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"I'm Looking for the Weirdos"

Controlling Images and Beginnings of a Group Consciousness among South Asian

Americans Interested in Activism

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Sociology

by

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Committee in charge:

Professor George Lipsitz, Chair

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December 2020

The thesis of Naomi Joseph is approved.

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George Lipsitz, Committee Chair

December 2020

ABSTRACT

I'm Looking for the Weirdos: Controlling Images and Beginnings of a Group Consciousness

among South Asian Americans Interested in Activism

by

Naomi Joseph

South Asian diaspora populations occupy a complicated position inside U.S. racial politics. On the one hand, their racialization in the U.S. subjects them to hate and discrimination that might motivate participation in social movements (Modi 2018; Prashad 2014). On the other hand, South Asian American communities include some of the richest populations in the country (SAALT 2019), a demographic that is much less likely to participate in social movements, especially left-leaning ones. In addition, precarious immigration categories or citizenship statuses in the United States may also discourage them from political action. Based on interviews and web surveys, Joseph argues that South Asian Americans interested in social movements combat two controlling images: one of the politically apathetic South Asian American, and the other of the perfect activist. South Asian Americans attracted to activism circumvent these controlling images by forming a self-definition based both on their racial identifications and on their own definitions of activism. They also find community among fellow "weirdos." This study contributes to the Asian American literature through its examinations of ally-ship, affiliation and accompaniment among aggrieved communities of color, demonstrating how the very category of activist is interpreted, enacted, and resisted differently because of the complexities of the structural positions that South Asians occupy in the United States.

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South Asian diaspora populations occupy a complicated position inside U.S. racial politics. On the one hand, their position as a community of color, especially those who are Muslim or who are mistakenly read as Muslim, subjects them to racist hate and discrimination that might motivate participation in social movements (Modi 2018; Prashad 2014). On the other hand, South Asian American communities include some of the richest populations in the country (SAALT 2019), a demographic that is much less likely to participate in social movements, especially left-leaning ones. In addition, precarious immigration categories or citizenship statuses in the United States may also discourage them from political action.

Using semi-structured, open-ended interviews and web surveys, I explore what South Asian American experiences reveal about the nature of collective identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001a; Taylor and Whittier 1992), controlling images (Collins 2000), biographical availability (McAdam 1990), social movements, and racialization in the United States. Based on my analysis, I argue that South Asian Americans interested in social movements combat two controlling images: one of the politically apathetic South Asian American, and the other of the perfect standard activist. South Asian Americans attracted by activism circumvent these controlling images by forming a self-definition based both on their racial identifications and on their own definitions of activism. They also find community among other people they perceive as fellow "weirdos," i.e. South Asian Americans interested in activism.

I hope to, in the legacy of Claire Jean Kim's *Bitter Fruit*, Neda Maghbouleh's *The Limits of Whiteness*, and Vijay Prashad's *The Karma of Brown Folk*, complicate binary narratives of the U.S. racial order, to reveal how what Kim describes as relative valorization

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combined with civic ostracism (1999, 2000) positions South Asian Americans as neither fully inside nor fully outside the nation's cultural imaginaries. My study will also contribute to the scholarly literature on social movements through its examinations of ally-ship, affiliation and accompaniment among aggrieved communities of color, demonstrating how the very category of activist is interpreted, enacted, and resisted differently because of the complexities of the structural positions that South Asians occupy in the United States.

Background

The definition of South Asian Americans depends slightly on who you ask. The National Asian American Survey in 2016 focused on Indians, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis. The nonprofit organization South Asians Americans Leading Together (2019) includes individuals hailing from Sri Lanka, Bhutan, the Maldives, and Nepal. The World Bank includes all the previous groups and includes individuals from Afghanistan.

Nearly 5.4 million South Asians lived in the United States in 2017, growing roughly 40% since 2010. They are an extremely diverse group in terms of religion, country of origin, and socioeconomic status. South Asian Americans constitute one of the richest populations in the country - the 2017 median household income for U.S. Asian Indians was over $100,000, almost double the U.S. median income. As of 2017, however, there were 630,000 undocumented Indians alone in the United States and more than 400,000 South Asians in the U.S. live in poverty (SAALT 2019). South Asians continue to be the targets of hate crimes directed at both Muslims and non-Muslims (Modi 2018). In short, South Asian Americans hold an intermediate space in the U.S. racial order; with markers of both privilege and oppression shaping the contours of inclusion and exclusion.

South Asian Americans as conceived in the US imagination are often considered relatively new immigrants, largely from the professional classes. Immigration from South Asia into the United States, however, actually occurred across three waves: the first from around 1900-1947, the second after 1965 with the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, and the third in the 1980s as part of reunification efforts from families who had immigrated in post-1965 period (Bald 2013; Leonard 1997; Prashad 2000, 2014). The first phase of immigration consisted largely of Punjabi men from predominantly farming backgrounds who worked in agriculture in California (Leonard 1997). When in 1945 Mubarek Ali Khan and J. J. Singh led testimony before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization of the U.S. Congress seeking to change U.S. racial exclusion laws against South Asians, they focused on the scientists, engineers and other professionals. They both avoided mentioning that the majority of Indians who were living in the United States in 1945 and who were being prevented from becoming U.S. citizens were farm laborers and industrial and service workers (Bald 2013). In doing so, Khan and Singh were attempting to create a (largely false) narrative of immigrant contribution that would allow them to retain their citizenship, but in the process were contributing to and reinforcing a long-standing controlling image of normative achievement and technical prowess. Though they were referenced as "Hindu" in census documents at the time, approximately 85 percent of the early immigrants to the United States were Sikhs, and another 10 or 12 percent were Muslims (Leonard 1997). Contrary to the controlling image invoked before Congress by Khan and Singh, the six or seven thousand Indians who came to the United States between 1899 and 1914 were reviled, perceived as illiterate, backward, and unassimilable (Leonard 1997). A significant proportion of the immigrants pre-1914 had

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served in the British military and police, often overseas in China, East Africa, and Lebanon (Leonard 1997).

Literature review

This study focuses on South Asian Americans who participate in social movements. I consider three questions: one, what can South Asian American experiences reveal about the nature of social movements and racialization in the U.S?; two, why and how do South Asian Americans participate in anti-racist social movements?; and three, how does South Asian American identity motivate or inhibit social activism? This research contributes to three broad categories of inquiry: 1) racial and ethnic studies, 2) social movements, and 3) the relationship between racial and ethnic identities and participation in activism. This study focuses on groups whose specific experiences complicate previous understandings in scholarship about race, ethnicity and social movements.

Racial and ethnic identity as constructed

Central to understanding South Asian American activism is the concept of racial and ethnic identity, especially the influence of identity on activism. Numerous scholars have focused on the ways that non-South Asian American identities have been mobilized around identity. Joane Nagel observed that ethnic identity "is a result of both structure and agency" and that "people's conceptions of themselves along ethnic lines, and especially ethnic identity, are situational and changeable" (1994). Racial structures are by definition formed in a context of politics (Omi and Winant 1994), which means that racial identity must also be understood as malleable in response to power.

The concept of controlling images helps us understand the relationship between power, identity, and activism. In her seminal work, *Black Feminist Thought,* Patricia Hill Collins provides a concrete way of understanding the relationship between power and identity through the concept of "controlling images," which, using the example of Black women, she explains are "certain assumed qualities" that "are used to justify oppression" (2000:5). Collins argues that Black women occupy specific spaces at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, and therefore hold specific knowledge about how these systems work (2000). Controlling images by design are meant to make structures and practices of social injustice seem to be natural everyday parts of life. Unlike stereotypes, controlling images are not just widely held, oversimplified images of people (Golash-Boza 2019), but are specifically weaponized to discredit the knowledge gleaned from the specific standpoint that Black women occupy (Collins 2000). Each controlling image about Black women was developed in response to a threat; therefore, the emergence and evolution of a controlling image about Black women provides a starting point for examining new forms of control more broadly (Collins 2000).

Collins's insight into the form and function of controlling images provides a framework for understanding how the study of South Asian Americans illuminates the ways that systems of power work in the United States. South Asian Americans also occupy a unique standpoint in the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, class and citizenship, thereby holding particular knowledge about how these systems work. As is the case with Black women, controlling images are deployed against South Asian Americans in response to a threat. Therefore, identifying and examining these controlling images serves as a starting

point for identifying forms of social control and illuminating the counters of white supremacy.

Collins specifically illustrates how controlling images can dampen activism. Black women, she argues, are caught in untenable positions between the controlling images surrounding them. The "mammy" image depicts a faithful, obedient domestic servant who has accepted her subordination. She is "the good Black mother" (Collins 2000: 75). The "Black matriarch", on the other hand is the "bad Black mother," or the "failed mammy" who took insufficient care of her children, thereby causing their lack of achievement (Collins 2000:75). These two images together put Black women in an untenable position: "African-American women who must work encounter pressures to be submissive mammies in one setting, then are stigmatized again as matriarchs for being strong figures in their own homes" (Collins 2000:78). The controlling image of Black matriarchs also suggests that Black mothers are causing troubles for their children that mask the culpability of the U.S. criminal justice system; they are made to feel bad for their efforts to improve their family's economic situation and are discouraged from examining the systemic issues. Similarly, the "welfare queen" image stigmatizes Black women who collect welfare or who are hired through affirmative action policies; in other words, creating a stigma around Black women fully exercising their citizenship rights (Collins 2000). Understanding the complex power systems that surround identity, and how those systems influence the content, structure, and reception of those identities, is necessary work for studying how identity influences activism.

Panethnicity is also an important concept for studying South Asian Americans. A panethnic group is, by definition, political in nature; as Yen Le Espiritu explains, a panethnic group refers to a "politico-cultural collectivity made up of peoples of several, hitherto

distinct, tribal or national origins" (2011:2). Panethnicity allows assessment of structural and

cultural factors in the construction and maintenance of ethnicity (Espiritu 2011). "South

Asian American" is a panethnic identity created in part by what Leland Saito refers to as

"racial lumping" – the practice by powerful groups of aggregating aggrieved minorities into a

common denigrated group identity (1998:60). Panethnicity can also function as an

oppositional strategy of alliance and affiliation that increases the critical mass among

similarly positioned but not identical racial and ethnic groups (Espiritu 2011). It is still

unclear, however, to what extent panethnic identity enables or inhibits mobilization among

South Asian Americans. Previous research suggests that competition with other ethnic or

racial groups could lead groups with different national origins to organize under a pan-

national boundary (Okamoto 2003). However, diversity in terms of class, nation of origin,

religion, region, language, caste, gender and sexual orientation among South Asian

Americans makes it especially difficult to build panethnic solidarities. Among Indian and

Pakistani Americans, the wave of immigration post-1965 was comprised largely of highly

educated professionals, whereas the wave of immigration post-1980s was comprised of

individuals with lesser educational and skill levels, often in lower-paying, non-professional

jobs (Mishra 2016; Prashad 2000, 2014). Occupational segregation of Asian Americans

encourages the formation of national pan-Asian organizations, but occupational diversity

and rifts within the community make these ties harder to bind (Okamoto 2006). The

racialization of Muslims and Sikh individuals in the United States and their persecution by

government officials in the wake of 9/11 in particular complicates the project of panethnic

South Asian American identity further (Mishra 2016; Prashad 2000, 2014). The panethnicity

framework provides important context through which to understand South Asian American

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interest and participation in activism, but the nature of South Asian American identity complicates the feasibility of the framework as a model for political empowerment.

Finally, South Asian American participation in activism can also be understood in relation to other proximate racial groups. Neda Maghbouleh introduces the concept of "racial hinges" to illustrate how the doors to whiteness swing open and shut for (in her example) Iranian Americans. South Asian Americans hold a similar space in that they are administratively considered Asian Americans but do not always identify with Asian American movements which tend to coalesce around East and Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders (Maghbouleh 2017; Mishra 2016). South Asians have in the past claimed Aryan identity (as demonstrated in the Bhagat Singh Thind case of 1923) and obtained a form of honorary whiteness economically, but those attempts have failed to protect South Asian Americans from racist attacks (as demonstrated by Prashad 2000). These examples suggest that South Asian American identity has been, at times, constructed as linked to the fate of similarly situated Asian groups, but those constructions fail to predict whether and how South Asian Americans might participate in activism. The study of South Asian American activism can illuminate previously underexplored dimensions of the construction of ethnic identity. As I will argue at length in this thesis, the concept of controlling images and the complications of panethnicity are especially salient in understanding how, when and why South Asian Americans do or do not participate in activism.

Defining activism

Previous literature on activism provides important framing for this study. Like the formation of racial and ethnic identity, participation in activism is also constructed under systems of power. For example, the concept of collective identity, defined as an "individual's

cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice or institution" attempts to explain how political and social interests converge politically (Polletta and Jasper 2001b). Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier observe that the lesbian feminist movement reveals how a collective identity can be constructed (1992). The idea of collective identity, as used by Taylor and Whittier, suggests in part that an aggrieved group might be politicized around what Emile Durkheim called "mechanical solidarity" or cohesion based on shared culture and way of life, a consensus over values, norms, and beliefs resulting from socialization (Johnson 2000). The example of the lesbian feminist movement demonstrates how these identities are formed and shaped in response to (in this case) patriarchal and heteronormative systems of power. Collective identities can be experienced as oppressive, but also serve as impetuses for mobilizations for political power; sometimes even both, depending on the perceived source of oppression (Gamson 1995; Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone 2016). The concept of collective identity also brings to the forefront previously suppressed and occluded identities. For example, members of the lesbian feminist movement exchanged their male-given surnames for women-centered ones and rejected traditionally feminine appearance in an effort to break with patriarchal identities and ways of life (Taylor and Whittier 1992).

Being an activist builds from collective identities that influence how activism is defined and recognized. As Chris Bobel explains, "Social movement theory has consistently suggested that social movement participation necessarily produces enduring changes in one's personal identity…a particular collective identity locates people as members of a group and this identity is fortified by virtue of participating in collective action, especially action that carries risk" (2007:148). Yet previous research demonstrates how some social movement

actors resist the term *activist* (Bobel 2007)*.* Taking on the identity of an activist, rather than doing activist work, is linked to a hierarchical system of values and judgements that anchor identities. In this system there exists a "perfect standard" activist "constructed by unrealistic, even romantic, notions of the omniscient, tireless, and selfless individual…a standard of constancy and commitment that few even self-described activists could satisfy" (2007:156).

Subsequent research has since investigated how the definition of activism interact with hegemonic ideas of gender. For example, narratives around "girls empowerment" can actually have a dampening effect on activism by focusing girls' efforts on psychology, self-reliance, healthy choices and individual achievements rather than in the context of sociological and/or political terms, thereby reframing girls' concerns as personal troubles rather than public concerns and taking it out of the category of activism (Taft 2011). Though the "ideal activist" is presented as abstract and genderless, in practice the "ideal activist" is male; the identity of the ideal activist is easier to achieve for men than women, and women are more likely to experience the negative consequences for not achieving the identity (Craddock 2019). Feminist sociologists of social movements have also argued that the conceptions of social movement activism should be expanded to be able to see the varied terrain of gendered social movements (Taft 2011). Currently, in practice, the "ideal activist" is narrowly defined as someone who do enough of direct action, which is conceived as the "right type of activism" (Craddock 2019:137). Direct action, and a constant commitment to activism, excludes women, who tend to face structural availability barriers to political participation (Craddock 2019). This literature suggests that the label is based on a masculine ideal and creates and reinforces negative gender relations in social movements; it also opens

the possibility of investigating how definitions of activism interact with racial and ethnic systems as well.

Bringing racial and ethnic identity and activism together

Previous literature has investigated the relationships between race, ethnicity, and activism. Michael Dawson (1994) argues that Black political homogeneity results from the perception that one's own life chances depend heavily on other Black Americans' statuses and fortunes. This leads Black voters to make political decisions based on group position instead of individual interests (as cited in Gay et. al 2016). Dawson argues that group consciousness and linked fate are the most critical components cultivating feelings of commonality between and among racial groups (Nicholson, Carter, and Restar 2020). A politicized identity can be constructed around an understanding of one's own racialization and ethnic identity.

Previous literature has also explored how racialization and positionality can affect civic engagement. Claire Jean Kim argues that Asian Americans have been "racially triangulated" in a "field of racial positions" through "relative valorization" and "civic ostracism" (1999:106–7). Relative valorization reinforces White domination by assigning more value to Asian Americans in relation to Blacks. Through civic ostracism, however, Whites construct Asian Americans as immutably foreign and unable to assimilate to alienate and exclude them from civil society (Kim 1999). Similarly, Sunaina Maira argues that South Asian Americans in particular experience the effects of cultural citizenship, or quotidian notions of who does or does not belong, because "it highlights the way in which the trope of national belonging, so powerful in modernity, is not just based on political, social, and economic dimensions of citizenship but is also defined in the social realm of belonging"

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(2009:9–10). As Maira explains, legal citizenship was insufficient to guarantee that South Asian American Muslim youth could rely on legal protection from the War on Terror post-September 11th. Instead, they faced profiling, surveillance, and detention; part of a long history of racializing Asian Americans as "perpetual foreigners." Cultural citizenship highlights the relationship between cultural identity and claims for social rights in oppressed communities; identity can be used to press for social rights, and the fight for those rights can also shape identity (Maira 2009). Both Kim and Maira theorize how mutually constitutive processes of racialization of Asian Americans and other racial groups affect civic participation.

More recent studies have used national survey data to study empirically the phenomenon of group consciousness and linked fate. For example, one study demonstrates that expressions of linked fate are similar across racial and ethnic groups, but that a sense of linked fate is only rarely associated with political views or political participation (Gay, Hochschild, and White 2016). Nicholson et al. (2020) focus specifically on group consciousness and linked fate between Asian and Black Americans, finding that Asians and Asian Americans in the US who display higher levels of group consciousness and linked fate have greater perceived political commonality with Black Americans. Based on the 2008 National Asian American Survey (NAAS), the study necessarily does not assess events subsequent to it, such as the impact of the 2016 election and the coronavirus pandemic, both of which have resulted in a serious increase in discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans in the United States. It controls for differences between ethnicities but the only South Asian group it includes is Asian Indian, which opens the question of how results from other SAAs (e.g. individuals from Bangladesh, Pakistan, or Nepal) might differ. It also

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provides a framework through which to study how potential differences, such as phenotype, religion, immigration experience, and class, that distinguish South Asian Americans from other Asian Americans, might affect feelings of group consciousness and linked fate. In addition, the study provides the opportunity to specifically investigate variables for pro- and anti-Black feelings, whether Asians born in the United States have different views from those born elsewhere, and the impact of having US-born children. Both quantitative studies, however, find evidence that racial identification leads to cross-racial solidarity.

Previous studies also suggest that different positioning within the U.S. racial and gendered order affects what activities marginalized groups participate in, and how those activities are received. As Collins explains, "Social science research typically focuses on public, official, visible political activity even though unofficial, private, and seemingly invisible spheres of social life and organization may be equally important" (2000:202). Collins highlights how, in the face of exclusion from "fundamental mechanisms for working-class activism" such as labor unions and political parties, Black women conduct their activism in two interdependent and complementary spheres: via struggles for group survival and struggles for institutional transformation (2000:202). Black women struggle for group survival by "craft(ing) Black female spheres of influence that resist oppressive structures by undermining them" and by nurturing their families and communities (Collins 2000:204). Given that systemic racism and structural injustice affects their families and communities, Black women find that group survival depends in part on institutional transformation (Collins 2000). Collins' insight into the spheres of activism among Black women provides a useful framework through which to understand how marginalized groups navigate activism and resistance in a world that makes traditional activism unavailable. Previous studies suggest

that South Asian Americans navigate similar dynamics. In an ethnographic study of South Asian American Muslim youth, Maira found that her research subjects did not have the capacity to be part of organized political movements, but they still participated in a type of activism that Maira calls "dissenting citizenship," which includes resisting profiling and playing the role of the educator and native informant. She found that South Asian American Muslims possess complicated ideas of dissent; their activism work was sometimes ambiguous and hard to identify, revealing what she called "the continuum of responses of resistance" (Maira 2009). This research suggests that not only does activist activity influence racial or ethnic identification (as evidenced, in part, by previous research on panethnicity) but also that racial and ethnic identity can influence the nature, depth, reach and scope of activist activity as well.

The puzzle

Previous research on identity and motivation for activism makes important contributions to understanding cross-ethnic solidarity, allowing many new questions to be asked. Studies identifying of how power works through racial and ethnic controlling images raise the question of how controlling images impact South Asian American activism. The framework of panethnicity provides an opportunity to inquire if the panethnic identity of "South Asian American" can be effective at motivating activism given the contestations and antagonisms among the communities within it. Asian American panethnicity, as described by Espiritu, entails antagonisms between groups based on colonial histories, religious differences, and more. The Asian American panethnic identity makes the movement more legible in the U.S. racial context and creates mobilizing power in bringing smaller groups

together to a larger whole (2011); it is unclear, however, whether a South Asian American panethnic identity might have the same tactical and motivational power as the pan-ethnic character of Asian American . In the field of social movements, the concepts of collective identity and the perfect standard activist demonstrate how identity and activism are inextricably linked, for better or for worse, and open opportunities to investigate how that relationship changes depending on the type of identity. Scholarship exploring how race, ethnicity, and activism relate through relative valorization, civic ostracism, group consciousness, linked fate, cultural citizenship and dissenting citizenship opens questions about how the 2016 election, broader definitions of South Asian Americans, and a focus on non-Muslim South Asian Americans might change the relationship.

Because ethnic identities are malleable and because social movements can see fit to either embrace or disavow ethnic identity, I consider three questions: **one, what can South Asian American experiences reveal about the nature of social movements and racialization in the U.S?; two, why and how do South Asian Americans participate in anti-racist social movements?; and three, how does South Asian American identity motivate or inhibit social activism?** Drawing on in-depth interviews with South Asian Americans, I explore how controlling images of the South Asian American and controlling images of the perfect standard activist create an almost untenable environment in which to be an activist. In this almost untenable space, South Asian Americans created their own community of what they describe as "weirdos" – a recognition of the unexpected and seemingly anomalous nature of the South Asian activist – one who resists both of the controlling images of Asian American passivity and the perfect activist to form a specifically South Asian American version of activism.

This thesis draws on interviews conducted in person and over the phone between April and October 2019 with 26 individuals[1] of South Asian descent living in the United States.   To be able to participate in the study, participants had to be over 18 years old and self-identify as South Asian[2]. Prospective participants were told that I was conducting a research study to understand how South Asian Americans define and participate in social activism in the United States. If asked, I clarified to prospective participants that they did not need to identify as activists. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the respondents:

Table 1

Characteristic	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
Pronouns used		
She/her/hers	18	69.2%
He/his	5	19.2%
They/them	3	11.5%
Age[3]		
23 to 38	20	76.9%
39 to 65	6	23.1%
Country of Origin		
India	18	69.2%
Other	8	30.8%

1   One individual was interviewed twice for roughly 30 minutes each time, while every other interviewee was interviewed once for about an hour. Therefore, I collected 27 interviews from 26 people.

2 From the diaspora (Caribbean countries, Kenya, etc.). – for example, there is a history of immigrants whose parents emigrated from India to Trinidad and Tobago and then they immigrated to the United States. I let folks identify themselves as South Asian and then tell me their country of origin

3 No respondent was between the ages of 18-22 or over 65.

Birthplace		
United States	13	50.0%
India	7	15.4%
Other	6	23.1%
TOTAL # OF PARTICIPANTS	**26**	

Twenty-five of the twenty-six participants' parents were born outside of the U.S. The

parents of 19 participants were born in India, 2 in Bangladesh or East Bengal, 1 of each in

Pakistan, Nepal, Ceylon[4], and Punjab (without indication of which side of Punjab). One

participant's parents were born in Berkeley, California. All 26 respondents indicated that

their grandparents were born outside of the United States, of which all but 2 were born in

pre-partition India. Of the 26 participants, 13 were born outside of the United States. On

average, these respondents had been in the United States for 17.9 years, ranging from less

than 3 years to 54 years.

Recruitment

I began by attending events run by South Asian Americans in Santa Barbara and Los

Angeles and sending emails to previous personal contacts of South Asian descent in

Washington D.C. I went through a list of organizations in the Los Angeles area provided on

the website of South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT). I would then message

organizations through their public websites. If the organization's website listed email

addresses for staff, I would email the staff member. If the website only listed a general email

address, I would email the general email address. In addition, I sent an announcement about

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[4] The respondent referred to their birthplace as Ceylon, even though they were born after the country changed
its name to Sri Lanka (Haviland 2011).

the study via email to the Alliance of South Asians Taking Action (ASATA) list serve and asked participants in the study to connect me to others in their network who they thought might be interested in the study.

Design

Once I had recruited a participant and determined the date and time of the interview, I emailed the participant the consent form as well as a link to a web survey.

Twenty of the twenty-seven interviews included in this analysis were conducted over the phone.   Seven interviews were conducted in person in the Southern California area and the San Francisco Bay Area. Interviewing affords me a methodological flexibility that surveying does not – specifically, it allowed for open-ended questioning that potentially enables respondents to introduce a wider range of subjective perceptions than could be identified by predetermined questions. Interviewing over the phone also allowed me to sample from across the United States without requiring travel and making it feasible for respondents to fit a conversation with me into their busy schedules.

Analysis consisted of hand-coding, coding using Atlas.ti, and memoing. While cleaning up the transcripts, I wrote memos to capture initial analysis. I then I hand-coded the interviews, looking for key themes in the text. Throughout the interviewing, transcribing, and hand-coding process, I wrote memos with initial analysis to document the process. In the final stage, I combined insights from the memos and hand-coding into key findings (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2020; Saldana 2009).

Rationale for Design

I chose this design because, as described in the literature review, some of the newest research focused on South Asian American political participation is quantitative in nature and

is electorally focused (Wong et al. 2011). Qualitative studies previously done on the topic have either been written before the critical turning point of the September 11, 2001 attacks (Prashad 2000), focused on a very specific population among South Asian Americans (e.g. Maira 2009), and/or have not focused on activism among South Asian Americans in the context of the 2016 election (Prashad 2014). On the flip side, many works that attempt to understand how ethnic identity might motivate social activism have not focused on South Asian Americans (Mora et al. 2018). This is one of the first qualitative studies of South Asian American activism in the United States since the 2016 election. Because South Asian American activism is relatively understudied, qualitative studies can be helpful in better understanding the categories of activism, especially given that previous studies (Maira 2009) have found that activism is often practiced and defined differently among South Asian Americans than among other populations due to the group's positionality in the U.S. racial order.

Positionality

My interest in the research topic stems in part from my own identification as a South Asian American who grew up in a Christian household. I sit in a web of identities that push and pull against each other: US born, woman of color in the American context, queer-identified, cis-gendered, from a religious background that is part of the majority in the US but in the minority among South Asians. As such, I take a lens of multiplicity, which, as explained by Lynn Fujiwara, "gives us the tools to read and engage otherwise conflicted moments as generating knowledge that fuels a coalitional praxis committed to Asian American feminist change on the ground" (2018:245). Feminist praxis also similarly demands that I consider the situated knowledge that I create through my own positioning

within multiple power structures; and the ways that my different identities (and those of the participants) intersect and overlap(Green n.d.).

The design of this study generates its own "conflicted moments," which creates its own benefits and costs. For example, interviewing over the phone made the study more accessible to more respondents. However, it provides the unique challenge that because of my Judeo-Christian name, I may not have been legible to participants as South Asian, which may have changed their responses. Some interviewees asked me why I was interested in conducting this study, at which point I revealed my ethnic identity. It is unclear how perceptions of my ethnic identity might have influenced responses. A few respondents asked me, either before the interview or in response to the question "Is there anything else you would like to discuss", why I was interested in the topic, or asked about my background in general, which enabled me to mention that I identify as South Asian. During other interviews, I mentioned my ethnic identity off-handedly over the course of the conversation. Interestingly, many respondents seemed to draw on what they thought of as common knowledge between us. For example, Leila K referenced a "Kali age,"[5]; she assumed that I would understand the reference when I did not. On multiple occasions, respondents would refer to famous South Asian, especially Bollywood, movies, without much explanation about what they were, which I took to mean that they assumed that I already knew about them. This idea of common knowledge about South Asians, or the underlying assumption of a pan-South Asian identity, is discussed in more detail in other sections of the paper.

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[5] The Kali age refers to the belief in the Hindu tradition that the world goes through four stages, ending in a golden age. The Kali age is understood to be the current and last of the four cycles, which is characterized by conflict and sin (Anon n.d., Anon n.d.; Evola 2018)

Results[6]

South Asian Americans (SAAs) combat two controlling images: the politically apathetic, money-focused professional, and the "perfect standard" activist (Bobel 2007:147). These seemingly disparate images reinforce each other by delineating two ideal types that are impossible to fulfil, thereby discouraging participation in social movements. In response, SAAs who are interested in activism negotiate their own space within the causes in which they are interested. They find their own shades of gray between complete non-participation and the "perfect standard" activist (Bobel 2007:147), redefining the concept of activism for themselves. They seek and often form their own networks with others who share the complications of both their identities and their interests.

Controlling image of SAAs

The image of the SAA, as articulated by respondents and elsewhere, often references a high-income doctor, engineer or businessperson. This person's energy focuses on marriage either for themselves or for their children. They are not very active politically but are active in civic associations focused on cultural events. They are "successful" in that they have good jobs, a stable nuclear family, and generally do not experience much hardship (Mishra 2016; Prashad 2000, 2014). Respondents also reference common generalizations of SAAs as a homogenous and unified community made up of recently arrived Indian immigrants primarily emigrating to the United States, rather than as a group with a centuries-long, multinational diasporic history.

This controlling image and the way it captures a partial truth about the community alienates politically minded SAAs from embracing South Asian-ness as a pan-ethnoracial

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6 Throughout the paper, I refer to specific respondents. All names listed, unless noted otherwise, are pseudonyms.

identity. For example, Madhu M, who now lives in the United States, described her isolation from others in the South Asian community growing up:

> *"...I grew up with a very strong South Indian specifically, South Indian community in Montreal and I don't really keep in touch with most of those people though because I do see like most of those people that I grew up with are living lives that don't feel totally connected to what I do. Like I definitely feel like I'm kind of like the, I'm like a black sheep of my family and also of the community in a way because no one else is out there trying to find like a full time artist and yeah, everyone else, you know, married a certain kind of a partner and all those kind of things. So, it just feels like, it's like, so there's kind of like the separation that I feel."*

Here, Madhu described how her divergence from the perceived norm creates a "separation" and how she feels alienated from her community because "no one else is out there trying to find like a full-time artist." Her profession in the artistic world, rather than the medical, business or engineering-focused professions that brought many other South Asians into the United States, marks her as different not only because she is in a topically different field, but also because the field she is in focuses less on monetary gain and more on aesthetics. She sees herself as less desirable to her community that those who "married a certain kind of partner." The stigma she feels because she chose a profession that is likely to put her in a lower economic status than those that "married a certain kind of partner" represents the controlling image of South Asian Americans at work. She is in a profession not specifically favored by the U.S. immigration system; in many ways, she is in a profession that serves in part to observe, provide new insight into, and sometimes critique current systems, which is a type of threat to the status quo. The South Asian American controlling image discredits her position by situating her as less desirable of a partner and less legible to her community. Because controlling images develop in response to a threat (Collins 2000), the question that arises here is what threat Madhu and others like her present. I argue that by choosing a

profession outside of those incentivized by the U.S. immigration policy, Madhu and others like her pose a threat to the racist systems undergirding those policies. She has chosen a profession in which she can exercise her full rights as a person living under a system – the right to examine, to analyze, and to criticize. Similarly, Chandy R commented: "I wasn't able to connect with people in the way that I wanted to connect with them. They were more interested in, you know, in cultural events, um, Indus and like dance groups and just hanging out, kind of being insular, and that never really appealed to me." In this quote, Chandy explains that the connections that he hoped to make with other South Asian American people did not occur because of their disconnected interests. While he was interested in connecting over shared interests in politics, social issues, and racial justice, others around him were more interested in "being insular." His desire to connect with other racial groups, ironically, separated him from his peers. His statement also alludes to a false dichotomy between connecting with "cultural events" and being politically active; being interested in cultural events means being less interested in politics, and vice versa. This dichotomy responds to the threat posed by the engaged South Asian American by setting up an impossible choice: either engage in your culture or engage in your politics, never both. It also serves to discredit the standpoint of the politically engaged South Asian American as someone who is rejecting their culture or is in some other way not a *real* South Asian. Githa P similarly alludes to the ways in which political activism is held in contrast to full participation in South Asian community and culture:

> *"I think that I've wanted more of a South Asian community and I have always felt like I've been at the fringes or failed at it. And so when I was growing up I was in schools in Detroit, I was surrounded by a lot of people in the same class as me, and you know even down to the dialect level, we*

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> *spoke…but there were a big difference in terms of our interests, priorities, things like that."*

Even though Githa was in a school surrounded by others from her same region and speaking her language, she, like Chandy and Madhu, felt a separation from her peers. Because she did not share the same "interests [or] priorities," she felt that she was "at the fringes or failed" at being a part of the South Asian community. She implies here that her interests in issues of political and social justice disqualify her from being a central, successful member of the South Asian community; in other words, she alludes to a similar dichotomy set up between being a *real* South Asian and being an activist. This dichotomy undergirds the controlling image of South Asian Americans in that it disincentivizes activism. It tells Githa, Chandy, and Madhu that if they want to be a different type of South Asian, then they will have to sacrifice their place in their community. This dynamic extends to family connection as well. For example, one respondent mentioned that when she first got interested in politics, the family paid more attention and showed more interest, but as her interest grew her family pigeonholed her as the activist relative and started to ignore her messages. Another one mentioned how her family makes fun of her for her past causes - she used to yell at them for consuming a product because of the company's environmental practices, and it became a family joke.

Non-Indian South Asians reported that the controlling image centers Indian experience, which also serves to divide South Asian Americans who are interested in activism. Githa P, whose family originated in Nepal, explained that:

> *"I think there's a lot of South Asian culture that exists, but I don't identify with it. And I don't know in the South Asian, if there is a thing of like, even with the South Asian culture, there being outlier South Asian [laughs] Again, I think like I've been in like South Asian spaces but it's very Indian,*

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> *Pakistani, dominant, and I feel like an outlier in those spaces, and so those are moments where I'm like "Oh I don't know if I identify with this," you know?"*

South Asian spaces hold the possibility of building community among people who are similarly racialized in the United States. By centering the voices of one or two ethnicities – Indian, Pakistani – the spaces lose some of the potential they might have otherwise had to build towards a group consciousness or collective identity. Instead, as Githa experienced, South Asian spaces that internalize the controlling image of South Asian Americans as solely Indian, alienate those who do not fit that image.

The conflict between the South Asian American controlling image, and the lived realities of non-Indian South Asians, especially emerged when respondents considered whether they would describe their identity as *South Asian, Desi* or both. The title for this project initially included the term "Desi," treating it as a synonym for "South Asian," however, respondents revealed that these terms, to them, indicated different lived experiences. For example, Manisha F described how claiming herself as Desi brought no questions, but identification as South Asian provoked queries about Indian food and culture, even though she is Pakistani:

> *"Um, and then I also think partly when people say South Asian, they think Indian and we're very much Pakistani. And so I like it if I walk into a group and I say, Hey, I, I, I will walk into a group and say like, Hey, I'm desi, but I would, I would almost never walk into a group and say that I'm South Asian because then I get asked a lot of questions about India and asked if I like Indian food and all sorts…I very quickly then backpedal and I'm like, no, no, no, no, I'm not Indian."*

As reflected in Githa's experience, Manisha found that if she identified herself as a South Asian, others would assume that she was Indian, thereby pushing her into the controlling image of South Asian Americans as predominantly Indian. The "group" would then assume

knowledge of Indian food and culture that she did not have, and so she would then have to distance herself from the controlling image. Her experience prevents her from wanting to identify herself as South Asian and again distances her from the sense of community that that identification could provide. Another respondent had the opposite experience; specifically, she described how her Mongolian facial features, typical of Nepal, convey an image that most people do not associate with the term, which inhibits self-identification as Desi. For her, identifying with the term *desi* connected her to the controlling image of South Asian Americans, which for her included physical attributes that she did not possess. So, like Manisha with the term *South Asian*, this respondent distanced herself from the term *desi.* The differing relationships among respondents between the terms *South Asian* and *Desi* indicate a broader rift among individuals originating from India and from other countries often understood to be part of South Asia, like Pakistan, Nepal, and elsewhere. This rift serves to make it harder for South Asian Americans to find community with each other.

Respondents who originate from India also battled the SAA controlling image as overly focused on a pan-Indian, Hindu-focused experience. Several respondents indicated greater identification with a regional background rather than a national or pan ethnic identity. A large proportion of those who indicated this preference identified as Sikh or Muslim. Many Sikh respondents referred to "what happened in 1984" referring to the violent event in June of that year when Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered a military assault on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, one of the most significant religious centers in Sikhism. The attack on the Golden Temple killed thousands of civilians. In October of that year, two Sikh bodyguards assassinated Mrs. Gandhi. In the days that followed, mobs of people, aided by law enforcement and government officials, stormed Sikh homes and stores across India

(especially in New Delhi) and massacred their occupants. Official reports counted 3,000 murders over three days (Singh 2014). For many respondents, learning about the 1984 massacre led them to separate their identity away from India and focus more on Sikh and Punjabi heritage. A respondent described a similar disassociation for a friend from Kashmir, a region that India and Pakistan have fought over since Partition. The respondent indicated that her friend describes herself as "not Indian, she's Kashmiri, because of exactly what's happening now." At the time of the interview, the Indian central government, controlled by the Hindu nationalist BJP party, revoked a seven-decade-long privileged status that had given the Indian-administered part of the region significant autonomy. The Indian government had also cut the internet, phone lines and cable connections to Kashmir, which is the only state in India in which Muslims are in the majority, to suppress dissent and limit independent news distribution, and had placed two former chief ministers of the area under house arrest (BBC 2019). Enforcement of a Hindu-based norm, at the expense of religious minorities in India, creates divisions within the SAA community. One respondent commented that "[the]South Asian community tend[s] not to like Sikhs or they tend to think Sikhs are like a subset of Hinduism…it annoys me to no end, so I don't really have a lot of solidarity with the South Asian community…as a homogeneous controlled block." Another respondent added that "maybe if I did not come from a minority community, I might have a different experience or a different take…" The divisions created by the maintenance of a specific image of Indian identity make it difficult for SAAs to build the group consciousness necessary to participate in activism as a community.

The internal maintenance of the controlling image affects SAA participation in activism. For example, one respondent described how she used to love going to the Pakistan

Day parades, but was kicked out of the parade for representing an anti-domestic violence organization. The organizers of the parade called the respondent and her fellow participants "homewreckers." Another respondent explained how her community would tell her parents that they should not let their daughter work for an activist-oriented organization. She then described how she suspected a family friend was being forced into a marriage, and her parents discouraged her from saying anything. The respondent later found out that the marriage was indeed forced.

For other respondents, maintenance of the controlling image means suppressing experiences that might, in other circumstances, push them to action. For example, one respondent discussed how after she was sexually assaulted in college, she chose never to tell her parents: "[My parents] immigrated all the way to this fucking country and went through everything that [they] did just for me to get fucking assaulted at a fucking frat party my first year of college, right. Like it's just, why ruin that American dream for you?" Another respondent explained that she never talked about being sexually assaulted by her uncle as a child because she knew that it would upset her mother. The common thread seems to be that respondents do not talk about certain things that happen to them to protect their parents from distress. Other respondents suggested that their parents do not want to know about the upsetting things that are going on with their children. The respondent who was assaulted in college explained:

> *"It doesn't help me to tell [my parents]. They can't do anything for me and I don't want to see them sad, but they also probably are highly suspect of the fact that I have a lot of friends in the Title Nine movement all of the sudden in 2013 and that my best friend is one of the leaders of that movement. They are not stupid. That's not a conversation I really want to have with them."*

The pressure to maintain a specific image, and keep their parents from feeling sad, did not

necessarily prevent respondents from participating in activism, but did prevent them from

being open about their work with their families. For the respondent above, the pressure to

protect her family leads her to avoid talking about the trauma that pushed her towards her

activism. It maintains a distance between her and her parents, depriving her of the support

that honesty might provide. It also means that her parents do not get to understand why their

daughter is so interested in the Title IX movement[7], or their own personal connection to that

movement. Knowledge that might have been galvanizing or might have led them to better

support their daughter never reaches them to maintain the controlling image. In fact, the

controlling image of South Asian Americans as successful and having a better experience in

the U.S. than they might have had in their home countries might have, alternatively, made the

respondents' parents less likely to be supportive of her or of the Title Nine movement.

Others, like Jasper N (quoted below) chose to push against the controlling image and reveal

its inconsistencies:

> *"So many people they have stereotypes about the South Asians as being*
> *successful and educated and upstanding citizens and all, you know, but*
> *there's a lot of alcoholism, there's a lot of gangsters and there's a lot of*
> *working class people, and molesting that goes on and you know, people,*
> *they hide all that stuff and you don't have, they keep it inside and they don't*
> *share with anyone. And, um, like I will always be sure to point it out and*
> *always make sure, yeah, no, we're, we're not all that, you know."*

Here, Jasper points directly addresses the dominant image of South Asians as "being

successful and educated and upstanding citizens." Jasper refers to this image as a stereotype,

but as her next statement implies, this image serves not only to make an oversimplified claim

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7 Title IX is a federal law designed to address institutional sex discrimination at all schools, universities, and educational training programs that use federal funding. Although it is most frequently discussed in the context of ensuring equal access to athletics, it also addresses sexual harassment, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and other types of sex-based discrimination. New directives from the. federal government in 2011 (identifying educational institutions as responsible for addressing sexual misconduct) and 2017 (which raised the evidentiary standards in sexual assault cases) have changed the ways that Title IX is enforced and implemented, making it a continual site for activism on college campuses (Zarrugh et al. 2020).

about South Asian Americans, but also serves to disguise the social problems within the community. Especially important here is her use of the term "gangster," which is often used as a coded term referring to Black men. By using this term, Jasper connects the South Asian American community to the Black community; implicit in the comment is that the South Asian American faces many of the same social problems that face the Black community, but they specifically "keep it inside and they don't share it with anyone" to maintain the controlling image of South Asian Americans as successful. Notably, Jasper also lists "working class people" as a group that does not fit within the dominant image, alluding to controlling images of South Asian Americans as white-collar, upper class professionals driven by U.S. immigration policy. Maintaining the controlling image allows the South Asian American community to also maintain the illusion that they have been able to somehow overcome or sidestep the social problems affecting other minorities. Here, the threat is the possibility of cross-racial or class-based solidarity; the controlling image of South Asian Americans responds to the threat by promoting the myth that some groups can overcome the pitfalls of systemic racism without upending the system. Pushing against a controlling image, regardless of the source, would be difficult. Pushing against a controlling image that comes from your own family or community raises the stakes of the resistance. Jasper reported that they did not have a relationship with their family anymore. Others chose not to discuss the issues that they cared about with family; still others chose to talk about the issues. Among those who chose to pursue the conversations, a few reported that their families were receptive; for others, as mentioned above, their interests stigmatized them among their family. Family attitudes towards respondents' activism took two major forms: either they avoided more high-risk activities, like marches, or they chose to participate in higher risk

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activities, but did not tell their families. As discussed in more depth later in the paper, the decisions around what activities South Asian Americans chose to participate in relies on a complicated calculus that considers their own and others' perceived risk.

The pan-Indian/pan-South Asian controlling image, like every controlling image, is based on kernels of truth. My interviews found that SAAs face real structural issues that prevent them from participating in social movements at the same levels as other groups. For example, Henrietta M "felt less available" to do activist work because of her financial and academic constraints. When she was in school, she felt less available to do protests because she was on a fellowship and felt a lot of pressure to do well, while her classmates had a 'safety net' that she did not because of her working-class background. Another respondent related her difficulties getting a visa to visit India and her concerns that participating in protests would make the process even more difficult. Yet another respondent was trying to become a nurse and worried about getting an arrest record. The social identities of respondents make them likely to be asked to be part of or speak on behalf of a group or attend a protest. These same identities, however, expose them to structural obstacles that prevent them from mobilizing around the issues they care about. All these respondents were willing to participate in activism but saw their options for activism as limited.

Complicated divisions based on ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, and long histories of state-sanctioned violence, illustrate the constructed nature of the pan-SAA/pan-Indian controlling image, and both its proximity and its distance from respondents' lived experiences. The contested and evolving nature of the image makes it difficult to rally around; in addition, the policing of this image can suppress activist work.

Controlling image of the "perfect standard activist"

While the controlling image and the real structural issues behind the image pull SAAs towards political inaction or even apathy, the controlling image of the "perfect standard" for activists has its own complications and contradictions. Previous studies have highlighted the complicated relationship that individuals have to activist-oriented identities. Research on the Menstrual Activism movement found that social movement actors sometimes resist the term "activist" because they do not fit the "perfect standard" that they associate with that term. Specifically, the perfect standard includes "living the issue" and demonstrating consistent and unflagging daily dedication, a standard so high that it can seem unattainable (Bobel 2007). Standards about activism have gendered and age-related aspects as well. For example, studies suggest that girls' conceptions of what it means to be an activist are situated in broader discourses about girls' empowerment, civic engagement, and youth apathy; girlhood is sometimes viewed as simultaneously supporting and opposing activist identity (Taft 2011). This research suggests that the terrain between defining activism and calling oneself an activist is rife with hurdles related to individuals' own hierarchies of identities and values (Bobel 2007). More recent research has found a similar resistance to the term "feminist," distinguishing among people who embrace the term, who wholly reject it, and who describe themselves as "fence-sitters," as people who are "neither a feminist nor an antifeminist, but believe women should be 'social, political and economic equals'" (Crossley 2017:27).

The SAAs in this study express very different reactions to the term "activist." Six respondents were unequivocally willing to define themselves as an activist, nine respondents

wholly rejected the label, and eight respondents were not sure[8]. In addition, respondents had very different reasons for defining themselves as activists or not. I argue that the respondents in this study's relationships to activism have similarities with Crossley's respondents' reactions to the term 'feminist.' What I term *aspirers* act like fence-sitters, in that they are unwilling to fully inhabit the term, even though they do a lot of work that an outside observer might consider as activist. They *aspire* to fit the perfect standard of the activist, as theorized by Bobel. What I term *dislikers* disagreed with the term "activist", not because the term signifies a higher status, but because the term overly centers individuals rather than the movement as a whole. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Mapping two different types of activist "fence-sitters"
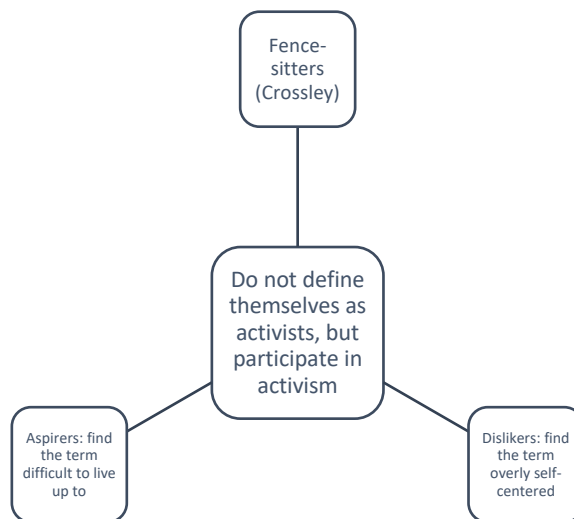
Several respondents, whom I term "aspirers" did not identify as activists because they related that they did not fit what Bobel terms "the perfect standard" (2007). The standard that respondents applied varied. For several respondents, the term activist connotes being known to others, and/or being in the public eye as an activist. For one respondent (Amrita K), this

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[8] Three respondents were not asked the question.

idea had a largely positive connotation; being publicly known as an activist means that you have "done enough stuff." An activist to many respondents is someone with "courage", a "leader", someone who holds knowledge about political and social systems and can effect change. Amrita K did not think of herself as an activist because the people she thought of as activists had a lot of connections with social justice and community groups that she lacked. She thought of activism as a set of "tiers". At the lowest level of engagement was someone who followed posts about social justice issues, or shared information about social justice issues on their own social media. Above that level, but still low on the list, was someone who volunteers; higher up on her tiered system was serving on an executive board of a social justice organization. Some respondents agreed that part of the definition of activist entailed disrupting oppressive structures of power in some way. For example, Chandy R explained that as a lawyer, his fundamental job was to preserve institutions, which disqualified him as an activist. Another respondent (Amina S) described her work as "menial" and not enough to merit the label of activist. Aspirers also explained that there was a difference between "professional activism" and other types of activism, suggesting that those who get paid for their work, who do activism as part of their full-time careers, are in a different class than others. Regardless of the standard that the respondent related, each of the respondents in this category affirmed that their activities did not meet the ideal standard. As one respondent [Sejal S] remarked: "I think it's just that whenever I hear the phrase activist, I think of people who are doing more than I am doing." No matter how much they work, the standard for aspirers continues to move higher and farther out of reach. The unattainability of the standard, and the positioning of "people who are doing more than [Sejal] is doing" above aspirers, puts the aspirers in a continually substandard position within their own work.

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Unlike aspirers, who described the label of activist as a positive goal to which one should work towards, dislikers explained that the term had a negative connotation. Kunal P related that when one takes on the label of activist, then they have let the system legitimate them and so are no longer an activist, since the job of an activist is to agitate against the system. Like Chandy R, the lawyer who did not see himself as an activist, Kunal P agreed that activists should disrupt systems. However, they disagreed in terms of whether someone should aspire to the label.

Dislikers and aspirers also disagreed on the extent to which employment reinforced or undercut the legitimacy of activist work. Aspirers testified that treating activism as an occupation or a full-time job is a necessary contingency for applying the definition of activist to a person. Dislikers, however, explained that treating activism as an occupation connotes that fighting for ones or others' rights requires a rare skill set which is inaccessible to most people. For example, one respondent, citing Indya Moore[9], expressed skepticism about people taking on the moniker of activist, because the term turns the work into an occupation rather than a way of life.

Other respondents expressed concern about the potentially corrosive nature of the term "activist." For example, one respondent worried that taking on the title of activist would stall someone out; that holding the title may make it seem that the title alone provided sufficient evidence of worthy work. She wanted a continual interrogation of the work and what interests it serves, placing focus on the doing, not on the title or the identity frame. She stated she "want[s] activism to be a verb." For others, the term "activist" overly centers the individual who is trying to help a community instead of centering the community itself. Githa

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9 Indya Moore is a transgender, nonbinary Black actor best known for their role on the Netflix TV show *Pose*.

expressed concern that the word activist has been used by people to "highlight themselves" in a "savior kind of way." The term "organizer" is preferable to activist for her, because it connoted pushing from the back, rather than activist which suggests leading from the front.

Among SAAs, nonactivists and fence-sitters are difficult to identify. Most who did not identify as activists in my study rejected the term "activist" for very specific reasons. In activism, the central question for judging whether to identify as a nonactivist would be something along the lines of "Do you believe that you should participate in civil society?"; I did not ask that question to my participants. Because my study was framed as a study about activism, a few respondents told me that they had wondered if they should reply to my call, because they were not sure whether they "counted" as an activist. This means that many potential nonactivist respondents would have likely filtered themselves out because they did not think they were eligible to participate.

In this section, I argued that many SAAs have different definitions of activism and activists. A "perfect standard" of the activist is a controlling image. Whether the individual subscribes to, reports ambivalence towards, or rejects the label of activist, they have an image of the activist that influences their behavior. The aspirers either try to step up their work, or on the contrary become apathetic because the terms seem like too much to live up to. Some dislikers change their approach to their work to center others. Regardless of what the response may be, the controlling image of the activist influences the individual's behavior.

Response to controlling images: making an activism of one's own

The previous two sections argue that SAAs interested in activism navigate two controlling images: one of the apathetic SAA and the other of the "perfect standard" activist.

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These images create a seemingly untenable position where on one hand respondents view activism as too difficult, too risky and/or alienating, or on the other hand as never enough. In this section, I demonstrate how SAAs navigate these forces by finding spaces between total inaction and highest risk action. They do so in three ways. One, they calculate what they are willing to do based on several factors both internal and external. Two, they look for, and often create, networks of other "weirdos" who work against the "standard" South Asian straight, Hindu, cis, technocrat, STEM-focused person. Three, they find new racialized groups with which to connect – moving beyond group identification as SAAs and beginning to find community and common ground with Black Americans and other immigrants.

A complicated calculus

Respondents demonstrated the ways in which they calculate their ability and willingness to act. Their comments recall Douglas McAdam's theoretical frame of biographical availability, which demonstrated how individuals' ability to participate in specific types of activism depended in part on their race, class and gender (McAdam 1990). This frame opens the opportunity to view the ways that biographical availability changes depending on religion, visa status, sexuality, and other minority statuses. A more recent study by Kraig Beyerlein and John Hipp conceives of civic engagement as a two-stage process. In the first stage, the individual is willing to participate in activism. In the second stage, the individual's willingness transforms into participation. The study finds that biographical unavailability has no effect on the second stage of converting willingness to participation but does remove people from entering the first stage; it keeps them out of the pool of willing protest participants (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006). In short, previous theory would suggest that

race impacts biographical (un)availability in that it reduces the pool of willing protest participants.

Respondents to this study complicate the two-stage model. Their testimony indicates that there is a step between willingness and participation, that some South Asians are interested in social movements and are willing to participate because of, rather than despite, daunting obstacles. For example, respondent Amina S related that her connection to South Asian groups was, in a way, forced by isolation. She is on a visa which does not allow her to work. She has been in the United States for seven years, on a series of one-year visas that keep getting renewed. Left in a state of continual impermanence, she found it hard to develop long term connections to people in the United States. So, she finds her community through South Asian groups. Soon after moving to the United States, she began to search for places to volunteer. Most organizations never returned her emails, but finally after persistent calls she connected with a South Asian-specific domestic violence organization. The organization gives her a way to occupy her time, but because her visa status is in a perpetual state of uncertainty, the organization is unwilling to have her invest in long term relationships with her clients. They sideline her to do basic administrative tasks and occasional translation work (she is fluent in several South Asian languages) which she does not find fulfilling. Because she is not able to promise that she will be around for a while, she cannot participate fully as a volunteer. So, her work with South Asian organizations helps her connect to her South Asian identity, but her visa status prevents her from being fully immersed into an SAA activist identity. It is important to note here that her experience reflects, in part, the consequences of U.S. immigration policy which does not allow her to set down roots. The consequences of this continual impermanence and lack of community support manifests itself through panic

attacks and depression. Amina reported that she and her spouse wonder whether they should move back to India to be around family and regain the satisfactions of support from other people, but they are also considering applying for green cards. Their decision will rely in large part on whether the green card process is successful. Amina S's ability to be civically engaged rests on her ability to promise a certain amount of long-term engagement to an organization. She is willing to participate, but her eventual participation is mitigated by the options available to her. It is also important to note that her biographical availability is in part mitigated by the structure of the visa process in the U.S. Her visa status has prevented her for seven years from working in the country and therefore making the meaningful long-term connections that might keep her here.

The SAA experience adds a new dimension to scholarly understanding of the factors that contribute to an individual's willingness to participate in social movements and other forms of civic engagement. Affirmative connection to racial identity might contribute to an interest in activism. One respondent reported disconnection from her South Asian identity, despite growing up in a South Asian community, in part because her father raised her without "a mom who organized your social life or prioritizes all the feminine things that women prioritize." So, she "felt kind of like an outcast" among South Asians. Later in life, she began to look for this community, but not being connected to it in the first place meant some potential missed opportunities in terms of racially related organizing as conceived by previous scholars (Mora et al. 2018; Padilla 1985; Zepeda-Millan and Wallace 2018).

Respondents who are willing to participate in activist activity often make decisions about what activities to participate in based on their specific biographical circumstances. For

example, Kunal P (who identifies as nonbinary) mentioned that they make choices on whether to attend a march based on their perceived positionality/ and safety:

> *"So what I'll say is that like I'll go to marches and I'll go to a protest, but oftentimes I won't because I will see who the organizers are or I will see where it's organized, and if I don't see, I think I tend to be given the way I express myself in the world… I have to be conscious of like where I put myself because I put myself forward for hyper targeting. So, if there's an event going on to support Black people, I will be there because I'm like, it's less likely that they'll attack me than the folks who are organizing around issues that are reports about community. But if it's another sort of issue, like where I somehow don't have to be the target of the system's oppression. So, like a lot of these rallies, a lot of white people will come out. I can quote unquote feel a little bit safer attending them because I know that at least there'll be a cost, uh, racial across community costs, ethnics costs, a lot of things sort of support where we can protect ourselves. But it's situations where I don't think that safety is there, I will find alternative ways to be supportive. But that's usually like where I don't, I'm not rich, but I know that I make more than some doctoral students and some people who live in [the same town as the respondent]. So, I try to use sort of that economic surplus that I have earned in many ways to kind of distribute the level. So, I kind of find the best way to be active."*

Here, Kunal describes their decision-making process for deciding whether to participate in an event. Their race and gender presentation factor greatly into those decisions. In Black dominated spaces where they felt that they would be less likely to be hyper-targeted and felt that their presence would have a net positive impact, they were more likely to attend. They also felt safe in white dominated spaces, because the event itself would be less likely to be repressed by the police or other authority figures. However, for activities designed to be high-risk, where they would potentially be "hyper-targeted" compared to other (especially white) protesters, they would find other ways to contribute. Taking their (in this case, class) position into account, they donate what they see as their "economic surplus;" for them, these donations are a way to use their economic privilege toward a greater good, even if their lack of privilege in terms of their race, religion, and gender presentation made in-person protest

too risky. Other respondents similarly made calculated decisions on what types of activities to participate in, based on their positionality. For example, a respondent who worried about publicly criticizing or protesting against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the United States chose to help facilitate conference calls among those who were willing and able to protest, and to help organize logistics for the protests. Those activities would keep her out of the spotlight and allow her to assist without physically attending the protest itself.

Other respondents found that the best action they could take based on their positionality was to push the people closest to them to act. Five respondents indicated that part of their activism consisted of discussing the issues they care about with friends and family. Interest in and discussion of activism often strained their relationships with those closest to them. Another respondent, who did not identify as an activist, did make it a point to talk about a chosen cause, that of combatting domestic violence, in book club sessions. Some of these conversations revolved around courses she was taking on the subject. She explained that she believed that it was important to talk about it to signal to others that she was a safe person to confide in, in case the members of the group were experiencing domestic violence or knew someone who was. In an extreme example, another respondent got divorced in part because her husband voted for Trump. She cut off a lot of her communication with her family because of their political views. People who enact their activism in their relationships might not be considered "activists" in the traditional sense of the word, or might see this type of activism as at a lower-level because it does not involve putting bodies on the line in public places, but jeopardizing personal relationships may have more long-term consequences.

In conclusion, the experiences of SAAs   reflect but also augment the insights of Beyerlein and Hipp's theory. They postulated that engagement is a two-stage process; this study builds on that work by suggesting that it is a 3-stage process. First, individuals need to be willing to participate in a movement, an inclination which is governed by political and moral beliefs. Second, the individual takes an assessment of available options for participation, factoring in perceptions about the risks to themselves and the potential benefits towards those they want to support. The third stage entails choosing an option and participating in the action.

I'm looking for the weirdos: beginnings of a group consciousness

The previous sections discussed the ways that the SAA experience complicates scholarly understanding of how individuals make decisions about their levels of participation in social movement activism, and how controlling images influence these assessments. This section discusses how SAAs coalesce around a progressive SAA identity, forming a group consciousness.

As described earlier in this paper, several respondents described themselves as being labeled as the unusual, eccentric family member or member of their friend circle because of their political interests. So, they look for other SAAs who hold similar views. Madhu M explained: "…when I look for something Indian, I am trying to find like the weirdos, like the South Asian weirdos, who are, you know, radical in their social politics." Amrita K added:

> *"...just being able to see South And, so yeah I think just being able to see South Asian people who are in the nonprofit sphere or doing, just like doing pro bono work, doing things that are not about becoming a doctor, having prestige, becoming an engineer, these really specific paths that most South Asians are told that they have to pick between, I think that's really empowering and really sort of like fueled me into sort of like feel like there is a space for me in this field of social justice and activism."*

Amrita specifically alludes to the controlling images of South Asian Americans as people who doing things like "becoming a doctor, having prestige, becoming an engineer, these really specific paths that most South Asians are told that they have to pick between." As described in a previous section, the controlling images of South Asian Americans function to convince people like Amrita that their only options for professions are those prescribed by U.S. immigration policy and based in class expectations. By choosing a career in the "nonprofit sphere" or "doing pro bono work," Amrita knows that she is placing herself against the controlling image. Finding other South Asians who made a similar choice fights both the South Asian American and the perfect standard activist controlling images. It fights the South Asian American controlling image by making it clear that South Asian Americans can take on activities and professions outside of the image while remaining *real* South Asian Americans. It also fights the perfect standard activist controlling image by illustrating that "there is a space for [her, as a South Asian American], in this field of social justice and activism." Chandy R described a similar path towards his community:

> *"I found my community of South Asians, you know, it's not the community that was all about the sciences, it's not the community that's all about Bollywood, it's a community that is political, it's a community of lawyers and activists, it's a community that I had been searching for…"*

Madhu, Amrita, and Chandy saw themselves as outside the norm of their ethnic communities, not wholly within it. They are looking for people on the fringes of the community, not at its center. Being around others like them introduces the possibility that they could, as Collins describes it, self-define what it means to be South Asian American (Collins 2000). The community that Madhu, Amrita, and Chandy described is SAA, political, and radical. Many of the ways that respondents differentiate themselves from other South

Asians and from what they see as the SAA (more conservative) norm support this idea.

Amrita K, for example, remarked:

> *"I'm not like an outlier and like adding to like…adding to like a whole history of other South Asians that came before me. 'Cause I did definitely feel like a super outlier growing up because my community was definitely like very moderate. Some people were moderate right or moderate left, but it was a lot more conservative community to grow up in, which I now know in retrospect, um, but I definitely, definitely felt like my views are so crazy and out there and I'm really different from people. But I think learning about all of these histories makes me feel like okay **there is a space for you, um, like in this work.**"* [emphasis added by author]

Here, Amrita explained how learning about SAA political history demonstrated that there was a "space" for her, that her views were not "crazy and out there," and that she was not a "super outlier." Instead, learning about SAA history connected her to a new, self-definition of South Asian Americans. This history suggests to her, and others like her, that she is not an aberration within the SAA community, a fear instilled in her from her parents and from the community she grew up around. She was led to believe that the community she grew up around was the norm, and that she was "really different." With the benefit of hindsight and connection to others like her, she can place herself as part of a history of SAA activism. Respondents also described how they tried to connect others to their communities if possible. For example, Githa P explained:

> *"….there's not that many young women that are politicized or open to being politicized among Nepali-Americans that I meet, so when I do get the chance to meet someone who maybe have some of a politicization that I recognize, that I see is fertile or is open to it in some way, I'm immediately like 'You need to go get involved, even if you're not in the area', trying to find ways that they can get involved in different projects."*

Here, Githa P described how she tries to encourage those who show an interest in activism and connect them to a broader activist community. Serena explains that SAAs like her "want

to hold on to some aspects of like a nontoxic non-patriarchal South Asian cultural identity, they're looking for spaces I think to do that. And so, I really think like people are finding other ways." Finding a community of politically active SAAs makes activist work seem, according to respondents, "more accessible." For example, one respondent described how she would organize with other mothers to attend marches and actions as part of a "South Asian contingent" with their kids, providing an opportunity for them to attend an event that would be difficult or intimidating to navigate on their own.

Some respondents find their community of politically active "weirdos" while trying to build community on their queer identities. Hari F explained this process:

> *"I've slowly started to build a South Asian community. It started with my desire for wanting a more, a larger queer community, and wanting to know more queer South Asians and somehow I found a few people and they introduced me to their friends, and we now have a fairly large group which is pretty cool, but I think we all connected over our queer identities more than our South Asian identities. But the South Asian-ness is also growing, like I respected that, because I think we're all kind of coming to it together."*

Hari testifies that in her search for a queer community, she found queer South Asians who, like her, deviated from norms of both South Asian American hetero-centric and queer white-centered communities. Other respondents similarly described looking for queer community first and being pleasantly surprised to discover a queer SAA community. These respondents already bucked the pan-SAA norm in terms of their sexuality, and in the process of finding their queer community also found a political and ethnic community.

Respondents spoke about organizations that aim to build group consciousness among progressive SAAs, including Gandhi Camp, Bay Area Solidarity Summer (BASS), Desi Blue, Subcontinental Drift, Parivar, SAALT, and Desis for Progress. In their efforts to

develop group consciousness and collective identity among South Asians, these groups attempt to establish a group understanding and self-conception of SAA activists as a cultural category. To do so, BASS teaches its participants "the 100+ year history of South Asian activism in the U.S." (Bay Area Solidarity Summer 2020). Similarly, the Berkeley South Asian Radical History Walking Tour gives participants a historical overview of SAA activism. In addition, they establish a norm conducive to engagement in social activism. BASS, for example, bills itself as a "social justice leadership camp for SAAs", and part of its goal is for participants to "learn concrete skills for creating real-world change" (Bay Area Solidarity Summer 2020). They also seek to connect participants with a multi-generational community of peers and mentors (Bay Area Solidarity Summer 2020), which by definition helps establish for participants the idea that social activism is actually a valued norm in their community. Speaking about Desis for Progress, Divya remarked:

> *So, I always had this political interest, like as part of my studies and then I had been working directly in that field. So,* ***I didn't really know that I needed this like [pause] space in my life.*** *I was inspired by the depth of knowledge that both the panelists were bringing, and they were South Asian. They were areas that don't really get highlighted as South Asian, like people doing a lot of activist work, people that do, are lawyers but doing like pro-...not pro-bono, but more like public um public good work, and things like that. [emphasis added by author]*

Here, Divya described how Desis for Progress creates a space where she can meet other people like her, people who are interested in activism and public work. These organizations make explicit their interest in progressive politics. DFP puts "for progress" in its name, which creates a signaling effect for interested individuals. Similarly, BASS asks participants in its application to identify "one way you've challenged or taken action against racist, sexist, classist, ableist, homophobic, or other kinds of oppressive behavior" (Bay Area Solidarity

Summer 2020). Though it is not listed as a qualifying factor, and it is unclear how many people they actually end up turning away because of the answer to the question, its presence in the application form suggests that being in the in-group requires having challenged oppressive systems in some shape or form.

Not every organization that the respondents described focuses specifically on radical or progressive politics. Gandhi Camp, as described by one respondent, focuses more on "care and awareness and kindness for other people" that "informs a lot of [the respondent's] social justice-based thinking and beliefs." TriKone, an organization for queer Desis, was described by a respondent as more insular and less interested in politics. However, many of the organizations mentioned by respondents present a model of ethno-racial identity as derived from radical politics.

Race beyond SAA

Another way that SAAs navigate controlling images is by linking their fates to other racialized groups, rather than remaining solely within the confines of the controlling image of SAAs. In his research on linked fate, Dawson (1994) focuses on how Black Americans see their fates interlinked with each other, regardless of class. SAA respondents to this study also saw their fates as interwoven with others, but demonstrate two key differences: 1) they conceived of their fates as linked not only to their own group, but also to groups outside of SAA identity and 2) they focused more on how their fates linked with those who are racialized in a negative way, especially Black, Muslim, and Sikh Americans.

Previous studies (Dawson 1994; Gay et al. 2016) suggest that individuals feel bound to other members of a group in a positive way - in other words, that if the group suffers, we suffer, and if the group succeeds, we succeed. Binoy J, who moved to the US from India, had

initially considered going back to India to work on the causes she cared about. However, graduate studies revealed to her the ways in which the same systems of oppression (for her, displacement) operated in the United States. Her personal experience and that of her family draws her towards social justice work. She explained:

> *"...my family is actually from Pakistan, both maternal and paternal side, so yeah in some ways I'm third generation of displaced people. I really understand what it's like to have, you know, forces sort of make life unmanageable and affordable and livable for you. So I found myself feeling very compelled and invested in the work...my family story is very much tied to economic well-being and being able to find belonging and stability in a community in that way, so economic justice is definitely attached to as an issue, but it was both like finding you know, anchors of these issues in my personal life... I saw my parents try to build their lives in their 40s so it's interesting and meaningful to me."*

Here, Binoy J described how her identity as the "third generation of displaced people" connects her to those in the US, South Asian and other, especially in her local area, who experience the same types of displacement.

Other respondents saw a link between the histories of SAA struggles and Black freedom movements. Amrita K, for example, cites brown and Black solidarity in Harlem, the Dalit Panther movement, and the Ghadar party in the Bay Area. Binoy J saw links between police brutality in the United States and government-sponsored violence in Punjab:

> *"In some ways the government-sponsored violence and the impunity with which the police seem to operate is very familiar to me. It sounds like to me exactly what the Punjab police scenario was against Sikhs in India. You know of course we didn't have the history of slavery and all of that, the compounded oppression of black people is something I think I never can fully grapple with no matter how much I try to study and learn, but it triggers, especially all the killings of young black men, it's very triggering for me in a way that compels me to be involved, so whenever I can, like protests, I'm there, if there are conversations that need to be had with my family, I'm all for them, like those are the places where I sort of choose to dive in."*

Similarly, Henrietta M mentioned that her experience with the police was shaped by post-9-11 dynamics, where the police became to her this "scary" entity "because they like surveilled you and they followed you." She also had an early childhood experience of seeing a "racist" harass her mother, and the police being unhelpful, saying that 'it's free speech' even though "he had threatened to punch her in the face." This experience led her to be more sympathetic to Black Lives Matter because she saw "parallels" with her own experience.

However, in the context of SAAs in a group membership with Black Americans, the relationship has at times been negative. Amrita K, for example, noted that part of what she wanted to accomplish in her volunteer work was to educate fellow SAAs about how the SAA community has benefited from anti-Blackness. In this case, it seems clear that she did not want to do so in order to promote anti-Blackness, but to alert fellow SAAs about their privilege in the US context. In a similar sense, Chandy R voiced concern about:

> *"the idea that we are victims…and that is probably true, but there there's this desire to say that we're greater victims than these other people that also historically been the subject of uh oppression. I do not care for that way of like comparing suffering. Um, and you know, this idea that we have to, that everyone's fighting for a piece of the pie, and there's…I've gone to uncles in the community and kind of old school political leaders and said why are we all fighting for pieces, for like crumbs, we're all fighting for a slice of the pie we're getting and their answer is 'well that's what's available', my response is always, 'well why don't we ask for a bigger slice…why do we have to be limited? Why do we allow the people in charge to limit what we have access to?'"*

Here, Chandy R worries that SAAs are building their group consciousness at the expense of other minoritized populations; that minoritized communities pit themselves against each other to divvy up resources among each other, rather than fighting together against a white supremacist state and society. Kunal P similarly expressed concern that trying to separate out South Asian communities in the U.S. by ethnicity or religious affiliation would "pit people

against each other" and "create all these new boxes, uh, that make them fight over the crumbs" instead of focusing on "the source of the problem." These respondents aim to focus on broader racial structures, rather than on protecting their subgroup.

In practice, perceptions of a linked fate with separate and overlapping groups manifest themselves in participant action. Respondents describe working with other SAAs as "allies," in support of Southeast Asian organizations, pro-Palestinian rallies, Black Lives Matter and more. They organize with racial justice groups, labor organizing, and more.

Conclusion to Results Section

Interviews with 26 SAA respondents across the United States reveal the dynamics that they encounter when pursuing activism. SAAs combat two controlling images. The first image, the politically apathetic SAA professional, pulls individuals away from activism. The second image, of the unattainable, "perfect standard" activist, suggests to many that whatever activities they do participate in will never be enough. These images work together to alienate SAAs who seek to participate in social movements. In response, SAAs who are interested in activism find their own shades of gray between complete non-participation and the "perfect standard" activist, redefining the concept of activism for themselves. They seek and often form their own networks with others who share both their passions and facets of their identities. Additionally, they recognize the links between their own history of racialization in the U.S. and that of other racialized groups and seek to build cross-racial solidarity. Overall, the interviews suggest that SAAs bring elements of identity negotiation, tactical innovation and community building to social movements.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study began by asking three questions:

- What can South Asian American experiences reveal about the nature of collective identity, controlling images, social movements and racialization in the United States?

- Why and how do South Asian Americans participate in anti-racist social movements?

- How does South Asian American identity motivate or inhibit social activism?

I find that South Asian Americans battle two controlling images – the politically apathetic South Asian American and the perfect standard activist – which work together to discourage participation in activism. Both controlling images set up ideal types that contradict each other. The perfect South Asian American is racialized to stay away from politics and to focus instead on money and status. The perfect activist is presented as so active, and especially so focused on high-risk activity, that given the racialization of South Asian Americans and the structural impediments in their way, becomes an impossible ideal to achieve. Therefore, retaining their identity as South Asians and participating in activism become mutually exclusive. South Asian Americans who participate in activism navigate these controlling images by redefining activism in their own terms. They also calculate what types of activities they will participate in based on their understanding of the risks, potential community or familial pushback, their positionality as compared to other participants, and the potential effectiveness of the action itself.

This study contributes to social movement theory, specifically previous literature on biographical availability. South Asian Americans in this study subvert previously understood processes of social movement participation in that they reveal a hidden middle step between being willing to participate and participating in activism. In this middle step, South Asian Americans weigh risk and effectiveness to make not just a binary choice about whether to participate, but also what *type* of activity they will do. The middle step allows South Asian

Americans to find a middle ground between being the ideal type South Asian American and the perfect standard activist. The upside of this finding is that South Asian American experience reveals the main potential entryways into social movement participation, not all of which have to be high-risk and not all of which have to be dictated by white, cis, male, U.S. citizen social movement actors. The downside, however, is that much of the type of activism available to and chosen by South Asian Americans is of a type that is often less valued in social movement spaces and remains largely invisible to scholars of social movements. The implication of this finding is that the current racialization and conceptualization of activism puts South Asian Americans in a perpetual second-tier position in activist spaces

This study also contributes to literature on racialization, specifically on controlling images. It builds on Patricia Hill Collins's theory of controlling images to illuminate a set of controlling images enacted on South Asian Americans and activists in general. Just as Black women are conscious of being exposed to certain common experiences that are different from other groups (Collins 2000), South Asian Americans interested in activism are also aware of living in a different world than non-South Asian Americans and in a different world than South Asian Americans who are not interested in activism. Though systems of power affect Black women in the United States differently than South Asian Americans, and result in different controlling images, the framework that Collins outlines in terms of distancing, collective wisdom, controlling images, and self-definition work in a similar way for South Asian Americans. The controlling image of the politically apathetic, money-focused South Asian American carries hints of both the effects of relative valorization and civic ostracism, as theorized by Kim. Elevating the South Asian American professional as superior reflects

the relative valorization of Asian Americans in general against the relatively lower incomes of Black Americans, ignoring the ways in which, as Prashad points out, selective visa programs have privileged South Asian Americans over Black communities. The controlling image of the politically apathetic, professionally successful South Asian American also shares traits with the model minority myth, which associates virtue and sin with success and failure, respectively. Deviation from the model minority myth "implies not only a moral shortcoming, due to [the immigrant's] own individual failure, but also separates them from the American norm, thereby reinforcing their foreigner status" (Park 2008:136). For SAAs, deviation from the norm similarly separates SAAs from their own community. South Asian Americans interested in activism, especially those that chose to work in a less lucrative field so that they may pursue their interests in social justice, in turn display a moral shortcoming in their desire to deviate from the norm, thereby alienating them from other South Asian Americans. They have also separated themselves from the American norm, which through immigration policy placed them in fields that contribute to the U.S. economy without disrupting the status quo.

This study's findings also suggest that these controlling images change the behavior of South Asian Americans interested in activism, by pulling them away from potential activist activity and/or by devaluing the work that they do accomplish. The findings of this study demonstrate that controlling images not only affect how people outside of the racial group see people within the racial group, but also how those groups see themselves. As discussed in the literature review, Collins notes how social science research has focused on public spheres of political activity, even though private spheres of social life, where many Black women have mounted their resistance efforts, might be just as important (2000). Black

feminist thought also emphasizes the relationships between Black women's oppression and Black women's activism, and how it demonstrates that the matrix of domination and its interrelated domains of power can respond to human agency. The relationship, as theorized in Black feminist thought, is not just about survival but about feeling ownership and accountability (Collins 2000). The experiences of South Asian Americans support the assertion that private spheres of life afford spaces to marginalized communities through which to resist, spaces that social movement scholars would do well to take seriously. Maira first noted in 2001-2003 that South Asian American Muslims often practiced their activism in the smaller, more private spheres of their homes and communities (Maira 2009). The individuals I interviewed for this study would have been around the same age as Maira's interviewees were in 2001-2003 (the time of her study) which suggests that my study charts in part the evolution of activism in the 17-19 years since her study. Respondents in this study, supporting the theoretical framework of Black feminist thought and Maira's initial observation, continue to enact their activism in the private spheres of their lives. These acts can be small in scale, for example having conversations with family and friends or making small lifestyle changes. They can also be larger, e.g. distributing voter guides and encouraging action from their broader networks, serving as educators to the broader community about their cultures, and/or cutting off communication with family members whose political and social views do not align with their own.

This study also suggests that the antidote to controlling images, self-definition, can be found and reinforced by community. South Asian Americans interested in activism face similar challenges to each other; though they may have different experiences which give them different patterns of knowledge, evidence suggests that South Asian Americans have a

group consciousness or collective standpoint. In the case of South Asian Americans, they found counterparts of "weirdos" similarly repelled by the professional, money-focused, politically apathetic South Asian American but also uncomfortable with the ideal of the perfect activist. The parallels are not just theoretical but also evidenced in action. For example, Collins describes the Black women's club movement and other efforts by Black women to provide education on Black culture as a place to "demonstrate the significance of self, change, and empowerment for Black women" and as part of a larger effort towards group survival (2000:216). South Asian Americans similarly find places to express their group consciousness through non-profit and advocacy groups such as Bay Area Solidarity Summer, Desis for Progress, and more. Just as the advocacy, refinement, and dissemination of Black feminist thought helps Black women find points of connection that further social justice projects (Collins 2000) spaces of group consciousness-building can help South Asian Americans interested in activism find other "weirdos."

As the endearment "weirdos" suggests, South Asian Americans face their own version of stigma in participating in social justice projects. As Park notes, the norms around Asian American identity have, in part, a disciplinary function. The punishment for deviating from the norm is alienation from both one's immigrant identity and from one's identity as an American.

Black women find that connecting with other Black women "requires that individuals become 'traitors' to the privileges that their race, class, gender, sexuality or citizenship status provide them" (Collins 2000:37). South Asian Americans find that in some cases, it means turning back on the privileges afforded to them, including their status as a model minority in the U.S. context. In practical terms, this can mean taking a lower-paying job that aligns better

with their values or speaking up against injustices within their own spheres at the cost of their standing within their family and/or their community. In other cases, South Asian Americans find other ways to participate in social activism that do not as directly threaten their jobs or social standing. The South Asian American experience suggests that the choice between perfect activist and perfect South Asian American need not be binary. Building a community is the antithesis of alienation; it blocks the punishment that the norm is supposed to activate. By creating a home in a space that was supposed to keep them at a distance, South Asian American activists mount their own type of resistance.

A few potential limitations hamper this study. First, the majority of respondents are women or queer-identified men, meaning that the perspectives of straight men are underrepresented in this study. In addition, respondents largely identified as left-wing or progressive, which is to be expected given that many of the respondents learned of the study through listservs of left-leaning South Asian organizations. Right-wing and/or Hindu nationalists proliferate the South Asian American community but given that I was raised by Christians – a fact that would be made obvious to fellow South Asian Americans by my name – this group is harder for me to access. Few respondents identified themselves as part of the South Asian diaspora who were born in countries outside of both the United States and South Asia, for example Trinidad/Tobago, Guyana, or Kenya. All respondents were between 23 to 64 years old, meaning that those under 23 and over 65 are not represented. This limitation is extremely important given that those under 23 are growing up while youth in their teens and early twenties are reenergizing previous mobilization efforts, like the gun control movement spurred by survivors of the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida and the climate change movement spurred by leaders such as Greta

Thunberg. Many South Asian Americans over 65 came to the United States as part of the

wave of skilled labor immigration spurred on by the Hart-Cellar Act. Future research could

explore the potential new insights from any number of these populations.

Future research could also explore new sites of group consciousness-building. As

alluded to in the Results section, many organizations, such as Desis for Progress, Bay Area

Solidarity Summer, Gandhi Camp, and Subcontinental Drift, are building a progressive South

Asian American "weirdo" community. Further studies could consider conducting in-depth

ethnographic studies embedded in one or more of these organizations to better understand

South Asian American activist self-definition. This group-consciousness building may look

different depending on the organization's location within the U.S., varying in respect to

region, urbanicity, density of South Asian Americans in the area, and other attributes.

Similarly, future research could explore the construction of South Asian identity in other

diasporic sites worldwide, especially the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United Arab

Emirates.

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