

Five

The Other Others



Indians and Arabs

Arabs: The Invisible Americans

Assimilation Equals Whiter than White

In 1909 Cincinnati's U.S. Circuit Court was asked to determine the fate of a Syrian man born in Turkey. Were Turks Caucasians? If so, the man had the right to become an American citizen. If not, he would be deported.

The issue seemed so important to the *New York Times* that, on September 30, 1909, the newspaper ran an editorial—"Is the Turk a White Man?"—that sought to define the racial status of Turkish people. The editorial's arguments still resonate in the contemporary Arab communities of Dearborn and Los Angeles.

The *Times* said that the Turks had started out as "the yellow or Mongol race." They quickly established an empire in India and then "swept down into Persia, overran Arabia and Egypt, and invaded Europe to Vienna." As they marched west, the Turks "freely intermingled with the Caucasian races whom they subjugated." They intermingled with so many people that the *Times* identified the following com-

ponents in their collective ancestry: Arab, Kurd, Slav, Albanian, Greek, and foreign slave girls of more mixed ancestry. Assuming the “foreign slave girls” claimed roots in Africa, Turks also possessed black blood, a contaminant stressed by the *Times*. “A trace of Negro blood, if only enough to stain the fingers about the nails will bar a person from white society.”

And yet the *Times* claimed the Turks as white Europeans. Even though “their mind does not work as ours” and “they are a cruel and massacring people who have lost none of their ancient proclivities,” the Turks were Europeans “as much as the Huns, Finns and Cossacks.” They deserved recognition as the formerly yellow people who, after intermingling with the Caucasians, became the white, European children of, among others, Albanians, Greeks, and African slaves of more mixed ancestry.¹

Two days after the *Times* editorial, a Lebanese-born journalist, Salloum Mokarzel, wrote a response to the newspaper. Why did the United States focus on race? “The main point at issue in this question . . . is not the practicality of considering the Turk a white man, but the possibility of considering every Turkish subject a Turk, eliminating in this general classification all distinction of race, language and religion.”²

Mokarzel’s letter defined the battle between American and Arab perceptions of social identities. The *Times* focused on race and skin color, while, as Arab scholars stress, people from the more than twenty nations under the Arab banner tended to identify more closely with nationality than with “racial” groupings. For people actually born on the southern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains, race was a peculiar concept, which only assumed importance when Arabs came to America and suddenly discovered that they fit in as well as a fig in an apple pie.

Remember our earlier discussion of Faras Shahid and Jesus Christ. In 1913 Shahid and Jesus were both deemed ineligible for naturalization because they were not members of the white race. George Dow, “a Syrian of Asiatic birth,” also received a no in 1914, but, instead of sheepishly accepting the verdict, Dow argued that he and his ancestors were whiter than white. In his appeal to the Federal District Court of South Carolina, Dow rejected the Salloum Mokarzel line of argument in favor of American racial categories. He stressed that, if the

federal courts wanted to talk about race, then Syrians were Arabs, “the purest type of the Semitic race and therefore Syrians had a better claim upon the White Race than that of the modern nations of Europe.”³

Dow won his appeal. He got to be white, but Syrian immigrants continued to face the same legal struggles as late as 1923. The “walnut colored” Arabs clearly confused Americans, so, as a reaction to that confusion, the early Arab (mostly Christian) immigrants from Syria and Lebanon expanded Dow’s arguments and said that no one should be excluded because of their heritage. Instead, Americans mistakenly lumped Arabs (who were white) with inferior races. Thus, as they worked to clear up the perceptual errors, “the external classification issues imposed in America did not alienate or even deter their civic loyalties to their new homeland.” On the contrary, “the outcome of the yellow race crisis no doubt strengthened the immigrants’ resolve to value and cherish their exonerated racial status as whites.”⁴

The Syrians and Lebanese won an acquittal. They were not black, yellow, or red, but whiter than white. While this imaginative reconfiguration of American culture proved temporarily successful in the courts, it forcefully sustained the dichotomy and its negative judgments of “nonwhite people.” Whatever the protestations of Syrians or Lebanese, the “walnut” skin color of many Arabs forever made them a problem to their host culture and even to themselves. As Anne J. M. Mammary writes, growing up as an Arab in mid-twentieth-century Detroit, she received an “internalized hatred of Arab peoples along with the racist ‘relief’ that we are not, in my grandfather’s words, ‘as dark as black people.’”

For twentieth-century Arab immigrants, becoming American often included a learned hatred of blacks; a learned hatred of yourself; and, simultaneously, a positive identity rooted in the ultimate negative. “Our (Arab) self definition often came by denying and running from variously deep shades of olive skin and at the same time clinging to the power in the United States that comes from having a sense of self delineation as being ‘not someone else—here not someone darker.’”⁵

Arabs learned to build an identity around the happy conclusion that they were not black. It is a revealing commentary on the tradi-

tional meaning of assimilation for America's "other others" and a pointed reminder that the century-old *New York Times* debate is anything but ancient history.

As in 1909, Americans today remain so confused by Arabs that, according to the Census Bureau, Arabs are the white people who attacked America on 9/11. However, because of the variables cited in chapter 1, the contemporary Arab American reaction to U.S. culture now includes a number of new responses. One subgroup refuses to act like George Dow and his whiter-than-white contemporaries. Today, these mostly younger Arab immigrants assimilate by becoming "people of color" and, simultaneously, a minority group who argue that they are invisible, not one of the groups recognized when Americans discuss race, color, ethnicity, and the need for social and economic justice.

The irony, of course, is that whether white or of color, the dichotomy *still dominates* because the people of color contingent assimilates by defining itself in relation to the labels, beliefs, and values established by the very worst representatives of American culture. It is such a dilemma that a second subgroup of Arab Americans attempts to defy the dichotomy by emphasizing their religion over their race, becoming "Muslim first" in the Christian civilization that refused citizenship to Jesus Christ. It is a dizzying transformation that often begins in the Michigan cities of Dearborn and Detroit.

Warren and Schaefer

In Dearborn, the intersection of Warren and Schaefer Avenues is the spot. The easy convergence of these streets signals the beginning of what many people call (with some exaggeration) the largest Arab city outside the Arab world. Population estimates vary widely; some say two hundred thousand people of Arab descent live here; others say three hundred thousand, but all agree that the "Arab" population includes Syrians and Lebanese (the majority), Palestinians and Yemenis, Iraqi Chaldeans and Coptic Christians from Egypt.

Approaching Warren and Schaefer from the west, you drive by the

Henry Ford Museum; past an upscale food, cheese, and wine market; and along a wide thoroughfare that includes the steel and glass executive offices of the Ford Motor Company. As you pass down Michigan Avenue toward Schaefer, the Arabic signs begin to appear. Right next to a large Thai restaurant, banners promise the opening of a huge restaurant offering “Mediterranean cuisine.” The equal prominence of Arabic and English text suggests that “Mediterranean” is a code word used to attract a mixed clientele. Arabs eat here, but everyone is welcome.

Make a turn, drive to Warren, and, as one recent immigrant put it, “I thought I was still in the Arab world.” Everything is in Arabic and English; by my odometer estimates, the community easily extends for a couple of miles on either side of the Warren and Schaefer axis. At the Arabian town center, you can buy coffee beans and cardamom. Figs are sold in five- and eleven-pound boxes. At the back of the market, a line of plastic containers house every grain imaginable. Neatly showcased on top of a counter stands a large selection of glass hookahs for a smoker’s morning, afternoon, or evening pleasure.

Most of the town center’s women customers wear the *hijab*. For believers it is a lovely way to feel God’s presence. Like Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn, the Muslim women of Detroit make shopping a religious experience. From one end of the community to the other, butcher stores prominently advertise that they only sell halal (lawful) meat. As Allah stressed in the Quran, halal is an injunction to eat only “wholesome” foods. Signs therefore announce “Halal Pizza” and “Halal Famous Hamburgers.” The “All Country Buffet” not only offers Halal meats but, in addition, assures its clients that it uses no “jello gelatin” (usually of pig origin), no lard, and no soy sauce, which contains, after fermentation, 2 percent alcohol.

Doctors and dentists offer their services in functional, brown brick buildings; I see nothing resembling the tree-lined, manicured “Class AAA” medical offices found in high-end Detroit suburbs like Grosse Point. Patients who want to supplement their Western-style care can walk to the “Chinese Herbs and Cosmetic Center.” Oddly, its signs appear in Arabic and English but not Chinese. Attorney Joumana Kay-

rouz's huge billboards portray her with long flowing blonde hair and plenty of lipstick. She offers to answer any of your legal questions—in Arabic—on AM 690.

Entering Dearborn from the east, you cross the railroad tracks, pass through a tiny community of Mexicans, and enter an industrial zone contaminated enough to satisfy anyone interested in an early death. Wading through the smoke and litter, signs eventually welcome you to a safer zone, an Arab community dominated by immigrants from Yemen. They announce that fact in English (and Arabic) as I seek to find a museum founded by the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS). Founded in 1971, ACCESS is “a human service organization committed to the development of the Arab Americans community in all aspects of its economic and cultural life.” When urban renewal strategies threatened to bulldoze the community into oblivion, Arabs united and created an organization to defend their interests and their space. Located across the street from the Romanian Pentecostal Church, ACCESS now claims to serve more than 119,000 people. Its staff is predominantly female, some wearing a *hijab*, some as stylishly dressed as attorney Joumana Kayrouz.

The museum is actually a work in progress. In May 2005, when I visited, ACCESS was still preparing to help open its huge, modern facility on Michigan Avenue. Staffers proudly pointed out that this would be the first museum in the United States dedicated to Arabs and Arab American culture. But that spring the museum was still housed in the hallway of the ACCESS community service building. A visitor could learn about coffee, architecture, jewelry, music, education, calligraphy, and tent and village life. Small dolls, the men in traditional garb with huge moustaches, slept in an exhibit that stressed the importance of local identity to Arab culture. Many of Detroit's Arab immigrants came from the same village and, like Mexicans in California, recreated the old world in the new.

The religion exhibit spotlighted one of the elements that allegedly made Arab Americans unique among their fellow citizens; as members of Islam, they revere Allah. The showcase labeled the “Three Great Religions” conceded that both Judaism and Christianity deserved equal recognition as great religions; but Islam abandoned the legal-

ism and ethnic separatism of Judaism and the Christian doctrine of original sin, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. Islam, the last and best of the three religions, “put a practical emphasis on the oneness of God and the necessity of serving God through good deeds and pious living.”

Since more than 60 percent of Arab Americans claim a form of Christianity as their faith of choice, the Islamic bias surprised me. In truth, the assertion of Islamic superiority accurately reflects traditional beliefs and cultures. Moreover, roughly 90 percent of Arabs do at least nominally embrace a version of Islam, while the other 10 percent—the majority of Arab Americans—are Christian Maronites, Copts, Assyrians, or Chaldeans. For an American, it is like reading the Bible in ignorance; you need a glossary just to understand the differences among these types of Christianity.

Suad Joseph argues that the Islamic link among Arab peoples is one tool that Americans use to mask significant linguistic, cultural, and historical diversity. As the appendix at the end of this chapter suggests, Arabs come from more than twenty nations, including Morocco, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Kuwait. In his essay “Against the Grain of the Nation—The Arab,” Joseph argues that Americans make Arabs comprehensible by creating a homogeneity that utterly denies the significant differences.⁶ Americans compress twenty nations into one and say that everybody who lives in this mythical Arab nation—the Middle East—is an Arab. We conflate the Turkish and Iranian nations and the significant differences among and between Turks and Iranians, not to mention all the other nations in the region. Finally, we equate Arabs and Middle Easterners with Islam, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Only 20 percent of the world’s one billion Muslims are Arab. Islam certainly originated in what Americans call the Middle East, but, in reality, Arabs are a small minority in a religion that, in American eyes, they allegedly monopolize.

This paradox has enormous consequences. Especially in relation to religious preference, the Arabs in the United States do not reflect majority preferences in western Asia and North Africa. Notwithstanding this fact, Joseph points out that “the erasure of difference among Arabs and Arabs in America serves the creation of another difference:

the difference between the free white, male American citizen and this constructed Arab.”

The problem for Arab Americans is that they need to define themselves in relation to America’s “peculiar fixation on race”⁷ and in relation to a concept of “Arab American” that falsely and negatively homogenizes a very diverse population. In the extreme, Americans even manage to make Islam a racial issue. Mary Ramadan argues that “to be white has been understood historically to mean being of European extraction.” Additionally, white has meant Christian. So, even if they are Christian, others perceive Arabs as Muslims, which, in Ramadan’s eyes, makes Islam “a religion of color.”⁸

The suggestion that we can have both people and religions of color testifies to America’s maddening fixation on race. It is no wonder that Arab Americans simultaneously call themselves a minority, ambiguous insiders, and invisible. We preach nonsense and then ask them to demystify the babble. It is an impossible task, but many of Arab America’s best minds nonetheless try to do the impossible.

An Invisible Minority

It has become cliché to say that Detroit’s worst neighborhoods look like a war zone. And yet the rubble has been cleared from some areas of the city. Near the museums, you see a few burned-out or collapsed buildings, but the overwhelming impression is that somebody cleaned up the debris and left nothing in its place. In the shadow of the General Motors skyscrapers and the Greek Town Casino, a visitor sees block after block of vacant land. It waits, along with Detroit inhabitants, for a future that includes more than three casinos within a two-mile range.

This is a big, vacant city in the middle of a battle between blacks and the immigrants who some allege were responsible for its deterioration. One of the most telling salvos in that battle was the 2004 “PowerNomics Economic Development Plan for Detroit’s Under-Served Majority Population,” that is, African Americans. In the fall of that year, the Detroit City Council tried to create an Africa Town by using

the casino tax revenues “to create an economic development fund for the sole use of African Americans.” Arab Americans would presumably receive none of the funds because they were part of the problem, not the solution. Arab immigrants took away jobs, and that dynamic “does not coincide with what is in the best interest of Detroit or its MUP (majority underserved population).”

When Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick vetoed the council’s recommendation, council members quickly overrode the mayor’s veto by a vote of seven to two. That moved Kay Everett, one of the dissenting members, to write this to the *Detroit Free Press*: “The madness of scapegoating immigrants and others who are not of African descent must stop. Non-black immigrants are wrongfully blamed in the PowerNomics report for ripping off community resources and taking jobs from blacks. So the Detroit City Council passed two racist resolutions that will divide our beloved city as much as the deadly race riots of 1967 and 1943.”⁹

In short, the Detroit City Council leaders wanted to create an Africa Town and exclude people who come from Africa. It is strange at best because Professor Ali Mazrui notes that the word *Africa* originally began in North Africa, Tunisia to be more specific. It probably derives from the Berber language, and it originally only referred to North Africa. In time, it expanded to the entire continent and then contracted to Africa below the Sahara when European colonists decided that Africa meant “black” Africans. Americans of all colors have sheepishly accepted Europe’s prejudiced position, so, as with the one-drop rule, in Detroit African Americans use the thinking of the worst Europeans to fence out people who originated the word *Africa* and come from Africa, only to discover that they are not African in the United States.

Detroit’s problem is the nation’s dilemma. The white/black dichotomy mercilessly divides us into victims and victimizers. However, the motor city victims who blame Arab Americans for ripping off resources and opportunities echo a complaint made by Albert Murray in 1970. “Not even the most degenerate rituals of the South are more infuriating to multigenerational U.S. Negroes than the pompous impertinence of those European refugees who were admitted to the

U.S. on preferential quotas, who benefit by preferential treatment because of the color system and who then presume to make condescending insinuations about the lack of initiative, self-help, and self-pride among Negroes.”¹⁰

Murray understandably spoke with anger about white Europeans. Meanwhile, in Detroit, many Arab Americans trying to make sense of our racial operating system see themselves as people of color, harshly treated by the same society that oppresses African Americans. Equally important, just like the Mexicans who warned African Americans about the issue of responsibility for injustice and inequality, Anan Ameri told the *Detroit Free Press* that “the racism in this country and the legacy of slavery is not the doing of immigrants, who often are subject to racism and stereotyping themselves.”

According to one study, Detroit’s most recent Arab immigrants are “largely poor and unskilled, have limited English proficiency, and are often illiterate even in Arabic.” They also experience prejudice that runs from “sand nigger” to “camel jockey.”¹¹ Arab Americans have serious economic problems, and they experience “racial” prejudice in a system that, especially after the civil rights movements, makes skin color and ethnicity as important a variable as it was when the *New York Times* published its editorial in 1909.

The difference is the variables (cited in chap. 1) that today foster a reconfiguration of American culture rather than a reaffirmation of its traditional beliefs and values. When Arab Americans enter the United States, they may just as easily encounter a decided bias *against* European and American culture and significant support from groups who want to “right” American history. In Detroit or elsewhere, Arabs may regard white as a negative identity, yet, when they try to make sense of our operating system, this is what many Arab Americans discover.

As argued at the Unity Conference for Minority Journalists, “there are four basic food groups of people of color, you know, there is African American, there is Indigenous, there is Latino, there is Asian. So, there is no space in that for Arab women. *For me it is problematic to assume that Arabs just do not fall into any category.* It is also problematic to assume that Arabs are white because we are not European and

because the Arab world was colonized, first by the West—specifically by Europe and carried on by North America—and it is still colonized and most people do not understand that” (emphasis added).¹²

This in-between status moves some analysts to think of themselves as not quite white or, even worse, invisible. Arabs have no category of their own in a society that mocks their cultures and the religion—Islam—that is a primary axis of identity for 90 percent of the most recent immigrants to Detroit, Los Angeles, or San Francisco. Nadine Naber notes that American print and broadcast media makes Arab Americans “incomprehensible.” Following the rest of the culture, the media first homogenizes twenty nations into one and then portrays Arab men as “irrational and violent, particularly towards women.” Meanwhile, the women learn that they are “a supra-oppressed group of women in comparison to white American women, who are idealized to represent equality, democracy and justice.”

Note the comparisons. To participate effectively in America, Arabs need to see themselves against the backdrop of the white/black dichotomy. They may decide they are neither, but when they seek to redress their grievances, they find themselves arguing with blacks about being African and with a media that makes “white women” the supposed role model for the docile and oppressed Arab female. Theoretically, the women’s movement is about choice; however, if an Arab woman makes the following comment she has problems. In the words of Shams Alwujude, “my recognition of my Yemeni history helps me to know which way I should be heading in my life. I choose to dress like a Muslim so that I may honor my religious beliefs and my identity.”¹³

In response to so many competing pressures, Arab Americans have at least three general options. One, the route chosen by George Dow in 1914, is to identify as white. Avoid the American insanity by embracing it. This can work for light-skinned Arabs, who pass as assimilated Americans in suburbs across the United States. However, this attitude produces an assimilation laden with racial judgments. As a young Arab in San Francisco put it when discussing the women who might be acceptable to his parents, “Asian is the worst. Black . . . they would think you were joking. It is not even an option. They would never get

over it. You would be the topic of discussion for the next . . . I do not know how long.”¹⁴

A second general response is to demand, with the mixed-race population, a separate (minority) category for Arab Americans. If rights and privileges are granted in America according to racial and ethnic categories, then Arabs need to step out of the white shadows and achieve prominent visibility by becoming a fifth “people of color” food group. Throughout the 1990s, Arab Americans were forced by the Census Bureau to contemplate the incredible disconnect between the “white” label proffered by Washington and the “sand nigger” realities experienced by Arab Americans. The Census Bureau had listened to Arab American complaints and seemed on the verge of offering a solution when the demands of the mixed-race groups overshadowed those of Arab Americans. In the race to secure redress of grievances, mixed race Americans won the day, while Washington opted to postpone consideration of the Arab American proposals indefinitely.

The third and final option is to continue the search for a new identity in what amounts to a racial and ethnic never-never land. Arabs are legally white but not white, visible (as negative stereotypes) but invisible. As one young man succinctly summed up his position, “I cannot be a white Anglo Protestant but I have to be something. Everyone has an identity. People keep asking: ‘What are you? What do you believe? Why does Islam oppress women? Why do you marry four wives? Why does your religion teach violence?’ Suddenly you begin to realize that you do not know what a Muslim is and you begin to search for yourself.”¹⁵

This young man thought of himself as a Muslim, not white, black, a person of color, or even an Arab. Religion is a recurring identifier in this and other cultural reconfigurations occurring in the Arab community. Instead of assimilating, Arabs are behaving like Ortiz’s Cubans, offering a culturally creative response to the dominance of the new host culture.

As Nadine Naber writes, Arab Americans are “talking back,” in a simultaneous rejection and acceptance of American culture.¹⁶ The focus on Islam signals a reconfiguration of U.S. culture as provocative as the one developed by Mexicans when, as ethnic combinations, they cleverly created the identity Chicano.

Muslim First

In her detailed analysis of the San Francisco Arab American community, Nadine Naber writes about “Arab cultural re-authenticity,” a worldview that resists assimilation by labeling Arab culture morally superior and good and Anglo Protestant as morally inferior and bad. This stark new dichotomy is a reaction to America’s involvement in the political affairs of Israel, Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan. Especially after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Arabs in the United States perceived a significant rise in the level and type of hostility directed against them. Trying to influence the political process seemed “futile,” so organizations like the Arab American University Graduates (AAUG) worked to counter the stereotypes through education and community efforts. Simultaneously, Arab Americans began to reconfigure, on their own terms, the meaning of the “Arab” label. This struggle for reauthenticity never emerged, as with the Puerto Ricans or the Chicanos, into a struggle for national liberation or an attempt to create a separate Arab American nation. Instead, as Naber points out, it persisted as an ongoing response to transnational migration and the pressures of assimilation and integration within the United States.

Some Arab Americans “reinvent” themselves by reacting negatively to demands for assimilation *and* to demands for multiculturalism. The former wants to create 100 percent Americans; the latter erases cultural differences by claiming that all cultures are equal. Instead, they assert the presence in the United States of a “true Arab culture,” whose unifying core is an affirmation of the Arab world, focusing on the singular importance of the Arab family. As one young woman put it, “in high school there was tremendous anxiety and tension between my wish to have a normal high school experience and my parents’, mostly my mother’s deep anxiety that *she would lose me to the Amerikan*. That was the famous line over and over and over again.”¹⁷

A foundation stone of any good Arab family—indeed in the dichotomous American system or any good family at all—is the need to control who marries whom. Both men and women experience significant pressure to marry within the parameters set by their parents. An Arab man can date a “white woman,” but marriage to an

Amerikan, white, or Anglo¹⁸ is a betrayal of true Arab culture and one's family. In this context, the word *betrayal* connotes everything from the loose morals of white women to a lack of respect for one's parents to a willingness to exchange a good and pure culture for a contaminated one.

The negative reaction toward American things is crucial, but, paradoxically, that reaction allows for a sliding scale of acceptable mates, many unacceptable to the very Americans who are the negative role model. Marrying a white man or women represents betrayal of the Arab ideal; but marrying a black, Mexican, or Asian is often even worse, because it presumably leads to a loss of status and respect both in Arab *and* American circles.

To reinvent themselves, some Arab Americans behave like members of nativist organizations, despising other minority groups. Naber underlines this paradoxical result of cultural creativity. "When he forbids his daughter from marrying a nigger," she writes, "he [the father] not only regulates her sexuality, but he participates in the production of the 'American Dream' by differentiating himself, his family, and the entire Arab people from the uncivilized racialized Other."¹⁹

This learned hatred of minorities occurs in Detroit as well as in San Francisco. One immigrant from Iraq describes this experience in and around Warren and Schaefer Avenues, when his cousin offered to show him around the area. A black man in another car cut the cousin off. In response, his cousin screamed, "You fucking nigger." The immigrant knew no English at the time, but the sentiment required no translation. In Iraq, this man and his cousin enjoyed many happy interactions with dark-skinned Iraqis. What was different about America? His cousin responded in this manner: "I don't know. Everyone does it here."²⁰

Arab immigrants come with their own prejudices. The homegrown division between Christian and Muslim reappears when they reinvent themselves in America. Both groups want to preserve true Arab culture, for example, but their definitions of what this is inevitably part ways when it comes to religion. One Lebanese Christian describes her father's reaction to her relationship with a man named Mohammed Abdel Rahman Ahmed Abdel Rahman. Even for Muslims, "it doesn't

get any more Muslim than that,” she joked. Her father demanded that she stop seeing Mohammed, and she wanted to know why. After all, despite Lebanese beliefs about their ethnic superiority, her father’s sisters married Palestinians. If they could do it, why not her?

The difference was Muslim. This young woman’s parents wanted to preserve traditional Arab culture, but, being Lebanese, they wanted to do so in a Westernized, Christian fashion. Her father’s friends in the United States and Lebanon gossiped about his daughter’s betrayal. “He is embarrassed because it is the worst thing if your daughter marries a Muslim and it is the worst thing if your daughter does not listen to you”—especially in the contaminated states of America.²¹

The daughter pointed out that her mother was from Armenia and that both of her parents claimed to be atheists, but it was no use. Muslim was as bad as black, Mexican, or Asian in this Lebanese/Christian/atheist family. For Naber, this desire to control one’s children is a “reactionary and conservative” response to life in America. Parents create a romantic ideal of something called “true Arab culture,” and they then use a combination of traditional and learned-in-America beliefs to guide their sons and daughters down the proper path. It is a typical first- and second-generation battle, phrased in prejudices that once again underline the negative consequences of assimilating to the dichotomy and the prejudices it espouses.

But another form of Arab American reinvention also points to the nationwide mutiny against white/black thinking. Many young Arabs have turned to religion in their efforts to challenge and reconfigure Anglo Protestant culture. This second-generation response is seen primarily among young men and women who understand what it means to be invisible or not quite white. Along with the political situation in Israel and Palestine, those labels already generated a need for a new, positive identity. But, in addition, these young people saw the meaning of assimilation in their true Arab families. Their parents often blame minorities for creating and perpetuating their social and economic problems. In essence, the parents talk back to America by talking like Americans, and their children talk back to them by reminding them—and Anglo Americans—of the Quran. “The only perfect person is Allah. We are all human, and our skin has nothing to do with

the treatment we deserve. A lot of sheiks are preaching, *when a lot of the people are immigrants*, that, in Islam, we do not see color and we should not treat a black person differently than a white person.”²²

Parents say one thing. Allah says another. And for young adults who believe in Islam, no contest exists. “Parents cannot get away with it.” The kids listen to the clerics and read the Quran. They then practice what Allah preaches and use the words of God to critique modern Arab culture. Allah wants a color-free society even if their parents and their parents’ friends do not. In a society that includes Chicano, Caribbean, Asian, and mixed-race challenges to the dichotomy, second-generation Arab Americans “find fertile ground for reconfiguring the 1990’s neo-liberal racial politics [read American-style multiculturalism] on their own terms.” They retreat from the peculiar fixation on race, they support universalism, and they reject racial categories as a way to define and treat members of the Muslim community.²³

They fill this tall order by deliberately defining themselves as “Muslim first, Arab second.” This represents a clear, conscious, and even revolutionary attempt to use language “as a vehicle for self-invention.” As with any word, the identity “Muslim first” is only important because of the beliefs and values contained within it. A “Muslim first” uses the identity as a clarion call of defiance because, “by reconfiguring the myth of a secular nation state,” these young adults and their successors “contest the hegemony of American popular culture as it casts everything that is Muslim in opposition to everything that is American.”²⁴

With 9/11 and the intifada right before their and America’s eyes, these young people repeat the call of African Americans like Albert Murray. Instead of judging Arabs against white norms and ideals, judge yourself against the backdrop of the Declaration of Independence and the American creed. Anglo Protestant culture comes up short. And if anybody wants to know why, just ask the youngsters who have declared themselves “Muslim first.”

The definitions of Arab American are quite fluid. This is a work in progress, and the two themes of “Muslim first” and “true Arab culture” by no means exhaust the many possibilities that exist when we exam-

ine a panethnic label—Arab American—that includes more than twenty ethnic communities, innumerable religions sects, and class and educational differences. Arabs respond in many ways, but for anyone interested in emancipation from the white/black dichotomy, the choice is clear. True Arab culture is contaminated with American prejudices, whereas “Muslim first” denies skin color as an axis of identity and tries to “right” American history, according to the Jeffersonian ideal that all people are created equal.

Instead of excluding nonbelievers, “Muslim first” opens itself to the world. Indeed, as hard as it might be for a post-9/11 American to take advice from a Muslim, the new identity talks back by underlining the problems that open-minded immigrants encounter when they try to understand themselves *and their parents* by using the concept of race and the white/black dichotomy.

Indians: Brown-Skinned Whites

Takao Ozawa, Bhagat Singh Thind, and the Aryan Revival

In 1923 Supreme Court justice George Sutherland, a naturalized immigrant from England, spoke for the Court’s majority when he delivered citizenship opinions that *still* determine American beliefs and attitudes toward immigrants from South Asia. The two cases appeared within three months of one another and reflect Justice Sutherland’s and the Court’s sincere, considered beliefs. “Naturalization was a privilege to be given, qualified, or withheld as Congress may determine, and which the alien may claim as of right only upon compliance with the terms which Congress imposes.”²⁵

A justice’s job was to determine the will of Congress. In cases that revolved around race, Congress had set a supposedly simple standard: The provisions of the naturalization law applied “to aliens, being free white persons, and to aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent.” It seemed easy enough, but, as Harvard professor Thomas Reed Powell fondly told his students, “Just because Mr. Justice Sutherland writes clearly, you must not suppose that he thinks clearly.”

In *Takao Ozawa v. United States*, Justice Sutherland refused to rely on skin color as a test of race. He stressed that “the test afforded by the mere color of the skin of each individual is impracticable as that differs greatly among persons of the same race, even Anglo Saxons.” Presumably, Sutherland’s own English relatives may have ranged from “the fair blond to the swarthy brunette,” while no one would call a light-skinned Japanese man like Ozawa an Anglo Saxon. Dropping color, Sutherland relied on the work of men like Friedrich Blumenbach. In American jurisprudence, “the words white person were meant to indicate only a person of what is popularly known as the Caucasian race.” Sutherland stressed that, since the two words were “synonymous,” understanding the will of Congress became easier. Of course, “the effect of the conclusion that the words ‘white person’ mean a Caucasian is not to establish a sharp line of demarcation between those who are entitled to naturalization.” Debatable aliens always came before the Court, but Takao Ozawa posed no problem for anyone with two good eyes and sound racial reasoning. He was “clearly of a race which is not Caucasian,” and Justice Sutherland confidently excluded him from consideration for citizenship.²⁶

Twelve weeks later Justice Sutherland again spoke for the Court in the case of Bhagat Singh Thind. The Supreme Court was only willing to consider Thind’s case because the plaintiff was “of high caste Hindu stock, born in Punjab, one of the extreme northwestern districts of India, and classified by certain scientific authorities as of the Caucasian or Aryan race.”

Based on Ozawa, Thind presented no problems. As a Caucasian, Thind clearly deserved to walk the red carpet to citizenship. Unfortunately, as Sutherland noted, “mere ability on the part of an applicant for naturalization to establish a line of descent from a Caucasian ancestor will not *ipso facto* and necessarily conclude the inquiry.” When it came to a man of high-class Hindu stock, Sutherland now replaced science with popular prejudice. Keep the Harvard professor’s admonition in mind when you read this line: “Caucasian is a conventional word of much flexibility as a study of the literature dealing with racial questions will disclose, and while it and the words ‘white

persons' are treated as synonymous for the purposes of that case, they are not of identical meaning."²⁷

In other words, Sutherland was falling back on vague claims about the difference between the popular and scientific meanings of "Caucasian." When used on Main Street or at the local barbershop, the meaning of "Caucasian" narrowed considerably. Sutherland's job was to appreciate the meaning of that difference and enumerate its implications for an Indian who, despite being Caucasian, might not be white.

According to Sutherland, "the term 'race' is one which, for the practical purposes of the statute, must be applied to a group of persons *now* possessing in common the requisite characteristics." Indians admittedly claimed distant Aryan ancestors, but, "while it may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable differences between them today." Aryan signaled linguistic rather than physical characteristics, and Thind's Aryan boasts meant nothing to the judge because different races living in close proximity might speak the same language yet be as different as a white and a black man. Sutherland reminded his audience "that our own history has witnessed the adoption of the English tongue by millions of Negroes, whose descendants can never be classified racially with the descendants of white persons notwithstanding both may speak a common language."

Synonymous only meant the popular meaning attached to the Caucasian by real Americans. Whatever ethnologists had to say, the average American simply would not think that Thind was a white man. "It is a matter of familiar observation and knowledge that the physical group characteristics of the Hindus render them readily distinguishable from the various groups of persons in the country commonly recognized as white." Only a dolt confused a Hindu with a white person; and, just as important, only a dolt assumed that any Indian could assimilate into the United States. Once again, the melting pot myth encountered the popular will of the American people. English, French, German, and Scandinavian children "quickly merge into the

mass of our population and lose the distinctive hallmarks of their European origin,” but, despite Thind’s alleged Aryan roots, “it cannot be doubted that the children born in this country of Hindu parents would retain indefinitely the clear evidence of their ancestry.”

Brown today, Thind’s children would be brown tomorrow. He could not erase the colorful distinction that, according to Sutherland, implied no judgment of inferiority or superiority. Instead, it was a question of Americans being repelled. “What we suggest is racial difference, and it is of such character and extent that the great body of our people instinctively recognize it and reject the thought of assimilation.”

Bhagat Singh Thind was a Caucasian or, in today’s popular parlance, a brown-skinned white. Sadly, Judge Sutherland’s opinions still exclude Indians who, however hard they try, are being prevented from fully assimilating into American life.

Little India accurately boasts that it is the largest circulated Indian periodical in the United States. In October 2004 the magazine featured a long article entitled “The Nowhere Man” by Shekhar Deshpande. Deshpande wrote that, despite wealth, education, and political clout, Indians could never rub out their racial identity in race-conscious America. Doctor, lawyer, or CEO of a Silicon Valley giant, an Indian always discovers that race “shapes their external social identity in the United States.” Indians live between the white and black poles, and “the degree of tolerance [they experience] is often shaped by one’s place on that continuum.”²⁸

In 2006, as in 1923, Indians find it impossible to assimilate into a society that still judges them by the color of their skin. One of the most interesting reactions to this exclusion is a resurgence of Hinduism among Indian Americans. In a provocative example of cultural reconfiguration, these new or revived Hindus behave like Arab Americans: they use religion as an axis of identity because “the racism faced by many young South Asians leads to a turn inwards for the reconstruction of one’s identity.”²⁹ Defying Sutherland’s still potent decisions, many contemporary Indian Americans behave like the Syrian George Dow in the 1920s: They are better than American whites. Thus, Indians openly and proudly assert that their Aryan roots make

them superior to other Americans. In temples and summer camps from New Jersey to California, Indians react to racism by celebrating the Aryan roots that make them Caucasian but not white, legal (after 1965) but still incapable of assimilation into Justice Sutherland's popular American culture.

No wonder Indians are "nowhere men." They left their homeland only to discover that the land of milk and honey still considers them confusing and none-of-the-above. Desis (the word implies a fellow Indian) seek a comfortable social space, but, as in 1923, it is still nowhere to be found.

India: A Highly Developed Society

Many Desis have a great sense of humor. They need one to answer the questions they get from everyday Americans. The following examples are from the Web page Desi Humor.com.

Q: What does that red dot on a woman's forehead mean?

A: Well, in ancient times, Indian men used to practice archery skills by aiming at their wife's red dot. In fact that is one of the reasons they had many wives. You see, once they mastered the art of archery and hit the target . . .

Q: I saw on TV that people there walk on burning coals. Why do they do that?

A: We don't have shoes. So we burn the bottom of our feet to make them hard so that we can walk.

Q: Does India have cars?

A: No. We ride elephants to work. The government is trying to encourage ride-sharing schemes.

Humor helps, but the seriously uninformed questions never stop, even after Indians try to challenge some of the stereotypes they encounter. The developed/underdeveloped continuum is a Western invention that arrogantly measures progress according to levels of

industrial and technological development: the number of cell phones, automobiles, televisions, highways, and shopping malls. Using a different measurement, India's 5,000-year-old culture includes thirty-five languages, approximately twenty-two thousand dialects, major world religions, and magnificent architectural structures. The United States is 225 years old. Who is the adult? Who is the underdeveloped child?

One of the great moral achievements of contemporary Indian society has been its continuing attempt to "right" history by eliminating thousands of years of cultural contempt for the Untouchables. Historically, Indian culture sanctioned (and, in some cases, still sanctions) the most inhuman behavior against millions of human cast offs, roughly 22 percent of the population. By some standards, Untouchables needed to shout a warning before they entered a street, so that way "decent" could safely avoid them. Untouchables need to walk with a mental measuring device at all times; social norms actually stipulated that they remain thirty-three feet away from the lowest castes; sixty-six feet from those in the middle; and from Brahmins, Untouchables needed a space of at least ninety-nine feet.

English added the word *pariah* to the language by using the Parayans of Kerala as a terrible symbol of human indifference to another person's pain. In 1948 India's pariahs presented seemingly insurmountable problems to a new nation but not to the figures who dominated the constitutional convention. With Jim Crow firmly in the saddle in the United States and talk of affirmative action more than twenty years in the future, Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava stressed in 1948 that special provisions for the Untouchables were "the soul of the Constitution." In a sense, all Indians took a public and solemn "oath" to open the nation's doors to the Untouchables "as a means for expiating our past sins. If any community continues in backwardness, socially, culturally, or educationally, then it should not be a question of ten years, or fifteen years, but up to the time that they are brought up to normal standards, facilities should be given and continued for them."

Indians heroically and honestly confronted the consequences of institutionalized prejudice by trying to inject instant life into a very young democracy. Given thousands of years of barriers to educational

and political power, Untouchables obviously lacked the resources needed to gain power in the new nation. So, the Indian Constitution of 1948 reserved 22.5 percent of legislative seats for the Untouchables in both national and state assemblies. All Indians could vote for these seats, but only Untouchables could hold them. This quota-based system was but one solution to a problem that plagues any republic with historical inequities. How can you talk about representative democracy if some groups go unrepresented?

In the expectation that these preferences would end in ten years, Indians also established meaningful educational opportunities and quotas for the Untouchables and mandated that 22 percent of all public employment posts went to the Untouchables. But Indian leaders soon discovered that established beliefs and practices undermine the best intentions. It was difficult to find Untouchables to take these new jobs because most lacked the education and experience needed to carry out the jobs. Meanwhile, the old prejudices thrived. At the 2001 United Nations conference on racism and public policy, India's Untouchables were still handing out buttons that said: "Caste is Discrimination on the Basis of Work and Descent. Equality for All. Free and Uplift Dalits!"

History handed the new nation of India monumental problems, and its leaders courageously faced those problems by accepting moral responsibility. India "failed" for the same reasons America has. Which comes first, the institutional change or the transformation of beliefs and values? Quotas and affirmative action or the cultural revolution that is the theme of this book? In an ideal world, both occur simultaneously; in real life, we stumble along. But when Indians in the United States are asked absurd questions about levels of national development, Americans need to remember that millions of Indians honestly tried "to expiate their sins" while we wallowed in our own.

The first Indian immigrants came from the Punjab region at the turn of the twentieth century. Although most were Sikh, Americans nevertheless called them Hindus. In addition, the popular press called them "inassimilable and possessed of immodest and filthy habits." Even before Chinese and Japanese, Indians proved to be "the most

undesirable of all the eastern Asiatic races.” As early as 1907, the Indian presence provoked a race riot in Bellingham, Washington, and if members of the Asiatic Exclusion League celebrated the melting pot at Sunday church services, they sought the exclusion of Indians during the other six days of the week.³⁰

The league succeeded. With seven hundred Indians in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, the number only rose to seven thousand when Justice Sutherland told Indians the popular meaning of Caucasian in 1923. As late as 1965, the Indian American population included no more than ten thousand people.³¹

In 2005 the Indian population in the United States officially numbered 1.7 million men, women, and children. The actual figure is much higher because, as among the Mexicans, Jamaicans, and Filipinos, many Indians merit an undocumented status. For example, Indians work by the thousands in New York’s restaurant industry, where one educated guess is that 35 percent of the workers lack legitimate documents.³²

In the 1970s many immigrants from India arrived with educational qualifications that made them exceptional in the United States as well as in India. Today fully 11 percent of Indian male immigrants to the United States possess a medical degree; the figure for Indian women is 7 percent. It therefore comes as no surprise that “the median family income of Indian households is 25 percent higher than for all U.S. households.” In California, roughly three hundred thousand generally well-educated Indians work in Silicon Valley’s technology firms, representing 15 percent of the high-tech start-ups in the region. One educated estimate puts their median annual income at two hundred thousand dollars a year. Indians now own 30 percent of the nation’s hotels and motels. Their success is so great that their white competitors often counter with provocative signs like this “welcome” billboard in Springfield, Massachusetts: “This motel is American owned and operated.”³³

Some Indian Americans do very well indeed. Others work in the most unexpected places. No less than twenty-five hundred of New York’s sixty-five thousand Metropolitan Transportation Authority workers claim to be of Indian origin, arguably “the largest number in

any single enterprise on the East Coast.”³⁴ Some Indians work the toll booths while others are engineers, but these underground Indians never live in the McMansions built by the doctors and other professionals along the tree-lined streets of posh suburbs like Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.

Indians Americans’ median family income figure is so high because analysts add the income of very rich people to the income of very poor people. A recent community profile prepared by the Asian American Federation of New York indicates that 20 percent of Indians in the city live below the poverty line. More than one-quarter of Indian American adults in New York never graduated from high school, and 13 percent never completed ninth grade. In the restaurant industry, one Indian exploits another because 16 percent of the Indian workers receive less than minimum wage, many never receive pay for long hours of overtime, and 75 percent of the restaurant workers lack health insurance.³⁵

Even those with master’s degrees walk a tightrope. Here my reference point is the large number of well-educated Indians who arrive via H-1B visas. High-technology firms like General Electric, Microsoft, and Hewlett Packard claim that the nation is desperately short of qualified computer software and hardware technicians. They outsource to (especially) India and China by using body shops that often treat the workers as badly as any Texas farmer treats Mexicans or other disposable workers. The Indian employees of these shops are on visas that normally last for three years, with the possibility of an extension to six years and then permanent residence in the United States. The trick is to have a firm sponsor your permanent status; and to do that these permanent/temporary workers often sacrifice competitive salaries and decent working conditions. At times, workers who want to change jobs need the permission of their present employer, permission from the federal government, and a guarantee from their new employer. It is a lovely contradiction: As they energetically champion global capitalism, American corporations simultaneously limit the geographic opportunities of, in this case, their very well-educated Indian workers.

In this snapshot of the Indian American community, we need to add one more group. In the 2000 census, almost 12 percent of Indian

Americans—221,000 individuals—identified themselves as “mixed race.” They and other South Asians (Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Nepalese) tend not to marry “out” with the frequency of Chinese or Japanese Americans, but the rate is sufficiently high to provoke discussion within the Indian community. When Achal Mehra congratulated a friend on his daughter’s impending marriage, he got this “sheepish” response: “It’s not like that, she is marrying a white guy.” His friend feared ethnic fusions, while other Indians see fusions as a natural consequence of the multiple opportunities and responses Indians make to the United States and its white/black dichotomy. Mehra suggests that “the face of the new Indian American is to be found in the thriving Indian cultures of Malaysia, Singapore, Trinidad and Fiji, where Indians migrated almost a century earlier and forged a multiplicity of blended identities.”³⁶

One thing is certain. Indian Americans exhibit significant diversity across educational level, class, caste, generation, and “race.” These factors alternately aid or impede adjustment to life in the United States. But no matter how an Indian responds, the white/black dichotomy always boxes them in. ABCDs (American Born Confused Desis) are a joke in the literature, but the confusion is real.

None of President Kennedy’s “best and brightest” men expected the Indians to arrive. The numbers increased from ten thousand to almost two million in less than forty years. Yet our only frame of reference was the thinking of men like Justice Sutherland. The coincidence of mass immigration with the civil rights movement and multiculturalism meant that skin color became more important as a means to rights and privileges and, theoretically, less important for those who tried to be color-blind. Ultimately, Indians and other Americans share a common bond: Americans do not know what to make of Indians, and, just as often, Indians do not know what to make of Anglo Protestant culture—and of Indians in it.

The Literate and the Articulate

Many Indian Americans share this story. God offered the man a choice between heaven and hell. Heaven seemed nice enough—“soft music,

serene angels, and an atmosphere of peace”—but hell boasted wine, women, and song. The man chose hell, only to be placed on his arrival in a cauldron of hot oil. The poor fellow asked God why. He answered: “Last time you were on a tourist visa, now you are on an immigrant visa.”³⁷

Immigrants, all immigrants, need to adjust to a society very different from their own. When my grandfather came from Spain in 1916, he stayed for a year, decided he hated the United States, and returned to Spain. More than half of the four million Italians who came between 1899 and 1924 returned home because they disliked America as much as America disliked them.³⁸

Indians stay for a variety of reasons, and many have no opportunity to ponder the meaning of life in the United States. Driving a cab or working a fourteen-hour day in a restaurant allows no time for the big questions. The goal is to get through the day. Identity questions are a luxury of what Deshpande calls the literate and the articulate.

An Indian colleague teaches physics at my university. One day he scribbled some formulas on the board, only to hear laughter from his students. Since there was not much to laugh at in the formulas, he asked what was so funny. Reluctantly, two African American students answered that, while he obviously had darker skin than they did, no one called him black. This was funny to the kids and to my colleague. Desis know they are not white, and they know they are not black. Yet, since there is no in-between, Desis need to make some intelligent response to a ridiculous question.

In the best of all worlds, Desis, two million strong, might actively question the sanity of their fellow Americans. With his dark skin and super straight hair, my colleague explodes the categories invented by the Europeans, who defined Africa as the land mass below the Sahara, *not* including the light-skinned Khoisans from the deep south. Unfortunately, in a prejudiced society, people are generally reluctant to embrace the most despised category. Indians might agree to be “people of color,” but black is a leap most are unwilling to make. White also presents problems, so here are four Indian American responses to the dilemmas posed by the question of color. No one precludes the others; in real life Indians mix and match their responses

based on everything from personal experience to a desire to break with Indian cultural traditions.

One response to America is to walk through life using a rearview mirror. Historically this was hard to do, but today it is a cinch. You can sit in a Starbucks in Englewood Cliffs; sip the latest, very expensive mocha concoction; and converse with your grandmother via e-mail or cell phone. She lives in a remote part of India, yet, as Lavina Melwani writes, “in this new world you have to give up nothing to become something else.”

In the process of becoming, traditional Indian culture always remains in the background, especially after “the long awaited new year’s gift.” In 2004, after a long debate, the Indian government offered all Desis the possibility of dual citizenship. Among other things, the Indian government wanted their money. In exchange, Indians realized a dream. As the editors of *Little India* wrote, “Most of us yearned for it as much for emotional reasons as for its economic advantages. As the legal status acknowledges the everyday reality of our lives, this dual citizenship will only bring us closer to India, and we can think of it as our own again. There is now reason and opportunity for real involvement and real effort.”

Dual citizens do not make good candidates for assimilation. On the contrary, the opportunity for dual citizenship reinforces this response to the United States: “Home is over there; the United States is just an unpleasant place in which to work.”³⁹ As Andy Iyengar, the head of a twelve-million-dollar telecommunications company, put it, “while I used to think of myself as an ‘all-American Indian,’ these days I feel different. I feel that India is my motherland and America is my fatherland.”⁴⁰

Mr. Iyengar makes his living in the fatherland, while he finds spiritual solace in the motherland. This common strategy leaves many Indians feeling like none-of-the-aboves in nowhere land. These Indians therefore spilt the world in two: “The world of the workplace is a world that must be exploited as much as possible”; and the inside world, the one that contains other Indians, “is a world of culture that must be protected and cherished.”⁴¹

Some of the Indians living this dual life play into the prejudices of the white/black dichotomy. As early as the 1920s, some Indians were using their alleged Aryan roots to distance themselves from African Americans. Today, with the advent of affirmative action, you can be severely, mildly, or even not prejudiced against African Americans yet claim “person of color” status in the affirmative action system. An astute Indian quickly grasps the hypocrisy of affirmative action in action. Many employers resist hiring a black, but they have discovered that one can meet government mandates by choosing darker Indians, “who are considered less troublesome, sometimes more competent, and no doubt socially advantaged.”⁴² West Indians and Arabs also play this role, and, as they and Indian Americans do so, affirmative action becomes another way to keep African Americans in their place.

A second response to America is to accept a forever-foreign identity. The critic and scholar Vijay Prashad abhors the prejudices of U.S. society, embraces the label “person of color,” and denounces a government that preserves “anti-democratic forces like the Saudi royal family.” As he sees it, “the distinction between the immigrant to America and the American who was an immigrant is in the cleaning of the toilet.” Brought up with someone else doing the dirty work, a Desi *never* cleans his own bowl. An American goes out, buys a cleaner emblazoned with a white caricature named Mr. Clean, and scrubs for all he is worth.

Since Prashad cleans his own bowl, cooks his own food, and repairs his own home, he embraces the progressive desire to do many of life’s most tiresome chores. For the past few years, he writes, “I have felt neither Indian nor American but always foreign.” He is a stranger in a home with two or three full baths, and he thinks about this “mostly while I am cleaning my (I assume American Standard) toilet.” It is a joke with a very serious punch line. No matter how much of a commitment they make, Prashad and many other Indians believe that Americans see them as “forever immigrants.” Like recent arrivals from China or Japan, Indians are tolerable but not quite white. Even when they speak perfect, accentless English they get the same question posed to East Asians: Where did you learn to speak English so well?

They are asked this because, among others, Justice Sutherland taught us to see Indians as foreigners, and they know it.

A third Indian response to America is Hindutva (literally, Hinduness), arguably the most fascinating and (from the point of view of social change) most counterproductive response to the white/black dichotomy. Like the Arab Americans who embrace Islam, Indian immigrants simply ignore or disregard the issues of race and skin color in favor of a religious identity. As Arvind Rajagopal notes, “religious identity becomes a way of evading racial marginality and of appearing to side-step that great chain of being that has whites above and blacks beneath.”⁴³ Religion becomes a shield that provides social esteem through an imaginative reconfiguring of Indian, European, and American culture. It is transculturation with a heavy dose of jingoism, all in the name of God.

European scholars and cultural theorists in the early nineteenth century sought the ultimate origin of the European genius in general and the Aryan race in particular. Greece obviously provided a crucial foundation for the continent’s cultural splendor, but, eager to distance themselves from the Mediterranean roots of Greek achievements, Aryan writers turned north. To minimize the influence of the Mediterranean, they needed a civilization “wholly independent” of Semitic and African influences, and they ultimately found their racial Rosetta stone in India. Using ancient languages as an alleged source of biological links, French writers like Jules Michelet soon wrote that India was the starting point of European civilization; India was “the birthplace of races and religions, the womb of the world.”⁴⁴

In a spectacular leap of faith, India became the original mother of everyone because “the Aryan model of Indian history served to establish the ancient origin of the Aryans peoples (or race) in Central Asia, their migrations first into Iran and India and subsequently into Europe.” Indians eventually became Caucasians, and this proved so appealing that, in 1877, Keshab Chandra Sen told a Calcutta audience that English imperialism implied a divine meeting of the minds: “In the advent of the English nation in India we see a reunion of parted

cousins, *descendants of two different families of the ancient Aryan race*" (emphasis in original).⁴⁵

Myths developed in Europe gave "great civilization" status to Indians, who accepted their role so readily that, as one recent Indian school text teaches, "the history of India is regarded as the history of the Aryans in India. Their occupation is the most interesting as well as the most momentous event in Indian history."⁴⁶ While Indians obviously react to these Aryan assertions with varying degrees of acceptance, the myth persists. When asked what race they belonged to, Indian immigrants to the United States often chose "Aryan." That label never appeared on the census forms, especially after the Holocaust, yet it—and "Caucasian"—remained a touchstone of racial identity when Indians staked their ancient claim to be a womb of the world.

Initially the Aryan claim to greatness lay unused. However, a "lucky" conjunction of events occurred. As Indian nationalism gained strength in the homeland, a need for social esteem and Indian values arose in the United States. One fed on the other, especially as the first generation of Indian Americans began to raise their children. Parents wanted alternatives to existing, ossified racial categories. Labels such as "nonwhite Caucasian" or "ambiguous nonwhite" offered little satisfaction. So, for Indians of all social classes (but especially the advantaged) "the dominant response to the jarring experiences of racism has been to reiterate a national-cultural identity that would give them 'respect' and a claim to a unique cultural heritage."⁴⁷

Indians become Hindus in search of dharma. In the United States, Hindu subsumes the Aryan identity under what Sucheta Mazumdar calls "the essential of nationality." Hindu is "universalized to embrace both the exclusive ethnic identity of the original peoples of India and the authentic cultural essence of the nation."⁴⁸ Meanwhile, one translation of the word *dharma* is "protection," while another is "that which holds together" or "sustains a being." Using either definition, one important institutional arm of the search for authenticity is the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, Inc. (VHPA). Maintaining close links to the Indian nationalist movement, the VHPA in the United States

focuses on promoting unity through a network of Parishad chapters that help sponsor everything from summer camps to the 2000 Global Dharma Conference. Noted swamis offer campers spiritual support—what the VHPA calls succor and support—to families that are searching for ways to impart Hindu values to their growing children.

On college campuses, the increasingly nationwide Hindu Students Council distributes a pamphlet called “Samskar, It’s All about Dharma.” Students learn to use Hindu as an axis of identity; and in multicultural America, Trisha Pasricha uses the white/black dichotomy to explain her reaction to a sixth-grade history class focusing on world religions. “The majority of the people, including the teacher are white. One African American, two Orientals, and myself, a second generation Indian girl make up the rest of the class.” Through grade school, Trisha constantly heard, “Do you speak Indian?” and, when she saw Hinduism presented in the school’s texts, she saw “some sort of drag-queen in make-up doing an obscene peacock dance. Out of all the dazzling pictures of Indian culture, *that* is the one they have to stick in?”⁴⁹

Tricia is understandably angry. She embraces her identity as an American Hindu and seeks dharma because “every day, young Desi children and teenagers are understandably tormented because of our perceived background. The school textbooks are half the cause. The average American does not know squat about India, and with the help of poorly researched textbooks, they learn nonsense. *The sheer embarrassment of the situation is enough to make Desi students everywhere wish we could have been ‘normal’ by American standards*” (emphasis added).⁵⁰

Since normal is out of the question for “brown-skinned whites,” Tricia and many other Indian Americans seek protection in Hindutva and dharma. They affirm their Hinduness, turning away from a society that only offers a drag-queen representation of a culture that, as the swamis stress, remains a spiritual womb of the universe.

Hindutva moves Indian Americans to postpone or disregard the dichotomy that is a principal cause of the search for dharma. A fourth possibility for Indian Americans is to transcend the racial nonsense and begin a revolution in cultural thinking. Deepika Bahri cites the need for a “kaleidoscopic and futuristic vision” in which we “undo the

categories” against which Indians and Hindus measure themselves and their magnificent and problem-filled heritage.⁵¹

Few Indians choose this revolutionary path. But it is a promise of hope, the dream of overcoming the variables that move so many Indian Americans to reject accommodation, not to mention assimilation into American society.

APPENDIX:

NUMBER OF ARABS IN THE UNITED STATES

The numbers below represent Census Bureau estimates for the Arab American community. As of March 2005, the bureau estimated 1.2 million Arabs. Other estimates reach to 3.5 million. Given variables that run from undocumented immigrants to the Census Bureau’s manner of classifying Americans, it is very difficult to make an accurate estimate.

I provide census numbers for the top ten ethnic categories. The actual numbers are certainly higher; the mystery is how much higher.

Lebanese: 440,279

Syrian: 142,897

Egyptian: 142,832

Palestinian: 72,112

Jordanian: 39,734

Moroccan: 38,923

Iraqi: 37,714

Yemeni: 11,683

Algerian: 8,752

Saudi Arabian: 7,419

These numbers are hotly contested. Arab organizations generally estimate 3 million or more Arab Americans. They criticize the Census Bureau for not including people who are recognized members of the

Arab League, for example, people from Mauritania, Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, and the Comoros. Arab American organizations also include—I believe correctly—people of Arab ancestry.

Source: Angela Brittingham and G. Patricia de la Cruz, “We the People of Arab Ancestry in the United States,” Census 2000 Special Reports, U.S. Census Bureau, March 2005, 1, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/censr-21.pdf>; see also Randa A. Kayyali, “The People Perceived as a Threat to Security: Arab Americans since September 11,” *Migration Information Source*, July 1, 2006, <http://www.migrationinformation.com/Feature/display.cfm?id=409>. The estimate of 3 million comes from the *Detroit Free Press*; see “100 Questions and Answers about Arab Americans,” www.freep.com.