network, 2010). Fewer still discuss children's direct political representation through right to vote (Hart & Atkins, 2011; Kratza, 2009; Wall & Dar, 2011) that fully accounts for children's direct citizenship (Franklin, 1986). It may be futile to argue here that the right to vote fully accounts for children's political participation, as it requires a different discussion. However, examining children's political geographies in the current political context, requires perhaps, what Skelton (2013) suggests, the need for scholars to pay attention to the diverse "ways and means, their [children's] strategies and tactics" of being political in their own way (p. 126).

An interesting argument made by Fernando Bosco (2010) supports this idea of young people's politics as determined by their networks, tactics, and by "doing." Bosco too argues that political geography can be mapped based on "what children do" rather than "who they are." Such a view includes young children who "often connect their families to politics at the community, regional and even national scales" (p. 382). In studying children of Latin American families along the US-Mexico border, Bosco argues that there is a connection between children's performative and embodied practices and

political activism that goes beyond formal participation in councils or parliaments, and yet is a political act.

That is, embodied and performative acts can represent children's politics, wherein the agent is re-working power relations to remake their worlds. Sarah Elwood and Katharyne Mitchell (2012) take this performative political agency of young people a step further and argue that children and young people's embodied practices as well as "representational and dialogic practices remain a critical element of their politics in everyday life" (p. 1). In my study too, I examine the various representational political geographies of young people – embedded in performative and embodied practices – that link young people to their communities and recognizes them as political agents.

While extremely useful in advancing how children of all ages, perhaps, can "do" politics "everywhere" through performative practices, Bosco's work does little to account for the ways in which children's socio-political context significantly plays a role in their geographies. Equally important, hence, in examining children's geographies is also the need to account for the specific context in which youth are growing up. Returning to Kallio and Halki (2013) I want to draw attention to their caution in naming all acts as political and suggest that "there is notable variation to their [young people's] politics vis-à-vis the situation" (p. 10). That is to say, "depending on where and how children and young people are situated, they [children] face different opportunities and hindrances to their political action" (p. 10). Such an explanation to some degree takes into account the fact that politics will have different meaning for different children, and that not all young people will share the same political agendas either. For instance, children facing racism express a desire for politics that counters racism, whereas white children do not

(O'Tooley, 2003, p. 78). In the same sense, the opportunities to express and conduct political action too may be varied for different children. Literature on children's political geographies has yet to fully account for these differences based on contexts, and socio-cultural factors that inform the very daily lives of young people across scales. Hence, my research fills this very significant gap on place, politics, race, and young people geographies.

GLOBALIZATION, GLOCALIZATION, AND TRANSNATIONALISM

While this dissertation draws heavily on the conceptualizations of the field of children's geography, it is also influenced by theories of globalization and transnationalism, that I critically address in this section as I study the everyday and political geographies of subjects who have been primarily affected by the global movements of migration. It is imperative to show how this study then draws on research in this area.

It has now been widely discussed that globalization theories, more generally, offer an explanation for how labor, finance, people, and cultures are able to transcend from one national context to another. Human migration, as Peter Stearns (2012) suggests, is one of the primary forms of globalization that situates this process not as a phenomenon of only recent times or a particular "age of migration," rather one that has existed in different and varying forms – through colonization, imperialism, labor migration – across generations and eras. Throughout these differing times periods, this process of globalization has also affected children. But only more recently, literature on migration details how even young children are affected by it and likewise how they inform migration. That is, children are

sometimes willing participants and sometimes not (Boehm et al., 2011). Nonetheless, cases of children's agency in migration is increasingly examined (Knörr, 2005) which makes distinct the ways in which migration scholars study young people's mobility from the children's geographers as discussed above. Both of these disciplinary approaches to children's mobility – as they pay attention to local and global dynamics somewhat similarly and differently – need to be documented in this study on immigrant children's everyday geographies in New York City.

Natalie Kaufman et al (2002), in the introduction to the volume, Globalization and Children, write, “Globalization is a process that opens nation states to many influences that originate beyond their borders. These changes are likely to decrease the primacy of national, economic, political, and social institutions, thereby affecting the everyday context in which children grow up and interact with the rest of society” (p. 4). In other words, globalization complicates the ways in which social institutions and local places offer meaning for children. The broader processes of what lies beyond the nation, hence, destabilize children's attachment to a particular place and complicate their everyday geographies. These global changes and processes likely inform children growing up participating in recreation institutions in particular ways, that not only transform the meaning of insular geographies of childhood, but also alter the very experiences of these place for immigrant young people.

Although some theorists of globalization would argue that the nation-state or the national, economic system, and their effects on local place are being weakened through forces of globalization, others such as Arjun Appadurai (2001) describe the “dark side” of globalization. This “dark side” accounts for power dynamics of nations in these

seemingly reciprocal global exchanges under globalization (for affects on childhood, see: Stephens, 1995). Rather than suggesting a celebration of global cultures or values, as a result of globalization, the “dark side” of globalization reflects on how imperial powers function beyond their own nation states. Critics, hence, advocate for “globalization from below” theories that offer a “challenge of an optical view of globalization,” and can result in a positive theory of globalization (Appadurai, 2001, p. 3).

Recognizing globalization as a structural force, contemporary scholars of anthropology of childhood argue for a dynamic between the global and the local levels (Kennelly et al., 2009; McLeod, 2009). Jacqueline Kennelly et al (2009) write, “Youth are not able to manipulate the effects of globalization at will, freely reconfiguring the global to serve the needs of their own local social spheres. Rather, youth must negotiate their lives through the intertwined dimensions of the global and the local in creating their new twenty-first century social spaces” (p. 261). Global forces influence youth’s local and everyday spaces, but the interactions of the local and global level create dynamics of entanglement or even tensions in young people’s life that they must then negotiate in their daily spheres.

One way to better conceptualize this “intertangled dimension” between local and global spheres has been through theories of glocalization, understood as a consequence of globalization. In other words, “glocalization is the dynamic and interaction of the global with the local in ways that global reconfigures the local and the local is able to reconstitute the global through the local cultures” (Smith, 2007), valuing the power of the local. It would, however, be prudent to assume that local place can shape and inform global forces. As Zygmunt Bauman (1998) writes, glocalization is best conceptualized of

as a restratification of society based on the mobility of some whereas a place-bound existence of others. For Baumann, glocalization and globalization are hardly any different. Whereas, globalization simultaneously valorizes and diminishes cultures at the local levels, also ensuring power in the hands of few, glocalization enables the “reallocation of poverty and stigma” with no residual responsibility applicable anywhere besides the local level (p. 37). To move beyond a skewed perception of global cultures the “intertangled” dimension with local cultures that young people too negotiate, albeit at times with difficulties, require further examination. This necessitates a move beyond the conceptualizations of “global” or “glocal” spheres in studying local places used and negotiated by young people. It calls into focus the need to examine support networks or processes that aid in connectivity for young people and helps them mediate the forces of “global” or “glocal” sphere.

As such, this can be understood through the framework of transnationalism and transnational migration networks. These transnational processes can be understood as a phenomenon of globalization where mobility features as a central tenant of the global scale, and is a process arisen to address the very complexities of globalization. Movement, belonging, and exchange of things, ideas, and people extend beyond one national context, accompanied by “de-territorialization” and networks that span myriad (at least two) social spaces (Appadurai, 1996; Featherstone, 1990; Hannerz, 1996; Castells, 2000). Though transnationalism figures as an inherent part of globalization, it reflects networks that connect varied levels of interactions and are manifest in local levels. This almost seems akin to Nicola Ansell’s emphasis on “flat ontology” that bridges global and local scales of children’s geographies. However, transnationalism, unlike concept of “flat

ontology,” has been useful for theorizations with regards to ethnic groups and immigrant communities (Boehm et al, 2011; Grewal, 2005; Maira, 2002; Ong, 1999), whose settlement or re-settlement has been studied as an irreversible process (Van Hear, 1998). Framework of transnationalism also offers, what theories of globalization elide, avenues to study sense of belonging and subjectivities of people, especially in the case of youth (Boehm et al., 2011; Hébert, 2005; Levitt & Waters, 2006; White et al., 2011), wherein, emphasis is placed to a large extent on understanding “re-territorialization” of identities (Lavie & Swedenburg, 1996). Nevertheless, imperative in this theorization is the concept that any strong “attachment to place often coexist[s] within a global network of relations” (Maira, 2002, p. 22) Hence, transnationalism must be understandable through ideas of connecting in place as a part of the global processes.

The metaphors associated with this concept, of “transnational connectivity” (Grewal, 2005), and of circulation and flow (Tsing, 2000), reflect on both the global and the local, simultaneously. Scholars writing about these metaphors and theories do not suggest any transcendence of place or power politics through “flows” and “connectivity,” nevertheless, they do engage with ideas of cultural and political acts of “place-making” (Tsing, 2000, p. 338). It is to say, transnational networks can function without migration or border crossing that are implied in globalization. But in fact, only create circulating nexus of exchange of symbolic practices of hybrid music, or art, or any embodied practices of transnationality (Gilroy, 1991, 1993; Hall, 1989, 1990; Nayak, 2003) in particular places informed by institutional infrastructures.

The cultural and political acts of place-making informed by transnational theories make it possible to understand South Asian children’s experiences of growing up in

America in ways that open dialogue for race politics as well. By taking into account the connectivities, flows, and networks that lie beyond, or oftentimes because of, immediate places, the racial and political geographies of children and the youth center spaces they occupy can be critically examined.

IMMIGRATION, ETHNICITY, AND YOUTH CULTURE

Another body of literature that informs this research topic is of ethnicity, immigration, and youth cultural studies. Such literature has been limitedly applied to examine local places of immigrant and ethnic children, and the processes of racialization found in such places that inform their lives. For this dissertation, such a framework proves productive as it brings together key elements of this project: race and ethnic politics with the study of youth cultures and youth geographies.

South Asian youth and their cultures, like many ethnic and immigrant populations of the diaspora, have predominantly been studied through the sociological or psychological discourses of “culture clash” or assimilation (see criticisms: Durham, 1999; Handa, 2003; Maira, 2002; Shankar, 2008). To counter this prevalent discourse, in the past two decades, some scholars have examined the dynamics of how South Asian teenagers develop “youth culture, with its own music, social spaces, clothes and a strong sense of national pride in being diasporic South Asian” (Rajiva, 2009, p. 78). That is, youth produce and perform unique cultural practices in the diaspora (Hall 1989), often understood as “new ethnicities” or “hybrid” ethnicities.⁶ Sunaina Maira (2002) finds such youth cultural practices, in particular transnational cultural practices, in part as a

⁶ A deeper discussion and analysis of “culture clash” and “hybrid” youth culture can be found in Chapter Five.

phenomenon of affiliation with an ethnic group. In her study, Maira argues that second generation South Asian immigrant youth groups in New York City colleges and dance clubs, produce a hybrid sense of “cool” culture that are “mixed with strains of collective nostalgia, and ...[they] perform a deep ambivalence toward ethnicity and nationality” (p. 16). Culture for these youth is not necessarily about “clash” or “assimilation,” rather, it is most intimately about ambivalence and performance in everyday life, like in dance clubs and college groups. Others, have discussed South Asian teenage ethnic groups in schools and homes (Shankar, 2008), and their cultural practices as a result of influence from transnational processes like Bollywood in America. In each study, ethnic youth cultural performances are examined, and informed by theories of place and transnationalism.

While youth cultural studies have only in the past two decades begun to capture the range of racial and ethnic orientations that youth may display in their cultural practices, they are not uncommon in scholarship in anthropology, sociology, and migration studies. In fact, these disciplines provide productive concepts for understanding how immigrant teenagers too can organize themselves through frameworks of ethnicity today. Anthropological notions of ethnic group formations such as “situational ethnicity” help explain how ethnic groups get formed based on particular political situations or social and economic contexts available to individuals in country of migration (Okamura, 1980; Paden, 1970). A slightly different and more recent sociological concept of “strategic ethnicity” suggests people organize into ethnic groups through strategic choice (Castles & Miller, 2003). Historically, such strategic aligning of oneself with a particular group identity offered a way to navigate class disparities, and make gains from larger pools of available resources, not just to celebrate diversity and cultural practices that may

be seemingly common to the particular ethnic or immigrant groups.

However, more pertinent to this study in the particular socio-political context of 9/11 is the concept of “reactive ethnicity,” originally discussed by Nathan Glazer, and later developed further by Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut (1996). They explain why some groups of immigrants choose to organize as ethnic groups in new countries of migration as a reaction to developments in their new country. While not so strategic, reactive ethnicity is developed in instances of discrimination immigrants experience on arrival or as they continue to live in their host country.

These latter concepts of “strategic ethnicity” and “reactive ethnicity” can explain to some extent why young people in contemporary era hang out in “brown spaces,” where they can deploy their “authentic” and heritage cultural identities, as well as produce new hybrid cultures, not without tensions and difficulties – both as a strategic choice that helps in producing their unique cultural practices as well as a form of finding belonging in reaction to post 9/11 discriminations they face (Maira, 2004). This is not to offer any illusions that “new ethnicities” are synonymous with racial harmony or lack struggle or pain, but to contextualize why ethnic groups may be productive for immigrant youth.

Similar to discussions on “reactive ethnicity” scholars have also discussed that ethnic group formation are a product of historically continuous racial discriminations and marginalizations (Sharma, 2010). These historical connections explain why and how group racialization processes take form today. Amita Handa (2003) writes, “... the positioning of South Asians vis-à-vis a dominant white/anglo population continues to be accomplished by drawing boundaries around notions of tradition, culture and women

related to those that operated in colonial India” (p. 55); conferring the choice of strategic ethnicity or notion of culture to historically grounded post-colonial theories (Chatterjee, 1997). Ethnic grouping and maintenance then, are associated not just with the culture produced in the “new” nation, but in fact, informed by the racialized history of the nation; wherein, racialization of people in the contemporary period relates with historically constructed ideas of that racial group. As some scholars of youth have recently argued, the notion of “racialization remains a central feature in their [South Asian teenagers’] lives: despite the changing status of diasporic culture” (Rajiva, 2009, p. 79).

Besides, some other scholars of ethnic youth cultures (Bucholtz, 2002) argue that teenage racialization in the diaspora in contemporary research indicates a move beyond any simplistic understanding of “youth resistance” as offered within classical studies (see eg: Clarke et al., 1975; Cohen, 1997; Corrigan & Frith, 1975; Hebdidge, 1979). What earlier formulations of youth cultures obscured, particularly in relation to ethnic cultures and ethnic group formations, more recent ethnographic and anthropological works make obvious; i.e., that race, like “youth” and “nation” arise most fully and tangibly in practice, in the “doing” of ethnicity and the “doing” everyday living. However, still few research studies make overt connections between the places and sites that encourage and enhance these racializations, “resistances” or “race consciousness” amongst ethnic diasporic teenage groups (for race and multi-cultural perspectives, see: Amit-Talai, 1995).

One problem driving the research to be presented below rests on questioning if race consciousness and racialization caused by global processes brings children and adults together in forming political and ethnic groups, then how do we understand third spaces like youth centers as islanding (or not) young people from their social realities?

Can ethnically oriented youth centers serve as productive sites for inter-generational cultures (Shankar, 2008) and for creating politicized landscapes for young people? Is protection possible or useful for the youth? If it is not possible, then what reactions might one encounter when youth's perspectives and interpretations are taken as the bases, the entrée points, into these larger questions and issues? In the next chapter I introduce the methods I employ to conduct the research that answers some of the questions raised here and in the Introduction. It is within the framework of these theories and fields of study – children's geography, globalization and migration, and ethnicity and youth cultures – described in this chapter that I conceptualize my research.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I discuss the research design of my study – a multi-sited ethnography –including the tools of data collection, reasons for selecting my research sites, a description of the research participants of the study, length of the study, and highlight how I conduct my analysis. In the second part of the chapter I discuss the importance of reflexive ethnography, drawing on how I navigate the multiple roles of volunteer, staff program facilitator, and researcher, which are predicated upon my race, age, gender, and nationality. I describe the significance of self-critical and conscious research with young people, wherein adopting the role of an equal, rather than a “least-adult” role in research with young people is more productive for research that values young people as social actors. I draw on various instances from my fieldnotes to discuss my positionality and how I consistently navigated the insider-outsider role to Desi teens’ peer culture. Finally, I question childhood studies ethnographers’ responsibility towards informing praxis as well as conducting critical child research. While I do not address this issue entirely, I will return to it in the conclusion of the dissertation.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this research, I employ one main methodology: a multi-sited research ethnography, which is supplemented with a discourse analysis (I describe later in this chapter). George Marcus (1998) writes about the methodological and conceptual usefulness of a “multi-sited ethnography” for particular research projects. He suggests

that studies examining local cultures in context of the new world systems, of globalization and transnationalism, easily lend themselves to multi-sited research ethnography, as multiple sites interact at the local level where the ethnography takes place.

Multi-sited research also includes physically following people to more than one research site to study a particular idea and people's experiences of it. The technique is described as, "literally following connections, and putative relationships" (Marcus, 1995) or following people or the phenomena or idea of study (Falzon, 2005; Holmes & Marcus, 2004, 2005). As ethnography is predicated upon attention to the everyday, and intimate knowledge of face-to-face communities and groups (Geertz, 1973; Walcott, 1999), multi-sited ethnography becomes a way to get at these particular set of subjects through intimate and everyday and face-to-face connections, albeit while taking account of broader global phenomenon of transnationalism as well as the physical sites that influence children in everyday life. Since I was interested in studying the very ways in which fixed geographically bound sites for youth, such as ethnic centers, create mobile and political subjects, and how youth are influenced by transnational and global processes manifest in their everyday life of growing up in recreation centers, I found that a multi-sited research ethnography best suited my problem and question.

RESEARCH SITE SELECTION

My primary research site is an ethnic youth center run by a South Asian youth organization, I call, Youth Organization for South Asian Immigrants (YOSAI), located in Queens, New York. It is located near a subway stop, which the founding director

suggested makes it an easily accessible location for city youth who commute by subways daily. I chose this center for my research study for several reasons. First, this is a center primarily set up for South Asian teenagers growing up in the contemporary period in an urban city. Due to its name, it particularly attracts children with roots in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and also those from Guyana or Trinidad who can trace their heritage to the South Asian subcontinent. The neighborhood where this center is located has been recently recognized as a growing hub of the South Asian population (Lesser et al., 2011). Also adjacent to this neighborhood is Jackson Heights, popularly referred to as “Little India, ” or “South Asian Neighborhood” (Khandelwal, 1995; 2002), packed with South Asian clothing, jewelry, music, groceries and food stores, and restaurant chains that originate from different cities of India, along with the Eagle theatre that screens only Bollywood films.⁷ Because of these diversities, New York city is considered a “global city” linked at the local level with the global and globalizing processes (Sassen, 2001), and identified as a growing hub for immigrants and their children with at least 40% living in low income families (Migration Policy Institute, 2012), if they are counted in the census at all. The YOSAI center located in this “global city” context becomes a significant site to study, as it coalesces the complexities of the city that simultaneously structures the youth centers as well as the lives of young people who inhabit it. Significantly enough, the city also recognizes the importance of my primary research site. YOSAI, established since 1996, has been listed by the City Lore Project as a significant cultural place of New York in their Census of “Places that Matter,” which calls into

⁷ The Eagle Theatre was recently shut down (in 2009) due to a strike of theatres showcasing Bollywood movies in India, resulting in the lack of new releases for the diaspora audience as well, and for this theatre in Queens, New York. It is being re-built as South Asian grocery supermarket. (Semple, 2009; Place that Matters, 2012).

examination the role the Center plays in children's lives in urban America (Places That Matter, 2012).

Secondly, as per the mission of the organization, YOSAI center generates various opportunities for children and also creates "avenues for youth to explore race, gender, class, and ethnic identity," which are central frameworks of examining the political geographies of young people's places in this study. The Center generates these avenues through their programs offered here, which include a range of leadership, youth activism, Bollywood dance, community building, sports, and educational classes. These programs take place at the center location but also oftentimes take children to locations outside of the center as well -- cities and other public and private place. I will examine the various programs and the mission of the Center in Chapter Three.

I began my ethnography at YOSAI in January 2010 as part of a methods paper for my doctoral coursework. I attended the Center once a week from January to May 2010 and conducted participant observation during the teenagers' volleyball session in the gym. This routine attendance made it evident that this site would be fruitful for my larger dissertation project. Hence, I kept returning to the Center, frequenting it as a volunteer for summer workshops in 2010 (June through August), and then visited during various events hosted by the center such as a the "end of year celebrations," or talent show competitions, or townhall meetings that I was invited to by the staff and youth the following years. I continued my interactions through 2011 as well, and assisted in programs in Spring 2011, wherein I accompanied two youth for an annual Desi summit in DC. I also built close rapport with some of these teens and their families as I was invited to their birthday celebrations and family gatherings at their homes and developed

friendships with the staff members who invited me to their homes, thereby extending my ethnographic research into secondary and third spaces. I returned to the Center to conduct daily multi-sited ethnography in summer 2012, and concluded my fieldwork in fall 2012.

The secondary sites for this research are places that emerge as a result of my fieldwork at YOSAI between 2010 and 2012. These include workshops hosted at partner organizations across New York, and other sites in neighboring cities, such as DC. Secondary sites are formal and informal places where teens from YOSAI traverse as a result of their participation in programs offered through YOSAI. Among the formal sites that teens visit outside of YOSAI are workshops and annual summits, wherein teens attend as participants or as speakers as I mentioned above.

One such workshop that youth from YOSAI attend is the Solidarity Summer (SS) workshop, held in DC every summer. The Solidarity Summer is run by a group of South Asian volunteers as a 4 day long summer workshop. Issues ranging from social justice, and connecting with “Desi roots,” to informative sessions about South Asian history of resistance and oppression, as well as issues of race and gender, along with discussions of the post 9/11 America, are all part of the workshop sessions. Each year youth from YOSAI attend this workshop open to all South Asian teenagers in America. They are selected on the basis of their prior interest in organizing and politics and on the basis of their application submitted to SS. Six teenagers from YOSAI attended the DC workshop in summer 2012. I accompanied the teens for the same.

Another secondary site is the location of the annual summit hosted by Saathi, a national non-partisan, non-governmental organization for South Asians in America. In 2011 Saathi’s annual summit was held in Washington, DC, in July, and focused on issues

of post 9/11 racial discrimination, and cases of bullying of South Asian and Muslim teenagers in schools. Other related topics of deliberation and social action at the summit ranged from sessions for mobilization toward an inclusive American society, to an anti-racial profiling petition that was presented at the Capitol Hill. Much of the summit focused on honoring the victims of 9/ 11 as part of the ten year anniversary. Two teenagers from YOSAI participated at this event in 2011, where I accompanied them, and stayed with them through the entire summit in my dual role as a researcher and chaperon.

Children growing up participating in the YOSAI center also collaborate on various workshops with neighboring partner urban youth centers and organizations like, Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), Sikh Coalition, Chhaya, Rajkumari Cultural Center. YOSAI center partnerships usually develop with regionally or nationally based organizations for children and youth more generally, or for Desis and Asian Americans more specifically. Such workshop events take place either at the YOSAI center in Queens or in auditoriums in Bronx, Manhattan, or the streets of New York City or at other times in some other cities. These workshops or campaigns vary in their focus. I attended most of these workshops and sessions during my fieldwork years and analyze these events in the forthcoming chapters.

Other secondary sites for this study include informal and in-between places where teens that attend YOSAI spend their time, such as subways, street corners where teens participated in local fairs organized by local South Asian non-profit organizations for dance and music and advocacy, various locations across the city where they traversed with the friends they make at YOSAI, and online spaces such as Facebook. While Facebook was not part of the plan of the ethnography, teenagers added me as a friend,

resulting in ethnographic research in this informal space as well.

Both the primary and secondary research sites are referred to as “third spaces” throughout this dissertation for two reasons. Firstly, research on young people often focused either on their lives in home or family life or their experiences at schools. Barring these two spaces where teens spend most of their time, children’s geography scholars find that there are new “third” or “fourth spaces” that young people spend much of their time at (Matthews, Limb & Taylor, 2000b; Muga & Erkip, 2009). As described in more detail in the previous chapter, all informal spaces between home and school, where young people spend their time are referred to as third spaces. Furthermore, as Homi Bhabha’s (1994) theory on third spaces suggests, these sites are productive spaces. I argue in my research that these third spaces enable negotiation, and mediation of daily realities, making it possible for third spaces to be productive sites for immigrant South Asian teens to develop new caring networks, and express new ways of being Desi in a US city. The primary and secondary research sites described above, hence, constitute as third spaces for the purposes of this study.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The research participants of this study include all persons at YOSAI – teens, staff, parents, and organizers – and those who I interacted with in secondary research sites as well. However, the main research participants are the teenagers who attend YOSAI. As this research aims to examine the everyday and political geographies of teens, it foregrounds teenagers’ experiences by drawing on their narratives and voices. However, this study also recognizes that youth’s voices and experiences cannot be understood nor

analyzed in isolation from the structures and people around them. The secondary research participants include the YOSAI staff – current center director and founding director, program coordinators, youth staff – and teenagers’ parents and are also included in the research.

The teenagers who participated in this study were between the ages of 14 and 19 years, some of them immigrants from South Asia while others were born in the United States soon after their parents migrated from varying countries in South Asia and its diaspora. Most of the teens and their families in this study have migrated from Bangladesh as a result of receiving the “green card lottery” in early to mid-1990s to live and work in United States (see Chapter 3 for more details). This “lottery card” is the diversity visa for securing permanent residence and opportunities to work for those who are from nations with less than 50,000 persons living in the United States. This visa was created under the Immigration and Diversity Visa Act 1990 and the parents of teens of this study from Bangladesh applied for it and received the lottery, allowing them to enter, live, and work in the United States.

Like many immigrants, the impetus to migrate to the United States is identified by my youth research participants as being based in a desire for a “better life for their kids.” The aspirations for an American Dream success story are rife, like amongst many South Asian immigrant families. However, since the lottery card visa did not require people to secure jobs prior to their migration, many who arrived from Bangladesh did not have jobs nor did they skills to acquire permanent positions of work. The parents of the teen subjects of this study are employed in day wage work, as cab drivers, street vendors, and other short contractual labor.

All the teen participants live in Queens, and attend middle or high school in New York City. For the entire period of the ethnography I interacted with about 30-40 youth at the center, and was able to build close rapport for the research with 20 teens. All names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms. I use the narratives of the teen participants to describe and characterize their lives for this study in the next chapter, which reveals more clearly the background of these teen participants lives.

Majority of the youth in this study identify having heritage ties with Bangladesh and are Muslim. Yet, this dissertation is not just about Bangladeshi Muslim youth, rather about South Asians more broadly as: one, the sample size does not entirely represent this population but also includes Hindus from Bangladesh, Sikhs from India, and Muslims from Pakistan (see Appendix IV). And two, the post 9/11 processes of racialization that inform the teens practices of political performativity represent identities that go beyond desires for national and religious affiliation (see Chapter Five), and in fact indicate desires for a “brown” community, as I discuss in Chapter Four.

TOOLS FOR DATA COLLECTION

The research questions I discussed in my introduction require appropriate tools that can adequately help to find themes and trends for chapters for this dissertation. Whereas questions about youth networks will ideally be addressed by mapping out the teenagers’ daily lives through my multi-sited ethnography, the questions about physical geographies and ideologies of the center will be best addressed by means of material and discourse analysis. By incorporating in-depth participant observation and informal and formal interviews, photo-elicitation and diary writing, this project reveals the particular

cultural practices and meanings about racialization, ethnicity, and politicized geographies of youth. Together, these tools offer a holistic research design that address my questions about the meanings produced by, and within, ethnic youth centers, seeking input from multiple actors associated with these places, in contemporary urban America.

MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY

Since “ethnography is a generic term for a set of research tools which places emphasis on uncovering participants’ understanding of their social and symbolic world” and documenting life stories (Edmond, 2005, p.124; see also Plummer, 2001) there are multiple tools in the technique of multi-sited ethnography that help obtain the data. For this research I adopt participant observation, wherein I immerse myself in the various places and spaces teens traverse via the YOSAI center, and document these young people’s lives, while being reflexive of my role and power as twice removed adult and researcher (Holt, 2004; Leonard, 2007). As well, I planned to conduct photo-elicitation interviews and diary writing with about 20 youth during the summer.

My process of multi-sited ethnography began initially as a “grounded theory” project (Glazer & Strauss, 2009; Charmaz, 2006), in January 2010. I have already conducted fieldwork at length over the summer of 2010 and 2011 and intermittently with weekly visits in 2010 and part of 2011. I collected detailed notes and familiarized myself with the organization staff and youth, helping built rapport and some initial reflections that shape the conceptual framework of this study and aid in conducting and completing this project. I also participated in four programs as volunteer and observer: volleyball group, food justice group, end of season celebrations, and summer workshops. I also

followed youth to two events planned by YOSAI outside of their recreation center, in DC and New York City, along with other informal settings where youth hang out, such as at malls, local eateries, and each other's homes for birthday parties. The multi-sited project also included visits to DC for the Solidarity Summer workshop described earlier and to other sites that came to my attention through my participant observations and messages directly received from the organization staff and youth. As Robert M. Emerson et al (1995) write, "Attending to the details of interaction enhances the possibilities for the researcher to see beyond fixed, static entities, to grasp the active 'doing' of social life" (p. 14). Capturing the "doing" of daily life of the center, by following the youth activities arising from within this center can result in a productive multi-sited ethnography that documents South Asian youth's experiences of their political geographies.

Another direct way of gaining access to youth's "active doing of social life" I had planned was to conduct photo-elicitation interviews and diary entries as part of the summer workshop called, Public Service, I co-organized for YOSAI's summer session in 2012. Every summer, YOSAI runs youth workshops for 8 weeks, through July and August, which resemble other programs hosted by the center during the rest of the year. The workshop or program managers during the summer, however, are not always employees on the pay roll, but adults from the South Asian community who serve as volunteers or part time employees. In the two years prior to 2012 these summer classes consisted of Bharatnatyam dance lessons at Hunter College, art workshop in Manhattan, Capoeira martial arts, food justice, Bollywood dancing, talent hunt, and college preparation classes at the center and beyond. The executive director requested that along with doing research, I should facilitate the summer workshop, Public Service, with

Aman, a staff member in 2012. Hence, I planned to incorporate the photo elicitation and diary method for data collection to be a part of the summer 2012 ethnography project for this study.

Several scholars conducting research with children have begun to include young people as participants in varying capacities in the research process. These projects range from children included directly in the research design process, or what is called “participatory action research” studies (Fine et al., 2000; Veale, 2005), or treated as paid peer interviewers (Boocock, 1981), or often times included to act as collaborative research partners or research inquirers along with adults (Nespor, 1999) or perhaps include children through their “voices” (Alderson, 2000; Holt, 2004; Jones, 2004); with each offering a unique value to the research project as necessary. For my dissertation, I aimed to include children through photo-elicitation interviews and diary writing that scholars argue help mitigate, at least to some extent, the authority of the researcher, and at most, help obtain information that is more child-driven and empowering (Blinn & Harrist, 1991; Bragg & Buckingham, 2008; Clark, 1999; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Harper, 2002; Noyes, 2003).

Photo-elicitation, in the most basic sense is the “simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview (Harper, 2002, p. 13). This method helps capture “children’s active role in the social order” (Clark, 1999, 39), and can aid in examining meanings directly along with those engaged in the social processes I seek to study. As John Collier (1967) describes it, this method is not a stand-alone research tool, but valuable when part of a larger ethnography, where photographs contribute to collecting additional amounts of data. By asking child informants in my study to take pictures

during the summer workshop of places to which they travel and then to respond to the photographs in an informal set up with me, created avenues for me to gain more information through the representations in the images and the stories and putative emotions they shared in our conversations. In this way, I could “deepen the understanding” of children’s subjectivities as well as create spaces for informal interviews and discussions (Becker, 2002, p. 10). The activity of diary writing was intended to compliment the interviews as youth could produce self-written text and narratives (see Engel, 2005), documenting their experiences of the center, programs, and questions about race.

While I was able to conduct the photo project and photo-elicitation interviews, I was unable to conduct the written diary project. Instead, the written diary project was changed into two photo story projects because of the teenagers’ lack of interest in maintaining a written diary. I decided to honor the teens’ interest and altered this tool of data collection to better meet their interests. Hence, the photo project became a two-part project. In the first part, teens in the Public Service program I was attending daily, were given cameras and attended a basic photography workshop conducted by an ex-full time staff member of YOSAI, Natasha, who is also a photographer. In this workshop, Natasha taught teens some basic photographing techniques and shots, such as how to take a long angle shot, close up, and so forth, and also taught them how to tell a story through photographs by creating a story-board. This helped the teens in creating their own photo-stories that I could use for this study. Further, I could use the photographs they created but they did not use in the photo story for the photo-elicitation exercise. The teens created two photo-stories: A Day at YOSAI and Places We Like, based on some initial guidelines

provided by me (see Appendix III). My aim for the summer workshop, and the above two approaches to collect data, was to stay close to the mission of the Center and gather data with help from children, which captures their experiences of the youth center and associated landscapes; paying attention to teenage identities in light of race and place, and mapping their networks produced through participation in urban youth centers. I had recorded the presentations of the photo-stories, and use these as well as the photo-elicitation interviews in the analysis in this dissertation.

My ethnography also included informal interviews, separate from those conducted as part of photo-elicitation project over the summer. These interviews were conversational or dialogic in style (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005, p. 223). While I coordinated specific times to meet with my research participants, these interviews were conducted in informal and formal settings, such as cafes, restaurants, on subways, in hotel rooms, and in YOSAI offices. In particular, I interviewed the teens as well as the current and first executive director of YOSAI center, staff coordinators.

My questions to the staff and executive director range from asking about their reasons for running such an ethnic youth center and political programs to their understandings about the family and children who attend the center. I also asked them about their perceptions of the importance of race, ethnicity, and leadership for young South Asian immigrants in urban America. Questions for the youth ranged from why they attend the center and the partner programs to questions about their understandings of race and cultural heritage and connections between the center, their homes, and their “homeland.” I also asked about how youth think the center influenced their lives, and how they envision maintaining connections to the center in the future, if at all, and in

what capacities. I tape recorded four interviews with staff members and fifteen interviews with youth attending programs at YOSAI in 2012. I later transcribed and coded them for themes for analysis.

The data collected from the ethnography is documented in field notes, wherein, writing field note descriptions is “not so much a matter of passively copying down ‘facts’ about ‘what happened.’ Rather, such writing involves active processes of interpretation and sense-making” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 8). And hence, the ethnographic data collected in field notes is not just some collection of transcripts in itself but also serve as initial documents of analysis for this dissertation.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Since my first set of research questions require an examination of the ideologies and the mission statements of the center and partner organizations, including the details of the programs that are offered at YOSAI, the discourse surrounding the management of youth centers, and the kinds of messages inherent in the programs, I conduct a discourse analysis of several documents. For this project, discourse analysis is adopted to mean “visual texts,” “physical texts” and more obviously as that which is “usually confined to speech and writing, and it always eventually focuses on the *writing*, whether that is interviews which are transcribed and then analysed or newspaper articles which are already neatly set onto in written form” (Parker, 1999, p. 1). This definition enables me to study various forms of “texts” and “documents” produced by the center and the partner organizations for the programs for children. These documents mainly include website material, posters of various programs reproduced on the organization website, on their

Facebook page, and also posted at the physical site on pin up boards at the center itself. Other documents include newspaper articles about the organization, and published interviews and videos with the staff and students. These public documents are published in local NY papers, *Queens 7*, *NY Daily News*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and newspapers for South Asians in the diaspora, *India Abroad*. As well, the articles published about YOSAI in the *New York Department of Youth and Child Development* (a major funding body for YOSAI), and *The New York Foundation*. The remaining documents are recorded at the center, or posted on Facebook, which I obtained permission for and access to for my research analysis.

ANALYSIS

To conduct a thorough analysis of the collection of field notes, transcribed interviews, posters, pictures, and newspaper articles for my dissertation process, I use Atlas.ti as a tool to organize data and use for analysis. Primarily, Atlas.ti helps categorize data and enables a process of coding that will organize material into themes, which become useful for chapter structure and writing. Atlas.ti is described as the qualitative data analysis (QDA) system, which not only works with text, but also “with any data you want. Audio, video, image, and geo-data.” Atlas.ti also helps “break down data into codes and build up conceptual frameworks” (Atlas.ti website, 2012). Considering the breadth of my study, I have a lot of field notes, text and images that were orderly organized and coded according to my conceptual framework, the result of which is visible in the forthcoming chapters. I received training in how to use this software that assisted speedy coding and enabled analysis.

POWER AND POSITIONALITY: CONDUCTING REFLEXIVE RESEARCH

Many studies of ethnography and qualitative research have by now highlighted the unequal balance of power in any research between the researcher and the researched. Despite efforts towards minimizing this power imbalance, such as addressing research subjects as research participants, it is ultimately the researcher who shapes the knowledge production, which indicates how positions of privilege – affiliation with a university, a higher education degree, middle-class status – allow the researcher to produce knowledge based on the research subject or participants input about their lived realities. Nonetheless, many feminist scholars and others have argued how reflexivity offers ways in which to balance the power relationship between the researcher and the researched (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991; Rose, 1997). Kim England (1994), a feminist geographer argues, “reflexivity is a self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as a researcher. Indeed reflexivity is critical to conduct fieldwork; it induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about research questions” (emphasis author’s, p. 82). Furthermore, reflexivity also positions the researcher to dismiss the idea of a researcher as an impersonal machine; making knowledge produced itself more holistic. My aim in this study has been to be reflexive during fieldwork as well as during the analysis of the findings. My above described research design too, hence, has been constructed and followed out in ways that are reflexive, wherein as many feminist scholars do, I try to adopt the role of the supplicant in the research process (England, 1994, p. 82; Holt, 1994). I will discuss this further in this chapter. However, noting and situating oneself as the supplicant throughout

fieldwork is not the only work of reflexivity. Rather, as Clare Madge (1993) argues, reflexivity is also about the multiple levels of positionality one holds. That is, reflecting on the position of multiple selves – in terms of race, gender, social and economic status – that influence data collected and knowledge produced. For research with child subjects, the consideration of age must also be taken into account in reflecting on one's positionality (Leonard, 2007; Raby, 2007). Hence, the purpose of this section and the rest of this chapter is to discuss the researchers multiple positionalities in the field, and the challenges these bring, as well as the resultant effect on knowledge created. Because ultimately, the purpose of this research is to situate the knowledge in a specific context, and as Donna Haraway (1991) suggests, that the very act of “positioning is... the key practice [of] grounding knowledge” (p. 193). In other words, reflexivity about the various positions a researcher holds offers grounded and subjective knowledge, making it reliable research. It also suggests an honest account of how the self – and the personal -- informs the research: the process and the knowledge produced.

In examining my multiple positionalities, I reflect not only on the self in terms of race, age, gender, and socio-economic status, but also as a volunteer, staff member, and college student – myriad ways through which my self is also constructed by the other (Butler, 1997; Lacan, 1998), in this case by the youth subjects and staff subjects of the study. I argue that in many ways, my latter positions as volunteer, staff member, student, and researcher are all predicated upon my race, gender, age, and status as a doctoral student from India. And further, I will discuss how the length of an ethnography and the approach to fieldwork and to subjects – “empathetic” and “self-conscious” – results in shifting roles as friend, sister, and other terms of familiarity that are developed in

immigrant networks. Yet, the primary position as researcher remains prominent when the researcher leaves the research site, at least temporarily, if not permanently.

When I first identified and visited YOSAI with the intent of establishing relations for my preliminary research, I met with the center director, Jessica, in January 2010. We discussed the various programs, the demography of the youth who attend the center as well as the staff who worked there. Jessica identified as being South Asian as she is married to a Guyanese Indian American and explained that YOSAI attracted South Asian Americans to work in the organization, which has an all South Asian board membership. She also mentioned that many Desi college students from across New York volunteer at the center, or conduct internships as well. Learning that I am from India and also a college student in American interested in research with the center, she quickly remarked that the best way to do so would be to serve as a volunteer for some program at the center. It was perhaps because of my race and my belonging to India that Jessica was comfortable with quickly setting me up as an “insider” who can volunteer and conduct research. I had to remind her that I would need Institutional Review Board ethical approval to conduct research even if in the role of a volunteer, and she agreed and said she’d be happy to work with me for the same. When I first met with the executive director about my role as a researcher, he too was comfortable with referring to me as an “insider” of the South Asian community and hence already a part of YOSAI. For instance, he tried to relate my research with my experience as a foreign student in USA: “you know how it is with immigrant communities, the minute you see anyone remotely close to your ethnicity, you cling to them. You must have felt something like that when you moved here for your education, no? But back home in India, you wouldn’t identify with

Pakistani's would you?" He continued to make a point that as a student migrant I would have similar experiences to the youth immigrants at the center in terms of finding community in the diaspora. I heard him out. However, at times, while I was glad to have gained entry into my research site very smoothly because of my race and ethnicity, I was very uncomfortable about my role as a volunteer, and "insider," as I felt that it would obscure my role as a researcher, guising my intent as a "helpful citizen" rather than the reality of the selfish intent of conducting research. Furthermore, as an ethnographer, I was interested in being an observer, and I was concerned that if I volunteered for the organization then I would present myself as aligning with their work and their ideologies, making it difficult for me to be critical in my research. In one of my early field note entries in March 2010 I reflect on my discomfort about this:

This role/ status as a volunteer makes my real purpose or even my status as a researcher murky. I will probably want to be critical about the organization in my analysis. Will it not become difficult to do so because I volunteer here now? To be a good volunteer I should support the organization's ideologies and also support the kids and guide them through the programs and their difficulties. But then I'm hardly a participant "observer," and will be informing my research.

This internal conflict was exacerbated by the fact that staff members would introduce me as a volunteer to the youth and not as a researcher, despite knowing my main intent in being at the Center was to conduct research. My own reflective work led me to constantly remind the staff and the students during initial introduction's that I was conducting an ethnographic study at the Center, and would share two sentences about it, seeking permission from them verbally as well. It was not that I was skeptical of the great services the organization was providing to the youth but that were I to align as "one of them" too soon, I may find myself in a difficult position to be critical of the organization for my dissertation. Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin (2005) note that being an

“insider” can be less threatening to the subjects, however, and this can also be “in part because you know the rules and are as bound by them as the interviewees are” (p. 87). Addressing me as a volunteer was perhaps the way of the staff to ensure I function at the Center with similar rules and codes of belonging as them. One of the staff members, Sugandha, had initially shown resistance to my presence as an ethnographer at the Center programs and did not want me to be part of Lead, an all-girls leadership group session, she facilitated. She had said, “girls share some very personal details in our group [Lead program meetings] and I hope you’ll understand but we do not want an outsider stepping in and just observing the girls sharing intimate details.” A few weeks later I was able to gain Sugandha’s trust as I spent time with her and the youth in ways they permitted me to. As I spent more time at YOSAI, I became more comfortable in my role as a volunteer and staff assistant as well as a researcher, and noted the value of each role - simultaneously. Through critical self-conscious reflexivity about my positioning in the field, I negotiated my multiple roles on a daily basis throughout the fieldwork stage, and consistently balanced the “insider” and “outsider” status and the related issues of power and positionality.

In fact, the value of having some “insider” role became more evident as I balanced my multiple selves. I was able to forge friendships with the staff members because of the perceived similarities and my role as volunteer. During 2010-11, there was a group of young South Asian women who ran various programs at the Center. On several occasions I was invited to their homes for dinners and potlucks. The conversations that ensued during these gatherings included discussions about the organization and staff politics, as

well as exchanges about the youth at the center, their own interest in activism, and the political role of young South Asians in America, to friendly interactions about personal and familial histories. While not all of these exchanges figure into the analysis in this dissertation, they gave me the context and background to contemporary discourses about what constitutes youth work according to Desi women. These exchanges also made evident for me how much of an “outsider” I was at times and how the histories of growing up in America as a young immigrant shaped the staff members’ current interest in and role as youth mentors. While we may have had shared political stand points, our experiences that shape these were entirely different, as I grew up in India and only moved voluntarily for higher education to the United States. Hence, despite my role as a volunteer and staff assistant I was an outsider in many ways, who was however, able to gain in-depth knowledge about the staff subjects because of my role as an “insider.”

Such boundaries between insider and outsider status are often quite murky and fluid. Nonetheless, “being viewed as an outsider is not necessarily bad for the research” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 87) because interviewing across class, or nationality, or age can be productive in some contexts as it enables distanced learning – the very basis of what ethnography demands an ethnographer to do. In the next section I discuss how doing ethnography with young people requires the researcher to be extremely self-conscious and reflexive and function as a supplicant in order to adequately learn about their lives.

“DOWN WITH THE YOUTH:” NEGOTIATING MY OWN PERSONALITY FOR YOUTH RESEARCH

“SHE’S ALWAYS RIGHT IN THE MIDST OF THE YOUTH:” YOUTH AS EQUALS AND PRACTICES OF FOOD

In conducting research with young people, childhood studies scholars have argued that ethnography proves to be an appropriate method for studying children’s lives (Prout & James, 1997; Hadley, 2007). In conducting an ethnography, however, scholars must attempt to take on the role of “least-adult” (Mandell, 1988), or further, participate in the social lives of the children as a semi-participant (Corsaro, 1985) or as a “quiet friend” (Eder et al., 1995). Scholars have suggested these participatory approaches because children are “persons in their own right” and these approaches enable researchers to get at children’s perspectives. However, while childhood studies scholars argue that young people must be studied in their own right by listening to them, the developing nature of young people – and the resultant inconsistencies that come with it – must also be considered in the research with them (Alderson et al., 2005). That is to say, it may be impossible to always be the “least adult” and may not be required at all times.

When I began my ethnography I attempted to take on the role of “least-adult” despite being a volunteer and a staff assistant. That is, rather than completely surrendering my responsibilities as an adult that the organization placed upon me, I attempted to take on the role of a supplicant in my exchanges with the teens who participated in the programs, albeit with much struggle. For instance, after introducing myself to the teenagers, I would hang around the group either reading or quietly waiting around for them to include me in their volleyball game or conversations rather than inserting myself in their play and talk. This often led to me interacting with the shy youth who were also new at the center and would hang around on the sidelines themselves. As

they made friends, I'd take their lead to be part of conversations with their new group of friends. This was an extremely difficult process, as I am someone who would, in other situations, actively make friends and start conversations with people within a large group, rather than hang around on the sidelines waiting to be included. This way of approaching my initial interactions with the teens, however, seemed necessary. I was also conscious of the fact that I should not immerse myself into their culture without also making it entirely clear that my intent of doing so is for the purpose of research, something that childhood studies scholars do not as such address in their discussion of "least-adult."

An early interaction with one youth, Sahib, a 15 year old boy, at the Center made me reflect on this "quiet" approach on gaining entry into youth's perspective, yet made me realize how it is not entirely reliable. Sahib was in the Public Service program I was helping facilitate in the summer. As I arrived into the youth center one morning, I walked over towards the seats where Aman, the PS facilitator, and Sahib were sitting. After greeting them, I learnt they were conversing about getting chessboards for the teens, and Aman decided to get up and go work on it. As he was leaving, Sahib asked Aman, "is she [referring to me] going to spectate us everyday?" On hearing this, Aman chuckled. Perhaps, he did so because of the choice of Sahib's words for my research: "spectate." Sahib went on to say to Aman, "you also had that other Asian woman do it too. What is going on?" Aman realized that Sahib had missed my introduction on the first day of the PS program and hence had some concerns about being "gazed at" or being "studied," implied through his word "spectate," and a reminder of a previous "Asian woman" researcher. Aman explained to Sahib that I was also helping out with the PS program, wherein I would run a photo-journalism segment, and hence, I was different from

previous researchers. Sahib seemed unsatisfied with the answer. I too was not comfortable with Aman's response as the reason I was running the photo-story project, misquoted as "photo-journalism" by Aman, was for my research data collection and another way of getting at understanding these teens live, which it appeared Sahib found violating to some extent. While Sahib had not addressed me, I was standing right there and decided to interject and clarify my position. I told him that if he did not want me to interview him or interact with him, or "spectate" him, I would not do so as he had a right to refuse to be part of my research. I explained what my research was about and clarified with him my various roles at the Center, including how I had been part of the Center since 2010, when I first began my ethnography. Sahib did not respond, but changed the topic back to chess. After a while, as all the teens were being served sandwiches at the center, he went and brought two sandwiches on his plate and offered one to me. We shared the plate. This gesture made me feel a little more comfortable about the previous interaction we had, indicative of the point that perhaps Sahib was willing to let me be part of his daily life at YOSAI just as he allowed me to share food with him.

While the "least adult" role often requires researchers to be quiet and listen more, it turns out that expressing and talking to teen participants about your own positionality in the field indicates to them that they are being treated with respect and as equals, and not being "watched" for study without their consent, which they had anyway already provided when they signed forms to join the program. I learned soon that doing research with teenagers is more challenging than with younger children as teens shift positions toward being young adults and not entirely inhabiting the position of a "child." Attending to these shifts, which are played out in the interactional present, requires a delicate

balance of learning from them, talking to them as equals, and sharing details about oneself. Hence, rather than adopting a “least-adult” role, it is important to turn the tables around and treat young persons not as age subordinates but as interactive equals.

Sahib’s gesture of sharing his plate of food with me also taught me that to get familiar with the teens and build rapport needed to conduct my research meant building rapport through exchange of meals and sharing food. Eating with the teen participants provided me access to their peer cultures and their lives. As I spent more days with the teens at the center and on overnight trips, they became more familiar with my presence as well and we developed our own rapport. One day two teens, Sukhmani and Veer, who live close to each other’s homes and leave the center together, asked me if I wanted to join them to grab something to eat at the mall before they left to go home. I took up this offer to be included in their peer-based activity immediately. As a result, I learned that hanging out at the mall, eating, and browsing through stores was a usual part of their daily activity after attending YOSAI and before going home. This led to productive information for my research findings in Chapter Four. While we were eating, I was also able to chat with them about their lives as well as mine. They seemed equally intrigued about my life and had a lot of questions for me.

Kathryn Gold Hadley (2007) writes that, “as children grow older, their peer cultures focus on talk over activity so there is little for the adult researcher to do other than listen or join the conversation to varying degrees” (p. 161-62). In my research, I found that indeed teenage cultures are different than young children’s cultures and their daily life includes a lot of talking. They, however, also participate in creative and play activities, as I analyze in Chapter Five. Furthermore, simply listening to teens or joining

in the already existing conversation is not sufficient to gain trust and become part of the peer culture or conduct reliable research. Honestly sharing different aspects of your own life and being responsive to questions about yourself also enables teens to share their lives and ultimately include the researcher in their peer culture. For instance, Veer and Sukhmani wanted to know about my family life and asked me if I had any siblings. Instead of just responding with a simple yes, I shared additional descriptive information about my childhood sibling relationships. I told them I had an older brother and that growing up we shared totally different social circles. We fought a lot as little kids but now we're very close. This triggered a pattern of exchange. They both started telling me stories about their siblings. Veer informed me that he first found out about YOSAI through his elder brother, but he too chooses to have a different social circle than him.

Many of the programs hosted by YOSAI included traveling to different locations in the city or in neighboring cities. Full day visits to college campuses or professionals for future career mentorship workshops included lunch breaks as well. Over the summer programs, YOSAI is responsible for providing with lunch for the teenagers. I had learned that sitting and eating with the teens rather than with the staff would enable me to have more time to talk to the teens and these informal spaces for exchanges were productive for research, as I mediated my "in-between" status of not being a teen nor a staff member. Even when big group of teens were sitting at a table for lunch, I was able to talk to them and learn some aspect about their daily and family and school life. Since my role as a "spectator" was already established, I felt comfortable in asking questions, and students felt they had the task of educating me, those who were willing to do so. Teens would tell me how the high school and SAT scores worked since I did not have that educational

experience. In any event, these intimate interactions with the teens became noticeable to the staff as well. For instance, after a college campus visit in Manhattan, about 20 teenagers and 4 staff members and I walked into a pizza parlor to get food. Instantly, I found myself sitting with the teens while the staff ordered the food. A few days later Aman, Aliyah, another staff member at YOSAI, and I were talking about an event where the executive director, Umang, was also accompanying us. Aliyah was commenting on how during the events that include different trips, Umang ends up talking a lot with the staff members, and they don't get a chance to talk to each other. At this point, Aman, jumped in to say, "well, no one ever gets to talk to Anandini anyway. She's always right in the midst of the youth. It is so tough to speak to her anyway." He added that, "no one can even sit with Anandini, so we'll see if Udai can. She's just so down with the youth. Totally making use of staff role for her research." I found this comment to be very intriguing, as I did not realize how the staff perceived my shifting dynamics with the youth. Aman was aware right from the beginning of my fieldwork that my role at the Center was to conduct research, but in the process I would offer to help facilitate the programs. He later clarified that he thought it was great that I was able to build the rapport with youth and spend time with them. However, this new task of being of "down" with teens resulted in some concerns from the staff, wherein new levels of insider and outsider dynamics became evident. That is, I was now balancing the role of insider and outsider divided along child-adult lines.

After events and workshops that were hosted outside the center, youth were sometimes allowed to go home directly from there or to other places they wanted to visit on their own rather than returning to the center. Sagar and I had been talking about his

school one time and he had told me about a small deli where they made great tuna sandwiches. Since he had learned that I did not eat meat, but did eat fish, he had been eager to show me this deli near his school and plan to go eat food there together. One afternoon, the PS group was near his old school for an exhibition viewing and he suggested we could go to the deli right after. He had also said that he wanted to meet another friend of his later and that I could come along. Learning that I would be able to follow him to other third spaces I got excited about this plan and we left the YOSAI group to go to the deli and to meet his friend. We told the PS program group and Aman that we would meet them all back at the Center later in the evening. During our time together in Queens – commuting between various locations and places guided by Sagar’s knowledge of these sites – I was able to learn a lot about various aspects of Sagar’s school life, peer interactions, and his encounters in navigating the city alone or with friends from YOSAI. The multi-sited approach to ethnography proved productive in that a new and changed location of interaction between the researcher and researched revealed information for the research that was sparked by memories associated with places we visited.

After this exchange I was grateful that Sagar had made this plan with me, however, I was surprised to learn of how this method of research was received by the staff of YOSAI. A couple of days later, in one of my conversations with Aman, when I was interviewing him, he asked me about my experience of the research process. Since my approach to ethnography was to be able to share the process with the staff members if they were interested, I told Aman how I felt about my progress, and also shared some reflections about my initial conflicted feelings about the multiple roles I played at YOSAI,

along with the emergent satisfaction of being included as an insider by the youth. I also mentioned that I felt I had a break through moment when I had the privilege of being invited by Sagar on accompanying him on a day about the city on his own. Being reminded of that day, Aman, commented: “oh, yes, you know I was quite surprised by that.” When I asked him to expand what he meant by that, he told me that he was shocked that I just went off with this 15 year old boy, alone. As I was still unsure of the implications of his statement, he further clarified, uncomfortably, that he had never seen an adult staff spend time alone with a youth like that outside the center, so it seemed surprising that I just “took off with him.” I realized some of the implications of his comment and asked if he thought it would have been different were I a male staff. He admitted he thought it would have been different, but it was that no adult staff would do this. At this point, I had to also remind him that I did not leave with Sagar in my capacity as a staff member, rather it was in the position of a researcher. I also shared how the plans got made spontaneously and that we had discussed the possibilities of this plan in previous conversations at YOSAI. I expressed that I was surprised that Sagar wanted to make this plan, but I saw it as a way of conducting research, and that we had developed a friendly one-on-one rapport by then and it would be fine. I told him I felt like Sagar was treating me as a researcher and an older sister.

My explanation satisfied Aman’s initial concern with the incident, which he only brought up when I reminded him of it. Nonetheless, it revealed to me how gaining insider status with the teens was at least to some extent a cause of surprise to the staff, and perhaps an indication that I was an outsider to the staff, despite playing the staff facilitator role. Yet, it was this friendly insider status with the teens that led Aman and

Umang to also ask me to consider a full time job at YOSAI at the end of summer 2012. Aman told me he had discussed it with Umang, and that they would like to see a staff member that is also deeply involved in the life of the teens to work with them. He also added, “the youth love you; they really want to see you around more. And so would we.” Such an offer and compliment was extremely gratifying and burdensome at the same time. It was nonetheless the result of my interactions during the fieldwork and the bonds developed with the research participants. I describe next that these bonds were formed as a result of spending time together, sharing jokes, playing games, and exchanging words in the same language with the research subjects.

JOKES, GAMES, AND LANGUAGE

On a lot of occasions the PS program, the all day workshop for 8 weeks, would begin later than the scheduled time of 10 am, depending on what event or activity was planned for the day. On days when youth had some free time at YOSAI and we were waiting around to leave the center or for someone to arrive and talk to the group, the teens would just hang around chatting, joking, eating, watching YouTube videos or movies, playing music or playing games. I would try and spend this time with them rather than with Aman or other staff members in their offices. Playing games during this free time was one of the most frequented activities. I found playing the game of taboo enabled me to gain some entry into their peer culture, among other activities. Taboo is a word guessing game, wherein one person who reads the word on the game card is expected to make the remaining players guess the word written on the card by describing it using different words. The players get three minutes per word. As a result of simply playing

this game the teens allowed me to participate in many of their daily peer activities, but when some youth began using Hindi words for the English word in the game, I felt even more included because of my good Hindi skills. Mueen was the first to start this trend in the game when he made us guess the word “house” by using the Hindi word “ghar” for it. While not all the teens who were playing the game spoke or understood Hindi, those who did started employing this tactic.⁸ Playing the game also gave me insight into the teens inside jokes and references. For instance, when Nida had to make us guess the word “Panda” she pointed to Gita and said, “who is she?” and Mueen instantly said “Panda.” I later chatted with Mueen and Gita about why she was referred to as Panda and learned more about their peer dynamics.

Being “down” with the teens also meant being “like them.” However, this was not something I could consciously and reflexively do consistently but it flowed from the moment, because of my personality and their efforts to negotiate their relationship with me. At one point, the youth felt comfortable in making fun of me for having a very old phone that did not have Internet on it. Veer and Sukhmani called me “old” and in so doing both created distance (old phone older person) and embraced me as someone who could be included in the circle of joking relationships (Bateson, 1952). I knew they were joking but it was also true as Veer would make fun of Sukhmani for being too thin, which one could say she was. When I finally got a new “smart” phone, I was excited to show it to the teens and particularly to Veer to tell him that I wasn’t “old” anymore because I had a cool new phone. Veer still joked about me being old in various ways, exaggerating my age by twenty years, calling out my difference to him, despite having now possessed a

⁸ Sharing similar language with my research participants was also useful in different exchanges I document in Chapter Five when I help teens write their names in Hindi in henna tattoos on their arms.

similar new phone. Since other teens had also commented on my “old” phone, when I noticed Mueen and Sahib were standing close by, I showed off my new phone to them too, asking them to look at it. To which Sahib exclaimed, “She’s like a little child,” and then smiled at me. Mueen replied in agreement saying, “Yeah, she’s totally like us. We spent time in DC together and she’s fine.” He turned to me and said, “that was a great trip.” While Mueen’s comment was clear to establish me as “one of them,” I thought Sahib’s comment indicated that I was somehow even younger to them in my interaction – “like a little child” – not like an adolescent. In this way, Sahib labored to lessen the power relation implicit in age categories through exaggeration of me being much older or much younger than I was.

Youth would also comment on my similarity to them because of my actions or the reactions my actions received from the staff members. One afternoon when we were hanging out in the youth lounge, the teens and I were chatting and laughing loudly, when one of the staff entered the room and reprimanded us for being loud. She then noticed my presence, was surprised, and turned to me and said, “you know, I expect this from the youth, not you, Anandini.” She giggled and walked away. The youth ended up laughing and in many ways because of this obvious distance from the staff, and similarity to the youth – as I too was scolded – I gained entry into teens’ activities and they would share information with me that they would not with other staff members. As we spent more time together, the teens felt comfortable in joking with me and expressing their fondness of me by calling me “cute” or “kind.” Either way, it became clear that I was in some ways “like them” or that they started to like me at least to allow me to be part of their Desi peer cultures.

FAMILIAL AND SUPPORTIVE BONDS

Gaining access to Desi peer cultures in the above ways brought me to build familial bonds with the teenagers as well. One of the girl's, Zainab, who I had known since 2010, invited me to her house for her birthday party in March 2012. At her house I met her parents and siblings and spent the evening playing games and eating with five other teens who also attended the Center. Zainab's parents had heard a lot about me through Zainab, they said, and expressed that they were delighted that Zainab had an older sister mentor outside of the home who was supportive of her. Zainab was actively involved in activities at YOSAI and beyond in organizing events and Desi youth mobilizations for social justice issues and I had accompanied her to DC for one such event. Zainab's mother also knew that I was from India and that I was independently pursuing my higher education in the US. As a result she also treated me as a young family member making sure I had some food to take back home and offered that I should come by whenever I missed home. Because of such bonds and others developed at the Center, many of the youth started recognizing me and approaching me in my multiple roles.

Yet, the teens were very aware, despite calling me "like them," and inviting me to their homes, that I was not one of them, but still part of their community. During an activity planned in NYC by Aman for the teens, which I went along for as well, Mueen and I found ourselves walking through central park, along with 4 other teens in our group. At one point, Mueen asked me, "you must be wondering what you're doing stuck here with these teenagers." I was surprised by this statement as I had chosen to be part of the

group activity, at the same time, they had requested me to come along with their group. But the activity also involved a lot of walking around to take photographs and was tiring at some point. While it was Mueen who had earlier also called me “like us [them],” here he distinguishes me from “these teenagers,” making my difference in age explicit. This critical reminder that I was not one of the teens, while I was still allowed to be part of their peer cultural activities, highlights the precise balance all youth researchers must be conscious of. Just as the teens can include you in their groups, equally quickly they can remark on your “outsider” status, indicating that both are possible at once.

In fact, such a consciously constructed dual status is productive for research. Towards the middle of the summer of 2012, a couple weeks into the ethnographic research, some of the teens including Mueen, who I had not interviewed yet, asked me “so when will you interview me?” or “don’t you care about what I have to say?” and similar questions putting the pressure on me to complete the task I was primarily there to conduct. Sometimes youth would cajole and convince their peers to allow me to interview them if they were resistant. I read their resistance to being interviewed as a sign of boredom or desire for a more interesting use of their time, not a resistance to me as they did like to spend time with me and would invite me for various activities. One afternoon when we were in DC when I requested Veer if I could record some questions I wanted to ask him, he refused. Veer was a little hesitant, as he wanted to rather just watch TV with me. I was okay to wait for a different time to ask him some questions for my research. However, Sukhmani, who was also present there and was on her way to get dressed for the event later in the evening, was adamant that Veer speak with me when I requested and not waste time. She noted that we had discussed previously that I would

interview him but never got around to it. Sukhmani said to Veer, “why don’t you just help her out. She’s been so nice to us all the time. Don’t you want her to finish her PhD?” This reference to my personality – she’s been so nice – while urging Veer to “help me” for my research highlighted for me how teens wanted to be supportive towards me as I had now become part of their community in many ways. Veer agreed and we recorded our informal interview, which I analyze in part in Chapter Four.

On the last day of the summer programs in 2012 and before I had to return to teach for fall 2012 at Rutgers, the staff and youth of the PS program bought a cake with “good luck” written on it for me and celebrated my “last day” with them. I was moved by this gesture as I noted how supportive they were towards my research. I felt overwhelmed because I felt as though I was still taking away with me more than I had given back, like many ethnographers and qualitative researchers tend to experience. While this was the last day of summer activities, I did return in fall on several occasions to meet the youth, and many of them had my phone number and would call to update me on different aspects of their lives or to seek advice or just to share what was going on and to catch up. Since teens had also added me on Facebook we were able to maintain contact and our ties through interactions on it, which eased the concern about completely breaking ties after the period of data collection was completed.

RESEARCHER’S RESPONSIBILITY: WHERE DO CHILDHOOD STUDIES SCHOLARS GO FROM HERE?

Many scholars conducting ethnographic and qualitative research, including those studying childhood and youth, have now discussed in depth the issue of researcher’s

ethical and social responsibilities. Many children and youth scholars have also established the need for reflexive research on recognizing difference based on age, as I discuss above, and most significantly have focused on how to recognize children as social actors in the very process of conducting research (McKechnie & Hobbs, 2004). This has resulted in the widespread movement towards participatory action research (Fine et al., 2000; Nieuwenhuys, 2004) with children where they are also considered researchers. While there are some limitations to this approach, in that, efforts for child participation remain complicated by the fact of who publishes the research, how participatory research is theorized, and to what extent children inform the research process as well as the knowledge outcomes. However, the field has made some advancement in establishing projects where children's voices are being included in issues concerning them in praxis. For instance, the most noteworthy shift is evident in the works of children's geographers; wherein children are consulted in projects about urban design, city planning (Chawla, 2001), child-friendly cities (Driskell, 2001), local communities (Hart, 1997), school design (Cuningham, 2006) and spatial design more broadly (Designing with Children, 2014). Another dimension where children are considered as participants is in the realm of child participatory rights issues affecting their work, education, and community life in countries where the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified (Boyden, 1997). Yet, the question remains if not all research on children and youth that relates with social issues and inequalities must also take responsibility in informing policy and praxis? This question becomes particularly pertinent in light of the emerging multidisciplinary field of childhood studies, wherein the very basis of research

is to be able to speak across disciplines (Cook, 2009; Thorne, 2007) as well as with practitioners (Cox and Dar, 2010).

In my research I was able to include children's perspectives and conduct child-centered research that recognizes children as social actors, however, I found it extremely challenging to reconcile and separate my need to produce critical and theoretical ethnographic research from responsibility to participate in children's lives and issues as a mentor and supporter. Because it is important to ask a very practical question: to what extent can all researchers truly distance themselves from the subject of research at hand? While ethnographers like Martyn Hammersley (1992) have raised questions about "what contribution can ethnography make to social and political practice?" I push the links between ethnography and social and political practice to also include discussions of the ethnographer and question: what role can an ethnographer play in social and political practice?

Furthermore, do multi-disciplinary childhood studies ethnographers who study contemporary social inequalities and interactions related to young people, have a different responsibility to use their ethnographic expertise for policy purposes and for the critique and advancement of the work of child welfare practitioners? While I cannot offer conclusive answers here, I will return to this in my conclusion as I discuss how my research expertise could be linked with my responsibility to advancing Desi teens political geographies and better youth centers services for marginalized youth in New York City. At the same time, I conclude this chapter on the uncomfortable note of being critical of my position as a childhood studies scholar who ought to question her "multi-disciplinary" role and who was unable to "give back" anything to her research subjects. I

do, however, take responsibility of producing a critical, self-conscious, and reflective multi-sited ethnography with Desi youth that may do some justice towards revealing the under-examined and complex lives of these research subjects that deserve analysis.

CHAPTER THREE

MAPPING YOUNG LIVES AND THE YOUTH CENTER THEY ATTEND

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I document the lives and geographies of immigrant South Asian teenagers growing up in New York. These teens attend the youth center, Youth Organization for South Asian Immigrants (YOSAI), where I began my multi-sited ethnography in 2010. Through interviews, observations of everyday interaction, and conversations with Desi teens, I was able to learn about the kinds of lives they live: how they arrived in the United States, their socio-ethnic-national background, parent and family dynamics, and experiences of growing up in a post 9/11 New York. This detailed biographic account of youth's past and current experiences of being Desi immigrants offers a lens into these under-examined lives and sets the context for analysis about their political geographies I discuss in the forthcoming chapters.

The chapter also maps the mission, history, and reasons for the construction of the youth center where I first met these teens of my study. I examine how the ethnic youth center, YOSAI, established in 1996 for immigrant South Asian teenagers in New York as a response to adult conceived ideas of safety, also aims to meet needs of teens now growing up in a post 9/11 New York. I tease out the discourses of "safety" – physical, affective, and political – that circulate as reasons for building a "South Asian" youth space. For this second part of the chapter, I analyze the documents, brochures, flyers, and website materials of the Center that describe its philosophy, mission, and programs. I also draw on interviews with current staff, executive director, and founding director of the

organization and center to map the youth center's history and discourses. In so doing, I situate young people's voices and interpretations against the discourses of the Center, taking into account the ways in which socio-cultural-political contexts inform teens' everyday geographies.

MAPPING YOUNG LIVES

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The youth who attend YOSAI center vary in ages between 13-19 years and are first or second-generation immigrants. The majority of the youth and their parents are from Bangladesh and arrived in the United States after the enactment of the Diversity Immigration Visa Act of 1990, popularly known as the "Green Card Lottery," which encourages migration from particular countries if those nations have sent fewer than 50,000 immigrants to the United States in the past five years (Kibria, 2011, p. 23-24). Most of the parents of the teens I met at YOSA had married in Bangladesh and then arrived in New York after receiving their "lottery" in the mid-1990s to pursue their "American Dream." Unlike those arriving to the United States from the Indian subcontinent as a result of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act,⁹ these "lottery" immigrants did not arrive as skilled workers and instead work as day wage labor. Some left their children in

⁹ The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, known as the Hart-Cellar Act, allowed the entry of migrants based on skills and family relations, not on basis of quotas, into the United States. Many people from India and Pakistan with degrees in medicine, engineering, and nursing arrived between 1965 and 1990, until immigration policies changed again. Hence, early second wave of immigrants' post 1965 consisted of highly educated, skilled professionals, and they quickly acquired middle to upper middle class status (Agarwal, 1991; Helweg and Helweg, 1990; Lobo and Salvo, 1998; Maira, 2002; Rangaswamy, 2000).

their home country until they had secured an occupation and place in Queens; others had children soon after their arrival. These children represent the population of teens attending the center when I conducted my ethnography.

Most of the teenagers with whom I spoke were aware of this “lottery” their parents had won, especially those who were left behind with their aunts, grandmothers, or mothers in the homeland. Sagar, who arrived in the United States at the age of 8, had spent his early years of life away from his parents with his aunt. His parents had migrated from Bangladesh to the U.S. soon after his birth. He found navigating the school system and friendships quite difficult when he first arrived in October, after the school year had already begun. Feeling left behind at school, he had to adjust with the new system of education, and also make up for the missed classes of that year itself.

Making friends was also not very easy for him as a new immigrant. He vividly recalls his first day at school, even at the age of 15, indicating how his first impressions at school have etched a mark on his experience of arrival:

I remember going up the stairs of the first day of school and I see this Bengali girl, and she looks at me cause, you know, I was crying. And you know, I was all weird and whatever, and I asked her, “what’s your name?” But she just turned around and walked away.

Sagar’s experience of his first day at school in America is difficult for him. When I asked if the girl he approached ever spoke to him again, he replied, “I think, no. She did not. She never spoke to me ever. I didn’t care. Hey, whatever. No big deal but it’s funny because she was with me all of elementary school and middle school.” While Sagar says he didn’t care that the girl didn’t speak with him, he remembers this story and shares it with me when I asked him about his experiences in the United States. He notes that it was

“funny,” though he didn’t find humor in that the girl did not speak to him despite the fact that they were in school together for several years.

Shalini Shankar (2008) describes similar forms of immigrant peer dynamics amongst Desi kids in schools in the Silicon Valley in the United States. She identifies that the children who are born and grow up in the U.S., often choose to distance themselves from recent immigrant children from South Asia, labeling them as “fresh off the boat,” and somehow unrefined or “backwards.” It appears that Sagar had to face this undesirable act of distancing from second-generation immigrant Desi kids as well. He later understood the pervasiveness of such groupings amongst Desi children, but one that he noted was not prevalent at the youth center, and I discuss this further in the next chapter.

Sagar’s desire to connect with a Bengali girl as a new immigrant is not surprising. It resonates with how immigrant communities develop and grow in their host country – through ethnic and familial connections (Kibria, 1990; Rumbaut, 2005; Shankar, 2008; Zhou, 1997). For Sagar, like for other immigrant teens, the desire for connection and community remains strong. Sagar’s first impressions of the United States are compounded by feelings of distancing, loss, and “weird[ness]” he experienced at school, even marked by feelings of being othered from those of his own ethnic community at school. While not all teens of this study are immigrants, such a first impression of Sagar’s life is presented to highlight the complexities of the teenagers lives who attend the center, and how different sites – school, center and even neighborhood (as I discuss later) – stimulate distinct experiences for being South Asian immigrants in New York and shape their daily geographies.

FAMILY LIFE

Arriving as part of the regulations of the “lottery Act” from South Asia, these youth and their families constitute a new class of immigrants with similar yet different set of difficulties and experiences of immigration from those who arrived as part of the Hart-Cellar skilled force. National, ethnic, and financial networks that sustain immigration relocations were not available to many of the families of the youth of this study as they were early to migrate from Bangladesh after receiving their “lottery.” The teenagers of this study recognize how tough it must have been for their parents to arrive in a new country. Nida, a 16 year old girl, told me that her father did not have much support or any networks to draw on to help him settle in when he first arrived in the United States from Bangladesh.

He [her father] was like the first. And after him my mom’s side [relatives] arrived, all the relatives were like oh, like, moved to Texas. And I don’t know how they picked these places but after he came here they had help and he helped them. But he had no help whatsoever.

Nida was born in the United States and is keenly aware and reflective of the difficulties her father faced when they first migrated. Many of the youth attending YOSAI too discussed how their parents help their extended families from Bangladesh to migrate to the U.S. through sponsorship schemes now that the “green card lottery” system is closed for those arriving from Bangladesh. Because teens like Nida recognize the difficulties their parents faced when they first arrived in the United States, they are keen on building extended family networks and peer relationships. Some youth are even eager to “grow up” so they can themselves participate in this economy of immigrant support for new families. For instance, Sagar related how he would like to help his same-aged cousin in

Bangladesh move to America by sponsoring her once he starts working. Having grown up together their first eight years, Sagar speaks with his cousin frequently over Skype.

Despite having long distance communication available to them, youth still desire physical proximity of their immediate and extended family. Noor, a 15 year old girl, relates to me how she and her mother spend lots of time at her aunt's house and how she enjoys this because her cousins are also there. She tells me that it is rare to have family within the same city and, hence, she values their time together:

Like, we have only one family here. And if we're over there [Brooklyn] then its tough to get here [youth center]. So my cousins are there. Actually blood related cousins. Like sometimes you know you call people aunt and uncle, but they're not really blood related. These are blood related aunts and uncles. And now with Ramadan, my mom, she likes to go there often. So we go there a lot.

Noor explains the value of family, especially during religious festival practices, as fasting and breaking fast each day during the month of Ramadan observations. These practices are considered as community activities performed with family members in the homeland as well as abroad. Hence, Noor's mom likes to go to her sister's house in NYC "a lot." Noor also highlights that these visits to her cousins' place are particularly important because she does not have many extended family members "here," in New York. Noor's distinction between "actual[ly] blood related cousins" and those whom she calls "aunt and uncle" but are not related by blood, highlights two things: one, the informal relationship networks constructed by Desi immigrant families where non-related community elders are addressed by kin titles. And two, it shows the significance of the physical proximity of the few blood related family, especially during religious months but also otherwise.

Mueen, a 17 year old boy, on the other hand, told me he has over 50 cousins in the United States, with many living just a couple of houses away from his home, which can be both an asset and an annoyance for his teenage life. His half-sister lives two houses away, which makes his parents feel supported in their role of parenting, and Mueen too finds it useful, relating the following incident:

My mother actually forgot about me last night [does not sound upset]. So I come home and I'm sitting on my computer and I'm doing what I do usually and then my mom comes in and says "oh you just came home?" And I'm like "no I came home at 3 o' clock" and she's like "what? We were home at 3." I told her I had gone straight to sleep. And she was like, "we thought you were still out at work." And I am like "no!" And then she's saying "ooh, could you eat?" I'm like, "yeah, I had to go to Saba's house and eat." You know, my elder sister [he explains to me].

In this instance, whereas, Mueen's mother didn't communicate with him about what to do in an event that his parents are not at home and he needs something like a meal, Mueen seems to know what to do: go to his sister's house for dinner. He even sounded quite proud about how he handled the situation of finding food when he told me this story. It seemed like he probably even had experience of doing this previously. But what's interesting is that just the physical proximity of relatives enables immigrant teens to draw on support from them. However, at other times, the physical proximity of cousins and family can be challenging for teenagers. Mueen recounts an experience with a cousin who lives a few houses away from him:

My other cousin, older cousin, just lives next door, and he's always annoying. I'm like I'm waiting for bus and he comes and starts talking to me: "where are you going?" I'm like, "outside." And he's like, "where?" I say, "you don't know." And then he is like, "what you going to do?" I'd say, "don't worry about it," and I'd put my headphones on and just went to the bus and sat back.

Having networks of cousins can be useful for support and helps Mueen to get food and not be dependent on his parents all the time, but often can also be "annoying" for him as

depicted in Mueen's narrative above. The constant questioning about his whereabouts, which his cousin subjects him to on the bus, can be annoying for any teen. But what is interesting is how Mueen's cousin takes an interest in the life of his younger cousin, as the persistent questions seem to indicate, highlighting the strength of networks of familial child care support within Desi families.

When families lack networks of cousins, aunts, and uncles to draw on, ethnic community members and neighbors, or "fictive kin" can be useful resources for support and child care (Kibria, 1993; Stack, 1974; Zhou & Bankston, 1994). Min Zhou (1997) reviews the literature on such processes of kin formation among various immigrant communities in the United States and writes: "immigrant families are able to mobilize ethnic resources to reconstruct systems of family ties in the United States by shifting and expanding the criteria for inclusion in the family circle" (p. 81). Such reconstructions occur in informal and implicit ways but highlight the social family ties that exist among immigrant communities in the diaspora. Noor alluded to this system of reconstructed families when she speaks about "aunts and uncles" who are not "blood-related" but they are referred to by kinship titles anyway. Desi teens and their parents consciously create such networks of child support, which include adult cousins, "aunts and uncles" who are not related by blood, as well as fellow peers, as care givers. Rizwaan and his friend Nabab, who attend YOSAI, told me about how Nabab became friends with someone who was not at his school, nor attends the youth center yet, because of an informal system of "following" that begins when a new immigrant kid arrives in their neighborhood. This system of "following" is a new form of child care for immigrant Desi communities that draws on young people to care for other young people. Rizwaan and Nabab, 18 and 16

years old respectively, tell me about this as we chatted about how they became friends:

Rizwaan: Yeah, but I knew him [Nabab] through a friend. From middle school. He [Nabab] used to follow that friend.

Nabab: She was my neighbor, so I had to follow her.

AD: Right, right, so a girl, and you “had to follow”? What? You wanted to you mean?

Rizwaan: No, back then you had to follow. When, say, when you’re new to the neighborhood and you know people who are the same as you, you tell them, oh, keep ‘em with you, follow them.

AD: Really? Wait, can you explain that a little more?

Rizwaan: Let’s say, he came new to America, and this person that goes to the same school as him, and knows your mom. And they [parents] told that, “can you keep him with you cause he is new here.” And the parents will tell him to “follow” him wherever he goes. So he’ll just stay with him.

AD: Ok, where did she move from? Bangladesh?

Rizwaan: Yeah.

AD: And how does his parents know her parents?

Rizwaan: Next door neighbor.

AD: Ah. Ok.

Rizwaan: He claims that’s his cousin. But that’s not true!

Recognizing that I did not share an “insider” perspective with the teens about “following,” and was confused by this term they employed in describing friendships and networks, I asked Nabab and Rizwaan more about it. In seeking to learn from them, I was able to understand this informal network of support better. This familial network of support based on a shared national and ethnic background, or as Rizwaan puts it, with “people who are the same as you,” can be productive for new teen immigrants. The informal system of “following” blurs the boundaries between “blood related” family and

others from the same region, as Rizwaan accuses Nabab for claiming that the girl he “follows” is his cousin. However, Nabab introduced the girl to me as “she was my neighbor.” Nevertheless, this above exchange is indicative of how such a system of following comes into existence and establishes ethnic networks of support that are of a familial-peer-based nature.

Rizwaan too had related how he once “followed” someone, a phenomenon that seemed to be quite ubiquitous amongst the Muslim Bangladeshi community of youth attending YOSAI. To further understand how this informal economy of care works, I inquired about Rizwaan’s own experience further.

AD: And did someone follow you too when you moved then?

Rizwaan: Oh, well, my mom always used to say, keep an eye out whenever someone new comes here. She would always say just take care of him.

AD: Yeah? How do you find out when someone is new, like at school or the neighborhood?

Rizwaan: No, like I get a phone call. Like when my uncle first came here, he is the same age as me actually. So when he first came here he was with another relative. And then he went to same high school as me and my mum was like be nice to him and make sure you’re around. But we were not even in the same program. I was in teaching and he was in business.

“Following,” hence, means “keeping an eye out” and “just [to] take care of” new immigrant teens, taught to teens by their parents. I was unsure and unable to clarify where Rizwaan would receive this “phone call” from, but, similar to Nabab’s experience, much of the directive around following, building networks, and creating support, came from advice from his mother. In both cases, the girl and the cousin had recently moved to their neighborhood in Queens from Bangladesh, and such support were established outside of the formal school systems.

Whether blood related cousins or not, neighborhood and ethnic networks are important familial associations for these Desi families. The idea of following suggests communities need to maintain ethnic ties, wherein they involve even their children in the process. The term, “follow,” used to describe an informal system of creating ethnic immigrant community and systems of support post migratory movement, is telling. Practice of support within immigrant networks, already a factor of mobility and movement, is characterized by a verb, “to follow” that suggests further mobility. It is the parents who initiated this form of mobility for their children, which at other times, I shall discuss later, is curtailed and restricted. Next, I want to examine how teens experience their city and neighborhood and map their daily environment in which they grow up.

CITY LIFE AND NEIGHBORHOODS

I was walking through this mall
 My mother and father at each side
 We are your everyday family
 We hold no prejudice, no great pride.
 Then why are people staring?
 It's beginning to feel weird
 Mom, that man that just went by
 He looked at me and sneered
 Is it the turban on my head
 Or the color of my skin?
 Is it the blood that flows through my veins
 Or is it my family, is it my kin?

Sidhansh, chup, shhh, she says
 Forget it move on
 We'll live another day
 And another day has come
 But I'm older now
 I want to stand up and speak
 But this is New York City
 The planet to be free

Why does my mother have to tell me
 How to celebrate this liberty.
 This air is racist
 The atmosphere is discriminate
 And every man walking on that street
 Is confrontational and belligerent.
 But this is my home
 Our sacred melting pot
 Our freedom is ensured
 Isn't it? Is it not?

Mom, I'm confused
 And need you by my side
 Last night when I went to bed
 I stayed up and I cried.
 Sidhansh, it's ok, I'll show you how the city works
 There's our people in every corner
 And it sleeps and it works.
 It shows itself to the brownest man
 To the one who holds his head high
 To the one who is proud to know who he is
 To the one is not afraid to try.
 Mom, everything I need to make
 Is completely ticked to you.
 You're total faith has been
 Nothing else, but true.

This above poem written by Sidhansh, a 16-year-old Sikh American boy, was presented at the YOSAI center during a spoken word “poetry slam” competition in 2012 that was themed “your experience of being a teen in New York City.” Sidhansh’s poem, like some others orated during the competition, reflected personal experiences of living in New York. Sidhansh’s poem can be understood as what Maisha Fisher (2005) describes about spoken word poetry: exposing “multiple truths and experiences” (p. 118).

In his poetic oration, Sidhansh describes his experiences of racism and discrimination, and the supportive networks that help counter these in NY. He begins the poem by relating his experience of a time when he walks through a mall with his parents. Unlike most middle or working class American teens Sidhansh feels comfortable going to

the mall with his parents. But what makes him uncomfortable are the “stares” and unwanted “sneers” he receives from those around them. He reflects that the reasons for these sneers are his visible racial characteristics— turban, color of his skin, even his kin— reminding the audience that the sneers are practices of the continued discriminations South Asians, including many Sikhs, Muslims, and Arabs, face in America. Sidhansh’s spoken word poetry describes how people as young as him experience racism – “this air is racist” – exacerbated in the post 9/11 era of Islamophobia, as he refers to his turban being a focus of discrimination. During the aftermath of 9/11 attacks in New York and across the country, many young people and adults wearing turbans, hijabs, or appeared to be South Asian, Muslim, or Arab, faced racist crimes, name calling, and acts of ignorance conflating religions (Sikhism and Islam) and ethnicities with terrorism (Cainkar, 2004; Maira, 2009). Signs of such widespread acts of discrimination against the Sikh community were also seen in the most recent Oak Creek gurdwara shootings in 2012, where a member of a white supremacist group shot several Sikhs outside the gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin as a racist Islamophobic reaction to their visible presence in America.

Sidhansh’s experience of discrimination leaves him questioning his place of belonging. His comment about what place to call “home” is not compounded by notions of an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) that has influenced questions about belonging for immigrant children. Rather, uncertainties about belonging are shaped by the American racist encounters that exclude, mark, and marginalize South Asian teens in this era. He calls into question meanings about freedom, the cultural celebratory myth of the American melting pot, and notions of liberty in light of racial encounters. He

questions what kinds of liberties exist in a nation that celebrates cultural diversity when he and others in his community are discriminated against for their very diversity despite the rhetoric of the “American melting pot,” which suggests togetherness and collective identity. This ability to draw connections between celebrated notions of freedom, and problems of racism, with a critical commentary on America’s multi-cultural politics of self aggrandizement, indicates political and critical thinking capacities amidst teens as young as Sidhansh.

And finally, in his poem, Sidhansh describes how his family aims to offer support in a climate of discrimination. Sidhansh’s mother’s initial reaction to his feelings of discrimination were to silence him as she told him in the mall to stay quiet, using the Hindi and Punjabi word, “chup.” Such an act of silencing in public space highlights the ways in which immigrant and raced bodies regulate themselves, and further, dictates how young people are treated in public spaces by adults: in ways that they should conform to moral codes and not disrupt the adult hegemonic order of public space (Cahill, 1990; Valentine, 1997). Sidhansh’s mother silences his public questioning of the “sneers” he received. She tells him to “Forget it. Move on.” However, he expresses frustration to this reaction by arguing that “But I’m older now. I want to stand up and speak,” indicating the struggles of being treated as a child, not yet an adult. Not only is Sidhansh regulated by the adult hegemonic order of public spaces, but also silenced by his own parent; marginalized because of his race and age. The former has been minimally examined in literature on children’s geographies (see also Chapter One).

Later in the poetic narrative, Sidhansh reaches out to his mother – “Mom I’m confused” – who then tells him an “adult truth” about the covert ways in which to deal

with racism and discrimination. She alludes to the networks of support South Asian families create and reminds Sidhansh that there are “our [Brown] people in every corner” who show themselves and appear for support when required. Through her guidance, Sidhansh articulates that familial and ethnic networks aid in negotiating experiences of discrimination, believing that these “brown” ties will help counter issues of racism and discrimination.

Teens don’t necessarily draw on networks in the way their parents do, but are directed by parents to do so. They do find other ways to negotiate discrimination, as I’ll describe in next two chapters. However, it is significant to note that Sidhansh, like Noor and Nida, is thankful for his mother’s support and concern, while aware how their restrictions impede their daily movement. As a result of instances of racism and discrimination that took affect across New York – in a widespread way– and even through the rest of the country against South Asian, Muslim, and Arab communities, many parents put restrictions on their children’s mobility, friendships, and tried to keep them “safe” for fear of physical or emotional attacks, which I discuss further in the next chapter as well.

Another teen, Jai, a 19 year old Sikh boy, relates in a video around the 10th anniversary of 9/11 how he was affected by racism in his neighborhood and city:

All my life my parents never let me out of the house just because of the fear that somebody might attack me due to me being South Asian. I spent a lot of my time alone actually. I never hung out with my friends. My parents were always afraid to let me out, to the park, or something. I had no social life outside of school. I never got to go to sleep overs or never got to go to my friends’ house or let them come over to my house cause my parents were afraid that I might get hurt or its unsafe, even if it was a block away from my house. I’m 19 years old and I somewhat feel like I’m constricted or tied down just because of other people having grudges against a whole community.

Jai relates how as a young person he has been restricted from participation in activities outside in parks or just anywhere other than school. Instead of being angry with his own parents, he empathizes with their concern for his safety. He however, expresses deep criticism towards the ambiguous “other people” who discriminate against his community, which causes restrictions on his mobility ultimately.

The director of a partner organization of YOSAI, reported, quoting a recent unpublished report at the time on South Asian youth marginalization in New York, that, “43% Muslim youth were asked or were threatened about their immigration status in and around their schools” (Fieldnotes, 2011). Such racialized discriminations against youth are hence widespread and resemble experiences of the youth of this study. Some systematic changes that further marginalized South Asian and Muslim youth in the post 9/11 era included, the creation of the separate investigative arm, the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) program of department of Homeland Security of the Government of USA in 2003, the Patriot Act, Clear Act, and others like Stop and Frisk Act. The report since published indicates that these new systemic developments have resulted in racial profiling of young people, many of whom are young immigrant South Asians and Muslims (South Asian Americans Leading Together, 2012). This is not to suggest that South Asians did not experience racism prior to 9/11. The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act resulted in the detention and even conviction of South Asian men for examination of their records based on “suspicious” claims (Desis Rising Up and Moving, 2014). However, the young people attending YOSAI are growing up in a heightened period of discrimination due to Islamophobia and currently experiencing the affects of the new separate investigative arms of the State

developed post 9/11 (Maira, 2008). Many of the teens who were attending YOSAI experienced the aftermath of 9/11 all through their childhood and teenager years as most of them were just around 5-6 years old when the attack occurred.

In the context of such a climate, South Asian families and teens respond to their neighborhood and ethnic communities in diverse ways as well. While Sidhansh's poem primarily highlights his experiences of discrimination in his city, it also focuses on how "brown" folk are in "every corner" and have been able to develop a network of support that is valuable. While public spaces such as malls in the city feel threatening, neighborhoods are seen as welcoming to many teens. Noor, a 15 year old Bengali Muslim girl, tells me about how she likes to live in her neighborhood because there are many Bengali's like her family in her area.

Noor: Most of my neighborhood is Bengali.

AD: Do you live in Richmond Hill?

Noor: No, Jamaica. Like, Jamaica states. Like there...

AD: Ok, I've recently read that Jamaica is a growing hub for Bangladeshi immigrant families.

Noor: Yeah, I think so too. I like that. Even there, people will hang their clothes outside on the balcony. [giggles] And my mom also does that. It's a very common thing and it's not weird over there. Even the cooking. That smells the same. Like the masalas and everything... it's not weird over there.

AD: No, huh. Do you think it would be different somewhere else?

Noor: Oh, yeah, if I was living in... anywhere else... it would be different!

In a neighborhood that primarily comprises of Bengali people, Noor does not feel "weird." Whereas, when Sidhansh is walking around in the city with his parents, he is "beginning to feel weird" when people look at his clothes or the color of his skin, he

opines. Noor expresses a sense of belonging in her neighborhood not simply by fact of my comment that Jamaica is a growing hub of Bangladeshi's; rather, through characteristics of belonging, such as shared acts of families hanging their clothes to dry outdoors, or the similar smells of food their families make. Finding these similarities with families in her neighborhood offers Noor a sense of security that the city does not provide.

For Veer, a 15 year old Sikh American old boy, who also attends YOSAI, his neighborhood, Richmond Hill, offers him a sense of religious belonging. Veer's brother spent his adolescent years in New York and is now completing his higher education in Punjab, India. Unlike his brother, Veer, wants to continue his education in the United States not in India. He further, however, talks about how he could identify with only some neighborhoods in America.

I guess if you look at my American side, I could say I belong here [America]. But if you look at my Indian side then I don't, cause like it depends on where I live in New York. Cause, say, if I live in Richmond Hill, then it'll be fine. Cause there will be a gurdwara. And it keeps me attached to my religion and that will be a benefit and in that sense I could live here. But if it is like far far away, without any of those [gurdwara's], then no, I don't think so.

Veer finds that to manage both Indian and American subjectivities he requires a neighborhood in America that offers him a sense of religious and cultural belonging. Proximity to a gurdwara is an important factor in choosing where to live in America, so as to stay connected to his "Indian side." While he splits his identity into "American side" and "Indian side," he makes the claim that to feel like his Indian side belongs in America, he would need to be living in a neighborhood with a gurdwara. Being Indian then is linked with being religious, and as an Indian American youth he would like to live in America, but in a neighborhood like Richmond Hill, where he presently resides, and which has a gurdwara in walking distance from his home. Veer regularly attends the Sikh

temple and even first heard about YOSAI there, as a small program for teens is run by YOSAI at the gurdwara. Unlike Sidhansh, Veer does not wear a turban, but finds deep connection to his religious sense of being, which he finds is supported in his neighborhood, and where all different “sides” of him can interact.

These teens then, aspire, not just to live in ethnic neighborhood clusters, as Noor’s description of her neighborhood may suggest, but as Veer describes it, to have ethnically friendly neighborhoods that accept religious, racial, and ethnic diversities. Nida, also a Bengali Muslim American, reflects on her own experiences of her neighborhood and describes that an ideal neighborhood would include diverse populations of immigrants. Nida speaks about the diversity of her neighborhood when I ask her where she lives:

AD: Anyway, do you stay in Queens? In Richmond Hill?

Nida: In Flushing.

AD: A lot of Bangladeshi’s there too?

Nida: Actually no, on the right side of my house lives like a Chinese family. And on the left side of my house lives a Dominican family. And then, across the street, there is a white person on the right. And then just two houses down from there is like a black family. So it’s like very very diverse. And then we are like a Bangladeshi family.

AD: Yeah, Queens is very diverse. I’m surprised there’s a white family...

Nida: They’re like from out of town. I don’t know... recently immigrated also. Actually, most of the people living there have been Hispanics not white.

AD: It is a diverse neighborhood...

Nida: Yeah, I like it that way.

AD: What about it do you like?

Nida: I feel like a person is limited to just one kind of race, they themselves are limited, cause they can’t think outside. You’re not culturally diverse. You’re just so... you just know... one thing and that’s so bad cause you just can’t get

anywhere. You have different mindsets. You're just more prone to racism and hate in general and not being comfortable. People are not able to talk to anybody but if you're aware of everyone's conditions...like, where they're coming from, working class or elite class...but even besides poor and riches... race... What you eat daily basis...then you know where they come from, what they like, how they live, whether they're good person or not. Can easily talk to them and tell.

Nida lives in Flushing that is not a heavily Bengali populated neighborhood, unlike how Noor describes Jamaica. Nida characterizes her neighborhood as a multi-ethnic immigrant neighborhood. She describes how her block has residents from various regions of the world, identifying them by their racial categories. What she likes about this neighborhood is not just the diversity it represents but also what end such diversity can serve: to counter racism, as she identifies the cause for racism to be ignorance about other cultures. She says that by fact of living in close proximity to families from different regions one can learn more about “where they come from,” “how they live,” and if they're “good or not,” enabling engagement and conversation that can dispel misunderstandings that instigate racism and hate crimes.

Nida's neighborhood represents an ideal for how people can learn how not to be racist, whereas, Noor's, Veer's, and Sidhansh's experiences call for how those who face racism can counter it – through ethnic solidarity and religious belonging. Noor likes her neighborhood because she says that hanging clothes out for drying and cooking food with pungent smells “[is] a very common thing and it's not weird over there,” something that perhaps she fears, and which Sidhansh experiences, will be labeled as “weird” or be disliked by those who don't experience difference themselves. These conversations with teens, along with their poetic articulations, reveal how city life and experiences of their own neighborhood are deeply linked with experiences of racism and cultural intolerance, and also with their ideas and experiences of difference, diversity, equality, and solidarity,

respectively. These ideas, I find, also inform why teens attend an ethnic youth center, as I discuss further in the next chapter. In this context of teens city and neighborhood life it proves fruitful to examine the youth center these teens attend. It highlights how young people live and what is the significance of third spaces for ethnic immigrant teens in the contemporary period.

MAPPING YOSAI: SAFE SPACE DISCOURSES

As discussed in the methodology chapter, YOSAI was established in 1996 as a space primarily for South Asian teenagers, with an attempt to create a site, as the founding director, Sara, states, to “offer a safe indoor space for teens to hang out.” Sara distinguishes the Center from religious and culturally focused organizations that existed for children of this community at the time she started the place. Instead, Sara began the Center as she wanted to help create a space that can “change the presence of South Asians in USA” and help young people “navigate racial landscape in the US more easily.” Furthermore, in her interview with me she said,

so that was the main thing: alternate career option and engagement in civic and political life. And um, the third piece was around kind of ownership and comfort with your ethnic identity at the same time as you are operating in a larger and diverse space... so there were many questions around the time that we were starting up... around issues of just a South Asian place and what that meant.

YOSAI was constructed for multiple reasons – all of which aimed at supporting South Asian low income youth to transition into a life where they can have good and alternate career options (different from those popularized as a result of second wave immigrant skilled workers professions in the United States as doctors, lawyers, and engineers), engage and participate in civic and political life, and find ethnic solidarity and express

their ethnic self in a diverse racial climate of America. All of this was to be achieved through an “indoor safe space” where teens could hang out.

As I analyzed the documents and brochures and the transcripts of conversations with various staff and youth at the Center, I found that all the goals were intimately linked to this notion of “safety.” This may not be surprising, considering that the context of the young people lives who attend the Center are deeply linked to similar notions of concern around safety, articulated in the first half of this chapter. In this section of the chapter I analyze the documents of the center to expand on the discussion of “safe space” for immigrant Desi teens. I categorize my section on the discourse of safe space of YOSAI under: physical indoor safety; emotional and affective safety; and political safety. Each of these discourses of safety offer light to the context in and strategies amidst which Desi youth are growing up in NYC. I describe next how the discourse of safe indoor/physical spaces as well as discourses of emotional and affective and political safety circulates within the Centers programs and its organizational mission framework.

PHYSICAL “INDOOR” SAFETY

Many scholars of children’s geographies have argued that since the late nineteenth century, recreational spaces and after-school centers for children and youth in urban cities of the U.S. have predominantly been informed by a moral discourse on “safe space,” “stranger-danger,” and the anxieties over keeping children and youth off the city streets (Adams & Van Slick, 2004; Cahill, 1990; Valentine, 1996). Wherein, the streets are understood as a metaphor for the public, political, and adult life (Mitchell, 2003). This has resulted in situating children, both “at-risk” and immigrant children and youth, into

indoor recreation, and adult-monitored built environments of learning (McLaughlin, 1993; Wilson & White, 2003; Zeiher, 2001; 2003). Like other youth organizations in modern societies, YOSAI too draws upon the discourse of physical indoor safe spaces to justify its purpose as a youth center in a city. Many of the programs of YOSAI can be seen in alignment with this literature.

The website details YOSAI as offering “safe space programs,” which are linked to various indoor sports programs.

Safe Space Program and Sports Activities:

Our Safe Space Program Awaaz consists of mini courses, drop-in workshops and one time events to give youth the opportunity for realizing and developing their talents. Additionally, through sports activities YOSAI provides an open-court for both boys and girls to play sports after school. YOSAI also organizes tournaments and sports days throughout the year that give young people who are otherwise not attracted to sports the opportunity to be introduced to it and have fun (YOSAI website, 2011).

Safe space programs include workshops and harnessing various talents, as well as connecting young people to sports. Through “open court,” or free play sessions, and tournaments the Center aims to attract youth to get involved in sport, and “have fun,” as a way to keep them from engaging in other activities outdoors. In the flyers advertising YOSAI’s tournaments and sports activities, the venue is marked as the “indoor-gym,” highlighting the links between sports and indoor activity, safety, and youth of color (YOSAI Flyer #xi 2011, 2012).

One of the current staff members, Salman, recalls attending the center with his older brother in 1996, when the organization first began, as primarily to play basketball. He tells me that the Center essentially began because young Desi boys wanted to play basketball but didn’t always have a place to do so. He said,

We felt like we couldn't compete with the kids playing in the playgrounds around our houses and wanted our own place to play a sport and one that was safe in our parents mind too. And we weren't so good at the sport so didn't feel ashamed by others watching. And that's also why Sara [the founding director of the organization] first started this center with a gym.

The value of a space that is "safe" is greatly important for Salman when he reflects on his own childhood sports. Because of his parents' concerns for his safety from the outdoors, like other teens who continue to attend YOSAI, Salman recognizes, in hindsight, this construction of YOSAI as a safe indoor space met his and his friends' interest in playing basketball. It also allowed them to play without feeling ashamed of their skills at the game as the audience of their sport altered as well.

During an interview with one program director at YOSAI, Aman, I note how he discusses the notion of safe spaces and youth centers, and describes what a safe space looks like: as an indoor site for teens that is distinct from other formal indoor youth spaces such as the home or school.

Aman: Yeah, part of the role of YOSAI is to be a safe space where youth can come and hang out. I really truly believe that.

AD: Why?

Aman: Um, because I know that they don't have it elsewhere and I love... I... that's something I feel like I would need too... with this society that there is no open space... I just want them to be able to go some place that is other than home that is attractive to them. Cause schools turn into this other space... of... I want them to like... have some sense of freedom and if that can be cultivated at YOSAI that's great.

With the construction of a safe space comes a sense of freedom according to Aman.

However, what this freedom looks like is not clear, but it seems to be constructed in contrast to what youth experience in other spaces of "home," "school," and "open space" that constitute some element of a lack of freedom for young people. By contrasting

YOSAI to home and school, Aman sets up the Center as a physical indoor space where safety comes via a sense of freedom, yet indoors. Unsurprisingly, discussion of streets as a possible place for young people to hang out in does not come up in conversation with him. As such, then, the negation of the streets as a site for young people, like the literature on youth in public spaces, suggests that streets are not spaces to be linked with teens and by association are not safe for them.

Another staff member, Pandey, tells me that “safe space” means keeping youth out of trouble from outdoors. Pandey spoke with a parent who wanted his son to attend the center “so that he would stay out of trouble from outside” (Fieldnotes, 2010). This desire among immigrant parents to protect their children from harm from the street or “outside” forces has been discussed in various studies on this topic, wherein parents device ways in which to either send children to after-school centers, religious organizations, or sometimes even move cities. For instance, Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut (2001) met a Laotian Hmong family that was planning to move to another city where there was a larger Hmong community, to try to rescue their eighteen-year-old son from gang membership (p. 93-4). Sierra Leonean Muslims in Washington D.C., organized an Islamic school to “draw a set of boundaries for their children that reflect a collective identity and, so they hope, protect their children from a variety of outside forces” (D’Alisera, 2004, p.125). One of the ways in which the YOSAI center supports families and manages to protect and keep youth “out of trouble” is by maintaining a physical indoor safe space ideology for the Center, establishing links between children’s activities with indoor activities of the youth center.

EMOTIONAL AND AFFECTIVE SAFETY

Since the center staff believe in the need to maintain indoor safe spaces such as the center, they also make consistent efforts towards maintaining the safety level of the indoor space – both physically and emotionally – especially when dangers associated with the “outside,” if happen inside the center, de-stabilize the dynamics of safety. These safety concerns get addressed in ceremonious ways that help re-establish the space as not just physically but also emotionally safe. For instance, Sehar, and other staff members of YOSAI decided to hold a “Safe Space Townhall” meeting at the center, in April 2010, after Sehar’s cell phone went missing at the Center. About four other things had gone missing from the center recently when they were left unaccompanied in the commonly used spaces there. The staff decided to host this townhall meeting with the youth to discuss how the Center can be made a “safer space.” Some of the youth who were close to the staff members also liked this idea and supported this meeting, as one of the youth Nitin said at the beginning of the meeting that: “the center, in general, is a safe space but our personal things should also be safe.” Another youth, Prakash, added that since they find the place to be like home, and their things are safe there, the same should go for the center. Such implications of safety re-construct what safety means within youth sites: to include resemblance with home and distancing it from sites like school or the outdoors. A youth suggested that if the Center wanted to be sure there was no theft again, maybe they could conduct bag checks. However, Sugandha, a staff member instantly responded saying,

but we’re not sure if we want YOSAI to be a space like that. That is, with metal detectors and all of that. And check points. But again, it is an open space so a lot of traffic comes through here and it could be anybody. We just don’t want YOSAI to look like that.

Here, Sugandha, like the youth Prakash, is distinguishing the Center from spaces such as the NYC schools where metal detectors are installed, or airports that have “checks points” which have been noted to racially profile many people from their own communities as raced bodies are particularly closely monitored in such sites.

Safe space for Sugandha and the other staff does not include direct monitoring and checks, but rather is about creating a sense of community and ownership. One youth, Navin, exclaims during the meeting that he would not steal from anyone at the Center because he knows people very well, indicating that the Center must work towards building strong connections and relationships, shifting the discussion of physical indoor safety to the need for creating deep connections and trust. Sehar, reiterates this need for connection and affective ties by raising questions about the meaning of safe space to the Townhall attendees:

So, YOSAI is a safe space? I’m hearing a lot of yesses. But this [theft] is stuff that happens but we feel safe. So in general, not just as a physical space, do you feel you can express yourself? Have an opinion? Be yourselves here? Like let’s look at the broader picture. And if not, how can we make YOSAI a safe space for most people?

Making YOSAI a safe space, Sehar reflects, is not just about creating a physically safe space, where material artifacts are safe, but it is also about openness, being “yourself” and expressing opinions. Many youth concurred with her that indeed, what makes YOSAI safe for them is that they feel like they can be themselves and have fun. The discussion during the townhall turned into plans for building ways to forge trust and community, and wherein youth feel they can express themselves. The staff and youth together, hence, decided during the meeting to resolve the issue of theft – and lack of safety of their material things at YOSAI – by hosting a youth social event where staff and

the youth would mingle and interact and play games, which would help build connections of trust and friendship and would enable openness, community, and feelings of safety.

The center is also described on several of its promotional material and website as a space where young people can express their identities, share difficulties they face as immigrant South Asians, and feel supported:

YOSAI is a safe space where South Asian youth can be themselves. You can play basketball, take a dance class, enroll in free SAT classes and discuss issues which affect your lives and community. You will be surrounded by people who will understand you and who want to harness your talents.

You will be exposed to new careers and opportunities. You will have the opportunity to develop the life skills to maximize your potential in whatever path you choose (YOSAI website, 2010).

This above descriptive account of the organization resonates with aspects of safety that Sehar discussed in the townhall meeting. Furthermore, the element of support from people who will “understand” teens is also quite common in the approach through which the staff members engage with the teens. In the townhall meeting, all staff members were eager to understand what teens needed at the Center. At the same time, creating safe space means that such a site also offers opportunities for safety in the future too: wherein, teens are “exposed to new career opportunities” and “develop life skills.” Creating affective safe space also entails attention to youth’s voice and agency. Sehar asked teens how they’d like to make YOSAI a safer space during the Townhall. In the above excerpt from the website, Sehar’s efforts are in alignment with the Center’s mission: paying attention to teens agency and supporting, “whatever path you [teens choose]” for their future.

Umang, the center director in 2012, tells me in his interview to think of this center as a “safe space with a purpose.” When I inquired more about the “purpose” he

highlighted that to make a safe space they have to craft their programs based on a four pronged model: “support, action, guidance, and enrichment.” He believes that these elements when incorporated into the programs make YOSAI a safe space. Hence, the center is a space that offers affective, emotional support, as well as scope for growth and enrichment.

YOSAI, like many youth NGOs, changes its youth programs yearly. In 2011, the organization had an official youth committee, called the Youth Council, which made decisions pertaining to the youth’s needs at the Center. This council consisted of 5 girls who, after a series of incidents at the center, including the missing phone of the staff episode, decided to get permission from the center director to create some “Center Rules.” Being leaders of a council for and of the youth, as the president, Zainab, a 16 year old Muslim girl, described to me, the council executive team felt they had to take charge of some of the activities at the Center, especially those related to safety amidst peers. The girls on the council drafted up 10 rules and posted them on a bulletin board in the Center. Of the 10, one overtly includes the need to maintain the center as an affective safe space. It reads:

YOSAI is a safe place, please respect each other’s differences. If you don’t have anything positive to say, keep it to yourself.

In this rule, the youth claim the Center to be a safe space, just as the Center seeks to promote. But furthermore, the teens give value to diversity and differences that the youth who attend the center come to represent. Through this rule, the youth aim to create, like the center staff, an environment that is free of derogation and negative reactions and, instead, be rife for growth and enrichment. As I was unclear what inspired this rule, Zainab clarified that she, and many others, felt that:

if someone reacts negatively to what we are sharing at YOSAI we won't feel like sharing it. It'll be like being in school or something. So, it is important to have positive support here for many of us, since we don't get it always. And in our Lead [leadership program at YOSAI] we share a lot of personal stories. We feel like this is our second home, sometimes even more comfortable than our own home (Fieldnotes, May 19, 2011).

Zainab highlights sentiments that Umang and other staff seek to create: center as a place that should be recognized by the youth where they can “feel like they’re in an environment where people understand who they are.” Zainab reflects on how the Lead program, an all-Desi girls leadership program, allows the girls to come together and share their difficult experiences and personal stories, which they would not be able to do so in other sites such as their schools, or even at home.

As such, then, YOSAI is constructed as a physical space offering affective safety. However, Umang further pushes the meaning of safety by going beyond physicality to completely being associated with feelings and affective experiences. Umang tells me in his interview that:

Yeah, I mean, sometimes I say that YOSAI, is not a place, it is a state of mind. It is what you independent of where you are you should know you are having a YOSAI experience. And so staff should be ... as youth... at the center or Gurdwara... you have the feel.

Umang emphasizes not just the physicality of the Center as a safe abode but also values it as an affective safe space as well, wherein youth and staff members can experience what the Center is, or how it “feels,” irrespective of the physical space they traverse. He elaborates that YOSAI is about connection and community that all who attend can eventually keep with them and find anywhere, alluding to the identities and networks that develop while interacting with YOSAI center and its programs. In describing the organization some more, Umang elaborates that safe space then means, “it all begins with

[that] trust,” wherein, young people are able to discuss their everyday difficulties and “have a sense of belonging.” Such a description resembles closely with the youth council members expression of safety at YOSAI: where teens can share personal stories. Hence, it can be argued that networks, trust, and feelings of support characterize this youth center.

Many programs hosted by YOSAI reflect how the organization seeks to make the Center a place where South Asian immigrant youth can find a sense of belonging. I find that this sentiment for creating belonging was further exacerbated after the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing Islamophobia that South Asians experienced. In the next section I map the youth center as a space for young South Asians that is linked directly to political and social justice issues of safety.

POLITICAL SAFETY

When the Center began, the safe space mission included the aim to enable Desi teens to “navigate the racial landscape of America.” In the political climate of the post 9/11 era, the safe space mission of the center becomes even more pertinent. The Center identifies some of the problems of hate crime and racial injustice that South Asian immigrant youth face in New York and seeks to restore safety in such a political climate of racial discrimination. The website describes why more indoor safe spaces and programs that pay attention to the affective side of youth’s everyday realities are especially required in the contemporary socio-political environment:

In the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks, the need for YOSAI’s [safe] programs gained new urgency. This was a difficult time for South Asian communities. Harassment and racial profiling against South Asians were rampant. Many South Asian youth refused to go to school or hang out in public places. They expressed anger towards the WTC attackers and frustration around why their homelands and beliefs were being blamed (YOSAI website, 2011).

Many of the youth too expressed a need for a safe space where they could come and discuss their experiences of discrimination as a result of 9/11. They identified that their mobility was restricted as a result of their parents' fears and concerns about their safety in an era when young kids from the South Asian community were being harassed in the public and also being excluded at school, as I described earlier in this chapter. It appears that the center then is keenly aware of how the South Asian youth community experienced discrimination and aims to serve their need for a politically safe space, when many had, according to their website, "refused to go to school or hang out in public places." While teens' response to the aftermath of 9/11 shifts as the years progress, as I will discuss in the next two chapters, I find that the Center is fulfilling the need for "safe space" for ethnic teens in ways otherwise unaccounted for in literature on youth centers (see Chapter One).

The programs hosted by YOSAI offer concrete ways in which to make young people feel "politically safe" in this post 9/11 climate. The website indicates:

In December 2001, YOSAI received a large grant from The Rockefeller Foundation. Under the leadership of Executive Director, Asha, YOSAI grew, almost overnight. YOSAI provided a safe platform for youth to tell their own 9-11 stories, participate in peace forums, demonstrate outside INS detention centers, and hold open-mic sessions. With the 2000 Census data revealing a significant rise in the South Asian population, we broadened our vision to respond to the times (YOSAI website, 2011).

Since 2001 onwards, YOSAI's safe space activities included creating a "safe platform" for youth to discuss the harm they felt from outside: of harassment, racial profiling, and resultant frustration of "blame" about their homelands. Many of the programs in the aftermath of 9/11 are still hosted indoors and at the Center. For instance, the Lead classes, an all girls leadership program, are held at the Center, where South Asian girls discuss

their experiences of racial profiling as a group. One of the flyers printed for Lead for 2009-10 includes a thought bubble next to an image of a girl with a single question: “What do we talk about?” and about seven responses listed as bullet points, including: “Family and culture” and “Discrimination,” highlighting how safe space islands include gendered safe spaces to discuss feelings of discrimination after 9/11. The poetry slam competition in which Sidhansh shared his poem on discrimination in NYC was hosted indoors as a platform to enable “youth to tell their own stories,” and expressing a political voice against hate crimes. Participating in “peace forums” and in demonstrations outside detention centers where many South Asian and Muslim men were detained right after 9/11 also becomes another way the Center seeks to offer political safety.¹⁰ Such participatory work of youth in responding to the dangers of political safety will be discussed further in the next chapter. Here, I want to highlight how the discourses of political safety circulate in the mission and programmatic work of YOSAI.

¹⁰ At a seminar for South Asians in America in Washington, DC, the director of another youth organization in Queens for Desi low-income teens and families discussed this point about post 9/11 detentions. During her presentation, she shared how her organization worked towards releasing men from her Bangladeshi community from the detention centers for wrongful custody. The Department of Homeland Security, in June 2002, instituted the National Security Exit-Entry Registration System (NSEERS), wherein non-citizen males between the ages of 16 and 45 from South Asian, Arab, and Muslim nations (including Bangladesh and Pakistan) were asked to register their immigration status with the Department. However, many of these men who went to get registered were detained at the Immigration and Naturalization Service centers (where no communication with family was allowed) and even deported from the country, while the rest of their families lived on in the US, without much contact with them. Many lawyers and civil rights organizations and community members rallied against the racial and religious discrimination that the NSEERS promoted as it conflated security threats directly linked with ethnic and religious identity. The NSEERS voluntary registration from the listed nations was stopped in 2003, and the other components of detention continued until 2011 when this special registration process was no longer required, except for at first point of entry into the country (Human Rights Watch, 2002; Maira, 2004; Offer, 2013). Some of the teens from this study either knew of extended family members or community members who faced this discrimination, or even had their own older siblings and fathers deported because of this policy.

Political safety is possible not just by providing a space at the Center for teens to discuss issues of socio-political discriminations they face, but also possible through the ways in which the Center supports political engagement that will makes teens' presence in the country safer, in a broader sense. This means that YOSAI programs encourage the Desi teens, who are marginalized, to have a platform to express political stand points. And as such, inculcate the possibilities of speaking out, through open-mic, or by expressing their concerns in the socio-political environment through urging them to be leaders in America. Unlike Sidhansh's mother's reaction to silence him in a public space and to only draw on informal networks for support to negotiate racism, the center staff encourages teens to have a voice, express themselves, and be more confident.

The 2010 flyer for Lead program highlights the need for teens to express themselves. The flyer poses the question: "Are you a South Asian high school student?" And then offers an answer, "Then stand up and let your voice be heard!" To what ends does the Center encourage youth to let their voices be heard is unclear, however, the Center is encouraging girls to speak up and express their concerns. The text below the title of the program suggests that "voices" of youth should be heard so as to "...change the world." Teens are drawn into responding to both local politics as well as global politics for change. The 2011 flyer of a similar leadership program, Reach, for both boys and girls, asks a different set of questions, more locally focused: "Would you like to be a leader, engage in community service and make new friends?" The flyer further informs the reader what they should do in reply: "If the answer is YES then join YOSAI's Reach program!" because "it's a time and place to work on issues that impact you!" The focus of the program is then to encourage young South Asians to be politically engaged by

urging them to make change at the global level – “change the world” –, and also more specifically within their local communities by doing acts of community service and responding to issues that impact them.

The everyday activities and workshops that become part of these programs listed above describe specific political issues that impact these youth and their communities. For instance, when lobbying groups were fighting for the right of young immigrant youth to continue their education at college level despite having no citizenship or official state documentation about their immigrant status in the country, YOSAI staff asked their youth in the two above mentioned programs to support the signing of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, 2011 (DREAM Act). A staff member posted the following message on YOISAI’s Facebook page, perhaps, addressing the youth as well as the adults who support the work of the center:

Help youth follow their dreams! Follow the target list to make calls to your representative today to help pass the Dream Act!
<https://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/371/images/House-111th-Master-Targets-111610.pdf>
 (Posted and saved on: Dec 03, 2010).

As the socio political climate alters, the Center also encourages youth to engage in varying forms of political activism, a way to create political safe space. Apart from also encouraging teens to make calls about the Dream Act to local congresspersons to pass the Act, the Center teens worked with community members in other political actions. The Center helped community members fill out the census forms in 2012. YOSAI does so in order to facilitate “a sense of community among the participants [teens], and to increase their level of civic and community engagement,” as stated in mission of the Lead program. Teens helped their parents and other community members to fill out these

census forms, serving as bridges between the wider world and their homes.¹¹ One of the staff members, Jessica, overseeing the Census program said that YOSAI had even set up a hotline number at their center so families could also speak and clarify any doubts that they may have about the form. Jessica said that many of the families and youth “fear filling out the form cause they feel will be made accountable or sent back to their home country” (Fieldnotes, February 2010).

Other staff members more directly reflected on the programs at the Center as shaping community partnerships and navigating racial landscapes through networks with peer organizations. Sugandha, the coordinator of Lead program between 2010-12, visited an annual summit hosted by Saathi, a national non-profit organization serving to advocate for issues of South Asians in America, along with two young girls from YOSAI, Zainab and Ayesha. All three were going to speak on a panel, “Equal Opportunities and Safe Spaces for South Asian Youth” to discuss young people’s experiences in America. In describing what work they do at YOSAI Sugandha says,

We create a space to build on identity and community issues. One way is we bring a lot of organizations in for programs. So it's not just South Asian specific. So yes, from South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association of NY [SALGA] to YA YA Network. And you know also about sexual health and rights and LGBT issues. Different organizations mainly from the city, but other communities too so that youth can also network [with other youth of different races]. Some youth end up wanting to do internships at these different organizations or programs and take it to the next level of leadership.

Sugandha describes how the youth space is not only a physical and affective safe site, but one that also aims to build networks and connections between various South Asian youth organizations, such as SALGA, a rights organization for queer Desis, Youth Activist-Youth Allies organization [YA YA Network], an “anti-racist and anti-sexist

¹¹ See Marjorie F. Orellana (2009) where she discusses a similar concept of “bridging” in her work on immigrant children as language brokers and translators for their families.

organization” staffed by 15-19 year olds in the New York City (YA YA Network, 2012). These networks that work towards finding equal opportunities in America, helps build a politically safe space for Desi youth.

The previous summer Zainab completed an internship with YA YA Network and worked on a project about the United States’ budget spending on education in comparison to its military, an issue she still engages with. Sugandha reflects that through such peer networking on social justice and community issues teenagers can “take it to the next level of leadership.” By suggesting another level for leadership, Sugandha is alluding to the varied possibilities for organizing work that young people can engage in and even become future leaders of racial or social justice organizations, as she elaborated later on in conversation with me. I heard Sugandha on different occasions encourage some of the girls in her Lead program to be leaders in the future. In a casual conversation, she said to one of the most politically engaged youth, Zainab, that “you should definitely stand for political office. One day you could definitely be our first South Asian American woman president” (Fieldnotes, Spring 2011). These encouraging messages about the possibilities of a future political life are not in contrast to teenagers’ current realities. The everyday programs organized by the staff members are geared towards preparing young people to be engaged in social justice issues currently and in the future, and making a mark as immigrants in the new country, constructing their current and future geographies as politically safe.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have mapped, using children's own narratives, the lives of young South Asian teenagers who are first and second generation immigrants living in New York in the 21st century. Most of the teens or their parents arrived from Bangladesh in the mid to late 90s and early 2000s. Such a migratory trend reflects the third wave of migration from South Asia in the United States that was encouraged by new immigration policies wherein migration from nations that did not represent more than 50,000 people in the United States were offered opportunities to get residency status. Most of these teens' families, hence, unlike other South Asian migrants are not arriving to the United States as a result of their professional skills; rather, they enter the country with limited financial support, aid, and limited skills for the professional job market.

The South Asian teens of my study experience many initial adjustments themselves, or are cognizant of the difficulties their parents faced when they first migrated. These struggles of immigration are compounded by the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, which exacerbated ignorant racial remarks and hate crimes against South Asians, equating them to terrorists, happening at the local and everyday level at schools, as well as in neighborhoods, and even at the state level. Growing up in such a complex environment is expressed by teens through their spoken word, and other informal narratives they shared with me during my fieldwork. The teens and their families, find various support networks in their neighborhood and communities to cope with issues of Islamophobia and discrimination, such as the system of "following" or finding belonging in their ethnic and immigrant neighborhoods. In the next chapters, however, I examine how these support systems, including their neighborhood dynamics, are not sufficient

support mechanisms, and teens find resources of support and political mobilization at the ethnic youth Center.

In the second half of this chapter, I set the stage for how youth centers like YOSAI, respond to teens needs at a discursive level. By drawing on YOSAI's print and web documents and staff interviews about the mission and purpose of the center, I trace the discourses of safety of a youth center, which includes attention to indoor, affective, and political safety. These discourses relate to the lived realities of the teens who attend YOSAI.

Mapping the everyday lives of immigrant South Asian teens, and the discourses that shape the programs of the youth center they attend, accounts for the under-examined and marginalized young lives. Such examination also raises questions about how space: both neighborhood, city, and youth centers contribute to and inform these young lives. Discourses of safety influence the ways in which young people live their lives, oftentimes resulting in restrictive mobility, yet also leads to participation in public life and space. However, by taking into account racialized dynamics and the contemporary political climate, this chapter reveals how discourses of safe spaces for young brown people include attention to affective and political safety, which is otherwise not accounted for in literature on youth centers focusing essentially on identity issues, or on how spaces island young people from their realities.

In the next chapter I examine the reasons why young people attend such a youth center as YOSAI, giving light to young people's own voices and experiences, and mapping their everyday political geographies further. In the final data chapter, I analyze teens performative and embodied practices in and because of their participation in the

youth center that indicate teens' responses to their socio-political realities. Such analysis highlights youth identities in the contemporary period, and how these are intimately connected with race and space.

CHAPTER FOUR

ENCOUNTERS WITH “THIRD SPACE”: SOCIO-POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF SOUTH ASIAN TEENAGERS

Minhaj: “My sister told me about it. She used to attend YOSAI too.”

Mueen: “My sister-in-law worked here, that’s how I first heard about it.”

Noor: “I needed free SAT tutoring, and my mom heard about it through Sahib’s mom.”

Nida: “My school informed me about this South Asian youth center that is all about action and agency... that got me interested.”

Rasheed: “I was bored at home so came here with my friend... got me to do something... and it’s history since.”

These short responses above trace the networks through which Desi youth first learn about the South Asian youth center, YOSAI. The initial encounters begin as a result of familial networks of support (I discussed in the previous chapter), as those who first told these teens about this third space include relations such as: sister, sister-in-law, mom, and friend. Some teens, like Nida, also learnt about YOSAI through school. The programs, such as the free tutoring, and those related to “action” and “agency,” attract some teens to the Center. That this space is for South Asian youth was also appealing to Nida. Youth like Rasheed who come to YOSAI to counter boredom, later get involved in making change in their communities, which I detail later.

In this chapter, I examine what brings teens to the South Asian youth center, YOSAI, and what makes them participate in its programs and activities month after month, over periods that sometimes extend to a couple of years. In some instances, teens

also return to this third space as staff members. After analyzing 10 in-depth interviews and other conversations with teens attending the Center, I find that teens use the third space – YOSAI, and other in-between-spaces, such as streets, neighboring cities, as a result of participating in YOSAI programs – to forge connections based on social class, ethnicity, and similar cultural beliefs and shared socio-political concerns that inform their daily lives. These connections exist in the form of friendships, romantic partnerships, mentorships, and familial bonds that cut across age categories and generations and their bonds transcend beyond interactions at the Center to other sites of home, neighborhood, informal spaces of the mall, streets, and online spaces. I contend that these ties are informed by current socio-political environment, immigrant parent aspirations, Desi teens’ own desires for connections and physical mobility, and are enabled through programs that YOSAI runs. Furthermore, I suggest teens’ reasons for attending YOSAI and its programs highlight the significance and uniqueness of third spaces over sites such as schools and homes. Whether it is as an act of learning about their own shared yet differing cultures, finding cultural connectedness, or avoiding cultural ignorance and countering racism, attending YOSAI offers Desi teenagers a sense of community and a unique way of “being brown” they are not able to be in other spaces. These third spaces, I argue, both support and shape South Asian teens political geographies, wherein the political must be understood as social and personal, a point I discuss in the last segment of this chapter.

In addition to supplying the brief responses above, some of the teens shared more reflective replies when I asked them how they first learned about the Center and what brought them there. Sagar, for instance, responded by saying, “you know, it’s interesting.

I think god has his hands upon us thankfully...” He then further expanded on why he thinks so and how the programs and the networks at YOSAI “changed his life.” At the time Sagar learned about YOSAI he had recently changed schools. He went from Skyline, a specialized high school, to Manuel, a non-specialized public high school willing to accept his low scores from grade 8, with which he could no longer continue at Skyline. After he started attending Manuel high school, he received an email from Skyline about YOSAI, and their various programs, including information about free tutoring help. He initially came to YOSAI for support with his grades, and a couple years later he was still attending YOSAI, not just for the free tutoring classes. Because he had already moved schools when he received an email about YOSAI from Skyline, he was surprised that he heard about the program from a school he no longer attended, and felt that divine intervention helped him find the support he now has at YOSAI. As I described in the previous chapter, Sagar’s experience in his first school was very difficult, as he had arrived in the U.S. as a new immigrant, that too, mid-semester in second grade. He had a difficult time making friends at school and this experience had not changed much through his adolescent years. When Sagar arrived at YOSAI, he not only got support to improve his grades but also found a new community of friends he identified with, expressing that as a result he felt YOSAI had “changed his life.” Sagar talked about his friends he made at YOSAI – mostly a group of Bangladeshi teens between ages of 14 and 19 years – as “friends for life.” He also talked about how YOSAI enabled him to have “real world experiences.” Sagar’s parents had enforced strict restrictions on his mobility to visit friends’ houses, or different parts of the city, alone. Hence, when he started attending

YOSAI, he was able to visit various parts of New York City, and other neighboring cities as a result of participating in the programs.

In addition to making new friends, Sagar also developed new skills. He took a poetry class at YOSAI that helped him write better poetry, thereby facilitating his participation in the Lincoln Center Youth Poetry Slam Competition in 2012. He also published two poems in a short book with the help of a staff member at the center. All of these reasons explain why Sagar, like many other teens whose narratives I string together in this chapter, finds encounters with third space – of YOSAI, and other spaces between the home and the school – as offering productive real world experiences, which enable friendships for life, and feelings of belonging. These exchanges and experiences at YOSAI and other third spaces also enable Desi teens to negotiate, not entirely without some struggles, their socio-political and cultural realities, which I detail in this chapter.

Eminent scholars of urban youth centers, such as Milbrey W. McLaughlin, Merita A. Irby, and Juliet Langman (2001) argue that youth centers are safe alternatives to life on the streets for inner city and urban youth. They write that these youth attend local and neighborhood centers because they “want to belong to organizations that help them escape inner-city despair, imagine and move toward positive, hope-filled futures” (p. 6). While the previous chapter highlights how ethnic urban youth centers, such as YOSAI, are constructed in part as safe alternatives to street life, teens of my study do not use the space entirely as an alternative; rather as an avenue for use and negotiation of their place in public spaces, street corners, and other unmonitored spaces (further detailed in the next chapter). This chapter highlights how, like many marginalized urban youth in America, Desi teens do engage with organizations to sometimes escape the sense of despair

experienced at home and school and that their participation in such local centers is a “want” or a choice. But furthermore, Desi teens use the center and other third spaces to navigate and negotiate their despondency over difficulties or restrictions, while fully aware of their social realities. They do not imagine moving towards some idealistic “hope filled future.” Rather, they engage with and grapple with their conditions in the here and now in ways they can respond to their situations or negotiate and mediate them (also see Chapter Five). In the following segments I discuss the socio-political and cultural realities and needs of the teens, which emerge in conversations with them about their reasons for attending programs at YOSAI. This discussion supports my argument that third spaces such as youth centers become sites for negotiating difficulties, inequalities, and cultural differences in the everyday and offer a sense of belonging for urban low income immigrant teens.

NAVIGATING SOCIAL CLASS

Since many teens initially joined the Center for the free SAT and tutoring classes, I wanted to understand what made taking the SAT class at YOSAI so attractive to many of the teens. Did they join tutoring at YOSAI because their parents wanted them to? Were these teenagers primarily interested in academics? Was their choice to attend the YOSAI SAT preparation class a result of their financial circumstances? And why did they still continue to attend other programs at YOSAI once their free SAT and tutoring class sessions were completed? The interviews with teens about the free SAT classes reveal their socio-economic hardships and the shared difficulties of finances the teens attending the center face. But I also found that programs at the Center helped them to express the

difficulties teens' faces as a result of their shared class positioning. I argue that Desi working class teens find support in mediating their everyday financial difficulties as a result of attending programs at YOSAI.

In conversation with Noor about why she attended YOSAI's SAT class she told me that before she joined the course offered at YOSAI she had been interested in taking a Princeton Review tutoring class. But when she learned that YOSAI offers SAT class free of cost, she decided to join it because of the "cost factor." She also told me how "all brown kids" seek tutoring help, either at Khan Academy or some place cheaper. Rizwaan concurred, saying, "we all do SAT prep, there is no question about it, it's just the fee issue." Another youth, Rasheed also said something similar about Desi kids in Queens and this pattern of tutoring. Teens attended YOSAI not just for the free SAT classes but also for free tutoring classes for help in different subjects through their middle and high school years. When I asked Rasheed why he attends programs at YOSAI, he told me that:

Rasheed: Because I need help with writing. And he [Aman, a staff member] said he'll help with college essays. Like I need class to be able to even think about college... All my friends they like go to tutoring but it's very expensive, like 2000 or 3000 dollars.

AD: For a semester?

Rasheed: For tutoring? Yeah. And like in Jackson Heights you have Khan's Tutorial, and it is \$75 an hour!

AD: Do a lot of Desi kids go there?

Rasheed: Yeah. Like every single Desi kid goes for tutoring!

AD: Really?

Rasheed: Yeah, for SATs at least.

Attending YOSAI for SAT or other tutoring support is a common Desi teen activity, according to these youth. Rasheed, like Rizwaan and Noor, seems to be sure that “every single Desi kid goes for tutoring!” making attending such classes a kind of cultural act that they too must be a part of. However, they express shock at the cost of each tutoring class being as expensive as “\$75 an hour!” Most teens at YOSAI are cognizant that their parents are unable to afford costly tutoring classes for them but that they require it to improve academically.

One afternoon at YOSAI I talked to three Desi teens about expensive tutoring classes and the financial constraints their parents faced in paying for them if they are not for free. Nabab, Minhaj, and Sahiba, who attended SAT classes at YOSAI, would often hang out together in the lounge or the classrooms at the Center during the summer of 2012. I noted that while hanging out at YOSAI, Sahiba was constantly doing some homework from a SAT prep textbook others did not use at the center. She would manage to do some work and also take out time to be part of the conversations Nabab and Minhaj were having. One day when I happened to be with all three in the classroom, I inquired about the homework that Sahiba was doing. She told me that she was working on her SAT homework. While Nabab and Minhaj were also taking SAT prep classes at the center, I did not see them doing the number of quizzes that Sahiba was completing. When I asked how come the two boys were not doing their homework too, they told me that it was because Sahiba was taking an SAT prep class outside of YOSAI, so their homework assignments were different. Minhaj quickly added with much excitement and shock, “and you won’t believe it, she pays \$5000 for it!” Nabab too jumped in and added: “can you imagine? She’s crazy. Even if my dad would pay something like that my neck would be

on the line. And if I didn't do well, I'd be dead." Nabab's usage of the clause "even if" when referring to his father's position on paying for an SAT prep class suggests that it is unlikely that he would pay for an expensive tutoring class. Nabab further added, "I don't think we could afford that anyway!" Like Nabab, many of the youth at the Center recognize that it is difficult for their parents to pay for tutoring classes and are aware of the financial constraints similarly faced by other working class families in New York and hence expressed shock that Sahiba spends money on her SAT classes. Along with financial constraints teens feel the pressure to procure good academic results that meet their parents' standards as Shabab expresses the exaggerated threat he would have to face – "my neck would be on the line" – if his parents paid for tutoring and he did not get results accordingly. Sahiba defended her position on taking the paid SAT class, so she said, "it's not like I don't have to perform well. I know it costs a lot of money for my dad too. That's why you see I'm working here all the time and getting grilled. I'm even sitting in for our free class here – anything I can get." Sahiba wanted to clarify that paying for the SAT class is difficult for her father as well, but it inspires her to work much harder for the classes.

While the pressures of academic success on immigrant children have been long documented by scholars studying this topic (Bankston, 2004; Gibson, 1998; Ogbu & Simmons, 1998; Zhou, 1997), my research at YOSAI suggests that the pressure of academic success is exacerbated among working class immigrant youth who cannot afford the same support for tutoring as middle class or upper middle class families. As Sahiba's and Nabab's comments reflect, the awareness about family financial difficulties and the pressures to succeed seem to be intimately linked for working class youth. Most

of the teens that attend YOSAI are very aware of their families' aspirations and class positions.

Similarly, Nida too, who aspires to be a doctor and one day open a clinic in Bangladesh, seems to understand the pressure for children's academic success that first and second generation immigrant children face. She tells me:

I guess because it is really hard enough for them to come here and give birth to first generation and they have to adjust completely. Like, they have to change their whole life. They give birth here and they expect something back. They don't want their hard work for nothing. It can't go to waste. So their child can't not succeed. So their child has to have both cultures and do something with their life. They didn't come here just for nothing.

Nida shows compassion towards her parents desire for her to succeed academically and choose a professional career that will establish financial security, one they do not have, and one that will indicate the success of their American Dream. She recognizes the role of class status that complicates her parents' aspiration. She adds, "like in Bangladesh, he [Nida's father] was more of the elite class," showing her awareness of the distinct shift in social class status immigration brought about for her family. However, the realities of succeeding academically evade some teenagers. A lot of the teens who attend the Center do not perform very well at school and actively engage in mediating their family's financial difficulties, something that the immigrant teenagers from upper-middle class and middle class families may not have to deal with. Many of these working class teens, then, begin to find ways in which they can earn some income – i.e., a fellowship, stipend, or even some paid work if they are 16 and over so as to cover their own expenses and even support their family. Mueen, who began working when he was 16, and attended several of the programs and classes that YOSAI offers. In one conversation with him

about different work experiences he told me about a time when he had to convince his father that he has to work because of their financial situation:

AD: You were telling me about your dad saying...questioning why you were working...

Mueen: Oh yeah... He wants to know why. And I'm like we need money and all. If I ask him for money he can't give me. So, he's like ok. Then my dad had some questions. But it's tough for me. I told him this is the only position I could get cause it is tough for me to get any other position. And he's like ok, do it.

AD: And paid internships are not good enough?

Mueen: I mean paid internships could work but it's just I didn't get accepted anywhere. I signed up for that American Indian work thing. I didn't get it either. Nida got it, but I didn't.

In discussing Mueen's interaction with his father with him a bit further, I learned that Mueen's father is hesitant about Mueen's working for two main reasons. He objects to the type of job Mueen would be doing – working as a janitor in a near-by hospital – a working class job, like him. And two, he is reluctant to admit that their family's financial condition does not cover some of his son's financial requirements. I had learned from the teens at YOSAI that most of their Desi parents consider it their responsibility to financially support the teens until their children complete their first higher education degree and even in some cases until marriage. However, they are not always able to do so as there is a disjuncture between their capacity for financial support and teens' requirements. Mueen's father, who drives a taxi, hopes for his son to have a professional career, which will help him live the "American Dream." Hence, when his dad learns Mueen is taking up a job that does not steer his son towards a professional career, but only meets immediate financial needs, he is uncomfortable and questions why Mueen needs to work at all. The father's aspirations for an American Dream success are

threatened by the prospect of his son working in a blue-collar industry—even if temporarily. Mueen, too, would have preferred to get another job, and had applied for the “American Indian work thing” – a prestigious paid internship at an American Indian organization – that was advertised at YOSAI. But Mueen notes that because of his grades in comparison to those of Nida’s, he was unable to secure the internship. Mueen’s awareness of the limited opportunities available to him as a working class youth with average grades reflects the realities of many young immigrants who negotiate everyday financial realities, even with support from youth centers.

While YOSAI does not regularly hire youth as staff, they have been able to create a couple of paid staff positions for teenagers. These were conceived and designed at least in part to meet the needs expressed by teens to find work and help their families financially or to meet their day to day expenses. Many organizations across New York support working class youth by creating job positions, paid internships, and fellowships for their city’s youth, but these positions are not numerous enough to meet the needs of YOSAI’s youth members. Some of the programs that YOSAI runs also address the teens economic needs as they provide stipends to the youth participants. This strategy of compensating working class teens financially to participate in extra-curricular activities helps provide financial assistance as well as opportunities for emotional and social support through the workshops they get to attend at YOSAI. In my conversation with Rizwaan, who has been attending the programs at the Center for several years and has worked previously at different odd end jobs to be able to support his family financially, I learned about these stipends, and other ways in which he and other teens earn an income, at YOSAI and beyond. Conversations with him and other teens highlighted the value of

the stipends and how important they are in enabling many teens to continue to attend programs at the Center:

AD: So why did you come to YOSAI every day?

Rizwaan: It was part of the stipend...every class counts.

AD: Really?

Rizwaan: So far I got money from Desi Men's and Reach and Siblings.

AD: Siblings program also offered money for attending?

Rizwaan: Yeah. I got 50. I got 170 for Reach. 150 for DM.

AD: How does it get calculated?

Rizwaan: Well, it's like 10 dollars for a class for DM. Then Reach is like 1 dollar 50 cents for an hour.

AD: How long is the class for?

Rizwaan: Like the whole year.

Earning cash stipend as a result of participating in programs at YOSAI seems to be a key motivator for Rizwaan to attend the programs and be at the Center. Even though he no longer takes classes at the Center he is aware of how the stipend is calculated. This reason for attending the Center everyday is common among the teens. Even Rasheed articulates this in describing what he likes about the programs: "...at the end of the day... I mean, we get paid for this!" When I asked what he would do with this money, like Rizwaan, Rasheed said that he would keep some and give the rest to his mother. Rizwaan's mother, he said, even asked for his help with money at one point, for which he feels responsible. When a new teen would join any of the programs, I'd hear him/ her asking one of the older youth, who had been participating in programs from the previous year, how much money on average they would end up earning through the semester long

programs. Such calculations that Rizwaan describes to me, were often discussed in conversation by the youth in the youth lounge at the Center. They would then make plans for what they'd do when they get paid. For instance, they would plan to spend part of the money on some food they love or go to a game arcade together, and give the rest to their family. Such dynamics may be read as youth's aspirations for purchasing power and efforts to mediate their working class positions. But very little is accounted for in research on how working class conditions directly hinder the academic pressures youth face from their immigrant parents, which this section briefly highlights.

Instead of focusing on academics, many youth turn to jobs more permanently in efforts to negotiate the daily class positions and acquire some purchasing power. One afternoon I learned that Rizwaan spoke with one of the staff members about an idea to teach a dance class at YOSAI. Rizwaan is a self-trained contemporary Bollywood dancer,¹² and has prepared, organized, and performed dance routines with some of the other boys at YOSAI's various celebratory events, such as, their 15-year gala fund-raiser. At other times, Rizwaan and some of his other friends from YOSAI have prepared group dances for talent competition events hosted at the Center or at other inter-organization NYC events or local Diwali Mela¹³ or at high schools. As a result of these frequent performances Rizwaan and his friends even formed a formal dance group, representing musical dance forms from Bollywood to Hip Hop and created an official page for it on

¹² Rizwaan's brother Minhaj told me that Rizwaan learned all his dance moves from watching YouTube dance videos of a famous Bollywood actor, Shah Rukh Khan. He added that Rizwaan also saw a lot of the dance routines performed by film stars at various Bollywood award ceremonies on YouTube and picked up steps for his choreography from there. I will discuss this influence of Bollywood further in my next chapter.

¹³ Diwali Mela is a fair hosted for the celebration of the Hindu festival of lights. These are often organized by local chapters of national Hindu Associations or Indian Associations in Manhattan and Queens. A group of boys from YOSAI – including Rizwaan as their leader – were to perform at one such festival in October 2012.

Facebook. Given this background of his dance activities, where he routinely taught dance to his dance group members, Rizwaan thought he could ask the YOSAI director to teach a class formally to more youth there. This class would be a way for him to teach fellow teens a creative art form that would keep them busy and encourage them to continue to attend YOSAI as well, he reasoned with the director. For Rizwaan, earning substantial cash, especially since he was 18 and because he had already attended all stipend paying classes at YOSAI and could not participate in them again, was essential.

The importance of earning an income for the teens of my study became more evident in a conversation that took place between Rizwaan, Sahib, a 15 year old Pakistani Muslim teen, and me. Rizwaan recently received confirmation that he would be employed to teach his dance class at YOSAI. Rizwaan and Sahib were quite ecstatic about this and they began discussing Rizwaan earnings:

Sahib: If you work 4 days for 2 hours that's 8 under Aliyah. And 4 here, that's 12...

Rizwaan: Two days a week here.

Sahib: That's what I'm saying, so it's going to be 12. So she's going to give you money for 15, like preparation and all that.

AD: Will she?

Sahib: Yeah... cause it's like 2 hours for class, but she said she'll give for 5 cause if he will work there and travel, that's 15. And if that's 10 dollars an hour...

Rizwaan: But...

Sahib: Yeah, that's \$150 after taxes and stuff. That's \$100 for a week. That's super... that's like an unlimited metro card for a month!

Sahib was extremely excited to learn about his friend's opportunity to work and earn money and was helping Rizwaan calculate his income in the above excerpt of our

conversation. Sahib discusses the two locations where Rizwaan would teach his dance class: “under Aliyah,” a YOSAI staff member at an after school program run by YOSAI at a school in Queens, and “here,” at the Center as well. Sahib used his knowledge of what another youth staff gets paid at YOSAI, and with some knowledge of the duration of the class, began to calculate how much money Rizwaan will make and equated it to earning a ticket to physical mobility: “like an unlimited metro card.” That he understood Rizwaan’s opportunity to teach dance not only in terms of monetary benefits, but also in terms of freedom of mobility on the metro is interesting, and a pre-cursor to discussions about teens physical mobility restrictions that are mediated through the youth center programs I discuss in this chapter. It is significant also to note here how teens collectively discuss their financial issues and empathize with each other about this common concern along with the pressures for academic success that Nabab, Sahib, and Minhaj had told me about. Sahib first got involved in dancing because of Rizwaan, who is also three years older to him, and finds it very exciting that Rizwaan is able to earn money at YOSAI while doing what he enjoys. Sahib’s excitement for Rizwaan reflects teens shared aspiration to earn an income and be independent, irrespective of their precise age. Ties to a common working-class position and similar aspirations are strong amidst some of the Desi teens who attend the programs at YOSAI and indicates how common social class experiences play a role in the emerging friendships among those who attend the Center. It also creates a sense of belonging for them that is not experienced in other spaces such as that of the school. Desi teens find that YOSAI is understanding of their working class issues, which it addresses through stipends, youth jobs, assistantships, and sometimes through its mentorship programs. And even if they do not find support through the

programs, teens like Sahib feel comfortable expressing their working class difficulties in the space of the Center.

Each year, YOSAI hosts a series of “meet and greet” events for youth, wherein youth from various programs at the Center meet South Asian American adult professionals whom the staff members believe can serve as models for teens for their future career trajectories. While most of these visits entail meeting adults in white-collar professions, different from the realities of the adults they are familiar with in their families, one such “meet and greet” visit proved to be exceptionally different for the teens. In August 2012, the teens from YOSAI visited Mr. Bhanu, a CEO of a taxi agency who also runs a Desi TV production company in New York, at his TV studio in Queens. After returning from this visit the teens spoke about Mr. Bhanu as one of the most interesting CEO’s they’ve met so far and found him to be a reliable role model, as he had shared his own story of immigrating from Bangladesh, and the difficulties he first faced working as a taxi driver in New York. Mueen recalled, sounding impressed, how Mr. Bhanu talked about how he shifted careers from driving a taxi to owning a taxi company by drawing on his experiential expertise. He commented on how impressive it was that Mr. Bhanu also merged his love for Bengali TV into a business strategy by combining his taxi business with a TV production business company.

Sahib reflected on the experience of meeting Mr. Bhanu in comparison to some other visits, saying, “now that was a fine visit; a good model. Rest of those folks are just boring. If only we could go to their kind of colleges!” Here, Sahib reflects that most speakers they had met before had attended IVY league schools – something that was beyond many of these teens academic and financial reach. On our subway ride back to

the Center from meeting Mr. Bhanu, other teens too chimed in about their feelings of connection with Mr. Bhanu over other speakers they had met. Sahib, who was dominating this conversation, said that he recognizes the limitations his class position plays on his further education. Veer also noted how the realities of the professionals' they met were very different from their own. While just a couple of YOSAI youth ever manage to go onto private colleges like Barnard; most go to local community colleges or local public universities, as they are busy working and supporting their families and not always able to achieve the academic scores expected for admission into more expensive and prestigious colleges. Sharing common experiences with other working class Desi's whose parents have great ambitions for them, hence, becomes a key motivator to attend programs at YOSAI and a connector for the youth in everyday life growing up as immigrants. Having similar life experiences, as Mr. Bhanu did, – of experiencing working class jobs in their families – and of being a Desi immigrant also resonated with these teens. At the same time, YOSAI offers programs through which these teens who have financial difficulties – like Rasheed, Nabab, Minhaj, and others I discuss in this segment – are able to navigate and negotiate these immediate difficulties through the program stipends or by even running their own dance class for the Center, as Rizwaan is able to. Hence, YOSAI becomes a site that enables opportunities for teens to form working class ties and negotiate to some extent the constraints of their social class position in the everyday exchanges.

“WE’RE ALL BROWN HERE:” CULTURE, COMMUNITY, AND
CONNECTEDNESS

When I first spoke with Nida about the reasons as to what brought her to YOSAI, she said it was the SAT program that YOSAI offers. But what motivated her to explore this place for SAT was that this Center was for South Asian youth, as indicated in the organization's name and its description. Nida explained that she wanted to attend YOSAI to find some ethnic connectedness:

Well in my neighborhood I have a lot of friends... I don't see them too much though. People I hang out with in my school are from all different races, and my best friend in school is Nigerian. And I have other friends who are just like different Asian: Japanese, Korean, and Hispanics, of course... all of them! And me...so I just wanted something that could relate more to me. I wanted to learn more about the culture, but everyone is in some ways all the same, a bit different, but it's the same.

Above, Nida highlights an interesting aspect of why an ethnic youth center is significant: it helps her to meet peers with whom she could "relate more." As opposed to peers in her school or in her diverse neighborhood, whom she likes, and I discussed in the previous chapter, Nida is interested in a support space that speaks to her ethnic and racial background. Like Sahib, who found connectedness based on his working class position at YOSAI, for Nida, finding a brown community also plays an integral role in why she wants to attend a youth center. Nida wishes to attend the Center because she wanted to "learn more about her culture," as broadly understood through the category of "South Asia" as the Center's name suggests. However, she is careful and critical in her commentary about "her culture" as not just being all the same, but also "a but different," alluding to the multiple ethnic, national, cultural, and religious beliefs of the region of South Asia. Yet, she calls it as "in some ways all the same" as the political and racial category of South Asia brings together these Desi teens to the Center together in the diaspora. Like many immigrant groups from the regions of South Asia, Desi teens like

Nida forge connections with those who share a similar history in the larger racial political climate of America, even though she acknowledges how many “different” peoples hail from the region of South Asia. Other Desi teens also share this sentiment about a desire for ethnic community and connectedness across the broad racial and ethnic lines as a reason that attracted them to be part of YOSAI.

Noor, for instance, tells me about how finding more connections with “brown” folk was important for her, even though she found such connectedness in her neighborhood, as I discussed in the previous chapter. She preferred, like many of the teens at the Center, to address herself and her peers at the Center as “Brown,” rather than South Asian or Bangladeshi or other categories, highlighting the significance of racial connectedness for them. But along with racial connections teens seek for cultural connections. I had asked the teens to conduct two different photo-story projects over summer 2012. The first entailed creating a photo story about their experiences at YOSAI and I checked in with the teens on how their project was progressing before the deadline. This helped me assist them and ensure it was completed, and more importantly, it allowed me to learn about various aspects of the Center that matter to them. In discussing this project with Noor, she reveals the significance of “brown spaces”:

AD: What do you have in mind about the project... how will you capture it?

Noor: I can do it during Iftar. Like we’re having that Iftar dinner right...

AD: Yeah, ok, interesting. You can do that... what else... how else can you capture what matters to you here?

Noor: What else is there?

AD: Um... I don’t know, lets think of it...

Noor: You know, it wouldn't be the same if there were Chinese people, Japanese people. Cause it'll be school over again.

AD: So are you saying you would have not gone to another SAT place instead? Cause this is particularly South Asian youth? Does that make a difference?

Noor: Yeah that. I like that. I actually really like it. Cause people are like me. I had this other program for SAT during my school, and that was like everybody. But this is just for us. I like this better, and it's really nice. That one didn't have any book either, it wasn't official, and not helpful at all.

AD: But did you make friends there? If you didn't do much work there?

Noor: I don't know. I wouldn't really make friends with them. But here, it was really really easy. Everyone's just talking to each other and talking about same things... part of the same culture I guess. It's good like that...

AD: Does it make you feel part of a community?

Noor: Yeah, it does. Cause everyone is similar. You have something similar with someone else. Like... there is no... I know there is... I know there is African American and Hispanics here, but there are no white people at all.

AD: That's true. Not at all... I noticed it the other day too. Do you like that?

Noor: I mean, I don't know... I'm not really surrounded by white people much. My school is mainly South Asian and Chinese. Just mostly Asians, so I'm used to it. Yeah.

AD: That's interesting.

Noor: But like mostly my school... it's in Bayside. So it's mostly South East Asian: Korean, Japanese, and all like that. That's the majority. I like how YOSAI is run.

Similar to Nida, Noor speaks about how YOSAI is a space where she can meet people who share the "same culture," or are "like me [her]." Even though she first started attending YOSAI for the free SAT class, her exchange above suggests that it is because of the similar racial make-up of the teens who attend YOSAI that Noor keeps attending the Center activities. She clearly states that it would be unlikely that she'd make friends

at the SAT class offered by her school because the teens were not “similar to her,” not part of the same racial community. When I clarified with her what she meant by “similar to her” she added, “well we’re all brown here, and similar, no!” making explicit her comfort and desire for racial and ethnic networks. Partly because of her experience, wherein she is “not really surrounded by white people at all,” she finds it easier to be friends with racial and ethnic minorities, and particularly likes that there is a space like YOSAI that brings together South Asian youth. As such, in addition to shared racial identities Desi teens are interested in finding similar cultural contacts too as they reflect on both racial and cultural factors almost interchangeably. Although not all teens at YOSAI perform Iftar or practice other religious observances, like fasting for Ramadan, Noor goes on to tell me, “at least here I don’t have to explain what I do all the time,” as most South Asian nations comprise of multi-faith and religious groups. This explained why she wanted to capture the Iftar party in her photo-story about YOSAI. Such support for religious beliefs, and cultural practices of the larger “brown” community that teens share and value at YOSAI, are important for Desi teens of my study.

In her ethnographic research on cultural citizenship and subject formation, Aihwa Ong (1996), discusses the ideological entanglements of race, class, and culture. Further, she highlights that “dynamic of racial othering [through institutions and civil society and the state] emerges in a range of mechanisms that variously subject nonwhite immigrants to whitening or blackening processes that indicate the degree of their closeness to or distance from ideal white standard” (p.751). While this section does not highlight these mechanisms of othering (see Chapter Three), Noor’s discussion highlights the resultant degree of proximity or distance from the ideal white standard she claims. At the same

time, it is interesting to note that Noor is already physically distanced from white communities – at school and in her neighborhood she is just “not really surrounded by white people much” – and hence, finds community in ties based on who is “similar” to her – racially, culturally, and ethnically.

The notion of “reactive ethnicity” also helps explain why having and claiming a brown community matters to the teens of my study. Originally discussed by Nathan Glazer, and later developed further by Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut (1996), reactive formation of ethnicity is considered a uniquely American product and has emerged as a “reaction to the situation, views, and discriminations they [immigrants] faced on arrival” (pp. 120). Noor, like other girls and boys I met at YOSAI is keenly aware of these racial differences (Chapter Three) and respond by choosing to identify with the brown community at YOSAI and not white or even South East Asian friends in school as much. This notion of reactive ethnicity also explains why Nida values having a brown community of peers in and out of school. Her three best friends, she later told me, are also brown.

Sagar shared such an experience of cultural ignorance he faces from peers at school that lead him to adopt a “reactive ethnicity.” He told me that when he speaks with non-South Asians, he tells them he is from India, because “most people have never heard of Bangladesh.” He added, “it is easier not to give a history lesson, and just say India [as his country of emigration], they get that, since there are so many Indians here [USA].” Sagar also told me that his religious identity as a Hindu further confuses non-brown peers, as “Bangladesh is 90% Muslim, and they don’t get how I’m a Hindu.” When I continued to look surprised by what Sagar had just told me about his tactic to avoid a history lesson,

he added, “you know we’re all brown anyway, so it [national identity] doesn’t matter to me.” Such articulations of reactive ethnicities also help forge a sense of belonging in their new immigrant host country. And likewise, finding a place where they can be “brown” or express their affiliation to their own or parents’ national identities is significant for them. At YOSAI, Sagar finds he does not need to explain the differences that make up who he is, as many other teens also come from backgrounds that reflect the differing and complex identities represented amongst South Asians – which make them “in some ways all the same, a bit different, but it’s the same,” as Nida put it – and they are not misunderstood.

Whether it is as an act of learning about their own shared yet differing cultures, or finding racial connectedness, and avoiding cultural ignorance they face from non-South Asians, attending YOSAI offers Desi teens a sense of community and a unique way of “being brown” that other spaces do not offer. Desi youth attend programs at YOSAI to forge new friendships where they can be a part of an ethnic community that understands and shares their cultural traditional and parental expectations. In the next two sections I explore this further.

CHOOSING RELATIONSHIPS: INTER-GENERATIONAL AND CROSS- GENERATIONAL NETWORKS

As the previous section suggests, youth who attend YOSAI, choose to do so, even though sometimes this “choice” may have been inspired by guidance from parents, aspirations for better grades, and more significantly to develop relationships of support based on class-ethnic lines. When youth attend the programs, they get volunteer hours for

social service, use their time to “do something” constructively, and many also find YOSAI to be a place for inter-generational and cross-generational support and a friendly environment they do not sometimes experience at schools.

I asked Nida what was her favorite part about coming to YOSAI center. Her response highlights that it is the people and the environment of freedom and friendliness at the Center that makes the place congenial and fun:

AD: So what’s your favorite part about this place...the people? Or the trips? Or?

Nida: The people. It’s just like how people come here... the environment basically. How we’re able to express ourselves. I know its so cliché but how we can express ourselves...that’s fun. And just having a good time with everyone without worrying about anything or about yourself. Everyone is ok with each other, and that’s nice.

AD: Which is something you don’t find outside of here?

Nida: I do, but it’s not that. It’s more... it’s just really comfortable here. Like other places you have serious people...in their own world. But it’s your decision to associate or not. Here we make sure we’re not like that. And if you are, someone is going to say something and that’s always the case here.

AD: Hmm.

Nida: Cause like other places you’re forced to go or something. But here it is kind of your choice to get out there and everyone is very similar in what they want out of here I guess.

Attending various programs at YOSAI is very much tied to Nida’s sense of choice and ability to express herself. Her freedom to continue attending or not attending these programs is very different from attending school that is compulsory and mandatory. Despite attendance not being mandatory, teens like Nida like to attend the Center daily and participate in programs besides the mentoring and tutoring classes, because her favorite part about the place is “the people” at the Center. Furthermore, she highlights how they all can “just have a good time” and “feel really comfortable here” without

worrying about “anything,” perhaps, alluding to earlier discussion of ours about racism in the city and a desire for a “brown space.”

While the programs and the idea of a South Asian youth space attracts the teens to the Center, it is the people they meet and friendships they make here that keeps them at the center and makes the programs fun for them. Mueen recalls that he started liking coming to the Center and attending the programs because of the friendships he made there:

At first I didn't like them [programs at the Center] at all. And then I met people... alright...I'll hang out with you people. Like I met intelligent people, like Veer. I didn't think was intelligent at first. And after a while he's a nice guy.

Mueen is hesitant to believe he'd like to hang out with the people at the Center whom he categorizes as “you people” making a distinction between himself and other South Asians, likely as a form of rebellion against his father's persistence that he make more Bengali friends. He had told me earlier in the conversation that he likes to be friends with everyone, and doesn't understand why his father pushes him to be friends “just with Bengali boys.” However, it is interesting that his experience with the people – youth and staff members – results in him liking the programs at the Center and attends this brown space daily.

Finding connection with people attending the Center seems to be a distinct experience for many of the Desi teens, one that is different from meeting people in other places. The teens end up spending a lot of time together at the Center even when they are not participating in programs. Rizwaan expressed that sometimes “I just come to hang out.” This space of the Center – not home, nor school – becomes a key site where teens forge friendships, they build networks with people that begin to extend across various

spheres of their daily life as they also start to hang out at each others homes, and even meet up near each others schools after their classes are over. During summer 2011 and '12, I noted that teens spent time at each others' homes for Iftar dinner, would go to the mosque together during Ramadan, or just go out to the mall and play arcade games. The friendships made at YOSAI cut across school, neighborhoods, and age.

Mueen further tells me about his relationships with people at the Center that inform me about his inter-generational support networks available to him:

AD: Ok, so what are the things that attract you to YOSAI? One you said is...

Mueen: [Cuts me off] Listen...it's also the people. You can talk to the staff here. In my school it is very hard time to talk to my teachers. Only, like, one or two teachers I could talk to.

AD: Yeah?

Mueen: Fine... my guidance counselor. But worst GC in the world. I set up a meeting with her and was like we need to talk about college prep, we need to talk about this and that, and she's like yeah, yeah, yeah. And I'm like I'm going to be here Monday 4th period. She's like yeah, yeah. And I set up the date and I go in there and everyone's like oh she's gone off for lunch. And I'm like, what the fuck.

For Mueen, the supportive staff members, who he can talk to, unlike the teachers and counselors at his school, help make YOSAI an attractive place. Other teens expressed similar sentiments. Mueen further noted that his guidance counselor was not helpful to him at all. And when I ask if he finds help at YOSAI he says,

Mueen: No, I have. It is easy to talk to people here. So I find it easy to talk to Sunil [a staff member].

AD: So what makes it easier to talk to staff here rather than guidance counselor at school?

Mueen: Psh! My guidance counselor at school is never around. These folks always here!

Having people around who are available, reliable, easy to approach and talk to seems to be an important resource for young people facing and navigating various difficulties as they grow up. Most immigrant parents are unable to help teens along the college application process because they are unfamiliar with the system. Hence, the support from staff at YOSAI when youth are unable to find guidance from their school counselors is extremely helpful for teens like Mueen. I prod Mueen to say more about the staff at the Center:

AD: Um... so you said you could talk to staff here...

Mueen: Yeah I could talk to Aliyah. I have no problem with that. Then, Ayesha is too easy to talk to. Ayesha and I are always hanging out. You know!

AD: Yeah. Like that day when all three of us hung out [we had gone to the mall to eat at Taco Bell].

Mueem: Yeah. [giggles]. I could talk to you... [laughs]. I can consider you staff. You're very easy to talk to. You're always joking around. And like in DC... [giggles again].

AD: [Laughs] Sure. But yeah you know my role is different...

Mueen: [Smiles] And then Sunil I could talk to very easily. Who else is there? Like other guys are like Sunil is mean. No, yo, he's cool. Its cause other boys are annoying. He's telling me I always think before I talk. He even got me a ... he got me this...[shows me a keychain].

Mueen finds staff members at YOSAI to be involved in his life and very different from teachers and counselors at his school, who are not even available for their appointments with students, let alone set up any sessions to follow up about youth's concerns. Teens like Mueen got along with most of the adults at the Center, especially the younger ones like Ayesha and Sunil, who used to be youth participants at YOSAI programs themselves at one point, and now run some of the programs or work as media coordinator and security staff. Sunil had brought back souvenirs for some people – the keychain Mueen

showed me – after he returned from a trip to a country in South East Asia to meet his mother. Such thoughtful gestures suggest to the teens that staff members remember them even while on vacation, and can forge friendly caring relationships with them. This further inspires teens to attend the programs and create networks of solidarity in this third space. Mueen even included me in this category of staff members with whom he can joke around and easily talk to. Such reflection on Mueen’s part made me realize that I had been accepted by teens like him as a friend with whom they liked to converse and share personal stories too. I was not just some “outsider” conducting research on them. This gave me confidence to continue my research. However, what is more significant here is the value of adult friendships for Desi teens. Adults and youth can have a friendly and equal respectful rapport if adults are willing to hear them and support the needs youth express.

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Some teens are drawn to YOSAI not only by the prospect of platonic friendships and inter-generational support, but also for the opportunity to date people with similar ethnic background through networks at YOSAI. While dating is considered a somewhat universal adolescent and teenage experience in western countries and increasingly so also in globalized world contexts (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Dhariwal & Connolly, 2013), understanding the role of race and cultural backgrounds and how these inform dating practices and experiences is important (Carver et al., 2003; Cavanagh, 2007). Shalini Shankar (2008) discusses the dating practices and practice of arranged marriages amongst Desi teens growing up in Silicon Valley, and writes that, “most Desi teens are subject to

constraints that are not widespread in America, especially around dating, sex, and marriage” (p. 169). She argues that Desi parents do not encourage dating as an end in itself and emphasize the importance of marrying within one’s caste, community and religion – “an agenda that has been inculcated into these teens [Desi teens in Silicon Valley] since childhood” (p. 169). However, Desi teens negotiate the various cultural values and rules around dating and arranged marriages as they also grow up in the contemporary context of California, she says. In the case of my study, I find Desi teens in New York too negotiate the explicitly stated, or sometimes unspoken, traditional values and cultural expectations around marrying within their communities as teens choose dating partners who meet their parents cultural expectations around marriage and desire to maintain community. Despite sometimes dating within these boundaries of cultural expectations of an ideal partner, Desi teens still do not discuss or share their dating practices with their parents as the very notion of dating is reserved for a later stage in life in the Desi community (Shankar, 2008).¹⁴ Shankar writes that notions of romantic love (associated with dating) are reserved for either after marriage, or after college. This ideal of course varies by caste, place of emigration, class, and other factors. In my study I highlight how Desi teens in New York, participating in the youth center, negotiate these cultural values around dating and their contemporary teenage desires around romantic partnerships through their use of and experiences in third spaces.

¹⁴ In their study on the role of gender and race in teenage dating practices Connolly et al (2004) write that Asian American teens are less likely than white, African American, and Latino teens to report having a romantic partner. They find this “difference is attributed to cultural variation in the acceptability of adolescent dating within different cultures, with collectivist societies favoring a later onset of romantic experiences than societies with an individualistic belief system” (p. 183).

Many of the teens attending YOSAI expressed differing levels of concerns about marriage and restrictions on dating placed upon them by their parents. Mueen told me that one of his cousins had married a Hindu girl, and his family was very upset about this. As a result of this incident, Mueen's mother instructed him that he should not do so and that his parents want him to marry a Muslim girl. Mueen expressed to me that he does not want to be restricted to marrying just a Muslim Bangladeshi girl. Another girl, Raveesha, expressed concerns about having an arranged marriage if she visited India. She said she really wants to visit Punjab, India, but is afraid that if she visits, her extended family residing there, along with her parents, may arrange for her to be married to someone in India.¹⁵ She posts her sentiments about this on Facebook at two different times last year. In June 2013, she posted: "Was planning on going to India... But doubt it. Don't wanna come back married." Later in December the same year she added "Really wish to go back to Punjab this winter break and get more suits and come back unmarried." Both Mueen and Raveesha were not dating anyone at the time, but are aware of their parents' and extended family members' expectations and values around marriage and dating. Mueen wants to resist this expectation, and Raveesha wants to delay the process of marriage altogether. In fact, Raveesha is interested in delaying romantic love and prospects of dating too. Raveesha's best friend, Zia, who attended the Center with her recently posted a meme picture on her Facebook wall, which stated: "Study now, love later." Raveesha commented on this meme and agreed with Zia's post. Memes can be understood as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (Dawkins, 1976; Shifman, 2012; 2014). Hence, this meme posted on Raveesha's wall can be read as Desi

¹⁵This notion that marriage is a vehicle for migration is a widespread belief and practice in various communities aspiring to migrate across countries. For reference on this topic, see; Kalpagam, 2008; Parrado, 2004; Wray, 2011.

cultural expectations to delay romantic love and some Desi teens' awareness and adherence to this cultural norm, while at the same time, imitating this ideal by actually delaying and avoiding arranged marriages and dating by focusing on studying and academics.

Other teens attending the Center, however, like many American teenagers begin to date in their adolescent years. However, they do so within cultural parameters set by parents for marriage, that is, date other South Asian teens that share their nationality, or religion, or other unifying social classifications. The possibilities to date other South Asian teens, without parental involvement and interference, are few for these teens. The schools they attend are highly racially mixed and so the opportunities to spend informal and free time with Desi teens of the opposite sex, if possible at all, are limited. Hence, YOSAI becomes a productive site where Desi teens in Queens are able to negotiate and mobilize their cultural expectations around love and dating and their adolescent desires for romantic partners.

While talking to Minhaj, Rizwaan's brother, about the classes he attends at YOSAI, I learned that the best part about the classes he attended was that he was able to see a girl, Mysha, who he had not seen in a couple of weeks at YOSAI. He expressed excitement that he could see her again everyday over the summer because they were in the same workshop. He also told me how perhaps the opportunities for meeting and seeing Mysha, whom he had grown to liking a lot through interactions during previous programs, is one key motivator for him to return to YOSAI the following year. He begins by telling me the classes he took in Spring 2011:

Minhaj: In Spring I did, er, Reach class, and also... I actually don't think anything else. Huh, yeah, that's it...

AD: Ok, that's it? How was that? What was that like?

Minhaj: That second Reach class we did was Aman's government class and over there we talked about public service, government, and issues, and also sometimes, we would watch a movie and we would hang out with Aman on his laptop, and making fun.

AD: Uhuh, and what part of the government class did you like?

Minhaj: The best part.... Only you will listen to this right?

AD: Yeah, only I will [I'm a bit surprised by this sudden question at this point]

Minhaj: Ok, uhuh.

AD: [I go on] And if I use it I'll give you a different name, so no one will know it was you.

Minhaj: [Quickly convinced and goes on]: So the best part about going to Reach class was seeing Mysha again.

AD: Aaah.

Minhaj: Cause yeah, I didn't see her in a long time because two weeks ago she was in a car accident...

AD: Oh no. Hmm.

Minjah: Yeah.

This conversation ended abruptly as we were on a bus and had reached our destination and had to get back together as a group. However, the way Minhaj paused to check who would hear my tape and then on learning that it was only be he and I, he begins telling me about Mysha, which seemed telling to me. It suggested that I had finally gained his trust – an essential component in doing an ethnography. But more significantly, that Minhaj was romantically interested in Mysha, but was perhaps shy to talking about it and also cognizant of the parental restrictions around dating girls, and hence, constructed this secrecy about it. When we spoke again the next day and continued our interaction, I

clarified if meeting a girl was a key driving force for Minhaj to attend the programs at YOSAI.

AD: That's nice. [I smile back at him]. So then is it because of Mysha that you wanted to attend Aman's Reach class, you think?

Minhaj: Aaaah [laughs]. Maybe... I think, maybe [smiles and blushes].

For many teens like Minhaj, the impetus to keep returning to YOSAI is the opportunity to be able to meet persons they like and would like to spend more time with and possibly date. Minhaj and I further conversed about Mysha and how he felt about her. He said he isn't sure if he should tell her how he feels – that he likes her more than a friend – because he's not sure if she can keep attending programs at YOSAI events as she lives in Long Island and it is difficult for her to attend the Center during the school year. But he informed me that they chat on Facebook a lot and even talk on Oovoo, a video calling program. Though these online spaces do not seem sustainable for him to develop a romantic relationship. Minhaj does not place all of his interests in attending programs at YOSAI to his interest in meeting Mysha or spending time with friends (though he does blush during his response), however, his approach to dating in relation to YOSAI reflects how this space is a medium through which Desi teens are able to develop and maintain ethnic networks, build friendships, and even explore possibilities for romantic partnerships that meet their cultural values.

While conducting research at the youth center I learned about three pairs of teenagers who were dating. I also discovered that these romantic partnerships had developed over the course of attending the programs at the Center and that the couples did not know each other prior to attending YOSAI. Not many of the teens attending YOSAI were in romantic relationships, but those who were in relationships had met their

partners at the Center. One staff member, Salman, had also met his now wife at the Center when he was a youth participant in the programs at YOSAI. The teens attending the Center were aware of this and found it quite romantic and ideal. Meeting a romantic partner at YOSAI seemed ideal to many because it was likely they would meet someone “similar” to them, as in, share their South Asian background, or religion, or live close-by, or even share similar parental expectations, and immigrant experiences, but also have the opportunity and place to date consistently.

One of the couples, Nida and Karim, began dating in summer 2011. During her interview with me, Nida told me how they began seeing each other and about the status of their relationship. She related that she first met Karim at one of the end of season summer events at YOSAI. Karim had complemented her for her singing and for her beautiful eyes. They became Facebook friends and kept meeting and talking at YOSAI whenever they attended the programs. At some point, they started seeing each other more regularly and both shared self-made rings of iron wire, which Nida showed me she still wears, indicating the seriousness of their relationship. However, she told me that both their parents’ did not know about their relationship, because “they won’t get it. They feel that we should focus on our studies and not on dating right now.” She added, “so it’s better we keep it a secret from them, even though ideally we’re like both Muslim and from Bangladesh!” Most teens and staff members at YOSAI, however, were aware of their relationship. But it is because of the cultural belief of delaying dating and love – “study now, love later” – that teens that find romantic partners who meet parental ideals for life partners, choose to keep it a secret from them.

However, teens are not always able to maintain this secret and may get into some trouble with their families when they find out. At other times, the staff and the peers work together to help maintain the secret, recognizing that it is primarily at and through YOSAI (as an excuse or otherwise) that these couples can meet and spend more time together. On Nida's 16th birthday, in summer 2012, I noted that she did not attend the Center, and missed the event planned for the youth in the PS program, a political service program hosted at YOSAI that summer, which she was participating in. On our return from an event hosted in Manhattan that day, I heard through Aman, the staff who runs the PS program, that Nida's parents wanted to take her out for a surprise birthday lunch, and had stopped by at the Center to pick her up, but did not find her there. None of the staff had seen Nida at the Center that day either. However, Aman suspected she may have used YOSAI as an excuse with her parents to go elsewhere, as he knew teens had done so previously. After finding out from another youth, Mueen, where she was – with Karim, celebrating her birthday at the McDonalds in the mall close to the Center – he spoke with her parents. He tried to cover up for Nida, saying she may be at one of the internship program interviews he had found for her, but he was not certain. However, Aliyah, another staff coordinator at YOSAI, who also spoke with the parents, did not support Aman's story and when Nida's parents asked about Karim, she refused to say anything at all. Aman, on the other hand, was quite upset about how Aliyah handled the situation. He later told me, "wouldn't it be better if she [Aliyah] could have just said, no, I do know Karim, and he's a great kid." He felt that Aliyah should have used the parents' question about Karim as an opportunity to support the teens' relationship to the parents if there were any doubts on their part. He also expressed that Aliyah should have never said "oh,

please keep an eye out for your daughter. This is wrong if she lied to you about coming here. We don't want that responsibility." And instead, asked me later, "but isn't this exactly what YOSAI is about...? That these kids can use this space for what they need it to be for them!," suggesting that youth should be able to use the Center as an escape if they wanted to. I didn't respond to Aman's question as I felt it was a rhetorical question and a matter of differences in understanding the institutional role of this ethnic youth nonprofit organization. However, I was intrigued by the various perceptions of how the center space can, ought to be, and is often used by teens and understood by the adults, revealing interesting differences in the approach to such a space. The next day when I met Nida, she seemed to have handled the situation with her parents, calling it a "misunderstanding," and instead talked to me about her birthday dinner her family and she went out for to a place of her choice that same night. She and Karim returned for the programs at the Center as usual and continued dating, highlighting the centers significance to these teens negotiating tactics around dating life.

For Nida and Karim, as well as for another couple, Veer and Sukhmani, who met through friends at YOSAI and then started dating, YOSAI is deeply connected to their own reflection about their romantic relationships. Relationships get established and develop as a result of participation in programs at YOSAI. During the summer 2012, the teens of the PS program were given cameras and taught some basic camera angles, shots, and techniques to take photographs (see Chapter Two). This was part of my research, where I asked all the PS students to work on their second photo project, which entailed that they come up with a photo story about "A Day at YOSAI" using images that reflect at least 3 of the rules they were taught in the photo workshop part of the PS program. On

August 06, the teens presented their photo stories with the group, with each of them including interesting perspectives to their “day at YOSAI;” focusing on themes of friendship, mentorship, talents, unsupervised fun at the Center, the physical structure, and what each room in the Center represents for them, and so forth. What was most interesting about the photo stories made by Nida, Karim, Veer, and Sukhmani was that they made it as couples. The two projects related an account about their time together and their love for each other, respectively. That the two couples associate “a day at YOSAI” with their romantic partnerships is interesting.

Karim was not part of the PS program but would often come by and sit in the classroom when everyone was just hanging out or working on a project independently as part of the PS class. He also helped Nida make her project. He was featured in the images, and presented the “day at YOSAI” project too. Nida introduced their project with a photo of the physical structure of the Center, and described the presentation as, “This is YOSAI, and this is the story of how and where Karim and I met. So a day at YOSAI is really about our time together.” The images included captions such as “the first look,” “hello,” “started talking,” “in love,” “hanging around.” Each photograph associated with these captions included the depiction of those titles with Nida and Karim in the frame in different rooms of the Center, such as, the gym, stage, back staircase, and youth lounge where they met, and spend time together.

Veer and Sukhmani’s project also included pictures of them, beginning with a self shot of themselves where they are smiling and looking at the camera while their cheeks touched. They described that their project includes pictures of the various activities they do at YOSAI, represented in the chronological order of the hours of the day. The images

following their self shot are of the subway they take to the Center, the work they do there, where they spend time – an image of Sukhmani lying on the red couch in the youth lounge, appearing to be asleep, which Veer describes as “what happened to her on the first day. Sahib came and told us there is some new girl asleep on our couch in the youth lounge,” -- playing basketball at the gym, and finally an image of frozen yogurt representing the food they eat together at the mall close to YOSAI after their classes or when the day at the Center is over.

Both the couples associated activities at YOSAI as linked with the time spent with each other. While their romantic partnerships began at YOSAI, their interactions transcend this space to other “third spaces” outside of the Center as well. These include, the mall where Nida and Karim hung out for Nida’s birthday, and where Veer and Sukhmani go to spend time and eat food or dessert after their day at the Center, indicated in their photo project. Both instances of spending time at the mall are kept a secret from the parents, but the staff and peers at YOSAI are aware of their relationship as well as of the spaces they hang out at together.

The teen couples use programs at YOSAI as an excuse to get out of home and meet each other, sometimes even skipping the class or events organized by the Center to spend time just with each other at the mall or the botanical gardens or other such places outside in the city. The Center – both physically and symbolically (as an excuse to parents to leave home) – then enables these teens to develop romantic engagements, peer and staff connection and support, and spatial mobility – eating at the mall, speaking on Facebook, and hanging out in the botanical gardens. Yet, these activities of escape cannot be analyzed as significant in and of themselves (as literature on urban youth

centers does). Rather, they highlight how teens negotiate restrictions they face because of their cultural values, and their social political contexts. In the next section I aim to further analyze the various forms of mobility that the Center enables for Desi teens and examine the significance of ethnic youth spaces for immigrant South Asian teenagers in New York.

Overall, this section highlights how attending YOSAI supports teens to maintain cross-generational relations of support, and even develop romantic partnerships that exist as overlapping realities of their American adolescent experiences and their cultural values. Continually returning to YOSAI and its programs is teens' own choice, but the programs and staff member's support – like Aman's effort to cover up for Nida or to act as guidance counselor for Mueen – further makes this third space significant for Desi teens.

“I LIKE GOING PLACES:” ESCAPE, EXPLORATION, AND EXPERIENCES

Many of the YOSAI programs that take place at the center in Queens also take the teens to various different locations: offices in Manhattan as part of the “meet and greet,” protest sites such as the INS detention center in NYC, or to other cities for workshops and social justice rallies, described in previous chapter. The staff also coordinated various college visits to cities like DC, or upstate New York, and Boston to help teens decide some of the colleges they can attend since many of their parents cannot afford such college visits, and schools don't provide sufficient support for this process of transitioning from high schools to colleges, either. These college visits offer opportunities for teens to either move locally in the city independent of their parents, or go for overnight trips with friends, something that is actually rare for many of them. Overall, these trips, such as overnight visits to different cities for college visits, or various

workshops and rallies around the city, expand the geographies these young people traverse.

Noor describes that these official trips outside of the center are one of her most favorable aspects about the programs at YOSAI:

AD: Uh, what have you enjoyed about the programs... so far?

Noor: Trips! I don't like these trips where we have to stay inside... I thought we were going bowling today. What happened?

AD: It got cancelled...

Noor: Oooh...and yesterday... it was because of meeting!

AD: Oh yeah. Not going today sadly.

Noor: Ok, natural history?

AD: Yeah, cancelled... ok so you'd like to go?

Noor: I like going places... like if we stay here we do the same thing: watch a video, write a response for it. But if we go outside. There is a variety.

Noor expresses that she likes going to different places rather than just stay indoors at the center, which is why she asks me about bowling, natural history museum, and expresses disappointment about cancellations. Teens would often try and request the staff to plan a trip to a place like Six Flags, an adventure park, or other sites of entertainment, but this was not always possible due to lack of funds and concerns around deviating from their organizational mission. But in order to better understand what about these trips is interesting for Noor, other than it offers “variety” to her day, I ask her to reflect about a particular activity, the scavenger hunt, an activity that allowed teens to independently travel through the city. For this scavenger hunt, youth in the PS program had to break up into teams of 2-5 and solve the clues about specific places listed on their scavenger hunt

sheet, prepared by Aman. The sheet listed riddles, synonyms, and hints that they had to solve to first identify a location or a feature about New York and then visit the location. For instance, “International express,” on the sheet meant the subway line 7.¹⁶ Once they solved the answers to the clues, they were supposed to take their cameras, provided to them by the Center, and take photographs of each of those locations or landmarks spread across the city and return to the Center. They were all given unlimited one day metro passes and the team that returned to the Center first after taking photographs of 7 of the clues on the scavenger hunt was awarded the prize of being first. As a follow up to my conversation about trips with Noor I ask her about the scavenger hunt experience:

AD: Did you like the scavenger hunt?

Noor: Yeah, that was really cool. That we went all over Manhattan.

AD: Have you done stuff like that...gone around in the city with friends?

Noor: I never... no... uhm, what do you mean?

AD: Like, just gone on the train and go to a new place.

Noor: If we did, we had a plan. To go to movies, bakery... never just went crazy! Always had some place to go...

AD: Ok. Uhuh.

Noor: But it was cool though. Here’s a metro card... go!

Noor finds the task of independently exploring the city without a “plan” to be quite “cool.” She distinguishes her experience of the scavenger hunt – a sudden plan to explore Manhattan – with other times she had gone to Manhattan, wherein the trip was planned much in advance and included a specific activity. Going about “all over Manhattan” is a rare activity for her, but one she enjoys, and even calls “crazy,” in an appreciative tone.

¹⁶ The subway line 7 in NYC is considered the international express as it runs through some of the world’s most diverse neighborhoods in Queens.

In talking to her further, she told me how it was rare that she ever travelled alone, as it was always either with her mother, and only sometimes with a group of friends. What was most exciting and peculiar for her and other teens was that they were given an all day metro card and asked to explore the city independently. An unlimited metro card brings forth a level of excitement quite unique to these teens. Sahib in his exchange about Rizwaan's salary had also concluded that the benefits of Rizwaan's pay were his accessibility to an unlimited monthly subway pass, drawing attention to aspirations for independent and cost-free mobility. Here too, Noor draws on the fascinating ticket to freedom that was handed to her by Aman, permitting her to just "go" about without adult supervision in the city.

Some of the teens were not very familiar with the subways and the directions of the locations they were supposed to visit and photograph for the scavenger hunt as they had little experiencing travelling alone on trains. If they did travel alone, like many other city kids, it was on previously traversed routes to their school from home or to the YOSAI Center and back home. So it was not surprising then that a one-or-two of the teens asked me to be on their team, as I was the only adult going for this activity, and sought guidance on how to download the New York City metro subway map on their phones so they could figure out how to reach different destinations they had only heard of but not been to. The group I went along with, however, comprised of teens that put the most pressure on me to go with them and were also the ones with whom I had interacted with the most. So it was not just for guidance on travel, but also for my company – as I

had gained an “insider” status by now with this group – that I went along with Mueen, Nida, Karim, and Kwanza.¹⁷

In any event, despite some limited knowledge of the routes, most of the teens expressed extreme enthusiasm about this activity. Sagar expressed even greater excitement about the scavenger hunt when I spoke with him about the various trips he went on through YOSAI. He also noted that the hunt was particularly exciting because he had not had such an experience in the past because of various travel restrictions placed upon him by his parents. Below, Sagar describes this through a description about his experience at YOSAI:

Sagar: [Cuts me off] Also...like if someone who doesn't know about PS or YOSAI and they enter and they don't have that much experience in real world...like me. Before I came to YOSAI I didn't have much experience.

AD: [I squint my eyes at this statement in a questioning way, urging him to explain more. I am unsure what he means by real world experiences].

Sagar: Trust me, I had so many experiences now. It's not funny.

AD: Ok. I want to hear about them.

Sagar: Like scavenger hunt. I never been on my own like that before.

AD: Really?

Sagar: Yeah.

AD: Were those places you saw all for the first time?

Sagar: Well, many. Brooklyn Bridge was for the first time.

AD: And you've just never been out alone like that?

Sagar: Yeah, I've never been out alone.

¹⁷ I return to the scavenger hunt in Chapter Five where I discuss some of the interactions that ensue that day, which also includes a discussion of how I had gained an “insider” status to their peer culture.

AD: How come?

Sagar: Parents.

AD: Hmm.

Sagar: And... what else?

AD: What's their reason for it though? Do you know?

Sagar: My dad, he still thinks that I'm a child. My mom thinks I'm not responsible... I guess it's normal cause I act like a child.

AD: So does he think you'll get into trouble, or get hurt? Or what?

Sagar: He's afraid that I'll get lost.

AD: Oh!

Sagar: And I'm like, I know how to read, I know how to ask for directions.

AD: Aha.

Sagar: Its not like I, er, I speak a different language or something.

AD: Does he get lost often? And that's why afraid you will get lost too?

Sagar: No, he's a taxi driver. He knows his way around!

By participating in the programs at YOSAI, Sagar is able to have new experiences associated with his city, which he is otherwise not allowed to experience for fear of his parents that he will get lost in the city. His parents, as Sagar understands, consider him too young, "still a child," and hence worry about him getting lost in the city. I have heard from other teens that their parents fear their children will be harassed or bullied in the city if they are alone, like one teen Jai related about his parents concern in light of post 9/11 bullying in NYC, described in the previous chapter. In this case, however, Sagar understands that it is a different fear, of getting lost, that his parents do not allow him to travel about in the city alone. He, like other teens at YOSAI, does not appreciate that

parents would think they would get lost, because they express keen awareness of distances, locations, and seem to be aware of various bus and subway routes to navigate the city, even if they may have asked for help to download a subway map for the scavenger hunt. Once they had the map, they felt confident in travelling through the city on their own.

One time when Sagar and I were in Long Island City in Queens to meet one of his friends, Sagar, was being tour guide to me. He knew all the different bus and subway routes to lead us back to the Center, and had asked me if I'd like to take a particular number bus so that I could see a little bit of the area since it was my first time in that neighborhood. He knew the area well because his friend's school was in that neighborhood. Before we decided our return mode of transportation, he had added that, "but if we are to get back in time for the dinner at YOSAI, then we better take the subway though, it'll be faster than bus." Such awareness about busses and subways showed his knowledge about various travel routes and how to independently travel in a city. Other teens too would talk about distances measured by blocks, time, and subway connections. Despite their parents' restriction on independent physical mobility, and fear their children would get lost, teens have an advanced sensibility of how to navigate their city streets and transportation and they like navigating and exploring it, given a chance. It is through this experience that they become acquainted with their surroundings and act independently. Teens at the center, like Sagar, associate seeing new locations in the city, or going on overnight trips as having "real world experiences," one that has been made possible through programs at YOSAI. While his parents are afraid that Sagar may not know

different areas in the city, he finds that YOSAI and his friends from YOSAI have helped him in exploring the city and his neighborhood.

Another teen, Veer, also discusses with me how he particularly enjoys trips that they take outside of the city as a group:

AD: And what's your favorite part about YOSAI?

Veer: PS

AD: Yeah?

Veer: Definitely PS and overnight trips.

AD: Why?

Veer: I don't know. It gives you change in mood. Since you're at YOSAI for two months over summer... so you get to go for overnight trips and stay in different places... cause it changes your routine.

Veer's "routine" includes studying for his exams and for SAT prep and just being around his parents. While Veer does spend time with friends in the city and goes with Sukhmani to the mall almost everyday, he enjoys the change overnight trips bring with them. Other teens too find going out of the city for over-night trips to be extremely exciting, new, and fun. Some of the girls had never been on overnight trips, let alone a night stay at their friends' house prior to their summer DC trip that the PS group took together. Noor told me that she had never gone to stay over at her best friend's house at night. Her mother did not allow it and felt that there was no need. However, with YOSAI, Noor's mother felt that the DC overnight trip would be good for her daughter, as she would have guided experience of a new city, and learn about colleges, for free.

Some teens also use YOSAI as an excuse for traveling and going to places their parents would not otherwise allow. For instance, Nida and Karim had gone to McDonalds

to celebrate Nida's birthday while she told her parents she was at YOSAI. Veer and Sukhmani also would go to the mall together while they told their parents they were at the Center. Sagar, and other boys, would tell their parents they were at the Center till a particular time, say 8 pm, but leave early from the Center and go to the mall, or to a game arcade, or play basketball till that time. Some teens even used overnight trips as a way to explore the city. On the return from a workshop from DC, two girls and one boy, told their parents on the phone that their bus was only going to reach Manhattan at midnight, whereas we were scheduled to arrive at 10 pm. The kids wanted to use the 2 hours to go and eat somewhere in the city and just walk around, which would otherwise not be permitted by the parents. They told their parents to pick them up from a spot in Queens at a designated time they were all going to get to together.

Desi teens manage to use YOSAI as an escape, whether through trips planned by staff or through their excuses they make to their parents. While there were instances when the staff were aware of teens using YOSAI center as an excuse to get away from home, and supported them in their actions, like Aman did in Nida's birthday episode case, this discussion about ethics is for another space. What is interesting is that young people find the Center can offer them a way to explore their city, and be outside in third spaces. They want to do so sometimes simply to get away from home. Rizwaan tells me about how frequently he comes to YOSAI center because he does not want to stay at home.

AD: Are you part of the Reach class?

Rizwaan: I'm not part of it... because I graduated...

AD: So nothing to do with PS either?

Rizwaan: Well, I had some classes... but would just come by here to hang out.

AD: So, are there other places also where you hang out with this crew?

Rizwaan: Queens mall. When YOSAI was closed we'd go there.

AD: Like on weekends?

Rizwaan: Ummm. But YOSAI is always open on Saturdays though.

AD: Oh yes, so then? If it is open you're still going to the mall instead? What would you say at home... like where are you going when you leave the house?

Rizwaan: For home, I'd just usually stay on my computer or sleep

AD: No, I mean, let's say you're going to queens center mall, would you tell your parents you're going to the mall or you say you're going to YOSAI?

Rizwaan: YOSAI. [chuckles].

AD: Okay...

Rizwaan: Cause, I don't usually tell them where I'm going.

At the time when Rizwaan had this discussion with me, I had known him for two years, and we had had several personal discussions about his rapport with his family. Rizwaan sometimes finds a way to leave the house to do things outdoors: go to the mall, on the pretense of going to YOSAI. He, like other teens, has strict deadlines and restrictions on where they are allowed to go and they do not like this. Minhaj tells me, "I don't want to constantly explain [to his parents] where I'm going and what I'm doing," reflecting a desire to no longer be treated "like a child," as Sagar had expressed they are often treated as such. They want to have autonomy over their decisions about their mobility and also not explain it. Some scholars would argue that this tension with parents is a common teenage phenomenon, however, one must note the compounded socio-political and cultural context in which these parents' fear about their children's mobility operates (as discussed in previous chapter as well). In any event, teens negotiate their freedom and

mobility by avoiding telling their parents where they are going, often times using YOSAI as an excuse, and even finding scope for travel and experiencing the “real world” physical spaces in their city through programs at YOSAI, indicating how the Center shapes their everyday geographies. “Going places” – to the Center as well as to different places in the city as a result of the programs of the Center – offers Desi teens opportunities to be independent. In such moments teens navigate public transportation on their own, highlighting how complex the everyday geographies of Desi youth are as they mediate parental restrictions on their mobility and explore their city life where they can experience racialized and racist encounters. In the final section below, I discuss how the Center, through its programs, furthers the teens’ desire for mobility and helps them respond to the fears and dangers surrounding their brown bodies in public spaces.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND POLITICAL WORKSHOPS

In this section I want to highlight the different political and social justice workshops that Desi teens participate in through YOSAI, which influence teens continued participation at YOSAI, and ultimately, informs and shapes their political geographies. In the summer of 2012, youth in the PS program at YOSAI attended “The Scam of Stop and Frisk” workshop, more casually called “Political Education Workshop,” organized by Make the Road, a NYC organization, to highlight the ways in which the Stop and Frisk program racially profile young people of color. The workshop paid attention to the links between race, income, neighborhood, age, and the number of stops made by New York City Police because of the Stop and Frisk Program. This program was meant to reduce the number of crimes across the city by stopping,

questioning, and detaining persons who may look “suspicious” to officers (Racial Discrimination in Stop and Frisk, 2013). The workshop was conducted soon after a silent march from lower Harlem to Bloomberg’s office in upper west side in June 2012 because the NYPD “stop and frisk” searches had hit a high number of 684,000 in 2011, not necessarily resulting in actually finding criminals (NYCLU, 2014; Dressner & Martinez, 2012).¹⁸ Out of these about 50% of the searches were conducted on young people between the ages of 14-24 years, which was the age range of the youth at the workshop.¹⁹

During the day of the workshop the youth and staff travelled from the Center as a group to the venue of the workshop by public transportation. The organizers paired groups of youth not on the basis of the participating youth centers they came from but randomly by numbers. Each group was supposed to use data provided to them to identify the income, neighborhood, and racial disparity in the number of stops of people of color. Much of the analysis resulted in highlighting racially skewed data, wherein more stops and frisks by police were linked to Black and Latino neighborhoods, and low-income populations. During this task, one of the youth in the group where I was also participating, sparked off a conversation about her brother. She shared how her brother, while not Black or Latino, rather a Sikh, was a victim to hate crimes as some boys in his school made fun of his turban and asked him to stop bombing buildings. She felt that this workshop was not really about her life per se, but she could relate to it because of her own close family member’s marginalization in the city.

¹⁸ Only recently in August 2013, the US District Court Judge, Shira Scheindlin, ruled that the stop and frisk practice was unconstitutional and the NYC police was directed to adopt a written policy for where it can be applicable.

¹⁹ For more data on Stop and Frisk, see: New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), 2014.

The previous year, YOSAI collaborated with other South Asian, Muslim, human rights, and immigration rights organizations on building a coalition to support and enable the passing of the End of Racial Profiling Act (ERPA) in Congress in 2010-11. YOSAI also signed and supported the “Face the Truth” campaign about racial profiling drafted and organized by The Rights Working Group (RWG). Established after 9/11, RWG is a coalition of more than 350 local, state and national organizations that advocate for the civil liberties and human rights. The teens joined the RWG along with staff members to rally about the racial profiling experience and made slogans about what it means to grow up Muslim, or South Asian in contemporary New York.

Desi teens in this study also traveled to DC for a political workshop hosted by Saathi, a pseudonym for a national organization for South Asians across the country. Saathi brings several smaller South Asian organizations together for organizing and advocacy and seeks to support the inclusion of South Asians as leaders in the current political landscape. During summer 2011, Saathi hosted an event, “Advocacy Day,” for lobbying about the ERP Act, the year Sugandha, Zainab, Ayesha, and I attended their annual summit.²⁰ The idea was to bring to light in the Capitol some issues of racial profiling that affect South Asian communities in America. Zainab and Ayesha were thrilled to get away to DC: not just to get away from their parents, but as Zainab said, “I’m so excited to meet Meenakshi.” To explain her enthusiasm to me she added how she knew Meenakshi: “I attended this political justice workshop just for youth last year in DC and she was running that. I know she will be attending this as well. She’s so kind and smart and you’ll see you’ll love her too.” Such enthusiasm to meet a South Asian

²⁰ This Advocacy Day was hosted on the same day as the seminar which is discussed in Chapter Three.

political organizer is quite interesting. At the time, Zainab was involved in engaging in social justice issues with her participation in YA YA Network, which I discussed in the previous chapter. But other teens too, when given the opportunity or tools, get very engaged in doing “something” for their community.

During this Advocacy Day in 2011, however, Zainab and Ayesha, Sughandha and myself, along with another South Asian American organizer at the Summit from NYC, were scheduled to meet staffers of the representatives Joseph Crowley (NY 7th District) and Yvette Clarke (NY 11th District), in Capitol Hill Congressional offices, to advocate issues affecting the South Asian community in New York. While speaking to the staffers, Ayesha and Zainab spoke boldly, discussed how they support the ERPA and want the congress men and women to push for the passing of an anti-bullying law. They shared stories with the representatives of their own experiences of growing up in America or re-narrated their friends’ accounts about racial discrimination that they had heard or helped their friends navigate. The two girls also confidently discussed how there should be more spaces like YOSAI in NYC, because it is spaces like YOSAI that offer them support to deal with everyday difficulties and gives them opportunities to visit colleges and advance in their future career, otherwise difficult for them to navigate.

By physically travelling to the Capitol building the girls expressed they felt more connected to their own community issues and that they would like to see their issues taken up at the federal level. They were engaged and enthusiastic about participating at this political level as a result of their participation at YOSAI. Zainab was certain,

I’m going to come back here. I think all the YOSAI youth should be brought here and their voices should be heard, not just Ayesha’s and mine. Our voices matter. These men and women are elected by us for us.

Such an overt sense about the power of their voices, and a clear articulation of their personal concerns, which they want to be met by congress, highlights how engagement with organizing and advocacy enables young people to engage more deeply with politics, and shapes their political geographies. This articulation about expressing their own voices also reflects a link to the sentiment in YOSAI program flyers mentioned earlier in Chapter Three: “Then stand up and let your voice be heard,” demonstrating how the ideology of the center informs the lives of children who attend it. But at the same time, these teens also show keen interest in such programs, which makes their interest in attending YOSAI more explicit and independent.

The teens at YOSAI also talked about participating in a four-day north-east based political justice workshop for Desi youth, Solidarity, in DC. Only about 4-6 teens from the Center are selected to go for this workshop, accompanied by one or two staff members. Zainab had met Meenakshi at this workshop the year before, and on returning from it in 2010, Zainab encouraged other teens at YOSAI to attend it as well. South Asians in their 20-30s interested in community development and youth power, organize this workshop annually (since 2009). They invite applications in the following way:

We invite any person of South Asian heritage to apply who is between the ages of 15-20. We are looking for individuals who are committed to sustaining positive change by being involved in a network of young leaders who are working toward justice.

Hosted as a four-day workshop, the various sessions at Solidarity workshop include topics such as: “What Does it Mean to Be Desi? And Other Guiding Questions,” “Regulating Queer and Non-Queer Bodies: South Asian Immigration,” “Framing the Issues: Capitalism,” “Racism,” “Sexism,” “Creativity,” “Nuts and Bolts of Organizing,” and “The Importance of Archiving Our Work” (Solidarity hand-out, 2012).

During the “Nuts and Bolts of Organizing” workshop in 2012 when I accompanied 5 teens – Mueen, Minhaj, Nabab, Raveesha, and Pavneet – from YOSAI, various issues of rights and justice from other sessions were brought together. Youth were asked to think of one issue they would want to “organize” for or take action about in their communities. The premise of such organizing work emerged from the session coordinator’s discussion of the idea that “personal is political.” Many youth selected issues they wanted to do something about as they affected them directly or affected their communities. For instance, when asked to share their “issue” of interest with the rest of the group during the workshop, Mueen said he would like to work on issues of queer Desi youth. He described, “our community discriminates against gays and lesbians. Very few Desi parents get it. I’d like to be able to support my queer Desi friends and check everyone around me if they make a homophobic joke.” Nabab and Minhaj, responded by saying they’d like to stop corruption in their local mosque. When asked to elaborate this situation, Minhaj described that he and two of his other friends at YOSAI felt that the Imam, head of their mosque, was misusing the donation money because no repair or changes to the building were made, their understanding of what the donation monies were towards. The workshop concluded with asking the teens to write down how exactly they’d address this issue: what mediums of communication would they draw on, and how would they translate their concern into action.

While children’s geographers warn researchers not to consider everything that is personal as political (see Chapter One), the causes these teens want to engage with are deeply personal but enable political shifts on issues within communities and societies and must be noted as informing teens political geographies. A couple of weeks later, while

back at the Center in New York, Minhaj came up to me and showed a letter he had written to the Imam of his mosque, which he and Nabab decide to deliver later that evening after their evening Ramadan prayer service. The letter was a request to their Imam about offering financial accountability to its donors. The two felt that they were carrying out their civic duty towards the community in this way, one that was encouraged at the Solidarity workshop. Such ideals of engaging with community issues and issues that affect them was also supported by other programs hosted by YOSAI, and I have discussed in the previous chapter. For the purpose of this chapter it is important to note how teens find motivation and support from radical and adult organizers from their communities and makes attending programs at YOSAI engaging and fun for them. Engaging with local and personal politics, an ideal promoted through programs they attend, ultimately informs and shapes their socio-political geographies.

On the first day of the PS program, in summer 2012, Aman asked all the teens why they joined a class focused on politics. While some had to take it as a “pre-requisite” to joining free SAT, others, like Noor, expressed interest in the class for volunteer hours. Many others however, shared their prior interest in politics – particularly local politics and religious rights issues that affected them daily. For instance, Sukhmani talked about the problems that Sikhs face, especially boys and men, who can visibly be identified as such because of their turbans. She said that Sikhs ought to have the right to represent their religion symbolically through embodiment of clothes, or otherwise, and not be harassed for it. She reminded everyone of cases of Islamophobia as well as the recent Oak Creek gurdwara shootings that racially targeted Sikhs. Sukhmani felt PS workshop would help her in doing something about these issues affecting her community. Nida

shared that she was interested in immigration rights. She disagreed with the usage of the term “illegal” when referring to a group of people in America, in popular and political discourse, and added, “I don’t agree with this ‘legal’-‘illegal’ business.” Such articulations about various socio-political issues that affect them and their communities, highlights the need for a space where Desi teens can address these issues. The PS program of YOSAI becomes one such venue for these teens to shape their political geographies.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have examined the various reasons that contribute to why Desi teens growing up in NY attend YOSAI and continue to participate in the programs offered here. These include: teens’ need to navigate their social class positions, desire for ethnic and racial connectedness, inter-generational support networks, aspirations for freedom and mobility, and interest in being politically engaged in local and everyday social issues that affect their lives. Such choices made by teens are not based on aspirations for “hopeful futures” as literature on youth centers suggests; rather, they are made in order to respond to their difficulties, constraints, and cultural expectations in the here and now. Teens’ experiences at home and school do not fulfill their needs for mentorship, or financial support. Instead, they find adult staff members and people at YOSAI to be available for them in times of guidance or support in differing instance, which results in their continued participation at the Center. Whereas, Desi teens first arrived at the Center to meet their academic needs, the more they use and engage with the Center and its activities, they are able to mediate their everyday multiple realities and

have as what Sagar expresses, “real world experiences.” Desi teens even find ways to uniquely be “brown” and experience a sense of belonging where they can date like American teenagers, but also negotiate their cultural and parental expectations around notions of dating.

These everyday experiences at the Center can be read as teens’ choices, and negotiations, but also must to be situated within the context of the programs of the Center and the ways in which the staff attempt to meet young Desi’s needs. Inter-generational support at YOSAI, exciting activities like scavenger hunt, programs like PS, where youth can express their socio-political concerns and begin to engage in their local politics through workshops, are a few ways, discussed in this chapter, through which YOSAI meets the needs of Desi youth. This chapter has highlighted the significance of third spaces in young immigrant lives, and demonstrated what Desi youth political geographies in the everyday look like. But this chapter also shows that youth spaces become significant for Desi teens when considerations of the socio-political context in which they are growing up are also made. In the following chapter I examine how teens performative and embodied practices in such third spaces make explicit Desi teens socio-political stand points in contemporary America, positioning them as agentic beings who actively and creatively attempt to navigate their discriminations and difficulties through engagement in third spaces.

CHAPTER FIVE

PERFORMATIVE POLITICS:

SOUTH ASIAN TEENAGE CULTURES IN “THIRD SPACE”

INTRODUCTION

Along with migration of people, globalization also brought about movement of cultural and global art forms (Appadurai, 1996, 2001; Featherstone, 1990; Hannerz, 1996). The flow of such cultural and global art and creative forms, such as music, film, and fashion, have impacted people and communities across the globe, and some scholars have now documented the impact on Desi teens growing up in the diaspora (Durham, 1999; Maira, 2002; Shankar, 2008). In this chapter I examine the cultural practices – performative and embodied – of the Desi teen subjects of this study that are informed by Bollywood, global music forms such as K-Pop, hip hop, and media. To understand performativity and embodiment this chapter draws on Judith Butler’s (1990; 1993; 1997) theory of performativity, which links all acts – or ways “to do” – to acts of subject formation. That is, any performative act is the enactment of an identity of the self, which is generated through the repeated circulation of norms and their transgression. With that theoretical orientation as the context, I situate Desi teenagers’ performances and embodied practices as deeply connected to their identities in particular spaces. I argue that the teens of this study express their ethnic identities and social political standpoints through their creative cultural performances in daily life. Wherein, these immigrant youth identities are marked not as hyphenated (such as, Rumbaut & Portes, 2001) nor simply “hybrid” (such as, Hall, 1989; 1990; Gilroy, 1993); rather can be read as ethnic and

racialized subjectivities of being Desi while growing up American, emerging as a result of constant negotiations with the society they grow up in and particularly post 9/11 discriminations. Further, I argue that the third spaces – the youth center, in-between sites such as subways, and street corners – prove to be productive spaces that enable teens to express, perform, and negotiate their identities and stand points which are otherwise excluded and marked as “othered” in sites such as that of the school. To do so I analyze teens’ use of language, performance in a flash mob, and embodied expressions through fashion and tattoos. This chapter hence, highlights Desi teens performative politics and agency manifest through cultural practices in third spaces.

BOLLYWOOD, SLANG, AND SWAG: CONSUMING AND RE-PRODUCING LANGUAGE AND DIALOGUES

The use of language and the “fashions of speaking” amongst teens has been understood as serving as “expressions of identity and solidarity while also acting as markers of racial otherness” (Shankar, 2008, p. 101). Shankar (2008) also argues that Desi teenagers’ “develop varying levels of competence in Hindi by watching Bollywood films” (p. 104). This scope and reach of Bollywood and its influence on children’s and youths cultural performances of dance, expressions of identity, and language acquisition and reproduction have been extensively documented (Kavoori & Joseph, 2011; Shankar, 2011). This chapter will explore various influences of Bollywood on Desi teens. In this segment I examine how use of Hindi and cultural slang adopted from Bollywood, along with terms borrowed from the cultural repertoires of other racial minority groups, reflects a racialized identity and a transnational subject positionality of South Asian teenagers in

America. These subject positionalities help teens connect with and create a sense of belonging that lies beyond a single nation, and re-affirm ties across pan-ethnic lines.

Hindi, the official national language of India, also functions as the most dominant language and cultural force of the subcontinent, crowding out the vast array of languages spoken in varied locations of the subcontinent and its diaspora. The transnational culture of Bollywood cinema, India's largest film producing industry, also privileges Hindi over other languages spoken in the subcontinent and amongst its diasporic populations, creating a mistaken sense of linguistic homogeneity among the South Asia diaspora. However, Bollywood – its Hindi dialogues – also offer a sense of familiarity and possibility for connecting across regional and ethnic differences for some of the teens in the diaspora. The teens who attend the center and with whom I do research are Desi teens whose linguistic repertoires are extremely varied, speaking a range of languages in their homes, at the center, and with each other. While I was at the center many of the teens spoke Bengali, Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi, and English, in varying capacities. Some learned these languages as their heritage languages from their parents or grandparents, and others picked up Hindi through Bollywood cinema. Sahiba had once told me that it was because of Bollywood that she was able to speak with me in Hindi some times. She only speaks Bengali at home and only English at school. She had expressed however that at YOSAI she could switch between languages and put all the Bollywood films she had seen to some use, a kind of “third language” for the “third space,” it seems Bollywood facilitates the process of consuming the Hindi language and particular dramatic phrases in Hindi for many of these teens who do not speak Hindi at home. For instance, Rizwaan speaks to his parents in Bengali, but watches a lot of Bollywood films, especially actor Shah Rukh

Khan's movies, as he is a huge fan of this popular Bollywood actor. Along with watching the films, Rizwaan views a lot of YouTube videos of the Bollywood award ceremonies, like the International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) awards, and observes the performances of actors at the ceremony, which helps him pick up certain dance moves and lyrics of songs that he uses in his choreographies for his dance group and the class he teaches at YOSAI to a group of non-Hindi speakers. Rizwaan, like some other teens, also picks up lyrics, or certain phrases, or exaggerated expressions of feelings that are common in some melodramatized scenes in Bollywood films to reproduce in his everyday interactions with peers and staff at the center.

As I described in the previous chapter, as part of the PS program, Aman had organized a Scavenger Hunt, wherein teens at the center were given an unlimited metro card and sent to take pictures across Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens for a day. This hunt included several hops on and off the NYC subway, which was exciting for many of the teens as they aren't usually using the subways to Manhattan without adult supervision. As I accompanied one group, my presence as an adult was marked as they would turn to me for some of the directions on the subway and also as they used creative ways to include me in their cultural repertoires. Our group – Nida, Karim, Mueen, and Kwanza – were getting on the subway to head to our last stop on the scavenger hunt, the 7 train, before we returned to the center, via the same train. As we stepped into the subway stop we saw the train arrive and I quickly rushed behind the teens as they speedily entered the train. In a moment of apprehension that the train doors may close before I entered and I'd be separated from the group I exclaimed a long sigh, saying an elongated "no" as I entered the train before the doors closed behind me. I managed to board with no trouble

but as soon as I step in Karim starts laughing and he and Nida repeat my long exclamation of “no” in Hindi as, “Nahi,” (the Hindi word for no) with added hand gestures of pretending to stop the train door to close in on them with one hand, and the other hand placed on their forehead indicating despair and loss. This expression of an elongated “Nahi” with the hand gestures imitates female protagonists of Bollywood films who express a sense of loss, depending on the plot. This stylistic choice to represent loss and helplessness has been deployed in many Bollywood films, and used frequently in the 80s and 90s. In a recent film, Om Shanti Om, released in 2007, a similar scene was shot where the actress Kiron Kher, playing the mother of an aspiring actor in the film, makes a spoof on older film actresses relaying their loss through this melodramatic gesture. To confirm if the teens gesture and mockery of my actions represented dramatized scenes from Bollywood, I said to them, “that’s very Bollywood of you two.” To which they responded, “exactly what you did!” Nida added, “what you said reminded me of the imitations my brother does of Bollywood scenes. That’s why I imitated your “no” as though you’re like some Bollywood actress!” She went on to say, “You’re too funny, Anandini,” accepting me within her familial and peer repertoire of Bollywood culture.

Here, Nida’s immediate response of calling me a “Bollywood actress” suggests that my suspicion about her imitation was accurate. She and Karim were drawing on the repertoires of Bollywood scenes and dialogues to express familiarity with me, while also making fun of me. Bollywood here serves to function as a bridge across generational conversations as they interact with an adult researcher they have come to know recently, and also features as part of the repertoires of their home life as Nida mentions her brother

imitates movie scenes at home.²¹ In many ways then, teens connectivity because of a transnational cultural form, of Bollywood, aids in producing humor, as Nida found my actions, and hence me, as being “funny,” and creating a collective transnational identity in public spaces. For several days after, the subway scene of “nahiii” was re-enacted and repeated with variations at the center by Nida and Karim and Mueen as a form of greeting to me, every time they met me. The story behind this new greeting was explained a couple of times when those around were witness to the twice removed re-enactment of the scene but didn’t quite follow what had become a spoof on my behavior as a Bollywood actress, and enabled me to gain entry into a new cultural Desi teen practice in “third space.” While I did not think I was acting as a Bollywood actress, the teens understood it as such and continued to joke about it, which created a space for solidarity and familiarity with me. It also led to allowing me to be at their “level” so to say, if only partially and temporarily. At once, I was part of their teen peer culture as well as their ethnic culture.

While studies often discuss how immigrant teens deploy heritage language, here the teens are consuming a transnational culture – Bollywood – to express and produce connectivity, and humor, in their daily communicative repertoires. Many teens also use mildly abusive terms popularized through Bollywood cinema in addressing each other. They also sometimes code mix these terms to sound like terms from their heritage language. For instance, many of the Bengali boys and girls would address each other jokingly as “shalla,” which has a dual meaning of “brother in law” as well as meaning

²¹ Scholars such as Anandam Kooveri and Christina A. Joseph (2011) argue that experience of Bollywood in the diaspora first begins at home for Desi teens. For this chapter, I am not so much interested in where the experience of Bollywood begins, rather where it manifests, in what ways, and what meanings does that offer about teens identities and performative politics.

“conniving” or “mean spirited.” This term is often used in its dual meaning form in movies as “salla,” the Hindi equivalent of the Bengali term “shalla.” Teens would also yell out to each other other phrases adopted from Bollywood, “kutey” or “kaminey” and sometimes even reference the entire dialogue in which the term first originated in a movie. For instance, Mueen would often call a friend, “Kaminey” and then add, “Kaminey, main tera khon pee jaunga,” (Rascal, I’ll drink your blood) which is a very popular dialogue from the climax scene in the film Sholay, a blockbuster success in the mid-70s, and considered a classic for all Bollywood fans. Such Bollywood cultural exchanges indicate the ways teens greet each other, or poke fun at each other. But more significantly highlights the shared ethnic subject positions of Desi teens in third spaces – allowing them to build cultural community and a lingua franca, based on common cultural understandings and usage of terms, which binds these teens in a unique way.

Bollywood music and dance is influenced by not just folk dance and music arising from the subcontinent but also from musical genres such as hip hop and other American musical and dance genres (Kavoori & Joseph, 2011). More recently Bollywood and the folk musical genres adopted in it, such as Bhangra, are also influencing and being represented in music of such artists as Cali Swag District and other American hip hop artists (Sharma, 2010). Many of the teenagers at the Center hence, also form connections across racialized ties with other communities of color in America through use of words that are available through these global musical forms. One such instance is identified in the interaction that took place on Facebook after a “talent show competition,” which was part of an “end of season” event hosted at YOSAI in Spring 2011 that showcases various activities teens participate in at this recreation center each term. A group of the boys had

performed to a medley of Bollywood songs, and won the vote of the audience as the best talented group amongst a range of performers for the talent show competition. One of the coordinators, Nabi, posted and tagged the pictures of this group of teenagers on Facebook from the day of the competition and added a comment: “One of our Most Successful Events. Props to the performers, hosts, organizers, backstage crew, alum youth, & supporters. Awesome crowd today. Congrats to the winners!” To which the following excerpt of an exchange ensued as written comments:

Janaki: You guys were so entertaining, loved it [referring to the Bollywood dance medley performed by a group of boys]! Even my mom couldnt stay stable on her seat she kept smiling and dancing.

Nabi: Photos are coming up in our album.

Sahib: I WANT VIDEO

Mueen: I want a Cookie but we cant all get what we want though.

Sahib: yes my neighbor just gave my mom some fresh baked cookies !!!!

Mueen: Damn your Neighbor.

Sahib: hahaha.

Taufiq: I WANT VIDEO OF NABAB!

Sagar: so do we!! Lol

Taufiq: I wanna see Nabab kabab's moves! :D [a pun on Nabab's name that associates it with a broad Asian and Middle-eastern food form, kebab].

Nabab: We all do!

Sagar: they were filled with swag.

Nabab: Something we asians got B)

Taufiq: South asian swag wassup ;)

This exchange which begins with praises of the event, and congratulations for the talent contest winning Bollywood dance group that comprises of seven boys from the center opens up questions about performance of language, ethnicity, culture, place, and racialization that are central to this chapter. Essential to this exchange then (which offer insights into South Asian teen culture and subjectivity) is the language through which the dance moves of a particular performer, Nabab, are positioned as being “filled with swag.” “Swag” also becomes present with “we [A]sians” – something they’ve got – as the performer, Nabab, expresses being an Asian with Swag and not just something he performs. But further, in the final sentence of the exchange “swag” becomes situated with a pan-ethnicity, that is of South Asians, not just broadly an “Asian” category as Taufiq’s comment indicates: “South Asian Swag wassup.” This post received multiple “likes” on Facebook, indicating approval of the notion that South Asians are swag.

However, what does the use of the word “swag” convey here? The term swag, a noun, is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as a bundle of clothes, or a decorative garland. Kelefa Sanneh (2011), writing for The New Yorker, describes the term swag as: “An all-purpose expression of agreement or endorsement.” I observed this term being used by many of the boys in other contexts at the center as well. In their daily exchanges “swag” was used very frequently to refer to people, actions, music, or anything that may be appreciated. I understood it as meaning something like the word, “cool.” Anything a teen would appreciate would often be tagged as: “that’s swag” in various everyday contexts. For instance, when Nabab wore new shoes – a new version of Nike Air – to the center, Sagar noticed them and walked up close to Nabab as he walked into the center

and complemented him by slapping him on his back, and saying, “those are swag bro.” Both these instances suggest slightly different usage of the term “swag,” wherein the latter usage suggests an incorporation of everything that “swag” signifies onto the subject of the shoe which is worn by Nabab, and in the former exchange on Facebook it serves to recreate the meanings of what being South Asian means, by associating the entire community of South Asians with what “swag” means. Of course, the wearer of the shoe in latter instance is also South Asian. Either way, the two uses of the term suggest “swag” goes beyond the dictionary definition and functions as a cultural heuristic.

Recent media reports locate “swag” in lyrics of hip-hop artists like Cali Swag District, BBoys, and most popularly to be found in JayZ’s songs, “Public Service Announcement” and “December 4th” in his 2003 album, The Black Album, and then further popularized in 2007 by Souljaboy. From my time spent with the teens I learned that their musical repertoires are expansive and incorporate JayZ and Souljaboy (and other hip-hop artists) alongside global forms of Bollywood music (as they hang around the recreation center in their youth lounge, playing such music, or watching the YouTube videos of these songs – some days Bollywood more than Hip-hop, and other days some other), which then inform their practices of language use and speech. One afternoon, some of the boys who were in the dance group, started showing me various YouTube videos, as we often sat together and did so. Rasheed was very eager to show me a video, posted about a year ago by Cali Swag District on their YouTube Chanel, titled: “Bollywood Dougie – Cali Swag District ‘Teach Me How to Dougie’ Extended Clip.” This extended clip featured young men and women dressed in “Bollywood” attire and dancing to “Teach Me How to Dougie.” Rasheed’s exchange with me about this video

highlights how these teens are aware of the globalized cultural exchanges that take place between Bollywood and other American musical and dance forms, making it easy for them to re-appropriate these into their evolving cultures and shapes their identities that can include both South Asian and American subjectivities simultaneously. And, hence, using the term swag, also adopted from Cali Swag District's band name, who supports Bollywood culture, into their Desi cultural repertoires is interesting.

Ajay Nair and Murali Balaji (2008) express their personal cultural repertoires as young activists in America in their introductory chapter of their edited book Desi Rap: Hip Hop and South Asian America. They write, "Hip-hop was the language for those of us who rebelled against both the expectations of Anglo society and of our South Asian parents" (ix). Taufiq and his friends like Nair and Balaji and many South Asians growing up in America face challenges both from a White society and their Brown parents as they often offer contradictory messages related to career choices, everyday activities, and how to spend time or about broader structural issues of race. Hence, they use hip-hop – both the musical genre and its language, such as the terms like swag/swagger, as well as the politicized art form to resist racism –as a medium to draw allegiances with both the black community and the South Asian community.

By drawing on hip-hop's language, historically tied to a black culture of resistance and situating it alongside the pan-ethnic identity of being South Asian, as "SOUTH ASIAN SWAG," Desi teens produce racial ties that help mediate some of the racial dualities that they may live in. In many ways then, this expression of identifying "South Asians" with having "Swag" suggests that teens affiliate with ties beyond a single nation and embody racialized and globalized subject positions. Yet, at the same time,

such positionality is possible through the use of American vernacular – as Desi teens employ slang of Cali Swag District and other American hip hop artists –, situating Desi teens subjects as American, racialized and global, all at once.

As consumers of transnational Bollywood and of racialized hip-hop, these teenagers interconnected subjectivities as transnational and racialized beings is made explicit. Whether the use of some words produce humor, or solidarity amongst some teens, these language practices, as well as other performative practices I detail next, are central to the political identities and subjectivities of these teens, all of which is made possible via the third spaces where the cultural exchanges ensued.

LUNGI STYLE FLASH MOB

“A bunch of Desi teenagers – boys and girls who attend the neighboring youth center – collect and gather together on a busy street corner in Jackson Heights, Queens, NY, on the morning of Columbus Day in 2012. Suddenly, recently popularized Korean pop song, “Gangnam Style,” starts playing through loud speakers installed in the street corner. The girls and boys suddenly come into a formation and break into dance moves resembling the steps in the music video of this song. A crowd accumulates around them. As the dance and song progress, intimately resembling the original, a sudden change to the performance follows. The boys dancing in the back rows move up front and the ones in front run to the back and are bringing out what seem like dance props. As the tempo of the song changes these boys at the back run up in front and are now wearing lungis²² over their jeans and trousers. When the music, blasting from the speakers, plays the chorus line of the song: “Oppan Gangnam Style,” these teenagers silence the original lyrics with the sounds of their own voices, and shout out: “Oppan Lungi Style,” bringing attention to their changed attire. Further, this is repeated differently with new lyrics screamed out loud by the youth, “Ae-e-e-ey, sexy lungi,” while the original soundtrack plays, “He-e-e-ey, sexy lady.” As the refrain repeats on the loudspeaker as part of the conclusion of the song, the teens group together into a dance formation in the middle of the street where they were performing. One of the boys stands apart and shows off his break dance and moonwalk moves. The song ends. The audience applauds and the teens pose for photographs, which many in the audience, and some local media journalists are

²² A long piece of cotton cloth tied around the waist down by men in eastern and southern parts of the Indian subcontinent.

eagerly taking of them. Minutes later these teens jump up, breaking their formation to hug each other, and shout exclamations of excitement. Most of the audience disperses, and so do the teen mobbers.” Fieldnotes, 2012.

This above segment is my descriptive re-telling of a flash mob conducted by mostly Bangladeshi youth from YOSAI. These teens communicated through phone texts and Facebook messages to organize this flash mob. Though many of them knew each other, some did not; they all came together through an online blog, Bengali Memes that records a YouTube video link of the teenagers flash mob performance on its web page.

Understood as originating in Australia (Galvin, 2003) and catching global steam, the flash mob arrived in the United States in 2003 when Bill Wasik (2008), as he self reports, organized the first of its kind where hundreds of unfamiliar people communicated over text messages, emails, and blogs, and met in Macy's in New York. The plan of the meet up was to talk about the price of a particular expensive rug to each other and the staff around, and leave in separate directions after 10 minutes. This mob then, disrupted the normal flow of the events at the store. It also, occurring for a flash of 10 minutes – like a theatrical performance, rave like similarity, or street dances – maintains a “strong spectacular dimension and explicitly aims to capture public attention” (Gore, 2010, p. 126). All flash mobs, as the name suggests, are gatherings of groups of people to create flashes, which function to disrupt by calling attention to their activities.

While the history and essential make up of a flash mob is debated and consistently evolving, using Foucault and Arendt's theories of power, scholar of flash mobs, Rebecca Walker (2011) contends that flash mobs can be understood as a “type of performative resistance” (p. 3). In the case of Macy's flash mob people were resisting – making known – their take on capitalism and in the case of the Desi teens I can argue they were re-

establishing, through this performative flash, their distinct links with Bangladesh, as well as challenging the notion that public spaces are primarily adult spaces (Cahill, 1990; Mitchell, 2003; Valentine, 1996).

Describing a flash mob inside Toys R Us in Times Square, in New York in 2003, Walker argues that “mob participants break the norms of acceptable behavior and by doing so perform the dual function of: (1) waking up their own participant bodies to the idea that other options for behavior exist, as well as (2) reminding the audience of the mob of the absurd and arbitrary nature of so-called ‘normal.’ In other words, the flash mob reminds us that we actually have a choice” (p. 15). Essentially then, flash mobbers, even these teen mobbers, are agentic citizens who disrupt and challenge the “normalcy” of a given public space as well as the normativity of dress and behavior and what those represent.

Walker’s theorization of flash mobs offers a productive frame for reading the flash mob by the Desi teens in Queens, despite a lack of a race and ethnicity analysis. Drawing on Walker, I argue that South Asian teens use their performative bodies to disrupt two sets of “normal:” one being associated to the popular binary (bi-cultural) or alternate hybrid subject position construction of immigrant children’s identities, and the second being the “normalcy” of public spaces as white adult sites. And finally, I suggest that this “choice” of organizing and the performative practice of a flash mob (as well as their choice about making t-shirts as I will relate in the next section) reflects youth choice as well as their political agency, wherein Desi teens identities become marked by their manifestations of it in “third spaces.”

When I asked the lead organizer of the flash mob, Rizwaan why his friends and he decided to do a flash mob of Gangnam style in this varied fashion, he responds: “Did you see the YouTube video of those kids in Bangladesh?” As I told him I did not know about it, he describes,

they did one [flash mob] in Bangladesh! They [kids in Bangladesh] were way ahead of us. If they could do a flash mob of Gangnam Style so quickly and post it [on YouTube], we had to get up and respond as well. So we decided we will come up with our own style on the pop song.

And the lungi style flash mob was born. This flash mob, then, is an act of choice or agency deployed in reaction to happenings in Bangladesh where many of the teens migrated from, and still maintain contact with cousins and relatives residing there. However, in their desire to respond to the “kids in Bangladesh,” they claim difference from Bangladesh, yet, through the manifest connection with the “homeland” these teens reflect ties with a point of origin, and heritage, crafting renewed ethnic identities.

This performance is marked by the teens’ attire and their lyrical alterations that draws attention to their bodies and to the lungi. Another youth from the center, Sagar, who participated in the flash mob, says to some of us who were curious about the choice of using a lungi in their performance, that, “Yeah! My dad’s not gonna dance in his lungi! So why don’t I do it?” Here, Sagar affirms the place the lungi usually occupies in the diaspora: in the private space of the home (and worn by their fathers). Compounded by this explanation, the embodying practice of wearing the lungi in the streets then displaces the lungi from the diasporic private home and brings it to the “third space” of their performative practice. Wearing the lungi signifies a public and youthful manifestation of an identification with South Asia. In their desire to respond to the Bangladeshi kids, these South Asian American teens claim their link to their point of origin as well.

But one cannot read this link without also considering how the teen mobbers also de-territorialize the lungi and situate it alongside globally popularized Korean dance moves and popular beats of “Gangnam Style.” Hence, the performance in many ways situates the Desi teens’ identities within a global framework. Desi teens’ subject positions reflect ties with a past heritage that are marked by their global and transnational engagements. In this way, teens re-create meanings of their self, functioning in everyday life through acts that disrupt where a lungi is “normally” present, as they find a way to make K-Pop their own form of expression and relate it with their experiences as Desis in the streets.²³

In further examining the meaning making cultural practice of this flash mob performed by these Desi teens, the discussion of disruption needs to be addressed in context of the spatial and public dimension of the lungi style flash mob performance. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, geographers of children and youth cultures have argued about the contradictions in perceptions and practices around young people in public spaces. Moral discourses on “stranger-danger” inform practices of “safe spaces” and have increasingly led to the monitoring, “islanding,” and privatization of spaces for children (Cahill, 1990; Zeiher, 2001; 2003). At the same time, independent older children, such as teenagers, hanging out on the streets, inspire “moral panics,” wherein they are seen as “dangerous” beings who may disrupt or cause harm to others in the streets (Stephens, 1995; Valentine, 1996). These “contested terrains” around young people in public spaces find root in the modern understanding of teens as constructed

²³ “Gangnam Style” song itself is a parody and spoof on the bourgeoisie class of South Korea. To then adopt such a song for a flash mob by the teens is particularly symbolic of the messages conveyed through their dance and the identities they relate with their experience as Desis: conveying an identification also as working class and not the children of “model minority” skilled professionals.

through a binary discourse of: being like angels (Apollonian) and like devils or animal-like (Dionysian), at the same time (Jenks, 1996). These conceptions of young people then frame popular views about them in public spaces. So much so that even children are quite aware of the concern they inspire when traveling the streets independently (Mugan & Erkip, 2009) because young people note and experience the “subtle regulatory regimes by which adults maintain their hegemony in public space” (Valentine, 2004, p. 83). For instance, Cahill (1990) discusses how young people visiting malls are often checked by security and asked to leave if they are in a big group or sitting around for hours. He also writes, if children are accompanied by parents to a public space such as a restaurant, any behavior that disrupts adult expected norms of noise – such as a crying baby or loud teenager – results in parents apologizing to other adults for their child's behavior or engage in pacifying their infant or scolding an older child. What young people do – continue to cry or consistently refute adult rules of behavior or expectations associated with public space – in these hegemonic spaces can suggest a reworking of this adultist hegemonic order of “third space.” A flash mob becomes a way in which Desi teens are reworking the hegemonic space of the streets and carving new public identities for themselves.

This becomes particularly interesting in light that brown bodies may be differently regulated in public spaces, as teens like Sidhansh expressed in their poem about growing up in NYC (Chapter Three). Further, two of the teenage boys who participated in the flash mob had previously related to me that their parents were concerned about them traveling alone in the city streets. One of the boys, Sagar, has a curfew of 7 pm, and another, Maalik, is not allowed to go hangout with friends in the

streets or parks in Queens. Another teen boy, Shah, related in a video he made about his experience of growing up in a post 9/11 environment that his parents worried about him even stepping out of the house in the day, for fear that he would be hurt because of the color of his skin. He was alluding to the hate crimes South Asians faced along with Arabs and Muslims right after the 9/11 attacks. By physically being present in the streets of Jackson Heights – wearing a lungi and claiming public space and displaying their Desi identity – depicts the way in which these young people in fact challenge the hegemony of the adult racist public space.

Further, within Jackson Heights, one finds spaces that are primarily adult centered: grocery stores, banks, jewelry stores, clothing stores, restaurants, and so forth, where young people rarely go unaccompanied. By being part of a mob of Desi teens in one corner of the street of Jackson Heights then young people are claiming some part of the hegemonic Desi adult space as well.

As some youth subcultural theorists have argued, use of spaces like streets, and parks and shopping malls by teens – oftentimes the only autonomous space [unlike school and home] for the young to hang out in--function as one form of youth resistance to adult power (Corrigan & Frith, 1975). A flash mob, as Walker reminds us, is a performative act – of occupying public space for a flash by a mob – that indicates, at the least, a choice and a subversion of the “normal.” The dancing teenagers in Queens then too disrupt the normal code of who is expected to be present in the public streets in a flash. They disrupt the normalcy of what is socially constituted approved attire – not usually a lungi in America, even within the immigrant neighborhood – and the types of behaviors socially expected in public space, not organizing collectively and publicly

drawing attention to their Desi identity with a mob of brown teens. And in so doing, this flash mob initiated and enacted by teenagers on a public street corner for adults and peers to view, suggests an act of claiming place, if not also, as cultural studies theories would offer for analysis, a form of negotiating adult control.

Functioning in liminal spaces of communicating on texts, performing on the street, and then uploading video on YouTube and sharing on Facebook, makes this performance a “third space” of possibilities that enables (re)new(ed) identities, that which is closely connected with networks with their past as they respond to “kids in Bangladesh,” through their “own style” of wearing lungis. The third space then becomes a socio-political transformative space, as it enables teen bodies to re-define their independent space in predominantly South Asian adult space in the neighborhood of Jackson Heights in Queens. The performative politics of the flash mob reflects how young Desi teens too are engaged in cultural practices where they re-work their subject positions as going beyond “binary” or “hybrid identities” – by taking global music and inserting their own lyrics to appropriate it as Desi in America.²⁴

LUNGI AS BELONGING AND OTHERNESS

The lungis, along with other fashionable clothing from South Asia, symbolizes a connection with a heritage and “home” country. On the occasion of Eid, many teens from the youth center celebrate the festival and wear heritage clothing at home or to their friends or relatives houses when they visit to wish each other and feast. The center in

²⁴ It is not so much about a hyphenated identity or hybrid identity for these teens. Rather, in the post-9/11 NYC, these teens are re-asserting their Desi identity (reconfigured in transnational, racialized ways) while growing up American, presenting a form of “reactive ethnicity” (see Chapter Four).

Queens also organized a celebratory event for the festival. As planning progressed, the event included the combined celebration of three festivals and holidays: Eid, Diwali, and Thanksgiving, on one Saturday in November 2012. While the invitation flyer describes the attractions of the event as including “food & music” and “henna and photos,” many of the teens who attended the celebrations focused instead on their attire and various style of dress. The teens wore either salwar kameez or kurta pyajama²⁵ and chatted about where they got their clothes from and admired each other’s outfits. They also posed for group and individual photo shoots, and later posted these on their Facebook pages and on the web blog the center maintains.

Teenagers’ attention to their attire is not surprising nor is it a new academic field of inquiry. Styles of dress both challenge social and political norms as much as they advocate them (Hebdige, 1979; Baker, 1985), as well as can reveal and conceal the ethnic identities of the wearer (Lurie, 1992; Rugh, 1986). Essentially, clothes offer a stylistic and cultural allegiance for the wearer, through which their affiliations and identities are made public, and in so doing also marks difference from others. In this case of the Desi teenagers, it is interesting that the teens wear Desi clothes that represent their socio-political positions as transnational Desis in America as they admire and discuss their outfits, and later dance and photograph their ethnically dressed bodies, at the center. Wearing kurta pyjamas or other Bollywood inspired Desi clothes allows teens to express again their contemporary transnational and ethnic subjectivities, just as the film industry

²⁵ Both these forms of clothing include long shirts worn over loose pants. Girls and women wear the salwar kameez and the kurta pyjama is worn by boys and men. The gendered difference in the two is noticeable in the styles of stitching of the two outfits and the color variations available.

symbolizes globally.²⁶ Rizwaan, who was wearing a kurta pyajama for the Thanksgiving celebrations at the Center commented to the group of teens and I who were standing around him: “I look like Shah Rukh Khan, don’t I?” I knew from my previous interaction with Rizwaan that Shah Rukh Khan, a Bollywood film star, was his idol, and often plays characters who wears similar style of dress. Rizwaan also danced to many of his idol’s songs along with his friends at the celebration and has previously on other occasions, and hopes to be famous like the actor some day. The teens fashion choice, hence, depicts how they not only establish a link with a past heritage and history of migration, as the lungi implied earlier, but also with contemporary global trends of fashion from Bollywood. In their stylistic choice of clothes and by taking photographs and posting them on their Facebook profiles, teens embody, memorialize, and mark their identities as shaped by experiences with South Asia.

By dancing at the event at the center to beats of Bhangra and hip hop and R&B, while wearing their Desi garb, these teens are also responding and marking their global positioning’s as such, embedded within their local practices in “third spaces.” Moreover, considering that these teens are celebrating Thanksgiving at this event, wearing Desi clothes is a sign of political agency – as a form of subversion, perhaps – wherein the ways in which immigrant American children choose to celebrate Thanksgiving is through linking it with and wearing their ethnic clothing, positioning their subjectivities in American festivals as marked by their embodied practices of being Desi.

However, it is important here for me to address that teenagers’ choices of wearing their Desi dress is not always met with acceptance in all spaces. What ethnic

²⁶ Bollywood is argued to be a global trend setter in fashion, style, and behavior amongst youth in the diaspora and amidst non-Desis across the globe as well (Gopal & Moorti, 2008).

dress and fashion offer for South Asian teenagers' in "third space" – political public act of re-marking their Desi identity – is, in fact, regulated and constrained in other sites. Objection or regulation from authorities reminds teens of their "otherness" as immigrant racialized bodies, as their attire threatens to challenge social norms in spaces such as schools. Instead, the third space of Facebook becomes constructive for teens. For instance, in the same month as the celebrations of three different festivals at the center, Nabab wore a lungi to his high school to celebrate Decades Day during Spirit Week, a week to celebrate some aspect of identity.²⁷ But he tells his Facebook friends, including me, that his choice of wearing a lungi was rejected at school when he dressed up for Decades Day. Celebration of Decades Day includes wearing something from a particular decade to honor that time period. Usually high school teens who celebrate this Day during Spirit Week, dress up as per stereotypical euro-western fashion styles of a particular decade, such as puffed sleeves or polkadot dresses signifying the 60s, and so forth. Nabab posts a picture of himself in a lungi on Facebook with his face covered by one hand, almost indicating a form of being shamed, and further adds the following message alongside the image describing the scene in the picture:

So I went to school and then changed in to the lungi since [change] of the status. And the security guard tells me to take it off otherwise he'll escort me outta the school. Well gee that's a great way to start my Senior Spirit week. Oh well. I ain't showin my face tho.

In his previous Facebook "status" update Nabab posted that he is celebrating Decades Day by wearing a lungi to his school. This above message describes how his plans for celebrating a "decade" at school ended up as an act of shaming, wherein he "ain't showin

²⁷ Spirit Week is celebrated differently at each high school in America. Not all schools participate in this informal ritual of entering high school. I draw on the meaning of Spirit Week from one of the teens in my study who explained it to me as such.

[his] face” on Facebook. Nabab decided to wear a lungi, which one of his friends, Mueen, explains to me was an act by Nabab to, “show his pride in his country for decades day.” While Nabab is American, here Mueen is suggesting “his country” is Bangladesh, his family’s country of emigration. Mueen further explains that Nabab was showing pride by wearing the lungi because it is “like a decade when they wore the clothes.” Here by “they” Mueen suggests persons of his father’s generation, and a “decade” his father first arrived in the United States, as such still wearing his ethnic clothes. Hence, for Nabab, celebrating Decades Day at school signifies an opportunity to make a socio-political stand on his history in America deployed through the lungi here again (as in the case of the Lungi Style Flash Mob).

Yet, what remains critical is the regulation of this allegiance as the security guard tells Nabab to “take it [lungi] off otherwise he’ll escort [him] outta [out of] the school.” Moreover, how does one make sense of this re-telling on Facebook by Nabab? If “third space” is theorized, as I’ve done in the previous segment of the flash mob, as sites for new growth and articulations of subject positions that relate to a heritage, then Decades Day and the descriptive re-posting of it on Facebook suggests that “third space” also includes these sites, and contradictions and constraints created within these spaces.

I conclude this chapter by drawing attention next to another meaning making embodied practice that Desi teenagers engage in response to regulatory conditions that mark their identities. This discussion does not intend to valorize the resistant practices of older children; rather, it is to say that “third space” enables the performance of socio-political agency by Desi teenagers.

RESPONDING TO ISLAMOPHOBIA THROUGH EMBODIED PRACTICES

During summer of 2010 many teenage girls participating in a leadership workshop at the center in Queens were independently hanging out in their youth lounge discussing plans to make and wear t-shirts that say: “I’m American. I’m not a terrorist.” This was inspired by the approaching 10 year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and in an effort to respond to the ensuing Islamophobia that resulted in hate and racist crimes faced by some of the teens or their friends and extended South Asian community, as discussed in earlier chapters. The girls who wanted to make these t-shirts were either Sikh, Muslim, or Hindu, but unified in their actions as it is their South Asian community that together have been victims of Islamophobia. Here religion, and Islam, then shifts into being a racialized category for them (Maira, 2004).

The idea of the slogan “I’m American. I’m not a terrorist,” was designed by the teens, drawing on a refrain, “My name is Khan. I’m not a terrorist,” circulated through a recent 2010 Bollywood cinema film, My Name is Khan. Many of the teens had shared with me that they had viewed this film. Primarily set in America, this film addresses the issue of an Indian American inter-faith couple, Khan and Mandira, who raise their son born to the Hindu wife in a previous marriage. Like some of the lived realities of the teens in this study, this son becomes the victim of a hate crime at school and eventually dies because of the violence inflicted on him by some peers chanting anti-Islamic terms. The step-father of the boy is a Muslim and shown as autistic in the film who decides to visit the President of United States. On his journey by road to meet the President, with minimal resources for travel, Khan repeats the refrain: “My name is Khan. I’m not a terrorist,” several times. Since Khan is a popular Muslim name, the character is drawing

attention to the fact that while he is Muslim, he and other Muslims are not terrorists, a sentiment which becomes necessary to articulate because of the racial discriminations resulting from this conflation. While the film draws on artistic and exaggerated styles of depiction of the narrative, the youth find parallels of the story with their realities. That the youth at the center perhaps related to the story line and hence adopted the catch phrase into their daily-embodied-life through the t-shirt, is noteworthy. Since the group of girls who decided to make these t-shirts are multi-faith, their twist to the phrase is interesting. On one hand, the teens act as consenting good citizens of America by wearing the t-shirt with the phrase “I am American.” On the other hand, they also embody through the next part of the phrase, a transnational subjectivity; one that is adopted from Bollywood cinema, and reflects also their belonging not just to a single nation but a racialized sense of being – I’m not a terrorist – making their socio-political stand on Islamophobia explicit through their act of making and wearing these shirts. They mark their subject positions through these t-shirts as American bodies that are also simultaneously racialized and have been othered. By drawing on Bollywood cultures these teens also represent connections with transnational South Asia. It is in such “third spaces” of the center where contestations and negotiations are vibrant, and through the embodied act of wearing clothes that either directly relate to their South Asian identity – like wearing a lungi in the flash mob performance –, or through influence of globalized Bollywood – such as adopting the phrase “I am not a terrorist” on their clothes – that South Asian teenagers political identities are manifest.

INSCRIBING LANGUAGE AND MARKING BODIES

The political subjectivities of many of the teens at the center are also understandable through an examination of the various henna and tattoo art of teens at the center. Some of the South Asian teens I met mark their bodies, literally, with permanent tattoos, and sometimes with temporary tattoos of henna created as mehendi patterns inscribing Hindi, Sanskrit, Urdu and Arabic script words and phrases on their bodies. During the end of season program celebrations at the center, girls bring out their henna patterns and henna cones to craft designs on each other's wrists, palms, and arms. Boys also take part in this some times. Many of the designs are sometimes children's own names, but in their heritage language script. I was part of two such observations. On one such occasion in 2011, the teens asked me to inscribe their names on their arms in their heritage language. Many of the children did not know how to write the script, they explained when they requested me to do so. While I was able to write in Hindi for one teen, we had to search for a website through the internet on another boy's phone to help me write his name and a phrase in Arabic. He insisted the inscription must be in Arabic or no other marking on his body were possible. As I do not know how to write in Urdu, I was assigned the task to copy it out on his forearm from the website. The teens then took a picture of these inscriptions on their arms and posted on Facebook instantly. In a sense, the teens permanently inscribed and marked their bodies through the photographs of the temporary henna tattoos. The fact that one boy only allowed for a particular language on his body suggests that embodied practices for teens indicate how and what they identify with; as well that a particular place allows for the possibility of such markings in the first place.

Two other young boys, now working at the center in Queens, have tattoos of Hindi words, saying “ohm” and “aveksha” on their arms. The former is a sacred syllable of Dharmic religions, and the latter is a Hindi word that means being watched over, at least according to the youth. In both instances, the marking of their arms with words from their heritage language suggests how teens are producing ethnic identities through practices of embodiment. While the former is a temporary marking it is memorialized as a mark of their ethnic identity through the images, which they share with a broader public on Facebook.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have shown that cultural tools of Bollywood – language, dialogues, fashion, and even refrains that resonate with their realities – enable teens to craft racialized and ethnic cultural exchanges across generations. These cultural exchanges highlight Desi teens’ subjectivities. In that, Desi teens subject positions are multi-leveled: they align with an originary past through their embodiment of the lungi to celebrate their immigrant positions in America, and also engage in transnational acts of place-making that typically employ cultural symbols, styles of clothes, and messages from the globalizing cinema of Bollywood. At the same time, they grow up conscious of their status as “othered” Americans. Desi teens’ cultural and meaning making practices in the everyday suggest a shift in understanding immigrant identities as binary or “hybrid” but rather as deeply linked with an originary heritage all the while situated alongside global forms of music and dance and as citizens of America. It is interesting to note how in the contemporary racial and spatial contexts these teens’ subjectivities are overtly

transnational and linked with new forms of being Desi and not just about being American or South Asian.

Finally, I highlight how, it is within the (re)new(ed) understandings of “third space” as physical, discursive, and symbolic site of possibilities, connections, disruptions, and contradictions that young people’s new performative practices – such as of the flash mob, dance, fashion, and tattoos – and their identities are situated. Young people’s identities become marked, memorialized, and public in third space of streets, Center, Facebook and YouTube. The explicit public manifestations of their identities as Desi, young, immigrant, and American, suggests a shift in how to think about young people’s identities and spaces from previous understandings offered in literature on this topic. Third spaces accommodate for these nuanced expressions of the self to manifest, which are otherwise othered in schools – as seen in Nabab’s experience of Decades Day –, or are difficult to take shape in the home where different expectations govern their daily life. Ultimately, this chapter highlights how despite various racial and social difficulties faced by these teens in daily geographies (discussed in previous two chapters) cultural performances and embodiments in third spaces enable teens to respond to and shape their political geographies. While Desi teens can be considered political agents, I do not suggest that they are able to resolve the discriminations they face; rather, third spaces and cultural repertoires enable them to respond to these conditions.

CONCLUSION

When I was revising the chapters of this dissertation, I received a phone call from Aman, a staff member at YOSAI, in New York, where I conducted the research of this dissertation. I had completed my fieldwork at this time, and Aman had called to catch up and update me about changes and developments at YOSAI where I first met him and the youth of this study. I had maintained a rapport with some staff members and the youth since I completed my fieldwork; hence, receiving this phone update was not entirely surprising. What was striking, and suggestive, were the updates Aman provided me about the teens still attending YOSAI, in particular in relation to the youth, Nabab.

Aman informed me that Nabab, the youth who had experienced being “othered” at school (discussed in Chapter Five), had stopped going to school for over a year now. His parents, staff and his friends at YOSAI, did not know about this. He would leave the house in the morning on the pretext of attending school but not always end up there. Sometimes he would attend classes at school, or just hang out in the cafeteria, or go to the park near his school instead, until it was time to attend the programs at YOSAI. Some days Nabab would reach the Center early, which seemed odd to Aman, but Nabab would have some excuse for the same, and would then utilize his time helping out Aman with programs, or hang out in the youth lounge equipped with books and three computers. After attending the programs at YOSAI, Nabab would return home late at night, not letting anyone in his family or friend circle learn that he was skipping classes at school. Neither the parents nor the staff members detected that he was missing school. However, Nabab’s friends at YOSAI found his schedule to be amiss and tried to figure out what

was going on with his school attendance. On figuring out that Nabab was missing school for almost a year now, some of his peers at YOSAI planned to host an “intervention” for him in the back lounge of the Center. None of the staff members knew about this, Aman informed me. At the intervention, Nabab’s friends told him that they knew that he was skipping school and because they cared about him they wanted him to finish high school so he could join them in college and not be left behind. Initially Nabab denied their claim about missing school and refused to seek help to get back on track with classes. However, after a few days Nabab reached out to Aman for help in resolving his lack of attendance issue at school as well as asked his support in explaining this situation to his family, with whom he did not have a good rapport as he had failed a whole school year last year. Nabab was certain they would be angrier with him now considering the importance academic achievement of their children was for them (see Chapter Four), and wanted Aman to mediate this situation.

All the while Nabab was missing classes at school, his participation in activities at the Center were sustained. He continued to be part of the independent dance group that was started at YOSAI by Rizwaan, which had its independent Facebook page as well. The boys in the dance group – consisting of five Bangladeshi Muslim and Hindu boys, including Nabab – would perform at events for youth organizations or colleges across the city, promoting themselves as a NYC Desi boys dance group. Nabab even returned to the Solidarity workshop in DC in 2013 to learn more about organizing and advocacy work that enables Desi youth to express their concerns in and for their communities. At YOSAI, Nabab was helping Aman organize debates around race and place based issues, such as, a discussion seminar on Trayvon Martin’s shooting and trial results in summer 2013. This

seminar focused on how, like Travyon, like many of their young brown bodies have experienced racialized hate crimes in public spaces since 9/11. Questions about such dangers to their brown and young bodies in public spaces were discussed, drawing parallels with cases faced by many people of color, and resembling the sessions in workshops they attended during this ethnography.

While extremely disheartening to learn that Nabab had lost interest in attending the public school educational system, and had stopped attending classes, his continued participation at the Center, engagement with socio-political debates there, and travelling across the city to perform dance routines to Bollywood songs, re-affirms the central thesis of this dissertation: the significance of third spaces for immigrant Desi youth in the contemporary socio-political context. As described in Chapter Five, Nabab had a discriminatory experience at school when his school security guard threatened him to change his ethnic attire despite the high school celebrations for which Nabab was dressed in his lungi. Such experiences compounded by the lack of accountability in attending classes at school led in part to Nabab skipping school for almost a full year. But, like Mueen, who resorted to finding support for his academic progress by speaking to staff members at the Center, rather than his counselor at school who was unavailable for him, Nabab too, found support at the Center. Further, it was his peers at YOSAI who hosted an intervention for Nabab and encouraged him to get through high school so that he can at least gain basic educational qualifications to move along. They too suggested that he seek help from Aman who often times served as a mediator for Desi youth between the difficulties they faced at school and at home. However, Aman had expressed to me that this role of being a mediator was not part of his job description. But because of his

familial ties developed as a result of working with the youth for two-three years now, he felt the need to support them, irrespectively. Being a young South Asian American himself he was able to identify with the youth, and also as an adult staff member he felt he could explain teens position to the parents and they would listen to him. Many of the parents he informed me addressed him as their own son, and would be more responsive to his requests and comments than to their children's. Aman expresses similar sentiments of affect, described in Chapter Four, when he expressed wanting to defend Karim and Nida's romantic relationship to Nida's parents. One recommendation that could emerge from this finding about staff members' role as mediators is that ethnic youth center staff members must also share similar cultural and ethnic background as the youth so as to enable holistic support – between the home and the school. Also, their work responsibilities should formally include the task of mediating between parents and youth. Not all staff members would otherwise be willing to provide this intermediary support like Aman was willing to.

Irrespective of the official role of the staff members, the third space of the youth center offers inter-generational and cross-generational support to Desi youth. In studying immigrant children's everyday geographies it became evident that networks of support exist across generational ties, but bounded by ethnicity and race. This support took multiple forms: mentorship, learning about their community and about politics through programs at YOSAI, and finding a sense of belonging based on their class and ethnic identity shared with their peers who attended YOSAI. Youth like Nida and Noor attended the youth center because they were able to interact with people who are “similar” to them, which helped them avoid instances of racial ignorance, as well as of racist encounters,

which they encountered in school or in public places. This dissertation documents the racism that youth like Sidhansh experience, and at the same time, highlights their tactics in negotiating these discriminations. While third spaces did not enable youth to transcend these discriminations it enabled teens to use the support in third space to mediate these very circumstances. For instance, teens attend workshops in DC to learn about how the personal racialized attacks are a result of politicization and racialization of their South Asian, Arab, or Muslim identities. When understood as political, these personal acts of discrimination can be negotiated in the daily life.

IMPLICATIONS ABOUT THIRD SPACES: PHYSICAL AND SYMBOLIC

This study describes and discusses third spaces as physical places as well as symbolic spaces and has implications for research on youth centers as well as contributes to advancing the theory of “third space.” While sociology scholars have argued that youth centers isolate the lives of young people and are constructed as a result of adult anxieties around safety of children from public spaces, my analysis challenges these findings. In the context of the contemporary post 9/11 racial-ethnic environment, my dissertation identifies through a discourse analysis of the YOSAI documents that some youth centers reflect the needs and experiences of their participants and enable them to be more engaged with their socio-political realities. The discourse analysis in Chapter Three highlights how ideas of affective safety and political safety are constructed by the Center because they recognize and affirm the difficulties and circumstances of discriminations Desi youth experience in public spaces and in schools as a result of the hate crimes inflicted on the South Asian and Muslim communities. The programs that YOSAI runs

support the affective needs of the teens, which are articulated by Sidhansh in his poem about “growing up in NYC,” for instance (see Chapter Three). These include classes on leadership, where boys and girls can discuss issues that bother them, such as, bullying at school, and other difficulties at home with their parents because of their generational and traditional belief differences as well. At the same time, many programs run by YOSAI reflect political safety discourses, which begin to first shape the political geographies of Desi teenagers. By hosting workshops on aftermath of 9/11, encouraging youth participation in rallies for End of Racial Profiling Act in NYC, and other mobilizing campaigns that include meeting congressional staff in the Capitol, the ethnic youth center staff and programs prepare young people to be engaged in social justice issues, making their current and future geographies politically safe. Hence, this study shows, that ethnic youth centers alter their programs for youth based on the needs of young people and the socio-political climate, supporting politically engaging activities for Desi youth. This finding consequently suggests that youth centers must take into account the racialized and politicized dynamics that inform young people’s lives as they construct various programs and support services for them, which has not been sufficiently accounted for in literature on youth centers.

This dissertation has also shown how politicization of youth identities begins at the youth center, but also takes shape at other physical places such as organizing workshops at the Capitol Hill and in public street corners where they perform the lungi flash mob. Therefore, the spaces between the home and the school, as well as those at the youth Center, are all considered third spaces of possibilities. That is, this study suggests that physical third spaces are emotive places for the young that generate possibilities to

connect with their social realities and negotiate their daily difficulties. The working class youth in this study are able to find paid internships through YOSAI, receive stipends for attending workshops and leadership classes, and even sometimes begin to teach their own classes. As discussed in Chapter Four, this enables youth to support their families financially as well as possess some purchasing power for themselves, navigating the difficulties of their class positions daily.

But further, this study has also shown how third spaces are symbolic sites of possibilities as it is through creative and symbolic practices of dress, dance, and music that Desi youth negotiate and make new political identities (see Chapter Five). As discussed in Chapter One, Homi Bhabha suggests that the third space make new identities possible, but it also displaces and erases the histories that lead to constituting them. However, the findings from this study suggest that third spaces are often multiple and intersecting sites of possibilities that do not displace histories but rather enable new identities. In fact, histories shape and inform the new identities of young people in third space—at least those they bring to bear on their own projects. When Desi teens bring an attire, the lungi, more frequently associated with their parents' generation and clothing found in the homeland into the public streets and dance to globalized K-pop song, they are weaving together their ethnicities, histories, and immediate concerns into action in the here and now. The lungi flash mob, moreover, was made in reaction to a performance in Bangladesh, thereby symbolizing and enacting a re-casting of their identities as globalized Desis and American, all at once. As Desi youth also face racial discrimination in public spaces, this act of overtly bringing attention to their cultural-ethnic identities in public space suggests that the tactics and possibilities that help youth mediate their

identities and socio-political realities manifest because of the difficulties and the displacement of their histories associated with their identities. In this way, this dissertation also adds to the theoretical orientations on third space wherein young people's movements and actions in physical third space, through symbolic practices, result in challenging Bhabha's theory of third space. It also moves away from any simplistic understanding of Desi youth as aspiring for "authentic" or "hybrid" identities that have no connections with their past, which several studies on immigrant youth cultures have addressed. Instead, this research turns attention to the political identities and lived social realities of young Desis in a post 9/11 era.

YOUTHFUL POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES

After analyzing the various programs and workshops offered by the ethnic youth center, YOSAI, this dissertation highlights where young people's political geographies begin to take shape: in political workshops, advocacy sessions, and in emerging political organizations in New York City. Questions about children's and youth's politics, however, have been raised by various scholars in the field of geography and childhood studies, and continue to be debated as it is considered a relatively new field of research. This study traces and analyzes both youth Politics taking place in formalized political spaces such as the Capitol Hill and Congressional Offices and in rallies and workshops. But I have also argued that youth's political expressions and agency are evident in their cultural practices, performative and embodied acts, and expressions as well. When teens decide to wear t-shirts with a phrase borrowed from globalized Bollywood cinema, "I am American, I am not a terrorist" that they envisioned and designed, it indicates their

creative and embodied practice of a stand against Islamophobia that draws on their global cultural affinities, which I discussed in Chapter Five.

Ethnic attire and fashion of the youth of this study, hence, also represent how political geographies are deeply connected to youth's ethnic identity and embodied practices. By wearing a lungi to school for the celebration of Decades Day, Nabab highlighted the ways in which teens like him express their ethnic identities, as he wore the lungi to school to show pride in his culture. Such acts are bold and represent their political stands as Desi teens grow up in America, where they are discriminated against because of their ethnic identifiers such as turbans, and clothes, which have been conflated with symbols of terrorism. Nabab was yet again othered for such representational politics when he was asked to change out of the lungi at school—and indeed his gesture became that much more political due to the reaction of school officials. As my study suggests that when examining political geographies of youth, scholars must pay attention to representational, performative, and racialized dynamics of young people, as their political expressions, struggles, and acts draw on these constructions, ethnic, and representational tactics.

As such, this dissertation shows how young people act politically in their own ethnic-youth- and place based ways, as it is the moment of the post 9/11 era that compounds the Brown teens political geographies. And further, that political agency for the young manifests in performative and creative practices as well. Literature on children's political geographies has yet to fully account for these differences based on socio-cultural factors and contexts that inform the very daily lives of young people across

scales. My research fills this very significant gap on place, politics, race, and young people geographies.

SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

My research has implications for studies of youth cultural studies, theories of third spaces, political geographies, as described above, as well offers significant contributions to fields of South Asian studies, and childhood and youth studies. As described in Chapter Four, the participants in this study are all working class youth from across South Asia, with majority from Bangladesh. Previous studies of youth and adults of the South Asian communities have offered substantial attention to middle class or elite professional class immigrants from South Asia, with few exceptions (Mathew, 2009). My dissertation has shown how working class Desi teens aspire to draw allegiances across class boundaries and find such working class solidarity at an ethnic youth center in New York and in their political practices. Working class Desi's aspire to support their families through earning an income as early as possible, and hence also initially get attracted to attend many of the classes and workshops at YOSAI and other youth organizations as these offer stipends, and paid internships. Working class Desi youth aspire to gain purchasing power and attempt to mediate their working class positions through their everyday practices of attending a youth center and its classes. Such analysis has been minimally considered in the vast literature on South Asian American studies, and none on the youth of this community. My research offers some initial analysis on class, which future studies must consider as the growing working class populations of South Asians in the diaspora have been marginalized in research examinations.

The lives of Desi youth of this study, like other working class youth discussed in youth cultural studies literature can not be simply explained through the frameworks of resistance through rituals. Rather, this dissertation highlights that race, place, and socio-political analysis complicates the realities and identities of working class Desi teen growing up today in post 9/11 New York. As this dissertation has evidenced, childhood and youth studies research includes as its central focus of analysis such topics that relate to children and youth, while drawing on theories and literatures from a range of disciplines that cut across the social sciences and the humanities. But if the field of child and youth studies must extend beyond disciplinary struggles and exchanges, then research that directly relates to lived childhoods must also begin to reflect on the affects on how research and the findings can inform these lived young lives. As discussed in Chapter Two, this dissertation has been concerned with critical and reflexive child and youth research and questions the role of ethnography and of ethnographers in informing social practice and policy when the study in particular relates to contemporary issues informing marginalized and under-represented communities. While it may be too ambitious to recommend that youth social researchers must also function as social practitioners, in the spirit of sustaining reflexive multidisciplinary children and youth research, I wish to direct future scholars in this multidisciplinary field of childhood studies to consider at the least the multiple roles one can and ought to mediate and play in socially responsible child and youth research. As well as that they must also consider the multiple dimensions in the lives of the young lives they research: contexts of place, political climate, and young people's race and ethnicity. As I reflected in Chapter Two, social responsibility can take shape in various ways: as one mediates multiple roles of

being a practitioner, volunteer, and mentor to young people and by supporting critical work for youth in the case of a study like mine. Or it can also take shape through other avenues, which can include writing policy briefs, organizing workshops, and participating in advocacy work relevant to the research findings. There are some inspiring models relating to children's geographies and city planning work already. I believe this dissertation has also shown that maintaining multiple positionalities does not undermine rigorous scholarly research; rather, is especially important for child and youth ethnographers who claim to inform the multidisciplinary field of childhood studies, as multi-disciplinarity must also include multiple dimensions for research on children and youth and for them as well. As researchers begin to pay attention to their own multiple roles and responsibilities in social childhood and youth research, scholarship about and praxis for young people too will begin to accommodate the multiple dynamics necessary to be addressed – such as race, ethnicity, socio-political climate, and significance of place that this dissertation pays attention to – for analyzing and supporting young lives.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR YOUTH

About YOSAI and the youth:

- What is your understanding of YOSAI? What do you think it is?
- Who did you first hear about YOSAI from? Why did you come here?
- Have you attended YOSAI center or its program prior to this summer? If so, when and what did you attend? What would be one thing that you'd tell me about your experience prior to this summer with YOSAI?
- Can you tell me some ways in which you'll maintain ties with YOSAI after the summer? Or will you never come back here?
- Do you know the staff here?
- How would you say the staff here is different from your parents or teachers, if you think they are different?
- Would you invite your friends from YOSAI to your house or family events?
Would you do the same with your friends at school?

About the PS program:

- What would you say to me about the YOSAI program if I didn't know what it was?
- Did you like it? Can you give me some reasons for what and why you like the PS program? Did the program offer something new to you?
- During the summer this year was there something you would have changed or hoped was done differently around you?
- Can you share one thing that was totally new for you in this program?

About race and belonging:

- When did you move to the United States? Were you born here?
- Do you feel you belong to a particular ethnic group? And how would you characterize that group?
- In what ways do you think belonging to YOSAI has helped in feeling like you belong to the US? Or does it make you feel like you belong to another country or some place else altogether?

APPENDIX II

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STAFF

Personal history:

- When did you start working at YOSAI?
- What was your motivation to work here?
- What do you think will sustain you at this job?
- What is the most interesting aspect of your job and why do you like it?

Notions about the organization and “community”:

- How would you describe YOSAI to someone who knows nothing about it?
- What is the mission of the organization -- as you understand it?
- What is the vision of the organization as you see it?
- What would you like to change about it?
- What kinds of associations does it have to any community?
- And what do you mean by community?
- Are there any kinds of community you think YOSAI focuses on more than others?
- How would you define South Asian?
- How do you understand “youth action”?
- How does it relate to other ethnic communities other than South Asians?
- What would you say is similar about YOSAI to other recreation programs in America?

- What would you say is unique about YOSAI?

Significance of place:

- Do you think this center location is ideal for the programs?
- What kind of value does YOSAI offer as a result of being situated in Queens?
- How does it help connect with other places?
- Can you think of ways in which the physical location of this center has an impact on the programs? Or on the youth?

Repertoires with youth and their family:

- Do you have to interact with youth frequently?
- What do you like about that and what don't you like about it?
- What do you think YOSAI offers to the youth?
- Do you think YOSAI helps the families too? And how?
- What kinds of expectations do the families of the youth have from you and/ or from YOSAI?
- Do you think youth have some expectation from the programs or the staff? Can you identify some?

Interview with staff members who were also youth participants in the past:

- When did you start attending YOSAI?
- What was your motivation?
- How did you hear about it?

- What programs did you attend?
- What brought you to work here?
- Does YOSAI offer a sense of belonging? And in what way?
- What kinds of significance does YOSAI have? Is it associated with one particular place? Or more?
- How do you think YOSAI relates to the subcontinent directly or indirectly?

APPENDIX III

GUIDELINE FOR PHOTO PROJECT FOR YOUTH

Phase One: Initial guidelines for photo making

How else do I seek your contribution and participation in my research? We will work with photographs. Now that you have cameras, I will ask you to take pictures and then we will discuss them and make photo-diaries. But first, I ask you to do one of the three or all three (you can decide):

- Take pictures of places you visit through YOSAI activities, or the places you like when you visit them. This could be in-between sites, like the mall or the street corner, or any other place like a building, or a state office, or a room, or your home. This is totally up to you!
- You can take pictures of people and things that are most important to you or you like.
- Take pictures of events you attend – both at home, with friends, or through YOSAI – during July and August.

Remember:

- This camera belongs to you. Carry it with you at all times.
- You will take pictures through till August 09. After which, we will view the photographs together for our photo-elicitation interview

- Those of you interested in creating photo-diaries will begin working next on those with Aman and me.

NOTE: After taking photographs we will discuss them and I will ask you to describe them. This stage will contribute towards the research project in which I seek your participation. We will do one-on-one discussions in the last week of July. In the next stage you can use your photographs for creating a photo-diary/ photo-video about your own life, about experiences of various places you attended through PS or about YOSAI or about your friends or family. Basically, you can show off your photography! And, you can present this at the end of season celebrations. I will share with you some examples of these diaries other kids have made in other programs in the US. And maybe we can also publish them or present them elsewhere if you are interested!

Phase two: Presentations

How to use your photographs and make them into stories? Two projects:

A Day at YOSAI

- Use at least 6 techniques of photograph making in your photos that were taught in the photography workshop by Natasha.
- Your photos should be about how you spend your day at YOSAI. This is broadly conceived. Depends on how you experience your day here.
- Then you will stitch the photographs together into a story board and present a powerpoint or any other visual format you want to use to share your “Day at YOSAI” photo-story.

Places We Like

- Use at least 6 techniques of photograph making in your photos that were taught in the photography workshop by Natasha.
- Use photographs from various events and trips or photographs you took over the period of the summer and make a presentation using these photographs on “places you like.”

APPENDIX IV

LIST OF KEY PARTICIPANTS:

Youth Participants				
Name	Age at start of the study	Gender	Religion	National heritage
Amaanat	15	Female	Muslim	Bangladeshi
Ayesha	15	Female	Christian	Indo-Trinidadian
Jai	19	Male	Muslim	Pakistani
Karim	17	Male	Muslim	Bangladeshi
Minhaj	15	Male	Muslim	Bangladeshi
Mueen	17	Male	Muslim	Bangladeshi
Mysha	15	Female	Muslim	Bangladeshi
Navin	16	Male	Muslim	Pakistani
Nida	15	Female	Muslim	Bangladeshi
Noor	15	Female	Muslim	Bangladeshi
Prakash	16	Male	Hindu	Indian
Raveesha	16	Female	Sikh	Indian
Rizwaan	18	Male	Muslim	Bangladeshi
Sagar	16	Male	Hindu	Bangladeshi
Sahib	15	Male	Muslim	Bangladeshi
Sidhansh	16	Male	Sikh	Indian

Sukhmani	16	Female	Sikh	Indian
Zainab	15	Female	Muslim	Pakistani
Zia	16	Female	Muslim	Pakistani

Staff member participants from YOSAI and other organizations		
Name	Designation	Gender
Aman	PS program coordinator	Male
Aliyah	Center coordinator and dance program head	Female
Ayesha	Youth Staff since 2011 – leadership class facilitator	Female
Jessica	Center director	Female
Nabi	Youth Staff – Leadership class	Female
Natasha	Photography workshop coordinator	Female

Sahil	Youth Staff since 2010 – security and design	Male
Sara	Founding director	Female
Sehar	Academic program director in 2010	Female
Sugandha	Leadership program director	Female
Umang	Executive director, YOSAI at the time of the study	Male

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- Wong, N.A. (2010). "Cuz they care about the people who goes there:" The multiple roles of a community based youth center in providing "youth (comm)unity" for low-income Chinese American Youth. *Urban Education*, 45 (5), 708-739.
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- Zeihner, H. (2003). Shaping the daily life in urban environments. In P. Christensen & M. O'Brien (Eds) *Children in the city: Home, neighborhood and community. The future of childhood series*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Zhou, M. & Bankston, CL III. (1994). Social capital and the adaptation of the second generation: the case of Vietnamese youth in New Orleans. *International Migration Review*, 28 (4), 775-99.
- Zhou, M. (1997). Growing up American: The Challenge of confronting immigrant children and children of immigrants. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23, 63-95.

CURRICULUM VITAE

ANANDINI DAR

ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

Expected May 2014 Ph.D. Candidate in Childhood Studies, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, United States of America.

Dissertation: *"I Like Going Places:" The Everyday and Political Geographies of South Asian Immigrant Youth in New York City.*

2007 M.A. in Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

Thesis title: *Child Abuse in Australian Aboriginal Communities: Controversies, Cross-cultural Perspectives, and Complexities.*

2006 Graduate Diploma in Gender, Sexuality and Diversity Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia (as part of an Exchange Program from University of Delhi).

2005 B.A. (Honours) in English Literature, Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India.

AWARDS AND GRANTS

2013-14 Graduate Assistantship, Center for Race and Ethnicity, Rutgers University-NB.

2012-13 Graduate Assistantship, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences & Graduate School, Rutgers University.

2008-13 Graduate Assistantship, Department of Childhood Studies, Rutgers University.

2012 Urban Geography Specialty Group Travel Award, Annual Conference, American Association of Geographers.

2010 David K. Sengstack Endowed Graduate Fellowship, Department of Childhood Studies, Rutgers University.

2010 National Science Foundation Scholarship for Enhancing Communication in Cross Disciplinary Research, University of Idaho.

2009 & '12 Graduate Student Research Grant, Dean of Arts and Science, Rutgers

University.

- 2009 Childhood Studies Department Travel Grant, Rutgers University.
- 2006 The Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty Scholarship, La Trobe University, Australia.
- 2006 Academic Excellence Award, Chisholm College, La Trobe University.
- 2005 Exchange Program Scholarship Award, Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi.
- 2005 Shri Daulat Rai M. Desai Prize for Leadership, Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi.

PUBLICATIONS

Dar, A. (2014, forthcoming). South Asian Youth Groups. In Simon Bronner, Mary Napoli, Cindy Dell Clark (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Youth Cultures in America*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.

Dar, A. (2012). Children's Lives. In Edward Ramsamy, Andrea L. Stanton, Peter J. Seybolt, and Carolyn Elliot (eds.) *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia and Africa: An Encyclopedia*. Volume 4: West, Central and South Asia. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Dar, A. and Cox, P. (2011). Editorial: Re-Exploring Childhood Studies. In *Childhoods Today*, 5(2): 1-8.

Dar, A. and Cox, P. (2011). (Ed.) Special Issue: Re-Exploring Childhood Studies. In *Childhoods Today*, 5(2).

Wall, J. and Dar, A. (2011). Children's Political Representation: The Right to Make a Difference. In *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 19 (4): 595-612.

Daniel, H., Watson, N., Atkins, R. and Dar, A. (2010). Prosocial Tendencies, Antisocial Behavior, and Moral Development in Childhood Prosocial tendencies. In Alan Slater and Gavin Bremner (eds.) *An Introduction to Developmental Psychology*, 2nd Edition. New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell.

Dar, A. (2009). Children in Conflict With Law: A Case Study of Young Boys in Delhi. In *My Name is Today*, Vol. 16. New Delhi: Butterflies.

Dar, A., Islam, I., Jayaram, S. and Ohri, A. (2007). *Report: Access to Protection of Dalit girls: An Inquiry; the case of Garhi Chhaju, Haryana*. New Delhi: UNICEF and Knowledge Community of Children in India.

Dar, A. (2007). (Ed.) *Report on the Seminar on 'Children as Victims of Crime: Psycho-social and Forensic Perspectives*. New Delhi: Prayas Juvenile Aid Center.

INVITED TALKS

2014 *Lungi Style: Everyday Geographies of South Asian Teens in New York City*. Children and Youth Studies Program, Brooklyn College, City University of New York. February 05, 2014.

SELECTED SCHOLARLY PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS

2013 *Recreation Centers as Escape: Negotiation of Borders and Networks by South Asian Teenagers in New York City*. American Association of Geographers, Annual Conference, Los Angeles. 09-13 April. (Paper accepted for panel: Youth, the Borderlands, and the Spaces In Between.)

2013 *Lungi Style Flash Mob*. Sixth Annual Graduate Forum on Race and Ethnicity. Center for Race and Ethnicity, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, February 22, 2013.

2012 *"That's SWAG!": Desi Kids and the Diasporic Cultures of South Asian Childhoods*. "Children and Youth in a Changing World": 2012 Inter-congress of International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) Bhubaneswar, India. November 26-30, 2012. Panel organizer for: Migrant Children's Cultures and the Culture of Migrant Childhoods.

2012 *Amidst the Material, the Everyday, and the Global: Childscapes of Diasporic South Asian childhoods*. American Association of Geographers, Annual Conference, New York, February 21. (Paper accepted for panel: Critical Geographies of Young People: Globalization, Space and Time: Global Discourses I)

2011 *Imagining Belonging: South Asian Migrant Children as Consenting Citizens of America*. American Studies Association, Annual Conference, Maryland. October 20-23.

- 2011 *Constructing/ De-constructing the Migrant Child Citizen. Multiple Childhoods/ Multidisciplinary Perspectives: Interrogating Normativity* in Childhood Studies. Rutgers University-Camden, New Jersey. May 19-22.
- 2010 *East Meets West: Migrant South Asian Youth Identities in India Abroad.* International Interdisciplinary Conference. The Society for Indian Philosophy and Religion, University Kolkata, India. December 28-30.
- 2010 *South Asian Migrant Children in the U.S: Identities at "Play."* American Anthropological Association Conference, New Orleans. November 18-21.
- 2010 *Should Children Have the Right to Vote?: An Exploration of Democracy.* Co-presenter Dr. John Wall. Department of Philosophy and Religion Symposium, Rutgers University Camden. October 20.
- 2010 *Cross-Disciplinary Childhood Studies: Challenges and Ways Forward.* Co-presenter: Patrick Cox. Enhancing Communication in Cross-disciplinary Research Conference. National Science Foundation and University of Idaho, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. September 30 – October 03.
- 2009 *A Migrant Child's Experience of Identit(y)ies in Trans-National Cultures: Usefulness of Photo-Interviewing.* European Sociological Association Conference, Lisbon, Portugal. September 02–06.
- 2009 *Photo-interviewing: Understanding a Migrant Child's Perspective of his Culture.* European Sociological Association Student Mini-Conference: Arguing with evidence in studying culture and the arts, Lisbon, Portugal. August 31 – September 01.
- 2004 *Youth Against Violence on Women.* United Nations Volunteers and Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti Annual Conference, Delhi, India. December 04.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 2013 *Global Childhoods*, Instructor (*Self constructed course syllabi*), Department of
of
Sp./Su Childhood Studies, Rutgers University.
- 2011-12 *Introduction to Childhood Studies*, Instructor (*Self constructed course*
Fall, Sp. *syllabi*), Department of Childhood Studies, Rutgers University.
& Su
- 2009 *Introduction to Childhood Studies*, Teaching Assistant
Department of Childhood Studies, Rutgers University.
Lecture: “Melding children’s literary representations with psycho-social
constructions about the attention deficit/hyperactive child.”
- Aug 2005 *Beginning Hindi I & II, Tutor*
-Dec 2007 South Asia Department, La Trobe University, Australia.

ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

- 2013-18 Inter-congress of International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological
Sciences
(IUAES) Commission on Anthropology of Children, Youth and Childhood,
Executive/ Organizing Committee and Member.
- 2011-14 H-Grad Editor (List and Web), H-Net, Humanities and Social Sciences
Online.
- 2011 Graduate Roundtable Workshop: Charting the Course, at Multiple Childhoods
Multidisciplinary Perspective, an international childhood studies conference,
Rutgers University – Camden, Co-chair.
- 2011 Research network, Sociology of Children and Childhood,
European Sociological Association.
Conference Selection Committee member.
- 2010 Exploring_childhood_studies listserv,
– present https://email.rutgers.edu/mailman/listinfo/exploring_childhood_studies
Founder and Administrator.
- 2010 President and Chancellors’ Committee for the Hire of the Dean of Camden
College of Arts and Sciences, Rutgers University,
Member.
- 2010 Exploring Childhood Studies Conference, Rutgers University-Camden
Childhood
Studies Graduate Student Organization Conference,
Co-Chair.

Migrant Children and At Risk Youth Panel, Exploring Childhood Studies Conference, Panel Chair and Moderator.

Children's Rights Panel, Exploring Childhood Studies Conference, Panel Chair and Moderator.

- 2009 Working Group on Childhood and Migration,
- present <http://globalchild.rutgers.edu/biographies.htm>
Member.
- 2008 Rutgers-Camden American Association of University Professors (AAUP),
- present TA/GA member.
Camden chapter, TA/GA representative to the AAUP-AFT TAGA Steering
Committee, 2009-2012.
- 2008 Rutgers University-Camden Childhood Studies Graduate Student
Organization,
– 2010 Member.