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### Author

Sharma, Nitasha Tamar

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**Musical Crossings:  
Identity Formations of Second-Generation  
South Asian American Hip Hop Artists**

by Nitasha Tamar Sharma

Department of American Studies  
Amherst College  
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Nitasha Tamar Sharma  
Department of American Studies  
Amherst College

**nsharma@amherst.edu**

This paper stems from a dissertation project on second-generation South Asian American hip hop artists based on twenty-two months of fieldwork conducted primarily in the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area. Through interviews, participant observation, and an analysis of their lyrics, this paper examines how South Asian American (*desi*) hip hop artists develop a racial consciousness and identities that both challenge narrow identity politics strictly drawn around ethnic lines and provide alternative ways of “being desi in America” by creating interracial alliances and racialized identities based on a politics of identification. By identifying as both South Asians and as people of color, the young adults in this study simultaneously articulate ethnic and racialized second-generation identities in ways that challenge assimilation theories that predict the downward assimilation of immigrants who adopt Black culture. This paper explores the political potential of hip hop—a medium rooted in an explicit discussion of power, history and inequality—for forging multiracial alliances in ways that unite Blacks and South Asians.

## Introduction

By now, I am used to the surprise people express when I tell them about my research on South Asian Americans<sup>1</sup> who are hip hop artists and who have deep ties to their local Black communities. I quickly realized that the concept of an "Indian rapper" was humorous to many people, even if they *had* heard of Apache Indian from England. Yet among South Asian Americans, the reaction—usually puzzlement, often laughter—stemmed from the understanding that South Asians just *do not* affiliate with Blacks, let alone dedicate their lives to a Black cultural form. Similarly, members of the Black community have insisted that if South Asians *do* adopt Black popular culture, it is a superficial act that takes place from a distance created in part by class differences.

During the course of twenty-two months of ethnographic fieldwork, however, I did find a number of South Asian hip hop artists. Despite their rarity—or perhaps because of this and the notable absence of amicable South Asian/Black interactions—I became convinced of the importance of their lives and lyrics. Based on both my concern about Asian anti-Black racism, and my interest in new multiracial social movements, this research centers on three main questions: 1) Why would some members of an upwardly mobile, predominantly middle-class immigrant “model minority” community choose to identify with a group—Blacks—that has been constructed as “disadvantaged”? 2) How do South Asian Americans use hip hop to create and express second-generation identities in urban America that challenge the narrow identity politics

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to South Asian Americans as either “South Asians” or as “desis.” “*Desi*” is a term used to refer to U.S.-born second-generation South Asian Americans. Participants in my study included North and South Indians, Indo-Fijians, Nepalis, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, and people of mixed-race descent (Indian-Black and Indian-German).

of ethnicity? and 3) What is the potential of Black popular culture for fostering interracial alliances between Blacks and South Asians in the U.S.?

This paper stems from my dissertation, which was based on twenty-two months of ethnographic research, including intensive participant observation and formal and informal interviews with over one hundred people and twenty-five core participants. My field site was based in the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area, but extended to the cities of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. The core participants are South Asian American hip hop artists, including DJs, MCs (or rappers<sup>2</sup>), record label owners, and promoters, who are socially, politically, and personally committed to their local Black communities. The participants are mostly Indian and primarily U.S.-born, but include Sri Lankans, Nepalis, Pakistanis, as well as 1.5 generation members of the South Asian diaspora from Fiji and Guyana.<sup>3</sup> This core group includes both men and women. Roughly half of the core group came from suburbs while the others were raised in predominantly Black working-class neighborhoods.

In this paper I explore how second-generation South Asian Americans in hip hop (who constitute a very small proportion of their generation) develop a racial consciousness and identities that challenge narrow identity politics drawn around ethnic lines. Instead, these artists provide alternative ways of "being *desi* in America" by creating interracial alliances and racialized identities as people of color based on a politics of identification with Blacks.

### **Background: The Connection Between Hip Hop and Indian Immigrants**

Hip hop was born in the early 1970s in the Black and Latino communities of the South Bronx. At this time, minorities in major American cities were being affected disproportionately

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<sup>2</sup> An "MC" (also spelled "emcee") is one of the four elements of hip hop, and stands for a "Master of Ceremony." I use this term interchangeably with "rapper."

<sup>3</sup> 1.5 usually refers to those who were born elsewhere and migrated to the U.S. before the age of thirteen.

by economic restructuring, federal cutbacks in welfare and social services, and the "war on drugs" (Rose 1994, Lipsitz 1998). Many working-class people of color—especially men—were losing their jobs (see Wilson 1996). Within this context, hip hop became a way for disenfranchised people to voice their oppression by "edutaining" (educating and entertaining) the public about government policies, silenced histories, and the actual conditions of everyday life in the inner city.

During this same period, demographics were changing as a result of a wave of incoming immigrants from Asia and Latin America. They came under the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which was based on a preference system that prioritized highly skilled professionals. As a result, large numbers of English-educated, middle-class and upper-caste Indians came to urban areas and later settled in suburbs across America. Many were hired as doctors and engineers. They soon gave birth to the U.S.-born generation of Indians, just as hip hop itself was being born.

As this new generation was growing up in the '80s and '90s, hip hop itself exploded into adolescence. Rising from a relatively unknown Black subculture, hip hop has become a top-selling musical genre in America as well as a global phenomenon. Hip hop quickly attained popularity in part because of its poetic politics and also because of its later glorification of conspicuous consumption. Many South Asian Americans could actually afford to buy the expensive items the artists were rapping about—and they did. The Indian American community is one of the most highly educated and affluent groups of Asian Americans, and is the fastest growing (see Maira 2002,7-8; Takaki 1994, 25; and Fenton 1988, 29).

The appeal of rap music for young South Asian Americans appears to be, at the broadest level, twofold. On the one hand, rap music is a sonic force with explicit lyrics that appeal to the disenfranchised, politically aware, and/or discontent. At the same time, the mainstream hip hop aggressively marketed by large companies such as Virgin and Sony tends to glorify violence, sexism, and materialism. Indeed, their marketing strategies seem to follow the mantras “sex sells” and “give the people what they want.” One question central to my research is: What is the appeal of rap music and hip hop culture for South Asian American youth? Elsewhere (see Sharma 2001), I have suggested the politicized nature of this affiliation. Those desis who dedicate their lives to this art form reveal their commitment to hip hop culture, and they consider themselves part of it. The ones who heavily participate in the culture embrace hip hop as a lifestyle; it shapes their relationships and influences what occupations they pursue, where they spend their time, and how they view the world—although in no homogeneous way. However, this connection certainly is not felt by the entire second generation, the majority of whom lack close ties with Blacks.

Along with economic success and the increasing suburbanization of some middle-class South Asians has come the acceptance of the model minority myth and its attendant anti-Black sentiments. This may be particularly true in California, where Silicon Valley at one point witnessed hundreds of new Indian millionaires per year. As the second generation began to attend college, they often pursued degrees in engineering, computer science, business, and pre-med. Many were urged by their parents to get good jobs so that they, too, might enjoy the material fruits of their labor. Self-segregation, class differences, and anti-Black sentiments combined to notably limit interactions between Blacks and South Asians. Music, however, has always proved to be fertile ground for fostering cross-cultural exchanges. What, it may be asked,

is the potential for hip hop to create interracial alliances between South Asians and Blacks in the U.S., especially in a post-9/11 context?

## **Appropriation is a Two-Way Street**

### **Part I: Hindi Music Enters Mainstream Hip Hop**

Since 9/11, America has experienced an increased demonization of Middle Easterners, Muslims, and those who are mistaken for them. Simultaneously, however, we have also seen the increasing popularity of South Asian and Middle Eastern commodities that emphasize the very difference of this "region," such as henna tattoos, belly dancing, and rap songs infused with Indian music. A few years ago, for example, a hit song, "Addictive" (Aftermath, 2002) by R&B artist Truth Hurts, lifted its chorus from a 20-year old Hindi song by the Indian singer Lata Mangheshkar.

Despite a pending \$500 million defamation lawsuit against producers Dr. Dre and DJ Quik by an Indian music company, Saregama, the airwaves soon broadcast a similar song. In this newly released song, "React" (J Records, 2002), rappers Eric Sermon and Redman sampled their chorus from yet another Hindi song. In this song, Eric Sermon raps "whatever she says, then I'm that," and then refers to the woman as an "Arabic chick." This emphasizes both the conflation of South Asia with the Middle East, and Eric Sermon's ignorance about who is singing the chorus and what is being sung. The simultaneous glorification and demonization of the Middle East and South Asia in American popular culture and media highlights the distinction that should be made between the *consumption* of the "Other" versus actual contact or *identification* with them. By looking at commercial hip hop, then, one would find it difficult to



argue that it has political potential for creating interracial relations based on mutual understanding, respect, and contact between South Asians and Blacks in America.

Any analysis of hip hop must take into account the shaping effects of capitalism, while maintaining focus on actions at the individual level in order to depict a more accurate interpretation of subcultures and the lives of their constituents. While hip hop, as a hyper-commodified subculture, ultimately does not work to dismantle the very capitalism that maintains hierarchies of inequality, previously silenced and disenfranchised individuals are able to earn an income and make decisions about how to live and represent themselves. The creation of counter-hegemonic discourses, then, does not necessarily lie outside of capitalism, and change can come from the individual (Mines 1997, cf. Williams 1977). Robin Kelley (1997) illustrates a key contradiction of capitalism that directly affects urban youth:

Finally, in the struggles of urban youths for survival and pleasure inside capitalism, capitalism has become both their greatest friend and greatest foe. It has the capacity to create spaces for their entrepreneurial imaginations and their "symbolic work," to allow them to turn something of a profit, and to permit them to hone their skills and imagine getting paid. At the same time it is also responsible for a shrinking labor market, the militarization of urban space, and the circulation of the very representations of race that generate terror in all of us at the sight of young Black men and yet compels most of America to want to wear their shoes (77).

Rap music rose in opposition to oppressive capitalist conditions, yet capitalism has also created and spread the far-reaching and multiple forms of Black popular culture that broadcast alternative narratives of identity (Gilroy 1987, 159). By working both within *and* against capitalist structures, hip hop culture becomes the site for individual and group political struggle, where words and actions battle the dominant ideologies. It is also a site of pleasure and emotions, where identities are formed and expressed. The affiliations between Blacks and South Asians through hip hop culture speak to debates about the relationship between dominant and subaltern cultures (like hip hop), and the interaction, at both the group and individual level,

between hegemony and resistance. An analysis of the relations between individuals of two minority groups that do *not* share a fixed hierarchical relation to one another also contributes to the scholarship that focuses on the oppositional relationships between subcultures and the dominant culture (e.g., Cohen 1955, Becker 1963, Ziff and Rao 1997).

If we look at a less publicized arena of independent and underground hip hop, we may get a different picture of South Asian and Black relations. In 2002, three virtually unknown Indian American hip hop groups—Himalayan Project, Feenom Circle, and Karmacy—all came out with their second albums. The presence of these and other South Asian hip hop artists—albeit largely unknown—prompted me to ask the question: In light of the scarcity of South Asian and Black contact, and the prevalence of anti-Black sentiments among many South Asians, why do some choose to dedicate their lives to hip hop as MCs (rappers), producers, journalists, DJs, and hardcore fans? What can this tell us about interracial relations between Blacks and South Asians today?

## **Part II: South Asian Hip Hop Artists**

About half of the South Asians I studied grew up in predominantly Black urban areas and became active in hip hop culture from a very young age—some were break dancing<sup>4</sup> as young as five years old. Because education was a priority for their lower-middle-class parents, they attended a succession of schools; this fact made them aware of racial and class patterns. A number of participants commented on the stark contrast between the poorly funded schools in their inner-city neighborhoods and the parochial high schools to which they commuted in the suburbs, where White students often owned \$28,000 cars. In addition, many second-generation South Asians in these urban areas grew up with neither their extended family nor a sizable Indian

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<sup>4</sup> Break dancing is one of the four elements of hip hop, including rapping (MCing), tagging, and DJing.

community. Like their suburban counterparts, they were often the only South Asian in their neighborhood. One Punjabi MC, Sonny<sup>5</sup>, who grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood, provides one reason for his lack of contact with other Punjabis early in life:

All of the [Punjabi] families that we associated with—after [my mother] got divorced, they no longer associated with us, so that's another reason why I didn't grow up around Indians. And then as far as blood family that came here from India, there was a language barrier and there were conflicts with the parents, so we didn't really get too close, either.

From these childhood experiences, Sonny observed the ostracism he and his mother faced as a result of not conforming to the community's expectations with regard to marriage. A surprisingly high proportion of participants from urban areas came from divorced homes.

Like Sonny, other young South Asians who lived in predominantly Black neighborhoods made friends with Blacks. Their lack of extended kin also may have permitted such childhood friendships. As Naresh, a Nepali respondent who comes from an inner-city neighborhood, puts it, "Maybe I don't hate Blacks because we didn't have an extended family to poison us that way."

Despite the second generation's lack of nearby kin, their parents did express anti-Black prejudices. When I asked Sonny whether or not his mother minded when he brought his Black school friends by, he exclaimed, "Oh no, there was always tension. *Always* [laughs]. She would say, 'Don't bring these people to my house.'" I asked why he did not share her sentiments and he said there was no intelligent argument backing it. Another MC of South Indian descent argued that the prejudices of the first generation are based on fear, media depictions, and a lack of contact with Blacks.

The environment in which these South Asians grew up is directly related to how and why they became hip hop artists. While many scholars argue that non-Black male youth embrace hip hop for its racialized and sexualized Black masculinity, in my research I found that this was not

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<sup>5</sup> This, and other personal names mentioned in the paper, is a pseudonym.

necessarily the case. While the connection between South Asians and hip hop may seem distant, especially for the suburban middle class, for those who come from urban areas, the connection was almost a spontaneous outcome of their environment. One Punjabi MC explains how he became an artist:

I think just by personality, or by education, or just my whole consummate being here on earth, I'm just an expressive person and this is the first form of expression presented *to* me. We were just surrounded by it. So I feel like it chose me. It has a lot to do with environment.

For other participants, however, the appeal was not primarily due to the fact that they grew up around hip hop. Ryan, a Gujarati Indian hip hop journalist, is from a wealthy and predominantly white suburban community. In an email to me, he explained that hip hop appealed to him for other reasons:

I think hip hop's anti-establishment sensibilities resonated with the general feeling I felt about me—reveling in being different and "un-mainstream." Hip-hop at that time was really political, whether it was obvious (Public Enemy) or not (De La Soul). It was through [Black culture] that I then discovered my own politics. I started to gain pride in being both Indian and contrarian [sic]. I learned a lot about the Black experience and saw that as the defining framework for ANY race discussions in America.

Notably, each of the participants attended a four-year college, and it was a critical time of identity formation for all of them. It was also when they came into contact with other second-generation South Asians—often for the first time. Yet it was then that they also realized their own sense of being separate from those students. One South Indian emcee, CJ, who grew up with Black friends and had moved around a lot during his youth, said:

I saw a lot of bad stuff that really gave me a perspective on life, you know? By the age of sixteen, at least half of my friends had fought their dads, physically. People were moving out of their house, dropping out of school and getting jobs to support themselves. I've seen people get shot. You know, coming to college, I think I had a very different perspective on life than most Indian kids that grew up in the suburbs. A lot of stuff that concerned them that they were worried [about] on a day to day basis, I guess was sort of petty.

The different background of some of these artists and their childhood experience of friendships with Blacks appears to have led them away from the predominant Indian social cliques on campus, which were loosely formed around student cultural organizations such as

Indus or the Indian Student Association. Instead, they tended to be politically active and veered towards more inclusive South Asian organizations such as Sangam and Ahimsa. One Sri Lankan MC and artist activist, Flow, explained why she only hung out with people in the progressive organizations: "I felt [those other Indians] weren't concerned with shit. [And] I was really angry at any[one] that wasn't concerned with shit, because I had been living this reality as a gay woman who really thinks this world is fucked up."

Flow considers hip hop her "savior" because it was the one source of stability in her life. She grew up thinking of herself as a boy, as she does to this day. As a result, she adopted the identity of a b-girl,<sup>6</sup> which she said allowed her to remain "true to myself" because that was "truth" to her. It was a gender identity that allowed her to be "in the middle." Thus, her gay identity, her experiences with racism from a young age, and her love of hip hop evolved together, and they became the framework for her multiple identities.

Stuart Hall has contributed significantly to theories of identity (1990, 1991, 1995), and his influence crosses disciplinary boundaries, proving especially relevant to the study of Black popular culture (1992, 1997). According to Hall (1995), identities are never stable, but are continually formed through a process of becoming (1995, 65). Identities are also contextual and multiple. Hall (1992) and others apply this anti-essentialist perspective to studies of race to argue against a singular notion of "Blackness" that implies a biological or genetic basis to a process that is actually socially and historically constructed (Dyson 1993). While this interrogation of the fluid, rather than fixed, nature of identity is critical for understanding self-representation, the postmodern assertion that all identities are hybrid (e.g., Gross et al. 1996) elides power differences and ignores the fact that, in particular times and spaces, individuals

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<sup>6</sup> A "b-girl" stands for break-girl, or a girl who break dances. Part of the b-girl uniform is to dress in masculina or baggy clothing.

present their identities *as* fixed (i.e. Hall's "positional identities" 1995, 66). Dirks, Eley, and Ortner (1994) note:

At one level, the observation that identity or subject positions are complex and nonfixed is banal. But the important thing is that politics is usually conducted as *if* identity were fixed. The question then becomes, on what basis, at different times and in different places, does the nonfixity become temporarily fixed in such a way that individuals and groups can behave as a particular kind of agency, political or otherwise? (32)

Hall's understanding of "Blackness" may be extended to the concepts of "Indianness" or "Sri Lankaness," which these communities in America are attempting to create through particular expectations and representations. These emerging identities have special ramifications for South Asian American women. The link between gender and ethnic identity may be regulated by family and community sanctions, whereby women's sexuality and marital practices are a monitored aspect of their ethnic identity. Women are deemed "keepers of their culture," and their ethnic identities hinge upon community-defined appropriate sexual behaviors based on both normative heterosexuality and chastity (Rurappa 2002, see also Espiritu 2001). South Asian American hip hop artists, such as Flow, who do not conform to these standards nonetheless negotiate, instead of turning their backs on, their relation to their ethnic communities. In addition, these individuals present multiple yet *grounded* identities that are anchored to their emotional, monetary, and political commitments to, and engagements with, the hip hop community.

Flow's intersecting sexual, racial, and political identities were formed by and are reflected in her musical tastes. One of her favorite rap groups is Public Enemy, well known for its Black Nationalist lyrics. She says:

I was their number one fan. I thought it was so dope that they were talk[ing] about Black people and what they were gonna do for their people. I immediately started claiming "Brown Power." A lot of these South Asians grew up in the suburban areas and they identified as White. My reality was different, because at that point, I didn't understand what was going on in the world; already I was experiencing *hard-core* racism at my school.

In contrast to the insular social lives of other second-generation South Asian Americans, the participants in my research tended to associate with a group of friends that was multiracial. These groups were not based on ethnicity, but centered around their passion for hip hop. They shared an ideology that at once recognized the reality of race and racism (something hip hop's lyrics express potently), *and* that created a space for alliances across these differences. As one Indian American who formed an underground record label with a cohort of other Asians and Blacks says:

It wasn't just that we bonded over a love of hip hop because, frankly, a lot of people like hip hop. We just thought the same—we appreciated the same tenor of creativity that certain artists displayed. Beyond that, we all sort of congregated at the radio station for the same reason and [that] was a pretty compelling genesis to our friendship and business relationship. That we were all different nationalities [sic—i.e., ethnicities] was pretty irrelevant—we knew we each came from different backgrounds but it informed us in the larger community, it didn't define us. This last point is key.

Therefore, instead of defining the parameters of the group, ethnic identities were almost secondary to musical identities. While forming multiracial social circles and identifying as artists, these individuals were, at the same time, broadening the notion of South Asian American identity by continuing to claim their South Asian heritage. Those who used a desi identity in this way were met by resistance from others of the second generation who branded them as "sell-outs" and, in one case, as a "rotten coconut"—Brown on the outside, but Black on the inside. Yet South Asian hip hop artists do not assert that they are Black. Instead, it is through years of listening to rap music and interacting with Blacks that they come to articulate an understanding of the relationship between the two histories in America. While many South Asian Americans fail to see their connection with the Black experience, Ryan explains his racial politics:

I didn't ever take the Black experience as my own per se, but I did identify with it because it plugged me into a broader community with [a] like ideology. By the time I left college I realized that the immigrant and, really, any racial or nationalistic discourse in this country is framed first and foremost by the Black experience. You don't have to identify with it in order to understand it, but you need to know that the discussion begins there.

Other artists explain the connections between Black and Indian histories of colonialism and slavery, while one Indian female DJ emphasizes the similarities of Indian *sadhus*<sup>7</sup> and Rastafarians. These common threads and concerns about broader issues that affect multiple communities of color is also expressed in their music, such as a song called "1964" by a two-person hip hop group named "Himalayan Project" ([www.himalayan-project.com](http://www.himalayan-project.com)).

This hip hop group is made up of a 1.5 generation<sup>8</sup> South Indian American based in New York, and a Chinese American from Surinam who lives in San Francisco. In their second album, entitled "The Middle Passage," MCs Chee Malabar and Rainman present an immigrant diasporic sensibility simultaneously with a localized articulation of their identities in their relation to different communities, including the poor, as well as to their parents' generation. The title of the album itself refers to both V. S. Naipaul's novel and the legacy of slavery across the Atlantic. The song title refers to the year President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act and the year prior to the enactment of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which led to substantial growth in the Asian immigrant population. Malabar and Rainman provide alternative re/visions of history and where it has taken us since that year, 1964. Malabar cements his thoughts on a musical track that opens with a soulful low-toned saxophone. The song is awash with the sound of slow waves flowing onto the shore, a light guitar strum, and a drum beat.

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<sup>7</sup> Indian holy men

<sup>8</sup> Malabar left India for the United States when he was eleven years old.



Malabar begins:

What's goin' on America, it's your least favorite son,  
 You know the one some beast mixed with East Indian rum,  
 Hemmed, condemned to rent slum tents in dense settlements,  
 See my melanin's akin to a felon's sins in this, civilization,  
 Where dead presidents replacing the Gods you're praising,  
 Jesus? Nah, it's just g's, churches is worthless, it's a circus,  
 Clowning around ain't where the work is,  
 We migrant workers, descendents of slaves,  
 Ascended to a stage, beyond brave,  
 Rendered a plague, civil rights came and went,  
 And what's left?  
 A few tokens molded hopin' they symbols for progress and for the rest,  
 It's stress, no checks, credit debts is societal death,  
 So what's bread?  
 I ain't gotta tell you that it's kneaded (needed) dough,  
 What we even breathin' for,  
 Where most of us live, if it aint the slugs or drugs,  
 The air's sure to kill ya.  
 I breathe the oxygen, cough a lung,  
 Sit and think for my people hope my freedom songs get sung.

Delivering these lyrics in an uncharacteristically calm voice, Malabar sweeps through a series of social issues beginning with his people's past (and present) experiences of being cordoned off, colonized, and "condemned to rent slum tents." He then speaks about the plight of living as a Brown person in this "civilization" which criminalizes people of color (i.e., "my melanin's akin to a felon's sins"). He uses "civilization" ironically, pointing out our enslavement to the prominence of money ("dead presidents" represent dollar bills and "g's" are "grands" or "\$1,000's"), which has replaced the role of religion. Even Black churches have become profit-making enterprises, Malabar explained to me as we drove through Brooklyn. He lists a barrage of stresses that the Civil Rights Movement has failed to assuage, including those issues most

urgent among Black communities, such as drugs, slugs (bullets), and debt, because, despite all the critique in the world, "dough" or money is still "kneaded (needed) dough." Within this context of despair, the meaning of life is not even clear, and Malabar concludes by hoping that his own "freedom songs get sung," thirty-eight years after the signing of the Civil Rights Act.

South Asian MCs, such as Chee Malabar, use hip hop to voice their knowledge of the past and situate themselves within the present. For them, hip hop is not just a vehicle for exposing hegemonic ideologies, which inform our common-sense understanding of things; hip hop is used by South Asian MCs to counter these prevailing discourses by filling in the blanks and re-(w)rapping history.

## **Conclusion**

South Asian rappers' lyrics about indentured servitude, drugs, and race are critical in light of the conspicuous lack of discussion of race among South Asian Americans. Hip hop culture provides individuals with a vocabulary for racial consciousness and tools for the expression of racial identities. By highlighting the potential for cross-racial affiliations based on shared interests, desi hip hop also raises the possibilities for challenging the politics of an essentialized racial identity.

Yet perhaps more critically, the music is used to voice concerns about issues that affect larger communities of color, such as police brutality, the prison industrial complex, and the immigrant experience. Given the detached and impersonal commodification of Middle Eastern and South Asian goods and women in mainstream hip hop, it is equally important to look at this underbelly of the musical form. This is where independent artists such as this small population of South Asian producers of hip hop are voicing alternatives in identity politics. By cultivating

their own racial politics and identities as people of color, they push the boundaries of "being desi in America," and call for interracial alliances that are based on a politics of identification.

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INSTITUTE FOR  
THE STUDY OF  
SOCIAL CHANGE

2420 Bowditch Street #5670  
Berkeley, CA 94720-5670

tel: 510-642-0813  
fax: 510-642-8674

email: [ISSC@berkeley.edu](mailto:ISSC@berkeley.edu)  
web: <http://issc.berkeley.edu>