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Beyond Bollywood: Exhibiting South Asian America

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BEYOND BOLLYWOOD

Exhibiting South Asian America

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ABSTRACT. This essay examines *Beyond Bollywood*, a landmark exhibition about South Asian Americans at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. Focusing on the curatorial premise of the exhibition, the aesthetic objects it incorporates, and viewers' affective relations to these objects, I argue that *Beyond Bollywood* generates a rich repertoire of feelings that reframe the relationship between visuality and representation in Asian American exhibition cultures. From exuberance and pride at the upwardly mobile immigrant narrative mapped by archival objects, to shame and anxiety generated through photographic artworks, *Beyond Bollywood* provokes us to consider the limits of visibility as a form of representational politics.

In February 2014, I attended the gala reception and opening of *Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation*. The exhibition opened with great fanfare on social media and was extensively covered by local and international print media as well. Alongside featured artists, curators, community supporters, and advisors to the show, I gathered around the life-size African elephant that dominates the entrance to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. The sheer excitement and energy that had gone into organizing this exhibition was palpable in the laughter and chattering that resonated across the hallway. With speeches by deep-pocketed donors, limitless mango martinis served at the bar, and pink and green lights on the reception floor, the opening reception was much like a Bollywood-themed wedding. Under the sponsorship of the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, *Beyond Bollywood* was the first major exhibition about a single Asian American community to be displayed at the Smithsonian museums.[1] Initially curated by the sociologist Pawan Dhingra,

JAAS JUNE 2015 • 193–217

and brought to completion by Mausum Momaya, the exhibition originated at the behest of Indian American community members, who approached the Smithsonian in 2007.[2] Along with support from the Smithsonian Institution, these upper- and middle-class immigrants funded the exhibition, giving between one thousand and one hundred thousand dollars per donor.[3] While donors did not have curatorial oversight, they did make suggestions regarding the exhibition's content.[4] Thus while *Beyond Bollywood* was organized under the auspices of the Asian Pacific American Center, the exhibition itself captured one middle-class immigrant community's private desire to see themselves publicly displayed on the Smithsonian's walls. The exhibition also has an online presence on the Google Cultural Institute, and its opening was preceded and accompanied by several public events such as book readings, fund-raising galas, and theater performances by South Asian American artists.[5] It is open to the public until August 2015, by which time elements from the exhibition (primarily text panels and photographic reproductions) will be used for a traveling version to be viewed across the country.[6]

In contrast to the lavish opening reception, the actual exhibition is tucked away on the second floor of the museum, one level up from the tourists that throng the Hall of Human Origins. A small sign announces the show, which is curated in a gallery space lavishly painted in rich shades of orange and purple. *Beyond Bollywood* brings popular cultural texts such as music in combination with archival documents, personal mementos, and artworks. The vast majority of objects on display, however, are photographs: reproductions of newspaper images, archival family portraits, professional head shots, and crowdsourced digital snapshots. The photographs collected in *Beyond Bollywood* are central to the ways in which we understand Asian American visibility, and more broadly, the aesthetics and politics of Asian American exhibition cultures. Coming to terms with these archival images and family snapshots enables us to examine our own investment as Asian American viewers in museological narratives of representation and display. As Ivan Karp has argued, "When people enter museums they do not leave their cultures and identities in the coatroom. Nor do they respond passively to museum displays. They interpret museum exhibitions through their prior experiences and through the culturally learned beliefs, values, and perceptual skills that they gain through membership in multiple communities."[7] At *Beyond Bollywood*, such "prior experiences" include diverse histories of immigration and experiences of racialization, embodied by visitors who identify as Asian American, as well as those who do not. Equally important, the fact that *Beyond Bollywood* is staged within a natural history museum (a primary site for the production and circulation

of narratives of human evolution and progress) amplifies the claims to representation that are made by the exhibition, as well as the taxonomic forms of display that inform its curation.[8]

Seen as an aesthetic and cultural text, *Beyond Bollywood* draws our attention to the problem of visuality in Asian American studies. Historically, visuality and its corollary, visibility, have been the primary means through which activists and scholars have pushed for the recognition of Asian immigrants in the U.S. public sphere. Making Asian American art and history more visible has been central to political project of the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center.[9] The trope of visibility has also shaped art-historical interventions in Asian American visual cultural studies, as artworks by first- and second-generation immigrants are frequently examined in relation to the racial, class, sexual, and gender identities of artists and their communities of origin.[10] In both contexts, the visual qualities of the art object index a visible ethnic identity and locate such identities within the racial formation of the U.S. state.[11]

Whether in the public sphere of television and film or in the more rarefied context of the art gallery, visibility is central to the representation of racialized minorities. Across these distinct spaces of seeing, the visual object becomes the conduit for the representation and recognition of the minoritized self in the democratic public sphere. Thus the accumulation of such objects in a national museum stands for the greater visibility of minority subjects within the multiracial spectrum of the national body. In turn, the exhibition enables viewers (particularly viewers who are themselves racialized) to lay claim to the possibility of embodying full citizenship through the visual object. The problem with this framework, however, is threefold. First, it requires us to read visual objects as texts that stand in for the racialized self. It produces an ethnographic relationship to the object, and mines the aesthetic object for its fidelity to the experience of racialization. Second, it makes representation incumbent on visibility, limiting our ability to consider aesthetic objects that abjure, deny, or refuse narratives of belonging. Third, if such aesthetic objects are rendered only as a means for visibility, we cannot account for those viewers who, in their relationship to the object, find that they cannot see themselves. As Anne Anlin Cheng writes, "It is the crisis of visuality, rather than the allocation of visibility, that constitutes one of the most profound challenges for American democratic recognition today."[12]

Beyond Bollywood emerges out of one Asian American community's commitment to making itself more visible. In order to do so, the exhibition employs a series of photographs, of varying degrees of aesthetic and historical value, that collectively provide sociological documentation of this

community's long presence in America. At the same time, the exhibition also incorporates photo-based artworks that challenge such nationalist paradigms, and whose viewing requires us to acknowledge histories of empire and colonialism that cannot be accommodated within the curatorial narrative. Walking through the exhibition, particularly for South Asian viewers such as myself, can be an experience that is simultaneously affirming and discomfiting. In my repeated visits to the Smithsonian, *Beyond Bollywood* has come to generate a series of questions about the relation among visuality, aesthetics, and representation, particularly in terms of how we see Asian American exhibition cultures. What are the frameworks of seeing that we have developed in relation to minority cultural production? What affective bonds of identification take place between the aesthetic object and the viewer? Finally, how and when does visibility become insufficient as a form of representational politics?

I draw upon recent interventions in cultural studies of photography in order to reframe the ways in which we can engage with the visual narrative of *Beyond Bollywood*. Elspeth Brown and Thy Phu, for example, call for "feeling" rather than "thinking" photography, amplifying photography's impact on us as viewers, as subjects whose emotions are produced in relation to the images we see.[13] By walking through the exhibition as a site of feeling, we can also reflect on what other ways of seeing emerge through our interaction with the photographs on display. By considering the politics of viewing via the "rubric of feeling," Brown and Phu call for linking "an older mode of photographic criticism's attention to power and historical materialism with new questions concerning racial formation, colonialism, postindustrial economies, gender, and queer counterpublics."[14] Similarly, Tina Campt has argued for an affective (what she calls a "haptic") mode of attending to photography, specifically in relation to archival images of the black diaspora. She writes, "The visuality of race and the indexicality of the photograph have been powerful twin forces in the deployment of the racialized index to produce subjects to be seen, read, touched, and consumed as available and abjected flesh objects and commodities, rather than as individual bodies, agents, or actors."[15] Campt reminds us of the powerful uses of photography as evidence, its realist qualities translated into documentation for the fact of abjected bodies. A haptic method of approaching photography enables us to not only situate photographic objects within the lifeworlds of the documented subjects, but also consider what feelings are conjured in us as we see, touch, and sense these images from the past.

Because the curatorial objective of the exhibition is to showcase the historical, cultural, and economic contributions of an immigrant group, each aesthetic object takes on a representational quality that stands in for

an individual life story *and* the racialized experience of a broader community. The photographs in particular lend themselves to different means of interaction, to ways of seeing that move beyond appreciating the images as historical fact. At the Smithsonian, viewers could touch the wall-mounted photographic reproductions; stand eye-to-eye with the images on display; and take photographs (or "selfies") of themselves alongside installations. During my visits I spent hours walking through the gallery running my hands over the large prints on display; peering closely at old newspaper images of Bengali traders and American yogis; talking with other viewers; and creating my own archive of documentation for research, as I took multiple photographs of each object on the walls. These haptic modes of encountering photographs produce ways of seeing that translate into multiple modes of feeling.

These various modalities of feeling are reflected in the exhibition, which maintains an emphasis on the nation-based category "Indian Americans" even as its curatorial and promotional text attempts to distinguish among three key terms: Desi, South Asian, and Indian American. An article discussing former curator Pawan Dhingra's contributions to the exhibition notes that "[a]lthough the culture displayed at *Beyond Bollywood* speaks to these countries [Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh] as well as India, the exhibition's contributions come solely from Americans of Indian origin. For this reason, the exhibit does not presume to represent greater South Asia."[16] While major cultural artifacts on display at *Beyond Bollywood* (such as former NFL player Brandon Chillar's helmet) have indeed been donated by "Americans of Indian origin"—and while major donors were of Indian descent—a host of minor objects on display contest such categories of national origin. These include, among the three hundred photographs on display, portraits of Indo-Caribbean immigrants and families; Muslim Americans from prepartition Bengal; transgendered and multiracial subjects; and Sikh immigrants who have been both marginalized and persecuted by the Indian state. To call this heterogeneous group of immigrants, who themselves may not identify as "Indian," as "Indian Americans" is to elide the profound differences of class, gender, religion, and region that are central to the transnational formation of racialized communities.[17]

While *Beyond Bollywood* insists on representing itself as an exhibition about how "Indian Americans Shape the Nation," I use instead the term "South Asian" to conceptualize both the immigrants who are on view in the exhibit and the visual objects used to index these various immigrant histories. By describing the aesthetic narrative of *Beyond Bollywood* as being about "South Asians" rather than "Indian Americans," my intention is not to reinscribe the hegemony of India in representations of South Asians in

America (a hegemonic aesthetic that is in fact reproduced within the exhibition's framework). Rather, I want to draw our attention to the awkward negotiation of difference between the photographic objects on display, among viewers who attended the show, and across the narratives of belonging that emerge in this exhibition. Expanding on my earlier research on diasporic public cultures, I use "South Asian" as a means of thinking through the production of locality.[18] Specifically, I examine the ways in which photographs are used in this exhibition to produce a historical narrative that appears to be about a single national group ("Indian Americans") but in fact engenders a broader portrait of a racialized community that encompasses not just Indian Americans, but also Bangladeshi and Pakistani Americans, as well as South Asians from a range of diasporic locations (Canada, East Africa, the Caribbean, and so on). Such forms of community are produced through complex relations of affinity and alienation that viewers develop in relation to the photographic objects on display.

As curator Masum Momaya noted in a public lecture following the opening of *Beyond Bollywood*, producing a feeling of belonging was central to the objective of the exhibition. Because the Smithsonian is charged with telling an "American story," her goal was to make clear three elements of this story: the contribution of Indian Americans, their struggles, and their daily life experiences. The problem, as Momaya emphasized, was that there is no single "origin story" for South Asian Americans that could be "dimensionalized" in space. Nor were there any physical objects in the Smithsonian's extensive archive that could be used to anchor the exhibit. Instead, Momaya relied on crowdsourcing a number of artifacts, reaching out nationally via Twitter to community groups and individuals.[19] As South Asians became "Indian Americans," and as Indian Americans were transformed from racialized immigrants to U.S. citizens via the series of photographs on display, the historical orientation of the exhibition also replicated dominant paradigms in Asian American civil rights discourse (from marginalization to full citizenship) as well as in Asian American visual culture (from invisibility to visibility). Thus the exhibition deployed visual artifacts as a means of re-creating a legislative history of South Asian migration.[20] Beginning with displays of South Asians as disenfranchised minorities, the curatorial narrative swiftly progressed to highlighting the legal, economic, and cultural achievements of this immigrant group. Rather than visualizing the transnational linkages of culture and capital that continue to bind together the subcontinent with the United States, this was a story about America enacted across the bodies of South Asian immigrants.

Beyond Bollywood opens with a pile of used shoes, symbolizing that the viewer is entering a family home or house of worship. As visitors enter

the main gallery, we hear the strains of the 1960 blockbuster Hindi film *Mughal-e-Azam* straining through the speakers. A vintage suitcase lies on the floor, containing a record player and LP cover for the movie's soundtrack, flanked by a small figure of the Hindu god Ganesha. From the outset, the curators make visible their commitment to religious diversity within the South Asian community, combining popular representations of Muslim culture on the Bollywood screen with Hindu iconography.[21] A collection of crowdsourced digital and print family photographs beams from the walls, anchored by a world map titled "Passages to America" (Figure 1). The map outlines nineteenth- and twentieth-century labor migrations from the subcontinent to the Caribbean, South and East Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, but prominently highlights the United States as a final destination. Beginning with these personal objects and family snapshots, the gallery opens out to a chronology of South Asian migration mapped through reproductions of archival photographs.[22] These include photographs of unnamed Punjabi railroad workers on the West Coast and "Mexican-Punjabi" families in California at the turn of the twentieth century, and portrait images of Bhagat Singh Thind and Kanta Chandra, the first South Asian man and woman to challenge U.S. citizenship laws (Figure 2). Such images bring to life the long history of struggle around legal citizenship, a struggle enacted by South Asian Americans for precisely the forms of visibility and representation that the exhibition itself offers. This wall of archival images culminates in a floor-to-ceiling photographic reproduction of Dalip Singh Saund, the first South Asian elected to Congress, in the company of then-Senator John F. Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson in 1958. "Who Gets to Be a Citizen?" asks the wall text. Culminating a narrative of legislative battles around race- and gender-based claims to citizenship, this image encourages viewers to celebrate the political representation of South Asians in the U.S. legislature. Paradoxically, however, Saund's achievement also begs the question of who *doesn't* get to be a citizen: that is, the question of how to document the tremendous labor invested in, and losses incurred through, immigrant claims to citizenship.

In many ways, the story of arrival generated by *Beyond Bollywood* rehearses dominant narratives of mobility and middle-class citizenship. Yet it is precisely the familiarity of this uplifting and upwardly mobile narrative that generated excitement among viewers at the opening reception. Several South Asians whom I spoke with on opening night were involved with fund-raising for the exhibition, or had consulted with curators, or had long-standing professional and personal relationships with Smithsonian staff. Despite quibbles that I overheard from viewers about who and what was represented, the experience of many audience members was genuine

Figure 1. Crowdsourced family photographs. Photograph by author.

Figure 2. "The Great Melting Pot." Photograph by author.

exhilaration. As viewers walked through the collection of photographic objects, peering at the wall text and taking photographs of themselves in front of various images, their experience of viewing came to acquire affective qualities. Simply being at the Smithsonian and seeing their family photographs (or photographs of families that looked like theirs) displayed at a national institution was central to the ways in which viewers engaged with the objects on display. What quickly became evident was the desire of many South Asian American viewers to identify *with* the aesthetic object: to make these photographs relate to their everyday lives, no matter how divergent their actual experiences of migration and citizenship were from the exhibition's central narrative. Indeed, it was precisely the ability of the curators to domesticate a wide variety of archival images, to make these photographs appear as if they mirrored the lives of viewers, that has contributed to the success of *Beyond Bollywood*. By reproducing a mainstream civil rights history, brought to life by the archival and crowdsourced images on display, the exhibition generated and produced in its viewers a sense that they, too, were part of an "American story."

Throughout *Beyond Bollywood*, personal and archival images are interspersed with artworks and installations, including one of the star attractions of the exhibition: an installation of the National Spelling Bee stage set (Figure 3). The Spelling Bee, won by South Asian American contestants for the past eight consecutive years is, as Sameer Pandya puts it, "America's Great Racial Freaks and Geeks Show." Aired on ESPN, it has the appearance of both a competitive sport and "pure meritocracy," as the sole criterion for advancement is spelling a word correctly.[23] At the Smithsonian, the installation draws in giggling teenagers who stand under the headset, attempting to hear contestants spell words from past Spelling Bees; young children who jump onstage and squeal into the microphone; and in one of my later visits, a mother explaining to her daughter that "Indian Americans" win the Spelling Bee because "their culture values education."

Such predominant notions of South Asian "cultural values" are amplified in a large gallery space adjacent to the Spelling Bee set, in a display titled "Groundbreakers." Against a deep purple backdrop are another series of photographs, this time professional portraits of South Asian Americans across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Displayed under the words "Spirit Mind Body," this glittering parade of celebrities includes writers such as Dhan Gopal Mukerji and Bharati Mukherjee; fashion designer Naeem Khan; the astronaut Kalpana Chawla and the Nobel Prize–winning scientist Hargobind Khorana; MacArthur Grant winners such as Siddhartha Mukherjee; and Hollywood directors and writers including M. Night Shyamalan and Mindy Kaling. The exhibit concludes with photographs of athletes such as

Figure 3. National Spelling Bee installation. Photograph by author.

Olympic gymnast Mohini Bhardwaj and NFL player Brandon Chillar.[24] The entire display is crowned by a life-size photographic installation of Miss America 2014, Nina Davuluri (Figure 4).

Across my repeated visits to *Beyond Bollywood*, this lavishly curated series of photographs was a focal point of the show. It was where viewers lingered to read the wall text, talked animatedly with friends about whom they knew and whom they didn't, and took selfies alongside Miss America. Like the earlier set of archival images that forwarded legal claims to citizenship, the Groundbreakers section also underscored the essential contributions of South Asian Americans. As the wall text noted, "Since its

Figure 4. "Groundbreakers." Photograph by author.

first days America has been a land of spectacular achievement built on the shoulders of immigrants. Indian Americans are known for success in medicine, engineering, and business, but did you know that many have broken ground elsewhere? Here are just a few of the luminaries of (Indian) America's amazing history." In a public lecture that Momaya gave, she suggested that the Groundbreakers section was a direct response to donor pressure. Several donors wanted what she called a "hall of fame," a section of the exhibition that would highlight the achievements of prominent South Asian Americans. The resulting series of "luminaries" did not include images of any donors to the exhibit, but it did indirectly reflect these donors' pride in and desire to make public their own professional success. Momaya noted that she successfully argued for expanding the range of "groundbreakers," initially limited to scientists and physicians, to figures in sports and the arts.[25]

The curators' commitment to making visible a broader repertoire of South Asian American experience, particularly in images that contest or expand notions of South Asians as a "model minority," is evident in several sections of the exhibition. Just beyond the Spelling Bee stage set, viewers come across a series of installations that document the class, religious, sexual and gender diversity of South Asian immigrant communities. This includes a replica of a motel lobby, seen from the point of view of Indian American motel owners.[26] Whereas a motel lobby, seen from the guest's entrance, is frequently anonymous (accessorized with industrial carpeting and furniture), the lobby counter that viewers see here is abutted by a cabinet stacked with VHS tapes of Bollywood movies, filled with Hindu iconography and deities (Figure 5). The walls of the installation itself are festooned with snapshot photographs of South Asian motel owners and their families.[27] Toward the left of this installation is a taxi bumper set into the wall: it screens interviews with Sikh American cab drivers in San

Figure 5. Motel lobby installation. Photograph by author.

Francisco, part of the documentary *Punjabi Cab*.[28] Toward the right of the motel lobby are a series of artworks by progressive South Asian community groups: a photograph of Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM); an oil painting by South Asian Youth Action (SAYA); and a large-scale graffiti mural by the artists' collective Art Under Pressure. Complementing these works is a series of feminist photo-based art by Swati Khurana as well as a collection of laser-cut woodblock prints featuring South Asian American hip-hop artists. On a narrow wall across from this display, we see two small photographs of queer and trans South Asians, participating in the annual India Day Parade in New York City and in World Transgender Day. At the far end of the exhibition, among the final objects on display is a turban worn by Balbir Singh Sodhi, among the first South Asian Americans killed in a race-based hate crime in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

Expansively documenting a heterogeneous immigrant community, *Beyond Bollywood* aspires to be an exemplary visual record of South Asians in America. At one level, the exhibition is a model of pluralism, underscoring this community's long presence in the United States through a diverse set of public contributions and claims to citizenship. Yet from another perspective, *Beyond Bollywood* demonstrates the limits of intersectional models of identity. Precisely because the exhibition tells an "American story"

through portraits of South Asian Americans—that is, it tells a familiar story of immigrant arrival and adaptation—the exhibition reproduces rather than renegotiates dominant forms of representation. By "adding on" to an existing visual template, one that reiterates a visual logic moving from invisibility (the anonymous Punjabi railroad workers) to visibility (the spectacular success of individual "groundbreakers"), the exhibition foregrounds a panoramic view of a multicultural national body. Just as the "hall of fame" includes prominent figures from the sciences *and* the arts, the exhibition as a whole includes images of upper- *and* working-class immigrants; Hindus *and* Muslims, Jains, Christians; straight *and* queer South Asians.

This strategy of securing diversity through the equal representation of minority subjects (evident in the curators' careful pairing of Hindu and Muslim iconography in the suitcase that opens the show) generates a visual narrative that obscures relations of power and difference within a diverse immigrant group. In so doing, *Beyond Bollywood* codifies a state-sponsored discourse of multiculturalism even as the exhibition describes instances of resistance to the state: for example, through photographs of trans activism and protests against race-based hate crimes. As visual objects come to index the racial difference of an immigrant community as well as religious, class, gender, and sexual diversity within that community, *Beyond Bollywood* conflates visibility with representation, and representation with belonging to the national body. The curatorial insistence on national belonging as the only possible relationship to visual representation perseveres across the exhibit, even as specific aesthetic objects on display—such as Sodhi's turban—index forms of hypervisibility that have resulted in the violent death of Muslim and Sikh South Asian immigrants.[29] Sodhi's death is memorialized within the exhibit through a series of objects (such as a flyer and a graphic novel featuring his facial image), but his death is simultaneously recuperated into a narrative of antiracist immigrant politics, as his turban is displayed alongside photographs of South Asian Americans protesting the assaults of "Dotbusters" in the 1990s.

When and where is visibility insufficient as a form of representational politics? For many South Asian American viewers on opening night, it was precisely the excess of visual objects—a profusion of personal photographs and archival images on every wall of the exhibition—that contributed to feelings of delight, glee, and pride. Likewise, visible evidence of the different cultural contributions South Asian Americans had made also shaped the viewing pleasure of Latino, African American, and white viewers whom I observed at the museum during the months that followed. Because *Beyond Bollywood* produces good feelings—it helps us feel good about being South Asian—it is not useful, in my view, to evaluate the exhibition

as a "success" or a "failure."[30] Rather, my interest is in using the visual text of the exhibition to examine our collective desire for representation as well as the limits of representation itself. Throughout the exhibition, visibility becomes a central means of establishing affective relations with objects on display, evident in the ways that visitors intimately engaged with the series of portrait photographs (e.g., by taking selfies). Literally being able to see oneself in relation to these visual artifacts produces feelings of contentment and pleasure for South Asian and non–South Asian American viewers. Yet these happy feelings are deeply implicated in existing discourses of multiculturalism.[31] Across my visits to the Smithsonian I never encountered a dejected or disappointed visitor, only those who clamored for more representation of other celebrities, for more archival photographs, or for a more diverse range of artifacts. How then can we use the visual form of the exhibition to counter such overwhelming desire for representation? In what ways can we feel differently about *Beyond Bollywood*, and how can such feelings create new forms of seeing?

I turn here toward one of the photo-based artworks showcased in the gallery. Directly across from the archival image of Punjabi railroad workers is a series of four diptychs by the Rhode Island–based photographer Annu Matthew. Titled *An Indian from India*, Matthew's work indexed a strikingly different narrative of South Asian migration. Using portraits from Edward Curtis's early twentieth-century photographic series, *The North American Indian*, among other collections, Matthew re-creates the scene of these photographs with herself as the subject. At first glance, both sides of the diptych look identical. Like Curtis's elegiac images, Matthew's self-portraits are also tinted a nostalgic shade of sepia, and the archival quality of the silver gelatin prints gives the appearance of historical originality. Yet the visual similarity on both sides of the diptych, enhanced by Matthew's spatial framing of photographic subjects as well as her use of a contiguous caption font, also produces a troubling sense of the uncanny, a question of exactly who and what is being represented. As Matthew reframes Curtis's portraits of what he called a "vanishing race" in relation to her own visible presence in the United States, *An Indian from India* makes the problem of representation central to its own enactment. Through Matthew's extensive use of digital technology to reproduce a turn-of-century photographic archive, as well as her use of her own body to duplicate these prints, the diptychs underscore the violent trajectories of imperialism that have irregularly and divergently shaped the racialization of Native American and South Asian American bodies.

Within the curatorial framework of *Beyond Bollywood*, *An Indian from India* emphasizes an intersectional identity, particularly in terms of

Matthew's own migrant biography. The wall text framing the diptychs prominently features a quote from Matthew's artist's statement. The longer version reads,

> As an immigrant I am often asked where I am "really" from. When I say that I am Indian, I often have to clarify that I am an Indian from India. . . . In this portfolio I play on these stereotypes using photographs of Native Americans from the nineteenth century. I pair these with contemporary images of myself in clothes, poses, and environments that mimic these "older" images. I am challenging the viewer's assumption of then and now, us and them, exotic and local.[32]

Matthew's explicit challenge to viewers generated a range of responses, both at the Smithsonian and in media reviews of the exhibition. During my visits I noticed that several gallery visitors walked right past the prints, hardly giving them a glance. Others stopped to read the wall text, laughed, and brought their friends over to admire the work. A South Asian visitor remarked aloud on how Matthew's statement resonated with her own experience; still others seemed befuddled by these artworks, out of sync with the portraits of historical figures and crowdsourced photographs that surrounded it. By contrast, in online reviews of *Beyond Bollywood*, Matthew's work unexpectedly became a touchstone for discussing issues of race and identity. "Which Indian Are You? Feather or Dot. (Not a quiz)" blared the headline from BuzzFeed; "Portraits Challenge Cultural Perceptions," said CNN; elsewhere, Matthew's photographs were described as "the most redeeming part of the exhibit."[33]

One diptych on display, "Tom Torlino, Navajo, three years later, Carlisle/Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, nine years later, Providence," (also known as "Tom and Annu After") draws attention to the conflicting feelings that emerge out of viewer responses to *An Indian from India* (Figure 6). Here Matthew reproduces an 1885 photograph by J. N. Choate, a predecessor of Edward Curtis who worked as the principal photographer for the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Choate's portrait of Torlino depicts a clean-shaven young man, wearing a suit and tie, his eyes glancing away from the camera. In an adjacent frame, Matthew similarly wears business attire: her professionalized image here could easily have been inserted into the Groundbreakers series in the adjoining section of the gallery. At first glance, both Torlino and Matthew's photographs make visible the effects of racial assimilation: as Torlino is brutally "civilized" following three years at the infamous Carlisle School, so too is Matthew, nine years after arriving in the United States. Yet glossing the diptych as a shared (but triumphant) history of adaptation obviously erases the difference between the condi-

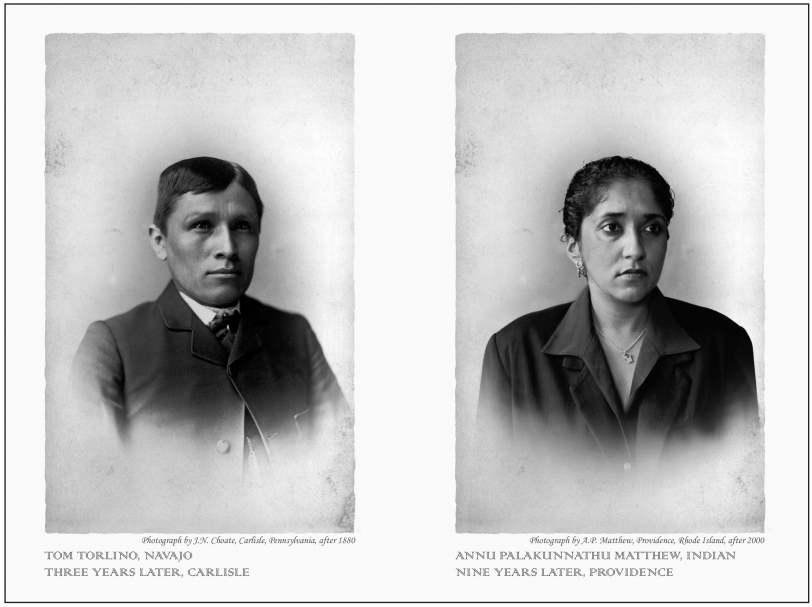

Figure 6. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew. *An Indian from India*
Tom and Annu After (2001)
Archival digital print, 12″x16″
Courtesy Annu Palakunnathu Matthew and sepiaEYE

tions of U.S. settler colonialism and Native American forced assimilation, and Matthew's own voluntary migration from postcolonial India to the United States. I propose instead an alternate reading, one that mines the visible similarity between Torlino and Matthew to map asymmetrical relations of power that structure our viewing of the diptych. Reading these dissonant lines of identification between subject and object opens us out to ways of seeing that transgress the curatorial objective of *Beyond Bollywood*. Moving from multicultural representations of U.S. nationhood to transnational visual histories of empire, Matthew's diptychs demand that we—as immigrants, as viewers—make visible the intensity of our own desire to see ourselves.

Two different histories of imperial photography frame the diptych, foregrounding the fraught relationship of identity between Torlino and Matthew, both of whom appear in this work as ethnographic subjects. Torlino's student file at the Carlisle School contains two photographs: one that shows Torlino in "native" headdress, adorned with necklaces, earrings, and a woven blanket over his left shoulder; and another—the print Matthew uses here—that depicts him after three years at the school. Both portraits

appear to be professionally staged.[34] His only existing student record describes him as a "Navajoe" male; his mother and father are described as "living," but are given no names; Torlino's "Indian" name is also absent.[35] Choate took a series of portraits of Native American students during his time at the school (often in pairs of "before" and "after" shots, similar to what we see in Torlino's file). Choate also sold several student images as tourist souvenirs, in the form of cabinet cards and stereographs that promoted his commercial studio work.[36] Choate's photographs thus functioned not only as an official record of the Carlisle School and its "civilizing" mission among Native students; the student portraits were also commoditized images that circulated widely, displaying the effects of U.S. settler colonialism on Native bodies. Alongside Torlino's image, Matthew's body (encased in a suit, hair combed back) echoes the disciplining effects of the United States as empire. But her self-portrait also recalls another visual history: that of British colonial photography in nineteenth-century India. This alternate archive of ethnographic portraiture, also used to codify "native" races, generated images that were archived in administrative volumes such as *The People of India*, commissioned between 1868 and 1875 and circulated widely to the British public.[37] Here Matthew's static pose, her refusal (like Torlino) to look directly at the photographer, and her use of a sepia-toned aesthetic bind together two distinct colonial archives of photographic documentation, in South Asia and in the United States.

At the same time, Matthew calls attention to the skewed relation of power between herself as an archival researcher of early American photography, and Torlino as the retrieved photographic object of her (and our) consumption. Rather than considering *The North American Indian* and similar collections as a repository of static images, Matthew alerts us to the performative possibilities of these portraits. As we know, Curtis and his peers deployed an array of props and costumes to produce what they considered "authentic" images of Native Americans, and frequently edited out emblems of modernity (such as jeans and clocks) from negative prints.[38] By duplicating the poses, stances, and clothing of Native subjects like Torlino, Matthew sutures the gap between photographic documentation of ethnographic objects, and narratives of selfhood that emerge from ethnographic subjects. Foregrounding her own reproduction of Torlino's bodily aesthetic, Matthew provokes the viewer to consider whether Torlino himself was performing an idealized representation of the "Indian." Though Matthew's strategic use of photographic reproduction is frequently misread as a means of assigning similarity to the racialized experiences of Native Americans and the immigrant experiences of South Asian Americans, in my view her work brings to life relations of power and difference.[39] By

highlighting the slippage between her profession as an artist and her performative role as a photographic subject within the diptych, Matthew refutes the temporal and spatial distance that structures the relation between the ethnographic photographer and (his) object.[40] Instead, by citing nineteenth-century colonial photography in India through archival portraits of Native Americans, and refracting both through her dissonant portrayal of an "Indian," Matthew provokes us to think about the time and space of diaspora.[41]

Through performance, citation, and documentation, Matthew's diptychs draw our attention to a complex genealogy of race and representation. *An Indian from India* unexpectedly binds together two archives of photographic portraiture, generated by U.S. and British imperialisms. In doing so, Matthew routes the visual history of her own documentation as an Indian immigrant via nostalgic, romanticized portraits of Native Americans and the taxonomic projects of British colonial photographers. The mobility of images in her series—from late nineteenth-century photogravure to digital prints, from India to the United States, from ethnographic objects to immigrant subjects—highlights the vexed relationship between visual legacies of colonial South Asia, and the visual economy of race in the United States. Exploring how these two imperial projects converge across technologies of documentation, forms of representation, and modes of bodily discipline demonstrates how Matthew's work is, in Ann Stoler's luminous phrase, "haunted by empire."[42]

At *Beyond Bollywood*, Matthew's diptychs hang across from an archival photograph of Bhagat Singh Thind, and alongside a poster advertising Mira Nair's film, *The Namesake*. But whereas Thind's image inaugurates, within the exhibition, a triumphant feeling of South Asian American citizenship, *An Indian from India* dispels with easy modes of identification. Instead it generates a different set of feelings for a smaller group of viewers: feelings that include confusion, bemusement, and disorientation. In spite of the capacious floor space of the Smithsonian gallery, there is no room within the exhibition to struggle with these feelings. Together with hundreds of other photographic images, Matthew's artwork was swept into a linear narrative about the achievements of South Asians in America. Much like *The Namesake*, the dominant story that emerges out of this museum space is about how one immigrant group stands in for a universal experience of what it means to be American.[43] Even as the series of photographs on display make racial, class, and gender difference visible to an American public, the exhibition as a whole cannot accommodate other forms of difference: postcolonial experiences of empire, and visual histories that originate elsewhere.

As *Beyond Bollywood* makes clear, in thematic survey shows about immigration we conventionally understand aesthetic objects as representations of the immigrant subject. The work of art acquires its value because it tells us something about the immigrant, whether that subject is figured within the artwork (such as in Matthew's self-portraits) or absent from it (for example in the installation of the motel lobby). That is, artwork by and about diasporic subjects becomes valuable because its significance as an aesthetic commodity is bound to its representational qualities as an "authentic" documentation of immigrant life. Within this context of display, diasporic art accrues ethnographic and sociological value as depictions of "real life" rather than as objects that require new forms of seeing, and that produce unexpected feelings.[44]

Such issues of representation, authenticity, and identity are central to the curatorial strategy of exhibitions like *Beyond Bollywood*. These are precisely the themes elucidated by Matthew's artwork, for her diptychs create a visual analogy between two different racialized communities, an analogy that at first glance codifies the multicultural history of immigration that unfolds over the exhibition. Yet if we linger on this artwork, attending to the dynamic relationship established between artist and archive, between ethnographic object and subject, and between performance and repetition, *An Indian from India* enables us to see the problem of visuality within *Beyond Bollywood*: namely, the exhibition's conflation of identity with visibility, and visibility with photographic representation.

That issues of visibility and identity—what we broadly call "identity politics"—continue to linger long after the 1990s demonstrates how the need for visual representation remains central to Asian American public culture. As Susette Min asserts,

> It is more important as ever to curate identity-based exhibitions. . . . [I]t is important to think about what part of this curatorial framework or strategy is outmoded and how, for example, identity-based exhibitions invariably serve as an effective strategy, a regulatory mechanism for promoting difference. . . . But such practices are not easy to let go, and to do so seems counterproductive, even irresponsible, in this day and age, when resources and cultural capital are increasingly inaccessible and unequally distributed.[45]

Min underscores the necessary work of curating Asian American art, linking that aesthetic project to the redistributive politics of social justice. At the same time, by highlighting how exhibitions of Asian American visual culture can operate as "regulatory mechanism[s] for promoting difference," Min demonstrates the ways in which fidelity to identity—manifest in cura-

torial frameworks that prioritize making minoritarian identities visible—is complicit with neoliberal discourses of multiculturalism.

Funded by private donors, displayed at a preeminent national museum, an exhibition like *Beyond Bollywood* is the quintessential "identity-based exhibition." The varied gender, sexual, class, and religious identities of South Asian Americans that are manifest throughout the show are crucial to producing a pluralist visual aesthetic of immigrant experience. The photographs that anchor the exhibition index precisely this diversity of experience, and are mobilized to document an immigrant community that strives toward full citizenship. Whether archival reproduction or digital family snapshot, the photographs create an affective relation of identity that binds the viewer to the image, enabling viewers (both South Asian and not) to claim this series of images as representations of "our" collective history. Told through this curatorial narrative, the dominant experience of *Beyond Bollywood*—its strongest feeling, as it were—is that being South Asian is about laying claim to America.

And yet *An Indian from India* also tells us an American story, one that produces dissonant feelings of belonging within the exhibition. These are feelings wrapped up in visual histories of empire, in imperial projects of taxonomic representation that deeply impact the forms through which South Asian immigrants identify with images of themselves. Thinking through the transnational photographic archives that Matthew manipulates and re-creates in her work shows us the fragility of representation, the ways in which visibility belies claims to belong. For despite Matthew's aesthetic fidelity to nineteenth-century American and British archival prints, what remains unavailable to us is the truth of the "Indian." Such a failure of representation requires us, as viewers, to contend with unsettling feelings, feelings that emerge from sensory experiences of history and memory that rest outside this curatorial project. But such feelings are precisely the place from which to think about the relationship between visuality and representation in Asian American exhibition cultures. By beginning with images that haunt us, rather than welcome us in, we can identify new ways of seeing ourselves.

Notes

1. *Asian American Portraits of Encounter*, among the first exhibitions organized by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, was held at the National Portrait Gallery from 2011 to 2012. Unlike *Beyond Bollywood*, this was a small group show of works by several Asian American artists organized thematically rather than by common national origin. Likewise, *I Want the Wide American Earth*, which was displayed at the Smithsonian National

Museum of American History in 2013, also emphasized a diverse range of Japanese American, Chinese American, Vietnamese American, and Filipino American histories.

2. Masum Momaya, "Before and After *Beyond Bollywood*" (lecture, Independent Curator's International, New York, April 24, 2014).
3. For a list of major donors to *Beyond Bollywood*, see "Founders Circle," http://smithsonianapa.org/beyondbollywood/founders-circle/, accessed October 2, 2014.
4. Momaya, "Before and After."
5. Select images for the show are available online at the Google Cultural Institute, https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/exhibit/beyond-bollywood/QRe7ecEu?hl=en, accessed October 2, 2014.
6. From May 2015 to July 2017, *Beyond Bollywood* will be traveling to a number of city and state museums in New Jersey, California, Indiana, Minnesota, North Carolina, and South Carolina. See http://www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibits/beyondbollywood/, accessed March 24, 2015. A selection of twenty-four exhibition panels were also displayed in Goa, India, in October 2014 as part of a conference on the "Indi-US bilateral relationship." See Newton Sequeira, "Beyond Bollywood: Tracing the Indian-Origin Story in America," *Times of India*, Goa ed., October 31, 2014, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/goa/Beyond-Bollywood-Tracing-the-Indian-origin-story-in-America/articleshow/44987938.cms, accessed March 24, 2015.
7. Ivan Karp, "Introduction: Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture," in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven Levine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 3.
8. See Monique Scott, *Rethinking Evolution in the Museum: Envisioning African Origins* (New York: Routledge, 2007). Scott argues that visitors enter natural history museums expecting teleological narratives of evolutionary progress that move from prehistory to Enlightenment, from "Africa" to the "West." Her ethnography demonstrates that these narratives often remain unchallenged despite curatorial initiatives to reorganize the context and content of display. Thanks to Yoon Sun Lee for drawing my attention to the epistemology of natural history museums.
9. The Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center describes itself as "a cultural laboratory that explores engaging and innovative ways to exhibit the art, history, and promise of Asian Pacific America." See "Founders Circle."
10. Scholarly works that emphasize the relation between artists' biographies and the thematic and formal content of their artwork include Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009) and Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora: Asian American Visual Arts Collectives* (New York: Timezone 8, 2008). Recent monographs have productively challenged this orientation to focus on the conceptual critiques forwarded by Asian

American art: see, for example, Sarita See, *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

11. Hence in Gordon Chang's *Asian American Art: A History, 1850–1970* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), visual art is deployed as a means of securing Asian immigrants' long presence in the United States.
12. Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 171.
13. Elspeth Brown and Thy Phu, "Introduction," in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Brown and Phu (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.
14. Brown and Phu, *Feeling Photography*, 7–8.
15. Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012), 33.
16. Shehryar Nabi, "Beyond Bollywood: Sociology Professor Pawan Dhingra Breaks New Ground with Smithsonian Exhibit on Indian American Heritage" (Tufts University School of Arts and Sciences), http://as.tufts.edu/news/2014beyondBollywood.htm, accessed March 24, 2015.
17. On "Muslim" as a racial category, see Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011). On the uses of "South Asian" as a progressive political construct, see Monisha Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).
18. Bakirathi Mani, *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
19. Momaya, "Before and After."
20. The exhibition builds on recent scholarly interventions in South Asian American history, including queer and labor-based social movements examined by Das Gupta in *Unruly Immigrants*; histories of early Bengali immigrants in Vivek Bald's *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); and studies of food culture in Anita Mannur's *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009). The title of the exhibition itself recalls Jigna Desai's work on South Asian diasporic cinema, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (New York: Routledge, 2003). No academic works were cited in the wall text of the exhibition.
21. Kaushik Bhaumik notes that the romantic melodrama genre of *Mughal-e-Azam* served to forward the socialist orientation of the Nehruvian state via the "creation of the ideal Indian citizen." See Bhaumik, "A Brief History of Cinema from Bombay to 'Bollywood,'" *History Compass* 2, no. 1 (January 2004): 1–4.
22. Some photographs on display have been previously published in academic monographs, including *Bengali Harlem*; other images are available online at the South Asian American Digital Archive, www.saadigitalarchive.org.

23. See Sameer Pandya, "The Spelling Bee: America's Great Racial Freaks and Geeks Show," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 11, 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/06/the-spelling-bee-americas-great-racial-freak-show/372528/.
24. The personal and psychic costs of being a "groundbreaker" are frequently obscured by their successes. For example, Dhan Gopal Mukerji suffered from depression throughout his writing career and committed suicide at age forty-six. See Mukerji, *Caste and Outcast*, ed. Gordon Chang, Purnima Mankekar, and Akhil Gupta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). As the wall text notes, Chawla died in the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster of 2003.
25. Momaya, "Before and After."
26. The installation directly references former curator Pawan Dhingra's research, *Life Behind the Lobby: Indian American Motel Owners and the American Dream* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
27. The photographs are from *The Arch Motel Project*, an ongoing work by Chiraag Bhakta and Mark Hewko, http://lifehere.com/Arch-Motel-Project, accessed October 2, 2014.
28. Liam Dazell, dir., *Punjabi Cab*, distributed by the Center for Asian American Media, 2004.
29. See Jasbir Puar, "'The Turban Is Not a Hat': Queer Diaspora and Practices of Profiling," *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 4, no. 1 (2008): 47–91.
30. On the imperative to "feel good about being South Asian" specifically in relation to exhibitions of visual art, see Mani, *Aspiring to Home*, 163–207.
31. On happiness as an affective symptom of neoliberalism, see Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 29–51.
32. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, "An Indian from India," in *Annu Palakunnathu Matthew: Bollywood Cowboys and Indians from India* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Light Work/Robert B. Menschel Media Center, 2002), 34.
33. Tasneem Nashrulla, "Which Indian Are You?," *BuzzFeed*, March 11, 2014, http://www.buzzfeed.com/tasneemnashrulla/which-indian-are-you#34ymfzb; "Portraits Challenge Cultural Perceptions," *CNN Photos*, February 11, 2014, http://cnnphotos.blogs.cnn.com/category/annu-palakunnathu-matthew/; Prerna Lal, "'Beyond Bollywood' but Perhaps Not Beyond the White Gaze," *Race Files*, March 19, 2014, http://www.racefiles.com/2014/03/19/beyond-bollywood-but-perhaps-not-beyond-the-white-gaze/.
34. "Tom Torlino Student File," *Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center*, Archives and Special Collections, Waidner-Spahr Library, Dickinson College, http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/student_files/tom-torlino-student-file, accessed October 2, 2014.
35. Ibid.

36. Lara Turner, "John Nicholas Choate and the Production of Photography at the Carlisle Indian School," http://chronicles.dickinson.edu/studentwork/indian/4_choate.htm, accessed October 2, 2014.
37. John Tagg argues that this photographic project, following closely on the heels of the revolt of Indian troops against British rule in 1857, generated "eight bound volumes [that] presented a comprehensive field guide to identifying the vexing multifarious native groups that had so recently demonstrated attitudes to British rule ranging from acquiescence and compliance to fierce hatred and violent rebellion. There was thus a compelling relationship between the accumulation of photographic documents, the pacification process, and a recently unnerved concern to calibrate more finely the sustainability of British rule in India." Tagg, "The Mute Testimony of the Picture: British Paper Photography and India," in *Photography's Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation*, ed. Ali Behdad and Luke Gartian (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2013), 194.
38. Christopher Lyman extensively discusses Curtis's use of props and costumes in *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982). See also an image of an original and retouched negative print from Curtis's archives in Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 92.
39. As Nandini Bhattacharya points out in her reading of Matthew's work, "These two groups [Asian Americans and Native Americans] represent America's 'others,' but not necessarily each other's other." Bhattacharya, "Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's *Alien: Copy With a Difference*," *Meredians* 6, no. 1 (2005): 91.
40. On the gendered relation between photographer and ethnographic subject, see Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology*.
41. On the time of diaspora, see Saloni Mathur, ed., *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora* (Williamstown, Mass.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute/New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011).
42. Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).
43. For a literary and visual reading of *The Namesake* that intervenes in "universal" narratives of immigrant experience, see Bakirathi Mani, "Cinema/Photo/Novel: Intertextual Readings of *The Namesake*," in *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, ed. Floyd Cheung and Lavina Shankar (New York: Lexington Books, 2011), 75–96.
44. Chon Noriega insightfully argues against an ethnographic display of immigrant art, calling for curators to deploy "conceptual rather than realist approaches, and an aesthetic project that takes a more ambiguous or fluid approach to identity." Noriega, "The Orphans of Modernism," in *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement*, ed. Rita Gonzalez, Howard N. Fox, and Chon Noriega (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 20.

45. Susette S. Min, "The Last Asian American Exhibition in the Whole Entire World," in *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, ed. Melissa Chiu, Karin Higa, and Susette S. Min (New York: Asia Society/New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), 39.