"India Shopping": Indian Grocery Stores and Transnational Configurations of Belonging

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This paper is a fragment of a larger ethnographic project titled “India Travels,” which examines the transnational circulation of public cultures – as embodied in texts, images, and commodities – between India and the US. In this project, I trace how some of the conflicts and contestations about culture occurring in the Indian subcontinent – some of the culture wars about who gets to define the nation and shape national culture – might or might not travel to the diaspora. In a diasporic context, what, for instance, is the difference between the conceptions of Sikhs and Hindus of their respective homelands, and how do these sometimes antagonistic conceptions shape their relationship with India? How do representations of “India” shape the lives of men, women, and youth in the diaspora, the communities they create, and the politics they negotiate? Following Arjun Appadurai, I wish to appropriate “India” as an optic rather than as “a reified social fact or crude nationalist reflex” (1996:18). Throughout, I wish to foreground the ongoing and contested construction of a transnational set of images, discourses, and institutions that engender what different people mean by “India.”

In this paper, my primary objective is to examine how grocery stores in the San Francisco Bay Area enable the production and consumption of a range of texts, images, and commodities that participate in this ongoing construction of India and Indian culture. My analysis is based on the following three propositions: (1) Indian grocery stores in the diaspora form a crucial node in the transnational circulation of texts, images, and commodities between India and the diaspora; (2) the objects sold in these stores create different regimes of value as they move from location to location; (3) gender (as it intersects with class and race) offers an important lens to examine the kinds of social practices facilitated by these stores. Rather than address each of these propositions in turn, I will weave them through my argument.
In a review essay on the “futures” of anthropology, Sherry Ortner points out that both the objects and our modes of anthropological enquiry have changed radically: “the field has changed irreversibly” (2000:984, 990). For several years now, it has been evident that ethnographies of local communities, identities, and spaces necessarily involve an interrogation of how the “local” is produced at the intersection of translocal, regional, and global cultural fields (Appadurai 1996; Gupta & Ferguson 1997a; Gupta 1998; Hannerz 1996). Anthropological enquiry has been re-envisioned in terms of efforts to interrogate the conjunction of place, space, and culture through a thorough rethinking of the concept of culture (Appadurai 1996; Gupta & Ferguson 1997b). As we have reconfigured our perspectives on the objects and modes of our enquiry, we have rethought the processes that constitute the texts we produce: from examining the poetics and politics of ethnography to re-examining the relationship between ethnography and other modes of cultural analysis; for instance, literary texts, film and video, and journalism (Behar & Gordon 1995; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Daniel & Peck 1996; Hannerz 2002). Furthermore, fieldwork, so central to the production of anthropological data and theory, has also been reconceptualized in ways that lay bare the nexus between the production of anthropological knowledge and the political projects of colonialism, and the de-territorializations and, indeed, re-territorializations brought about in the wake of international migrations, transnational mass media, and global capitalism (Gupta & Ferguson 1997b). The anthropological analysis of transnational processes presents fruitful challenges and opportunities to reinvigorate and reinvent conventional modes of anthropological enquiry. Again, some excellent models exist: from studying the production of a transnational public sphere in specific parts of the world (for instance, Mayfair Yang’s research on Shanghai [1997]) to conducting what George Marcus (1998) calls multi-sited ethnographic research by following the movements of migrants and exile (Rogers 1991; Schein 1999) and tracing the circuits of transnational capital (Ong 1999). In this paper I want to explore how tracing the cultural constitution of spaces and objects might enable us to do an ethnography of transnationality. In so doing, I bring the critiques of fieldwork and ethnography cited above into conversation with a longer history of studying objects and commodities in anthropology. Concretely, I am interested in how, in diasporic contexts, Indian grocery stores are sites in which people and objects on the move converge. As particular kinds of social spaces, these stores enable us to study the reconfiguration of gender, class, and race in an interconnected world.

A Brief History of Indians in California

I begin by situating the constitution of Indian communities in the Bay Area in a longer history of immigration from Asia. As pointed out by Lisa Lowe, “immigration has been a crucial locus through which US interests have recruited and regulated labor and capital from Asia” (1996:7). In addition to being shaped by the US economy’s changing needs for labor and capital, immigration policy is refracted by race and national origin. California occupies a distinctive place in the history of immigration from India. The start of the twentieth century witnessed the migration of laborers from Punjab to California and other parts of the West Coast (Leonard 1992), and constituted the tinent. The Alien Land Law citizenship, and the 1917 "Act of the 1946, the Land Immigration Act. Thereafter, South Asian immigration in started after the 1965 Imm rose from 12,296 in 1970s, there were abc (Khandelwal 1995), and in Filipinos and Koreans. Act 0.8% of the total populat South Bay and 1.0% in the neither for the increase in substantial numbers of rei. H-1B visas are given to m Service of the US governs with skills that satisfy the decade now, a majority of the software engineers from Inc. statistics, in 1999, 32% of t is. H-1B visa-holders hav economic and cultural lan Mercury News, about 100 According to the INS, dur H-1B workers came from i from India by emp companies. In the Valley, these H-1B visa-holders comp labor, and immigration. H Companies usually sponsor are often contracted to the over the US. They are well citizens and permanent resi paid about a third of what tasks). Because their visas a companies or body-shopp difficult for them to chan unionizing or organizing or seek to eventually gain pen successful in doing so. Fur H-1B visa-holders become The case of the H-1B vie enact and produce a tiered l gender, and age; contrast, it annual quotas for H-1B vis quotas, especially those pe
Sherry Ortner points out that she is a geographer who has studied immigration and migration. The intersection of identity, space, and culture has been re-examined in her work. Gupta & Ferguson's work has been re-evaluated in this context. The Allen Land Laws of 1913, 1920, and 1923 cast all Asians as ineligible for citizenship, and the 1917 Immigration Act explicitly excluded Indians from naturalization. In 1946, the Luce-Celler Bill repealed the “barred zone” clause of the 1917 Immigration Act. Thereafter, between 1946 and 1965, there was an increase in South Asian immigration into the US. The second wave of South Asian immigration started after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act; the entry of Indians in the US rose from 12,296 in 1960 to 51,000 by the end of 1965 (Hing 1993:70, 72). By the 1980s, there were about 20 to 30,000 South Asians emigrating every year (Khandelwal 1995), and in 1985 Indian immigrants ranked third (at 28,498) behind Filipinos and Koreans. According to the 1990 Census, Asian Indians constituted 0.8% of the total population in the nine counties of the Bay Area, with 1.3% in the South Bay and 1.0% in the East Bay. This data, however, is outdated; it accounts neither for the increase in the Indian population in the Bay Area, nor for the substantial numbers of residents who arrived on H-1B visas in the last ten years.

H-1B visas are given to men and women that the Immigration and Naturalization Service of the US government (INS hereafter) classifies as highly-trained workers with skills that satisfy the prevailing needs of the US economy. For more than a decade now, a majority of H-1B visas have been given to computer programmers and software engineers from India, Taiwan, Ireland, Israel, and so on. According to INS statistics, in 1999, 52% of all H-1B visas were given to computer-related professionals. H-1B visa-holders have played a pivotal role in the transformation of the economic and cultural landscape of Silicon Valley — according to the San Jose Mercury News, about 100,000 H-1B workers live in Northern California alone. According to the INS, during the first half of 1999, 46% of all computer-related H-1B workers came from India. A majority of the H-1B visa holders are recruited directly from India by employment agencies that hire them out to computer companies. In the Valley, these agencies are known as “body shoppers.”

H-1B visa-holders complicate our understanding of the relationship between class, labor, and immigration. H-1B visa-holders are a new breed of migrant worker. Companies usually sponsor the H-1B visas of their employees. H-1B visa-holders are often contracted to the body shoppers who hire them to different companies all over the US. They are well paid by Indian standards, but considerably less than US citizens and permanent residents (according to some estimates, many of them are paid about a third of what US citizens and permanent residents make for the same tasks). Because their visas are the property of their employers — whether computer companies or body-shoppers — their legal status is always precarious, making it difficult for them to change jobs, and of course there is no question of their unionizing or organizing or overtly participating in politics. Most H-1B visa holders seek to eventually gain permanent residency in the US, and quite a few have been successful in doing so. Furthermore, in times of economic crises or “downturns,” H-1B visa-holders become extremely vulnerable and are among the first to be fired.

The case of the H-1B visa-holders reveals that, once again, immigration policies enact and produce a tiered hierarchy, sedimented not only by race but also by class, gender, and age; contrast, for instance, the urgency surrounding calls for raising the annual quotas for H-1B visa-holders, with the stagnancy and backlog in all other quotas, especially those pertaining to family reunification, so that parents, less
wealthy relatives and the (generally female) spouses of residents now have to wait for years before gaining entry as legal residents. Immigration policies articulate both the needs of the US economy for an "appropriate" labor force, and an imperative to restrict its inflow so as to prevent a so-called "excess" of labor supply (Lowe 1996:13). In an economic context marked by mixed production and flexible accumulation, race emerges yet again not as a fixed singular essence but, as Lowe argues, "as the locus in which economic, gender, sex and race contradictions converge" (1996:26). In general, the racial self-representation of Indians in the Bay Area is overwhelmingly shaped by class. While the number of Indians working in blue-collar occupations, the service industry, and in small businesses has increased substantially, the story of this community is now frequently told in terms of the dominant narrative of "Indian success" in the Bay Area, most notably in Silicon Valley. The narrative of Indian success in Silicon Valley—and this story is told largely in cultural-nationalist terms—reinserts them into the dominant racial order; simultaneously and ironically, it contributes to the race-blindness on the part of a majority within this community. It seems to me that the (relative) race-blindness of Indians in Silicon Valley is shaped by specifically local political-economic and historical factors in that it might be much harder to sustain in, say, New Jersey or Queens, New York or, for that matter, in other parts of California.

The celebration of the (varied) successes of middle- and upper-class Indians in Silicon Valley must not blind us to the racial foundations of the US economy and the US national imaginary. Bonnie Honig cautions us that the myth of immigrant success reveals the intimate relationship between xenophobia and xenophilia:

The foreigners whose immigrations to the United States daily reinstall the regime's most beloved self-images are also looked on as threats to the regime. And this is no accident. Their admirable hard work and boundless acquisition put "us" out of jobs. Their voluntaristic embrace of America reaffirms but also endangers "our" way of life. The foreigner who shores up and reinvigorates the regimes also unsettles it at the same time. Nationalist xenophilia tends to feed and (re)produce nationalist xenophobia as its partner (1983:3).

Honig's broader point about the dangers of the myth of the successful immigrant might give us pause as we witness the celebration of the upward mobility of some Indians in the Bay Area and especially in Silicon Valley: first, because there is indeed something unsettling about the always-already foreigner whose upward mobility might leave "us" behind (the "us" in Honig's argument obviously refers to a normative European American Self and not to the foreign Other). More importantly, rather than foreground or even acknowledge the intersection of race and class in the regulation of immigrant labor, these representations of immigrant success have crucial consequences for Indian Americans' own representations of their community as predominantly middle class or upper class. These representations render poor and working-class Indians in America voiceless if not invisible.

But for all their success stories, to what extent are Indians in America deemed assimilable into the dominant racial and cultural order? Race struggles are frequently portrayed as cultural struggles on the part of many Indian Americans, whose unassimilability into the fabric of dominant US national culture allegedly reflects their racial unassimilability. However, be situated in a larger context, Asian culture in the dominant public sphere is constructed by the contradictions of other"Asian" ways of being and doing. The Asian American experience is one of multiple identities, an amalgamation of the United States and its cultural and political institutions. As Lowe (1994) argues, "the manifold anxieties of Asian countries that Asian immigrants are still a national economy" (1996:4). I take my title, "India Shopped," in connection with this project. Asian" is a construct, the kinds of goods that we consume, sometimes even the goods and services that are displayed and sold, the modality of the familiar about nation, community, geography. Indian grocery stores provide goods not just with the Indian cooking, they also make discourses for consumption. The ascendancy of "India" occurs in the hierarchies, regional differences, social differences of the world. While the stores_I'm going to describe_tries to provide their customers and employ the skills of other nations in the world, some of them call themselves Caribbean, East Africa, and some from India have lived. Furthermore...
reflects their racial unassimilability. The racial unassimilability of Indians must, however, be situated in a larger ideological context of constructions of Asia and Asian culture in the dominant US national imaginary. As several Asian American scholars have argued, Asia, and Asians in America, have long represented the space of alterity against which dominant notions of citizenship and belonging are constructed in the US. As Lowe points out, “Asia has always been a complex site on which the manifold anxieties of the US nation-state have been figured; such anxieties have figured Asian countries as exotic, barbaric, and alien...on the other hand, Asian immigrants are still a necessary racialized labor force within the domestic national economy” (1996:4–5). This depiction of Asians seems particularly pertinent to the ambiguous and ambivalent racialization of (some) Indians in the Bay Area, who are portrayed as embodying the quintessentially “American” values of capitalist entrepreneurship, ingenuity, and hard work, and simultaneously, as always-already foreign because of their unassimilability into US “national culture,” and their recalcitrance to blending into the so-called melting pot. In what follows, I will examine how, in this political and cultural context, Indian grocery stores might enable men and women of Indian origin to forge community and identity.

India Shopping

I take my title, “India Shopping,” from one of the store owners I interviewed in connection with this project. He said to me: “Oh, people don’t just come here to buy groceries. They come for the whole package. They come for India shopping.” The “India” that is produced and consumed in these stores is a highly contested construct; the kinds of affect this “India” arouses range from fond nostalgia to ambivalence, sometimes even antagonism. I’m especially concerned with how some of the commodities displayed and sold in these grocery stores facilitate the production of the modality of the familiar which, in turn, reveals a complicated set of discourses about nation, community, gender, and family. In other words, through the ways in which Indian grocery stores produce a sense of familiarity for their customers, they provide them not just with the spices, lentils, and other ingredients deemed crucial to Indian cooking, they also make available a range of products, artifacts, images, and discourses for consumption. The social contexts in which the production and consumption of “India” occurs in these stores is marked, among other factors, by gender hierarchies, regional differences, and class differences.

While the stores I’m going to describe primarily sell groceries, they also sell other goods imported from India – namely, cosmetics, music, religious icons, and, in some cases, clothes and jewelry. Most of them also rent videos and DVDs of films and television programs from the South Asian subcontinent. These stores cater to people from all over the South Asian diaspora. It is important to remember that store owners are extremely savvy about the diverse ethnic and national identities of their customers and employ different marketing strategies to target immigrants from other nations in the South Asian subcontinent, including Pakistan (in fact, some of them call themselves Indo-Pak stores rather than Indian stores), and also the Caribbean, East Africa, and other parts of the world where people of South Asian origin have lived. Furthermore, depending on their locations, these stores are
traversed by shoppers and browsers of diverse national, racial, and cultural affiliations, including European Americans. These stores perform different functions for the latter (from satisfying their curiosity about their new and not-so-new neighbor, to enabling them to purchase exotic “ethnic Indian” products). Clearly, Indian grocery stores in the Bay Area are complex social spaces, and the commodities and texts they display and sell are polyvocal in that they evoke a range of responses for the men and women who patronize them. In this paper, however, I turn my focus on the memories, longings, and often ambivalent (if not contradictory) structures of feelings these stores and the commodities and texts they display—what I have termed objects-in-motion—invoke in men and women who have migrated from India.

How do grocery stores participate in the creation and consumption of discourses of the homeland for people of Indian origin in the San Francisco Bay Area? As sites of public culture, Indian grocery stores enable us to track how, in Indian America, “Culture” is reified in terms of loss or fear of loss—something that has to be consciously retained, produced, or disavowed. Culture, as Lowe argues, “is the terrain through which the individual speaks as a member of the contemporary national collectivity, but culture is also a mediation of history, the site through which the past returns and is remembered, however, fragmented, imperfect or disavowed. Through that remembering, that decomposition, new forms of subjectivity and community are thought and signifies” (1996:x).

In what follows, I reflect on the cathexis of highly contested pasts onto commodities sold in Indian grocery stores. In so doing, I argue for the importance of objects to social life. I borrow from Baudrillard’s formulation of objects as representational systems in and of themselves (1981). At the same time, I’d like to hold on to the materiality of objects by turning to the notion of objectification. Daniel Miller argues that “values and social relations are not prior to the cultural form they take, and therefore not reflected by them, but are created in the act by which cultural forms come into being” (1995c:277). Miller terms this mutual entanglement of things, values, and social relations objectification. Consumption, therefore, is meshed with objectification; as Miller points out, consumption is “a use of goods and services in which the object or activity becomes simultaneously a practice in the world and a form in which we construct our understandings of ourselves in the world” (1995b:30). I, therefore, appropriate the notion of objectification to problematize distinctions between things, thought, and action.

Since things are inextricable from social life, I find it helpful to trace the trajectories of things-in-motion as they travel from context to context, and to track their role in meaning-making and in the regimes of value they produce and incite. As pointed out by Arjun Appadurai, the notion of regimes of value emphasizes that acts of commodity exchange and consumption do not presuppose “a complete cultural sharing of assumptions, but rather that the degree of value coherence may be highly variable from situation to situation, and from commodity to commodity” (1986:15). Regimes of value are inseparable from other domains of politics, for the consumption of commodities is always-already embedded in other social and semiotic practices. What sorts of regimes of value are created by the consumption of products sold in Indian grocery stores?

On the one hand, Indian grocery stores in the Bay Area mark the urban landscape with specific signifiers of ethnicity and “Indian” culture and, hence, enable Indian communities to represent their identity (it is not surprising which these stores are concentr events where Indians gather and, where many new employment opportunities. This obtains information about religi about Indian fashions. Given th they sell invoke and pro tradition (Appadurai, 1986). It seems how these stores manufacture Rushdie’s imaginary home India. I will do this by analyzing the ship between food and disparate nostalgia; the social spaces crea

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Another woman spoke to me years ago about marrying a man who favored Indian dishes helped “get to know him, his needs. And in Jackson Heights (in New York) looked forward to that.” For interviewed, cooking Indian is
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Area mark the urban landscape and, hence, enable Indian communities to represent themselves both to themselves, and to the dominant community (it is not surprising that, in some US cities, the neighborhoods in which these stores are concentrated are known as "Little India"). They also provide spaces where Indians gather and exchange important information about community events, and where many new arrivals learn about neighborhoods, schools, and employment opportunities. This is where some women might exchange recipes, obtain information about religious rituals and, in the stores that also sell clothes, about Indian fashions. Given the social spaces created by these stores, the commodities they sell invoke and produce powerful discourses of "home," family, and tradition (Appadurai 1986; Bonus 1997). I'm especially interested in examining how these stores manufacture variable notions of the homeland - what Salman Rushdie calls imaginary homelands - for some people from different parts of India. I will do this by analyzing three aspects of Indian grocery stores: the relationship between food and diasporic memory; brand names and the evocation of nostalgia; the social spaces created by the stores.

Food and Diasporic Memory

Parma Roy points to the intimate relationship between "gustatory and national memories" (n.d.:12), and the power of "nostalgic gastronomy" (n.d.:18) in the semiotics of food for diasporic and migrant subjects. Food acquires a distinctive valence, and a distinctively gendered valence, in diasporic and migrant communities. As markers of cultural continuity/difference, hybridity, and/or assimilation, the gastronomic habits of diasporic subjects become especially fraught areas for contestations and negotiations of gender, community, and kinship. One informant pointed out the importance of being able to buy "suitable" ingredients so that she could cook Indian food for her husband and children. As a busy professional woman, she gave priority to cooking Indian food because, she said, this was one way of maintaining her "culture" abroad. "Language and food are two ways to retain our culture," she explained. "Now that the kids are in school, they're forgetting their Gujarati. But the least I can do is to give them one Indian meal a day." As Roy reminds us, "Food, in the migrant/diasporic subject's cosmos, becomes - whatever it might have been at its place of putative origin - tenaciously tethered to economies simultaneously and irrevocably national and moral" (n.d.:2).

Another woman spoke to me about how, when she first arrived in the US fifteen years ago after marrying a man she didn't know very well, cooking her husband's favorite Indian dishes helped "develop" her marriage. She continued: "It helped me get to know him, his needs. And on weekends we would go together to buy groceries in Jackson Heights [in New York, where the couple lived at that point], and we both looked forward to that." For both these women, and for several others I have interviewed, cooking Indian food was integral to their roles in the family and to their constitution as national and gendered subjects - indeed to their identities as Indian women.7 As dutiful wives and mothers, they believed they could keep their respective cultures "alive" through the food they cooked, a task made infinitely easier and, in some cases, pleasurable, by being able to buy the necessary groceries at Indian stores.
The relationship between food preparation and ideas of “suitable” or dutiful womanhood is clearer when we hear what some women store-owners told me about their efforts to “teach” younger and second-generation Indian American women how to cook Indian food. One woman store-owner in Berkeley recounted:

Very often, young women who’ve grown up here come to my store because they are missing something their mom used to cook. They describe it to me, and I tell them how they can make it in their own apartments. They don’t know anything about Indian cooking. But if you’re Indian of course you’ll want Indian food [note how the longing for Indian food is naturalized – or rather nationalized – here]. Sooner or later you’ll miss it. After all how long can you eat hamburgers. It is not in our culture. And then they come to me. I tell them what to buy, how to cook. What basic ingredients to always keep in their kitchen. I tell them how to use short-cuts so it’s not necessarily what their mothers cook, because they don’t have the time to cook authentic recipes. But it is Indian food that can be made in America. I tell them what to do. It’s obvious they’ve never cooked before.

These words bring together discourses of food, gender, and culture in interesting ways. According to this store-owner, second-generation women, marked as such by their appearance and their accents, would “of course” want to eat Indian food because, despite how they might look or sound, they are, after all, Indian. If, as Miller observes, commodities are “brought to life in the consumption practices of the household” and “enact moral, cosmological and ideological objectifications,” the products of grocery stores “create the images by which we understand who we have been, who we are, and who we might or should be in the future” (1995b:35). Furthermore, “Indian food” (clearly, the immense diversity of the culinary traditions of the subcontinent is being collapsed here) enables the reproduction of “culture” in the diaspora. While the recipes these store-owners give to young Indian American women might not be “authentic” (to the extent that they entail improvisation, shortcuts, and the hybrid use of ingredients) they are, nevertheless, deemed “Indian” or at least are “Indian recipes” that can be made in the US.

Notwithstanding this shop-owner’s homogenizing of “Indian culture” and “Indian food,” most store-owners were, in fact, extremely knowledgeable about the diverse culinary habits of their customers. They were all too aware that they had to cater to a regionally and culturally heterogeneous community. For instance, while earlier, most stores only sold ingredients used in North India, they now made it a point to offer products used in southern Indian cuisines. Store-owners were proud of their niche-marketing practices shaped, in turn, by their knowledge of local demographics and patterns of settlement: as the owner of a chain that has branches in Berkeley and Sunnyvale said to me, “I always keep gongura [an ingredient used in Andhra food], in my store in Sunnyvale because there are lots of Telugu-speaking people there. In Berkeley, there aren’t that many Telugus [sic], so I don’t bother.” Another store-owner who called his business Indian Bazaar spoke proudly of selling “food from all over India.” On the one hand, this is the story of US multiculturalism meeting savvy marketing; at the same time, it also expresses the nationalist “unity in diversity” narrative promoted by the postcolonial Indian state.

Certain commodities sold in emotions in some of the men and women, however, no past: it was a complex set of some cases nostalgia entailed individual who would, at once, feel and a sense of relief at having her analysis of the nostalgic Democratic Republic, “In the rather than the reproduction

Susan Stewart describes no blance and identity... nostalgia (from Naficy 1993:150). So nostalgia as being about the definition does not always h Area. Many of those that I in India, but felt nostalgic all the desire to return to the home generally (their conception o According to Bakhtin, the temporal relationships. For gendered a nostalgia that ke land.” As one informant put warp. It’s messy, it’s loud. It’s to your clean and quiet house and memory also get transp Indian grocery stores (here I to some shop owners and the same brands that they used Hamam soap, Brahmi Amla my informants, Sunita Gupta past eight years, told me, us Sunita is a thirty-something p the area. She spoke of how’s bought Glucose biscuits to his early mornings in his parent

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Brand-name Nostalgia

Certain commodities sold in Indian grocery stores evoked a range of nostalgic emotions in some of the men and women who consumed them. For most of these men and women, however, nostalgia was not just a simple, romantic longing for the past; it was a complex set of emotions shot through with ambivalence. Indeed, in some cases nostalgia entailed contradictory emotions, sometimes in the same individual, who would, at once, feel a sense of loss regarding certain elements of the past, and a sense of relief at having left that past behind. As Daphne Berdahl points out in her analysis of the nostalgia surrounding commodities from the former German Democratic Republic, “In this sense, nostalgia is about the production of a present rather than the reproduction of a past” (1999:202).

Susan Stewart describes nostalgic desire as arising from the “gap between resemblance and identity... nostalgia is enamored of distance, not of the referent itself” (from Naficy 1993:150). Some scholars of diaspora, such as Hamid Naficy, define nostalgia as being about the desire to return to the homeland (1993:148). This definition does not always hold true for Indian migrants in the San Francisco Bay Area. Many of those that I interviewed may or may not want to actually return to India, but felt nostalgic all the same. In their case, nostalgia was not driven by a desire to return to the homeland, whether it is their home-town, their state, or more generally (their conception of) India.

According to Bakhitin, chronotopes enable the interconnection of spatial and temporal relationships. For some customers, the chronotope of grocery stores engendered a nostalgia that keeps alive an ambivalence towards the purported “homeland.” As one informant put it, going into Indian stores is like “going into a time warp. It’s messy, it’s loud. It’s fun while you’re there. But you can then return home to your clean and quiet house. You don’t have to stay there [in the store].” Nostalgia and memory also get transposed or catheterized onto some of the products sold in Indian grocery stores (here I refer particularly to products made in India). According to some shop owners and their customers, most Indians go to these stores to buy the same brands that they used in India – popular brands such as Maggi Noodles, Hamam soap, Brahmam Amla hair oil, Glucose biscuits, and Amla Butter. As one of my informants, Sunita Gupta, who had been frequenting stores in Sunnyvale for the past eight years, told me, using these brands “brought back memories of home.” Sunita is a thirty-something professional who works in a Silicon Valley company in the area. She spoke of how she always reached for the same products. She always bought Glucose biscuits to have with her morning tea because they reminded her of early mornings in her parents’ house.

Every morning, I would awaken to the sounds of tea being served in our living room. My parents used to wake up very early, go for a walk, and then drink their tea when they returned. My father would sit with a pile of newspapers, and my mother would sit beside him, serving tea. I would wake in bleary-eyed, dip my Glucose biscuit into my tea, and sip it slowly. As soon as I was done, I would rush off to get ready for school. My mother would scold me every morning for dawdling over my tea; I would always have to eat my toast on my way to the bus stop. It was a set routine: every morning I would...
drink tea with them; my mom would yell at me; I would ignore her and sip my tea, my father and I smiling slyly at each other. No matter what else happened, this happened every single morning, every morning... Here, so far away, I still dip my Glucose biscuits into my tea. And I skip breakfast because I never have time to eat before I leave.

Hence, commodities may function as "cultural mnemonics" (Naficy 1993:152), enabling the production and consumption of particular narratives of the past, a past, rooted as it were, in the shifting signifier that is the homeland. Other women I met also described how particular brands of products evoked very specific memories of their childhood in India. Indira, who taught in a primary school in Fremont, spoke of how she always bought Brahmi Hair Oil because, every Sunday, her mother would oil her hair for her. Similarly, every Diwali - which is the Hindu New Year - she bought Mysore Sandalwood Soap because that is what they used in her family on Diwali. As she said, "You're so far away and you want links with those days."

As one of the store-owners exclaimed to me: "There are three reasons why my customers reach for the same brands they used in India: nostalgia, nostalgia, nostalgia!" Through the products they sell, Indian stores enable the cathectic of different fragments of the past on to commodities, enabling both the consumption and (re)production of "Indian culture" in the diaspora. At the same time, it is important to remind ourselves, first, that obviously these commodities do not evoke nostalgia in all customers; second, even among those who nostalgically reach for the same brand names that they consumed in India, the emotions these commodities evoke are quite varied.

Furthermore, nostalgia is predicated on a selective remembering and forgetting of the past (see also Berdahl 1999:198). Thus, the consumption of a particular commodity in the diaspora might lead an individual to remember the warmth and laughter surrounding family gatherings and celebrations in the homeland (rather than the conflicts and family politics surrounding them). I came across several instances of this selective remembering and forgetting soaked in a nostalgia evoked by a favorite brand (for instance, Maggi Noodles or, as in the case above, Glucose Biscuits), but one stands out particularly vividly in my mind. I was interviewing a middle-aged couple in their living room about the role of Indian grocery stores in their lives in the Bay Area, when the man started to speak of how a particular brand of basmati rice brought back nostalgic memories of family celebrations of the Hindu festival Diwali. As the man waxed lyrically about the mountains of food prepared for the occasion, the wife slyly remarked to me that Diwali in her in-laws' home meant that the women of the family would be "stuck" in the kitchen all day preparing the grand meal. "No way am I going to do that here," she added. The gendered division of labor surrounding food preparation in her in-laws' home meant that she could not share in her husband's nostalgia, and selective remembering of Diwali celebrations of the past.

Evidently, the nostalgia evoked by favorite brands of commodities is neither reflective nor constitutive of any sort of collective memories or identification on the part of customers of Indian origin. In fact, as in the case of Berdahl's informants, nostalgia can "evokes feelings of longing, mourning, resentment, anger, relief, redemption, and satisfaction—often within the same individuals" (1999:203). There are two additional caveats I would like to insert here. As I noted earlier, the meanings attached to products; consumption practices occurred; valence when consumed in the shampoo when used in India; particular value because it evolved; and, I do not intend to paint a family that is uniformly pleasant; evoke sorrow or fear. Indian grocery stores, familial, with all the longing; What resonances or memories the familial is not evocative of; safe space?

Retailing the Familiar:

As noted earlier, the anthropological challenge for practitioners of inquiry of transnationality? Or course means many things. M. to understand another life world instrument of knowing. Class linked with field work, in which implicit in the recent discussion here: that the ethnographic (staring at) spatiality, a construe space and time" (1993:173). In shopping in these stores, and for some people of Indian origin, Indian grocery stores in the Bay Area might signify identity and furnish a clausrophobia and commit everyday practices, customs and Indian diaspora in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Let me begin by recounting years since I'd last been in Sp. community in Silicon Valley.

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nings attached to products are obviously shaped by the contexts in which these
consumption practices occurred. Commodities bought in India acquire a different
vance when consumed in the US. Thus, a favorite shampoo was simply a favorite
shampoo when used in India; in the diaspora, however, this shampoo acquired
icular value because it evoked specific memories of home and childhood. Sec-
ly, I do not intend to paint a fuzzy, soft-focused picture of memories of home or
family that are uniformly pleasurable. There are many for whom these memories can
voke sorrow or fear. Indian grocery stores are not just familiar, but for some deeply
familiar, with all the longing, ambivalence, or terror that the familial can invoke.
What resonances or memories might these stores invoke for those for whom
the familial is not evocative of pleasure or security? Or when the home is not a
safe space?

Retailing the Familiar: The Social Spaces of Indian Grocery Stores

As noted earlier, the anthropological study of transnational processes has proved
dallenging for practitioners of ethnography. What does it mean to do an ethnog-
ography of transnationality? Ortner describes ethnography thus: "Ethnography of
course means many things. Minimally, however, it has always meant the attempt
to understand another life world using the self - as much of it as possible - as the
strument of knowing. Classically, this kind of understanding has been closely
linked with field work, in which the whole self physically seeks to understand. Yet
licit in the recent discussions of ethnography is something I wish to make explicit
here that the ethnographic stance (as we may call it) is as much an intellectual (and
moral) positionality, a constructive and interpretive mode, as it is a bodily process in
pace and time" (1995:173). In this section, I will examine the sensory experience of
shopping in these stores, and will trace the kinds of affect produced in these stores
for some people of Indian origin in the Bay Area. In addition, I will analyze how
Indian grocery stores in the Bay Area create social spaces in which people of Indian
origin might forge identity and community. As we will see, these stores create spaces
of familiarity that are comforting for some shoppers and that, for others, are fraught
with claustrophobia and community surveillance. They are rich sites to observe the
eyday practices, customs and rules of social interaction that exist among the
Indian diaspora in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Let me begin by recounting my observations of one such store. It had been eight
years since I'd last been in Spice Bazaar, an Indian grocery store in Sunnyvale, a
community in Silicon Valley that is home to a large number of residents from India.
There had been many changes: from a dingy one room, catering to Indian students
and professionals in the area, it was now a dingy three-room store. There were tables
on the sidewalk displaying vegetables, and as I walked past them, I could smell the
tomatoes ripening all-too-rapidly in the blazing July heat. Despite it being a weekday
noon, the sidewalk was full of people, mostly women of different ages, buying
produce. From the way they were dressed, some women looked like they were
making a stop there on lunch break from their offices.

But not everyone here was on break from their offices. One elderly woman in a
white polyester sari, her white hair pulled back in a severe bun, was going through a
huge bin of okra with meticulous care. She would pick each okra, and put it to the
snap test: if it snapped under the pressure of her fingers, she would grimace and
throw it back into the pile; those that survived the snap test were placed in a plastic
bag. As I stood taking in the sights and smells, I noticed a middle-aged couple
greeting a salwar-kameez clad younger woman with great enthusiasm: it was obvi-
ous that they were friends and had not seen each other for a long time. When she saw
the older couple, the younger woman immediately draped her dupatta over her head
and bent to touch their feet in a traditional Hindu gesture of showing respect to one's
elders: the older woman embraced her and they started to exchange news.

I randomly picked the middle of the three doors leading into the store: it turned
out to be the main entrance. On one wall were pasted flyers of all kinds. As I peered
at them, I saw flyers for nanny and housekeeping services, posters of upcoming film
concerts, advertisements for room-mates, and real estate notices. Lining a second
wall were shelves of videotapes and DVDs: the young woman behind the counter
with stacks of registers, stared blankly back at me in response to my somewhat timid
smile. Intimidated and a bit self-conscious, I walked on: unlike my usual trips to
Indian grocery stores, when I rushed in with a list of things to pick up, this time I was
determined to browse. Inside, the store was even more crowded than the sidewalk
outside. All the spices were on a row of shelves in one of the rooms, lying in what
seemed to me to be utter disarray; lentils, icons of Hindu gods, and posters of Sikh
gurus were placed together on another shelf. There was music blaring, and one
woman, who seemed to be the owner, glared balefully at her customers as she rang
in their purchases: with a start I was reminded of the kind of “customer service”
I received in stores in my hometown, New Delhi.

It was not just the “customer service” (such as it is) and the apparent disorder that
reminded me and several of the people I interviewed of shopping experiences in
India. Through the products they offer, their sights and smells, Indian grocery stores
enact the semiotics of the familiar in complex ways. The visual clutter is only one
part of the sensory stimuli they provide. The dominant impression most people
I interviewed had of Indian stores was their distinctive smell. If to other commu-
nities, these stores represent sites of (olfactory) alterity, to many Indians who go to
these stores, they represented spaces of familiarity. To several men and women
I spoke with, Indian grocery stores felt familiar in a foreign land where Indians are
marked as alien by the smells we embody. Varsha, a second-generation Indian
American woman, described her changing feelings towards the smells of Indian
stores thus: “When I was a kid, one of the things I hated was you came out smelling
of spices, smelling of India. I used to say, Mom, we can’t go anywhere afterwards
because we smell like India. But later I started liking the smell, I liked that pungent
smell.” Another woman pointed out to me, “It’s not just the smell of the spices and
the dals, it is the smell of the press of people, of Indian bodies.”

There are other sensory cues that make Indian stores feel familiar. One woman
I spoke with mentioned that she made it a point to go to Spice Bazaar on weekends:
“it’s just like bazaars in India. There is always music blaring in the background;
everybody talks loudly. If the owner wants to check on the price of a particular
product, she shouts across the store to someone in the back to look it up.
I always have a headache by the time I leave. But it’s always fun. It’s not like Safeway
or Wal-Mart.”

In addition to providing other auditory clues, Palaces is a new chain of a
part of Silicon Valley and, India Palace is famous for CDs and audiotapes, of w
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to many Indians who go to a few men and women sign land where Indians are a second-generation Indian wards the smells of Indian was you came out smelling it go anywhere afterwards smell, I liked that pungent the smell of the spices and

feel familiar. One woman Spice Bazaar on weekends: daring in the background; at the price of a particular the back to look it up. Its not like Safeway

In addition to providing the familiar sounds of Indian bazaars, these stores provide other auditory links with the homeland through the music they sell. India Palace is a new chain of stores opened in Sunnyvale and Milpitas (Milpitas is also put of Silicon Valley and, like Sunnyvale, home to a very large Indian community). India Palace is famous for its huge selection of music. I saw three long shelves with CDs and audiotapes, of which two were lined with South Indian film and classical (Carnatic) music. On the top of the shelves were signs declaring “South Indian Music.” Tapes and CDs in different southern Indian languages – Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu – all lay mixed together in stacks. I commented to the saleswoman at the counter that this was a huge collection of music, did they get a lot of customers? Yes, she replied, “these South Indians love their music no matter where they are.” The store obviously catered to a large number of people from the southern regions of India, their music all lumped together under the homogenized category “South Indian music.” This display reinforced a system of categorization whereby the music and, by extension, the diverse cultures of southern India were lumped together. This homogenization emphasized the dominance of North Indian assumptions about a normative “Indian culture,” and reflected some of the explosive tensions and fractures between regional and ethnic communities in India. The construction of the familiar, in such cases, reinforces (and elides) the tensions and hierarchies present in India around the shaping of a hegemonic national culture.

At the same time that these stores enable a crucial link with their respective homelands through the constitution of spaces of familiarity, not all of these links are pleasurable or nurturing — and gender seems to be a crucial variable in this regard. For some women, the social space of Indian grocery stores represents an extension of the surveillance exercised within the community. Younger, second-generation women have frequently commented to me about how, when they accompany their parents to these stores, they are repeatedly admonished for “immodest” or “loud” behavior. As the nerve-centers or, rather, as gossip-centers of the community, these stores are spaces where some women are subjected to particularly gendered forms of surveillance. Furthermore, as Seema, a colleague in a domestic violence organization, pointed out to me, in instances where women's mobility is restricted by their abusive spouses, they are “allowed” to go by themselves to Indian stores even when they are prohibited from going to “regular” stores, because Indian stores are deemed “safe” by their husbands. On the one hand, the stores provide opportunities for women whose mobility is otherwise curtailed. On the other hand, the very fact that abusive men feel that their wives are unlikely to do anything “inappropriate” while in these stores suggests that they also represent an extension of patriarchal control: the sense of familiarity staged by these stores obviously has a dark side as well.

For example, one informant, Bindu Singh, spoke of how, ten years ago after her divorce from her abusive husband, she was stigmatized by the Indian community in Berkeley where she then lived. She recounted that she had felt like an “outcast” and this sense of stigma was most vivid when she went grocery shopping at the Indian stores lining University Avenue. “I felt everybody's eyes were on me. Maybe I was not being paranoid, but I'd walk into a store and I knew everybody was talking about me. The community in Berkeley was very small in those days, and everybody knew what was going on in each other's homes.” But, she said, their attitude had changed
recently. After her divorce she had seen some very hard years as a single parent to her two children, but she had managed to train herself as a real estate agent and had achieved tremendous success in her profession; furthermore, her children were now grown up, with her son at Stanford and her daughter at UCLA. Having become wealthy and provided a “good upbringing” to her children, she had earned the acceptance of her community members. She said: “[Then] I ignored their stares and now, when I go to their stores or meet them somewhere else, they are so nice to me.” “Now they want to ask me for advice,” she added sarcastically. From being spaces of surveillance and claustrophobia, these stores had become spaces where Bindu, with her independence and, more importantly, her upward mobility (marked both by her successful career and the fact that her children went to elite colleges), was greeted with grudging respect by her community members.

It should come as no surprise to us that, at the same time that shop-owners insisted that they treat all their customers equally, they and their employees develop ways of identifying the class positions of their customers. As one person told me, “Educated people, the professionals, behave differently from taxi drivers.” Indeed, my participant-observation in stores in both Berkeley and Sunnyvale confirmed that most shop-owners treated their working-class customers differently. Some shop-owners complained that working-class customers tended to haggle more; they also alleged that, in some cases, they had to watch these customers and, in particular, their children carefully because they were afraid they might shop-lift. The owner of Indian Bazaar in Sunnyvale claimed, “We don’t have to do this with educated people.” Hence, the social contexts in which the production and consumption of “India” occurs in these stores are marked by class differences, highlighting how class fissures communities in the Bay Area. Class distinctions also exist among stores, so that some stores consider themselves more upper class than others. Finally, class distinctions exist within stores as well, not just between owners and employees but also, in the case of so-called family-owned stores, between owners and the rest of the family, especially poorer relatives whose labor is exploited.9

Conclusion

In this paper, I’ve argued that Indian grocery stores form a crucial node in the transnational circulation and consumption of commodities and discourses about India. I have been interested in exploring how these grocery stores, the objects-on-the-move they display and sell, and the social spaces they create, might enable us to do an ethnography of transnationality. I have attempted to demonstrate that, as sites of public culture, Indian grocery stores invoke and produce powerful discourses of home, family, and community—all of which are contested, and all of which are gendered in important ways. The commodities displayed and sold in these stores are deeply enmeshed in the social lives and identities of Indians in the Bay Area. Hence, I have been particularly interested in the relationship between commodities and the production of culture in the context of travel. As I have been describing, these stores are important sites for the production of “Indian culture” outside India, forcing us to re-examine the relationship between culture and territory—especially territory policed by nations and states—in an increasingly interconnected world.

NOTES

The larger project is based on a transnational circuit, New Delhi and the San Francisco Bay Area. My research in New Delhi is of great historical significance to an early South Asian community in rural California, which served as a home to a diverse India subcontinent and ranging from the earliest South Asian community in rural California. See Sahlin (1976); Hodder (1992); symbol analysis of goods, culture (1986); and Miller (1995). In “Objects on the Loose: Ethnography and US, Singh also George (1997) and Visv

Insightful as Honig’s argument construals of cultural diff
A commodity, as Baedeker (1921) and Appadurai (1986, 1996) tell us, is a 'through-and-through' real thing, and the semiotics of commodities in consumer culture involves nation, race and gender. It is clear that my analysis of consumer practices is not intended to neutralize differences between the Indian and the American context. The main focus of the research is the internalization of culture through the lens of commodity culture. The studies of consumers in diaspora, as noted above, reflect the diversity of consumer practices in the global village. As consumers move across cultural boundaries, they encounter and adapt to new social and cultural practices. This process of adaptation is influenced by the target audience and the context in which the product is marketed. The study of these phenomena provides insights into the ways in which consumers construct their identities and negotiate their social and cultural positions in the global market. The Indian diaspora, as a case in point, provides a rich ground for exploring these issues.
assimilationist narrative because, contrary to what it presumes, not all immigrants can (or wish to) "embrace" America; for many, the ineffability of racial and cultural difference forestalls such an embrace.

5 See also Palumbo-Liu 1999.

6 This appears to be more true of stores in Berkeley, with its large student population and liberal, multicultural politics, than Milpitas and Sunnyvale where they cater largely to shoppers of South Asian origin rather than to the "mainstream" community. One informant commented to me that "white people look out of place" in stores in Sunnyvale, implying that one didn't see too many European Americans there.

7 Cf. Mankekar 1999 on the discursive constitution of notions of Indian Womanhood in India.

8 Multiculturalism is characterized by the aestheticization and commodification of cultural difference (Lowe 1996:9). It seems to me that while some Indian grocery stores might enable alternative cultural practices resistant to an assimilationist model of US national culture, they often also reify, aestheticize and commodify ethnic difference. This is particularly true of stores in Berkeley which also cater to European American customers and, hence, feel compelled to represent "Indian culture" to "mainstream" Americans. This appears to be less applicable to stores in Sunnyvale and Milpitas which, as noted above, are not frequented very much by European American customers.

9 See Dhalliwal 1995 and Wadhwani 1998 for excellent analyses of labor policies within Indian family-run stores in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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