

# Dance on!: Inter-collegiate Indian dance competitions as a new cultural form

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## Abstract

Inter-collegiate Indian dance competitions emerged in the late 1990s in the United States and have since become wildly popular. Why dance? Why now? We explore these questions through *Nachte Raho*, a competition hosted by a University of Iowa student organization. Such events allow participants to publicly embody the contradictions they experience as minoritized children of immigrants on a predominantly White campus. Thus, dance enables community building among minoritized students and has entertainment value to non-Indians. Students distinguish *Nachte Raho* from unruly “community functions” organized by immigrant parents and aim instead to produce a professionalized show intended primarily for peers.

## Keywords

Cultural politics, diaspora, ethnicity, identity, South Asian/Indian dance

## Introduction

I had no idea about this competition thing, about any of this stuff, until I went to college, whereas some of my friends, especially those who are from highly populated South Asian community areas like Chicago suburbs, ... they knew about it ... it seems like the fever has

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pretty much caught the U.S. and everybody is trying to make a team and everybody is trying to compete ... (Male dance team captain)

Inter-collegiate Indian dance competitions constitute a new cultural form in the United States. What explains the phenomenal success of a cultural form that did not exist before the late 1990s? Why now and why dance? We explore these questions through *Nachte Raho*, a dance competition that a University of Iowa (UI) student organization has hosted since 2002. We had each attended the annual event for several years and experienced the show as members of the audience (with Akkoor also serving as judge) before conducting formal research in 2009.<sup>1</sup> The polished public performance in which students assert a confident hybrid Indian–American identity belies the backstage dynamics that reveal complexities and contradictions of ethnic community and identity.

Anticipation builds as the event approaches in March each year. The buzz in the student newspaper, on the university web site, and on Facebook-posted promo videos screams exotic, youthful, fun! The undergraduate population at this public university is primarily White and Midwestern. Despite the new visibility of international students from Asia and increasing talk of recruiting Iowa's expanding young Latino/a population, the number of self-identified Asian–American students on campus has remained small (4%). The student union is an unremarkable institutional space that, despite its function, seems to draw fewer students than do either football games or downtown bars from which students spill onto the sidewalks. However, for this one evening, the ordinarily sedate student union is transformed into a “desi” space.<sup>2</sup> *Nachte Raho*'s sound and color, both loud, enliven the Midwestern aesthetic of “plain” and the drabness of an Iowa winter that by March feels never-ending. As ticket-holders wait in a line that snakes through the union hallways, they might, if lucky, glimpse an elaborately costumed team making its way to the backstage area. The silks, satins, spandex, and shiny ribbons worn by performers, male and female, are mirrored by Indians waiting in line, some of whom (especially females) seize this opportunity to wear Indian outfits too ethnic for ordinary work and social life. The excitement of those lined up in the hope of grabbing good seats is not to be disappointed, for most leave fully satisfied by an evening of high-energy, cultural entertainment.

This is no “insider” event produced by and for Indians, though such “community” events also exist and, as we will argue below, constitute a counterpart to *Nachte Raho*. *Nachte Raho* is a performance of Indian culture brought into a mostly White but increasingly diverse space by UI's Indian Student Alliance (ISA). The ISA includes US-born Indian–Americans and visa-holding international students, but our research quickly revealed that participants in *Nachte Raho* are primarily the former—those with immigrant parents, US passports, brown skin (of many shades) and American English.<sup>3</sup> They share the general Asian–American problem of continually being marked as foreign but do not conform to US phenotypic definitions of Asians. The student organization enables them to claim space on a multicultural campus by offering packaged entertainment and embracing the spirit of inter-collegiate competition.

The lives of South Asian–American youth are fraught with contradictions, which converge in the student union ballroom one evening each March. Here students perform for multiple audiences: White peers, Indian peers, students of color who are neither Indian nor White, faculty, staff parents and others in the “auntie–uncle” category, along with

young children. In this essay, we privilege the voices of organizers and performers who, we show, face contradictory expectations. Indian dance competitions, we argue, constitute a new cultural form that has emerged in early 21st century precisely because it allows participants to wrestle with, even embody, the contradictions that shape their everyday lives as racialized children of immigrants on a predominantly White campus. These contradictions are shaped by demographic trends, inter-generational dynamics, campus multiculturalism, the rising popularity of Bollywood style in mainstream American culture, and recent policies of both India and the United States that promote diasporic identities. Gilroy (1993) has argued cogently that the power of Black cultural forms derives from their very “doubleness” (p. 73). If discourses of racism, nationalism, and cultural purity present identities as mutually exclusive (Gilroy, 1993), then *Nachte Raho* disrupts these discourses by asserting—publicly, loudly, joyfully—a form that is impure, hybrid, unfinished, and thoroughly diasporic.

*Nachte Raho* is both dance and competition. Dance is a particularly effective way to work out the tensions and contradictions of ethnic identity for minoritized groups identified through national (“Indian”) identities. Dance is a primary site for producing knowledge of identities and representations (Heller, 2011). However, it is also a way of bringing people together, in real time and physical space, to create community. Thus, students embrace the world of dance teams and competitions not only to represent themselves on stage but also to build solidarity off-stage. *Nachte Raho* draws not only from folk dance and Bollywood culture but also from the world of inter-collegiate sports. Sport is a prominent arena in which national identities are embodied and contested (Burdsey, 2006). Dance team leaders, who are called “captains” rather than choreographers, take on the role of coaches; they train their dancers, push them to perform better, and enthuse about “team spirit” to maintain morale immediately before and after a performance. Some teams draw clusters of rowdy fans who aggressively chant their school name. Some wear costumes—*kurtas*, *lehngas*, *lungis*, *salwars*—in their school colors. The evening is sprinkled with references to the weight loss, physical fitness, and stress release that result from a dance “workout.” *Nachte Raho* draws equally from both dance and sport to create a performance of embodied culture. The body is known to be a powerful symbol of identity at the level of the personal as well as the social (Hargreaves and Vertinsky, 2007: 8). *Nachte Raho* participants create community by practicing together to learn bodily practices marked as ethnically Indian. These teams are neither virtual nor film-viewing communities, but face-to-face social groups; they embody culture.

Indian dance competitions have multiplied across the United States in the last decade, especially in metropolitan areas where Indian populations are concentrated. *Nachte Raho* has emerged as the largest inter-collegiate competition in the Midwest region, entertaining a sold-out audience year after year in a venue that seats 900, with student tickets selling for US\$10. It has grown in size and visibility to become, in its first decade, the second-largest student-organized event on campus (after dance marathon, a fundraiser). The generous prize money (US\$5500 in 2011) has put *Nachte Raho* on the map. Teams come primarily from the Midwest, but the 2011 and 2012 competitions also attracted teams from as far as Atlanta, Boston, and Berkeley. Many competitions in the United States are restricted to Bollywood or *bhangra*, a Punjabi folk dance that has become extremely popular in United Kingdom, United States, and Canada. There are now over 200 independent and college *bhangra* teams and some two dozen

annual competitions across the United States (Lal, 2008: 86). *Nachte Raho* includes three categories of dance: *bhangra*, *raas* (a folk dance originating in western India), and Bollywood fusion.

*Nachte Raho* enables Indian–American students to inhabit—to embrace—the contradictions of their lives, but in a public way, on stage, under the lights. They are good children fulfilling familial aspirations of higher education and upward mobility while also demonstrating their familiarity with, and enjoyment of, Indian culture. At the same time, they are American college students performing “cool” so as to win the admiration of their non-Indian peers. Asserting their hybrid identities on stage entails risk. What if no one shows up? What if they offend the “auntie–uncle” generation or invite ridicule from their peers?

The contradictions around gender are particularly striking. Bollywood films, so central to diaspora experience, both express and promote a central contradiction in the lives of Indian women. On the one hand, most films uphold a moral ideal of the conservative extended family that depends on the loyalty and chastity of its women; on the other, the song and dance sequences also promote an alternative ethos of sexuality that is fun, risky, and promiscuous (Dudrah, 2012). In the Bollywood fusion pieces, young women gyrate, thrust out hips and wear revealing clothes that they are unlikely to wear at home, where “home” includes not just household but by extension ethnic community and nation (Bhattacharjee, 1997: 308). Given these fraught dynamics, it is not surprising that the female dancers give much thought to the appropriateness of their outfits.

Male dancers transgress gender norms too. In *bhangra*, men wear a sarong-like cloth (*lungi*) wrapped around the waist, in silky fabrics and bright colors like shocking pink, sunshine yellow, and glittery purple; the resemblance to a skirt is unmistakable. Several young men admitted cringing at first at the idea of wearing a *lungi* on stage. In *raas*, men wear hip-length tops with skirt-like gathers around the entire circumference that begin at the chest; the male tops and female skirts flair out in unison as the couples twirl on stage. The University of Iowa is a campus saturated by football culture, where the locker room for visiting teams is painted pink. The former football coach Hayden Fry linked the color pink to “girls’ bedrooms” and “sissies” and described the locker room décor as a strategy to weaken the opposing team (*Des Moines Register* 4 April 2013). In 2005, the pink locker room erupted into controversy as faculty and students protested that it is demeaning to women and gays, but the locker room remains pink at the time of writing. The transgression of donning a skirt-like shocking pink outfit is not to be underestimated in a Midwestern context where masculinities are linked more to football than dance. South Asian males, long stereotyped in the United States as brainy, non-athletic nerds, risk reinforcing their feminization that dates back to the British colonial era. Each year, the dancers manage to pull it off, as evidenced by the hooting, the uproarious applause, and the constant refrain of “cool” echoed both on and off stage. *Nachte Raho* is successful, even powerful, because it enables students to invoke the complexity of community and identity as performed, as contradictory, as both for themselves and for multiple audiences.

## Staging culture

While the ISA board members booked the venue for 2009 *Nachte Raho* well in advance, planning for publicity, decorations, t-shirts, and master of ceremonies (MC) scripts began

in earnest only a few weeks before the event. The evening before the show, the ISA hosts picked up visitors from the airport, hosted a mixer, assembled gift bags, and cleaned up afterward. Despite the late night, board members arrived at 7:00 a.m. the next morning to help install an enormous rented stage, hang decorations, and manage dress rehearsals. By noon, the dress rehearsals began. By late afternoon, the seats were sold out. By 5:00 p.m., board members changed from jeans to formal Indian attire, setting themselves apart from non-Indian peers and this evening apart from everyday college life, and stationed themselves to collect tickets and serve food. They served hundreds of guests who waited in line patiently and with good humor. The efficiency, poise, and professionalism with which the students orchestrated these activities were facilitated by communication using Citizens Band (CB) radios. By 8:00 p.m., dinner was over, and the organizers moved to the already packed hall to host the show. The stage was set for a successful event.

Board members provided entertainment and introduced teams for an enthusiastic crowd. Threading through the sequence of competition dances were episodes of a skit based on the popular Indian game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* (*Kaun Banega Crorepati*), familiar to US audiences from the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, which had just been released a few months prior. The mock game show host rouses the audience with his booming introduction:

Ladies and Gentlemen! Welcome to *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*! [Everyone] is dreaming of becoming a millionaire. This is where the dreams become real! On this very stage, every week, we try and give people a chance. Either their dreams come true, or sometimes their dreams are dashed. But this is where it happens!

Roaring applause. Thus, begins a show that interweaves skits, jokes, and dances. Dance performances incorporate all of the following: references to Hindi films; movements from folk and classical Indian dance and from modern, hip hop, jazz, and step; orientalist images of “the East” (harem pants); and icons of American popular culture such as Pink Panther. Even as the event is marketed to non-Indian audiences as “Indian” (Gilroy, 1993: 99) the organizers recognize the music, movements, and costumes as deeply hybridized (see Purkayastha, 2005: 154).

Pre-recorded humorous videos were also interspersed between dances. One video entitled *Brown vs. White: Beyond the Color* depicts a dodge ball competition between the Brown team, composed of three men and one woman, all of whom appear to be Indian, and the White team made up of three (apparently) White males. The Brown team cannot compete with the slick moves and athletic prowess of the White team, and their failures such as missing a catch are exaggerated through slow-motion video. Throughout the show, the comic relief is self-deprecating and non-threatening to White audience members; the video enacts and parodies the stereotype of Asians as lacking athletic ability. Indeed, organizers self-consciously avoid humor that might offend either parental generation or non-Indian audience members.

Ethnic commodities were another salient theme. One video skit depicts the story of a young Indian–American who tells his tragic story of falling in love with a bottle of Thumbs Up, the popular Indian cola. The bottle breaks his heart by shifting “her” affections from her Indian hero to a bottle of Coca-Cola, as iconic of American-ness as

cowboys. In India, Coca-Cola was popular until 1977 when it was pulled out in response to protective policies of the Indian state. When the company returned to India in 1993 in the wake of economic liberalization, it acquired many popular national brands such as Thumbs Up. Most in the audience are unaware of these soda pop politics. Another video advertises Lux brand bath soap by parodying a common American soap ad but reversing the gender. Instead of a beautiful woman, a male ISA board member luxuriates in a bathtub of suds. With dreamy smile and eyes half closed, he slowly rubs a bar of soap along his hairy arms and legs as they emerge from the foamy bubbles. The humor remains accessible to a wide audience, for soap ads both “here” and “there” feature feminine beauty. All videos can be appreciated by a wide audience, but some references are lost on those not familiar with both Indian and American symbolic worlds. For those who “get” the references, these inside jokes create a sense of ethnic belonging, even within a primarily White space, without offending those who don’t know what they are missing.

### **Transforming community functions into public shows**

Nachte Raho is a second-generation cultural project. Many Indian parents push their children to participate in Indian cultural activities, including dance, when they are young (Lessinger, 1995), but the relationship between parents and children shifts when the latter go off to college and embrace an Indian identity on campus. For South Asian immigrant families, sending a child to college fulfills aspirations of upward mobility and reinforces model minority status. However, college is also a place where many young people come to a new political consciousness, especially around issues of race and ethnicity (Maira, 2002; Maira and Soep, 2005). Professional-class immigrants from India who arrived in the first wave after 1965 have tended to see themselves as White. Most are not aware of the violence and discrimination faced by earlier waves of South Asians in the United States. Nor do they acknowledge the degree to which the success of post-1965 immigrants owes a debt to the civil rights movement. However, their US-born children tend to see themselves as racialized (“brown”), particularly after 9/11. Student organizations play an important role in shaping identities on campus (see Brettell and Nibbs, 2009: 682). Immigrant parents are proud that their children are involved in Indian cultural activities on campus and relieved that they are socializing with other Indians, but, paradoxically, they also worry that such activities will negatively impact academic work. One mother observed that participating in *Nachte Raho* has helped her timid daughter come out of her shell, and yet she seemed exasperated: “They give so much time to this association! I was tired of hearing about it, and my heart was melting inside [because she was working so hard].” Some parents are ambivalent about the seriousness with which their children pursue cultural activities in college, and students assure parents that their grades will not suffer as a result.

Students define *Nachte Raho*, we learned, in opposition to Indian functions organized by the immigrant generation, of which Diwali is generally the most important. Diwali is a Hindu holiday, celebrated in India with socializing, lights, and fireworks in public space. It is widely celebrated among Hindu Indians in the United States, but, partly due to safety regulations, it has been reinvented to highlight food, fashion, and cultural performances (Purkayastha, 2007: 84). Even when secularized in diasporic contexts, Diwali remains at core a Hindu holiday.

Students explicitly contrast *Nachte Raho* with Diwali celebrations of their childhoods. While some enjoyed community functions organized by parents, one Indian–American senior who never joined ISA remembered being dragged to Diwali functions: “[M]y parents used to make us go to Diwali functions, but we don’t speak Hindi, we don’t watch Hindi films, we don’t know how to dance Indian dances—so we never liked going to those.” She attended *Nachte Raho* for the first time in 2009 and contrasted it with Diwali functions of her childhood,

where it seems like parents force their kids ... every kid that can walk. The girls can all dance. The boys can all play violin. It’s all so miserable. But [while watching *Nachte Raho*] I remember thinking “geez these kids are really good dancers” ... It was a lot different than going to Diwali functions!

That she enjoyed *Nachte Raho* surprised her. A former competitor similarly described how dance competitions differ from community functions. “It’s totally different,” she said. “[At the] the community stuff nobody cares if you mess up on stage ... when I call it a community thing it’s not a competition any more. It’s just, you know, so your parents can take some pictures.” The captain of one visiting team remarked,

Well, at community events they put three-year-olds on stage, and the moms will be doing more of the steps than the kids will be doing. They just want to see their kids on stage [laughs]. At school you cannot put crap on stage. It has to be very, very practiced. It has to be very good. You are not only presenting it to the Indian community, you are presenting to a wider based community as well.

Indians (of the immigrant generation) in Iowa City organize their own “community” Diwali celebrations each year, and these are the kinds of events students recall from their childhoods in which variety shows are arranged without auditions and with pressure for *everyone* to perform. The goal is to get every child on stage, no matter what their talent: performing classical or Bollywood dance; playing Bach on the piano; singing Jingle Bells; blasting a popular tune on electric guitar; demonstrating Tae Kwon Do; solving a rubric cube against the clock. A 2013 community function [attended by Khandelwal] included five young cowboy-booted boys awkwardly dancing without rhythm to a Hindi song and a set of middle-aged couples dancing gracefully to romantic Bollywood medley—all for an adoring audience. The purpose of such events is fun and community building, not public presentation of Indian culture. They are participatory in that everyone knows those on stage, and the line between stage and audience is fluid. The contrast between dance competitions and community events reveals that insider events are inclusive rather than competitive, participatory more than representational, and primarily oriented toward the development of children. When Indian–American youth reminisce about community “functions” of their childhoods, they insist that these are “casual” and mainly for parents, while dance competitions are “serious” and require quality control. Despite the clichéd chaos of Indian functions, where shows drag on for hours and audio-visual (AV) problems are the norm despite the high level of scientific skill in the room, US-born ISA students recognize that these functions are meant to include as many members of the Indian community as possible.<sup>4</sup> Even students who were critical appreciated

the sense of belonging (and performance skills) that these events foster. Nevertheless, in *Nachte Raho*, they perform professionalism through the ritual of auditions, strict enforcement of rehearsal schedules, an ethos of fair competition, clear division of management labor, and hiring pros to manage sound and lighting.

The ISA also hosts its own Diwali event on campus, and our discussions with students reveal an implicit distinction between *Nachte Raho* and the ISA's Diwali program. While the former is organized almost entirely by the US-born cohort as an inter-collegiate competition, the Diwali program draws in more international students and a smaller percentage of non-Indians. Diwali is also celebrated by the ISA with a variety show that includes dance, but it is not a competition. The ISA Diwali program does not exactly replicate "Indian functions" organized by the immigrant generation, but it seems to strike a compromise between the competing imperatives of inclusiveness and community building, on the one hand, and quality control, on the other. ISA board members who organize Diwali invite children from the (two) local Hindu "Sunday schools" (Balviharas) to perform in the show, but they require auditions and enforce a strict limit on stage time. Auditions can be tense when ambitious parents in the community have prepared elaborate costumes and skits for their children, but in this context the students, not their elders, hold the authority. And yet student organizers self-consciously compromise quality in the interest of maintaining community. ISA Diwali is a middle path, between an unruly, participatory community function and a slick inter-collegiate dance competition.

UI students remake the celebrations organized by the parental generation, to which they were subjected during childhood, into a disciplined and professionalized form of entertainment suitable for non-Indian audience. The result is *Nachte Raho*. Comparing *Nachte Raho* to ISA Diwali, ISA board member Anil explains,

[ISA] Diwali show is mostly, you know, a local show. And, like every show, it has evolved. Four years ago it was really bad ... it would end with a desi orchestra. It was basically people from the community who had formed a band who would sing and they would sing 10 songs so that you had two hours of that ... you know, it is fun, but at some point you are losing your audience. No one wants to sit there for four hours, especially the non-Indians. They are going to be bored out of their minds for the last two hours when you're singing these songs that no one knows, that they don't understand, they don't really understand what the deal is all about. So we decided two years ago that we were going to cap everything on time. We were going to screen everything and make everything more professional. Even Diwali, which is more of a community event, has become more professional.

[ISA] Diwali, he insisted, is still a "homegrown community thing" while *Nachte Raho* has a different goal altogether: "The mission statement of *Nachte* is to get the best teams in the country and to have the best damn dance competition, period. The goal of Diwali is to celebrate the people." Anil evokes the unfinished quality and new possibilities that emerge from diasporic cultural forms shaped by dispersal, locality, and unforeseen detours (Gilroy, 1993: 86). The captain of a visiting team reported that at his (private) university Diwali is the largest student-run production on campus and stressed the high quality of the show: "Everyone at our school is, like, your Indian dancing is so cool!" US-born cohorts have transformed the participatory events of their childhoods, to which they would have been embarrassed to bring their non-Indian friends, into public events

that carry cultural capital on campus. And yet, we suggest, it was precisely the parental practice of pushing every child to perform that created young adults so comfortable on stage.

## Inclusion and exclusion

The “auntie–uncle” (or parental) generation is composed of middle-aged Indians raising children in the United States, most of whom grew up in India and migrated for study or jobs after 1965. They seemed to appreciate the show. One woman in her 40s, exceptional for her age because she is second generation, recalled being the only Indian family in the town (in Canada) where she grew up. Her mother cooked Indian food and the family made an annual trek to a large urban area to buy Indian groceries, yet she grew up not really knowing anything about India and would like something different for her children. “[T]here is a whole different way to fit in now,” she reflected.

There is an overarching discourse of multiculturalism that wasn’t present when I was growing up. It was a discourse of assimilation, so you just didn’t want to stand out ... Maybe I go [to *Nachte Raho*] too because it’s emblematic of a place I never had. It’s very cool to be able to see them being Indian American in a way that was not available to me a couple of decades ago.

There is much to celebrate in the decline of assimilation models. Today, standing out is a way of fitting in, such that having to hide one’s culture is experienced as oppression. Many who grew up with US assimilation models are impressed with the students’ confident expression of Indianness in public and seem unconcerned with issues of cultural purity. Many immigrant parents with school-age children, felt that exposure to such events as *Nachte Raho* was positive, for it offers a hip alternative to other ethnic practices that tend to be religious. *Nachte Raho* may cross boundaries of ethnicity and religion more easily than religious events such as *Diwali* because of its secularity and the rising appeal of Bollywood among Whites.

Religion becomes one of the most accepted ways of being “ethnic” in the United States, so religious institutions become a primary community-building site for minorities (Kurien, 2007; Purkayastha, 2005). In the United States, the politics of race and religion are inseparable, as Hindu temples become spaces of building ethnic community and Islam becomes increasingly racialized. Scholars of Indian diaspora have raised concerns about the way in which Indianness is equated with Hinduism, erasing actual religious diversity on the subcontinent. This has led many immigrants to embrace a conservative version of Hinduism and to support right-wing Hindu nationalist organizations in India (Mazumdar, 2003; Prashad, 2000). We suggest that secular activities such as *Nachte Raho* have the potential to undo the easy equation of Hinduism and Indianness.

At the same time that *Nachte Raho* counters religious divisions, one critique of multiculturalism is that it homogenizes cultures in ways that result in new exclusions. An Indian–American undergraduate student we interviewed attended the event in 2009 for the first time; she was impressed with the display of talent but also noted the expense. “You can’t be a struggling college student with no help from mom and dad [and participate in dance],” she said.

I don't have any help for college. I pay for my own stuff, loans and whatnot, so I don't have the luxury to have these nice slinky outfits, the travelling, or the time. I have to work all the time.

Her parents are both professionals, and yet she cited her class position as one reason she felt excluded from these activities. She then noted other reasons she always felt like an outsider when around Indian people: her mother is Christian and her father Hindu, and she was not raised in any religion. Julie grew up in a liberal university town and felt that her family was accepted by people in general, but not by the other Indians. Both her parents grew up in India. Her mother cooked Indian food and decorated the house for Diwali, but her family neither watched Hindi films nor identified as Hindu. She did not feel accepted by other Indians and suggested that this was because her mother was Christian and previously married, or that she herself was allowed to date. The ISA is self-consciously inclusive (and the 2009 board included one Indian Christian and one White student), but the hegemonic definitions of Indian culture that pervade the US Indian diaspora left Julie feeling decidedly un-Indian. At the same time, she wistfully mentioned that she might have become involved in activities such as *Nachte Raho* had they been available to her.

Much has been written about the exclusions embedded in Indian cultural events and identities based on class, religion, and sexual orientation (Khan, 1998; Maira, 2002; Prashad, 2000; Shankar, 2008; Shankar and Balgopal, 2001; Shukla, 1997; Sunder Mukhi, 1998). *Nachte Raho* organizers insist that the event is open to everyone and cite as evidence the presence of a few non-Indians on teams and association boards. Teams in the 2009, 2010, and 2011 competitions included a handful of members who are White, Korean–American, bi-racial, and African–American.<sup>5</sup> ISA board members and competitors agreed on one point: If someone auditioned and was skilled, then they should be on the team. The captains were all emphatic that anyone is welcome to audition for their teams. The idea that people are selected for talent through fair and open competition signals the professionalism to which they aspire, a point we return to below. Dance competitions, even if they cross religious divides, cannot be completely open spaces, for they retain exclusions based on access to resources, beauty, dance ability, and familiarity with Hindi films. However, because the event also requires many off-stage tasks, it is important to note that many involved in its organization do not actually appear on stage.

*Nachte Raho* fulfills multiple goals. It helps students themselves create supportive community space through embodied performance of their difference, with all the contradictions this entails, and it speaks to multiple audiences. If one ISA goal is to create spaces of belonging for Indian students themselves, then another is to make public claims of belonging in the wider campus domain (being “cool”). *Nachte Raho* succeeds at the latter. However, if the event has many fans, it also has some critics who question its reification of culture.

## Essentialism and authenticity

Though culture is always political, organizers described *Nachte Raho* as a secular, apolitical performance of Indian culture. When asked why they became involved in dance, students spoke of keeping their culture alive, of being in touch with their roots, of remembering where they come from. We heard many such expressions of “museumization”

(Das Gupta, 1997; Ram, 2005), as if culture is a thing to be packed in a suitcase and unpacked, after migration, for display or for passing down to the next generation. However, extended discussion generally revealed that students were fully aware of the selection process at work. For example, when one student stated that dance is central to Indian culture, another responded that “[I]t’s really dependent on what your parents pushed you into actually.”

Students readily admit that regional folk dances such as bhangra and raas have no relationship to their own family background. Bhangra is a folk style from Punjab, but most of the dancers on the Midwest teams we interviewed were from non-Punjabi families. Moreover, we found no evidence of collaboration with elders and thus no direct transmission from one generation to the next; the primary resource for choreographers is YouTube. Students may talk of “retaining” culture, but “transfer” better captures the active propagation of dance forms from past to present and from one sub-ethnic group to another (Thakkar, 1993). Most immigrant parents in the United States grew up in urban India and know folk dances through films or tourist venues, not as participatory activities. When US-born youth talk of “roots” and “heritage,” they refer to a generalized, pan-Indian culture, removed from language and regional specificity but also seem aware of the extent to which they have transformed these styles of dance. Theirs is a multiple and shifting identity, not the naïve longing for authentic selves implied by the pejorative term ABCD (American-Born Confused Desi). That they speak of tradition and roots on the one hand and hybridity on the other exemplifies their doubleness, a term we prefer to “confused.” In this context, the rhetoric of tradition has the twin goal of appeasing parents and Indian proponents of cultural purity (as discussed below), while also marketing their event to non-Indians seeking to experience “Indian” culture.

Even in the absence of direct transmission of dance forms between generations, we suggest that something has in fact been transmitted by post-1965 immigrant parents. College students who participated in community functions as children learned to be at home on stage. The very impulse to construct “cultural programs” as both heritage and entertainment was instilled by post-1965 immigrant parents. The US-born cohort of students invents its own way of performing Indianness and they do so for peers more than parents. The coming of age of these young people is also, in a sense, the coming of age of Indian diaspora in the United States.

Commercial Hindi cinema and Indian diasporic practices and identities are mutually constituted (Dudrah, 2012; Maira, 2002; Mehta, 2010; Punathambekar, 2005; Sunder Mukhi, 1998; Uberoi, 1999). Anil, the one UI international student involved in organizing the 2009 *Nachte Raho*, explained that [visa-holding] Indian graduate students would complain that the ABCDs do not watch Hindi movies or speak Hindi, but he disagreed. “So what?” he asked, “I don’t watch a lot of Hindi movies. Does that make me less Indian?” At other times, he too equated Hindi movies with Indian culture when he described two second-generation students Sheila and Mallika who speak Hindi, go to temple, and watch every Hindi movie. “And,” he exclaimed with admiration, “I’m like, wow, if you were to judge Indianness, they are more Indian than I am. It’s scary, and I *grew up* in India my whole life. I am from Bombay!” With reference to his White American fiancé he joked about a moment of panic when he suddenly wondered how his kids, who will be mixed, can retain an Indian identity. In the same breath, he expressed

comfort at the thought of Sheila and Mallika. “My kids can be saved,” he said, and stressed that he need not worry because his fiancé is more “gung ho” than he is. “She watches more Hindi movies than I do,” he says, “and I’m, like, you and kids can watch it, and I’ll be inside watching *Die Hard* or something!” Anil rejects Bollywood films at the same time that he reifies them as constitutive of Indian culture!

Internal debate about the cultural status of Bollywood styles emerged in our conversations with participants. Maira (2002) suggests that Hindi films are a canonical element in authentic Indian identity and provide a template for cultural programs which evoke a touristic experience for spectators. In contrast to “tainted” culture of remixing, she argues, Hindi film dances are seen by *desi* youth as traditional Indian culture despite the fact of their hybridity (Maira, 2002: 122–123). We found instead that US-born students involved in dance competitions describe it as a hybrid form that “incorporates everything.” As one captain elaborated,

Everything. It gives you much bigger spectra of doing whatever you want. You can take from any form of dance: salsa, any Latino, hip-hop, American contemporary. And it’s so cool to see how other people play with that ... and for us, because we are bicultural, it’s just so [right] ... We have our parents [telling us] “Indian. Indian. Indian. Study hard and pray!”

Her co-captain added, “Be doctors and engineers!” Students viewed classical dance as unchanging and iconic of authentic culture but dismissed it as not entertaining.<sup>6</sup> They saw Bollywood as a hybridized form appropriate for bicultural youth.

Students objectify Indian culture to claim a minoritized identity and to entertain non-Indians, as multiculturalism demands, but, in doing so, open themselves to accusations of inauthenticity. In other words, their performances are not *always* successful. Relatively few Indian international students are involved in *Nachte Raho* as participants or as spectators. They create community in private gatherings not visible to the mainstream public, for they have no need for validation from a mainstream audience. Not only do they not participate in any significant number, but some dismiss it as a distinctly ABCD event. One international graduate student explained that “the *desi* community [referring here to international students *as distinct from* second-generation students] is not interested in attending this event.” Another questioned the Bollywood-based definition of culture presented on stage in *Nachte Raho*: “Nobody is doing *bharatanatyam* or *kuchipudi*, or *kathak*, or *odissi* or folk. I mean that’s the broader debate as well—Are Hindi movies equal to Indian culture? It’s not just *Nachte Raho*. It happens everywhere.” She was critical not only of second-generation Indian-Americans but also of non-Indians who think that they know South Asian culture because they can say “chicken tikka” or name a popular Hindi film.

The cultural status of Bollywood was contested not just by critics positioned outside the event but by those within the dance competition scene as well. Participants described it as “very Americanized” and as “100% performance rather than culture.” The bodily moves, one student noted, cannot be called “South Asian” or “Indian” whereas *bhangra* or *raas* *can be* so identified. Another insisted that *bhangra* is becoming even more traditional:

I think this year we have turned even more [traditional] from last year, um, like another degree of traditional. I think that’s where everything is going with *bhangra* teams in the college

arena—also independent teams. Everyone is striving to be as traditional as possible to represent as like it is in Punjab.

Raj, a bhangra team captain, told us of a time when his team went to Seattle and found “a very, very dense traditional old school Punjabi community” that did not like his team’s performance at all. The Punjabis felt their culture was insulted and Raj’s team was booed off stage. His explanation was that a lot of teams had come from Surrey and Kent in Canada, places densely populated with Punjabis where second-generation kids grew up in a “very hard core traditional Punjabi community” and spoke Punjabi among themselves. The sole Sikh Punjabi guy on Raj’s team understood Punjabi and translated the comments. As Raj understood it, “they were saying that our team does not belong and that we were insulting their culture, that we don’t know what bhangra dancing is, what it means ... We had never experienced that. We thought we were pretty bhangra.” All participants in this confrontation were composed of second-generation youth, but the US-born student revealed his parochial understanding of what it means to be Indian born in North America. The US population tends to come from urban India but is fairly diverse in regional origin, and none of the bhangra teams competing at *Nachte Raho* were composed of Punjabis. The Indian population in Canada, particularly in Vancouver, has historically been dominated by Sikhs from rural Punjab; they have tended to be socially segregated and more insistent of their Sikh Punjabi—rather than Indian—identity (Biswas, 2004; Walton-Roberts, 2011). If Indian–American culture has tended toward pan-ethnic forms, its Canadian counterpart has been heavily Punjabi. Raj was blindsided by the reality that a folk dance he thought of as (pan-)Indian means something entirely different for Punjabi communities in Canada.

In dance competitions, tradition is contested by participants, fans, and critics. Some call Bollywood “tradition” while others consider it to be pure entertainment and not culture. One team captain said that the more traditional dances tend to win at the regional competitions but then flounder at *Best of the Best*, where, he stated, entertainment is the highest priority. What counts as traditional bhangra in the Midwest is an insult to tradition in western Canada. As dance migrates, both its original and diasporic sites are subject to change. This is true for Bollywood and folk dances which in diaspora come to be symbolic of culture and oriented toward spectatorship rather than participation. In *Nachte Raho*, second-generation students embrace hybrid cultural forms publicly as expressions of their identity, but they cannot escape the politics of cultural purity imposed both internally and externally.

## Why now?

Scholars have studied second-generation performances of Indian culture in educational contexts (Brettell and Nibbs, 2009; Harlan, 2004; Purkayastha, 2007; Shankar, 2008) but have yet to examine Indian dance competitions. We suggest this form has emerged at this historical juncture due to a convergence of three factors: demographic trends, multiculturalism, geopolitics. First, the migration trajectory and demographic profile of Indians in the United States is a key factor. The early experience of South Asians in the United States was fraught with struggle over discriminatory laws regulating marriage, property

ownership, and eligibility for citizenship, further complicated by their contested racial classification (Leonard, 1997; Rangaswamy, 2000). The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act was the watershed moment for initiating massive immigration from Asia. The new policy was intended to attract scientific labor and resulted in a flood of migrants from India highly trained in science, engineering, and medicine. In short, it led to “migration of the educated and migration for education” (Sahay, 2009: 4). The first wave of post-1965 Asian immigrants arrived just as racial barriers were eroding and minoritized communities were beginning to promote cultural pride. Many obtained professional jobs, dispersed into US suburbs, and raised children in mostly White neighborhoods (Purkayastha, 2007: 82).

Several *Nachte Raho* participants reported being the *only* Indian kid in their school or the only one besides their own sibling. Indian–American youth in New York City have generally attended more diverse schools and even so describe growing up in two mutually exclusive worlds; they were “American” at school and “Indian” at home (Maira, 2002: 92; see also Lessinger, 1995: 98, 116). Being Indian was marked as “good” and rewarded by parents, while performing American activities and styles was “cool” and approved by peers. The need for this juggling act was not understood by parents, non-Indian friends, or teachers, and the stress was heightened for young women (Maira, 2002: 92–96, see also Purkayastha, 2005: 107).<sup>7</sup> Our findings support this sense of bifurcated childhoods in the Midwest.

Demographic shift occurred when children of the post-1965 migrants began to attend college in large numbers by the early 1990s, with campus life shaped by both multiculturalism and inter-collegiate competition. Other trends defined the 1990s: public celebration of festivals; tendency to equate Indian culture with Hinduism; heightened awareness of race; increase in student organizations on college campuses; emergence of youth interest in folk dance; and intense concerns over dating and marriage (Khandelwal, 2002: 59–63, 150–155). For children of professional immigrant parents it has been common to hide Indian practices from childhood friends but then to “come out” as Indian after heading to college where ethnic identities are often solidified.<sup>8</sup>

The students we interviewed were exposed to Indian practices, habits, objects, and values during their Midwest childhoods. Their parents created community with other Indians (mostly Hindu but also Christian and Sikh), often in small gatherings at private homes and after driving great distances. For most, a university campus was the first place they interacted with significant numbers of students of Indian background outside of household or community events. As one student explained, “[I]n high school all my friends were Caucasian, so I couldn’t express to them my culture, my desire for Indian dance, whereas with the friends I have here I can do that. I can talk to them about it.” The captain of a visiting team who grew up in a Midwestern suburb was more blunt: “When I got to college, it was like ‘Oh my god there are so many brown people,’ like, you know what I mean?!” Each person has their own reaction to it, but I was loving it!<sup>9</sup> Some high schools in large cities had a critical mass of Indians by the 1990s, but this is not the experience of students we met.

A second factor is multiculturalism. For US-born students raised in suburbs or small towns in the Midwest, their first encounters with other Indian–Americans in public space occurred at a time when colleges embraced multiculturalism even as campus life

remained racially segregated (Maira, 2002: 68; Purkayastha, 2007: 82–83; also see Shankar, 2008: 120–123). Purkayastha (2007) observes that multiculturalism posits difference between groups to be primarily an issue of culture, implying that social equality can be achieved by ensuring that all cultures can be expressed. It essentializes cultures as distinct entities but also creates a legitimate space for cultural activities that can be supported by university resources. Finally, the post-industrial US economy “sells culture” in the form of ethnic literature, fashion, and music. These trends converge with the efforts of diasporic groups themselves to create pan-ethnic cultures that transcend regional and linguistic specificities (Purkayastha, 2007). If multiculturalism took a cultural turn in the late 1980s, by the 1990s, it had become a policy rubric for business, government, civil society, and education, rendering monoculturalism a new stigmatized category (Melamed, 2006). *Nachte Raho* enables both performers and appreciative audience members to feel multicultural, cosmopolitan, hip.

The 1990s was also marked by media attention to US-based Indians’ success in fields as diverse as spelling bees, literature, and information technology (IT) start-ups, all of which reinforced a model minority myth. It also erased aspects of Indian immigrant history, such as class diversity and episodes of overt racism, including violent attacks on Punjabi farmers in the early 20th century, anti-Hindu “dotbuster” attacks in Jersey City in the 1980s, post-9/11 murders of both Muslim and “Muslim-looking” South Asians and more general racial profiling, and increasing anxieties about the outsourcing of American jobs. Professionals have been insulated from the uglier forms of racism faced by service workers, taxi-drivers, and street vendors. *Nachte Raho* exemplifies the dynamic by which US multiculturalism depoliticizes racial conflict by focusing on the celebration of culture.

The rise of performance-based expressions of Indian ethnicity is the result of demographic shift and multiculturalism, but we highlight a third geopolitical factor. US foreign policy has tilted toward India as suspicions of Pakistan intensify. The 1990s was also a period of immense change in India, marked by economic liberalization, increased economic and political influence in the world, and a shifting stance toward the diaspora. India currently garners greater financial and cultural capital related to its geopolitical rise, the affluence of a growing middle class, and the increasing influence of Indians living in diaspora.

These changes have also resulted in stronger and more densely institutionalized linkages between diaspora and Indian state. In the 1990s, liberalizing India reversed its earlier disavowal of its emigrants and began to court the elite among them as a source of both investment and development; it did so through offers of dual citizenship and the romance of homeland (Mani and Varadarajan, 2005). The government of India also reached out to foreign-born Indian youth by launching student-exchange programs and the Person of Indian Origin card granting rights based solely on ancestry.

State policies at both ends contribute to creating transnational social fields (Louie, 2004). The convergence of demographic shift and US multiculturalism is a catalyst for the spread of Indian dance competitions among second-generation Indian–American students since the late 1990s.<sup>10</sup> US-born students arrived on campus in large numbers when it was both possible to obtain institutional resources for Indian cultural events and status-enhancing to do so, but policies of the Indian state also shape their affiliations with

homeland. It is no surprise that the current cohort of Indian–American students may be inclined to announce an Indian identity on a Midwestern campus. Claiming a *desi* identity carries more cultural capital today than it did 30 years ago. *Desi* teens are encouraged to express their ethnicity, albeit in circumscribed ways. Multiculturalism encourages them to celebrate some aspects of cultural background (food, dance, costume) and to speak their heritage language in socially sanctioned spaces (Shankar, 2008: 13–14). This change is due not only to demographic shift and multiculturalism but also to the rising political clout of India and recent efforts to court its diaspora.

### **Why dance? Why folk and Bollywood?**

Questions of tradition are central to cultural politics in colonial, postcolonial, and diasporic contexts. In the context of 19th century colonial discourses, tradition came to be defined as a place of stable and authentic Indian culture with women as its carriers (Mani, 1989). This dynamic persists in diaspora as parents worry about helping their children adapt to the United States without losing their Indian identity (Das Gupta, 1997; Purkayastha, 2005: 98). In nationalist and diasporic contexts alike, a selection process results in certain practices being embraced as “Indian” while others are jettisoned. The importance of dance to Indian culture is evidenced by the elaboration of dance forms as worship in Hindu scriptures, Indo-Islamic forms of courtly dance, the diversity of regionally specific folk dances, and the centrality of dance in Bollywood cinema. Twentieth-century reformers moved dance from the temple to stage as an act of modernization to render these dance forms respectable and to elevate them to a national art. One form was renamed “*bharatanatyam*” or “*dance of India*” and has become iconic of Indian tradition in diaspora, in a process similar to the link between Ballet Folklorico de Mexico and the teaching of Mexican ballet to children in immigrant communities in Iowa (Dwyer, 2006).

The existence of rich and varied dance traditions on the subcontinent does not explain their elaboration in diaspora, for other important artistic forms such as poetry and puppetry do not thrive in the US. The process of selection from available cultural resources is the result of pressures from both sending and receiving cultures. In India, young boys and girls who study classical dance do so because they come from families of dancers and musicians. However, in the US dance classes for girls (not boys) converge neatly with American middle-class ideals of child-rearing that routinely include training in music, dance, and sport. Indian daughters of the professional classes learn *bharatanatyam* in lieu of ballet. Even if few immigrants feel personally attached to classical art forms, these have become ideal vehicles for enculturation of young girls in Hindu families because they are deeply embedded in cultural values, affect, philosophy, and mythology and are the least threatening ways to expose children to Indian culture (Thakkar, 1993). How better to teach an American child to *feel* devotion, a highly valued affective state in Hinduism? Classical dance has become over-determined in the United States as a means of transmitting Hindu culture to girls, even as its form and training have adapted to the diasporic context (Katrak, 2004; Ram, 2005). Priya Srinivasan (2011) explores the complex dynamic between dance gurus and their US-born students to expose the contradictions of minority citizenship, particularly around issues of female sexuality. Most

young women competing in *Nachte Raho* are classically trained, while not one male student we interviewed had formal training in dance.

The importance of classical arts in diaspora child-rearing is clear, but what about the role of folk and Bollywood dance styles? Anthony Shay (2006) argues that the popularity of folk dance is a direct legacy of World's Fair expositions held in North American cities from 1876 to 1916, during which millions of fair-goers acquired a taste for the exotic. In an era of rapid industrialization, peasants embodied all that was authentic and their dances became symbolic of nations. Shay further argues that the explicit goal of early folk dance festivals was Americanization of the immigrant. Priya Srinivasan, bringing a transnational feminist lens to the analysis of Indian dance's travels to the United States, argues that by the 1930s American dancers had incorporated elements of Indian dance, reinventing it as modern American dance while disavowing its origins. Modern American dance presented itself as innovative and born of individual genius and the same time that it established ethnic dance as a distinct aesthetic project that was backward in time, repetitive, and old; this binary persists today (Srinivasan, 2011: 103–105). These folk festivals became the venue for presenting colorful costumes, ethnic food, and exotic movement to a new generation of Anglophone North Americans; these events exemplify the liberal concept of inclusion, which celebrates the aesthetic distinctiveness of ethnic groups against the unmarked backdrop of American culture (Shay, 2006: 26–32). *Bhangra* and *raas* are marked as traditional and Bollywood as modern, but Bollywood should also be considered a folk dance of contemporary India, because it is popularly disseminated (via film) and accessible to a wider range of people without need for years of training.<sup>11</sup>

ISA board members are convinced that classical dance will not maintain audience interest, for it requires knowledge and patience to appreciate. As far as we know, there are no inter-collegiate competitions in classical dance, and one student we interviewed constructed Bollywood as high-energy and non-repetitive in apparent contrast with classical Indian dance. Aside from the historical role of ethnic folk dance and its popularity as recreational activity in American culture, the pragmatic appeal of folk dances is that they are relatively easy to learn, secular in nature, and accessible to audience members. They also include men, whereas classical dance training among Indians in the United States has been constructed as a female activity. Scholarship on dance among Indian immigrants tends to focus on elite Sanskritic traditions, and the “folk” practices are even more neglected in subaltern aesthetics (Ram, 2010). In *Nachte Raho*, *bhangra* and *raas* are deeply Bollywood-ized through remixing and costuming.

Aswin Punathambekar (2005) traces the way commercial Hindi cinema came to embody Indian culture for diasporic communities in the mid-1990s as a response to several shifts: new technology moved film viewing into the home; demographic shift led to the proliferation of Indian stores that distributed movies; film content began to cater to diaspora sentiment. The nationalist narratives of global Bollywood, where nation is equated with family, helps explain its popularity with diaspora communities (Mehta, 2010). What makes it “cool” on campus, though, is the fact that it now has currency with White audiences. In *Nachte Raho*, young women walk a fine line in an attempt to be both good and sexy, while men assert a counter-hegemonic masculinity. They make *desi* “cool” with a mainly White audience.

Dance as embodied practice is particularly useful for building ethnic community, because it involves physical bodies working together in real time. It has “the unique capacity to bring a large number of immigrants into face-to-face interaction and generate a visceral sense of belonging” (Wilcox, 2011: 318). Parents want their children not just to learn dance steps but also to have co-ethnic friends. In exploring the immense popularity of classical dance training among Indian immigrants in Australia, Kalpana Ram (2005) argues that sensory confluence and bodily mimesis, over time, does allow young students of the Indian diaspora to learn epic narratives, lyric verse, and aesthetic feel of an otherwise alien culture. And yet it can be performed on stage for an audience of outsiders. Wilcox notes that the very idea of organizing a Chinese dance troupe in a large Midwestern city originated in 1992 in an encounter with the gatekeepers of a multicultural event: Chinese immigrants were not allowed to sell Chinese food unless they agreed to do Chinese dance. And yet, the group is now a flourishing dance school that serves a large immigrant community (Wilcox, 2011: 322). Invented traditions take on a life of their own, and there is something uniquely powerful about dance as one way of being ethnic in American culture.

## Conclusion

Indian dance competitions constitute a new cultural form. Khandelwal was involved in a campus Indian student association in the early 1980s whose members could not have even *imagined* such events. Minoritized groups in multicultural societies face the dilemma of how to build an ethnic social network while also seeking recognition within dominant culture. Our research reveals that *Nachte Raho* enables students to pursue both projects and to embody, if not resolve, the contradictions shaping their lives. Gilroy (1993) observes that occupying a space between two categories that racist and nationalist discourses deem mutually exclusive, such as Englishness and blackness, is politically provocative (p. 1). So is it to joyfully and proudly scream to one’s peers: I am brown and Indian and American too! At the same time, dance competitors do so in a way that is in line with multicultural discourses and non-threatening to a White audience.

Dance, as embodied practice, is a powerful means of bringing people together; teams constitute spaces of ethnic solidarity. Popular dance styles are ideally suited for this purpose because they are infused with hip hop and other genres and are accessible to dancers and observers. Moreover, folk dance is a privileged signifier of culture and ethnicity in the United States, and Bollywood styles now constitute global mass culture that does not rely on dense ties to homeland.

*Nachte Raho* is a self-consciously professionalized performance that manages to please both student peers and also the “auntie–uncle” generation. It has its critics but generally succeeds in establishing cultural capital on campus, without alienating families. In *Nachte Raho*, students perform Indian–American *desi cool* with little reference to parents or elders. They actively deny continuities with “Indian functions” of their childhood, and yet their claim to be performing Indian culture makes parental opposition all but impossible. Parents are willing to help finance these activities. More importantly,

administrators are happy to fund such events as expressions of diversity and students and staff members are happy to buy tickets.

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### Notes

1. We conducted formal ethnographic research on *Nachte Raho* for 6 months in 2009. During this time, we attended Indian Student Alliance (ISA) board meetings, participated in all events and rehearsals the weekend of the show, and followed up with participants afterward. We conducted formal interviews with six dance teams (dancers and captains), 29 audience members, six current board members, one previous board member, four graduate student members, two judges, and three parents. These data are supplemented with many more informal conversations through several years (2007–2013) of personal involvement in the event by both authors in various roles: judge, audience member, parent who has attended with children; faculty member who has taken students; member of Indian community whose children have participated in both ISA and community Diwali shows. Unless stated otherwise, all references are to the 2009 *Nachte Raho* performance.
2. The term “desi” has currency in among second-generation South Asians. It is an inclusive category that cuts across lines of nation, religion, caste, language, and so on. (Shankar, 2008: 4).
3. The ISA, or the Indian Student Alliance, was created by merging two pre-existing organizations. Prior to 2006, the Indian Student Association represented mainly international (graduate) students, while the Indian Cultural Association had a second-generation (undergraduate) Indian–American membership. The two organizations merged to become the Indian Student Alliance (ISA) with the stated aim of “reuniting the native Indian populace with the Diaspora community.” Tensions between second-generation Indian–Americans and the visa-holding international students are part of the backstage dynamics of *Nachte Raho*, but they are too complex to address in limited space of this article.
4. Even if many of these events are referred to as “Indian” the boundaries of participation remain fuzzy. Events generally draw a smattering of South Asians from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka and some Christian and Sikh families. Diwali functions, even when secularized, do not draw Muslims.

5. Analysis of racial dynamics among students of color is important but beyond the scope of this article. However, see Whaley's *Disciplining Women* for discussion of the participation of small numbers of skilled White, Asian-American, or Latino dancers in Black sorority step shows (2010: 84).
6. Dance scholars have outlined the dynamic history of Indian "classical" dance forms as they were reformed and made respectable then made global (see Srinivasan, 2011).
7. Shankar (2008) presents a very different picture of South Asian teen culture in three Silicon Valley high schools at the peak of the dot-com boom, in a context of ethnically diverse schools and extreme wealth among many South Asians; she found strong links between home and school both for the elite kids and those whose parents work on assembly lines and as janitorial and cafeteria staff. Our findings based on research in Iowa are more in line with Maira's portrayal of a bifurcated Indian-American youth identity.
8. Maira (2002) uses the phrase "coming out" and one of her research participants describes these students as "flaming" (p. 98). The comparison to gay "coming out" narratives has its limits, for Indian-American students do not risk alienating their families in the same way.
9. For further discussion of South Asian-American pan-ethnicity and "brown" identity, see Shankar and Balgopal (2001), Prashad (2000), and Brettell and Nibbs (2009).
10. In addition to demographic trends and multiculturalism, another recent shift has been the heightened discrimination against South Asians in the post-9/11 context; however, no one we interviewed about *Nachte Raho* mentioned 9/11. Nina Chanpreet Kaur (2011) has studied the emergence of bhangra competitions specifically (not Indian dance competitions) organized by Punjabi Sikh youth separately from their Indian-American or South Asian-American counterparts. This has occurred in areas with large Sikh populations, including New York, New Jersey, and California. Singh argues that in the post-9/11 context these bhangra competitions constitute a space of angst in which Punjabi Sikh youth produce authenticity to create a sense of cultural unity in the face of discrimination; in other words, they define and assert their identity both for themselves and their peers and in response to the fear of misidentification (particularly for Sikh men who wear the turban) and loss of traditions.
11. I thank an anonymous reviewer for *Cultural Dynamics* for this insight.

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