3.

Flipping the Gender Script

Gender and Sexuality in South Asian and Hip Hop America

> Because, though I am Tamil,
> I am silver piercings
> Am hip-hop
> Am boy
> Am bald
> —D'Lo, male-identified queer MC and poet

> Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.—Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*

America's differential and relational sexualization of Asians and Blacks over time has shaped contemporary gender and sexual politics within desi and hip hop America—communities that frame the everyday dynamics between South Asian and Black men and women. This chapter examines how desi hip hoppers contend with the gender and sexual norms of the various communities to which they belong. Desi performers create new second-generation identities by sampling ethnic and racial influences, and they draw from a range of gender and sexual identities as well. Sex, love, and music

are linked in the artists' lives as they evaluate expectations, obligations, and passions: who they love crosses over with what they love; what they love is deeply implicated in who they love. My analysis of the engagement in hip hop by South Asians centers on their intimate and professional relationships with Black and South Asian men and women. The artists' desires and attempts to reconcile professional and romantic aspirations for love and art highlight the undertheorized impacts of Blacks on the formation of alternate desi gender roles and sexualities.

In extending my account of desis' disruption of ethnicity and innovative racial claiming, I analyze in this chapter how desi men and women negotiate the gender and sexual politics of hip hop, of mainstream society, and of their insular immigrant communities. I reveal how, or even whether, these men and women incorporate particular gendered and sexualized aspects of "Black culture" into their self-conceptions, and I show how this is accomplished in ways that may be surprising. I offer alternative interpretations to the existing literature on the appeal of hip hop for non-Blacks through my ethnographic account of non-Black and non-White, female and male, straight and gay hip hoppers. Theories developed about Whites and hip hop do not apply equally to their Asian counterparts. The scholarship is often critical of Whites' desire for a racialized sexuality that expresses distanced and insincere complexes of fear and desire. Using this explanation, many Americans interpret Asian American men's interest in hip hop as a desire to overcome their emasculation. My examination of South Asian masculinity, however, troubles this move and rejects the conflation of desis with both Whites and East Asians.

Female artists, in particular, confront desi and Black notions of respectability along with misogyny and gender double standards (McBride 2005). Hip hop scholarship, in addition to overlooking Asians, has also paid inadequate attention to women, particularly non-Black women (cf. Rivera 2003; Chatterjee 2006; Nair and Balaji 2008). Black female scholars, many of them part of the hip hop generation, have foundationally recounted the presence of women in hip hop and illustrated how female artists, particularly rappers, challenge the sexual stereotypes of Black women. I too depict how women negotiate misogyny and sexism, and I highlight hip hop as a culture with empowering models for women's sexual agency, even

for non-Blacks. Two of the desi female artists, one of whom is a gay MC and the other a heterosexual DJ, claim hip hop identities and clear the way for pro-womanist spaces within the predominantly Black, male, and straight world of the music industry, and they do this despite their marginalized gender, racial, and sexual statuses as Brown women in hip hop. Related to this, I address whether or not the male artists also partake in dismantling or maintaining gender hierarchies of oppression.

By culling insights from Hip Hop studies, South Asian American studies, and Afro-Asian studies I highlight in this chapter the role that Blacks play in contemporary sexual and gender formations of Asians in America. Analyses of South Asian and Black relations mediated by Black popular culture expand our understanding of Asian American gender roles, sexuality, and intermarriage with Whites (e.g., Espiritu 1997; Koshy 2004; cf. Hall and Turner 2001; Thornton and Gates 2001). The majority of the artists have been in romantic relationships with Black partners—including African Americans, Africans, and Caribbean Islanders—despite South Asians' anti-Black prejudices and parents' desires for cultural continuity. Racism and a love of hip hop frame the desi artists' professional and romantic choices and these converge in their emerging race consciousness. However, female and male artists reflect different relationship patterns that speak to the differential ways that gender intersects with sexuality among American South Asians.

The artists draw from sexual and gender references provided by their Black peers that are found within hip hop culture seemingly outside the repertoires of mainstream desis. They are often absent in research as well: ethnic studies literature on interracial relations privilege these populations' relations with Whites. The artists, like all Asians in America, forge their sexualities within the nexus of historical processes (e.g., immigration legislation) and ideologies (e.g., conceptions of Asians as sexual deviants). For instance, the desi women in this project are aware of their desirability by men across color lines. Their interactions in hip hop clubs with Black men who orientalize them and compare them with Black, rather than White women, for instance, reorient the factors that scholars have determined shape Asian Americans' and African Americans' self-conceptions of beauty, desire, and competition. How-

ever, I also distinguish between the American racialization of South Asians from East Asians as it impacts their sexual lives.

Analyzing the artists' negotiation of interracial relationships and the hip hop industry calls attention to interactions between South Asians and Blacks that, despite historical precedents, scholars have largely avoided (cf. Prashad 2001; Bald 2008). The lack of attention paid to Asian/Black relations, particularly sexual and romantic ones, insinuates their impossibility in our imaginings of racialized sexuality. Yet surely desi artists represent a larger cohort of Asian Americans who find models of sexuality and gender roles within Black popular culture and through their interactions with Blacks. Their experiences confound interpretations of "Asian American sexuality" as emasculated males attempting to access the virile hypersexuality of Black masculinity or as exotic Brown women who embark on rebellious escapades through temporary trysts with Black men. Instead, the complex negotiations between Black and Brown partners attempting to fulfill ethnic and racial obligations while pursuing musical passions highlight the veritable minefield of complex allegiances and expectations that push apart and pull together young Americans in a nation highly conscious of "difference." Ultimately, we find that the influences of Blacks and Black cultural formations upon the emergent identities of Brown youth extend beyond the realms of ethnicity and race, fear and desire.

These Are the Breaks: Two Brown Women in a Black Male Business

I wanted a male perspective, so I asked a desi MC what he thought about the position of women in hip hop. "Wow," he said, which he followed with "um." He paused, but then stated, "Within hip hop, I think women have a very good place, a very solid place. Very good form for representation." For clarification I asked if he thought that women were already in hip hop or that there was the potential for women to be in hip hop. "I think they're there. The doors are open for them." At the same time, however, he acknowledged that "it's a very tough place for women to be in hip hop." And he went further to add, "I think a lot of women end up selling themselves into the stereotype"—referring to one conception of women in hip

hop as sexually available. The women agree that hip hop is a very tough business for them especially when, as in the case of D'Lo, the female-born artist identifies and performs as a male. In our conversations the desi female artists and I ambled through dense thickets of gender, race, desiness, music, and sexuality only hinted at by this male MC. As women familiar with Black urban club culture and passionate about hip hop, we bonded by going together to concerts, clubs, and other events where we faced similar interactions with Black men and women.[1] We navigated and analyzed the complicated gender and sexual dynamics of this highly masculine and heteronormative culture.

Straight and gay South Asian female hip hoppers illustrate how the historical sexualization of Blacks and Asians in America informs the artists' musical passions and progression today. These women's conceptualizations of their range of sexual and gendered choices counter the more "traditional" thinking of fixed options within South Asian communities. While much literature on Asian American gender and sexuality either leaves out or assumes South Asian Americans, femininity within South Asian communities is viewed as something to be guarded and is tied to upholding respectable ethnic traditions and mores. Perhaps more neglected is desi masculinity, which is usually seen as both exceptional of Asian American manhood (i.e., not following the line of Asian American emasculation) or as typical (the emasculated South Asian tech worker or the comedic foreigner like Apu on *The Simpsons*) and tied to economic stability. In fact, hip hop provides sexual roles that resonate with these women who have few models of desi femininity available to them that speak to the United States–based context of their lives. Additionally, being a woman shapes their musical productions and has led to struggles in business interactions.

Their sampling and expressions of gender and sexuality are creative second-generation responses to the limitations of American, South Asian, and Black ethnic and racial politics. Despite the tricky maneuverings required by these dynamics, the strong gender identity and passion for music by Deejay Bella and by the poet-activist-MC D'Lo, the two female-born artists in my study, lead them to use Black popular music—putting their gender politics on the dance floors in club spaces—to intervene in male-dominated places. I intersperse their stories in the text of this chapter to illustrate how

some artists negotiate the business while expressing desi gender and sexual identities that sample Black masculinities.

The hip hop industry promotes the commodification and sexualization of women, the idea of women as extraneous accessories, and heteronormativity. These ideas operate in and beyond the videos and lyrics of some kinds of commercial rap to infiltrate the experiences of women in all levels of hip hop. Hip hop historians and the culture's major players have silenced women's contributions by relegating them to a few token paragraphs in the extensive volumes of hip hop production (cf. Pough 2004, 2007; Sharpley-Whiting 2007). We see how gender and sexuality mediate the experiences of non-Blacks in a highly racialized domain; taking part in predominantly Black productions leads to unexpected racialized expressions of desi gender and sexuality. I begin my examination with a brief biography of the musical careers of Deejay Bella and D'Lo before detailing the gender politics of Brown women in a Black male dominant field.

The Technician, Deejay Bella: Marginality, Sexuality, Positivity

> No one's listening to me . . . It's not right to work so hard and not go anywhere. Women are not seen as being bomb ass DJs blowing a party up.—Deejay Bella

Bella spins records for music-loving crowds, making them dance until the wee hours. In a phone conversation one night she told me that she wanted to meet more women in the business. She chatted about people's conceptions of DJs: "You think of a guy. I'm not the type, right! I'm sort of petite, right?" She laughed, "Nobody's going to carry my records for me," and then ended with an upbeat, "but it's all good." These devoted artists deal with overlapping and conflicting sets of expectations that are often brought together in their homes. Bella, a manager-level environmental engineer by day and a DJ in every other moment of her life, leads an exhausting schedule. Her home displays the signs of her true calling: there is no TV in her Oakland apartment, just hundreds of records stacked in crates from floor to ceiling across an entire wall of her living room, spilling into her walk-in closet, just as a professor's books might. Where there are no records, the walls are papered with famous

reggae artists' autographed posters. Other walls are adorned with family photos, and as a strict vegetarian Bella has cleared a place for a *puja* (prayer) area in the kitchen. How did this suburbanite from Las Vegas become so involved in the Bay Area Black music scene?

Bella likely inherited her audiophilia from her father, a Gujarati immigrant who was a guitarist in a rock band in India. In the early 1970s he created a small studio in their Las Vegas home where Bella would play records as her father taped all his music on a reel-to-reel recorder. They "always had music," she noted, because her father listened to music while he worked. In addition, her mother listened to prayer music on the weekends, and Bella and her sister also danced the *garba* (an Indian dance from Gujarat). Mostly self-taught, she had figured out how to play the organ and then moved on to play the violin in elementary school. Then she began her own record collection with money she earned from babysitting. Bella's interests intersected with those boys at high school who shared her depth of knowledge and penchant for particular artists. After graduating from high school and heading to college in the early 1990s, she was also well on her way to becoming a hip hop and reggae aficionado—a niche that has captivated her interest for almost two decades. The investigative nature of her interest led to the evolution of her musical tastes. Always historicizing music, Bella says, "It's the roots of the music" that are important, as she searched for the original versions of songs not played on the radio, including punk, ska, reggae, and hip hop. Her sense of the power of music eventually deepened to become her life.

Like other artists from mostly White areas, Bella expanded her musical repertoire at the radio station at her Bay Area university. She became the station's promotions director and was responsible for reviewing music, arranging time slots, raising funds, and networking.[2] Venturing off campus, armed with her own pair of turntables, the sophomore began to volunteer at break beat sessions in an alcohol-free Black cultural space in East Oakland. She then became entrenched in the Oakland-Berkeley-San Francisco Black music scene, which was dominated by local producers, promoters, and DJs—most of whom were men.[3] Bonding with some of the prevailing DJs of the time who were doing a lot of "good political and social music work" helped her develop her own sound. As an

Deejay Bella, with a career spanning almost two decades, spins at a 4th of July event. Photograph courtesy of Deejay Bella.

accomplished DJ, who has now also produced and recorded original music, by 2000 Bella was a recognized member of the reggae/dancehall/hip hop scene and her name graced nightclub fliers and the events section of local papers. As she began to book her own gigs, this petite Brown woman had to find her place in an arena enmeshed with gender and racial politics.

D'Lo, the Crossover: Gay, Hindu, Hip Hop

Everything that I've ever done [in music] has been a *stru-g-gle.*
—D'Lo, poet, MC, activist

D'Lo is the only female-born desi artist in this project who produces and performs poetry and music for a living.[4] A mutual friend told me about this "female Sri Lankan MC" who had been the opening act for the political rapper Michael Franti and performed on Russell Simmons's Def Poetry Jam in 2003. I first met D'Lo in 2002 during a visit to New York City when s/he invited me to a spoken-word event organized by the 911 pro-Mumia anti-police brutality organization that s/he worked with ("nine-one-one, not nine-eleven," D'Lo clarified).[5] The MC's invitation, a return of an earlier page I had sent, went as follows: "Hey woman, why dontchu stop by? It's real casual and all. Just meet me there and we can kick it. There'll be some other desis there, too, so don't worry." (D'Lo later confided his/her relief that I wasn't what s/he thought I might be: the [mainstream] type who needed to be around other desis to feel comfortable.) I was surprised by his/her voice—s/he sounded "straight up like a hip hopper dude," I wrote in my field notes. I went so far as to rethink what I was wearing, worried that it might be overdressed and too feminine. But I kept on my dress and Indian wool shawl and headed on foot toward the Baptist church on 31st Street that cold October night. Inside, it was a laidback scene of about twenty people, mostly young and racially heterogeneous, including a few Blacks, a larger number of Whites and Filipinos, and four desis including D'Lo and myself.

Luckily, I had not missed D'Lo's performance. As s/he limped (s/he had just been in an accident) to the front of the audience, I was struck by his/her style: s/he looked like a boy. D'Lo seemed to be influenced by the geographic and racial context of his/her

D'Lo's multiple ambiguities force audiences to check their assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality. Photograph courtesy of Bernie DeChant.

youth, borrowing from the styles of Chicano and African American youths from Southern California. D'Lo wore what I learned was his/her uniform: super-baggy jeans, a T-shirt covered by an oversized plaid jacket buttoned only at the top (or, alternately, a baggy hooded sweatshirt) that hid any trace of his/her female body (or brand names), and black lace-up boots. Over his/her head, shaved bald as s/he mentions in the poem that opens this chapter, D'Lo sported a blue bandana, and s/he also had pierced ears and wore a nose ring. D'Lo claimed the stage, and our attention, with bold gestures and bolder statements. Boisterously cracking jokes with hip hop-inflected slang in a girlish drawl, s/he used sweeping arm gestures reminiscent of male MCs to emphasize his/her points. D'Lo crossed all kinds of boundaries and broke all kinds of expectations—racial, gender, and sexual. But I came to learn that underlying all of D'Lo's identities was his/her commitment to social justice through political activism and art, always infused with knowledge and comedy. With a brilliant smile, D'Lo commenced with an NYPD joke:

"Knock knock!"

We all replied, "Who's th . . . !"

"BAM!!!" s/he yelled before we could finish our response.

D'Lo's reference to the de facto police policy of "Shoot first, ask (questions) later" had the audience roaring with laughter. S/he was just as skilled in bringing his/her tenor of seriousness back to a low rumble. His/her three poems, told in a funktified L.A. drawl that seemed more girly than gritty (an issue s/he often joked about), were about the civil war in Sri Lanka, jazz and the depth of music, and the corruption within the Rampart Division of the LAPD.

D'Lo has been a student of music (and a jokester) his/her entire life: "The only thing in life that was constant was music." Similar to Bella, s/he took piano lessons, sang *bhajans* (devotional songs), and says s/he "loved me some hip hop" before s/he was a teen, in the 1980s. Although s/he lived just seventy-five miles north of Compton, California, where Black youths were producing gangsta rap, his/her access to hip hop in his/her predominantly White neighborhood was limited to watching *Yo! MTV Raps*. By the time s/he was a teenager, D'Lo had compiled a list of over two hundred rap artists. S/he began writing poetry, mostly about music, when s/he was around twelve years old. Modeling Sweet Tee, one of his/her favorite MCs, s/he soon began to write lyrics.

Self-taught like the other artists, D'Lo formed a female hip hop dance crew with South Indian, Pakistani, and Latina dancers who performed at parties and culture shows in high school (at that time, D'Lo identified as a gay woman). For D'Lo, hip hop was "never really a Black thing, or a White thing. It was a cultural thing and it's *youth*."[6] Hip hop helped him/her to contend with the racism that was "hard core" in his/her childhood, and it aided in his/her developing sexuality and gender identity. D'Lo conducted his/her own "cultural analysis" of music—and a new set of race relations—during his/her study abroad at Oxford University where s/he attended video school. Music again drew him/her into multiracial social situations: s/he began to take drum lessons and at night s/he would pop lock and take part in dance battles at hip hop clubs in London. In these venues s/he stood out, "because back then, in '95 even, you never used to see Indian people at hip hop clubs. You never saw Brown faces."[7] There probably were not many female bat-

tlers, either, let alone Sri Lankan girls who identified as bois. Heading back to the United States to attend University of California, Los Angeles, for ethnomusicology, D'Lo joined with a White Jewish girl to become the rapping duo Disturbing Silence that "fuckin' tore UCLA apart." As an androgynous-looking Brown woman performing Black popular music with a White woman, D'Lo disarmed audiences with his/her smile. S/he explains that s/he never "played the gay card"; instead, s/he and his/her partner presented themselves as "strong" rather than queer women in front of student organizations such as La Raza and for Black student audiences. Over time, however, D'Lo has crafted shows that force his/her viewers to contend with all of his/her counternormative crossings.

When I first met D'Lo s/he had graduated and moved to New York, where s/he was among the minority of women who had earned a certificate from the School of Audio Engineering. D'Lo became heavily involved with the Artist's Network's Refuse and Resist program against police brutality, as well as with their anti-war Not in Our Name protest. D'Lo was also active as an MC, hosting various South Asian shows such as Artwallah in Los Angeles and Diasporadics in New York. Performing at these festivals alongside desi male MCs like Chee Malabar, D'Lo's non-White queer masculinity diversified the range of desi masculinities performed onstage. D'Lo's presence stretches the options that desi audiences deem imaginable for themselves, as D'Lo claims a "gay, Hindu, [and] hip hop" space for him/herself (see Fajardo 2008). Prior to his/her current success as a solo actor, poet, lyricist, and comic performer, D'Lo had tried to learn the technical aspects of music production from male studio producers who were reluctant to show the trade to a woman. In spite of these difficulties, D'Lo is on the road to attaining his/her goal of working in a studio and producing tracks for hip hop artists.

Brown Women in a Black Male Field

The difficulty that desi women face in infiltrating the business is not solely due to racial dynamics; some of the desi men are able to make a mark by opening studios, starting record labels, and signing artists. Women's knowledge at least equals their male counterparts, and it is evident that sexism pervades these realms. As a product

and reflection of the United States, hip hop is a male-dominated culture. The MCs in particular are mostly men; women, even Black women, tend to be rare among rappers, just as they are at freestyle battles and in the hip hop business at large. Hip hop scholars have detailed the challenges that women face as they attempt to make a name for themselves, especially given their relative lack of access to technology and the greater restrictions on their time (see Rose 1994; Kelley 1997; Pough et al. 2007). Additionally, both Black and White men in the industry promote women less, and female artists may lack access to male networks that could advance their careers while they also face sexual harassment. Brown women in hip hop face tensions and articulate contradictions that overlap with and diverge from those of both desi males *and* Black females in hip hop. In response, D'Lo and Bella act by engaging these groups through dialogue.[8]

Bella confronts a particular set of gender and sexual dynamics as a Brown female DJ in the Bay Area. Since our first encounter in the late 1990s, Bella and I have spent time together hanging out at our homes, attending social events, and going to numerous clubs where we partied and I was able to see her work. When I asked her how people react to her as a female DJ, she stated: "As a DJ period, they listen, they respect." She reflects on the positives and negatives when she remarks, "Nice guys come up to me, surprised, and a lot of good comments, too. Flirted a lot with on the bad side." Sexual politics intersect with gendered dynamics when Bella experiences the paternalism of male club owners, promoters, and other DJs who are surprised that she is technically skilled, knowledgeable about the music, and has such a large selection of records. She feels like she is "constantly proving" herself, and although she tries not to "waste that energy and [instead] focus on playing," it sometimes feels like having a "stack of cards against you." As in many aspects of American business, women in hip hop need not only have the skills of their male counterparts; Bella and other female DJs like Spinderella and Kuttin Kandi also need to work especially hard to gain the respect of and recognition from fellow professionals. According to Rachel Raimist, the creator of a documentary on female MCs, "As a woman in hip-hop you have to struggle that much more, constantly having to prove yourself, fight for respect, and strive to be taken seriously" (2004: 62). The experiences of Bella and D'Lo

link them to their predecessors in hip hop herstory, including Roxanne Shante, Queen Latifah, and MC Lyte, all of whom had to negotiate similar dynamics.

Misogyny has a concrete and much contested place in hip hop and takes center stage in academic debates about this culture. However, desi female fans and producers, like Black women, must grapple with misogynist lyrics and sexist attitudes in their everyday work lives and feel silenced and reduced to sexual beings by men in the industry. Bella interacts with a variety of people across genres of music. The Bay Area reggae and dancehall scene, for example, is led by DJs and promoters whose families came from South Africa, Nigeria, the Republic of Congo, and Jamaica, as well as by local White American DJs. In contrast, the hip hop scene is made up of a different set of people, mainly African Americans, but still incorporates a range of styles. The sonicscapes that Deejay Bella occupies exemplify the multidimensionality of Black musical worlds, especially in the multiracial mecca of northern California, yet men still predominate. Many accept Bella, but she still faces solitude. Both in her science and her music work, men sometimes attempt to usurp her authority by reducing her to her sexuality. Men have often portrayed women in hip hop in one of two ways: the sexually available vixen/ho (e.g., Lil' Kim) or the potentially gay artist/dyke (e.g., Da Brat) (Raimist 2004: 62). As Bella says in frustration, "I'm a little person and everyone looks at me and says, '*You're* my boss?' . . . People can just think I'm gay, if that's how they rationalize it."[9] The politics of being non-Black and female intersect with the generally progressive sexual politics of the Bay Area and its large presence of gays and lesbians. This nexus places alternative sexualities at the front and center of numerous interpersonal exchanges. I asked D'Lo, who at the time placed his/her identity as a gay woman who identified as a boi front and center of his/her performances, how s/he felt about misogynist elements. D'Lo responded, "Yeah, but that's just one part. I love this shit . . . There has to be changes somewhere, but meanwhile, let's make something new so that there's that alternative."

As Tricia Rose argues: "Rap music and video have been wrongfully characterized as thoroughly sexist but rightfully lambasted for their sexism" (1994: 15). Mark Anthony Neal further notes that "despite popular belief, hip-hip is *not* the most prominent site of

sexism and misogyny" (2005: 146) and, Neal includes, *homophobia*, given that its producers live in a society that engenders these same "values." Bella's engagement in the worlds of science, music, and local desi circles frames her interpretation of sexism, paternalism, and gender dynamics as systemic and societal rather than defining them as "hip hop" or "Indian" cultural phenomena. After all, so much of the criticism directed at Black urban youths and their cultural expressions scapegoat hip hop for societal products such as sexism, for instance, in place of a sustained and structural analysis of heterosexual male privilege in a racialized nation (Morgan 2000; Collins 2004; Pough 2004; Chatterjee 2006; Sharpley-Whiting 2007). This diversion is propped up by media depictions that reduce "hip hop" to its most commercialized, basest representations, including stereotypical and repeated images of Black men and women. Mainstream conglomerates profit from pimping stereotypes and seducing Americans to partake in mindless consumption. This is done partially for sales and to distract Americans from urgent matters including wars at home (on the poor, for example) and abroad. This is not to say that rappers, from the superstar to the everyday variety, should advocate sexism and homophobia, or excuse them when they do. But it provides a broader context within which to read the gender and sexual dynamics in hip hop.

Extending an analysis of sexism beyond the actions of men in hip hop to hear the voices of women, including desis, whose lives are shaped through hip hop illustrates the complexities of gender relations (see Pough 2004; Neal 2005). As Neal, a proponent of Black feminist manhood, remarks, "Rarely do we discuss how women use hip-hop to articulate their view of the world, a view that may or may not be predicated on what the men in hip-hop (or their lives) might be doing" (2005: 158). Beyond this, imagine what we discover when we listen to non-Black and gay women who use hip hop to form and express alternative and sampled identities.

Black popular culture imprints upon the emerging consciousness of Bella and D'Lo, along with the Bay Area radio producer Asma, who apply the insights they gain from hip hop to their analyses of American society. Just as they and their desi male counterparts locate racism as a structural and historical process, these women understand sexism and patriarchy to be phenomena that are both in and beyond hip hop culture because of their encounters with these

practices in multiple circles. Radhika is a hip hop fan and organic farmer who has worked on community garden projects with people coming out of jail in the predominantly Black Bayview area of San Francisco. As a woman who is Bengali and White, Radhika indicts the racist scapegoating of hip hop when she states that heavy metal bands "have all the same misogyny and nobody wants to talk about that." These women take hip hop to task for perpetuating negativity while contextualizing antiwomanist sentiments within a societal framework.

Desi women in hip hop come to question its male and masculine norms not only through their relations with Black men but with Black women as well. Black female MCs from the 1980s were formative to the self-conceptions of young desi girls in love with music and learning to love themselves. D'Lo loved "all the female MCs," and his/her favorites include the hip hop pioneers Sweet Tee, Cookie Crew, and MC Trouble. Hip hop fans and foes alike debate in too simplified a manner the role that women play in their own oppression. Desi girls, who often had access to only one generation of female elders, drew from the range of sexpressions among Black female rappers, including the pro-woman, proud Afro-centric Queen Latifah; the hard-core MC Lyte who could lyrically smash any dude; TLC, the safe-sex rhyming trio; and Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, who proclaim as much right to their sexual liberty as the men who diss or desire them. Those hip hop heads who grew up in multiracial communities were drawn to nondesi and non-White expressions of sexuality virtually absent in the literature on Asian American youth. Just as their ethnic alienation turns them toward race-central worldviews, the gender restrictions within South Asian diasporic communities direct them toward alternative modes of expression. The particular intersectionality of the racial and gender identities of desi women in hip hop marks their experiences as unique from and overlapping with hip hop's other participants (Collins 2000).

Sexism encourages desi women to find allies with Black women and their shared experiences in hip hop. This includes the issue of how to be true to one's minority and female status simultaneously, which leads to the development of female cooperatives or networks that help protect them in the business. Bella, who finds it difficult to meet other women involved in hip hop, creates women-centered

networks by hosting events and spinning at parties hosted by female DJs. D'Lo's position, on the other hand, disrupts an understanding of his/her position strictly in terms of being a woman because as a boi s/he sometimes employs a "male" perspective in explaining why s/he enjoys surrounding him/herself with women. "I was a boi. I *loved* women anyway, you know what I'm sayin? I'm gay. I like to have women around me." D'Lo's public presence as a boi-identified gay Sri Lankan pries open hip hop as a male-dominated site of hegemonic Black masculinity, particularly in his/her role as an MC—a role generally occupied by men (Fajardo 2008: 419). At times, D'Lo takes the stage next to male MCs as an embodiment of alternative masculinity, but at other times s/he faces men who treat him/her unlike "one of the boys." Thus, the unconventional gender, sexual, and racial identities of desi female artists also bring them into conflict with other groups.

Some Brown female hip hoppers feel marginalized and treated unfairly by both Black women *and* men in the industry: some do not get paid for their gigs, are dropped from the lineup of performers, or feel that promoters do not communicate fairly with them. Although they usually celebrate other women's achievements and build community with them, at times desi women are frustrated when they compare themselves with their peers whose careers seem to advance. One artist feels that Black women are not inclusive in music, which heightens her sense of invisibility. Some also face harassment—even physical intimidation as other women in the business also face—and in club spaces alcohol can lead to tense encounters. A desi woman was hired by a promoter to spin records at a "party for lesbians" in the Bay Area. Upon her arrival, however, the DJ realized that the crowd was in fact not a gay one (for which her record selection for the night was geared) but rather the regular heterosexual weekend audience. During the course of the event, a young Black patron, frustrated with the music, threw her drink over the DJ's equipment. The desi artist, who said she "dealt with this shit before," felt set up by the promoter and analyzed the altercation as an unfolding drama of the intersection of race, gender, and sexual politics. She pointed to a number of her identities that, within the context of a heterosexual Black nightclub, was reread as nonnormative: "I'm sure part of it is that I'm Indian, I looked gay, I wasn't playing enough rap." The DJ held a relatively "powerful"

status as music selector within a setting in which Blacks often set the terms. The DJ interpreted the patron's dissatisfaction with the music choices as a signal of the patron's dissatisfaction, too, with the DJ's "deviant" identities, combining to make desi female artists sometimes uncomfortable in their roles in the hip hop business.

These conflicts are the exception, yet it is nonetheless virtually impossible to be a woman in hip hop and remain unaware of the gender and sexual politics at play. For desi female performers, sometimes the odds seem to be stacked against them. As one artist said in frustration, "I should go for a woman's field. What's a woman's field? Rape counseling, I should work with abused girls." And although the artists do give their time to progressive causes, none can leave music; indeed, above all other identities it is music that defines them. Music moves each artist in ways that cannot be described through words and intellectual analyses. In turn, they each wish to move their audiences.

When young desi women enter the hip hop scene as participants, they enter a predominantly Black social field with few models for understanding their position as non-White, non-Black artists. Over time, DJs and MCs like Bella and D'Lo see that their experiences merge with those of other females attempting to gain distribution and attract wider audiences while contending with sexism, sexual advances, and homophobia. At other points where the racial outsider status of desis subsumes their gender status, Black and Brown women are at odds. Desi artists and the tricky orchestrations that they describe contribute to the conversations in hip hop studies scholarship that thus far largely implies a Black audience and focuses on the relationships between young Black men and women of the hip hop generation. Some scholars and journalists have become attuned to the silencing and mistreatment of women in hip hop. We can reflect even more on the problems and promises of hip hop culture when we understand how non-Black, female, and non-straight participants contend with potent exchanges that play out in clubs and within the hip hop business at large.

These dynamics are part of the game, however, and the artists, having spent a good portion of their lives in these spaces, learn to negotiate them and even carve out spaces in which to voice their own identities alongside the range of their Black peers who cohabit hip hop's social landscapes. In fact, the lessons learned by desis

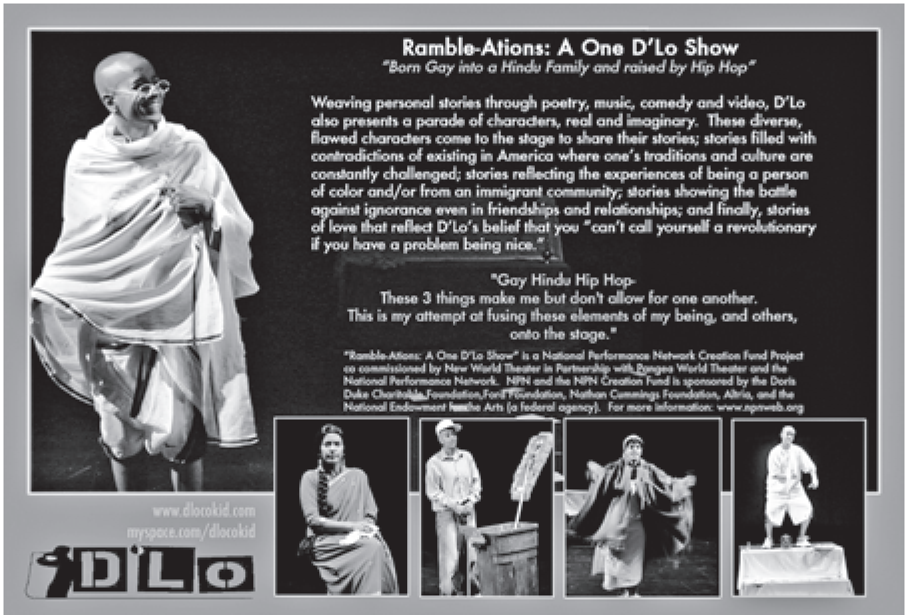
about the implications of gender and sexuality impact their music and their relationships with Blacks, as does their racial and ethnic difference. Tense and productive exchanges emphasize to desis the meaningfulness of differences, and they infuse their music with this sense of commonality and distinction. Artists like D'Lo and Bella, despite their double marginalization as non-Black women, continue to manage their frustrations and work independently and consistently. Because they live for music, they contend with these complexities and occupy spaces "in the middle"—between and across communities, identities, and expectations. However, their membership in ethnic communities often operates under a different set of gender expectations than those in hip hop, thus requiring the artists to expend equal amounts of emotional effort. Hip hop's desis once again check our assumptions of sameness and difference with regard to gender and sexual mores across communities.

Negotiating Gender Roles in Desi America, Expressing Sexuality through Hip Hop

> Oh, I know that when Neil will grow older, he will appreciate and he will realize how beautiful our culture is.—Indian mother's voiceover on "Neil," Karmacy Track

> But she knew enough not to go . . .
> Knew that, over there, bald heads were for
> bad people turned pious   or just bad people
> and bad people are ugly
> coz hair always matters.
> And these bald women had to wait   as punishment   to slowly become beautiful.
> And she? She re-shaved her head once every week   And waiting to do it   Was punishment.
> —D'Lo, "From Silent Confusion to Blaring Healing"

In his/her performance of the poem "From Silent Confusion to Blaring Healing," a Brown, bald, boyish D'Lo flips the gender script by calling attention to the differential (de)valuation of the bald head in transnational perspective. In Sri Lanka a shaved head is imposed upon outcastes, such as widows, to mark their pariah status; in



Ramble-Ations, a "one D'Lo show," features skits in which D'Lo embodies a number of roles including Gandhi and his/her Amma (mother). Flier courtesy of Pilar Castillo.

the United States, D'Lo willingly shaves his/her head to represent his/her inner self. Instead of sidestepping the factors that mark him/her as different, D'Lo engages with these dynamics up front through comic and political self-expression. D'Lo has been touring the nation with his/her show "Ramble-Ations: A One D'Lo Show."[10] The subhead on the promotional material for the show reads, "Born gay into a Hindu family and raised by Hip Hop." And the text further proclaims, "Gay Hindu Hip Hop—These 3 things make me but don't allow for one another. This is my attempt at fusing these elements of my being, and others, onto the stage." As a boi born in a woman's body, D'Lo performs complex gender and sexual identifications onstage in what seems to be a direct affront to the norms valued within South Asian communities.

D'Lo, however, wishes no disrespect. Rather, through lyrics and onstage performances the artist encourages audiences to rethink ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual authenticity by enacting alterna-

tive desiness as s/he lovingly—even humorously—refutes desi respectability. D'Lo employs call and response—a foundational principle of hip hop—to engage the audience members, who may even perhaps identify with some of the performer's multiple transgressions. This use of hip hop to alter the terms of South Asian Americanness is just one example of the artists' engendering of political participation. D'Lo's visual presence and artistic material expand the range of South Asian sexualities in the diaspora as s/he illustrates to Brown audiences identities, including queer female masculinities, previously believed impossible and certainly deemed ethnically diluted (Halberstam 2000; Chatterjee 2006).

The presumed "invisibility" of South Asians in commercial hip hop underestimates the impact of Black popular culture. Further, desi artists correct the misconception that the "values" of hip hop and South Asian ethnic communities are at odds, like Black and Asian "cultures." But how can a gay Brown male-identified woman find solace in the misogyny and homophobia of hip hop? Black female artists and queer producers of hip hop, some of whom create a genre called "homohop" that is present in the Bay Area, show why those seemingly ignored or even oppressed by hip hop remain committed to the culture.[11] Additionally, some scholars and "hip hop feminists" (Morgan 2000) have also found agentive ways to employ Black culture as a tool for dialogue and self-expression. So, too, have some desis. The explicit sexuality of some aspects of hip hop does not always devalue Black women; instead, it is often a celebration of expressive embodiments of Black women and their bodies (Neal 2005: 130), particularly in a context in which men have undervalued Black womanhood (hooks 1981). The content of hip hop and its characters spark the conversations of desi female artists on relationships, sex, and sexuality. It provides some desis with models of sexuality that they could choose to emulate or challenge, sample or reject. D'Lo's queering of the diaspora may be interpreted as exceptional or as inauthentically desi (how can one be desi and queer?) (see also Takagi 2000; Eng 1997, 2001). Yet D'Lo illustrates what Black sexualities offer American desis in their process of providing (queer) alternatives to hegemonic conceptions of desi gender and sexuality (Gopinath 2005).

Like other immigrant parents, South Asian elders feel it their duty to indoctrinate children with culturally appropriate gender

roles and sexualities, an especially urgent task within the context of displacement from their home countries. Thus, not only are "the daughters of their community disproportionately burdened with the preservation of culture in the form of religion, language, dress, food, and child-rearing" but also female chastity and regulations against exogamous relations are of ultimate importance (Dasgupta and Das Dasgupta 2000: 327). American-born children, conscious of filial responsibility to re-create culture through economically stable and reputable careers along with heterosexual, endogamous, and timely marriages, struggle when they see that they might fail to realize their parents' dreams. Intergenerational rifts open because American social norms expose desi youths to new possibilities. These become potential samples for American desi life. Parents attempt to restrain crossovers, however, when they observe their children interacting with Blacks and, worse, see them taking active part in a despised culture. This is not what "coming to America" means. But, parents reason, this is just a phase of youthful rebellion, and it will end with future stability.

Along with the nearly universal assumption that their children are heterosexual, parents from the subcontinent generally hold their sons and daughters to different sets of expectations. To be marriageable, girls should be chaste and not date. In marriage, they should emulate their mother's role as "keepers of culture" responsible for enculturating their children with religious, linguistic, and culinary practices (Gupta 1999; Espiritu 2001; Maira 2002). Parents grant boys, on the other hand, more freedom and less accountability.[12] However, brothers and male cousins are expected to marry appropriately—before which they must attend good schools, major in something useful, and secure a solid and respectable job. When the girl's family looks for a boy in marriage, parents often evaluate all of these factors.[13] "Almost abusive in its consistency," writes a hip hop desi to me about his parents, "is their asking when I'm getting married, usually coupled with the suggestion [that] I should go to India and find a wife."[14]

Second-generation desi youths do not simply mimic their parents' values and perspectives as automatons. Rather, they sort through them and try to balance competing dreams. Desi youths often make the kinds of marriage and career choices that gel with their parents' hopes, partially to fulfill their duties and because it

fits well with their own visions of a future. Others dissent, however. In particular, although desi artists want to please their parents, this desire often clashes with their love of Black popular music, a distinctly nontraditional practice. Interestingly, their choices are as gendered as their parents' expectations. Male MCs feel it important as sons to care for their parents, marry South Asian women, and raise desi children to continue the family line. But they understand that their eccentric career paths limit marital choices among desi women who might prefer men in more stable fields. Desi women in hip hop, however, often form relationships with men in the music business, meaning they flout family expectations in career *and* marriage. That is, some of the men feel a tug to choose between love *or* art, but the women's romantic love *and* their passion for music coalesce.

Before attending to the sexual politics of desire I want to clarify the way that desi MCs approach hip hop as a masculine field. Too many times their motivations have been dismissed as simply an eroticized desire and fear of racialized Blackness, though this may be true in the case of many—but not all—non-Blacks (Lott 1993b; Roediger 1998; Maira 2002). To rephrase Bakari Kitwana's observation on Whites and hip hop: "[desi] boys don't necessarily want to be Black. This conclusion is an oversimplification" (2005: 14). Some mainstream desi youths *are* attracted to hip hop for its racialized masculinity, but the artists have other motivations.

"Indian Negroes?" The Racialized Sexuality of Desi Men

> We call [Blacks] *kalus*. We kind of have this affection for them, it's kind of funny. We're kind of afrai . . . not afraid of them, but we have so much respect for them. Also 'cause Indians love basketball, right? So we totally have respect for, like, kalus that can dunk. And the general muscular body that they have, we want . . . A lot of Indians are thin . . . So, we all want to be like that: the thick calves and being able to dunk . . . So for the male point of view, the kalu is what we find, like, not the ideal, but . . . first because you know in terms of their mental, or whatever, in terms of how they study, we don't have respect for that in general. It's kind of racist, but, you know. But we want the physical typing. We want to maintain like the Indian goodie-goodie, academics, but we want to have that too. The view is to have the best of both worlds. But in terms of kalu

> women, the majority of us don't find them too much attractive . . . I actually find White women more attractive than kalu women . . . Our whole connection to the kalu culture is through the men, you know?
> —Rajiv, mainstream Indian University of California, Berkeley student

The idea of a young desi man like Rajiv, in the above quote, attracted to hip hop often conjures images of a model minority who, in the words of Thien-bao Thuc Phi, "take[s] on a racist exaggeration of black manhood to replace the demasculinization placed on [him] by white supremacy" (2008: 303). After all, states Judith Halberstam, "arguments about excessive masculinity tend to focus on black bodies . . . and insufficient masculinity is all too often figured by Asian bodies" (2000: 2). A second interpretation reads the attraction of Asian Americans to Blackness, including the adoption of hip hop aesthetics and slang, to be a response to their devalued immigrant ethnicity. Indeed, the racialized hypersexual masculinity of Black men depicted in some hip hop *is* a draw for men of all backgrounds. Sunaina Maira explains the sexualized draw of "a particular machismo" signified in hip hop for mainstream desi males who contend with the contradictions of class and race by negotiating "coolness" and "nostalgia": "It may . . . connote a certain image of racialized hypermasculinity that is the ultimate definition of 'cool'" (2002: 336). As such, for Whites Blackness becomes, according to David Roediger, "the object of racialized desire, and simultaneously racialized fear" (quoted in Maira 2002: 336; see also Cornyetz 1994). This is not, however, what motivates desis in this project to produce Black popular culture and live in Black urban communities in New York and California. Desis who become MCs do not learn who Black people "are" through decontextualized media images. Daily, they engage with Black men and women as romantic and business partners alongside their interactions with South Asians in love and art. In this section I examine how the consumption and production of Black popular culture by desi MCs intersects with heterosexual romance to accurately explain how hip hop and ethnic commitments shape their gender identities and sexual choices.

Mainstream desi youths often display a paradoxical relationship to Black men, specifically through their desire for Black masculinity yet distaste for interracial relations. This is partially related to the American sexualization of desi men, who confront depictions of

themselves as "lacking" masculinity, particularly in their encounters with other men. An Indo-Fijian I spoke with felt his manhood challenged by a pair of racist White men; he also felt disrespected when the leaders of a basketball pickup game routinely passed him over in favor of a Black man who had less basketball skill. Dru, a young Black student attending a San Jose, California, community college who dated desi girls, describes his male friend as "surprisingly muscular for an Indian," thereby reinforcing Rajiv's conceptions about desi men's fitness. Some desi girls' preferences for "big," "muscular," and "dark" Black men also imply that desi men lack these features.

Most of the analyses of South Asian masculinity, few that there are, draw from theories about Asian Americans despite their differential racialization. Many desis disidentify with the category Asian American because of cultural and phenotypic distinctions. But there are overlaps, such as in media depictions of emasculated Asian men as caricatures, cab drivers, and as nerds and geeks who rarely get the girl. And particularly in relation to Black masculinities, South and East Asian men become lumped in the constructed dualism of Asian/Black. While there is little information on South Asian and Black male relations in the United States, desi men may feel and may be viewed by others as relatively less masculine, thereby accounting for the desirability of Black masculinity (but not mentality) recounted by Rajiv.

While avoiding Blacks, mainstream desi men attire themselves with racial and gendered cues (or samples) of young Black men, thereby turning racialized aesthetics (low-slung jeans, particular brand names, slang, and posture) into ethnic and gendered performances (Maira 2002). They ethnicize or remix these by, for example, incorporating Hindi or Punjabi slang in their speech, calling themselves "coolies," and wearing gold chains with *khalsa* medallions, the symbol that represents the Indian religion of Sikhism. One desi woman I spoke to, Meena, prefers it when Black men talk to her because the style of South Asian men, who try to "talk like they're Black," seems "forced." "They don't want to mix into that [Black] community," the Berkeley student says, "but they want to take their dialect and music and stuff like that and try to put an Indian face on it." "Indian face" immediately conjures images of "blackface," but does it imply something different than "rotten

coconut"? In either case, such interpretations of "doing race" are contradictory because they suggest that individuals *construct* racial identities, which contests the essentialist assumptions of Blackness and Indianness that underlie such comments, including the idea that certain groups "own" certain authentic gendered performances. These reified conceptions bear the imprint of centuries-long discourses that have racialized the sexuality of various groups in the United States in order to "naturalize"—and therefore differentially value and exploit—group distinctions. But perhaps we can also interpret the sampling of urban styles by Brown youths as the expression—possibly troubling, possibly innovative—of a process of cross-racial fertilization symbolizing connectivity.

Urban desi MCs mark their familiarity with Black culture in the way that they carry themselves: the kinds of clothes they wear, the way they don them, and the way they walk and talk. For others, the way the artists inhabit their bodies and their displays of cultural capital, particularly their knowledge of hip hop, can imply that they grew up within this culture. These men do not usually feel compelled to challenge stereotypes of Asian masculinity. However, they are not indifferent to the forms of masculinity expressed through hip hop. Hip hop settings often require performances of normative masculinity and aggressiveness that initially attracted these rappers. "There *was* a masculinity to it," acknowledges the Rukus Avenue cofounder Sammy, "and there's certainly [an] appeal to it in that sense and that's where I fell in love with hip hop after that point." Chee enacts his masculinity as often as he performs race when he battles other MCs in order to help onlookers interpret him. In these ciphers of evaluation, he feels, one needs to represent or else be embarrassed: "If I don't come off here, I'm gonna look like a sucker." But if the consciously cultivated stage personas of desi male MCs are obviously masculine, they are not overstated in the ways that others, upon hearing of "desis in hip hop," often assume. Contrary to some analyses of the adoption of hip hop by non-Black men, these artists do not embody stereotypical conceptions of Black masculinity, and neither does this fully, or even mostly, explain their participation. This is partially because they represent the genre of conscious rather than gangsta or bling rap that earns airplay. Intergroup contact does not always erase conflict, but it often can do so. Because of their close ties to Black friends, girlfriends,

and their extended families, desi rappers are conscious of a range of Black masculinities (as there are among South Asians) not captured in stereotypes promoted by the mainstream media. Blacks, too, reflect "heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity" (Lowe 1996). Thus, desi men realize that they have options in thinking about how to be a man.

Though there are exceptions, non-Black males who love hip hop are not unequivocally "thugs" who desire Black masculinity to compensate for their emasculation. "That's a stereotype," Rawj said when we were talking in a coffee shop in Berkeley about the appeal of Black masculinity for Asian rappers. He reminded me that when he was growing up in the 1980s, sex did not pervade the image of hip hop and videos (in which "every rapper is hella hard or trying to look sexy," Rawj describes) were not yet widespread. Looking over the press photos for Feenom Circle's latest project, we joked about potential booty pictures and jewelry, highly unlikely given

MC Chee Malabar. Photograph courtesy of Preston Merchant.

their perspective (in the photos the closest thing to bling was a kukui nut necklace). Another Indian MC, Vivek, told me of the time, after rapping at a post-9/11 desi gathering in Oakland for which he was wearing a kurta with the skull cap often worn by Muslim men, he stepped outside for a breather. He was accosted by a first-generation desi man in his thirties who, with cigarette in one hand and beer in the other, exclaimed "Man, I'm glad you're not what I expected, to be all thuggish!" Speaking about this exchange later, Vivek emphasized to me that Indians in hip hop were trying to do something "*positive*," something "*conscious*," and that this is neither about drinking and smoking (which he does not do) nor about fulfilling stereotypes.

Desi men, despite the recent arrival of their families to the United States, find a range of masculinities available to them. More concerned with art than image, their engagements with Black people and hip hop culture differ from desi males who desire and despise Blacks from a distance. Drawing especially from local ethnic, racial, and musical collectives, they sew together various stylistic and expressive cues to perform their masculinity. These MCs enact Brown masculinities onstage that reject problematic images of Black men promoted in commercial hip hop and expand the range of available gender roles for desi men.

Love or Art?

> I feel that there's a responsibility attached to making that commitment to somebody in terms of being able to provide, or help provide. And I want to have a family. That's, beyond anything, my biggest goal in life. I would give up everything else for that in a heartbeat. That's not even a question to me.—KB, Indian American MC

Why do some—though not all—desi men dedicate their professional and artistic lives to Black culture and yet marry desi women? Is it the "raja syndrome" that privileges boys (DasGupta and Das Dasgupta 2000: 333), drawing them to their female counterparts? "Indian guys are probably more into the obligation [to family] than the girls. I've heard so many stories where guys just leave their girlfriends because their parents found a wife for them," says Meena. Calling them "mama's boys," Meena says that while desi men will

do things in college that their parents are not aware of (dating, for example), they ultimately follow parental advice about majors, and "they'll get a good job and they'll marry who their parents want them to marry, so they usually keep the traditions going." Discussions about South Asian parental constraints often focus on daughters; males are thought to have relative freedom. Radhika, who is Bangladeshi and White and dates a Black male rapper, says: "In general for any culture the men have a lot of freedom to go explore other cultures and the women are the keepers of culture." If this is the case, why don't we see *more* interracial marriages among desi men in hip hop?

Missing in descriptions of the gender double standard is the filial duty and economic pressures that South Asian parents place on sons. "Men are supposed to carry the family," Deejay Bella says. "They have to take care of their parents" as sons do on the subcontinent. The economic achievements of Asian male professionals in America link their masculinity to upward mobility and wealth. "Controlling images" of Asian American doctors, engineers, and professors that abound in television shows and in Hollywood films affirm their association with the mind rather than the body, which tends to be the focus of stereotypes about Black men and women (Espiritu 1997; Collins 2000).[15] South Asians usually expect men to support their families, and as a result desi men "*have to* make money," Bella emphasizes.

Such expectations set up a tension between ethnic obligations and musical passions in the lives of some desi men. "It was more like love or art," says Rawj, and this "actually caused me a lot of inner distress." "It's a tough choice," Karmacy's Sammy concurs. Finding love and art to be oppositional, Rawj decided in his twenties to pursue music with his hip hop group Feenom Circle instead of finding a wife, despite his sense of sacrifice. For him, music was his "dream, but at the same time this is the importance of your culture." Moreover, money is important in finding a wife and supporting a family. As Rawj explains, "I really felt like a Punjabi father wouldn't be really hip to giving his daughter away to a guy who, on the side, does this. You know what I mean? Unless I was successful at it. Successful in monetary terms." As these rappers attempt to fulfill obligations, they contend with people's misunderstandings of their musical choices as a desire for (Black) hypersexuality, which

contrasts with the respectable white-collar masculinity praised as an ethnic ideal among desis (Maira 2002: 49). Social status and their elders' views of music as a fanciful vocation is just as important as financial security: "I feel like there's a certain stigma against musicians in general in Punjabi culture. That it's like, of a lower breed," says Rawj. Thus, hip hop may represent a barrier to potential desi spouses who search for more familiar lifestyles. Material realities and their individual passions and obligations cause some rappers to keep daytime careers in computers and law, for example, even if these jobs "drain" them of creativity. Despite such conflicts, a number of performers wed desi women and made albums; they succeeded in both love *and* art by wedding their ethnic and hip hop communities.

Marrying a co-ethnic, the norm among South Asians in the United States, is important, and not only to please one's parents. "I *did* want to marry a Punjabi girl . . . because I thought it was important and it wasn't because somebody put it into my head, either," Rawj asserts. Like Rawj, KB married an Indian American woman and felt that this was not predetermined. Desi women are familiar with the filial expectations that their partners faced; perhaps, too, they may be counted upon to continue ethnic traditions. But the desis whom the artists feel comfortable around are, themselves, not mainstream. As Rawj explains, it would "take a certain kind of woman" in order to "meet [him] at the same point" where he found himself to be. These rappers were looking for "an equal," someone "real deep," "sympathetic" to their music, "someone with culture," and an educated woman who did not expect her husband to be the sole breadwinner. As it happened, Rawj ended up marrying his rap group's Web designer, a desi woman who looked at his career "as a plus as opposed to a minus." Rappers like Rawj, KB, and Sammy are able to bridge divisions between the pulls of art and love because they found supportive women—women who are "completely down" and who understand their choices. These unions discount the "raja syndrome" as the only explanation for desi endogamous marriage and instead point to a less-stereotypical view of American desi women and men who are concerned with more than economic incorporation and cultural preservation.

Hip hop culture impresses upon desi rappers ideas about gender; it is also the mode through which they express their own perspec-

tives on gender relations. Their rhymes on this topic are heteronormative as they discuss marriage, love, and loss. Sometimes rappers praise South Asian women. Karmacy's four-man Indian crew in their song "Neil," for example, rap about an Indian girl that Neil's mother had been trying to set him up with since grade school, and whom he consciously avoided because he was too busy being an American boy. In college, however, he sees this woman in a new light and ends up with her, praising her as a repository of Indian culture and thereby fulfilling his mother's hopeful prediction quoted in the epigraph. That Karmacy's MCs found and married desi women who respect and support their engagement in the arts may be the ultimate expression of this mother's hopes *and* the artists' own dreams, articulated through hip hop music. This is a prime example of sampling—the artists neither reject fully nor adopt wholly hegemonic desi gender norms.

Desi men who are not married tell a slightly different story. The majority of male artists have dated both desis and nondesis, thereby avoiding their parents' ethnic insularity. "I think [my parents] know I don't play by those rules," said a desi man who prefers "light-skinned bohemian" women of color. It is probably the case that the artists' involvement with a Black subculture with alternative notions of beauty has shaped their preferences. Lara, a Black woman in her early thirties who works in the music business in Oakland, is surprised to hear about South Asian anti-Black sentiment, countering, "But boy, do those Indian men love on Black women!" Yet desi and Black relationships raise the scorn, disappointment, and grief of South Asian parents who are "scandalized" and "cried." In the case of one Indian American man who had married a Black woman, his parents were disturbingly "happy" the marriage ended in divorce. In rare cases parents come around once grandchildren are born, although these elders tend to be triple migrants—Indians from Africa or the West Indies where contact with Blacks is greater.

To some extent, interracial—even interreligious or interregional—marriage is an increasing possibility for diasporic youth. Yet while many South Asians have mixed marriages in their extended families, they still remain the topic of gossip and derision. Desi youths have aunties and uncles who subscribe to "BMW," a witty acronym used by the novelist Gautam Malkani (2006) to stand

for "Blacks, Muslims, and Whites," the hierarchy of preferences, from "least" to "most" desired, if one makes the mistake of marrying "outside." Such condemnations have been "extremely traumatic" to some desis in relationships with Blacks.

Almost as a rule, however, desi artists do not date White women, in contrast to most scholarly depictions of Asian American sexuality (Marchetti 1994; Fong and Yung 1995; Shinagawa and Pang 1996). They cite attraction, politics, and compatibility as their reasons. Early experiences with racism may still impact these adults. The politics of attraction during high school made these artists all too aware of their racial difference from White beauty ideals, especially for those who went to White schools and who felt unattractive to White girls. For example, White women were not attracted to one desi rapper until, he says, "jungle fever"—"the movie and the phenomenon" of interracial attraction—came on the scene in his senior year.[16] He reacted to this and, like D'Lo, "wasn't really trying to have too much time for White women or White people in general, you know?" Reflecting back, he reasons that he might

MC Chee Malabar. Photograph courtesy of Richard Louissaint.

have had "too strong of a racial politics" at that point, now that he agrees with Gandhian principles of tolerance. Chee Malabar, who prefers the "Black and Spanish women" who approach him in New York, is not attracted to White women because he feels they would not be able to understand his perspective and experience in life. "I have more on my mind than they can imagine," Chee said soberly. That minority women "understand where I'm coming from and . . . I can be honest with them," is critical to this MC, which reflects the importance of a shared worldview that crosses some color lines but not others. These MCs view Whiteness as a divide that they cannot or will not overcome.

Romantic choices relay something about the racial identities of MCs: "Tell me whom you love, and I'll tell you who you are," notes the epigraph that frames Frances Twine's essay on the "romantic management of racial identity" (1996: 292). In her study of the dating patterns of biracial Black and White youth, Twine argues that the "shifts in racial self-identification were often partially expressed and grounded in romantic choices" (295). The racial identities of South Asians in America are ambiguous and shifting, too, and their decision to date minority women and *not* White women is an explicit identification as being non-White. The commonality of being a minority—including Whites' deviant sexualization of minorities, which affects conceptions of desirability—is an important component of what they find attractive in non-White women. Hip hop offers South Asians access to an explicitly racialized identity; dating Blacks may similarly offer, as Twine notes, "romantic access to a racialized cultural identity" (301). If, as Milton Gordon (1964) claims, intermarriage (to Whites) is seen as the final stage to assimilation, then what does it mean when one chooses a non-White partner? The artists' views on Whiteness and their tendency to date minorities suggest a relation between their racial politics and the way they conceive of themselves as racial and sexual subjects, thus discrediting the notion of a colorblind or postracial America (Hollinger 1995; see also Moran 2003). That these South Asians in relationships with Black women identify as desis and maintain their connection to other South Asians and certain ethnic practices also means that they are not "becoming Black."

The rappers also date desi women (it would be "strange" not to love Indian women, one commented) who tend to be "like them":

some of these women have also dated interracially, understand the artists' choices, and are willing to go against the desi grain. Another MC's interactions with South Asian women have increased alongside his involvement in the desi music scene. Pointing to cultural and environmental reasons as opposed to shared ethnic background, he says of one West Indian desi girlfriend that they were similar because "she grew up in the Bronx around all Black people, she talks the way I talk, she listens to all the same music I listen to." Hip hop rather than ancestry, therefore, becomes their shared culture.

Desi men in hip hop sometimes represent and sometimes diverge from the broader second generation in their career and marriage choices. They attempt to deal with competing expectations within South Asian and hip hop America, both steeped in particular gender and sexual dynamics. While male artists often consider love and art to be competing realms, some bridge the two, including the married artists, all of whom wed desi women. Indeed the other desi men in hip hop have formed relationships with a range of minority women, thereby finding it important to be with someone who supports their decisions and shares their interests—including hip hop culture—and the concerns they rap about. But what explains what looks like a full crossover into hip hop by the female artists who tended not to date desis at all? Is it because "girls seem more brave in a way," as Meena hypothesizes, and are more willing to take part in particularly those social arenas parents most want to restrict them from? And if so, how do these impact our interpretations of the identities and politics of desis?

Love and Art

> I've personally never had a problem dating Black men, and I don't feel like culturally I would have to be with an Indian to do the things that I need to do. I feel like I need to be with someone with the same worldview. There are Black men who clearly approach me for the Kama Sutra thing. But then there are others who approach me and are just open; they respect me and that's all I really need.—Radhika, community activist

Female artists contend with the notions of race and sexuality of both South Asians and Blacks, but their gender and sexual dynamics play

out differently than they do for their male counterparts. Historically, Westerners have exoticized South Asian women as desirable albeit devalued partners. The dynamics of interracial heterosexual relations are not limited to interactions between South Asians and Whites; Black men also orientalize desi women. How, or do, female artists interject these fantasies, and how do such perceptions shape the dynamics between Black and South Asian women? Desi women's own sexual preferences highlight the impact of mainstream notions of Black masculinity and the counterweight of sustained interracial contact. Like their male counterparts, female artists do not date White men, but they rarely date desi men either. Desi female performers are aware of the gender and sexual norms among co-ethnics and their Black male and female peers. In staking claims in multiple communities they sample from a range of available options—including tropes of Black masculinity—to present alternative sexualities and lifestyles. They take risks to challenge orientalist stereotypes as well as misconceptions of "women in hip hop." Their choices overlap and diverge from the male MCs, but both sets deal with similar difficulties in achieving satisfaction in love and art.

Desi men and women in hip hop both look for partners who understand and are supportive of what they do, yet the women tend to date Blacks, including African Americans, Jamaicans, and Ethiopians. They do this at considerable risk of ostracism, because South Asian anti-Black sentiments often culminate in anxieties over the particular pairings of desi daughters with Black men. This frustrates many of the female artists who want the freedom to love whom they desire while also keeping their family's affections. Understanding the tensions surrounding these patterned choices deepens our examination of the causes and consequences of romantic relationships between South Asians and Blacks.

Although some of the female artists had wanted to date desi men when they were in college and soon after, they are generally resistant to doing so now, in their thirties, precisely because of the ideas that many desi men, even those born in the United States, hold about tradition and gender role expectations. These women remember all too well their childhood and college experiences within their ethnic communities, and they continue to dislike others monitoring their sexuality and thus critique mainstream desi ideas. As one

Berkeley student told me, "I think Indian guys really have a problem . . . like 'oh my god, she's such a ho!' for doing anything that's not completely covered from head to toe and not touching anyone." For example, a female artist and I, dressed in club attire on our way to go out, ran into a group of desis we knew at a popular Indian *chaat* (or snack) shop in Berkeley. They circled the artist and praised her tight-fitting outfit—attire associated not just as "American" but as Black American (see Maira 2002: 13). Yet once she was out of earshot one man disapprovingly claimed that she was just there "to strut around." In light of this incident, Sunaina Maira's description is apt: "The Indian remix subculture . . . showed little variation in the coding of female style and, more important, an underlying preoccupation with the stylistic coding and regulation of Indianness, and implicitly of Blackness, especially for women" (2002: 46). By contradicting—in fact moving all the way in the opposite direction—of standards set for proper desi behavior, the artists' ethnic authenticity is questioned. If proper desiness is linked with community solidarity, then "women deviating from this idea of traditional Indian womanhood are considered traitors to the community" (DasGupta and Das Dasgupta 2000: 327). In response, desi artists operate largely outside of desi spaces.

Hip hoppers find their co-ethnics' reactions to be hypocritical and close-minded erroneous assumptions of who a person is based on his or her attire. They feel that desi men will "totally judge females that act a certain way, and then they'll try to get with them," laughed Meena, who believes this is "disrespectful." Ironically, mainstream desi men often imagine these very "disrespectful" interactions to be characteristic of desi female-Black male interactions, and this displacement becomes their touted reason for their need to "protect" desi girls. Thus while South Asians often imagine that hip hop spaces are tense with male-male heterosexual competition, patriarchy, and sexism, ethnic communities in fact re-create these dynamics.

Desi female MCs and DJs are subject to a unique expression of anti-Black racism on the part of desis: namely, they become its target. After fending off drunk and groping desi men at parties who assume the "right" to (touch) desi women (the same men who claim it is Black men who "prey" on "their women"), female performers do not agree with mainstream desi men's assumption about the

(sexual) motivations of Black men in contrast to the "honorable" motives of desi men. "Black culture is very sexual," comments a desi man. Thus, the artists' attachment to hip hop and Black people—especially the Black men whom desi women artists date—lead mainstream South Asians to glue such stereotypical conceptions to the artists. Meena says that the Indian men in her college circles often link desi girls with darker skin color to (loose) sexuality. In tricky moves, South Asians' biological conceptions (i.e., the imagined hypersexuality) of Black people are contradicted by the plasticity with which they apply these ideas to others: desis—who are not (inappropriately) sexual—who hang out with Blacks (who are inappropriately sexual) therefore become (inappropriately) sexual, themselves! The artists have long encountered such sentiments and their prevalence continues to turn them off from socializing with co-ethnics who do not understand their sense of style and find their access to Black people and cultures mysterious and suspect.

In contrast to desi hip hoppers, countless mainstream desi girls told me that they ended their relations with Black men because they would never marry them. The disturbing ways that some mainstream desi youth relate to Black men and women in their intimate relationships parallels the troubling and anti-Black ways they adopt hip hop culture. Black men relate their own stories of "crazy Indian women," often remarking that their girlfriends refuse to introduce them to their parents, or deceive their parents about the true identities of their boyfriends. Dru, a gregarious biracial Black and German college student from the South Bay, went to a Muslim desi's house (appraised at three million dollars) and his date prepped him to say, in the event that her parents came home, that he was attending community college but that he was transferring to "whatever UC (University of California) you like," in order to elevate his educational status in their eyes. In another case, he says he went out with a Pakistani girl who instructed him to get into the back seat of the car (a Lexus GS300, no less) and duck down as they drove by her parents' house so they would not see him. Dru fully understood the implications of her request: "It's to hide the fact that (a) she's talking to boys, and (b) she's talking to boys who look like me." Such is the extent to which unquestioned racist norms circulate among South Asians and affect those outside its bounds. That desi girls still date Black men does not make them anti-racist, espe-

cially when they condone their parents' behaviors by choreographing charades and expecting their Black friends to understand the degree to which the South Asian community devalues them. "I said no," Dru says in response to the girl who asked him to duck down. "I'm not gonna do that for anyone. It makes me feel like a coward, even if it's for her benefit."

The desi artists attempt to challenge these kinds of interactions that frame the general tense dynamics of South Asian/Black relations in the United States. In contrast to other desis' clandestine activities, they usually maintain open relationships with Black men despite community pressures against doing so. Therefore, different kinds of conversations emerge among family members; whether positive or negative, their presence expands the extent to which South Asians across generations have to contend with the influences of Blacks. Just as White racism and beauty norms push desi artists away from dating Whites, desi racism and chauvinism send these women away from South Asian men and sometimes toward Black men.

The situation is a bit more complicated for female performers who, now in their thirties, want to find life partners but find relationship choices to be difficult. As Maira explains, "Women who had dated African American men and struggled with parental disapproval expressed perhaps the most emotional critique of the anti-Black prejudices of immigrant parents" (2002: 71). Like their male counterparts, women think deeply about how to develop personal lives that can support their professional, political, and artistic choices. As a result, they weigh the merits and drawbacks of dating South Asian versus Black men. As this is the case, we cannot contend that America is either a colorblind, postracial society or a multicultural haven in which differences matter no longer. Neither can we believe that South Asians are on their way to "becoming White."

One desi in her early thirties—prior to dating her boyfriend, a Black rapper—was becoming anxious about her single status and decided to search for a husband on a desi Internet dating Web site. Pulled by her political and future desires (she wants to remain connected to Bangladesh and have her children learn Bengali), Radhika stated, "Well, logically I should find a Bengali guy because I can't give the kids that language." Having dated only one Indian in her

life, she had primarily dated Black men over the past decade. But the question arises, "Okay, could he [a Black man] handle India? Could I bring him there?" She believes that a Black man might be mistreated, especially "the darker they are the worse it is." She did meet a desi man whom she "admired culturally and intellectually" (not physically? I wondered), but the relationship failed after a couple of months. When she stated, "I think that no matter which way I go, I'm going to have to give up something" in choosing between a desi or Black man, she describes the same tension voiced by the men I discussed earlier in the chapter. Radhika's conundrum differs from those faced by other Asian American women who choose between the comfort and ethnic continuity assumed in endogamous marriages and the potentially privileged status accessed by marrying White men. This desi was giving up visions of her future that related either to living in South Asia or to continuing her work within a Black working-class community in San Francisco. Her political and emotional futures seem to unzip within the racialized politics of dating and marriage. In what appears to be individual decision making, the artists confront conditions by forces—like racism and immigrant community formation—larger than themselves. And so, they pick their battles.

Generally speaking, desi women in hip hop do not seem overwhelmed by the tension between "love *or* art," or if they do they try to overcome it. Perhaps they are already living so outside the bounds of their parents' expectations that they feel a kind of freedom to confront certain expectations while conforming to others. But it is nonetheless difficult to control the positive (integrating into an artistic community) and negative (losing ethnic support) repercussions of choosing nondesi partners. But their bonds with men in the hip hop business, men with whom they can share their passion about music, hip hop, and art, also offer support and community. For some of these women, their passion for music overlaps their passion for the men, often Black, who produce the music.

Asian and Black couples garner much public interest: an online article titled "Black Men, Asian Women" alone garnered 555 comments (Sen 2006).[17] Clearly the phenomenon of Asian and Black relationships is not odd or surprising to hip hop's desis. Desi female artists in relationships with Black men will often meet their families, attend holiday events, and share food and music. In turn, the

women introduce their partners to Indian food, Bollywood, and South Asian music, the latter of which their male partners sometimes incorporate into their musical productions. But being open about their interracial relationships necessitates the couples' courage as they negotiate which cultural events they attend, especially during important festivals like Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. Attending a hip hop party, particularly in the multiracial Bay Area, can be more relaxing for a mixed couple than dealing with elders' stares at a desi event. Many desis I spoke with feel more comfortable among Blacks than among desis, although these, too, were spaces rife with complex vibes.

While the intersection of sex and race can lead to a type of "double burden" for women in hip hop, this is not always the case. Gender relations can be even more complicated: South Asian women sometimes have an even easier time entering Black social circles (such as at predominantly Black house parties and hip hop and reggae clubs like Oasis in Oakland) and functions (such as the Malcolm X Jazz Festival in Los Angeles) than do their male counterparts. Being seen by men in the industry as sexually desirable can trump, or integrate favorably (albeit problematically) with, in this sense, their racial difference.[18] Hip hop is of course not only a highly gendered arena but is also a heavily sexualized one, particularly due to the sociality of the events (i.e., going to hip hop shows or clubs is an explicitly social, even sexual, affair aided by alcohol and other drugs, whereas going to school, for example, might not be). But here desis often face remixed politics that characterize South Asian and White interactions.

Some Black men subject desi women to Black Orientalism, a rendition of the exoticization and otherness they experience from White Americans. Afro-Orientalism, with its ability to link Blacks with Asians, can be colonizing and decolonizing. As Bill Mullen notes, "Afro-Orientalism is a counterdiscourse that at times shares with its dominant namesake certain features but primarily constitutes an independent critical trajectory of thought on the practice and ideological weight of Orientalism in the Western world" (2004: xv).[19] Without discrediting the political potential of Afro-Orientalism (the critical contribution of Mullen's work), the sexual dynamics in nightclubs also reaffirms aspects of Western (White) Orientalism. "Where y'all from?" a Black man asked a group of

desi girls at a hip hop club peopled with attractive young Bay Area natives working hard not to look too expectantly at potential dance partners. "You all look exotic," he said appreciatively. Black men sometimes describe Indian women as desirable and "beautiful" for having "long wavy hair" and "big butts." We also find hints of both "kinds" of Orientalism in Du Bois's overlooked novel from 1928, *Dark Princess: A Romance*, an anti-imperialist love story about Matthew Townes, a young Black American medical student, and Princess Kautilya, the daughter of a maharaja (king) from India. Mullen focuses on Du Bois's internationalist perspective and on workers of the world, but he also highlights the fact that "Du Bois's conception of orientalism was wedded to a patriarchal or paternal ideology inflected in contemporary debates about female subalterns in the United States and India, in particular, and by Du Bois's own romantic conceptions of the Asiatic" (2003: 218–19). While analysts have argued that Du Bois attempts to fuse the exoticism of Kautilya with "radical politics and love" (232), desi/Black relations in the club are not politically progressive just for being interracial.

Many of the South Asian women I spoke with who frequent hip hop clubs explain that they are a "safe race" for Black men because they are not White and not Black and because they are "exotic" ("the whole Kama Sutra thing"). D'Lo says that his/her Sri Lankan girlfriends often go to clubs where Black men approach them because, s/he interprets, the men like "dark-skinned girls with nice hair." These issues, "especially the effects of skin color and hair texture," impact "Black women's self-images and how others treated them" (Collins 2006: 166); they also shape the self-awareness of desi women who socialize with Blacks. A fair-skinned green-eyed Indian woman from Seattle told me that Black men like her because she is "whitish" but also "not Black." Colorism is yet another link between South Asian and Black communities in which individuals place a higher value of beauty on fair skin (indeed, most South Asian parents warn their children to stay out of the sun). For Meena, being exoticized by a Black man who thought she was Egyptian was "flattering in a way, but it's kind of sad, too. Like, why do they think that someone of a lighter race is so beautiful to be?" These dynamics also affect the experiences of Brown women in hip hop since it may be the case that, as Thien-bao Thuc Phi says, "the growing number of African American men with Asian women

has caused some tension between black women and Asian women" (2008: 312).

The sexual and heteronormative dynamics between Black and Brown men and women in Bay Area dance clubs in the 1990s and 2000s fostered competition between heterosexual women of color for (Black) male attention. Women of color can and do forge bonds resulting from their shared experience of gender and racial disenfranchisement in the United States but they have had to overcome obstacles of the patriarchal race-first framing of American society (Lorde 1984; Harris and Ordona 1990; Espiritu 1997). Heterosexual romances in clubs mostly populated with young Black men and women often assume the racial solidarity of Black Nationalism, similar to desi men's "protection" of South Asian female sexuality in the desi remix scene. Despite this parallel, when tensions over courtship arise Brown women in Black social spaces become defined in contrast to Black women, making the former feel "like an outcast a lot of times." However, the female artists also adopt conceptions of physical beauty that intersect with musical interests that draw them to Black men.

Like some mainstream desi girls, some of the female artists feel that Black men are more masculine than desi men, pointing to their musculature. Some highlight physical aspects of their past and present partners, saying that they prefer dark skin. Does this correlate with Eric Lott's characterization of Whites' "fascination with black male potency" (1993b: 57)? The artists certainly claim that their boyfriends are sexy in what may be seen as the reverse flow of Afro-Orientalism. But their desires for Black men are contextualized, and are rooted in more than fantasy and distance: they are also turned on to the men's passion for music and their artistic skills. One woman finds the content of her boyfriend's rhymes—that he's "putting a good message out there"—important: "I'm really drawn to his brain, that he can do that stuff." Another woman ponders whether her obsession with music translates into an obsession for men who make music; by spending time with them she could figure out how their minds work and then apply these lessons to her own productions. Thus, it is not Black men per se that these artists find attractive but rather the individuals, often Black, who make hip hop music. We see from desis' experiences inside and outside of the club that while racialization and sexualization impact South Asian

and Black relations, their trajectories are not predetermined. For both parties in the long-term interracial South Asian/Black relationships that I witnessed, their motives for being with one another surpass the stereotypes of either desi exotification or Black sexualization (Sen 2006). They bond over shared experiences as American minorities and as fellow music heads.

Music, love, and sex entangle themselves in cross-racial desires. Desi women who became hip hop artists try to pursue their sexual, social, and career lifestyles without too greatly disappointing their parents. Relative to the male artists, female artists take greater risks of being shunned for their refusal to be proper desi girls in their personal and professional lives. For them, love and art often coincide. Ironically, while female artists may seem like they have crossed over to the "other side," Blacks and South Asians still imbue these women—whom they tie to "culture"—with desi ethnicity and femininity. The gender and sexual choices of hip hop's desis speak volumes about the intraethnic and interracial dynamics between South Asians and Blacks in the United States. And desis cannot resolve these tensions simply by inserting themselves into the Black social, business, and sexual worlds of hip hop.

"In the Middle": Brown Women, Black Masculinities

> Girl, I'll be your rebounder.
> —D'Lo, Sri Lankan MC and poet

> Queer diasporic cultural forms work against the violent effacements that produce the fictions of purity that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies. (Gopinath 2005: 4)

Male and female desi hip hoppers have differing relations to Black masculinity. They disrupt our assumptions of Asian men's desire for a racialized masculinity, and the female artists reveal the underreported desire of some women to embody (not necessarily access) this same Black masculinity. That is, images of Black men in hip hop and other elements of the culture offer women like D'Lo several sexual *and* gender tropes they can emulate to reconstruct their nonnormative identities into an expression of self they feel is true. I was fascinated to learn that desi women risk disownment from

their families when they decide to live out extreme decisions that contradict South Asian and American gender and sexual norms. In fact, it is desi women, not desi men, who incorporate tropes of Black masculinity into their own sexuality in surprising ways by adopting the persona of "pimps," "players," and "b-bois."[20]

D'Lo faces extra tension from Sri Lankans for his/her lack of conformity on multiple fronts (see Gopinath 2005). "I had come to the conclusion that I was different, nobody was going to understand me," D'Lo says. Being gay and identifying as a male in adulthood, D'Lo embraces a lifestyle and look counter to Hindu, Sri Lankan, and Tamil femininity. Some members of minority communities in America name homosexuality a "White disease," or as something that exists outside of their groups and is one of the perils of becoming "too Americanized" (Takagi 2000; see also Maira 2002: 47–48). Constructions of non-White sexuality heighten South Asians' reactions to desi homosexuality and transgender identities, which, according to gatekeepers, "harm" the overall image of "the community." This policing recasts South Asian gays and lesbians, who already are targets of multiple vectors of homophobia, as *internal threats* to the proper images of ethnic respectability of Asian America (McBride 2005). But by no means did all desis choose to live by these terms.

D'Lo's ambiguous racial, gender, and sexual crossings cause anxiety among people whose expectations s/he disrupts. Misunderstood and rejected because people "couldn't understand" him/her, the budding artist "needed to bounce [leave home] in order to search" elsewhere. Music, particularly hip hop, became D'Lo's sanctuary and career, which in turn only contributed to his/her parents' dismay. D'Lo didn't want to become a doctor, and "in fact," s/he says, "there's a piece that I [perform that] says, 'She was supposed to get married and be a doctor / I'm gay and I want to be a rock star.'" In order to pursue his/her passion for music and women, D'Lo was always "running away" in order to find "freedom." Just as Asians in America have been ousted from their home(land)s, queer and transgender Asian Americans are ousted from their familial and ethnic homes (Eng 1997).

Hip hop shaped D'Lo's sense of self. His/her "gay consciousness developed" from the time s/he was little: "Like I felt like I was a

male, you know what I'm saying?" Having to become a girl during puberty was difficult because s/he "couldn't do it properly." Then hip hop came as a revelation: "Finally . . . I realized, 'you know what? I can just be true to myself and just take the title of a b-girl.' You get what I'm saying? Because that was truth to me. That was like in the middle." D'Lo's sense of being "in the middle" echoes descriptions of biracial and bisexual individuals. Like ethnically and sexually ambiguous people, D'Lo disrupts reified and pure notions of "male" and "female," "South Asian" and "Black," "immigrant" and "citizen." Indeed, this very ambiguity often creates discomfort and destabilizes knowledge, thereby causing others to ask "What are you?" As in so many other ways, hip hop provides these individuals with the possibility of being "in the middle" and maintaining the "truth" of their racial, immigrant, and other identities. Hip hop provides a flexibility of roles that speaks to the very experiences of these second-generation youths.

D'Lo adopts the b-girl/b-boi persona as a way of being that allows for the expression of his/her queer and masculine identities in forms borrowed from hip hop and expressed through performance. As Sandra Chatterjee writes, "Because D'Lo, a gay performer with a female body, embodies clearly a hip and black masculinity that many young South Asian men aim to sport, her performance destabilizes the heterosexual foundation of diasporic ideologies of domesticity that define hierarchies of authenticity, inclusion, and exclusion" (2006: 451; see also Gopinath 2005). As it does for other queer rappers, hip hop allows D'Lo to showcase his/her sexuality—his/her love of women—while also encompassing his/her racial and dancing identities, which are malleable in his/her hands. D'Lo also expands the repertoire of desi masculinities beyond desi men. Yet despite the trenchant commentary of D'Lo's performative work, his/her experiences still reflect the common United States conception of ethnic dilution through racial contact. Describing his/her more femme days when Black men used to flirt with him/her, in a telling slip of the tongue s/he said, "Even when I was Sri Lankan . . . I mean, even when I was a girl!" Catching this, we erupted in laughter, understanding the fluidity and interconnection of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (see Johnson 2003). Although D'Lo identifies strongly as a Sri Lankan, s/he has access to *having been* Sri Lankan and a girl, whereas now s/he has transformed into something

other than a Sri Lankan girl. B-boying grants this metamorphosis a suitable shape and fulfills D'Lo with its *content*, or message. And in all this flux, D'Lo finds the stability of hip hop to be not only healing but also generative. D'Lo's onstage performances fulfill Halberstam's hope that "masculine girls and women do not have to wear their masculinity as a stigma but can infuse it with a sense of pride and indeed power" (2000: xi).

D'Lo isn't the only female-born desi to appropriate male roles within hip hop. I was with Bella at a hot Oakland nightclub called Sweet Jimmy's where she was hired to spin the backup tracks for a local rapper's performance. She began her set with two records of the commercial Black rapper Ludacris's contagious hit song "Area Codes," one on each turntable. Bella mixed his hook, "I've got hos . . . I've got hos . . . I've got hos . . . ," back and forth, switching from one turntable to the next, with the audience members nodding their heads to the beat. Bella not only switched from turntable to turntable but also switched codified gender roles by taking the rapper's recorded voice as her own as she swayed in her long, form-fitting pink dress. Through mixing and spinning the DJ flips words used to denigrate women and rearticulates them from a female's perspective about heterosexual relations. "See," she said to me one day as we lounged in an African-owned San Francisco bar sipping hibiscus-flavored cocktails, "they have it all wrong. Men are the hos, they are always willing to put out" (be sexually available). These women engage anti-essentialism strategically by identifying with a group against whom they have been defined. This enables the DJ, in Bella's case, to flip discourses of hegemonic Black masculinity to redefine herself as a woman.

Some female artists also identify with pimps or, more accurately, with pimping. To be sure, they identify not with a literal pimp, but with what some members of the hip hop generation have redefined "pimping" to mean (Neal 2005: 137)—namely, calling the shots and having control over one's life in potentially counternormative ways. For example, one artist uses pimping to refer to "trying to get hookups" and gigs, and maneuvering within the music business in general (also considered hustling). Can South Asian women appropriate pimping as part of a feminist consciousness tied to a minority status? "Pimping is a state of mind . . . a movement about no longer being the victim, a movement where women do not have to

take some of the crap that men dish out" (Megan Moore quoted in Neal 2005: 138). According to Gwendolyn Pough, Black female artists "have appropriated the language used by men rappers to denigrate women and use it as a means of empowerment in their own lyrics" (2004: 13). Thus, even a desi woman might assert that *she* was the pimp in her relations with men, thereby challenging the idea that these men played her. This counterintuitive framing of gender relations reflects the competitive nature of the music industry as well.

D'Lo and Bella present an intriguing pair of women in hip hop because they seem to contrast in so many ways, including their self-presentation and style. D'Lo's masculinity counters Bella's femininity, for example. But they both sample and weave together Black male tropes of players, pimps, and b-bois, thus flipping the gender script by identifying with Black masculinities. In doing so, they alter both *Black* masculinities, and desi *masculinities*. In the "One D'Lo Show" performances, which include D'Lo's skit as a sari-clad Sri Lankan mother grappling with her daughter's homosexuality, audiences are confused: "Is she a girl? Is that a girl or a boy?" Even offstage, D'Lo confounds norms and expectations altering the terms of masculinity and desi sexuality. D'Lo shines as an MC while Bella flexes her technical mixing skills. In critiquing rappers for their anti-womanist sentiments and also adopting their voices as a "means of empowerment," Bella's dialogue with hip hop not only deeply engages its gender and sexual dynamics but alters the very terms of what is possible.

On occasion, desi women artists adopt Black masculinities—sometimes those very stereotypes that define Black male "deviance"—to position and empower themselves within the complex dynamics of urban popular culture. Adopting models of identity from nondesi sources, they still present themselves and their non-desi partners to South Asians despite repercussions. Ultimately, they identify as women of color who share struggles over sexism and sexuality with Black women in and out of hip hop. These desis negotiate love and business relationships with Black men and women by sharing information and knowledge about how to better their skills and enjoy shared passions. Rather than suppressing their ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, they cultivate these identities through woman-friendly networks and challenge sexism and homophobia.

Deejay Bella. Photograph courtesy of Bilen Mesfin.

Claiming Womanist and Queer-Friendly Spaces

The female desi artists create spaces of positive energy where women can convene as progressive-minded artists within a male-dominant scene. They "bring wreck" (to sample the hip hop scholar Pough [2004]) by bashing stereotypes and forcing women and men on the dance floor and in the studio to recognize exactly who is bringing the beats and busting the flow. Sexual and gender agency expressed through music and enactment becomes politically potent when audiences, drawn into the collaborative nature of hip hop performance, bring closeted identities to light. According to Pough, the actions of some Black women in hip hop "represent a kind of space where they are claiming this public sexual identity in ways that . . . we really haven't seen because of the politics of silence surrounding black

women and sexuality" (2006: 808–9). South Asian and Black women are sexualized in differential yet overlapping ways, and desi women, too, contend with ethnic restrictions on their sexual expressions in the diaspora. They emphasize crossovers among minority women by cultivating racially inclusive women-friendly spaces and networks.

To meld political and gender concerns Deejay Bella created Sistrens, a gathering designed for Bay Area "women artists with a social bent." Events sponsored by Sistrens include motivational speakers and home-cooked vegetarian fare. Further, at parties and clubs Bella makes sure to play female reggae and hip hop artists who rarely get airtime with male DJs, and she goes out of her way to support women in hip hop. When asked why she does this, she responds, "I *have* to." Bella has developed subversive techniques to deal publicly with the abundance of homophobic and misogynist lyrics in recorded music. First, she raises these topics when socializing with men in the business. "I don't play any of that homophobic shit. Do you guys play that?" she asked two Bay Area male DJs as we partook in late-night dining after their gig. When one said he played it if he thought the crowd could not understand the patois, Bella offered her own method of dealing with an offensive but popular song the audience wants to hear: she would just play the instrumental version of the record. Other cases call for her to play a verse of the man's song, but she will follow it by mixing in a female "answer track." This creates a dialogue between the two artists and engenders a certain—sexy and equal—vibe on the dance floor. Bella once came across fliers that featured nude women advertising an upcoming Bay Area party. She tore down the fliers and replaced them with new, women-friendly ones she had made. By initiating conversations with male colleagues and making executive decisions, women in hip hop claim a space and maintain dialogues—between men and women, among women, and between Blacks and non-Blacks—that fuel the growth of musical forms and consciousness about music content. In these dialogic relations (Bakhtin 1981), South Asians and their peers draw from their knowledge of dominant ideologies and the ideas and expectations of society in order to denaturalize the terms of the exchange. And although the power of our times is increasingly centralized, it remains unfixed, denaturalized, and not "owned" (Foucault 1976:

210). As such, these individuals may change the very terms that define them—and the consciousness of those around them.

Desi artists are codified, restricted even, by the popular meanings of race, class, gender, and sexuality. But they nonetheless take action, or "decision making power" (Giddens 1984), to shape their lives. They try to work within woman-centered networks, support other female artists, and identify with women of color. "We're really similar," Deejay Bella says about Latina and Black women, "I feel them and what they're saying and the stereotypes Black men have of women." Despite the business-fostered competition, desi women connect across lines and call on hip hop and the men who produce it to be accountable for their role in gender oppression. The performers continue to thrive while taking pro-womanist and anti-homophobic stances against stereotypes that sexualize women of color and silence their presence. D'Lo, for instance, once formed with two Black women a group called WADDAG (or "What a G," perhaps signifying on "G," meaning "gangsta"), based on an acronym standing for "Women Aware Deep Dark and Gay." Black *and* non-Black women in hip hop can make feminist interventions for social change, despite "finding it hard to claim a space for themselves in the male-centered world of Hip-Hop" (Pough 2002: 9). Through women-centered events and artistic choices that celebrate female artists, female hip hoppers practice their art in ways that aim to equalize gender relations within and beyond the music industry. They remind us of the possibilities of bounded agency and the political potential—the "transformative capacity" (Giddens 1984: 92)—of everyday actions.

Conclusion

The choices of desis in hip hop illuminate the process-oriented dualities of actors' agency and institutional determinants. No one's options are limitless; *habitus*, which creates bodies as bodies create it, is a structure that defines what is conscious and informs a society's members of their available options and active possibilities. Institutional forms, no matter how restrictive, are not determinative and within this concept is the possibility of changing accepted wisdom, or *doxa* (Bourdieu 1977). Hegemony, or the power

of societal norms and structures that are expressed through daily practices, interacts with the power of the individual to actively promote or rebel against those very norms. Because they choose a critical consciousness that contests a variety of norms, the desi artists engage in everyday acts of resistance against not only conformity but also oppressive ideals. As members of multiple communities, they contend with sets of competing and overlapping hegemonic norms. They strive to represent a spectrum of sexual and gender expressions in desi America; similarly, they attempt to mark their presence as non-Black men and women in the male, Black dominant industry of hip hop.

Hip hop scholarship must be careful not to reproduce the inequalities of hip hop culture and the sexism of American society writ large by granting airtime to male stars who disregard or speak for women and non-Blacks. Fans and commentators often view Black women's concerns as supplemental to the "real" issues in hip hop, and they are generally asked to comment only on the topics of gender and sexuality. Similarly, non-Blacks are underrepresented and often only enter debates about race and authenticity. Women, non-Blacks, and gays and lesbians must be integrated in dialogues on hip hop as they comprise, along with straight Black men, the hip hop nation.

Some desis interject these conversations, bringing with them some of the concerns of their ethnic communities. So what does it mean when non-Black minorities insert themselves into a culture exploding with Black sexual politics (Collins 2004)? Their engagement with Black popular culture as *bricoleurs* (Hebdige 1979) who cut and mix identities engenders new articulations of desi gender and sexual identities. As samplers, hip hop desis perform the construction of gender and sexuality. Desi male and female MCs deflect assumptions of their desires for Black masculinity by articulating South Asian American masculinities that provide new models for desi youth. At the individual level, desi hip hoppers relate to Black masculinities and femininities, which they try to reconcile with ethnic expectations. While all of the desi artists wish to fulfill their parents' expectations about marriage and career choices, their musical and personal pursuits often run counter to these expectations. Bridging the various communities allows them to fulfill multiple obligations of love and art while cultivating inclusive and progressive communities.

Black masculinities resonate with some desi women in fascinating ways as they negotiate—and sometimes alter—the assumptions of audience members. Reflected in the artists' lives are tense and productive encounters between desi and Black men and women framed by the historical racialized sexualization of these communities. Desis in the business of hip hop and interracial romance uncover overlapping concerns across Brown and Black communities that are obfuscated by divisive discourses. The evidence insists that we consider not only the impact of Blacks upon South Asians but also the power of desis to alter hegemonic notions of Blackness and sexuality.

The artists also contradict hegemonic ideals through their relationships with Black men and women. They embrace the humanity of Black people by challenging anti-Black racism through their musical and personal choices. In exchange, they are rewarded with respect and are accepted by Black peers who offer community outside of ethnic bounds. Although not inherently progressive, interminority relationships are part of the artists' racial consciousness and signal their identification as people of color. In this way, love and music are deeply entangled and are infused with the politics of gender and sexuality. Underlying this complex vortex of interactions and identifications is the conscious politics of these hip hop desis.

Hip hop *still* maintains a space of empowerment and politicization in which unequal gender relations can be worked out, within and even *across* color lines. These dialogic encounters reveal important crossovers with those designated as the "other" of South Asians. Female artists express a race, gender, and sexual consciousness beyond any one form of identity politics. They embrace and enact social change against multiple forms of oppression, including the sexism and homophobia that compound the racism and nativism they experience in America. While these women contend with misogyny in hip hop, they and their male counterparts locate the roots of sexism and homophobia—just as they locate the roots of inequality and class exploitation—within broader historical, structural, and societal factors. This type of critical consciousness enables them—indeed compels them—to continue to produce hip hop music.