Representations of South Asians in Western Media
**FIRST, some facts & reflection on what you know**

**Fast facts about the South Asian American population**

Below are some key facts about the national population in the United States from Census 2010 data:

- **Over 3.4 million South Asians live in the United States.**
  - Indians comprise the largest segment of the South Asian community, making up over 80% of the total population, followed by Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Nepalis, Sri Lankans, Bhutanese, and Maldivians. [See Table 1]
- **It is estimated that at least 66,000 Indo-Caribbeans live in the United States.**

Within the South Asian community, various populations experienced unprecedented growth between 2000 and 2010.

- Comparing Census data from both 2000 and 2010, the **South Asian community as a whole grew 81% over the decade.**
- The Bhutanese community experienced the most significant growth, jumping at least 8,255%. [iii]
- After the Bhutanese community, the next fastest growing South Asian group were Nepalis followed by Maldivians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, and Indians. [See Table 1]
- **The Indo-Caribbean population increased an estimated 23%.** [iv]

You can find a quick overview of the South Asian diaspora’s history at: [http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/overview.html](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/overview.html)
How visible/ invisible are South Asians in mainstream visual culture?

Based on these representations, who do we understand them to be, what they do, and where they belong?

• Do you think of “them” as Americans or as foreigners?

• How is this affected by your experience of the representations (or lack of representation) of South Asians in mainstream culture?
The following slides have some popular recent examples of South Asian characters in American TV.
Some Depictions of South Asians in North American Pop Culture

Awkward Indian science guy (immigrant), Big Bang Theory (TV)
Depictions of South Asians in North American Pop Culture

Alex Parrish (immigrant), FBI trainee, possibly terrorist, possibly heroic, in Quantico (TV)
Depictions of South Asians in North American Pop Culture

Jonathan (adopted, 1st gen), executive assistant in 30 rock. Comic non-stereotypical, in 30 rock (TV)
Depictions of South Asians in North American Pop Culture

Ravi (adopted, immigrant), school student. Highly stereotypical, in Jessie (TV)
Consider and Reflect

- CAN YOU THINK OF OTHER EXAMPLES? (WHAT MEDIA? WHAT FORMS OF VISUAL CULTURE ARE THESE?)
- ARE THESE TRUE OR INAUTHENTIC REPRESENTATIVES? (WHAT CHARACTERISTICS? ARE THEY SOPHISTOCRATED? OR BASIC STEREOTYPES?)
- HOW DO THESE HELP INFORM (AMERICANS) ABOUT THE NUANCES OF SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORIC CULTURE? (ARE THEY ALL “INDIAN”? HOW DO WE KNOW? WHAT SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES/TYPES DO YOU NOT SEE?)
- HOW DO THEY DIMINISH GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE DIVERSITY OF SOUTH ASIAN CULTURES IN AMERICA? (ARE THEY REPRESENTATIONS OF “FOREIGNERS” OR AMERICANS? IS THIS BALANCED? ARE THEY SWEEPING GENERALIZATIONS OF SOUTH ASIAN AS ONE CULTURE?IN WHAT WAYS?)
This article is a chapter from a book that focuses on the role of accents in creating images about particular ethnic identities. In particular it focuses on how media representations of South Asians via particular characters and their accents create particular stereotypes and expectations of and about them in diasporic communities.

Dave reports that prior to 2000, South Asians were rarely seen in any variety of portrayals in Western art and media. Apu, from the Simpsons was the most well-known of South Asian characters prior to shows like Quantico, the Mindy Kaling Show, Aziz Ansari’s Master of None, and adaptations of books into major motion pictures such as Life of Pi, the Namesake, Mistress of Spices etc.

Dave presents us with the character of Hrundi Bakshi in the Hollywood movie The Party (1968). This was a Hindu character – an Indian immigrant – played by a white actor (Peter Sellers) in brown face and with an assumed stereotypical accent.

Like many other such portrayals, the heart of the character (as Indian), is created by accentuating the difference between Americans and the awkward and often oblivious immigrant. This is often done to comedic effect, where the awkward, clueless immigrant becomes a clownish native who becomes a source of comedy and amusement. (contd…)
Such portrayals also tend to posit these recent immigrants along with other Asian characters, as model-minorites.

In describing scenes from the film, Dave shows how the character of Bakshi, his accent and his physical bumbling make him a “cultural thing”.

The character is an actor playing an Indian soldier loyal to the colonizing British. The actor (as part of a comedic script) bumbles and bungles through the filming and in his social interactions with his British superiors.

This film was significant in that it represented a South Asian character as a character in itself, rather than as a prop point for British/ American history. In the 1960s, no one in Hollywood was interested in writing for and about “Asians”, so this itself makes the film and Bakshi’s character standout, never mind that it is quite blatantly racist, by today’s standards. Prior to this, “Native” characters were only ever shown in stereotypical tropes of (a) wily and impoverished natives, (b) mystical wise men, and (c) hostile, treacherous and noble natives rising up against British rule. (contd...)
In the film, Bakshi’s character is a caricature of other stereotypical characterizations of Indian characters in American and British films. It also focuses on how South Asians are “allowed” and tolerated with alternating disgust, bewilderment and amusement, in the United States, as long as they do not ‘threaten’ the Americans.

In a way the film intends to be absurd and show the perception and treatment of Indians and other “others” in Hollywood as absurd, as their ideas and participation in any serious way, in American life is “minimized and reduced to comic mannerisms”.

This article is a chapter from a book that focuses on the role of accents in creating images about particular ethnic identities. In particular it focuses on how media representations of South Asians via particular characters and their accents creates particular stereotypes and expectations of and about them in diasporic communities. This chapter follows the previous chapter on the concept of brown voice in the character of Bakshi in the 1968 film, The Party.

By citing the episode in which Apu, as an immigrant, does not have an overtly non-American accent, Dave shows how the overt accent made comical, highlights the racialization of the character.

Dave presents Apu as the epitome of ethnic characters that speak English and “American”, showing familiarity with American culture and colloquialisms, but remain awkwardly outside of its mainstream. They are depicted as being always on the margins or the outside, and longing to be accepted as part of it. (contd..)

- As such they do not have “cultural citizenship” in the United States. Such characteristics of particular characters tend to become representative of “undifferentiated ethnic groups that enable an ignorance of the nuances and rich diversity within “other” communities.

- This focus on an episode where Apu’s inability to mimic “being an American” brings to the forefront a consciousness of ethnic assimilation and also, what it means to be culturally American.

- Dave says, characters like Apu also show how South Asians and Asian-Americans appear in the mainstream American imagination.

- They are an opportunity for us to think about how racial and ethnic hierarchies (especially of non-western minorities) are formed in and through popular culture.

- One can see real life effects of this in the assumptions that American undergraduates make about foreign students and TAs based on their accents, especially South & East Asian.
Questions for critical thought:

- How do the readings by Dave alter your previous ideas of the shows, & movies mentioned in the readings and lectures?

- **Cultural appreciation** = appreciating and adopting the cultural habits of another culture in all ways, including in their own and our culture. **Cultural Appropriation** = appreciating and adopting the cultural habits of another culture in our own cultural contexts, but not appreciating or accepting them if the original culture’s use and visibility of them (in our culture). For example, it’s exotic and cool for Selena Gomez and Beyoncé to wear saris and bindis, but surveys show that if an Indian student or faculty member wears bindis and saris to work they would be perceived as foreign and less acceptable in American society. This is a case of Cultural appropriation. What are your thoughts on this and other examples in popular culture?

- Having read these articles and seen these visual “texts”, what are your thoughts on the inclusion and exclusion of diasporic minorities within mainstream culture?