

A Curriculum of Cultural Translation: Desi identities in *American Chai*

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American Born Confused Desi Emigrated From Gujurat House In Jersey Kids Learning Medicine Now Owning Property Quite Reasonable Salary Two Uncles Visiting White Xenophobia Yet Zestful

Now you know your ABCDs.

(Hidier, 2002, p. 108)

Canada prides itself on being a multicultural nation – one with policies at the federal and provincial levels to promote integration, acceptance, and diversity (Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2011). A vital part of Canadian society in the last generation has been members of our society whose parents and relatives were part of a wave of immigration between the 1960s and early 1980s. I grew up in one such first-generation family, with an Indian-born mother and racialized-white Canadian father – one of many people born with what might be called a hybrid desi background in Canada. In fact, I might be part of what many Indo-Canadian adults consider a “desi-generation.” *Desi* is a term “coined by Indian nationals to describe culturally challenged second-generation Indians raised in the U.S.,” and by extension, Canada and Britain (Lahiri, 2000). It is an abbreviation of the Hindi word *pardesi* which means foreigner.

Therefore, like many in my generation, I am acutely aware of my distinct place in our Canadian fabric – one that renders me not quite fully Canadian. Despite being born in Edmonton, Alberta, I am often asked “where are you from?” In many ways, I feel as if I am at the heart of official Canadian multiculturalism by being a visible minority yet simultaneously on the fringes of the white majority. As the result, I am attracted to most things that shed light on, or make light of, the complicated cultural position of desis in Canada. And I am not alone. Comedian Russell Peters, for example, has championed this pastime of peering simultaneously inward and outward at Indo-Canadian culture by bringing his commentary about the complicated terrain of being born to immigrant parents in a Western milieu to comedy clubs, television specials, and movies. He capitalizes on the often humorous “disconnect” between so-called traditional Indian values and Canadian culture to speak to non-Indians and Indians alike. Whether you find it funny or not, his comedy illuminates what it might be like to live as a hybrid citizen – one seemingly in limbo between India and Canada, what Tenuja Desai Hidier calls being an *ABCD*, an *American Born Confused Desi*. There are many are other forms of desi



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comedy and commentary including amateur online videos featuring desi comedians making light of how hybrid cultures are seen by others. These comedians employ historical terminology to reverse the colonial gaze in a comedic context, speaking “back” to India while addressing both desi and non-desi viewers. Some of the more popular examples include the stand-up club *Indian Invasion Comedy: Civilizing the West*, the comedy troupe *Bollywood Shenanigans: I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter Chicken*, and the online video series *Shit White Girls Say to Brown Girls*.

All of this points to a larger cultural conversation. Desis explore what it might mean to be “born confused” by carving out room in Canadian society for a conversation about finding and shaping a hybrid identity amidst all of the cultural chaos, politics of multiculturalism, pains and joys of immigration, and colonial histories back in India which have never left our parents’ and relatives’ minds (for example, many lived through the Indian partition in 1947). The conversation often returns us to the space of a so-called motherland: India.

Many first-generation Indo-Canadians like me have only visited India as tourists but were nevertheless raised to identify with it as the location of “real” origins, values, and traditions. Far from shying away from this seeming paradox, many desis seem to take their hybrid Indianness into what Bhabha (1994) has called elsewhere a Third Space, where personal journeys, translations between cultures, and cultural expressions in media such as music and film unfold. Desi films in particular belong to a genre of “in-betweens” – directed by ex-pats and migrants, filmed in American, British, Australian, and Canadian locations, and situated between the large movie industries of Bollywood and Hollywood. Foremost, desi films are modes of expression and explorations of ways of living as a migrant hybrid citizen – citizens who are invariably caught-up-in, contribute to, and are on a curricular journey within a Third Space framed by Western and Indian cultures (Wang, 2004). These films are on the rise in numbers and popularity, and include titles such as *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), *American Desi* (2002), *American Chai* (2001), *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), *The Guru* (2002), *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), *Mississippi Masala* (1992), and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), to name a few.

Desi films confront representational enunciations of identity– in particular about how one learns to perform and feel desi. As a desi, I ask what it means to stake a claim to a hyphenated identity and, by extension, what the very term “identity” might mean. As such, I (re)search what constitutes hybrid Indo-Canadian identities within Canadian communities. Two research questions ground this project: first, how might we translate the cultural representations put forth in desi films of Indian diasporic communities abroad and here in Canada? Second, in what ways do diasporic films work as a curriculum of living at the interstices of different cultural spaces? To address these questions, I examined three diasporic films in a recent research study: *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Bhaji on the Beach*, and *American Chai*. However, for this paper, I add to the cultural conversation about what it means to be, enunciate, and perform desi subjectivities in the twenty-first century by taking a closer look at just one film, *American Chai*. I look to diasporic movies as a transnational curriculum inquiry project, a journey through third spaces, marked by what Wang (2004) eloquently calls “movement simultaneously inside and outside” Indian and “Western” cultures.

Educational research has absorbed dynamic discussions taking place within cultural studies about hybridity as a productive “third space” (beyond binaries of colonizer and colonized) that is “interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative” (Bhabha, 1994), where curricular questions about the pervasiveness of totalizing binaries that describe West and East civilizations can be asked (Aoki, 2005). This questioning of essentializing binaries such as colonized versus



colonizer, civilized versus savage, and self versus Other, has been extended beyond academic articles and discourse about academic or literary texts into the realm of popular culture. Films about diasporic Indo –Canadians, –British, and –Americans address our imagined and material boundaries between cultures, the very places where cultural differences can be seen most vividly, and where conflict has historically arisen. Cultural differences at these boundaries is most pronounced as the misrecognition of meanings, values, and signs (Bhabha, 1994). And desi films such as *American Chai* exemplify how the spaces between and among cultures are sometimes viewed as an unbridgeable chasm.

Nevertheless, this film, and others in the genre, conclude with cultural understanding, compromises, and resolutions on the part of their first generation protagonists – and suggest as I argue in the paper, pedagogical ways of negotiating the Third Space (Bhabha, 1994), the “cracks” (Aoki, 2005), or the “interstices” (Asher, 2009a, 2009b), through particular modes of translation that “ensure that the meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha, 1994, p.208). In the words of Henry Giroux (2002), films continue to be curricular on account of being “a compelling mode of communication and form of public pedagogy...that functions as a powerful teaching machine” (p.6). Therefore, I ask what desi films attempt to teach viewers who are both inside and outside this culture about the representational enunciated spaces seemingly located in/between.

To answer this question, I use a methodology that involves examining the narratives put forth in *American Chai* that depict how characters strategize the formation of their multiple identities through a common cultural language inside “multilayered lifeworlds” (New London Group, 1996). More specifically, I look at how culture might be understood in the Third Space as language and performance that is constantly translated by desis such as myself: first generation diaspora living in the West who have transcultural knowledge. Finally, I look to Judith Robertson’s (1995) method of screenplay pedagogy to peer inward at my engagements and re-readings of identifications with and against the films, locating narrative constructions of my identity within this space of (self)-translation.

Quantum (third) spaces as a conceptualization of desi identity

American Chai, directed by Anurag Mehta, is a parody of both college life and Indian culture. It is about a first-generation Indo-American student named Sureel, a college senior who studies music despite telling his traditional, controlling father that he has been enrolled in a pre-med program for the previous three years. Despite being plagued by the spying and over-the-top antics of his cousin Raju, an “FOB” Indian (“fresh off the boat”) who attends the same campus, Sureel tries to live freely, pursuing his dreams. He has mainstream desi friends and roommates that have such nicknames as “Engineering Sam” and “Pharmacy Bob” and who subscribe, even enthusiastically, to the career assigned to them by their parents. Sureel struggles with his attraction to “white girls” and Anglo-Saxon white culture, dating a girl named Jen – a groupie who likes Sureel only for his music. Moreover she fetishizes his Indian roots, wearing a bindi on her forehead and hippie-style Indian-influenced clothing. He is also the leader of a band named *Fathead* that at one point in the film mutinies against him and kicks him out because of his Indian family “baggage.” Jen then dumps him unceremoniously because he is no longer in the band.



This is a turning point for Sureel who begins to contemplate why he resists all things Indian, including the university's Indian student society and its events. His mind is slowly changed about Indian culture through his attraction to another Indo-American student, a science major and Indian dancer named Maya. After forming a new band, *American Chai*, whose musical focus is also a blend of American music styles and Indian influences (but moreso than *Fathead*), Sureel finally tells his father about his music career as part of a desire to be recognized for who he really is, and also to win the support of his love interest. His father rejects his son, hitting him for lying for four years as he paid tuition for a music degree instead of a pre-med program. Sureel relies on the possibility of national recognition for his music in a large competition – a typical “battle of the bands” – to aid in justifying his music career to his family. In a moment of recognition initiated by Sureel's mother, who finally speaks meaningfully in the film about wanting to see her son play and do what he loves, Sureel's father relents and attends the performance. He sees his son's talent, and recognizes that his own life has been full of sacrificed dreams gone unfulfilled and realizes he does not want the same for Sureel.

Sureel's life narrative is not unique. Many curriculum theorists have explained their personal journeys, others' experiences of migration, the condition of being born hybrid, and what it might be like to live in diasporas, as part of a collectively understood experience of existing in Third Spaces (see works by curriculum theorists Ibrahim, 2008; Ng-A-Fook, 2009; and Wang, 2004). The vocabulary of “Third Spaces” and “hybridity” are common in postcolonial studies. Homi Bhabha originally used the term to point towards the mutable spaces between subject-positions where disruptions in hegemonic practices of colonialism could occur. Hybridity, for Bhabha (1994), is a liminal Third Space, “the cutting edge of translation and negotiation” (p. 38). Although this space is understood in different ways by different theorists within the international field of curriculum studies, in this paper I offer a perspective of Third Spaces that labours to unpack the experience of desis like Sureel and potentially other Indo-Canadians growing up in a Westernized milieu with similar and different familial and cultural influences.

In an age of transnational self-identifications, members of diasporas construct their identities and outward self-representations without national and physical borders in the way. The popularity of diasporic movies point to the fact that hyphenated identities have currency – that “hybridity, diaspora, and post-coloniality are now fashionable and even marketable terms” (Hutnyk, 2000, p.118 in Giardina, 2003). Public displays of hybrid identities make the representations of Third Spaces from the “margins,” sites of resistance (hooks, 1990) far beyond the historical desire to be allowed to move from the colonized periphery to the colonial metropole – that is, beyond a desire merely to be seen and acknowledged. These films speak to a different reality – that hybridity is about mobilizing fluid identities, demanding recognition, and making the diasporic self available to be reached-into and explored (Ibrahim, 2008). Many ways for understanding Third Spaces already exist – both in cultural studies and in education. Ted Aoki (2005) opens up a dialogue about the possibilities of inhabiting multiple spaces, describing the simultaneity of living in dual spaces in a philosophical rather than physical universe to ask what lies between curriculum-as-planned and curriculum-as-lived in the pedagogical space. Using a technique of “cracking” words apart, Aoki reveals how the split within words teaches us ways in which the graphical (writing) informs the ethnos (ethnic identity). He arrives at a formulation of identity through a mechanism of identification inseparable from the act of writing, just as Bhabha (1987) did in his influential paper, “Interrogating Identity.”



Nina Asher (2003) similarly argues for us to move past binaries of “self” and “other” toward “interbeing” as a form of self-reflexive pedagogy. Working in the field of multicultural education, she questions why non-Western representations within the academy still remain marginal – for example, the study of post-colonial literatures versus Western literatures in English departments. Asher’s (2009) work with Indian-American students is an effort to “decolonize” texts so that social transformation can follow. She looks at the effects of colonization in educational contexts – in texts, in self-representations, and as recursive identity formations at the boundaries between cultures. A consciousness about the self’s hybrid status extends into community spaces, where people strive to move beyond binaries of self and other towards the self-reflexive pedagogy of “interbeing” that draws upon Thich Nhat Hanh’s concept of “mindfulness” – a way of being acutely aware of the self in the world (p. 238). Also looking at the borderlands between cultures in the educational context, Awad Ibrahim (2008) investigates the role of Third Spaces in theorizing lived-experiences of students in Ontario classrooms. He describes third spaces as “organic,” because they are “historically situated and partially unconsciously executed” (p. 240). The simultaneity of positions is a complicated experience of “being assigned *and* taking up both ‘continental *and* diasporic African’ identity” (p. 242). This ambivalent process leaves the diaspora with a cultural identity assigned to it, absorbing that new identity, and reproducing it in complex acts of translation.

Therefore, in what follows, I ask how movies might further our understanding of the concept of hybrid Third Spaces through the stories they tell as potential sites of cultural translations. Homi Bhabha’s (1994) original concept placed culture within a framework of ongoing acts of translation. Each individual act of translation is an effort to create place and meaning in a continuum of experiences between/within multiple cultures. A film might be thought of as a “freeze frame” in a moment of cultural translation. The translation act is both linguistic (literal translations between languages) and cultural (the cultural reinvention of self in new spaces – like the Indian who presents herself differently when abroad, bringing a translated version of “India” to others through self-representation). This translation along multiple trajectories is the *ambivalence* of hybridity that he explains in relation to mimicry by the colonized, the “colonial double” (p.86). As well, mimicry is historically strategic in the curricular ways it is performed as a threat to colonialism:

...the excess of slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*) does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed in an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence. By ‘partial’ I mean both ‘incomplete’ and ‘virtual’. (p. 86, original emphasis)

This state of ambivalence today, for diasporas, can be seen in the occupation of multiple contradictory spaces at once by a member of the diaspora. The Western milieu in which the diasporic individual lives, and the residues of a “home” culture learned in the diaspora (Indians born in the West who have never seen India but still identify with it somehow) constitute these contradictory but simultaneously inhabited spaces. The diasporic subject might carry within her the histories of colonialism, the feeling of being an imposter, but not just in relation to the colonizer but *all the time*, since there is no “home” to go back to and no answer to that commonplace question, “where are you *from*?” Desi films therefore necessarily call attention to



uncertain cultural futures, including possible losses and/or transformations of (m)other tongues and Indian traditions as they become less recognizable over generations *as Indian*.

Different theories that take up the spatial and cultural multiplicities of third spaces, specifically those which address the possibilities of inhabiting many spatial/cultural positions simultaneously, bring me to how I see third spaces (see Beck 2009; Soja 1996; Young 2009). I would like to propose here a *quantum* view of third spaces. The fluidity of cultural enunciations reminds me of the increasingly theoretical and interpretive developments in the field of quantum physics over the last century. Consider Planck's (1900) theory that light is emitted in packets not waves, a concept expanded upon by Einstein who described light as being made up of particles in 1905. In 1926, Max Born attempted to resolve light's inherent paradox by proposing that the wave function of electrons represents the *probability* of their presence in a particular location. These discoveries began the pervasive questioning of a causal universe. For example, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle (1927) showed that both the velocity and position of particles could never be determined at once because the act of attempting to measure position changes the velocity and vice versa. Thus, we might consider an analogy here between quantum physics and the concept of third spaces as a site of enunciation. Bohr's Principle of Complementarity in physics puts it most clearly: an independent reality in the ordinary physical sense can neither be ascribed to the phenomenon nor the agencies of observation. There is no resolution to the fact that a causal universe is undermined completely by the fact that the involved position of an observer changes subatomic reality. Similarly, one might ask if the cultural observer, like the physicist, can ever be exempt from such an involved position.

So how might the idea of quantum physics be used to reread third spaces in relation to diasporic films such as *American Chai*? Foremost, it helps to structure a concept of identity transnationally – one that remains fluid on account of the influences of intergenerationality and movements across borders. For example, Indio-Canadians perform different acts of identification in their daily lives with and against Canadian culture and Indian culture simultaneously. The same applies for characters in diasporic films, for each specific scene, and for the entire film itself. The complicated terrain of multiple identifications is closely tied to the representations that precipitate from them. For example, my reading of a book about diasporic Indians, or watching a film, changes the way I act in the world as an Indo-Canadian. This is regardless of whether I accept or reject what I read, see, or consume. Each film, scene, character, or utterance might also be considered a single act of representation as well, depending on one's perspective. The diagram below depicts some of the ways an observer (whose identity is necessarily wrapped-up in acts of viewing and subsequent self-representing) might be part of quantum (third) spaces:



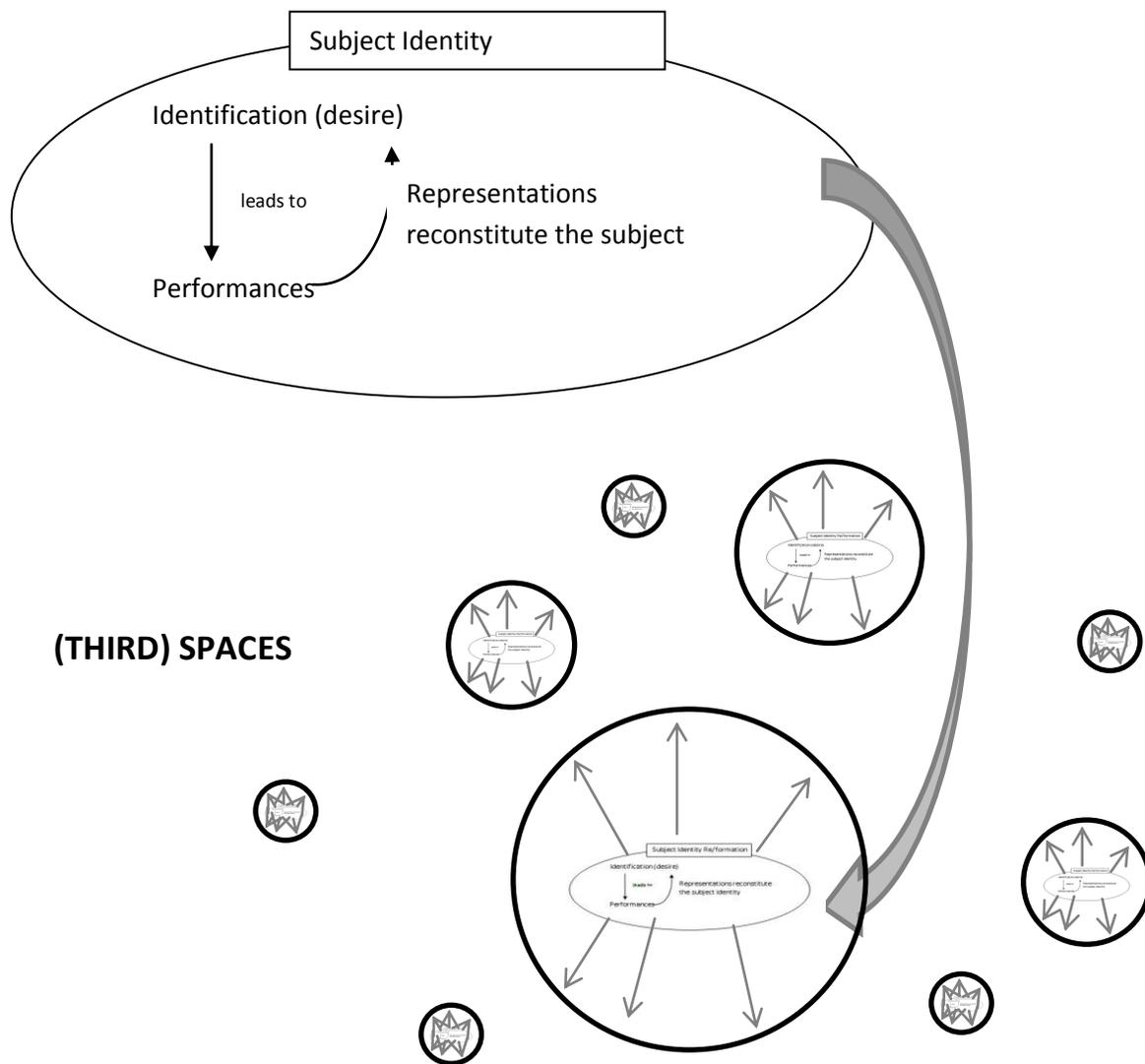


Figure 1: A conceptualization of quantum (third) spaces in three dimensions. Within each circle is a concept of identity in which representations are the product of constant identifications and resulting desires to re-identify, change the object of identification, or reject it. Those representations are pushed to the outside, to the “shell” or the outer perimeter of the circle and it is what people see – whether as films, as writings, as pictures or any other form of representation or self-representation.

I call these spaces of identification and representation quantum (third) spaces – with the bracketing of (third) to acknowledge the original concept of third spaces while offsetting its potential reading as consecutive to possible “first” and “second” spaces (homelands of India and Canada, for example). The fact that the language of this alternate space has taken the name “third spaces” is not meant to imply hierarchy nor a blending of firsts and seconds, but rather an alternate place from which to speak.

The representations pushed to the outside after each moment of individual identification (shown by the arrows within each circle) are a way of thinking about the things we see and consume – whether they are YouTube videos about desi culture, t-shirts, movies, books, or poetry. We can produce, recognize, and consume simultaneous representations at once. My understanding of (third) spaces includes the existence of several spaces at the same time, in varying dimensions in 3D space. This is an attempt to break free – allowing me to think of (third) spaces as both places and the spaces between places (removing the necessity of positionality). Hybrid cultural identities do not volley from one space to another (India/Canada, for example), emotionally or physically. Being in a (third) space includes experiencing constant change within oneself, with multiple contradictory and simultaneous feelings of belonging/not belonging. The only theory to which I kept returning to explain this simultaneity of feelings and experiences was quantum theory, where it is both possible and probable for an entity to be two or more places at the same time.

We can look at diasporic films in relation to instantaneous encounters and fleeting moments of cultural enunciation that exist only for a moment and are gone again. They can be understood as sites of fragmentation where a person’s identification results in a single representation, a single utterance *within a film*, pushed outward from the inner space of identification to become the “shell” of the circle that people see and consume in a single scene. Diasporic films *as a whole* could also be understood as fragmented sites. One circle could be a whole film that includes multiple identifications and representations all put “out there” for consumption. In the process, audiences are able to see translations (some lost, some incoherent), journeys made or not made, exiles unable to return, and diasporas devoid of a motherland – all at once in a particular kind of (third) space we call a single film. We also bring our own prior experiences to the viewing, each walking away with different perspectives of what a film might be “about.”

Different circles imply that (third) spaces can be a number of things, all of which are evolving and shifting. They can be referential – a circle that emerges from a moment of identification to be another circle, another (third) space – and we see this in real life with fads, knock offs, movies similar to other movies, t-shirts that copy pictures logos from other cultural artifacts, etc. Thus, Bhabha’s concept of culture being referential, or the idea that the subject can become the “other of itself,” is not lost. The frames of reference in a quantum (third) spaces are always shifting, as well. One circle might be the translation of another (in the sense Bhabha writes about – as imitation, copy, transformation). But the originary object is fleeting and gone in the next instant. Unlike in Bhabha’s theory, however, the originary object does exist, just in another time. In quantum theory, the past and present can co-exist, and we see this in cultures which try to hold onto values and traditions held deeply for generations, alongside change in modern society.

In terms of a curriculum of cultural translation, the idea of translations between cultures linguistically as well as the movement of peoples (translations across geographies) can also be



read through the concept of particles in space. Considering Aoki's attention to the spaces "between," a whole sphere in Figure 1 is free to move in all sorts of spaces – in cyberspace, in real space, across borders, and among different audiences. Identifications and representations move between cultures (bicultural or multicultural); the particle lacks fixity as it translates across space and time (generations).

What does *not* get said or represented is also key in this conceptualization of (third) spaces. Trinh Minh-ha (1999) talks about this in relation to the inner space of films: "What exists in a film, for example, between two images? What happens in the interval? The question mark is huge here, for every one of us would come up with a different response" (p. 201). I believe that this space of *possibility* is important. The gaps, spaces where *no* articulations have been made, are also spaces of limitless possibilities. However, I cannot attempt to account for what exists there. After all, the circles move through space and time, vacating more spaces as they move, allowing for more articulations of hybrid (third) spaces to emerge.

Watching American Chai

As stated earlier in the paper, I used Robertson's (1995) screenplay pedagogy as a methodology to observe and analyse structures and elements in the narrative of *American Chai*. In its original use, screenplay pedagogy is a technique whereby films are used as "vehicles to provide insight into the making of knowledge and meaning in primary teaching...focused on how people learn to think as teachers" (p. 27). Robertson (1995/1997) looks at how bachelor of education students become attached to, and read themselves against, particular representations of teachers they view in Hollywood films. In this research, my goal was to develop understandings of the way hybrid communities are conceived in a film like *American Chai*, and by extension in multicultural societies like Canada. I asked how representations in/as films are implicated in identity formation for the characters onscreen, and of diasporic communities as a whole. I specifically looked at how the protagonist, Sureel, and his journey achieved particular significance for me by remaining mindful of how the identity-building process for members of the Indian diaspora onscreen is part of shaping my own, and perhaps by extension others'.

When watching *American Chai*, I collected initial observations through journaling. I watched the film several times, taking note of, and interpreting, the elements of plot and narrative, and scene-specific elements such as the characters' dress, choices of music, set locations, and particular uses of language (Hindi or English). To answer my initial research questions put forth at the start of this article, I paid particular attention to three categories of thought as I documented my interpretations:

1. How the characters' hybrid identities are shaped in Third spaces (as representations outwardly conveyed; translations and/as movements in space-time).
2. How desi and immigrant characters in diasporic communities are portrayed through these representations.
3. How I respond to being "made" as desi through representations in *American Chai*.

The third point involves a self-reflective practice of considering myself watching the films (observing myself observing a film). I am most concerned with this aspect of the analysis in its relevance to screenplay pedagogy with its attention to the way identities are formed through the film viewing process. Undoubtedly, my sense of self as desi before watching the film is not the



same as after. As I identify with or against the characters in the films, I form new modes of understanding and representing myself on account of the experience of viewing the movies.

My viewing notes for *American Chai* began with a simple observation: the movie's title is hybrid. It reminds us that this is an *American* film first, and a blend of Indian cultures second – a *chai*, or tea made of mixed spices. The opening sequence of the film further reinforces this when characters are introduced. We meet Sureel, whose name appears to be a double reference, first to the film (Su/reel), and to the possible spaces of Indian hybrid identity (Sur/real) where a desi from suburban America would be able to live the fantasy of going to music school in college without his parents finding out. The concept of name-labels is carried even further, when we meet Sureel's best friend, Engineering-Sam, the typical Indian good-girl named Maya, and the ridiculous Raju – a caricatured immigrant whose knowledge about American girls is derived exclusively from American TV (bikinis and loose sexual morals). However, instead of being mere caricatures of desis and immigrant Indians throughout the movie, the characters (including their names) use parody to point to some real issues. The parents are never given comedic names. Sureel's father and mother often use Hindi phrases to address their son, especially when talking about arranging his marriage to a "nice Gujarati girl." As well, I am struck by the seriousness and common sense tones of the parent's concerns. In one scene, when the parents are at an Indian party, all of the other parents of medical school and engineering children describe their kids as studious and serious. We see contrasting moments of these students drinking, dancing, and making out. Sureel's parents' fears about their son are articulated at this party when they claim he is probably out with the ladies, doing something stupid. We see, however, that Sureel is at home in his dorm room alone, playing Indian classical music on his sitar. Sureel wishfully speculates, "if only my father knew how much his record collection influenced me." The film thus presents a discord between the parents' worries and assumptions about their desi children and the reality of what their children do while away at college.

I feel that this movie, whose plotline is easy enough to follow, asks serious curricular questions about what it means to have a hybrid identity. On one level this is "the old story of an immigrant [Sureel's father] who has worked long and hard so that his eldest son can reap the benefits of life in America" (Brussat & Brussat, 2002). Jeffrey Anderson (2002), in *Combustible Celluloid*, points out the film's release "right on the heels of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* as another story about a youngster who longs to live his life against the wishes of his traditional parents – a fairly old story." Lawrence Van Gelder of the *New York Times*, still referring to the film as a "Timeless Tale with an Indian spin," is more sympathetic. He points out how the film casts a "sometimes satiric eye on the elders and their ways but also on college students and their rites. Mr. Mehta makes merry with the sociology of the subject and has the courage and originality to let the ending grow from character rather than cinematic convention" (p. 1).

Indeed, the opening sequence of *American Chai* appears to introduce a theme central to Indian literature and film that is not merely a rehashing of other cultural coming-of-age tales. This theme is the concept of Indians as imposters. I am reminded of a thematically different American film which came out in the same year, entitled *The Guru* (2002) featuring a fake Indian spiritualist living in America who makes a living as a sex guru. This film parodies the culture of self-help, yoga culture, and the kind of escapist solutions provided by Deepak Chopra in his spiritual-health books targeted at middle-aged, middle-class Americans. The idea of Indian as an imposter is not new. V.S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) is a similar tale of an Indian who rises to fame as a fake guru and becomes wealthy. *American Chai*'s filmic and



narrative plot works on the same premise – that the Indian is an imposter – a faker of white culture and of white tastes, a modern twist on Bhabha’s (1994) concept of the mimic man. Sureel’s “real life” takes place away from home, at his college campus where he does not have to be Indian at all. It is only his family “baggage” (in the words of his *Fathead* band mates) that haunts him. He can discuss the merits of white girls over Indian girls with his roommates, revitalizing the concept of Indian male sexuality for an American audience.

Sureel’s efforts to go incognito begin in childhood on the playground when his friends ask him if he is Jewish or Christian (since everyone is one or the other in the neighborhood). They press him for details, “Are you Negro? What tribe are you from?” He declares as a kid, then, that all he wants to be is “like everyone else.” Thus for Sureel, through his youth and young adult life, the project of blending-in necessarily involves a denial of Indian heritage or its use in propelling self-interests – such as the invention of the band *Fathead* (no Indian name there!) which writes and performs Indian-influenced fusion music. Only during Sureel’s emergence as a desi – a confronting of his hybrid roots which forms the main plot device of the film, does he name his band *American Chai*. I noted when viewing this film that “American” necessarily precedes “Chai” in this formulation. The Indian in the film has to self-declare, as many second-generation youth in different cultures do, saying, “I’m an American first!” The distance between his family home and college life, and the efforts Sureel takes to remove one from the other (changing his dress, staging his dorm room, letting his dad fantasize about a nonexistent career) serve to amplify the imposter status of the “Indian in New Jersey” – the Indian amongst whites.

This characterization of desi Indians as faking-it, combined with the common victim-hero trope of second-generation immigrant characters in films, gives this movie a sense of internal placelessness. More specifically, Sureel’s life is volleyed between his attraction to Jen, the hippie, Indian-clothes clad groupie, and the supposedly “meaningful” attraction to Maya, the “good Indian.” He also swings between home and college, stage, and dorm room, and the identities of desi and imposter (including his efforts to distance himself from Raju). This element of placenessness seems to capture the feeling of being lost between two worlds as a desi youth. While the disconnection became a parody of parents, their beliefs, and “FOB” immigrants, the struggle to articulate the self against the trope of the “proper” immigrant emerges as the major plot device. No doubt, the film is about a minority-becoming – a finding of the “self” or emergence without a model, what educational scholar Susan Huddleton Edgerton (1996) calls “translation without a master.” The seemingly aimless quality of the film’s spatial organization – the bouncing plot that takes place between free college life and strict home space – actually felt to me to encapsulate the very real struggle to find a hybrid identity. Sureel doesn’t know what it means to be a desi with the desires he has, the feelings of rejection towards Indian culture and its seemingly outdated or clumsy traditions. One of his attempts to articulate this is at the Indian-American academic student conference in the film where he speaks to other desis, encouraging them to promote Indian culture, not lose sight of traditions, and to remember the value of Indian fine arts. He cultivates a new sense of being Indian through participating in desi student events. Even though the film wraps up in a predictable way – through Sureel’s partial return to Indian values (the most he has ever felt in his life), and acceptance on the parts of his parents – I felt that the inconsistencies, lags, and B-movie acting actually contributed to the lost feeling and guilt about rejecting some Indian values and practices that many desis, including



myself, have felt directly. The sense of placelessness became a purposeful element rather than something to be critiqued as a cinematic weakness of Anurag Mehta's debut film.

A Temporary Analysis: Cultural disc(h)ords and melodrama

Sureel's character functions as the quintessential melodramatic victim and hero. The trope of melodrama, a common Hollywood cinematic motif, is employed in this film to make a moral statement about two things: the onus of desi youth not to abandon their Indian roots, and the responsibility of Indian parents to become part of the American melting pot of cultures and accept their children's career and love choices.

Throughout the film, Sureel is portrayed as a victim of cultural circumstances: it is not his parents' fault that they are immigrants but they just "don't get it" about the fact that he is "American." This is articulated by Sureel himself in the opening lines of the film where he narrates over and above the pastoral neighborhood scene, "I was born here so *I* am American. My parents were born in India..." Writing about American film, Linda Williams (1998) writes that within the mode of melodrama, characters are tested in relation to their "moral legibility" (p. 52), and that the task of protagonists is to "put forth a moral truth in gesture and to picture what could not be fully spoken in words" (ibid.). *American Chai* makes this its primary project – to unravel the struggle of a student who is faced with moral challenges on account of circumstances beyond his control (being born desi) and who triumphs through gesture, through the ultimate act of showing his unforgiving and traditional family that his quest to become a musician has been a worthwhile life endeavor.

As well, the structure of melodrama is meant to "recognize and regain a lost innocence" (p. 61) of its youthful characters. This is the case for Sureel, whose life of lying and deception to his parents is juxtaposed with recurring and often elaborate ways for him to be true to himself – as a musician, as a "regular American" high school student, in his tastes in movies and friends. He is victimized by cultural circumstances but is portrayed as on a journey to reveal himself fully to the world for who he is, perhaps regaining the lost innocence he has had to give up on account of needing to lie. Maya helps Sureel reveal his "moral worth...to the audience and... to the other characters of the film, in the course of the narrative" (ibid.). This revelation takes on complex dimensions. Instead of a shedding of Indian culture and full absorption of his so-called "American" tastes – a heroic triumph over the "oppression" of Indian culture – Sureel instead experiences a partial return to his childhood when Indian values and morals were impressed upon him by his parents. But this return is only made possible by a love interest. The film needs Sureel to fall in love with a desi girl, or else the regaining of lost innocence cannot be achieved. Sure enough, Maya fits the bill. She is a science student, beautiful, obedient to her parents, and looking for a desi boy to date. Sureel is the unconventional boyfriend, but one who needs rescuing. Thus, Maya lays down the groundwork for the moral legibility we seek in Sureel. His character is not altogether likeable when he is a liar and defiant son, wasting his father's money on college. His rescue by Maya provides him a model upon which to lay his own newfound morals, and a character whose self-assuredness and moral strength guide him through the difficult journey of revealing his true career desires to his parents.

Looking at the filmic structures through screenplay pedagogy, I note that the separation of spaces (different scenes, different locations) for the parents and the college life helps to situate Sureel's struggle within the closed family dynamic. He only has to confront one space. As well, his parents have redeeming and forgivable characteristics. The father's concern that Sureel



cannot be a “Michael Jackson” and that the American music scene does not have room for Indian artists in the mainstream, are legitimate concerns. More profoundly, it is easy to be struck by Sureel’s father’s brutal honesty about his own dreams lost on account of immigrating. He sacrificed his life to own a business and provide for his children. His revelations are part of the darker, sad parts of immigration. The father’s depth in these scenes makes Sureel’s struggle to overcome the stresses of cultural hybridity more real, and more painful. He is at risk of hurting his parents legitimately by choosing a trivial music career.

Thus, the function of melodrama – of the victim/hero overcoming cultural restrictions to earn a new identity (that he forges anew without a model), is deeply entrenched in the process of cultural translation. In a reading of identity that takes into account representational strategies pushed outward through identification and desire, Sureel occupies multiple (third) spaces profoundly. He is a different desi youth at home at his parents’ house than he is at college. And his “white” desi American identity at the beginning of the film is not the same (third) space as his newfound return to a more innocent, “true” Indian-American identity at the end. His creation of complex, contradictory (third) spaces which he occupies unclearly (to himself) is the ambivalent curriculum of cultural translation in relation to his parents and to the audience. To use common social studies terms about multiculturalism, the film might champion a “melting pot” ideal for the parents (we wish them to just “get with it”!) but a “mosaic” ideal (a return to cultural “roots”) for Sureel. The translation message thus works in two directions, implying that there is a cultural equilibrium to be found. The return to innocence experienced by Sureel is matched by newfound progressiveness of the parents (at least from a Western perspective), to achieve a happy cultural medium and resolution to the plot through the highly conventional “battle of the bands” scene.

This film spoke to me most clearly and (dare I say) “authentically” in relating the cultural aimlessness often felt by desi youth in North America. Sureel’s drifting identity, his clinging onto multiple ambivalent identities, is something many desi youth experience. An older, more mature Sureel who returns to cultural roots (facilitated in part by his playing the sitar and enjoying fusion music already) is also an experience of desis who have made unconventional career decisions. As an adult and part of the first generation of desi youth in Canada, I also often ask, “what kind of *Indian* am I? What kind of Canadian does that make me?” Through the film’s pervasive sense of placeness alongside the project of forging of a cultural path anew, *American Chai* pays deep homage to real curricular experiences of “becoming minoritarian” in a world where there is no guide for desis about how to do so.

Conclusion

A profound desire to cross cultural borders and yet never forget the act of crossing and what was, or might be, left behind, is what propels the characters *American Chai* to test cultural boundaries. The film relies on cultural transgressions initiated by identifications outside the (homogenized) cultural group of “Indian” foremost because Sureel rejects all things Indian until he meets Maya. Returning to the first research question introduced in this paper, we might come to understand the interstices between cultures as spaces fraught with discontent. Indian culture and religion is first presented as a singular “traditional” entity against which all other dynamic identities exist. The film offers us a curriculum that necessarily homogenizes immigrant culture while presenting a multiplicity of possibilities offered to desi youth once that culture has been left behind. However, it is not that simple. There is a return to Indian roots (through this filmic route) – a



translation of cultures that works in multiple directions. We see that elders are respected because Sureel fears hurting the tradition of the Indian family unit and his immigrant parents. In this way, Indian culture interpellates the desi who has transgressed borders to become the “Westernized” Indian. As such, (third) spaces of desi self-identification not only amount to a separation of the self across multiple dimensions (how one might act with their “traditional” Indian family versus one’s actions in front of American friends), but goes further. In the quantum concept of (third) spaces, the contradictory feelings of being American and Indian at once are possible, as are simultaneous temporal and spatial representations of both. Translation occurs as the possibility of “wearing” both identities simultaneously without being restricted to a description of hybridity that is necessarily linear, limited to existing “along-the-way” between Indian and Western cultures. From *American Chai*, we learn that the desi person interpellated by Western culture likewise brings Indian values and culture to the West. Cultural knowledge is shared multidirectionally and simultaneously.

To add to this reading, I return to the second research question which asks how diasporic films work as a curriculum of living at the interstices of different cultural spaces. Importantly, the concept of quantum (third) affords readers curricular opportunities to consider the intertextual function of analysing *American Chai* against desi culture and other desi films. I am reminded of Bakhtin’s (1986) thesis on intertextuality. He explains that “[t]he text lives only by coming into contact with another text (with context). Only at the point of this contact between texts does a light flash, illuminating both the posterior and anterior, joining a different text to a dialogue” (p. 162). This assertion is based on the premise that an utterance in isolation is meaningless without other utterances to contextualize it. I would argue this for both films *and* the desi identities which they create and represent. Diasporic films form part of a genre that creates the myth of a particular type of global citizen. The films are consumed worldwide, occupying different curricular spaces between cultures and generations. This is the terrain Gillespie (1995) explores in her work studying ads that target Punjabi youth in Southall, England. Ads are used to address the desi Punjabi population, creating a particular *kind* of second-generation Punjabi for public consumption – one who conforms to a national (British) view of citizenship but who importantly participates in a kind of aspirational “becoming” as a new kind of cultural citizen in the same space. Similarly, these films ask desi viewers to contemplate their own (third) space positionality. Looking intertextually between films and viewer (the kind of relationship Stuart Hall writes about in his explanation of encoding/decoding), my context as middle-class Indo-Canadian plays into my understanding of the films only decodable through my other acts of media consumption. I “get” the films because I feel they are staging a performance of a certain kind of identity formation in similar filmic vehicles I already identify with and have seen onscreen elsewhere.

In terms of the intertextuality of desi identities in (third) spaces, the formation is outward from the filmic utterance itself. What this creates is a static space and identity that is “Indian” and which remains somehow unchanging because it is “traditional.” *American Chai* features desis created newly through their resistance to these “traditional” Indian values. The theme of transgression necessarily implies a casting-off of home culture and assimilation into an alternate culture (with dangerous implications). Sure enough, *American Chai* puts forth these fears. Sureel’s father relates his real experience of racism and loss on account of immigration. His experiences remind us of the effects of colonialism that still live inside diasporas. Yet the diasporas themselves develop new identities – pushing representations outwards as stores, street signs, temples, and communities emerge in immigrant locales outside India. Desi films create what Appadurai (1990) calls “mediascapes” about such communities:



Mediascapes...tend to be image centred, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places. (p. 9)

Diasporic films are such mediascapes where carefully constructed images of Indian communities abroad become the foundation for an industry which circulates the symbolic ethnicity of an entire generation. Desi films in general take snippets of diasporic realities and fictionalizes them, creating stories around real events that play out in desi families everywhere, thereby universalizing and reinforcing the symbolic function of desis onscreen.

American Chai importantly cracks apart the concept of India as a fixed (cultural) place to offer a translation of Indian cultural identities within the Indo-American diaspora. Seemingly frozen-in-time, Sureel's parents are part of a fictional, static, traditional India. However, the "traditional" India for which the parents have nostalgia and upon whose imagined values they base their parenting, no longer exists. Moving through time and space, the work of identification with a modern India is a difficult challenge for those living in the diaspora who might not have been home for many years. Not only are desi identities thus shaped against and outward from a non-existent traditional India, but we have to recognize the (third) space mobility of *that* India – one which identifies with and against a multitude of global/Western pressures. Perhaps what desi films do best is expose how India has become both an imagined and imaginary place.

Earlier in this paper, I contended that quantum (third) spaces take up the concept of representation on a personal level (identifying with mixed cultural influences and outward self-representation) and through the filmic vehicle (representation on the big screen). They also exist on a national level – as an India (re)shaping itself for public consumption abroad. The choice of parents in this film resides in their pretence that their culture does not transform – that somehow it is immune to working "at both ends of the migration chain" (Watson, 1977, p. 2). This view's roots/routes lie in public media and research that even today writes diasporic communities as always "displaced" from a homeland. The binary of "home" and "abroad" that makes a mythical India the place where so-called "traditional" values reside, keeps diasporas on the periphery of mainstream Western societies. "Diasporic discourse in this context," Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1994) explains, "is strong on displacement, detachment, uprooting, and dispersion – on disarticulation. It is appealing precisely because it so easily lends itself to a strategic disaggregation of territory, people, race, language, culture, religion, history, and sovereignty" (p. 339). Sureel's immigrant parents can be read against this habit of representing immigrant communities abroad as static and unmoving in a way that confounds the real global movements in time and space of Indian culture, products, and people.

I look at the struggles of the Indian diaspora onscreen as representations of a process of *becoming* through the self-representational apparatus of (third) spaces – modes of representation that lack fixity in time (across generations) and space (across countries and continents). Though this might seem like an attempt to universalize the hybrid experience, to reduce it to a single trope, it is not. My response to this film – those things which struck me most, and even my personal identification with and against particular representations of desi identity, are part of what forms my self-representation in the very real diaspora in which I live. My curricular engagement with the film involved learning how I am formed by desi films through the act of



interpretation, and how I might carry new self-formations with each viewing into the world as an Indo-Canadian woman living in Quebec.

Finally, let me address the following curricular question, “why study diasporic films?” These are not films whose stories reinforce allegories of nation-building, nor are they narrations of essentialist paradigms of certain “ethnic” identities. They stand in-between. Even though the body of Indian diasporic films is characterized by a certain racialized group (first and second generation Indians), I challenge the view that the films must represent a particular form of multiculturalism – what Mercer (1994) terms the “burden of representation” (p. 92). These are not films whose task is to represent minority cultures in a strictly positive light in an anti-racist struggle against (white) Western presumptions. Nor do I feel they are meant to speak for communities as a whole. My analysis of *American Chai* is a responses to the act of viewing the film in a single time and place, and this makes the moment of viewing unique not only to me, but to each desi and non-desi viewer alike. These films render both their objects, and viewer subjects, heterogeneous and hybrid in our multiplicity of reactions to filmic representations.

Note

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