

When you think of South Asia, what images are the first to come to your mind? Henna, perhaps? Do you think of a high-achieving population that is also, somehow, struck by poverty? Perhaps the image that pops into your head is one of sari clad women, or racks of brightly colored spices. These are common images that infiltrate Western media-images that South Asian American children are also raised with and that shape the lens through which those same South Asian Americans define culture.

This paper examines the South Asian American subculture of competitive performance team cultures as a site for challenging internalized notions of Orientalism and the eternal search for ethnic authenticity. What started on college campuses has now spread throughout the United States into an industry unto itself and impacts the lives of thousands of South Asian American college students – past, present, and future. The field work for this ethnography was completed as a participant observer. I was able to attend rehearsals, travel to conferences, and conduct interviews with participants from each team. I also drew upon my own experience as an active member of a South Asian American campus community.

As my fieldwork revealed, students often use their participation in these teams (which are, most commonly, centered around singing, dancing, religion, and organizing) as a medium to simultaneously define and challenge the boundaries of their ethnic identity. Using fieldwork conducted over the course of one semester at a large public Midwest university, I examined the way South Asian American students navigate societal pressures, such as the pressure to succeed academically (the Model Minority Myth) and cultural influences to create a uniquely South Asian American subculture that is all-too-familiar to those who partake in it, and a completely unexplored territory to those who do not.