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Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America (review)

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MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S., Volume 37, Number 4, Winter 2012, pp. 212-214 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mel.2012.0068>



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Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America. Bakirathi Mani. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. 328 pages. \$85.00 cloth; \$27.95 paper.

In *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America*, Bakirathi Mani moves Asian American studies away from a politics of representation by examining the complex production of the South Asian diasporic community and its connection to the subcontinent. Looking at how community is created across generational, religious, regional, and linguistic divides, Mani illustrates the ways in which South Asian identity is socially constructed. South Asianness is not simply a matter of ethnic identity, Mani argues, but rather a question of locality: “Locality is the means through which first- and second-generation immigrants . . . come to experience what it means to belong” (3). She uses locality to look at the quotidian production of a diasporic community and examine the affective experience of belonging, how “immigrants create a subjectivity and community based on a shared experience, in this case an experience of migration” (5). Furthermore, Mani contends, locality often is experienced through the production and consumption of popular culture; participation in popular culture is not just about representation but is the means through which immigrants identify with others to become South Asian.

Throughout the book, Mani chooses to work on what she calls “the center of popular culture,” focusing on “the ways in which middle-class immigrants re-embodiment dominant constructs of ethnicity and nationhood” (13). Mani argues that these cultural productions frequently reproduce popular narratives of multiculturalism: reading these communities and these cultural texts and limiting them to labels such as “progressive” or “complicit” fails to account for how “the formation of South Asian communities is immersed in multicultural as well as neoliberal notions of nationhood” (14). Examining the production of locality allows Mani a more nuanced reading of these sites of cultural production in which she can question the merits of scholars’ investment in progressive representations of race.

This complex approach is highlighted by Mani’s choice of texts and methodology; she skillfully utilizes ethnography, performance studies,

and social theory to read literature, documentary films, art festivals, pageants, and a Broadway musical. In Chapter One, Mani analyzes works by Jhumpa Lahiri, including the short-story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and the novel *The Namesake* (2003). Rather than treat Lahiri's fiction as narratives of immigrant assimilation, Mani demonstrates that Lahiri's work highlights the need for "a different temporal and spatial landscape of Asian American literature, one that rehistoricizes the conditions of postcoloniality for first- and second-generation immigrants" (24). Mani's explication of Lahiri asserts an understanding of South Asian identity in the United States partly shaped by the subcontinent. Thus, Mani bridges the divide between postcolonial and immigrant literature, pointing to how historical narratives connect the US and South Asia.

In Chapter Two, Mani moves away from the temporality of locality and toward the spatial construct of locality, focusing on documentary films by South Asian filmmakers. Mani argues that these films engage with spatial notions of locality in three ways: political differences between the US and South Asia are amplified; documentary filmmaking demarcates who is South Asian and who is not; and "the documentary subjects unexpectedly produce and inhabit South Asian localities in the United States" (80). Moreover, Mani examines not only the subjects of the documentary but the filmmakers themselves, who have differing political and class identities, in order to demonstrate how locality is created in the encounters between the two.

Chapter Three explores the production of localities with a discussion of the annual Miss India pageant and the ways notions of community are performed by the contestants, audiences, and organizers of the pageant; she argues that the pageants deploy narratives of multiculturalism but also nationalist ideologies of India. She concludes that "how immigrants inhabit these multiple ideologies of nationhood, and when they embody dissent, demonstrates that locality is far more capacious than domesticated narratives of citizenship" (121). This question of dissent or resistance is further explored in Chapter Four, as Mani turns toward South Asian art festivals that market themselves as progressive political events, attempting to highlight the diversity of what it means to be South Asian and create anti-assimilationist narratives. Yet Mani argues that these festivals often result in compliance with American multiculturalism, calling into question the progressive label; furthermore, "they also highlight the disjuncture between identifying as South Asian . . . and identifying with the history and cultural politics of contemporary South Asia" (27).

This dissonance between identifying as South Asian and identifying with the subcontinent plays a large part in the conclusion of the book, as

Mani looks at the Broadway musical *Bombay Dreams* (2004) to theorize the problem of place: “*Bombay Dreams* highlights the difference between producing a diasporic cultural text—one that was written, composed, and staffed by South Asians—and consuming a multicultural performance of ethnicity” (209). She questions her own enthusiasm for seeing South Asian performers onstage, while at the same time disidentifying with the narrative of the musical that erases marginalized characters in order to create a vision of Indian secular nationalism. This simultaneous pleasure and disidentification highlights the irregular nature of belonging; there is nothing natural or easy about locality, but, as Mani contends, “the difficulty of identifying as South Asian elucidates how locality remains liable to repetition and failure” (28). Overall, *Aspiring to Home* allows for a deeper understanding of the complex transnational processes of identification and belonging, particularly in how immigrants engage with cultural texts.

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