

Laughing in Spaces of Sameness:  
Disrupting the Seriousness of Critical Pedagogy

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## **Dedication**

For Elizabeth Brown Davis,

who has a wonderful laugh

## **Abstract**

Although scholars have recently begun to attend to emotions in the context of teaching and learning for critical consciousness, much of their work has focused on anger, angst, and guilt. Our understanding of how laughter and humor circulate in critical classrooms is far less developed. Moreover, as of yet, we have not systematically explored how humor and laughter mediate immigrant youths' understandings of their social experiences inside and outside of these spaces. We particularly lack a nuanced understanding of what happens when immigrant youth laugh together in informal educational settings, such as co-ethnic community organizations.

This dissertation reflects a 9-month ethnographic investigation of the experiences of twenty-two adolescent children of Indian immigrant parents in a co-ethnic community organization called India Community School (ICS). Attention was paid to the significance of laughter in this space, with a particular focus on laughter within the youths' literature classroom. I examined how laughter and humor circulated within and through classroom talk about issues critical educators typically approach seriously, such as oppressive discourses and inequitable power relationships.

I begin by illustrating how youth and adults entered ICS with the serious purpose of creating and strengthening connections to a real and imagined India. This seriousness of purpose, however, did not preclude the organization from being a site of lightness and levity. I describe moments of laughter in the literature classroom and theorize how laughter and space impacted what it meant to feel understood or "got," or understood, in this particular co-ethnic setting. I then illustrate how, at times, laughter circulated within

and through anecdotes youth told about ways in which their ethnic identities were (mis)imagined by non-Indians. I consider how, during moments of laughter, youth exposed dominant discourses and disrupted normative power relationships. Finally, I explore the inherent ambiguity of theorizing laughter in classroom spaces by spotlighting particular instances in which youth interpreted familiar others to be “just joking” when they leveraged what critical theorists would consider to be marginalizing comments.

My research suggests there is much to learn from spaces of sameness. Findings point to ways in which the identities people share within a space might facilitate laughter—and thus *talk*—about critical issues surrounding those identities. Implications for what this means for teaching critically in *diverse* classroom settings are discussed. Finally, this work highlights the need to better attend to how youths’ laughter, at different moments (and sometimes simultaneously), both disrupts and perpetuates oppressive discourses. This is particularly important for researchers committed to theorizing critical pedagogies. If we truly want to connect learning to students’ lived experiences we need to stop ignoring how their communities use humor in complex ways to perpetuate, cope with, and change our sociopolitical climate.

The research builds on and contributes to literature in the fields of emotion, humor and pedagogy, critical teaching and learning, immigrant education, and scholarship on the discursive minimization of social oppression. Findings have the potential to complicate and reframe our understanding of immigrant youths’ identities and the role of humor in teaching for critical consciousness.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

*How can we connect what we are reading to youths' lived experiences?* This was the mantra that ran through my lesson planning conversations with Diya, my co-teacher in the literature class at India Community School (ICS) (all names of people and places are pseudonyms). ICS was a non-profit community-based language and culture school that operated on Saturdays. It offered classes for people in our Midwestern community interested in learning Indian regional languages and participating in classes about Indian culture, history, and arts. Although some non-Indians enrolled in the school, it was a space occupied mostly by Indian children, youth and their families. The organization held a literature class for adolescents, and Diya and I, for the second year in a row, volunteered to teach it.

At the time, I was a graduate student at the local university and was steeped in research about immigrant youths' experiences inside and outside of schools. Approaches to multicultural education that focused primarily on holidays, ethnic foods, and static notions of culture, frustrated me, because I felt they ignored the social justice issues at the root of educational inequities (Flynn, 2009; Nieto, 1999; Sleeter, 1991). Social justice-oriented teaching and learning philosophies, such as critical pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy, with their foci on developing students' and teachers' critical consciousness seemed to possess more transformative potential (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1995). An important part of these teaching philosophies, I learned, was involving youth in curricula that draws on their strengths, interests, lived experiences,



and community resources to promote their academic achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000). I carried this understanding with me into the ICS literature classroom.

Diya and I spent several class sessions reading texts from a series called *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) with the young people in our class. ACK stories re-tell in comic book format primarily Hindu and Buddhist folktales, “history, [and] mythology” (Gai, 2009, p. 266; Rao, 2001). Sometimes these stories are told through human characters; at other times, animal characters convey a human message. Often, characters display moments of wit, cunning, or cleverness to overcome dilemmas and usually there is a didactic message at the end. As Pratik, the vice principal of ICS, emphasized, “these are the stories we grew up hearing from our parents. Stories about India. Stories about morals. More often than not, these ACK comic books end with a moral – a good moral. The story might be something witty, but it ends in a good moral” (Interview, April 30, 2011).

After engaging youth in orally re-telling and discussing ACK stories, Diya and I asked youth to write prose stories about dilemmas in their own lives and to then translate the stories into comics—much like the ACK stories. As a researcher, I was interested in how youth understood what it meant to be Indian adolescents in the Diaspora. I wanted to know how students made sense of the diverse ways in which books, movies, other media sources, and people imagined Indian identities—and what impact this had on their lives. I also wanted to know what happened when curriculum directly addressed dilemmas youth faced in their everyday lives.

I was disappointed when I first reviewed youths' comic strips and later the video recording of youth reading their stories. I was hoping their stories would be about the real-life dilemmas I imagined the youth faced: rich and juicy issues into which a critical ethnographer could really sink her teeth. Privately, I anticipated youth would produce narratives about Indian adolescents bravely battling against the media's depiction of them as model minorities (Prashad, 2000), or perhaps stories about youth talking back to discourses that situate them as "forever foreigners" (Tuan, 2001). Instead, I got: a squirrel saved by a fox duped by karma (moral: "what you do comes back to you"); a koala bear who tricks a "man eating dolphin" into an early demise (a double moral in this case: "don't take advantage of people" and "be happy with what you have"); and Oscar the Grouch, Elmo, and Katy Perry "getting caught in a web of lies." Sigh.

In sifting through my data the first few times, I initially ignored students' ACK comics. I felt they were not telling me *anything* about how youth understood their lived experiences as young adults in the Indian Diaspora. After all, at that time, I was reading books and articles that suggested some Indian immigrant youth experienced racial, religious, and cultural hostility inside and outside of schools (Gibson, 1988; Joshi, 2005; Maira, 2009; Verma, 2008). Where was the angst in youths' ACK dilemmas? These kids either did not understand the assignment, or were just fooling around, I concluded to myself.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Later, after spending an extensive amount of time analyzing the data, I realized that what I initially read as youth "fooling around" in creating generic dilemma comics, as opposed to more personal stories, was actually youths' attempts to replicate more faithfully the ACK genre, which tended to highlight *universal* dilemmas and morals in what one youth described as a "lighthearted" tone. Also, it is important to note that

But something called me back.

There was something familiar about youths' renditions of their comics. And it was not just that I had heard these morals, storylines, and similar animal characters before—many were ripped right from the pages of the original ACK stories. No. It was something about the *way* the youth were telling these stories. A few of the youth laughed or smiled while they read their stories on video. There was also an air of levity to some of the stories—from the light-hearted characters to the funny scenarios in which they found themselves. In hindsight, I think the reason the youths' comics did not initially seem significant was because they reflected what was so normal in the ICS classroom: a sense of playfulness, being lighthearted, and sharing in moments of laughter.

These moments of laughter overlapped with serious academic curricula. For example, in addition to reading ACK stories (which convey serious morals) with youth, Diya and I also engaged them in reading and discussing *Aruna's Journeys* (Sreenivasan, 1997), a contemporary realistic fiction novel about an adolescent protagonist conflicted about her identity as an Indian American. Youth wrote reviews of this book and published them on the website of an Internet book retailer. Youth also wrote reviews of books of their own choosing and presented these to the class. Toward the end of the ICS

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neither Diya nor I directed the youth to write specifically about the socio-political dilemmas they faced as Indian youth. But the fact that we left the assignment open led to some interesting findings. In particular, it revealed my *assumption* that youth would write about “heavy” topics given the opportunity. They did not. I assumed the dilemmas they would write about would center on the troubles of being Indian in the U.S. They did not. I found I was positioning the youth as troubled, conflicted second-generation immigrant adolescents (Ngo, 2009, 2010). The research thus speaks to the importance of *rethinking* how we frame immigrant youths' identities in teaching and learning spaces (Ngo, 2009; Sarroub, 2008).

school year, the class read contemporary poetry about India and talked about what India meant to them. We also viewed *Taare Zameen Par*, a Bollywood film produced by Aamir Khan (2007). In almost all of the assignments, and in many of the classroom discussions, students were asked to relate the texts back to their own lives. It was a space in which youth occasionally engaged in important conversations about wider discourses shaping society and their own lives. These conversations happened organically. Aside from connecting literature and discussions to youths' daily lives and experiences, Diya and I did not set out to create or work to sustain a carefully planned and scaffolded critical curriculum (cf., Flynn, 2009). At the same time, however, we did not shut down these organic conversations, but welcomed them, and often attempted to extend them. These conversations provided important insights that helped me think differently about the theory and practice of teaching critically.

During classroom discussions, youth expressed affinity for one another, jokingly heckled each other, at times made space for individuals to share ideas, and, in different moments, unreservedly yelled over each other. They also occasionally laughed in the context of discussions about issues critical educators often position as topics that should be approached seriously. Some of these issues included misconceptions about Indian cultural markers (like *bindis* and what they signal), the mocking of Indian accents, the positioning of women (as opposed to men) as domestic laborers, the positioning of Indian and Middle Eastern geography and art as being indistinguishable, and the use of the terms “dot” and “feather” to distinguish between Indians from South Asia and Native Americans. Their laughter in the context of talk that centered on these topics was

incongruous from my perspective. I entered into the project expecting youth to express primarily angst about socially oppressive discourses. Initially, I was not sure what to make of their laughter.

Take, for example, this excerpt from an interview with Ishani, a female participant in the literature classroom:

*Sarah:* Okay. So sometimes kids in our class are able to laugh and joke about topics like that some people might see as serious. Like, sometimes we talk about race or we talk about stereotypes about Indians, right?

*Ishani:* Mm hmm.

*Sarah:* So, what's your understanding of this?

*Ishani:* Well, see, I'm like a laid back person, so if someone calls me— 'cause like at school, people call me a "mocha," 'cause I'm not exactly black, but I'm not exactly white. So like whites are the milks, and blacks are like the black coffee, and then we're like a mocha. So like I, I don't find that like racist at all. Like I think it's funny. But like there's some people in our literature class that would, I guess. So I mean, some people find it funny, and some people don't, and it's just the way that you're like raised and like the way you, they take things and stuff.

*Sarah:* Okay. So you are able to like laugh about those things.

*Ishani:* Yeah—I don't care.

*Sarah:* You don't care.

*Ishani:* No. (Interview, March 12, 2011)

Ishani's response to people at her school calling her a "mocha" startled me. She acknowledged that although some people might find this form of labeling offensive, she personally did not find this behavior racist "at all." In fact, she asserted that she found it "funny." This was not the reaction I expected. I anticipated that being called a "mocha" would cause Ishani to feel angry or at least annoyed. There was something about calling a human being a mocha, an Oreo, a coconut, or a banana (or milk or coffee for that matter) that raised the tiny hairs on the back of my critical neck. Doing so seems to reify the uncritical categorization of people and situates their identities as binary and simplistic.

And here was Ishani saying she found it funny. While I understand that youth at Ishani's school may have used labels like mochas, coffees, and milks to signal closeness to one another (i.e. they were on good terms with each other and thus could joke about racial labels) (Croom, 2010; Hill, 1998; Spears, 1997), as a teacher in a different setting, I did not have insider information about those relationships or the identity work those labels were doing in the school setting. Taken at face value, the way Ishani framed as humorous an experience I would consider marginalizing, was *unexpected*. I found it so bewildering that I paraphrased Ishani twice just to make sure I understood her correctly; she confirmed twice.

Similarly, in the literature classroom, I often expected youth to respond to critical topics with emotions like, sadness, anger, or at the very least, a healthy sense of gravity. While this was sometimes true, I observed, over time, that the predominant mood of the

class was one of levity. This was not a space of heavy hopelessness, but rather, of laughter—sometimes quiet and subdued, at other times loud and boisterous.

Youths' way of interacting with the curriculum and each other initially surprised me. I came to the experience with a preference for quiet, controlled, and orderly "on-task" classroom discussions. Their way of laughing in the context of talk about what I considered to be serious social justice issues caught me off guard. It seemed strange to me. And then I despaired: What would I write my dissertation about? I waited, pen in hand, to jot down what happened when youth were offered a space in which to pensively mull over the issues they encountered. "Come on, kids. Let's get serious," I silently begged, as they happily tripped on about squirrels saved by foxes duped by karma and laughed about others' misunderstandings and misappropriations of Indian "culture."

About five months into the work, I stopped trying to see things my way (namely that serious social justice issues should be approached, well, with *seriousness*) and, tried, instead, to understand what was actually happening in the classroom: that laughter was doing important and potentially transformative work in this space (Lensmire, 2011; Lewis, 2010). I refined the inquiry in response to my observations. The following questions guided the analysis:

1. What is the significance of laughter in this space?

2. How, if at all, do laughter and humor circulate within and through talk about issues critical educators typically approach seriously, such as oppressive discourses and inequitable power relationships?<sup>2</sup>

If, as critical educators, we want to fully recognize young people's humanity we need to pay better attention to how they use laughter to cope with the situations they face, how they strategically position themselves to speak against constraining discourses, and, conversely, how humor gets recruited to reify these discourses. As I demonstrate in this study, laughter and humor played surprisingly important and intricate roles in mediating youths' interactions with each other, their responses to texts, and their discussions about the sociopolitical issues relevant to their lives. These were intimate, nuanced details that have the potential to reshape how theorists understand the role of emotion in teaching and learning for critical consciousness (Dockter & Lewis, 2008; Janks, 2002; Lensmire, 2011; Lewis, 2011). Crucially, they were data that could only be gathered *in situ*, where the laughing happened.

### **Significance of the Research**

My work with youth in the ICS literature classroom contributes to the field of educational research in two important ways. First, it talks back to an ethos of classroom life and scholarship that disciplines emotions (Boler, 1999; Ellsworth, 1989; Micchiche, 2007), in general, and, in particular, sidelines the emotional experiences of laughter and humor in teaching for critical consciousness (Lensmire, 2011; Lewis, 2010). It disrupts the notion that critical teaching and learning manifest primarily as serious performances.

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<sup>2</sup> The notion that emotions "circulate" comes from Sara Ahmed's (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*.



Second, in highlighting how youth in the ICS classroom used humor in subtle ways that, in different moments, seemed to be generative and subversive, the research contributes to existing bodies of literature that seek to complicate images of immigrant youth as vulnerable and culturally conflicted young people (Ngo, 2008).

**Disrupting the Seriousness of Critical Pedagogy.** Critical literacy scholar, Hilary Janks (2002), argues that critical analyses, in teaching and learning scenarios, tend to be positioned as logical or rational endeavors. She illuminates that emotion tends not to be given adequate attention in critical frameworks. “What is missing from this [critical] model,” she asserts, “is the territory beyond reason” (Janks, 2002, p. 9). For Janks, failing to attend to students’ emotional responses to issues we critically analyze is dangerous because we may mistake their abilities to “produce the required deconstructive reading of the text” for actual transformation or “change in either their aspirations or their practices” (Janks, 2002, p. 9; see also Dockter & Lewis, 2009 and Wohlwend & Lewis, 2011).

Although some scholars have recently begun to address the role of anger and sadness in teaching for critical consciousness (e.g., Callahan, 2004; O’Brien, 2004), we know far less about how teachers and students understand the role of humor and laughter in talking about and thinking through social justice issues (Lewis, 2010; Vlieghe, Simons & Masschelein, 2009). As critical scholar, Timothy Lensmire, has observed, there is something about laughter in the context of what can rightly be termed “tense” issues that teachers often find unsettling (personal communication, Spring 2011). Who is doing the laughing? Who is being laughed at? From what motivations does the laughter stem? If

we, as teachers, allow laughter, are we reifying the status quo or helping to disrupt it? Laughter, in short, is complicated, slippery, and, at times, uncomfortable to abide (Lewis, 2010). In general, education scholars interested in teaching for critical consciousness—and schooling in general—have marginalized and under-theorized the role of laughter in learning (Lensmire, 2011; Lewis, 2010). My work directly addresses this gap in the literature by reading “against the grain” of discourses that situate laughter as problematic or absent in spaces of critical learning (Davies, 2000, p. 84).

Lewis (2010) makes an important contribution toward theorizing laughter in critical pedagogy. He asks: “[C]ertainly a revolutionary pedagogue *can* laugh, but *should* he or she, and what are the political (if not revolutionary) implications of this laughter” (p. 636)? Lewis attempts to “explore the ramifications of Freire’s peculiar insistence that it is necessary to laugh with the people” (p. 640). Lewis seems to focus on whether teachers should laugh with (alongside) the “oppressed.” In my own work as a researcher and teacher in the ICS literature classroom, I was not interested in whether I should or should not have laughed alongside the youth, but, rather, what happened when the youth, *themselves*, laughed together in what was, in effect, behind closed doors. They were not laughing in the context of a diverse urban public classroom, but rather in a co-ethnic space, in which they held their Indian ethnic identities in common.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) notes that civil rights activist “[Bernice] Reagon compared building community institutions with being in a barred room offering nurturance and a safe space” (p. 208). In Reagon’s words,

That space while it lasts should be a nurturing space where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are . . . in that little barred room where you check everybody at the door, you act out community. You pretend your room is a world [Reagon, 1983, 351]. (Collins, 2000, p. 208)

We do not have a nuanced understanding of what happens when immigrant youth laugh in the barred rooms they build for themselves. We have not yet systematically explored what sense they make of the world in these spaces and what role humor and laughter play in how they “decide who [they] really are.” Although we have some understanding of the role co-ethnic community organizations play in helping immigrant youth develop social and cultural capital (e.g., Lew, 2006; Zhou & Kim, 2006), we know far less about the significance these spaces hold for helping youth develop the critical consciousness they need in order to transform and talk back to mainstream discourses. My research with the youth at ICS helps build this understanding.

**Reframing Images of Immigrant Youth.** Youth from immigrant families comprise a growing portion of our school population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). We urgently need to better understand the complexities of their social and academic lives if we hope to successfully address the opportunity gaps in U.S. classrooms. Our current limited understanding of the complexities inherent in immigrant youths’ experiences is particularly concerning given that schools tend to view immigrant students through a deficit lens, a paradigm that significantly jeopardizes their opportunities for school success (Sarroub, 2008). Critical research (e.g., Flores-González, 2002; González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Maira, 2009; Reyes, 2007; Sarroub, 2005;

Verma, 2008) reframes immigrant youths' identities by illuminating data that "disrup[t] the status quo, and unsettle both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions" (Madison, 2005, p. 5). My critical ethnographic account of the out-of-school lives of adolescent children of immigrant parents contributes to this body of work.

My initial expectation that the ICS literature classroom would be a place of seriousness and angst stemmed, at least in part, from the way in which immigrant youth of color tend to be framed in dominant discourse, and sometimes in educational research, as vulnerable and conflicted young people (Ngo, 2008, 2009, 2010). While this notion is in many ways justified (I am not seeking to downplay the challenges immigrant youth face in our society), it also problematically positions these youth as somehow deficient and non-agentive (Ngo, 2009; Sarroub, 2008). In exploring how youth, in some instances, talked back to dominant discourses through *humor*, my study offers a vastly different way to imagine the identities of immigrant youth.

Finally, the experiences of South Asian young people tend to be understudied in the field of immigrant education. This is troublesome given that popular discourse tends to situate South Asians in constraining ways. Images, distributed via films, magazines, newspapers, and television shows, that cast South Asians as model minorities, dangerous others, and culturally exotic foreigners have implications for the academic and social experiences of immigrant youth (e.g., Joshi, 2006; Maira, 2000, 2009; Verma, 2010). We need to pay greater attention to the complex ways in which youth respond to these images *and* to the ways in which they represent themselves. Doing so is imperative if we want to

create alternative and more equitable ways of understanding and engaging with South Asian immigrant students in our schools and communities.

The experiences of Indian adolescents in the middle school years are particularly marginalized in educational scholarship. This study spotlights the perspectives of Indian youth in middle school and early high school. The research has the potential to deepen our understanding of their community-based experiences. Moreover, up to this point, most qualitative investigations have examined Indian youths' experiences in areas such as New York and New Jersey; Indian youths' experiences in the Mid-western region of the United States are not well understood (i.e., Verma, 2008; Hansen, 2010). The work presented here augments this subfield of immigrant education in important ways.

### **Description of Chapters**

My study builds on and converses with literature in the fields of emotion, humor and pedagogy, critical teaching and learning, and scholarship on the discursive minimization of social oppression. In the chapter that follows, I provide a review of relevant research in these areas that has helped me make sense of my experiences in the ICS literature classroom.

Chapter 3, "Research Design and Dilemmas," invites readers into the research setting and process. I describe my critical approach to ethnography, the site, and introduce readers to the participants. I also share some of the practical and ethical dilemmas I encountered in the field and in my writing up of the work.

In the fourth chapter, "Illuminating Spaces of Levity," I illustrate how both adults and youth entered ICS with the serious purpose of creating and strengthening connections

to a real and imagined India. Their seriousness of purpose, however, did not preclude ICS from being a site of lightness and levity. I describe moments of laughter in the literature classroom and think through how laughter intersected with space (Soja, 2004; Sheehy & Leander, 2004) and what it meant to feel “got” in this particular co-ethnic place. I draw on the work of Ahmed (2004) to think about how conceptions of “comfort” might help us understand the significance of laughter in co-ethnic spaces.

In Chapter 5, “From Ha-ha to Aha in *Critical Spaces*,” I describe how, at times, laughter circulated within and through anecdotes youth told about ways in which their ethnic identities were occasionally (mis)imagined by non-Indians. I consider how, when laughing about how their Indian identities were misinterpreted by members of the wider society, youth *exposed* dominant discourses and sometimes *disrupted* normative power relationships. This chapter provides empirical evidence to support Lewis’ (2010) call for educators to reconsider the role of laughter in teaching for social justice and to rethink paradigms that portray critical teaching and learning as primarily traumatic, angry, and angst-inducing experiences.

Chapter 6, “The Hot and Cold of Classroom Humor,” explores particular instances in which youth interpreted familiar others to be “just joking” when they leveraged what critical theorists would consider to be marginalizing comments. It addresses the inherent ambiguity of responding to humor in classrooms when youth invoke the *idea* of joking among friends to reify socially oppressive discourses and to minimize them (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; van Dijk, 1992, 1993). I draw on poststructuralist theorists (Davies, 2000; Weedon, 1997) to make sense of moments in which the “meta-

discourse” of joking (Billig, 2001, p. 270) nullified the need to critique socially oppressive realities.

In the closing chapter, “Insights and Implications,” I write about what it means to learn from spaces of sameness, highlighting the politics of pleasure (Ahmed, 2004) and the significance of spaces in which youth are simultaneously the subjects and the audience of their own discourse (hooks, 1989; Haymes, 2003). I also suggest scholars should better attend to how co-ethnic spaces serve as free spaces—sites of resistance and sustenance for immigrant youth and their families (Evans & Boyte, 1992). Particular attention is also paid to theorizing how the identities people share within a space might facilitate laughter—and thus *talk*—about critical issues surrounding those identities and what this means for teaching critically in diverse classroom settings. Finally, I propose researchers need to delve more thoroughly into the messiness—the ambiguity—of humor in classroom spaces.

## Chapter 2

### Situating the Study

My research is informed by the work of scholars who have theorized emotions in relation to pedagogy (e.g., Ahmed, 2004; Boler, 1999; Ellsworth, 1989; Micchiche, 2007; Zembylas, 2006, 2007). The ICS classroom was a space in which youth discussed what it meant to be adolescents and to be growing up in the Indian diaspora. Laughter and humor sometimes accompanied these conversations. I spotlight emotion, humor, and pedagogy research to illustrate my theoretical framework for interpreting the significance of laughter in these moments. I also review relevant scholarship in an emerging body of literature that specifically attempts to make sense of laughter and humor in contexts of *critical* learning (e.g., Callahan, 2004; Janks, 2002; Lensmire, 2011; Lewis, 2010; Mayo, 2006).

I then highlight the scholarship of Tuen A. van Dijk (1992, 1993) and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) on the discursive minimization of social oppression and the work of Michael Billig (2005/2009) on jokes to elucidate why we should attend to how humor gets recruited to talk about oppressive discourses. The theoretical framework I explicate here becomes central to my work later in the dissertation when I interpret particular moments in which youth invoked the notion that others were “just joking” about racism, gender inequality, and ethnic teasing—and thus did not mean what they said. Critique, in these moments, seemed unnecessary, and made reading humor in the classroom space a particularly ambiguous task.

### **Emotion, Laughter, and Pedagogy**



The way we talk about emotions signals how we understand their relationship to our bodies and to the society around us (Boler, 1999). In popular discourse, emotions are typically described as internal and private moods, with elements of physicality, that happen *to* individuals (Boler, 1999). Anger management websites, like *AngriesOut.com*, which locate anger inside individuals and purport to help “people release those mads in safe ways, so that no one gets hurt and we feel better,” are particularly reflective of this common understanding (Talk, Trust and Feel Therapeutics, 2012). Within this framework, individuals are meant to “contain or channe[l]” emotions and their physical expressions (like outbursts, tears, or laughter) to benefit themselves, others, or institutions (Boler, 1997, p. 205; Boler, 1999).

This conception of emotions fails to account for the complex ways in which they are collectively constructed and mediated by “language, culture, and power” (Ahmed, 2004; Boler, 1999; Lewis & Tierney, 2011, p. 321; Micchiche, 2007; Zembylas, 2007). Who gets to feel what, and in which spaces, are not neutral, individualized matters (Ahmed, 2004; Boler, 2009). How we interpret our feelings and what we do (or do not do) with them gets worked out not only in private spaces, but also in public ones, like classrooms, workplaces, and texts (Ahmed, 2004; Boler, 2009; Micchiche, 2007). Conversely, emotions are also *performative* (Ahmed, 2004; Micchiche, 2004), “both illuminat[ing] and complicate[ing] the discursive and material practices that produce them” (Lewis & Tierney, 2011, p. 320). How we leverage and discipline emotion, in different moments, maintains or disrupts the status quo in ways that shape people’s lived experiences (Ahmed, 2004; Micchiche, 2007).

Like the emotions with which laughter circulates, the meanings and experiences of laughter are not solely private experiences, but rather are socially mediated (Carty & Musharbash, 2008; Swart, 2009). And like emotions, I understand laughter to be not only mediated but also mediating (Lewis & Tierney, 2011). Laughter gets conscripted to do social *work* that can strengthen, but also police identities and material realities. Empirical research bears this out. Shared laughter can be nurturing, sustaining, and extremely effective in destabilizing social oppression (e.g., Carpio, 2008; Dubberly, 1993; Lynch, 2010; McLaren, 1999; Sorensen, 2008; Watkins, 1999/1994), but it can also serve as a way to constrain people's choices and to perpetuate inequities (e.g., Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 2005/2009; Swart, 2009).

Thus, important to the present study is the notion that laughter does not only circulate with what might be considered pleasant emotions, such as joy or delight (although the idea of what counts as a pleasant emotion is itself socially constructed). One theory of laughter suggests we laugh when we recognize incongruities around us (Gordon, 2010; Morreall, 1983; Weaver, 2010). This can operate at the linguistic level of jokes when a punch line is incongruous with our expectations, and thus strikes us as funny (Morreall, 1983); but we can also see and invoke humor to make sense of, cope with, and expose incongruities in our social existence (Boskin, 1986; Carpio, 2008; Gordon, 2010; Morreall, 2009/2005; Rossing, 2012; Smitherman, 1999/2001). These incongruities are not always ha-ha funny in a good way; laughter does not always correspond with the "the 'lighter side' of social life" (Carty & Musharbash, 2008, p. 214). On the contrary, at times laughter is serious, as when it accompanies feelings of anger,

disbelief, shock, and despair about the way social institutions systematically subjugate minoritized people (e.g., Boskin, 1986; Carpio, 2008; Gordon, 1998; Lipman, 1991).

In fact, marginalized communities, throughout history, have routinely used humor to contradict social oppression and its associated physical and emotional violence (e.g., Carpio, 2008; Jones & Liverpool, 1996; Sorensen, 2008; Swart, 2009). Subversive humor's historical *depth* cannot be overstated. Bakhtin (1968/1984), for instance, details how Rabelais, in the Middle Ages, "attack[ed] the fundamental dogmas and sacraments, the holy of holies of medieval ideology" through the use of humor (p. 268). *Carnival* and its popular festive images—which had even deeper roots, still—shook supposedly immutable intellectual and moral authorities. In Bakhtin's (1968/1984) words, "For thousands of years the people have used [...] festive comic images to express their criticism, their deep distrust of official truth, and their highest hopes and aspirations" (p. 269; See also Lensmire [2011] for a discussion of Bakhtin's *carnival*).

In a similar vein, Jones and Liverpool (1996) document how Calypso artists in Trinidad have traditionally used humor to speak against oppression by the ruling classes and outsiders (p. 285). "The humor of [...] calypsos," note Jones and Liverpool (1996), "was directed at all pretenders to social and political elevation. As representatives of the social and racial underdog, they directed ridicule, satire and insults at the upper class" (p. 283). Similarly, scholars have asserted that African American communities have long used humor to resist racism, to explicitly name white supremacy, and to survive in a dehumanizing context (Carpio, 2008; Gordon, 1998). Other scholars have highlighted how social hierarchies in Northern and Southern India are routinely, albeit temporarily,

upended through the use of sanctified levity during ritual performances of religious practices (Pintchman, 2010; Raj, 2010).

In her account of the Boer Resistance to British colonization in South Africa at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Swart (2009) asserts that humor “offers a moment of transcendence, a fleeting escape from a reality too awful to face” (p. 897). She writes persuasively about the way humor helped sustain the Boers during armed conflict, and how laughter was an essential aspect of communal survival after the war:

In the aftermath of the South African War (1899-1902), the Afrikaner seemed defeated—the rural economy was shattered, family farms were destroyed and more than 25 000 Boer women and children were dead in the concentration camps. Yet in this apocalyptic post-war world, something strange was happening. Afrikaners were laughing. (p. 889)

Swart characterizes the post-war laughter as “a grim acknowledgement that the silenced could still at least laugh” (p. 907). During the war, humor was integral for “ethnic bonding” and in allowing the Boers to express continued resistance through the safe discourse of jokes (p. 897). Swart acknowledges that laughter in the context of trauma “at first glance appears bizarre,” but her work spotlights the importance of looking to laughter and humor to understand these injurious moments in more nuanced ways (p. 906).

Lipman’s (1991) review of the historical record in *Laughing in Hell: The Use of Humor during the Holocaust* corroborates this idea. He acknowledges that the topic of laughter appears to be nothing less than repulsive when reflecting on the atrocities of the

Holocaust; however, he argues the use of humor by the victims of this genocide not only existed, but was “pervasive[e]”—and that it did vital work in sustaining people’s survival and resistance (p. 6). According to Lipman (1991), “Humor was both a psychological weapon and a defense mechanism. It was a social bond among trusted friends. It was a diversion, a shield, a morale booster, an equalizer, a drop of truth in a world founded on lies” (p. 10).

Lipman gives humor a human face in his work. He writes about Holocaust survivor, Rachella Velt Meekoms, who as an adolescent, “would stage vaudeville shows in Auschwitz with other teenage inmates” (p. 9). Rachella described her experience like this:

‘In spite of all our agony and pain we never lost our ability to laugh at ourselves and our miserable situation. We had to make jokes to survive and save ourselves from deep depression. We mimicked top overseers and I did impersonations about camp life and somebody did a little tapdance, different funny, crazy things. [...] The overseers slipped into the barracks while we weren’t looking, and instead of giving us punishment they were laughing their heads off. I couldn’t believe it: one day they were hitting us black and blue, and then they were laughing while we made fun of them’ [Sylvia Rothchild, ed., *Voices from the Holocaust*]. (Lipman, 1991, p. 10)

Rachella’s recollections attest to the complex role laughter played in the experiences of Holocaust victims. On the one hand, the overseers’ laughter points to how humor can be used to perpetuate or sustain violence against people. On the other hand, it was

simultaneously a powerful tool used by prisoners to cope with and challenge authority and persecution. To ignore laughter in this context is to disregard how its victims *actively* opposed the process of dehumanization.

The instances recounted above represent moments in history in which groups of subordinated people have talked back to, coped with, and transformed painful experiences of social oppression *through* laughter and humor. While I want to acknowledge laughter and the leveraging of humor as pathways for giving voice to painful experiences, I do not want to minimize the pleasurable invigoration laughter offers—even in the face of atrocities. Carpio (2008) speaks to this point:

In the context of African American expressive culture [...] the humor of incongruity allows us to appreciate the fact that, far from being *only* a coping mechanism, or a means of ‘redress,’ African American humor has been and continues to be both a bountiful source of creativity and pleasure and an energetic mode of social and political critique. (pp. 6-7)

While humor can be instrumental in enduring and addressing social marginalization, it can simultaneously serve as a source of inspired sustenance, something generative and life giving in and of itself (Carpio, 2008). Or, as Bakhtin (1968/1984) suggested, humor can serve as a way to give voice to people’s “highest hopes and aspirations” (p. 269).

Despite its potential for social critique and pleasure (or more accurately, *because* of it) early Western societies cast humor as “morally suspect” and associated laughter with insincerity, irrationality, idleness, limited self-control, hedonism, and irresponsibility (Morreall, 2010, pp. 3-9). This perspective cast the laughing person as

“intellectually, emotionally, or morally defective” (Morreall, 2010, p. 6). Although these attitudes have shifted over time (Chapman & Foot, 1996), they have not entirely disappeared. The perspective that humor signals idleness and the shirking of responsibility seems alive and well in our current No Child Left Behind culture of schooling. Who has time to crack up when there are tests to prepare for?

The (not so) modern fear that laughter might disrupt orderly curricula has its roots in the way schools have long been imagined as “smoothly efficient factor[ies]” designed to “put out products (students) well-constructed for the demands of the economy” (Lensmire, 2011, p. 121). Uncontrolled outbursts and frivolous engagements with pleasure have the potential to clog or derail (what is supposed to be) a finely oiled machine.

Classrooms have also been policed as arenas of rationality (Boler, 1999). Within these spaces, “emotion has been understood as an expression of affect, or natural bodily sensation, that is separate from the mind, hence irrational and in need of discipline” (Lewis and Tierney, 2011, p. 231). Imagined as existing “separate[ly] from the mind,” emotions—and, I would add, emotional experiences like laughter—have been positioned as antithetical to reasoned, objective ways of knowing (Ellsworth, 1989; Lewis & Tierney, 2011, p. 231). The way educationalists have, at different times, discursively constructed emotions as pathologies, moral shortcomings, and as moods to be cured, disciplined or managed, reflects how affect has long signaled “deviance” in classroom spaces (Boler, 1997, p. 204; Boler, 1999). Although laughter in school settings has been

severely under-theorized, it is not difficult to imagine how its association with “irrational” emotions would render it unlikely to be embraced in classroom contexts.

Fortunately, some scholars have recently begun to examine what laughter might mean for pedagogy (e.g., Garner, 2006). Garner (2006), for instance, designed a controlled experiment to corroborate the hypothesis that professors’ use of humor during lectures would help university students remember lecture content and increase their enjoyment in the course. Studies like this are useful because they explore the intersections of humor and learning. However, positivistic experiments rely on sterilized and static views of humor. In Garner’s (2006) words, “humor can be very subjective, so great care was exercised in the selection of the humorous material” (p. 178). The control group and the experimental group in his study watched identical video lectures—with the experimental group viewing a lecture augmented with meticulously vetted (by professors) humorous content (Garner, 2006, p. 178). In my view, the power of humor and the significance of the work it does are located in the subjective. Studies like this strip laughter of context and identity—the very things that give humor meaning. Moreover, Garner’s (2006) work, while making an important contribution to improving the way we understand humor and pedagogy, did not address humor’s power to catalyze social transformation or critical consciousness.

### **On Looking at Laughter through a Critical Lens**

Critical educators are concerned with disrupting the status quo and illuminating “the relationship between power and knowledge” (McLaren, 2003, p. 76). As Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (2003) suggest, “[C]ritical pedagogy embraces a dialectical view



of knowledge that functions to unmask connections between objective knowledge and the cultural norms, values, and standards of the society at large” (p. 12). The purpose of teaching through a critical lens is to expose the ways in which power operates to create and sustain inequality. Importantly, critical pedagogues also highlight how people, in a variety of ways, struggle against and subvert dominant modes of framing “commonsense social categories” (Mayo, 2008, p. 246).

Darder et al. (2003) cite Paolo Freire to make the point that, within critical frameworks, change is seen as possible because situations of social oppression arise within socio-historical-political (read: human-created) contexts and what humans make, they can also break (p. 12). As Giroux (2003) puts it:

[C]ritical theory points educators toward a mode of analysis that stresses the breaks, discontinuities, and tensions in history, all of which become valuable in that they highlight the centrality of human agency and struggle while simultaneously revealing the gap between society as it presently exists and society as it might be. (p. 51)

Critical pedagogues view moments of discontinuity as points of possibility; they capture instances in which people expose institutionalized practices that curtail equity. Once exposed, the struggle to create change can begin.

Given that humor often highlights incongruities, or discontinuities, in society—and that people have been leveraging humor to spotlight these discontinuities for “thousands of years” (Bakhtin, 1968/1984, p. 269), one would anticipate that critical theorists would be acutely interested in how laughter and humor circulate within and

through the experiences of teachers and students engaged in critical learning contexts. To a limited extent, this has been true. Lewis (2010), for example, reminds us that Paulo Freire pointed to the significance of laughter in critical praxis, and that critical ethnographer, Peter McLaren (1999), theorized laughter as a form of resistance in classroom spaces. In general, however, few contemporary scholars have taken up the call to think deeply about what laughter means in critical classrooms.

The lack of attention lent to laughter in spaces of critical learning has to do, at least partly, with the way critical pedagogy has tended to privilege “rational” analyses of dominant discourses and their implications for people’s lived experiences over other ways of knowing and thinking through these concerns (Callahan, 2004; Ellsworth, 1989; Janks, 2002; Lensmire, 2011; Lewis & Tierney, 2011). Emotional investments in, experiences of, and responses to the serious issues critical pedagogues address have often been viewed as less legitimate ways of engaging in social critique than measured, detached deconstructions (Ellsworth, 1989).

When critical theorists do turn to emotion, often their emphasis is on expressions of discomfort, such as anxiety, frustration, anger, resentment and grief (e.g., Callahan, 2004; Rich & Cargile, 2004; Zembylas, 2010). In higher education, in particular, including teacher education, students’ experiences in critical classrooms are often framed as emotionally stressful “because of the focus on power and status differentials in society” (Dolan, 2012; Callahan, 2004, p. 79; hooks, 1989; Mayo, 2008; Rich & Cargile, 2004; Wang, 2008; Winas, 2010). Callahan (2004) even goes so far as to suggest that

critical educators should be trained as therapists in order to “deal with [the] psychological trauma” associated with participating in critical learning (Callahan, 2004, p. 82).

Scholars’ focus on “negative” emotions is not problematic in and of itself. As Boler (1999) notes, feminists’ mobilization of women’s anger for social change has been extremely effective in redressing some of the inequities women face (pp. 113-114). Similarly, Ahmed (2009) observes that “within Black feminism, the passion of anger is crucial to what gives us ‘the energy’ to react against the deep investments that exist in forms of racism as well as sexism” (p. 51). To be certain, emotions like anger, despair, sadness and frustration *should* be attended to (even more than they currently are) and leveraged for transformative action. What *is* problematic is that very few scholars have attended to how laughter and humor circulate *with* these emotions in classroom spaces.

Carpio (2008) notes how African American expressive culture has often used *laughter* to give voice to “grievance and grief,” emotions that are essential for fueling social justice work:

[T]he expression of both grievance and grief is crucial in working toward and keeping alive the dream of a radical social transformation. To mute grief or otherwise ignore it is to implicitly deny the monumental impact of an irreparable crime against humanity. [...] [H]owever, grief need not always be expressed in traditional forms of lament. In African American expressive culture, grief often assumes a tragicomic mode, best known through the blues. But this tragicomic mode also finds stunning expression in black humor. (p. 11)

Carpio's observations that grief, anger, and resentment about social oppression can co-circulate with humor signals the need for critical scholars to better theorize laughter in classroom settings. If we ignore laughter and humor in critical classrooms we may unknowingly disregard how students use these expressive experiences to vocalize injustice. This limits the depth to which we can know and understand the struggles youth face (Lensmire, 2011).

As problematic as this limited understanding is, there is something equally as troubling at stake: the ability we lose, when ignoring laughter, to fully recognize the work youth do, through humor, to *resist* dehumanizing discourses, practices, and institutions. That is, when we marginalize laughter in our classrooms and in our research, we risk not seeing the ways in which youth are spotlighting discontinuities and subverting constraining ways of being in the world. Carpio (2008) speaks to this point: “[D]espite the life-threatening injunctions against black laughter, for black Americans, humor has often functioned as a way of *affirming their humanity in the face of its violent denial*” (p. 5, emphasis added). What I want to draw attention to in this quote is that for African American artists, and for those who engage with their art, humor has historically served as an avenue for laying claim to agency, for challenging dehumanizing ideologies, and for rejecting untruths. If we marginalize laughter in critical education scholarship, we risk occluding opportunities to validate, extend, and learn from the work of teachers who already understand how laughter serves as an avenue for students to affirm their humanity in the face of social oppression (Lensmire, personal communication, Spring 2011).

The limited extant body of scholarship theorizing laughter in critical learning spaces supports the notion that researchers ought to pay closer attention to humor. Below, I briefly highlight the work of three scholars, Hilary Janks (2002), Timothy Lensmire (2011), and Cris Mayo (2008), who have already begun the important task of thinking deeply about laughter in the context of critical pedagogy. I present their work individually, but also point to ways in which their work talks to each other's scholarship. I share their work in this format because, thus far, few publications have brought together multiple voices on the topic of humor and teaching for social justice.

*Hilary Janks.* Janks (2002) suggests humor may help scholars address a central dilemma in critical literacy classrooms: the fact that “logo-centric” deconstructions (the privileged mode of critique) of social inequities are simply not always possible when youth (or teachers) are emotionally invested in the topics at hand, or if reasoned, objective arguments about the issues conflict with their embodied identities or desires (p. 9). In these cases, reason is rendered powerless. “Where identification promises the fulfillment of desire,” observes Janks (2002), “reason cannot compete” (p. 10).

In response to this dilemma, Janks (2002) urges critical scholars to consider the centrality of “the territory of desire and identification, pleasure and play, the taboo and the transgressive” (p. 9). Jokes, in particular, she suggests, which “allow us to rebel against authority, to attack powerful institutions or views of life (Freud 1916, p. 153) and to unmask deception (Freud 1916, p. 262)” (p. 18), offer one avenue for entering into and existing, at least for some time, within the “territory beyond reason” (p. 9).

To illustrate her point, Janks (2002) offers readers a psychoanalytic analysis of the South Africa-based fast food chain, Nando's, humorous advertisements. "Many of the Nando's advertisements," she suggests, "raise awareness of social issues in South Africa which, with the use of intelligent humour, make us both laugh and think. Irreverent and transgressive reframing make the social issues visible" (Janks, 2002, p. 14). She demonstrates how Nando's jokes allow for playfulness and pleasure, while simultaneously making space for critique.

She asks us to envision classrooms in which youth are not asked to "police their pleasures" (p. 17) but to leverage them:

Imagine students using either reason and/or empathy to focus on society, and then, like Nando's, finding humorous ways to expose the workings of power. [...] Imagine students, like Nando's marketing director, working at the edge, pushing the boundaries of what is sayable, trying to work out the limits of what is and is not possible. (p. 18)

Janks (2002) proposes that humor can help youth engage in deconstructing dominant discourses in ways that do not ask them to leave their identities and desires at the classroom door.

**Timothy Lensmire.** Like Janks (2002), Lensmire (2011) sees value in imagining schools that embrace the "territory beyond reason" (Janks, 2002, p. 9). This is necessary because mainstream factory model education, in his view, severely restricts opportunities for youth and teachers to experiment with new ideas, identities, and social relationships through moments of play and laughter (Lensmire, 2011). Critical pedagogues, as well, he

contends, “have too often remained tied [...] to a Western rationalist project that ends up, among other things, ignoring the body and emotion” (Lensmire, 2011, p. 121).

Pedagogies that sideline the body and emotion, and that continually enforce rigid compliance with dominant ways of thinking and being in classrooms, risk marginalizing youth and teachers who disrupt these frameworks (Lensmire, 2011). “I believe,” notes Lensmire (2011), “that many students are denied access to ongoing learning in schools exactly because our conceptions of learning do not include the assumption that it might include, or even require, playful and oppositional responses to our teaching and curriculum” (p. 123).

Lensmire (2011) asks us to reimagine schooling and critical learning through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin’s *carnival*. He argues that it is in *unserious* moments—moments of play and laughter, that, as in *carnival*, transformative things happen: regular ways of thinking are upended, new ways of being together are enacted, and our energy for critiquing social inequities in our “workaday world” are restored (Lensmire, 2011, p. 120; see also Andre [2010], as cited in Lensmire, 2011).

For Lensmire (2011), laughter can *support* and *sustain* our efforts to teach for critical consciousness. Confronting dehumanizing ideologies and acknowledging their heavy consequences can lead to “despair and paralysis” (p. 122). Engaging in moments of play, laughter, and unseriousness can actually help us *keep doing* the hard work critical pedagogy demands because of the relief and new perspectives carnival-like experiences offer.

*Cris Mayo*. Similar to other scholars (e.g., Callahan, 2004, pp. 79; hooks, 1989; Rich & Cargile, 2004; Wang, 2008), Mayo (2008) depicts critical classrooms as “tense” spaces in which students and teachers are expected to perform *earnestness* (p. 245). Earnestness, for Mayo (2008), is akin to seriousness. It is the opposite of playfulness. In her work, she juxtaposes the culture of “stalled earnestness” (p. 244) in critical classrooms, which she sees as promoting a sense of passivity in students, to the kind of pleasure and participation that different forms black signifying humor invite. “I see promise in using humor—simultaneously amusing and unsettling—to intervene in the usual resistances and earnestness in teacher and student contributions to social justice classrooms,” Mayo observes (p. 244).

Mayo’s (2008) work speaks to that of Janks (2002) and Lensmire (2011) in that all three scholars spotlight the effectiveness of “humor’s jolting combination of pleasure and critique” (Mayo, 2008, p. 244). For Janks (2002) humor works because it taps into students’ identities, desires, and emotions in ways that allows for critique. Jokes, she suggests, “pus[h] the boundaries of what is sayable” and thus allow us to challenge dominant discourses (p. 18). In Lensmire’s (2011) view, humor provides carnival-like episodes in which bodies and emotions are fully engaged. In these moments, routine ways of being in the world are disrupted and new possibilities open up. For Mayo (2008), humor works for these reasons *and* because it does not allow students to remain *passive* participants in socially unjust practices; the humor that Mayo (2008) highlights—Black queer camp performances and two satirical antiracist websites, *Black People Love Us* and Damali Ayo’s *How to Rent a Negro*—demand audience participation and force viewers



to acknowledge their roles in perpetuating dominant and destructive social categories. Ayo's website, for example, demands that white people remunerate—in cash—African American people for their past (and present) exploitations and violent appropriations. In Mayo's (2008) words,

The humor used in these performances of antiracist pedagogy constantly disrupts the passivity of the audience/class—spectators are not only taken to school, but they are turned out in the world with a demand for compensation that motivates the participation/spectatorship at the sites and in systems of oppression that motivate the sites. As strategies for intervening in the stalled earnestness of social justice and antiracist education, these sites provoke and provide suggestions for critique and engagement. (p. 251)

For Mayo (2008), a culture of earnestness in critical classrooms means a culture of rigid seriousness. A culture of rigid seriousness means a critical pedagogy with limited opportunities for play. Limited opportunities for play translate to limited opportunities for performance and participation. When students do not participate, they do not rethink their roles in systems of oppression. It is precisely at this juncture that critical pedagogy gets stuck.

As a critical educator in a teacher education program, I have experienced this feeling of being stuck. In one course, I worked with predominantly white undergraduates to explore how issues of race, class, and culture shape teaching and learning. Students were challenged to think about pedagogy not as a neutral endeavor, but as one mediated by social processes, power, and identities. While many students found it comfortable (and

a relief) to think and talk about schooling in this way, others did not. Our conversations often stalled when students could not see how they, themselves, were participating in systems of oppression. At other moments, our work got stuck when the challenges of teaching for equity just seemed too overwhelming. I read on my students' faces—and often felt myself—the “despair and paralysis” Lensmire (2011) references in his work (p. 122).

Mayo (2008), like Lensmire (2011), suggests humor can help us get unstuck and can sustain our critical work. According to Mayo (2008), “Humor can disrupt the sense that because social categories appear intransigent, all thought and action about them must remain stuck” (p. 245). The same idea is captured in Bakhtin’s notion of carnival. “In carnival,” interprets Lensmire (2011), “the people laughed at ideas and practices supposed to be universal and eternal, and saw them for what they were—partial and contingent. And for the folk, for everyday people worn down by oppressive conditions, this was a hopeful lesson” (p. 120). In other words, humor, laughter, and levity have the potential to help students and teachers move forward in the context of paralyzing realities because they create spaces for acknowledging contingencies and for playing with new conceptualizations of identities and social categories (Lensmire, 2011).

Perpetuating the notion that critical classroom spaces are—or should be—rigidly serious spaces may actually be counterproductive to transformative teaching and learning. Ke\$ha’s electro-pop hit song, “We R Who We R” (Sebert, Coleman, Gottwald, Hindlin & Levin, 2010), captures, in a particularly vivid way, why. Her song conveys what I understand to be Lensmire’s (2011), Mayo’s (2008), and Janks’ (2001) visions for

how many students (and teachers) feel in classroom spaces that are “too serious” (Lensmire, 2011, p. 117). To a defiant beat, Ke\$ha sings:

DJ turn it up

It’s about damn time to live it up

I’m so sick of being so serious

It’s makin’ my brain delirious

We may very well be forcing youth and teachers into a state of delirium by continually reproducing a culture of anti-play and anti-humor, a culture that sidelines their bodies, emotions, and desires. Ke\$ha, in her song, rejects all of this. She rips her stockings, dances all night, upends gendered expectations by “hitting on dudes,” and fearlessly “tears up” her town (a space she assertively repositions as a dance club).

In listening to “We R Who We R” listeners get the sense that Ke\$ha is insisting upon an escape from seriousness. She demands a moment—a whole night, actually—of play in which social norms are disrupted. How often do youth in schools demand moments like this, moments of unseriousness in which they can express “the sort of joyful, playful relation to the world and each other that would actually allow us to look fearlessly at the world and tell the truth about it” (Lensmire, 2011, p. 1125)? Probably more often than we think. How often are these demands honored? Rarely. My research is unique in that it documents what happens when youth demand moments of levity—and *get* them. It has the potential to augment the theoretical work of scholars like Janks (2002), Lensmire (2011), and Mayo (2008).

While critical scholars need to continue to theorize laughter as an important component of humanizing praxis, they also have a responsibility to delve into and interrogate the slipperiness of laughter and to uncover ways in which people in power employ humor to subjugate others (Boskin, 1986; Janks, 2002; Mayo, 2008). This move is necessary because, as art historian and literary scholar, Wylie Sypher, articulated, “comedy is both hatred and revel, rebellion and defense, attack and escape. It is revolutionary and conservative. Socially, it is both sympathy and persecution” (as cited in Watkins, 1999/1994, p. 16). We need to better understand humor’s both-ness and how it impacts life in and beyond classroom spaces. In the next section, I address how social oppression gets reproduced and minimized through discursive practices, and how humor is recruited to do this work (Billig, 2001).

### **Minimizing Social Oppression**

As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, youth at ICS sometimes used humor in transformative ways (i.e. to insert their emotions and identities into their classroom space and to critique dominant discourses about Indian identities). In other moments youth invoked the idea of humor to explain *away* racism, gender inequity, and ethnic teasing. I turn to the work of Tuen van Dijk (1992, 1993) and Bonilla-Silva (2010) to explain how people discursively downplay—or minimize—social oppression; I then look to Billig (2005/2009) to create a framework for theorizing how humor—as a specific discursive practice—is strategically leveraged to silence social critique.

Van Dijk (1992, 1993) theorizes that social inequalities get reproduced through the *routine* ways in which we talk about and represent them in conversations and written

texts. He is specifically concerned with the ways in which racism is reproduced via these everyday discursive practices. He proposes that,

Racism, defined as a system of racial and ethnic inequality, can survive only when it is daily reproduced through multiple acts of exclusion, inferiorisation or marginalization. Such acts need to be sustained by an ideological system and by a set of attitudes that legitimate difference and dominance. Discourse is the principal means for the construction and reproduction of this socio-cognitive framework. (van Dijk, 1993, p. 192)

Put another way, people's language-in-use (Gee, 2005) reproduces and reinforces ways of thinking and communicating that sustain social inequalities (van Dijk, 1992, 1993).

If everyone's voice enjoyed equal airtime, it might be easier to combat "attitudes that legitimate difference and dominance" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 192); however, this is not the case. "Political, media, academic, corporate and other elites," argues van Dijk (1992) "[...] are the ones who control or have access to many types of public discourse, have the largest stake in maintaining the white group dominance, and are usually also most proficient in persuasively formulating their ethnic opinions" (van Dijk, 1992, p. 88). This unequal distribution of power in society perpetuates racism in a cyclical manner, effectively shutting out voices of dissent (van Dijk, 1992). It also means that racism is not only perpetuated at the level of individuals, but at the level of institutions via mainstream texts, like newspapers, magazines, scholarly publications, commercials, etc. (van Dijk, 1992).

How elites talk about and reproduce racism is not straightforward, because, as van Dijk (1992, 1993) and Bonilla-Silva (2010) both argue, racism is perceived to be incompatible with democratic ideals and laws. This does not mean social inequalities do not exist, but rather that within contexts in which there is an ethos of meritocracy and equality, it becomes tricky to express prejudice while simultaneously convincing others that you do not actually hold these views (van Dijk, 1992, 1993). According to van Dijk (1992), people use discursive *strategies*, like denials, reversals, and euphemisms, to save face when voicing such perspectives (Van Dijk, 1992). “I have nothing against blacks, but . . .” is a one such denial commonly invoked by people to present themselves positively (van Dijk, 1992, p. 87).

Denying racism is part of a broader discourse of color blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Color blindness is the notion that people and institutionalized systems within a society do not “see” color, that the society does not discriminate based on race (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Pollock, 2004; Tarca, 2005). Color blindness is rampant in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). One way that color blindness gets continually reproduced is through a framework that Bonilla-Silva (2010) describes as the *minimization of racism* (p. 26). According to Bonilla-Silva (2010), the “minimization of racism is a frame that suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances” (p. 29). This frame is useful because it allows white people to explain inequalities by blaming minoritized people instead of the institution and their own role in discursively suppressing others (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). That is, minimizing racism allows elites to ignore the ways in which mainstream texts and their own language-in-use (the verbal

reversals and denials) work in concert to reproduce the very institutionalized inequalities they claim do not exist (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; van Dijk, 1992, 1993).

One of the most dangerous aspects of color blindness is that it often leads to the silencing of *critical talk* about racial inequalities (van Dijk, 1993; see also Pollock, 2004). “Because the dominant racial ideology [in the United States] purports to be color blind,” observes Bonilla-Silva (2010), “there is little space for socially sanctioned speech about race-matters” (p. 55). Without socially sanctioned ways to talk about oppression, social critique can come across as spurious (van Dijk, 1993). As van Dijk (1993) articulates, “Denials challenge the very legitimacy of anti-racist analysis [. . .]: as long as a problem is being denied in the first place, the critics are ridiculed, marginalized or delegitimated: denials debilitate resistance” (p. 181). The notion that *denials debilitate resistance* has important implications for critical educators seeking to expose the inequities youth face in schools and communities. It means our work is not always viewed as legitimate. Importantly, it also means that youth, themselves, may not view their own critiques of social injustices as legitimate.

Although van Dijk (1992, 1993), Bonilla-Silva (2010), and others (e.g., Pollock, 2004) have offered rigorous conceptions of how racism gets systematically denied through discourse, how youth invoke humor as a discursive strategy to minimize social oppression is less understood by education scholars. Billig (2005/2009) argues, “Those who laugh at ethnic jokes are likely to deny that their humor is racist. They will typically claim that they are ‘just joking’” (p. 27). “The ‘just joking’ defence [sic.],” argues Billig, is the “assumption that because a remark is spoken as humor, it cannot be genuinely

racist” (Billig, 2005/2009, p. 31). Significantly, the same sense of playfulness that allows some jokes to offer us mini-moments of carnival that invite us to think in new, transformative ways, also, in other moments, can reassure us that oppressive discourses are not serious, not real, not in need of redress.

Billig (2005/2009) draws on the work of Freud to describe how invoking humor can allow people to say racist things without traversing the colorblind code:

Under the cover of the joking situation, prejudiced thoughts can be expressed and socially enjoyed. In this way, the downgrading of outsiders escapes the censure that would inevitably accompany the expression of 'serious' prejudice in many contemporary discursive situations. The joking context creates a temporary situation which seems to permit laughter at exaggeratedly stereotyped unreal members of the outgroup, as jokers celebrate the funniness of their joking and deny their own racism. (Billig, 2005/2009, p. 35)

Billig’s (2005/2009) observations about the “just joking” defense extend van Dijk’s (1992, 1993) argument that people use discursive *strategies* to minimize racism. Humor is clearly one of these strategies. Psychologists, Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (2005/2009), concur. They argue, “the phrase ‘only joking’ presumes that words can be used without serious intent, and that they are not intended to cause offence. [. . .] [I]t effectively releases the joke-teller from an obligation to consider the offensive nature of their ‘jokes’” (p. 48).

Who invokes the “just joking” phrase, in what contexts they do it, and what the invocation does to promote the minimization of social oppression should be of central



concern to critical educators. This is particularly important given that existing school-based research suggests humor is sometimes leveraged to maintain social inequities and to discipline youth in marginalizing ways (Huuki et al., 2010; Kehily & Nayak, 1997). During my time in the ICS classroom, I wondered what role humor was playing in minimizing social oppression in youths' talk about inequities—particularly when they ascribed the “just joking” defense to *others*. I also wondered what power youth accrued by allowing humor to co-circulate with their talk about dominant discourses framing their identities. In the next chapter, I invite readers into the study. I outline the research design and illuminate dilemmas I faced in collecting the data and writing up the study.

## Chapter 3

### Research Design and Dilemmas

*Critical ethnographers describe, analyze, and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress, and constrain. Critical scholarship requires that commonsense assumptions be questioned.*

-Jim Thomas (1993), *Doing Critical Ethnography*

Critical ethnography aligns closely with the way I approach my work with the youth at ICS. In many ways, media sources, like blockbuster films, newspapers, and widely distributed magazines reflect, construct, and perpetuate assumptions about South Asians that become commonsense. Likewise, commonsense notions about what Indian youths' responses to these misconceptions should be—and what emotions, in general, should look like in classrooms—shape our expectations about how teaching through a critical lens to expose these issues should be performed. Through my research, I seek to disrupt or complicate these commonsense notions in order to spotlight alternative ways of understanding what it means to be Indian in the Diaspora and what it means to engage youth in critical teaching and learning.

#### **Research Setting: India Community School**

My research took place at India Community School, a co-ethnic community organization located in the U.S. Midwestern city of Parkside (all names are pseudonyms). At the time of data collection, Parkside was an ethnically diverse metropolis, with

growing Latino, Black, and Asian populations<sup>3</sup>. Of the Asian population statewide, Asian Indians comprised a substantial sub-group, with more than 17,000 Indians living in the state at the time of the study.

During my time at the site, India Community School had been in operation for more than 30 years. Its purpose was to promote an “understanding and appreciat[ion] of Indian [...] culture” and to facilitate the learning of “Indian languages[,] [...] history, geography, philosophy, arts and literatures” (Mission and Purpose, ICS Handbook). It offered classes on Saturdays from September through May. ICS was different from other Indian cultural organizations in the area in that it positioned itself as secular. While other groups focused on religious teachings or catered to communities hailing from specific regions in India, ICS did not. It welcomed children, youth, and families from all religious backgrounds and brought people together from across various regional affiliations. Most attendees were Indian, but some were not. Several white people also participated at ICS, including the principal, one board member, and three teachers.

A volunteer board of directors and teachers operated and managed the organization. During the study, 39 volunteer teachers served approximately 200 students. At that time, ICS offered a variety of language classes, including Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, Telegu, Kannada, Tamil, and Nepali. It also offered several levels of social studies classes for children and a literature class for adolescents. Electives included cooking, music, art, cricket, and dance classes. The ICS school day typically commenced

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<sup>3</sup> Two foundations focusing on community research and immigration published the data I drew from to describe the demographics of Parkside. I have not named my sources in this paragraph because doing so would reveal the site’s location.

at 10:00 am and concluded at 12:30 pm. Each Saturday began with an invocation in which the entire community sang India's national song, *Vande Mātaram*. Often announcements were made at this time. After the invocation, language classes were held, followed a snack break for children and youth, after which participants attended the social studies and literature classes. Children, youth, and adults then participated in electives. Before leaving ICS, the community gathered again to sing *Jana Gana Mana*, the Indian national anthem.

The ICS community held its classes in space it rented from Hamilton High School, a public secondary school in Parkside. There were eight main locations within the school in which ICS activities occurred. The first was the central meeting area, where participants met for the invocation, announcements, and snack. This was an interior space on the first floor of the sprawling multi-story school. ICS also made use of the cafeteria adjacent to the central meeting area for music classes, the preschool Hindi language class, and occasionally the art class. The other language and social studies classes were held in two wings of the school. One wing was attached to the central meeting area, while the other was located down a small set of stairs and through a corridor. Electives were held in various rooms throughout the school, including the Home Economics classroom (for cooking), the gym (for cricket), and the wrestling room (for yoga). Children, youth, and adults involved in the dance classes practiced in open spaces, such as the central meeting area, or in hallways. ICS rented the school's auditorium for special occasions, like Social Studies Day and Graduation Day. ICS had one small storage closet located at the school;

teachers and organizational leaders typically transported the materials they needed for lessons back and forth in their cars.

**The literature classroom.** My focal research context was the literature classroom at India Community School. I selected the literature classroom as my primary site of inquiry because I was interested how Indian youth made sense of their lived experiences at the site and in their communities. The literature classroom was a location in which Indian youth voluntarily gathered for 45 minutes each week to socialize, to discuss Indian literature, and to respond to how these texts related to their everyday lives. The literature class was held in one of the Hamilton High language arts classrooms. Posters with literary terms hung on the walls. Single wooden desks with mauve Formica seats and metal book bins were arranged in opposing rows facing the center of the classroom. The Hamilton High teacher's desk was situated in the back of the room and a blackboard stretched along the front wall. Windows lined the wall adjacent to the blackboard, offering an expansive view of the school's football field and track.

**The youth.** Twenty-five youth attended the literature class during the 2010-2011 ICS school year (youth attended the class with varying levels of consistency, and two left part way through the year). Seventeen youth were female and 8 were male. Their ages ranged from 10 to 15, and most were in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades at their weekday schools. Many of the youth lived in the suburbs surrounding Parkside. Six of the youth attended school together at a suburban charter school that offered advanced curricula in math and science. Two youth attended a charter school for the arts and sciences, two attended private schools, and six attended traditional middle and high

schools. Several youth reported seeing each other outside of ICS, such as at school, at a religious study group, at sleepovers, and at extracurricular activities like figure skating. Figure skating was only one of the many extracurricular activities in which some of the youth were involved. Others included: dance, theatre, Kumon math, Academic Triathlon, robotics, art, skiing, swimming, basketball, volleyball, soccer, horseback riding, karate and track. Over half of the adolescents also played a musical instrument.

The majority of the adolescents had at least one parent born in India and many had two; most of the youth, themselves, were born in the United States or in Canada. A small number immigrated as young children to the United States from India with their parents. Many of their parents were professionals. Twelve of the youth self-identified as being Hindu, one as Catholic, one as Sikh, and one as atheist. Most of the youth participating in the literature class had been involved with ICS for at least 2 years, and some since preschool. All of the girls in the class, except for one, were enrolled in the youth dance program at ICS and most of the youth also took a language class.

***The co-teachers.*** Diya was in her late twenties at the time of the research. Her parents were of South Indian origin and she grew up in Tanzania and later in Toronto, Canada. After attending law school, she worked as a clerk for a judge in Larkville, the city next to Parkside. During the study, she lived in a suburb of Parkside with her husband and two-year-old son, Gauruv. At the time of the study, Diya had been volunteering at ICS for 5 years; she developed and taught the first literature class at the organization two years prior to the research.

I was in my early thirties during the study. I lived in Larkville and was a full time doctoral student at the local university. Prior to being a student, I had been an elementary school teacher. I am a white European American, and not Indian, but I have a number of close friends in the Indian community and spent much time with them before, during, and after the data collection process. These relationships allowed me to enter ICS with a working understanding of some of the literature and discussion topics raised in the class. These relationships, however, did not eliminate the ethical dilemmas I faced in conducting research at the site; I discuss these dilemmas later in this chapter.

Diya and I divided our work in terms of preparation for and facilitation of the class sessions. Our lesson planning often occurred through email correspondence or over the telephone. We began the year by drafting a syllabus and schedule, although more often than not, our plans adapted and changed in response to contingencies like snow days and special events at the organization. Throughout the school year, we took turns creating and preparing materials to use in class.

It was not always easy to prepare in advance for the class, given that Diya had many professional and personal responsibilities outside of the organization. Likewise, I was swimming (read: drowning) in field notes, interpretive notes, interviews, and teaching responsibilities at the university. There was an acute contradiction between wanting to prepare thoroughly for the class and the realities of our outside lives. In terms of teaching during the class period, Diya assumed the role of lead facilitator. Throughout the school year, Diya and I took a flexible attitude toward the class, planning as much as

we could, and “going with the flow” when necessary. Diya and I both agreed that our relationship suited each other and the class well; we laughed together often.

## **Methodology**

**Negotiating entry.** Entry into the research site began a year prior to formal data collection. I identified ICS through an Internet search and I asked the organization’s president for permission to conduct a pilot study at the organization. After receiving board approval, I volunteered as a teacher at ICS for a year and simultaneously explored the experiences of parents at the site. I elected to focus on parents, rather than youth, during the pilot study because I wanted to develop rapport with community members and earn their trust before asking to observe their children. I did, however, get to know many of the youth in my role as an assistant literature teacher. Prior to teaching at ICS the second year, I asked the principal for permission to systematically study the experiences of youth in the literature class. I was granted permission to proceed with the work. As part of my participation at the site, I co-taught with Diya both the literature class for adolescents and the art class for children and youth. Many of the students who attended the literature class during the pilot study period attended again during the dissertation data collection year.

**Participants.** Participants included 22 out of the 25 youth in the literature class. Fourteen of the participants were female and 8 were male. Youth self-selected to be in the study and consent was obtained from their parents. Diya was also a participant in the study. Although we shared the “big picture” goal of providing positive learning experiences for youth, Diya did not identify the issues to be investigated in the research



study; I directed the research agenda. However, throughout the year, she supported the work by consistently making room for research elements within the class sessions (such as providing time in the curriculum for me to introduce the project, allowing me to use an audio-recorder to document classroom talk, permitting me to record field notes during class sessions, etc.). Six other adults (parents and teachers) at the organization also participated in the study. Four of these adults were organizational leaders, including the principal, the vice principal, president and a board member. I invited these adults to be a part of the study in order to triangulate data I constructed with the youth participants.

**Data collection process.** Several kinds of data were collected in this study, including: 1) youths' classroom assignments; 2) 37 ethnographic field notes detailing students' experiences in the literature classroom and observations of broader activities at ICS; 3) researcher-produced photographs, audio-recordings, and video documentation of classroom activities; 4) youth-produced photographs of their experiences at ICS and in their everyday lives; 5) 1-2 transcripts of interviews with individual, pairs, or small groups of youth participants; 6) 4 transcripts of interviews with Diya, 7) 4 (total) transcripts of interviews with ICS organizational leaders (for triangulation purposes); 8) 1 youth survey with semi-structured and open-ended questions about their experiences at ICS and in their communities; and 9) several researcher-produced written reflections on the processes of research, curriculum development, and teaching.

Data collection methods consisted of 1) participant observation at the research site one day a week for 30 weeks (one ICS school year) (I observed youth in the literature classroom; in their language classrooms; during electives; and during special occasions

[e.g., Diwali and Holi celebrations]); 2) field note documentation of site visits and classroom activities; 3) collection of students' classroom assignments; 4) digital and audio documentation of classroom activities; and 5) informal and semi-structured interviews with individual, pairs and small groups of participants (including youth in the literature class, leaders at ICS, and my co-teacher).

Interview questions for youth focused on what it felt like to be involved at ICS; what their experiences were like in their weekday schools; what meaning they gave to their participation in the literature class; and how they understood the role of laughter and humor in the ICS literature class (See Appendix A for a sample youth interview protocol). My interview questions for Diya asked her to interpret particular events that occurred in the literature classroom and to articulate how she conceptualized our pedagogy (See Appendix B for a sample interview protocol). Interview questions for the ICS leaders prompted participants to reflect on their involvement with ICS; what knowledge ICS was trying to teach youth; and what the role of laughter was in the ICS community (See Appendix C for a sample adult interview protocol).

I conducted the interviews in English, audiotaped them, and had them transcribed verbatim. I reviewed each transcript while listening to the audiotape to insure accuracy. I also wrote interpretive notes after listening to the interviews. Having the interviews transcribed as I moved through the project, rather than transcribing them at the end of the project, benefited my work immensely in that I was able to analyze the data for initial findings and to use the information that participants shared in their interviews to direct the research in productive ways.

**Analytic procedures.** While in the field, I began to notice and wonder about the nature of levity in the literature classroom and in the larger organization. I began to ask youth and adults questions about laughing in the space of ICS, and I made more focused observations about humor, laughter, and wit. I began analyzing the data by identifying specific instances during which youth engaged with laughter and humor. I wrote memos about these moments, interpreting the occurrences. Then I used constant comparative analysis strategies to systematically examine the full body of data (field notes, interview transcripts, student work, and cultural documents) (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

In my analytic process, open and focused coding happened simultaneously and sometimes recursively. I was aware of my emerging research focus (the nature of laughter in this co-ethnic space) and thus coded the data line-by-line for instances of or references that pointed to youth and/or adults engaging with laughter and humor, as well as for comments about being in a co-ethnic space, etc. I simultaneously engaged in open coding, “remain[ing] open to other analytic possibilities” in the data (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 47-48). Sometimes the same instances were coded in more than one way. I also created a hierarchy of codes, with minor codes placed under major codes (Please see Appendix D to view the coding table). I used Nvivo 9, a qualitative multimedia data analysis software package, to systematically track my coding processes.

While coding the data, I wrote 130 memos about the major and minor codes that provided insight into my research questions. These memos included excerpts from the data set (field note excerpts, interview excerpts, etc.) and often detailed how different codes were related (in other words, they captured the process of axial coding and

integrative memoing) (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In addition to memoing directly about my data, I also began to read texts about laughter and humor at this stage of analysis. I wrote additional memos about how these texts helped me theorize my data. In my memos about the data, I included notes about additional bodies of literature that might prove helpful in better understanding the significance of laughter at my site. These memos informed the structure and content of the literature review.

Because of my interest in exploring the nature of laughter in a co-ethnic space and how understanding youths' experiences might inform how educational researchers theorize immigrant youths' identities and the complex role of laughter in teaching about serious social justice issues, I decided to focus on two concepts I wrote about in the memos: 1) The Significance of Laughing in a Co-Ethnic Space; and 2) Laughing About and Through Serious Social Justice Issues. I re-read the data coded and stored under the corresponding "nodes" in Nvivo. In reading through the data coded at these nodes, I was not necessarily looking for frequency of instances or references, but, instead, for what insights the data provided. Data points were not discounted simply because they occurred infrequently.

Although empirically based, the chapters in this dissertation are ultimately interpretations of participants' experiences. My own identity, which I discuss in the next section, shaped these interpretations (Islam, 2000; Madison, 2005). To emphasize the interpretive nature of my work, in general, I present excerpts from field notes, throughout the data chapters, in narrative format, employing techniques such as dialogue and literary description in lieu of blocked quotes and offset data chunks. I am telling a story in this

dissertation (Ngo, 2004, 2010)—the story of how *my* conception of teaching and learning for critical consciousness fundamentally changed by participating at ICS. It is my hope that readers will be reminded of this purpose by encountering literary techniques in the data chapters.

### **Research Dilemmas at India Community School**

**Coping with time and space constraints.** My dual identity as a teacher and researcher presented certain practical dilemmas that impacted data collection. I often found it challenging to manage these roles simultaneously, given that each role—individually—requires intense concentration, creativity, and organization. Although Diya assumed the lead facilitator role in the class, there were several occasions when she was absent and I taught the class alone or when teaching simply required both of us to be actively involved. It was difficult to carve out time to take field notes while facilitating learning experiences. Sometimes I addressed this dilemma by audio-recording classroom interactions. I never resolved the dilemma completely.

My dual role also caused emotional complications because I was very aware that other people in the organization might read youths' laughter and socializing as off-task behavior and thus spotlight my shortcomings as a teacher. I was interested in watching the social dynamics of the class unfold naturally, but at the same time, I felt the need to curtail some of this activity because of my self-consciousness. It was only after delving into the literature on emotions, laughter, and pedagogy that I more fully comprehended the roots of my discomfort.

On another practical level, my responsibilities as a teacher constrained the time I was able to spend observing youth in spaces outside of the literature classroom. As noted previously, in addition to teaching the literature class, I also co-taught the art class with Diya. The art class took place at the same time as the youths' electives. Although there were several occasions when Diya graciously taught the art class alone so I that could be present during youths' electives, this was not always possible. The time required to set up (and clean up) materials in the literature and art classes limited my observation time within the wider organization.

Additionally, I experienced the pain of what I have come to call "One Shot Syndrome." This was the severe angst I felt knowing that I had only one day—a few hours—each week to collect the data I needed. This anxiety was made more intense knowing that my time was divided between data collection and teaching. If I missed conducting an interview with one of the youth because he or she was absent, I had to wait another week to reschedule, and this often meant pushing back an interview with another participant. In the context of a fixed amount of time (only about 30 ICS school days), this was stressful.

This time constraint led me to sometimes interview youth in pairs or small groups. While pair and group interviews often seemed to encourage youth to reflect and share their thoughts with me, I sometimes worried that interviewing youth together might constrain what they felt comfortable sharing with me, if, for example, they were concerned their ideas might conflict with those of their peers. The limited time for interviews also meant I was only able to interview some of the youth one time. This

reality was far removed from my proposed research agenda, in which I imagined interviewing each youth individually at least three times.

Constrained time and space dovetailed during the research experience. Not only was time for interviews limited, so was the physical space for conducting them. Sometimes I had to interview youth in open areas of the school, such as in the cafeteria or corridors. These spaces were often noisy, which made it challenging to obtain clear audio-recordings and to concentrate.

**Relationships, identities, and barred rooms.** Although my identity as a teacher created practical dilemmas, I did not want to relinquish it because I felt it positioned me as a reciprocal partner in the research process (Aleixo, Hansen, Horii & Un, forthcoming). This was important to me because Diya generously assisted me with the construction of data by advocating for my work and by participating in interviews, and I wanted to give something in return.

During the course of the investigation, I reflected on the idea that perhaps Diya was not so much advocating for the research, itself, as she was advocating for *me*, because of the friendly relationship we had developed. Truly, Diya and I enjoyed good rapport. We laughed and joked with each other often. When we met in downtown Larkville to talk about the project, we also spent time talking about our lives. Toward the end of the data collection phase, I visited Diya at her home so she could lend me a sari to wear to a function in the Indian community. She chuckled when I emerged from the bathroom wearing the fitted blouse backwards (it was the first time I had put one on). When I realized my mistake, I doubled over in laughter. Then I looked down and

suddenly became painfully aware that all the hours I had spent crouched over my laptop typing up field notes had caused a permanent crease to form across stomach—that same “stretch mark” was now prominently exposed in the empty space between the blouse and the sari underskirt. I was a sight to behold. I was embarrassed and in stitches over it in a way that you can only be when in the company of a good friend.

While, for the most part, this friendship felt sustaining and pleasant, I began to be troubled by Foucault’s (1981) idea about “what makes power hold good”:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t always weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault, 1984, p. 61, as cited in Moje, 2000, p. 27)

I wondered how our feel-good friendship impacted how power circulated between us in the context of the research project. In particular, I questioned how our friendship impacted our consent process in both positive and potentially negative ways.

For instance, Diya quickly consented to participate in the study, giving only a cursory glance to the information contained within the consent form (albeit we had previously discussed the project and I sent her an copy of the previous year’s form to preview before providing her with the final version of the consent form). Although our relationship may have made it easier for Diya to understand the details of the work due to the fact that her consent was informed almost daily through our frequent and open



interactions, it may also have made it difficult for her to decide *not* to participate in the research or to withdraw from the study if she felt doing so would disappoint me.

Moje's (2000) reflexive scholarship prompted me to think about how positive relationships might become sites in which inequitable power relations between researchers and partners are perpetuated. I began to wonder if our friendship positioned Diya as vulnerable in the context of the study, and if this perpetuated ethnography's colonizing legacy. While I kept this concern at the forefront of my mind, my experience at ICS simultaneously prompted me to think seriously about how positioning community partners as vulnerable might *also* be a form of colonization. I felt seeing Diya as vulnerable ignored how she exerted considerable power and agency during the research process.

Moje (2000) writes that, "some power differentials can be produced in embodied—actual physical and material—relationships" (p. 35). In reflecting on her collaborative research with a teacher in a classroom setting, she observed that it was not only her affiliation with a university that positioned her as more privileged in the research setting, but also how the teacher ascribed power to Moje's (2000) formal style of dress; her ability to sit and talk with students during lessons instead of "policing the room" (as the teacher had to do); her restrained eating habits (which the teacher read as a sign of "will power"); and her status as a married woman (p. 36). "These embodied relations," notes Moje (2000), "were integrally connected to my institutional power affiliation, illustrating that affiliatory power is a very complex and unpredictable artifact of sociohistorical and institutional relations" (pp. 36-37).

While I agree with Moje's (2000) notion that embodied power can easily push the power differentials in favor of academic researchers in classroom settings, I want to complicate this idea even further by suggesting that power can shift in the other direction as well. This is a move Moje (2000) would encourage, given that she positions power relationships as inherently complex and dependent on context (p. 35). In the specific context of family-centered ICS, Diya embodied powerful identities. She was a wife and a mother, subject positions I sensed people at the site respected. She was also Indian, which meant she did not need outside markers to signal her affiliation with India or to explain her interest in Indian culture.<sup>4</sup>

My own identity posed an ethical dilemma in conducting research as a non-Indian in a community-based organization. In one of her interviews, Diya spoke about the significance she felt the literature class had in the lives of the youth participants. Her words seemed to echo those of Reagon (1983), who, as was noted earlier, "compared building community institutions with being in a barred room offering nurturance and a safe space" (Collins, 2000, p. 208). An important aspect of barred rooms, as Reagon imagined them, was that they provided a space for communities to "sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are" (Reagon, 1983, 351, as cited in Collins, 2000, p. 208).

Similarly, Diya noted:

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, I learned toward the end of the research project that Diya felt my role as a researcher gave me a purpose for talking with people across the community; she felt she did not always have a lot in common with other parents at the site, given that her child was much younger than the typical ICS participant. In other words, she did not position my non-mother identity as an impediment to relationships because my research linked me to others in ways she felt she did not easily connect.

I think there's a strength in numbers there [in the class] where the more the kids talk about it [how their Indian identities are read by others] amongst themselves, the more they're kind of able to figure out what they want to do about it. Whether they're going to ignore it, or whether they're just kind of going to stand up for what they really think it should be, or whether you know, they're going to create something new out of what the world holds as a definition of what they are, and kind of reshape that. (Interview, October 22, 2010)

Although many of the youth in the literature class were not as isolated in their weekday schools as Diya and I originally imagined (several, we learned as the study progressed, attended school together), Diya's point was a powerful one: she was suggesting that ICS served as a space in which youth could figure out what the world was saying about them and who they really wanted to be. During both the pilot study and the dissertation research I learned from several members of the ICS community that participating in the organization provided a valuable space in which adults, children, and youth could be with other Indians. It was a site for expressing pride in being Indian and for feeling connected to each other and to family. Although the organization sought to educate the wider community about Indian culture and thus positioned itself *not* as insular but as outward looking and welcoming to non-Indians, I wondered if, in conducting research in this setting, I was actually wedging open the door of a barred room. By acting on my "interes[t] in cross-cultural engagemen[t]," was I softening an in-group/out-group hyphen ICS participants were trying to keep sharp—perhaps not at the level of official discourse, at an emotional one (Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 473)?

At the forefront of my mind was Chicana ethnographer Sofia Villenas' (1996) observation that separate spaces and the physical presence of community can play powerful roles in helping marginalized people talk back to and reshape dominant discourses. In her writing, Villenas (1996) draws on the work of feminist scholar Emma Perez (1991):

You attempt to 'penetrate' the place I speak from with my Chicana\Latina hermanas. I have rights to my space. I have boundaries . . . At times, I must separate from you, from your invasion. So call me a separatist, but to me this is not about separatism. It is about survival. I think of myself as one who must separate to my space and language of women to revitalize, to nurture and be nurtured. Then, I can resurface to build the coalitions that we must build to make the true revolution—all of us together acting the ideal, making alliance without a hierarchy of oppression. (cited in Villenas, 1996, p. 718)

My observations at ICS pointed to many ways in which the organization acted as a place of nurturance, of revitalization. In conducting research in such a space—in a barred room in which community was enacted and fortified—was I extending a long history of white researchers imposing themselves on minoritized people, of colonizing spaces through their presence and through their written representations that purported to be authentic and authoritative (Aleixo et al., forthcoming; Steinmetz, 2004; Villenas, 1996)?

Despite the complexity of power relationships at the site, and despite my engagement in dialogical data collection (via interviews with participants, for example) (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Madison, 2005; Thomas, 1993), I could not ignore fact that

my work was still imperialistic within the broader theory and practice of ethnographic research (Steinmetz, 2004; Villenas, 1996). After all, the power to interpret the words and experiences of participants—and to represent and circulate those interpretations through publications—ultimately (albeit uncomfortably) rested with me (Aleixo et al., forthcoming).

Some scholars will find it problematic that a white researcher is writing about Indian youth (hooks, 1989, p. 44). To be certain, interviews and observations between my participants and a researcher of color, or more specifically, between my participants and an *Indian* researcher, would have produced different data about their experiences at ICS. Although I do not believe that cultural outsiders cannot or should not attempt to learn from people outside their familiar social groups (hooks, 1989), I appreciate the concerns of scholars who take issue with white scholars conducting research with historically colonized people (e.g., Verma, 2008). To address this dilemma (although not to redress it), I emphasize that, as a critical ethnographer, I am not offering objective reflections of youths’ “real” realities; rather, in this dissertation, I share the insights youths’ experiences, as I understood them, afforded me about teaching through a critical lens and about reframing the way educational scholars read immigrant youths’ identities.

Let me be clear: I do not position myself as an authority on Indian youths’ identities or experiences (hooks, 1989; Villenas, 1996). My account of youths’ experiences at ICS is *partial* (Ellsworth, 1989; Ngo, 2004, 2010). My interpretations are filtered through my own racialized and gendered perspectives, my past experiences as an educator in public schools, my long-term participation as a teacher at ICS, and my

emotional attachment to the youth at the center of the study. What “remains to be written” are additional accounts of humor in the lives of Indian youth offered by South Asian researchers uniquely positioned to glean different, and perhaps more nuanced, insights (Hemenway, as cited in hooks, 1989, p. 46).

## Chapter 4

### Illuminating Spaces of Levity

*On the last day of the ICS school year, I sat in the middle of the Hamilton High School auditorium, waiting for the graduation ceremony to commence. “Annual Day” was more than a cursory acknowledgement of the completion of the academic term; rather, it was a three-hour program in which children, youth, and adults performed—usually through skits, dances, interactive quiz games, and digital video productions—what they learned during the school year.*

*Several youth from the literature class were already in the auditorium. Many of the girls, who would later perform a traditional Indian dance, were wearing salwaar kameez. Some also adorned their foreheads with bindis. Typically, the female youth in the literature class wore jeans, trendy sweaters or tops, and other fashion-forward accouterment, such as buff-colored Uggs. Their dress on graduation day indexed the specialness of the occasion (many adults in the audience were also wearing traditional Indian clothing), along with their membership in the dance troupe.*

*Many of the girls, as was standard at ICS, also brought with them into the auditorium material objects and conversation threads from their outside lives: Ishani and Manasa carried cell phones; Rupa brought a copy of the popular young adult novel, *City of Bones* (Clare, 2007); Karishma talked about her experience the night before at a “lock-in” (a supervised “slept over” at her school); and Ramya, referencing recent headlines touting an immanent apocalypse, asked me tentatively if I believed the world was going to end at 6 pm (I said no, but secretly wondered if I might not have to write up*

*the day's field notes after all). The girls chatted as people milled about the auditorium. Several of the girls' parents, I noticed, were also in the space.*

*Soon the voice of Pratik, the assistant principal, echoed over the loud speaker. "This is your captain speaking," he announced. He welcomed the audience to ICS Flight 32 (at that point in time, ICS had been in operation for 32 years) and noted, "This is a flight from Parkside to India and back again." He urged parents to keep an eye on their small children during the 3-hour travel time, lest, he joked, organizers supply unattended youngsters with sugar and caffeine—stimulants that would surely kick in as soon as families returned home.*

*Kartik, one the boys from the literature class—and a MC for the event—welcomed the first group of performers to the stage: the preschool students and their teacher. The children held poster boards onto which papers had been affixed. From my vantage point in the audience, I recognized the Indian flag as one the images displayed on their posters. The teacher asked the children to name some of the national symbols of India, such as the national flower, the national game, the national fruit, the national tree, and the national aquatic animal. People in the audience clapped when the children supplied answers to the teacher's questions.*

*Once the preschoolers had completed their performance, Kartik reappeared on stage. He announced the Hindi Level 1 class, which comprised children mainly of Kindergarten age. Pratik, who, in addition to acting as the assistant principal, also served as a Hindi teacher, came on stage. "No, I'm not the 5 and 6 year olds," he joked. The children—the real 5 and 6 year olds—he explained, "will be singing a song we all*



*grew up with.” Ten young children, dressed in traditional Indian clothing, introduced themselves one-by-one in Hindi and then sang a children’s song well known to the audience. Adults aimed digital cameras in the youngsters’ direction and clapped for the children after they completed their performance.*

*The children’s song was followed by similar, but more complex, language performances by older children, youth, and adults. The audience was also treated to dance routines choreographed both to folk music and contemporary Bollywood hits. At one point, the ICS cricket players reenacted a key moment in the 2011 Cricket World Cup, of which India, playing Sri Lanka, was the winner. “It’s a six!” exclaimed the cricket teacher. “India wins the world cup!” The audience cheered enthusiastically—as if reliving the moment the real win occurred.*

*“What a flight,” summed up Kartik toward the end of the ceremony. After certificates of appreciation were awarded to the volunteer teachers, the audience stood as the U.S. national anthem was played. Although the anthem was instrumental, I heard a white woman in the audience singing the words. I felt a strange urge to sing along with the woman—to sing together; I mouthed the words for a while. Then I felt uncomfortable singing, because I did not believe the U.S. was “the land of the free” for everybody. I thought, in particular, about the South Asian people who were detained or disappeared after 9/11 and I felt very guilty about the rush of patriotism I experienced at the beginning of the anthem. However, I could not help noticing—acknowledging—the momentary rush of nationalism. In the few seconds that it lasted, I think I felt what many ICS members experienced within the organization: a sense of pride in one’s country and*

*culture—and a sense of community. The U.S. national anthem concluded and the Indian national anthem, Jana Gana Mana, played next. Although I had listened to Jana Gana Mana many times before, this time I listened with a new intensity.*

### **A Serious Purpose**

India Community School was a space in which connections to India were routinely promoted and reinforced, both through the official curriculum and through informal interactions between participants. One way in which participants understood and talked about India was as a geographical location—a physical place “out there” that could be—and often was—traveled to for work and family visits. Just like the imaginary flight Pratik invoked during the graduation ceremony, many of the youth in the literature class, along with adults, had flown “from Parkside to India and back again” several times.

India—or the idea of India—was also positioned as a set of cultural meanings tied to identity and, importantly, to immediate and extended family relationships. Children and youths’ identification with the idea of India (cf., Sarroub, 2002) was promoted through official curricular offerings that focused explicitly on regional language learning and cultural art forms, such as music and dance. Although the official curriculum *helped* young people gain access to cultural meanings and relationships, “more than the classroom education,” noted Samir, a board member and a father of ICS participants, “I think it is the interactions that happen between the kids and parents and the cultural things that happen that help them understand [the concept of India]” (Interview, March 12, 2011). In many ways the social aspect of ICS was just as—if not more—important than the curriculum itself. Vijay, the president of ICS, articulated the significance of a

space like this: ICS was a place in which he could “connect back to [his] roots, [...] establish some identity, [...] explore [his cultural] experiences [...], and [...] feel excited to share those experiences with the rest of the community” (Interview, March 26, 2011).

Pratik and Samir, who were both parents of second-generation children and young adults, both felt ICS had an important role to play in helping 1.5 and second-generation youth connect with their families’ understanding of what it meant to be Indian. Pratik characterized his investment in ICS as “quite intense” because of this role played by the organization:

These children—our children—who are growing up here, they need to be in touch with their roots. They need to [...] have some kind of medium to understand what their roots are, so as not to lose touch. [...] My involvement with that aim in mind has been quite intense. I made it a mission of sorts to—wherein it’s incumbent upon me to make sure that these children—this generation—does not lose sight. Does not lose touch and does not forget the smells of the culture that we as parents have left behind. And we understand, we know, that these kids at no point in time would be going back to their country of origin, so we want to create—at least I want to create—a mini India—if you want to call it—over here, so that these kids and the generations to follow would have some sort of, some semblance of India over here from which they can learn, from which they can appreciate, and to which they can relate themselves to. (Interview, April 30, 2011)

The children’s Annual Day performance of the “song we [adults] all grew up with” is a concrete manifestation of Pratik’s deep desire to help the youth of ICS experience

‘nostalgia without memory’ (Appadurai, 1996, as cited in Maira, 2002, p. 113). Re-creating Indian cultural experiences at ICS was a way to construct a mini India in a space far removed from the geographical place of the parents’ country of origin. Weekly routines, such as singing *Jana Gana Mana* as a community, along with celebrating holidays like Holi and Diwali, were vital parts of creating a small world within a world within which youth could gain access to the same songs, smells, languages, literature, and discourses that ICS parents grew up with in India. This was important because, in Pratik’s view, “this generation” would “at no point in time” return to live in the actual geo-cultural space of India. Implicit in Pratik’s talk was the notion that memories of the material aspects of India—the feel of the space—was inextricably linked to identity, to a way of being in the world.

Samir also referenced memory in discussing the significance of the organization’s attempts to “introduce the concept of India” to youth and children:

[...] [M]ost of the kids who come are youngsters either born in the U.S. or born in India but came here when they were still young, so they don’t have much—many memories of India—at least not deep, lasting memories. So the idea is, ‘What is India?’ and ‘How do I explain India to them? They are bombarded with so many strong images of America *every day* at school and TV, from friends. So we want to provide at least a little visibility so that they can see, okay, that is your heritage.

(Interview, March 12, 2011)

Samir suggested that the “images of America” took up significant space in the lives of youth—and that ICS cleared a small window to help youth “see” their heritage. This was

necessary because the youth did not have the kinds of substantial memories of India that their parents brought with them to the United States. In his interview, Samir situated the discrepancy between parents' memories of India—and thus their cultural frames of reference—and youths' limited memories as problematic in some situations. Later in the interview, he explained that if youth could understand where they came from (i.e. their cultural roots), they could better understand where their “parents are coming from,” when, for example, they told their adolescent children they could not engage in activities—like dating or dancing with people at the prom—that were, in some cases, acceptable in the U.S., but not in India.

“The kids,” noted Samir, “they live a double life. I don't know if you understand this, but they live a double life” (Interview, March 12, 2010). The double life Samir indexed reflects how researchers and dominant discourses have long portrayed immigrant youths' cultural experiences as bifurcated and in some cases conflicted (see Hall, 1995; Maira, 2002; and Ngo, 2009 for critiques of this portrayal). ICS, for Samir, was a way to bridge these lives.

One Saturday in November, a representative from a different Indian organization made a guest presentation at ICS. The ICS community gathered in the cafeteria to listen to the speaker. He asked how many people knew the Indian national anthem. He held up the Indian flag and noted that without organizations like ICS, youth would not know the meaning of these symbols. “[Our] grandchildren are forgetting,” he asserted. He suggested that the current generation no longer had an emotional connection with the Indian national anthem and flag (Field note, November 20, 2011). Similar to Pratik and

Samir, the guest speaker seemed to convey a sense of unease about children and youth “forgetting” what their parents remembered about India. The guest speaker situated ICS as one “medium,” as Pratik articulated, for helping children and youth recollect anew the meaning of India. The guest speaker’s speech—and his anxious tone—spotlighted how, at least for Pratik and Samir, ICS fulfilled quite a serious and important function in the lives of immigrant youth and their families.

Despite the anxiety voiced by the guest speaker, youth in the literature class tended to articulate strong connections to India and positive feelings about their Indian identities. In some moments these connections were expressed in overt statements, such as “I am proud to be Indian” (Field note, January 8, 2011), “I do identify myself as an American, but I definitely don’t want to lose sight of my Indian heritage” (Field note, February 26, 2011), and “I really appreciate [my Indian identity]” (Interview, March 12, 2011). At other times, their sense of connection was conveyed through their relationships to cultural materials—like their enthusiastic consumption of Bollywood films (one youth reported having a collection of over 200 films), their interest in TV programs and commercials featuring Indian actors, their references to a website for South Asian youth (MyLifeIsDesi.com), their participation in Indian cultural activities outside of ICS, and, in some cases, through their personal aesthetic.

Maya, for example, was one of the most fashionable young women in the class. She enjoyed going to the mall and routinely wore trendy outfits. “I am not ashamed of being Indian. [...]” Maya commented. “People ask me, and I’ll be happy to tell them—like, I wear bangles all the time, and that’s like an Indian staple” (Interview, January 22,

2011). Similarly, Lalana, another female youth in the class, stated, “I’m proud of like my culture. So I really want to show it off—‘Oh, I’m Indian. And this is what we do’” (Interview, January 5, 2011). She enjoyed being asked about her Indian cultural identity by people outside of ICS. Likewise, Prema valued spending time with other Indians, both within and outside of ICS, and Savita noted that she enjoyed participating in ICS because it felt good to be involved with her “Indian culture every Saturday” (Interview, November 20, 2010). By and large, youth did *not* tend to position their affiliation with Indian culture as a burden they bore, but rather as something they cherished—something that occasionally presented challenges—but that was nonetheless a highly valued and positive component of their complex identities.

It was not surprising then that many of the youth articulated a serious purpose for enrolling in the literature classroom: to connect with and deepen their understanding of Indian culture through literature. For Manasa, the objective of the literature class was to “be able to relate to like texts about India. And then, you know, just I guess express our Indianness through writing” (Interview, October 30, 2010). This was important to her, “‘Cause in school, we don’t write about stuff like that. You know? Like we write about things like—I don’t know. We read Shakespeare and stuff, but here we’re reading stuff by Indian authors, so it’s just—I don’t know. We kind of get to see that maybe they went through the same things we’re going through like with the whole cultural limbo” (Interview, October 30, 2010).

Savita also valued being able to read “Indian stories from India instead of always reading like American books. Like I can relate to a lot of the books that we choose in this

[class]—like about people our age” (Interview, November 20, 2010). Like Manasa, Savita felt that she did not have many opportunities to read Indian literature in her weekday school: “It’s always a book about either like Chinese or Americans or Hispanics or something. There’s never books about Indians” (Interview, November 20, 2010). Unfortunately, Manasa’s and Savita’s experience of curricular marginalization in their weekday schools was not unique among the youth at ICS, nor among Indian immigrant youth more generally (c.f., Verma, 2008).

### **Levity in the Literature Classroom**

Although the literature class, like ICS more generally, fulfilled a serious purpose for the youth (and adults), it was simultaneously a space in which laughter—and a sense of levity—*flourished*. Individual youth used humor in different ways to promote a sense of lightness, play, and laughter. Ishani, for instance, occasionally played with the structure of language (by calling my audio recorder a “recordio,” for example) and performed an Indian accent in a spirited way. Prema displayed a sense of wit when she donned a larger-than-life placard for Halloween resembling a math homework assignment gone wrong (a large red F was drawn in the upper right hand corner). The costume was entitled, “An Indian Parent’s Worst Nightmare” (Field note, October 30, 2010). Similarly, Manasa wore whimsical and witty articles of clothing, such as a winter hat knit in the shape of a cupcake, a t-shirt depicting a wedge of cheese about to be grated (“Okay! Okay! Okay! I’ll talk! I’ll talk!” said the cheese), a tiny Santa hat affixed to a headband, and a devil horns headband. Youth, on occasion, also directly referenced humor in their talk with one another, saying things like: “That’s funny” (Field note,



February 26, 2011), “You’re like dying of laughter, dude” (Field note, March 5, 2011), “It’s actually really funny” (Field note, April 23, 2011), and “Just kidding” (Field note, April 30, 2012). These different performances of humor combined in unique ways to promote a sense of levity in the classroom space.

Sometimes youths’ laughter was subtle and subdued, issued forth by individuals or shared privately with perhaps one or two other people. At other times, laughter was boisterous and collective. Often youths’ laughter seemed to index sheer delight in their peers’ amusing performances and personal antics, such as during an unconventional recitation of a poem, entitled *Jana Gana Mana*, performed by Ravi—a male youth many members of the class characterized as being exceptionally funny.

The incident occurred in February, in the middle of what was an excruciatingly long Mid-western winter. After listening to morning announcements in the common meeting area, I trudged in my snow boots down the school hallway to the literature classroom. Nineteen of the twenty-four youth in the literature class had already planted themselves at desks. They had self-selected their seats, with most choosing to sit on the side of the room flanked by a wall of windows. They reminded me of greenhouse saplings instinctively turning toward the light. Ravi, however, was not seated near the wall of windows, but, as was his usual habit, was roosting in the weekday teacher’s chair (outfitted with wheels) behind her desk in the back of the classroom.

After reviewing the upcoming assignments, Diya announced that the class would be doing a brief unit on poetry inspired by a poem written by one of the members of the class (earlier Prema had shared one of her poems with Diya and me). Diya and I

distributed our makeshift poetry anthologies, which comprised poems about India composed by master and novice poets printed on loose sheets of paper and stapled together in the upper right hand corner. Soon Lalana announced she had identified Prema's poem, "Yes, No, Stereotypically Me," in the anthology. Youth enthusiastically flipped through the poems and commented aloud about them. A few minutes later, over the rustling of papers and overlapping voices, Diya announced, that due to the "level of noise" in the room, it seemed most of the youth had finished reading the poems. She selected Ravi to read a poem aloud for the class.

Ravi, still seated in the teacher's chair, rolled to the front of the classroom. He read the first poem in the packet: "Jana gana mana" (Gopichand & Nagasusela, n.d.). This was a poem composed by two youth about India's national anthem. Just as they did during Annual Day, ICS youth and their families sang *Jana Gana Mana* every Saturday. The singing of *Jana Gana Mana* at ICS was a routine marked by seriousness and reverence: participants were expected to stand for the singing and talking during the national anthem was frowned upon. The poem reflected the anthem itself, shimmering with images like, "our glorious past, our mythical heroes, our mystic sages" and current ideals of "ris[ing] beyond/The barriers - of cast, creed and race." In short, it was a solemn poem designed, I sensed, to generate a sense of reverence for India.

"Jana gana mana—" read Ravi in such a way that the words tumbled over each other fluidly, comically, like circus acrobats. Youth in the class laughed. Continuing, Ravi read each stanza of the poem in a serious tone, breaking into measured irreverent silliness at each refrain; youth cracked up, each time, right on cue.

Ravi was always cracking people up. He was well liked in the class, and youth overwhelmingly attributed his funniness to his “personality,” which they affectionately characterized as “weird.” Ravi seemed to have an innate ability to “see[m] really innocent” while saying things that “end[ed] up being really funny” (Kartik, Interview, May 21, 2011). On one occasion, Ravi pretended not to know how to pronounce a particular Hindi term (*masala dosa* [a type of spicy crepe])—and this moment became legendary, with youth continuing to reference it throughout the year. Youth found this moment hilarious because they understood Ravi really knew how to say *masala dosa* (i.e. his insider membership in the co-ethnic space was undisputed), but read it incorrectly anyway.

In discussing this moment, Savita, Prema, and Shobana added that by mispronouncing *masala dosa*, Ravi opened a space for others to “correct him” (Interview, February 5, 2011). That is, he opened himself up to *faux* chastisement—“and it made it funny” (Interview, February 5, 2011). Everyone was able to participate in the laughter. Ravi put himself at the center of the joke, but was actually really in control (he was not a real victim) because everyone was aware that he really knew how to say *masala dosa*. This experience was not unique. Ravi routinely opened himself up to friendly heckling, and, in turn, drew others into participating in the class. As Diya put it: “He’s very sweet. Like [...] he read ‘*Jana Gana Mana*.’ And that whole like—the way he did the ‘*Jana Gana Mana*’—and then every time, people laughed. It was like—would the author have wanted that poem read that way? Probably not. But at the end of the day, did he get the rest of the kids to listen to the whole poem? Yes” (Interview, February 23, 2011).

Occasionally, laughter circulated with personal anecdotes youth told about growing up as Indian American adolescents. The laughter that accompanied a narrative Manasa relayed about her Indian peers in school, whom she characterized as culturally white, was illustrative. It was still winter, still cold, when Manasa shared her story. Youth were scattered in desks around the literature classroom. We were sharing reviews youth wrote about books of their own choosing. Manasa had just read to the class her review of *Flight to Freedom* (Veciana-Suarez, 2002), a novel about an adolescent Cuban immigrant, and the conversation turned to how youth in the class felt about their own cultural identities. Youth batted around different ideas. After a bit, Manasa, outfitted in jeans and her t-shirt depicting a wedge of cheese in the process of being grated, remarked, “I sorta resented it [her Indian cultural identity] when I was younger, just because I would get made fun of in school just a little bit. I’m still the only [Indian] kid in my entire school.”

“Same,” added Ravi.

Manasa continued: “And there are 2,000 people in my high school.”

“Are you sure about that?” asked Maya. “In all of Lincoln High School, there’s not another Indian person?”

Manasa said there were actually two Indian students at her school, but “they’re like really white.” One or two people in the classroom laughed.

“Whoa!” said Ravi.

I asked Manasa what it meant that these two students were really white.

“They don’t like –” began Manasa, as crosstalk washed over the room. Youth in the class laughed as I probed to find out what acting white meant. “Okay,” began Manasa. “They’re just like culturally clueless I guess.” Someone in the class laughed. Manasa pushed forward: “They don’t know anything about their culture.” This was a moment in which the topic was quite serious, yet in which laughter still surfaced. It was moments like these that drew my attention more intently to the culture of levity that youth seemed to continually reproduce in the classroom.

### **Laughter, Space, and Feeling Got**

As I spent more time in the literature classroom and began to attend more closely to laughter and levity in the space, I asked youth to articulate their understanding of my observations. One Saturday I sat in the cafeteria with Ananya and Reva. I asked them if laughing together at ICS with their Indian friends felt any different than laughing and joking with their non-Indian friends in other spaces. “Yeah,” said Ananya, “I think it does.” I asked the girls to tell me more.

“Well,” added Reva, “because they sometimes don’t get the joke.”

“Yeah,” agreed Ananya.

Reva continued: “They don’t always get the joke, and when I’m here they get the joke that I made.”

“Or sometimes it’s the other way around for me,” said Ananya. “Like sometimes my school friends will get a joke that I say, but people at ICS will kind of get confused by it, or the other way around” (Interview, April 16, 2011).

Reva's and Ananya's comments point to the significance of *space* as a theoretical construct. They seemed to suggest that people in different spaces have access to different "social languages" (Gee, 2005, p. 35), that people in different spaces are privy to unique contextual understandings, and that these different understandings impact their social experiences.

The girls' observations dovetail with those of critical geographer, Edward Soja (2004), who suggests "contemporary scholars are cultivating a growing awareness that space is more than an attribute or simple outcome of social processes but is also a causal force with as yet relatively unexplored explanatory power" (p. xiv). "Whereas space was once thought of as empty, available, and waiting to be filled up," note Sheehy and Leander (2004), "recent theorizing about space has brought to light that space is a product and process of socially dynamic relations" (p. 1). What Soja (2004) and Sheehy and Leander (2004) are asserting is that space *does* things (c.f., Ahmed, 2004, p. 191). Spaces, and the bodies moving within and through them, co-construct each other; or as Sheehy and Leander (2004) articulate: "space [...] [is a] social product and process" (p. 1). This way of theorizing space suggests the *co-ethnic* space of the literature classroom, and of ICS, more broadly, might productively be theorized as a "causal force" in the types of experiences youth have within the its walls and within the organization more generally.

Ramya, who turned 15 years old during the study, spoke specifically about the co-ethnic aspect of the literature classroom when I asked her to describe different strategies youth employed to insert their voices into classroom discussions. She referenced a

moment in which youth were heckling Ravi. He was presenting a book review and had to continually yell over others in order to be heard:

Well, when Ravi was like presenting today, he kept yelling, so that's probably a way, and then you just kind of have to scream. 'Cause I think people in, like all the Indians are more comfortable around each other. Like if this was school, no one would be yelling. I think people would be more self-conscious about like what they say and how they say it and how they present themselves. So I think here we're more relaxed and people just yell more, because—I don't know. I don't really know how to explain it, but like they're more comfortable, so they can feel like if they want to get their point across, they're just gonna have to yell at someone to do it. Yeah like—'cause I wouldn't yell at anyone in school, but yeah, I do it here sometimes. (Interview, March 5, 2011)

Ramya's reflection suggests she perceived youth to feel a certain level of comfort, openness, or sense of ease, within the space of the literature classroom. She articulated that this sense of comfort was linked to being around other Indians. I interpreted Ramya's words to mean that youth felt comfortable asserting their thoughts within in the co-ethnic space—even yelling if they had to in order to get across their point. She noted that a sense of self-consciousness might stifle the same kind of expressions in diverse weekday school settings.

Ahmed (2004) proposes people experience comfort when they do *not* feel the borders between their bodies and the objects and space around them. "Comfort," she theorizes, "is the effect of bodies being able to 'sink' into spaces that have already taken

their shape. Discomfort is not simply a choice or decision [...] but an effect of bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or ‘extend’ their shape” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 152). She provides the example of a well-worn upholstered chair that has molded to one’s body. The chair feels comfortable precisely because the border between one’s body and the object is so indiscernible. When bodies do not fit the spaces they are in, or vice versa, people experience discomfort. This idea extends to the comfort and discomfort we feel about our identities in different spaces (Ahmed, 2004). I suggest Ahmed’s (2004) framework for theorizing feelings of comfort and discomfort is useful for explaining the openness Ramya indicated youth felt with each other in the literature classroom. Although individual youth certainly experienced the literature class differently, it may have been that the co-ethnic aspect of ICS “fit” (at least to some degree) youths’ ethnic identities and experiences in such a way that they did not acutely feel the border between themselves and others in the space.

Ahmed’s (2004) notion of comfort also resonated with how youth spoke about other Indian youth “getting” —or relating to— their lived experiences. According to Ramya, conversations with Indian peers were different from those that she could have with “American” peers<sup>5</sup>. Ramya “wouldn’t be able to say the same thing to [...] American friends” that she could say to her Indian friends (Interview, March 5, 2011). She positioned American peers as unable to fully understand or appreciate the lived experiences of Indian youth. Significantly, Indian youth at ICS were situated as *fully*

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<sup>5</sup> I recognize that the term “American” is problematic in that it reifies the stereotype that Indian youth are somehow not American, but I use it because it is the descriptor the youth used in their speech.



*capable* of understanding *each other's* experiences. Manasa, Ramya's close friend, invoked a similar idea when she explained, "At ICS, it feels like people kinda get me more" and "with my friends at ICS it's really easy 'cause they're in the same boat as me" (Interview, October 30, 2011). Implicit in Manasa's comment was the assumption that Indian youth in the Diaspora encountered similar experiences navigating their cultural identities and daily lives.

In one interview, Sashi, a male youth in the class, expressed that he found it easier to initiate and sustain friendships with other Indians (as opposed to Americans) because they shared a common understanding of each other's outside lives. For Sashi, understanding one another's outside lives meant sharing an understanding of cultural customs. This common knowledge allowed Indian peers to engage in meaningful conversations about their lives. They could talk "about something that's going on," as opposed to surface level small talk that did not relate to people and events that were significant (Interview, March 12, 2011). Sashi juxtaposed this type of conversation with one he imagined having with American peers: "If you're like friends with an American, unless that American knows a lot about India, you can't really use your outside life with them" (Interview, March 12, 2011). Being friends with American peers, for Sashi, meant sacrificing opportunities to draw on one's outside life. It also meant giving up a certain amount of "privacy" if an Indian youth wanted to teach an American peer about Indian cultural traditions. Interestingly, even if an Indian youth were to engage in the labor of teaching an American peer about Indian customs, according to Sashi, "they wouldn't really know what you're talking about when you talked about it" (Interview, March 12,

2011). I understood Sashi to mean that, for him, in some cases, it was almost futile to attempt to open one's outside life to American peers because they just wouldn't get it.

Ramya wove together the concepts of co-ethnic space, comfort, and laughter when I asked her if there was something unique about laughing with peers at ICS. She commented that she did not feel she laughed as much as the other youth while in the literature classroom but observed, "in the halls and stuff, we're always laughing" (Interview, March 5, 2011). She suggested laughter within ICS was somehow less constrained than laughter in places occupied by non-Indians. "I think it's [laughter] more open here," she noted, "because—Well, like okay, so if I had all my Indian friends at my school, I wouldn't learn anything, because we'd just be laughing the whole time" (Interview, March 5, 2011).

This sense of openness—or feeling less constrained—was linked to being among "Indian friends." Ramya observed that "of course" she had American friends, but her Indian peers were her "best friends." Her Indian friends were her best friends because "they [were] like the same" as her and understood what it was like to grow up as an American teenager in an Indian household (Interview, March 5, 2011). Indian friends "just get" these experiences, because, they have gone through "similar things" (Interview, March 5, 2011). Laughter among Indian friends was imagined as free flowing—almost a force in and of itself. Notice how Ramya suggested that the presence of Indian friends in her weekday school space would *change* what normally happened in that space.

Ramya's comments were remarkably similar to those made by a Layla, a Yemeni immigrant youth in Sarroub's (2001) study, who "distinguished her 'American friends'

from her Yemeni friends by level of connection and comfort: “[My friends] are all Yemeni because that’s who I like. You know, I like to hang around with my, the people that I really connect with” (p. 404). Although Ramya, like many of the youth in the literature classroom, did not limit themselves to friendships with exclusively Indian peers, it was a similar feeling of sameness—or mutual understanding—that, according to Ramya, would hypothetically lead to the kind of laughter that would disrupt what normally happened in her weekday school space.

The idea that laughter is more open in co-ethnic spaces because Indian friends “just get it” circulates within and through the diaspora community at large. It is the premise behind websites like MyLifeisDesi.com. Several of the youth in the literature class were familiar with this website. It was a venue for posting funny stories about life as South Asian youth, a virtual co-ethnic space for joking about their shared experiences. According to Manasa, good posts were those that reified—in a creative and clever way—a stereotype about being a South Asian youth. Posts that failed to meet these criteria were marked as “rubbish”—“all the stories that people don’t like because they don’t fit the Desi stereotype” (Manasa, Interview, March 5, 2011). Contributors wanted to receive comments, such as “Yes, *yaar* [friend], you are so Desi” on their posts, as opposed to comments like, “You are so Umrican [American],” which figuratively translated to “go away” (Manasa, Interview, March 5, 2011).

At the time of the study, Ramya had posted twice on this site. One of her posts was about Manasa’s reluctance to go to *Dandya* (a community dance activity) because she felt she needed to study. Ramya explained her post like this: “Like one time, Manasa

told me that she [...] didn't want to go, 'cause she had a B+ in math and she wanted to study and get it up to an A, so I put that on there [in the post], 'cause yeah, [...] only an Indian kid would do that" (Ramya, Interview, March 5, 2011). Interestingly, Ramya's post reflected in a virtual co-ethnic space a message similar to the one Prema's Halloween costume ("An Indian Parent's Worst Nightmare") conveyed in the physical space of ICS. Prema treated the stereotype that Indian parents expect youth to achieve ultra high grades (and that Indian youth strive to meet this expectation) with levity. She simultaneously acknowledged the stereotype and laughed about and through it. Significantly, her costume offered onlookers in the space an opportunity to laugh, too.

Just as Prema invited laughter, Ramya, too, noted that she tried to make her posts on My Life is Desi sound "funny." The purpose of the website, according to Ramya, was "just to make people laugh" (Ramya, Interview, March 5, 2011). Manasa explicitly linked her humorous experiences on My Life is Desi to her experiences at ICS: "I guess when we laugh at ICS we're also making fun of ourselves at the same time. Just like going on My Life is Desi is too" (Interview, March 5, 2011). She felt that when youth were laughing in this way, they were "all relating on common ground [...], and I mean no one's getting offended by it and its fun" (Interview, March 5, 2011).

One provocative My Life is Desi post read: "Today I realized being Desi is one gigantic inside joke" (mylifeisdesi.com, accessed February 20, 2011). In an interview with Ishani, I asked her what sense she made of the post. Although she did not visit this website, Ishani noted that she "totally" agreed with the post, and interpreted it by invoking the idea that there are larger conversations (Gee, 2005), such as what it means

to be an ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) to which Indian youth are privy. “I guess like in America it would be an inside joke ‘cause like American Born Confused Desi. Like, we can all relate to that ‘cause I guess we’re all like coconuts or whatever” (Interview, March 12, 2011). For Ishani, being a coconut meant being “brown on the outside, but [...] white on the inside” (Interview, March 12, 2011); that is, racially South Asian, but culturally white. An American child,” she noted, in contrast, “wouldn’t find [these jokes] funny at all” (Interview, March 12, 2011).

In other words, Americans, in Ishani’s interview, were positioned as being *unable* to laugh at these jokes because they could not relate to the lived experiences behind the jokes and thus were not knowledgeable about the wider discourses, or conversations, framing what it meant to be an Indian adolescent in the Diaspora. For Ishani, ICS was a space in which Indian youth could share their experiences and laugh about them—it was a place in which youth “got” each other and could share “inside jokes.” She suggested that the jokes youth shared were understood not only by the adolescents in the class, but also by “all Indians” (Interview, March 12, 2011). Part of the pleasure, I argue, of sharing these inside jokes is that youth did not have to explicate their context, references, or significance. Because they were at the “center of their own discourse” in the space of ICS, performing inside jokes for themselves and not outsiders, youth could focus on enjoying, extending, troubling and playing with the wider conversations shaping their identities—instead of laboring to explain what they meant and tailoring their performances to those not privy to these inside jokes (Bing & Heller, 2003; hooks, 1989, p. 15; Haymes, 2003).

Interestingly, Ishani invoked the idea that socializing with Indian and American peers in *separate* spaces was a legitimate way to handle Americans' inability to "get" Indian inside jokes and experiences; and to enjoy these jokes and experiences with Indian friends in an unrestricted manner. She observed, "like for birthday parties and stuff, we always have like an American party and then an Indian party" (Interview, March 12, 2011). Separate social spaces were seen as *advantageous* because Americans were situated as not understanding the inside jokes the Indian youth shared: "Like the Indian friends might get something, and then we would laugh, and the American friends would be like, 'What?'" (Interview, March 12, 2011). She emphasized that the two groups "just wouldn't really combine" (Interview, March 12, 2011). Ishani suggested it benefited both groups to have separate parties; they could each have more fun this way. I read separate spaces—spaces in which Indians could be alone together—as spaces for talking and laughing freely.

Ishani's description of separate birthday parties resonates with what Sarroub (2002) depicts as the "private space" Yemeni girls occupied within the public space of their school cafeteria. In school, as in the girls' community, Yemeni boys intensely policed girls' identities, watching carefully for transgressions of Yemeni cultural norms. In the school cafeteria, however, the girls occupied a space apart from the boys. In this space, they discussed their identities and read "contraband" texts (Sarroub, 2002, p. 138). "Private spaces," notes Sarroub (2002), "were places and times during which the hijabat could voice their concerns, reify their beliefs, and sometimes put their doubts to rest. Public spaces (the cafeteria in general or the hallways), however, were indexed only by

the culturally laden roles” (p. 139). The Yemeni girls’ identities, in other words, could be performed differently, and with more freedom, within private spaces than they could within public spaces.

Hall (1995), in her work with second-generation British-Sikh youth, has also documented how youths’ identities shifted depending on the spaces they occupied. She suggests that it was “the shifts in the relations of power and culture from one cultural field to the next [that] provide[d] varying opportunities for second generations to ‘play’ with cultural identities” (p. 253). The people moving in and through the different spaces in the adolescents’ lives (such as their religious temple, home, school, etc.), along with the social norms established in those spaces, caused youth to perceive that there was ‘a time to act Indian and a time to act English’ (p. 254).

In a similar vein, and not unlike the second-generation Indian youth in Maira’s (2002) ethnography, Ishani, in advocating for separate birthday parties, described one strategy for “managing situational, or context-dependent, ethnic identifications” (p. 92). Separate parties pointed to the idea that there was a time to act Indian and a time to act American—and that the people in the spaces youth occupied, in part, signaled what time it was. The interesting thing about the separate birthday parties was that Ishani positioned Indian youth as legitimate members of *both* social groups (c.f., Maira, 2002). They were imagined as easily able to move between spaces, while the Americans were not. Using the lenses offered by Sarroub (2002) and Hall (1995), separate birthday parties, or private spaces, could be read as times and physical places that Indian youth created *specially*, purposely, because it allowed them to laugh together freely.

Youths' insights about what it meant to laugh in spaces of sameness point to ways in which the identities people share within a space impact what gets talked about, who can laugh, and who feels free (hooks, 1989; Haymes, 2003). In the next chapter, I document how laughter circulated with talk about topics critical educators typically position as serious—racism, sexism, and ethnic teasing. In many ways, the co-ethnicity of the space *facilitated* laughter during these moments. Significantly, these were moments in which productive and transformative work happened. I highlight these moments to illuminate how private spaces (Sarroub, 2002), like that of the literature classroom, in which youth are at the center of their own discourses (Ahmed, 2004, hooks, 1989; Haymes, 2003), may be essential for teaching and learning for critical consciousness.



## Chapter 5

### From Ha-ha to Aha in *Critical Spaces*

*After cracking up over Ravi's rendition of "Jana Gana Mana," youth in the literature class chewed over another poem in our makeshift poetry anthology, called "India is Not Just A Place," by renowned poet Sri Chinmoy (1997). "India is not just a people," read a youth aloud. "India is the celestial music,/And inside the music/Anybody from any corner of the globe/Can find the real significance of life."*

*"India is not just a place. What is India to you guys?" asked Diya. Several youth began talking at once. Diya called on Manasa, who commented, "I feel like in this poem, he was trying to address like the deep culture India has. Like, how old it is. How it's got deep roots and everything. And how anyone can really relate to it, I guess, because the values, I guess, in the culture [...] I guess what I'm trying to say is no matter where you are, you can still feel close to India if you want to."*

*"Okay," responded Diya, before probing further: "When he says that anybody from any corner of the globe can find the real significance of life. Do you think that's true? Do you think that anybody—all your friends that if they were not Indian—do you think they see India as anything more than just a place?"*

*"I feel like if they try to yes," responded Manasa. "But a lot of them are pretty ignorant. So, I mean, if they tried to and they were open-minded, I feel like they could."*

*"Um, I kind of disagree," inserted Karishma, "because I don't really think it's about open-mindedness, but I think it's more like they haven't experienced it yet. If*

*they've never been to India, they don't really know much about it, except for what they learned in like geography class."*

*Karishma's comment about geography class sparked something in Ravi. "Has this happened to you?" he asked the class. "Like whenever you're in like your geography or history class and then there's like this Asian unit. And then whenever the teacher announces like 'India' everyone stares at you." An eruption of affirmation exploded in the room, with several youth saying "yeah" and "yes" simultaneously.*

*Lalana, who had meticulously painted white stripes on each of her finger nails, shared that "everyone looked at me" when students in her weekday class viewed a cheeky Disney Channel cartoon which depicted "Indian ladies in Indian dresses" celebrating to music. Lalana's peers asked her if she—as in all Indians—celebrated in this way.*

*Manasa also described a series of uncomfortable moments during which one of her male weekday peers figuratively stared at her Indian identity. "There is an American Indian at my school," she began. "As in he is of Native American descent. And he figured out that I was Indian a while ago. So all of last week at school, in all the classes I have with him, so three classes. He sits next to me in all of those. So he was doing an Indian accent the entire class—"*

*"Ohh!" uttered a youth.*

*Manasa continued: "It got extremely annoying. And the teacher told him to stop. But he wouldn't and he was just like, I dunno, he was all like, 'We must get that curry'."*  
*Manasa, who typically spoke with a midwestern accent, delivered her classmate's*

*directive in an Oscar-worthy exaggerated Indian accent that left the youth in stitches. “He was pretty bad at it, too,” she added.*

*Later, Lalana shared a similar personal experience: “My mom, she like taught at my school. [...] And, um, she substitutes a couple times. And everyone comes to me, either mimicking her accent or saying—[...] There’s this, there’s this Chinese guy that says— [...] He comes up to me and he’s like, ‘Hello Lalana how are you doing?’” Like Manasa, Lalana, who also spoke with a midwestern accent, relayed the boy’s phrase with a thick pseudo-Indian inflection. Youth in the class laughed. “I’m like,” added Lalana, “You know like my mom doesn’t talk [like that].”*

In discussing “India is Not Just a Place,” Manasa captured again how youth at ICS tended to talk about India as both a physical place *and* an ideological space. Karishma pointed to how an understanding of the ideological space of India, a space that many of the youth valued, was inextricably linked to *place*. Without having experienced the place of India, she argued, non-Indian friends would have a hard time understanding and appreciating the cultural ways of being Chinmoy (1997) alludes to in his poem. One way non-Indian peers could learn about India, noted Karishma, was in school spaces—like geography classrooms. As the vignette illustrates, however, classrooms can also be spaces in which misconceptions about India and Indian identities are perpetuated.

Manasa’s and Lalana’s anecdotes about their classmates who made fun of Indian accents were particularly vibrant examples of the ways in which India and Indian identities were occasionally (mis)imagined by others outside of the organization. Manasa and Lalana were clearly irritated by their classmates’ behavior, and yet youth in the

literature classroom laughed as the girls recounted these moments, *out-performing*, with dramatic flare, their classmates' fledging attempts to mimic Indian accents. These moments—instances in which youth laughed in the context of what critical educators would typically consider serious conversations—were not unique in the literature classroom.

### **From Ha-ha to Aha**

Garner (2006) argues that the use of humor by college lecturers can help students go from “ha-ha to aha!” (p. 177). While Garner (2006) is primarily concerned with humor's ability to help students remember lecture content (p. 179), the notion that humor might help youth move from ha-ha to aha means something much more significant in the context of teaching and learning for critical consciousness. Specifically, it challenges fundamental assumptions about what critical pedagogy looks like in practice. Within traditional ways of framing critical pedagogy—paradigms that privilege “logo-centric” deconstructions (Janks, 2002, p. 9) and expectations of “negative” emotional expressions, like angst, anger and sadness (Callahan, 2004; hooks, 1989; Winas, 2010)—the moments of laughter described above might easily be ignored or dismissed as “off-task” instances, moments in which youth were “just” fooling around and were not engaged in important work.

The scholarship of Janks (2002), Lensmire (2011), and Mayo (2008), however, urges educators to look more carefully at these moments and what they might mean for transformative teaching and learning. In particular, I argue that instances in the literature classroom, in which laughter was permitted to circulate in the context of *serious*

conversations and alongside emotions like anger and irritation, represent the kinds of moments in which critical educators ought to be keenly—desperately—interested. Critical educators ought to be on the edge of their seats over moments like these because, in these instances, laughter was circulating with talk in which youth *exposed* dominant discourses framing Indian identities and disrupted *normative power relationships* between themselves and members of the dominant culture—the very essence of what critical pedagogy attempts to do (Mayo, 2008; McLaren, 2003).

In particular, observations from the ICS literature classroom illuminate how it is possible for laughter to circulate within and through discussions about issues critical educators take seriously. If we ignore these moments of laughter because we expect critical work to manifest only as seriousness, anger, or sadness, we risk overlooking the nuanced and subtle ways in which youth engage in deconstructing socially oppressive discourses. Below I illuminate moments in which youth exposed three ways in which Indian identities were commonly portrayed in popular discourse and how they interrupted these dominant images—all within a context of levity.

**Immutable Indian Accents.** Youth explicitly talked about others’ (mis)perceptions of Indian identities during their discussion of the young adult novel, *Aruna’s Journeys* (Sreenivasan, 1997). The discussion involved animated conversations in which youth shared narratives and personal experiences about the ways others framed Indian identities and cultural practices. During one of the early conversations, Ravi pleaded with me to be the first youth to share a prevalent misconception people held about Indian identities. When it was finally his turn, he, like Manasa and Lalana in the

opening vignette, noted, “Okay, [...] another common misconception is like all Indian people, ‘Tak like dis’” (Field note, January 22, 2011). At this proclamation, the class dissolved into animated laughter. Over the giggles, Ravi added, “Well, it’s like my mom has a perfect American accent when she’s speaking English. And then when she’s speaking Malayalam”—Although Ravi’s words were swallowed up by youths’ laughter and overlapping talk, he seemed to suggest that when his mother spoke Malayalam, she had a perfect Malayalam accent. Persisting, he added, “And then when she’s speaking Hindi, perfect Hindi accent.” The class cracked up (Field note, January 22, 2011).

Here, Ravi, similar to Manasa and Lalana, in the opening vignette, exposed, or *bore witness* (Zembylas, 2006) to the misconception that all Indian people speak with “foreign” accents. As with Asian Americans, in general, popular discourse tends to represent South Asians as newcomers with strong links to distant homelands and distinctly ethnic cultural frames of reference (Tuan, 1998). Correspondingly, South Asians are typically depicted as new immigrants in movies and television shows. Films, such as *Chutney Popcorn* (Carnival & Ganatra, 1999), *Bend it Like Beckham* (Chadha & Nayar, 2002), and *The Namesake* (Nair, 2007) are illustrative. These visual texts depict first-generation South Asian parents and 1.5- or second-generation children. Their plots hinge on characters negotiating cultural ties to “foreign” lands, customs, and values in the context of Diaspora.

The image of South Asians as foreigners is routinely stabilized through the consistent portrayal of characters speaking thickly accented English (Tuan, 1998). Jagannathan (2010) reminds us of Apu Nahaspeemapetilon’s (from *The Simpsons*

[Groening & Brooks, 1995]) tag line: “Thank you, come again.” Instead of signifying a courteous gesture toward customers, this line is used to mark and mock Apu’s “foreignness.” Similarly, Indian American comedian, Russell Peters, incorporates an Indian accent into his routine to elicit laughs: “Don’t we sound really hip?” he jokes. But of course (and unfortunately), the audience knows Indian accents are pegged as decidedly un-cool in the sociopolitical context of the U.S., a point Peters makes explicitly in his joke: “We know you’re mocking us,” he jabs (“Russell Peters Indian Accent,” 2006). Incessant emphasis on accents underscores the exotic-as-foreign characterization of South Asians (Tuan, 1998) and reinforces an Orientalist notion that ‘the East’ is inherently distinct from the ‘West’ (Said, 1978).

Significantly, Manasa’s and Lalana’s performances upended their classmates’ “extremely annoying” attempts to leverage the perpetual foreigner motif. Manasa turned the motif on its head by critiquing her classmate’s (in)ability to perform an Indian accent well. Her comment, “he was pretty bad at it, too,” combined with her exposure anecdote, highlighted and named the boy’s incompetence. Lalana, like Manasa, also inverted the unequal power distribution inherent in her narrative by asserting that her mother did *not* speak with the exaggerated tonality implied by her classmate. She also spotlighted the boy’s ignorance and portrayed herself as telling him (or at least us, the audience) the real truth. Ravi did something similar in explaining—over youths’ laughter—that his mother’s accent changed depending on the social and linguistic contexts she occupied. His mother, he pointed out, “has a perfect American accent when she’s speaking English.” The dominant discourse that Indians speak with immutable and exaggerated

accents did not go unchallenged in these classroom moments in which laughter flourished. Rather, as Janks (2002) has observed, “irreverent and transgressive reframing ma[de] the social issues visible” (Janks, 2002, p. 14).

**Dot-or-Feather?** Laughter also occurred when, toward the end of our first discussion of *Aruna’s Journeys*, I invited Maya, fashionably clad in a blue blouse with flared sleeves, black jeans, long silver necklaces, and bangles on both wrists, to “get in one quick thought” before youth had to leave for their next class. “Okay,” she began. “Okay. Well, I don’t dunno. I dunno if any of you guys feel like this, but I like hate it [when] like any of my teachers call Native Americans Indians” (Field note, January 22, 2011). She framed this practice as “politically incorrect” and emphasized that the groups of people to whom these labels refer are “*not* the same thing” (Field note, January 22, 2011). Interestingly, youth did not respond with empathetic raised fists to Maya’s proclamation that her teacher used what she saw as a politically incorrect term; rather, they responded with laughter as Maya described how she “actually rose [her] hand and [...] ranted to [her] teacher” (Field note, January 22, 2011).

More than a month later, Lalana noted, “My friends, my friends, whenever they say Indians for Native Americans they mean, they always say like, ‘Indians. With the feathers’” (Field note, February 26, 2011). As in other exposure moments, a youth in the classroom laughed in the context of Lalana’s anecdote, which revealed a pattern about how others in her school setting leveraged ethno-political labels. “Yeah,” added Ramya. “My friend’s like, ‘Yeah. I mean Indians with the feathers, not the dots on their foreheads’” (Field note, February 26, 2011). In the same manner, Ravi invoked the *idea*



of humor in his own dot-or-feather narrative. Classmates in his geography class, he relayed, invoked the dot-or-feather framework to clarify which kind of “Indians” were the focus of the lesson. “Of course they’re gonna say that, it’s geography class,” he noted. “[L]ike I know it’s Native American and then they’re like [...] ‘With the feather, not the dot.’” A youth in the classroom laughed, and Ravi kept talking: “And I’m like, I started laughing. ‘Cause they knew—” (Field note, February 26, 2011).

In Lalana’s, Ramya’s, and Ravi’s anecdotes, feathers and dots stood in as symbolic markers for ethnic identity. The effectiveness of these symbolic markers relied on the notion that static cultural markers can capture or represent in a monolithic way the highly diverse cultural identities of Asian Indians and Native Americans. Interestingly, by highlighting their classmates’ references to “the dot,” the youth also testified to the salience of *bindis* (small, usually round marks drawn or pressed on the forehead) as identity markers within dominant culture. *Bindis* have become part of what Maira (2002) has described as “commodified ethno-chic” (Maira, 2002, p. 32; see also Durham, 2001). The wave of ethno-chic corresponds to a prevalent representation of South Asians as particularly alluring, or intriguing, *because* of their “exotic” style (Maira, 2000). In this depiction, South Asians’ “foreignness” is situated as fashionably exotic (Maira, 2000). Maira (2000) notes that in the 1990s, Indian “styles” were decidedly in vogue, with body art, such as mehndi (henna “tattoos”) and bindis, as well as South Asian clothing styles, becoming widely available to retail consumers during this period. Consumers’ love affair with Indian aesthetics has not abated in the current decade. Presently, popular discourse cultivates an obsession with fashionably exotic Indian

weddings, an embrace of the glitz and glam of Bollywood, and an insatiable appetite for consuming “ethnic” body art and clothing styles (Durham, 2001).

Notably, youths’ laughter during these dot-or-feather narratives, as with laughter during Manasa’s, Lalana’s, and Ravi’s “tak like dis” stories, did not preclude expressions of irritation, offense, and annoyance, but rather circulated in *parallel* with them; a sense of levity was not mutually exclusive of emotive expressions of anger (Carpio, 2008; Mayo, 2008). Maya, for example, “ranted” at her teacher when she called Native Americans “Indians” (Field note, January 22, 2011). Similarly, Prema, in a different moment, said she did not find the dot-or-feather discourse offensive, but did find it “annoying” (Field note, February 26, 2011).

Significantly, Ravi characterized the dot-or-feather motif as something *laughable*. He discursively shrugged it off. This had the effect of turning the table on the discourse, of inverting the power relationship inherent in it; instead of allowing it to be a frame that somehow threatened his identity, he “just laughed,” effectively stripping it of its power (Billig, 2005/2009). These moments, in other words, were marked by a unique combination of what scholars have identified as the transformative power of both anger (Ahmed, 2009; Carpio, 2008) *and* humor (Carpio, 2008; Jones & Liverpool, 1996; Lipman, 1991).

**(Mis)Imagined Arranged Marriages.** A final illustration of how laughter circulated within and through moments in which youth exposed dominant ways of framing Indian identities centered on outsiders’ assumptions about arranged marriages. During the January discussion of *Aruna’s Journeys*, Manasa shared the following story:

“Another misconception, okay, here’s another thing that happened to me. I was talking to my friend, and I said, ‘Oh, I think this guy is kinda cute.’ And he happened to be Indian. So then, she said, ‘Oh. Maybe you guys can get an arranged marriage—’” I could not hear the end of Manasa’s sentence, because empathetic laughter and expressions like “Ohh!” clamored over it. Again, this laughter existed in parallel with expressions of indignation. The friend’s suggestion was characterized by youth in the literature class as a “burn” against Manasa, as “mean,” and as “insulting” (Field note, January 29, 2011).

“And—” Manasa continued: “[I] told my friends my parents had an arranged marriage, like if it just comes up somehow, like if they’re like, ‘Oh, Manasa! Where did your parents meet? Etc., then, they say, ‘Oh, really— [...] And then, they, they’re like, ‘Oh, do they love each other? Is your dad mean? Etc., like—’”

“What?!” a youth exclaimed.

“That’s so sad,” another uttered.

After some crosstalk, Manasa added that she wore a *bindi* to school one day. “Everyone thought, well, I don’t know,” observed Manasa. “People were like, ‘Manasa, are you married?’” The class laughed. Over the laughter, she noted, “Which was really stupid of them to ask” given that she was so young at the time the incident happened (Field note, January 22, 2011).

A week later, Karishma added to the conversation by sharing the following personal anecdote: “My friends were like, ‘Wait. So are you going to marry an Indian guy? [...] And they’re like, ‘Are your parents gonna make you marry an Indian guy? Are

they gonna disown you if you marry a white guy?” after which laughter and crosstalk washed over the classroom

Karishma continued: “I don’t know, really. I think my dad would care, but I don’t think my mom would—I mean, I think after awhile if it’s a good person then they’re like, ‘Okay. Fine.’”

Manasa and Karishma made misconceptions about the practice of arranged marriages *apparent* through their stories. In particular, they situated their peers as understanding the practice of arranged marriage to be oppressive to girls and women. Manasa’s peers questioned whether her parents, who had an arranged marriage, truly loved each other and wondered if her father was emotionally abusive (“mean”). Similarly, Karishma’s peers situated marriage within the Indian community as a contract into which women were forced, with the only way out being for girls to be excommunicated from their families.

In the popular imagination, traditions, such as Indian weddings, that are so enthusiastically embraced in popular discourse are simultaneously imagined to be repressive in other situations. Consider this *Glamour* headline: “A Global Horror: Young Women Forced into Marriage” (2006). The piece denounces the damaging impact that “forced” marriage has on young women. Their tag line is chilling: “For many young women around the world, marriage isn’t a joy but a living nightmare—one created by their own families [. . .].” Interestingly a vibrant photograph of a child in a fuchsia bridal sari is placed poignantly above the article and has the following caption: “A child bride: in India and other countries, parents marry off girls as young as eight.” According to this

particular image, South Asians are silently, but visually, included in the populations of women subjugated by forced marriage.

*TIME* ran a similar piece entitled “Marriage Rows” (Morrison, 2007). The article discusses Jasvinder Sanghera's (2007) memoir, *Shame*. According to Morrison (2007), Sanghera refused an arranged marriage, her family disowned her, and she founded a support program for other women in similar situations. Instead of fashionably exotic, these marriages are portrayed as foreign, toxic, and “normal” in South Asia: “It's an old South Asian story: boy meets girl just before the wedding. Boy marries girl whether she wants to or not. Girl loses her identity, her sanity and sometimes, her life” (Morrison, 2007). ). In these instances, the mediascape seems to interrogate South Asian culture, barking harshly, “What the hell can people from a backwards culture possibly know” (Said, 1978)?

Often this dominant image emerges in much subtler ways, however, than those offered by the *Glamour* and *TIME* articles. The “oppressed by tradition” motif is typically expressed through generational conflicts between first-generation immigrant parents and second-generation children (Lowe, 2000). For example, as Geraghty (2006) notes, Jess, the Sikh youth protagonist in *Bend it Like Beckham*, has to ‘rebel’ against her parents’ cultural “traditions” in order to fully partake in British mainstream society. Although her parents expect her to marry and “cook full Indian dinner,” Jess “wants more than this.” She has to fight desperately to live the “liberated” life she desires (Puar & Rai, 2004). Unlike the enticingly fashionably exotic representation of South Asians, or the model minority image—the upwardly mobile version of South Asians—this

representation situates South Asians as oppressed victims of poverty and/or cultural tradition.

Within the barred room of the literature classroom, Manasa and Karishma called their peers out on their assumptions (at least to those of us in the room) and they inverted the power relationships inherent in their peers' questions and assumptions. When youth assumed that wearing a *bindi* meant Manasa was married as a middle school student, Manasa unequivocally pointed out that this question was “really stupid of them to ask” (Field note, January 22, 2011). She demonstrated that perpetuating this misconception reflected a lack of understanding on the part of her peers. Similarly, Karishma provided a much more nuanced understanding of marriage practices within the Indian community than that expressed by her peers—one that accounted for the possibility of negotiation and changing perceptions. For instance, she noted that her father might at first object to her marrying a non-Indian, but that her mother might be more open minded. She also allowed for the possibility that both of her parents would eventually approve of a marriage to a non-Indian (a white non-Indian at least) if “it’s a good person.” Significantly, these disruptions of dominant discourses were not marked solely by seriousness, but also by laughter.

### ***Underexposed Images***

To cast as insignificant classroom conversations marked by laughter is not only to overlook important moments in which youth spotlight dominant discourses, but also to obscure instances that educators might extend in productive and essential ways. For critical pedagogues, it is not sufficient to merely make dominant discourses apparent. We

also need to expose the socio-political-historical factors that produce and reproduce the dominant discourse shaping youths' lived experiences (Darder et al., 2003). By and large, the youth in the literature classroom left the roots of dominant portrayals of Indian identities *underexposed*.

For example, any account of why South Asians are typically portrayed as foreigners in the popular imagination needs to take into consideration that "Asia, and Asians in America, have long represented the space of alterity against which dominant notions of citizenship and belonging are constructed in the U.S." (Mankekar, 2002, p. 80). That is to say, Asian Americans, including South Asian Americans, have historically represented "conditional citizens" and "forever foreigners" against which non-Asian Americans define their own "insidership" in U.S. society (Tuan, 1998; Tuan, 1999, p. 106). The representation of South Asians as having immutable accents and as perpetually "from somewhere else" makes (disturbing) sense given this larger discursive marginalization of Asian Americans in the United States.

On the surface, representations of South Asians as newcomers seem to reflect the fact that they have emigrated to the U.S. in significant numbers only fairly recently. However, this pattern of migration itself reflects a long history of social and legislative discrimination against Asian Americans. Prior to the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, South Asians were subjected to legal sanctions that limited their emigration to and full participation as citizens within the United States. Although a few thousand South Asians from the Punjab region migrated to Canada and later to California in the early 1900s, their entry into the U.S. overlapped with large influxes of Chinese

immigrants (La Brack, 1988). White nationals were anxious about the economic competition these Chinese immigrants represented and a discourse of “yellow peril” spread rampantly (Maira, 2002). South Asian immigrants, categorized as “Orientals,” were quickly subsumed by this discourse (Menon, 2006, p. 66).

To mitigate the threat of Asian “invasion,” the U.S. passed a series of laws in the early 1900s that excluded non-citizens from purchasing land, thus edging Asians, who were not given status as citizens, from making a profitable living in the growing agricultural industry (Mankekar, 2000). By 1917, legislation “explicitly excluded Indians from naturalization” (Mankekar, 2002, p. 77), and by 1923, South Asians’ marginalization was solidified when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against Bhagat Singh Thind’s claim that his Dravidian ancestry meant he was legally Caucasian and thus eligible for citizenship (Biswas, 2005). A year later, the 1924 Immigration Act established national origin quotas for migration to the U.S. and ushered in a period during which South Asian immigration “all but stopped” (La Brack, 1988, p. 8). Although migration increased after 1946 when the Luce-Celler bill re-opened immigration to South Asians and offered them naturalization (La Brack, 1988, p. 9), it was not until President Johnson passed the 1965 Immigration Act that South Asian Americans began to have the kind of sizeable presence (over 2 million) that they do today (Mankekar, 2002, p. 72; SAALT, 2007, p. 1). Given the legislation that has historically barred or slowed South Asians’ emigration to the U.S., it is not surprising that popular representations situate them as “foreign.”



Furthermore, as Bhagat Singh's Supreme Court Case suggests, South Asian Americans have experienced a long history of racial ambiguity in the United States (Morning, 2001), a history that further contextualizes why they seem to embody alterity in the public imagination. Because of their phenotype, South Asians are not neatly categorized as "black" or "white" (Kibria, 1998). Nor do they neatly adhere to the public's understanding of what it means to be "Asian" (Kibria, 1998). As Morning (2001) so succinctly puts it, "neither South Asians nor other Americans seem to perceive them as racially 'Asian'" (p. 64). According to Kibria (1998), "those persons who lack a clear-cut 'race' because they are not easily placed into available racial categories (such as 'Black,' 'White,' or 'Asian') are likely to be a source of unease to others, who wonder about the exact social identity of the person they have encountered" (p. 70). Given this situation, I suggest that in addition to reflecting South Asians' history of political marginalization, and thus protracted migration to the U.S., the media's portrayal of South Asian Americans as "foreigners" may also be read as an attempt to resolve the dilemma of not being able to assign South Asians a "race," and thus a permanent "place" in U.S. society.

The plethora of images celebrating the *alluring* side of South Asians' imagined exoticness (i.e. the celebration of Indian weddings, and the embrace of *bindis*, saris, and all things Bollywood) begins to make sense when we consider U.S. society's relationship with "diversity," or uncritical multiculturalism (Maira, 2000). Outwardly endorsing the "cultural" markers of Others is "fashionable" (read: politically correct) because it offers a way for privileged insiders (read: white middle and upper class citizens) to *perform*

inclusivity and cross-cultural knowledge in the context of a racially and socioeconomically stratified society (Maira, 2000).

There is also the pleasure factor. To adorn our bodies and drench our senses in the aesthetics of a culture different from our own feels fresh and serves as a mechanism for asserting individuality in our me-centered society (Tuan, 1998). In our cookie cutter world of J.Crew and Gap, “ethnic” looks are arguably a way to differentiate oneself from the crowd. Ironically, while non-South Asian people are free to choose temporary South Asian ethnic “identities”—even when they have no actual (except monetary) connection to South Asian communities—South Asian Americans do not have the same option of whimsically picking up and putting down ethnic markers because, in the popular imagination, South Asians are *perpetually foreign* (Tuan, 1998).

Dominant representations of South Asians, or more specifically, Indians, as fashionably exotic also convey how U.S. society situates India as a *safe*, consumable Other (Joshi, 2006; Maira, 2000). We feel comfortable—enthusiastic even—about bringing Bollywood into our homes and wearing India on our bodies. The positioning of India as an effeminate Other, able to be consumed, enacts a form of Orientalist domination (Said, 1978), an act of economic (read: buying power) and hegemonic control over the imagined Other (Maira, 2000). But this form of very selective consumption is also related to the way in which race, religion, and politics intersect in our current sociopolitical context to situate South Asian Muslims, often imagined as being from Pakistan, as threats to civil society. Whereas popular discourse situates India and Indians

as religiously safe, it imagines Pakistan and Pakistanis, because of their association with Islam, as inherently dangerous (Joshi, 2006).

Importantly, within the U.S., cultural markers, like *bindis*, have also been read at different historical times, as symbols of Otherness (Maira, 2001). In the 1980s, for example, a group called the Dot Busters systematically waged violence against Indian women wearing *bindis* (Maira, 2001). Since September 11, 2001, cultural identity markers like turbans have become proxies for the Middle East and Islam—forces the media suggest are to be feared and controlled (Joshi, 2006; Menon, 2006). "Before the government reported on the details of the 9/11 attacks," observes Prashad (2005), "ordinary people took it on themselves to punish anyone with a turban—that is, anyone with headgear that resembled the turban worn by Osama bin Laden" (p. 584). Balbir Singh Sodi, a Sikh gas station owner, was the first victim of a hate crime after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, but "there were 645 incidents of backlash against Americans of South Asian or Middle Eastern descent in the week following the Sept. [*sic*] attack" (Mishra, 2001, p. 3).

Unlike the fashionably exotic representation of South Asians, or the prevalent model minority image—the upwardly mobile version of South Asians—youths' stories about arranged marriage misconceptions situated South Asian women as oppressed by "cultural" traditions (cf., Ngo, 2008). There is a tendency in our society to embrace false binaries, like "tradition and modernity, East and West, and First World and Third World, among others" (Ngo, 2008, p. 5; Said, 1978; Verma, 2010). In these dichotomies, "the East" is typically imagined as traditional and "backward" while "the West" is cast as

modern and logical (Said, 1978). Within this framework, U.S. popular discourse tends to “blame” the “cultural traditions” of non-Westerners for social practices that oppress marginalized groups (such as women and youth) (Ngo, 2008). Instead of examining the socioeconomic factors that sustain this practice, the media tends to pinpoint *culture* as the reason communities perpetuate it. Headlines, such as a “Global Horror: Young Women Forced into Marriage” (2006) would read differently if these articles explored the globalized economic and educational disparities that maintain what we commonly see as “cultural traditions.”

Manasa, Lalana, Ravi, Ramya and Karishma did not contextualize their anecdotes with these socio-historical factors. Instead, their anecdotes were grounded in contemporary moments and personal relationships. Manasa and Lalana’s peers mocked Indian accents, and Ravi spotlighted his mother as a counter example to the immutable Indian accent image. Similarly, it was youths’ school peers and friends who invoked the dot-or-feather motif and asked uninformed questions about arranged marriage practices. Like Ravi, Karishma used her mother as an example of someone who’s views about arranged marriage were not absolute, but flexible.

The fact that youth grounded curricular discussions in their lived experiences and personal relationships aligned closely with the goals of critical and culturally relevant pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2006). However, by limiting their discussions to personal and contemporary experiences, youth missed opportunities to see their experiences as anything other than *natural* (Weedon, 1997). That is, they failed to see how their personal experiences reflected wider and historically situated ways of reading

images of South Asians. It is difficult to arrive at the critical realization that what humans make they can also transform (Darder et al., 2003, p. 12), if youth do not recognize that their experiences are not inevitable, or natural, but rather constituted via discourses shaped by power and politics over time and across spaces (Davies, 2000; Weedon, 1997).

It is not surprising that Manasa, Lalana, Ravi, Ramya and Karishma did not articulate the socio-historical contexts shaping their stories about others' (mis)readings of Indian identities. South Asian histories and the experiences of South Asian immigrants in the U.S., tend to be severely marginalized in mainstream school curricula (Verma, 2008). According to Verma (2008), "definitions of core and legitimate knowledge continue to adhere to a Eurocentric, Western perspective—with the 'foreign' or 'Other' as absent or as defined by a Western gaze" (pp. 109-110). Verma's (2008) observation has implications not only for South Asian immigrant youth, but for *all* minoritized youth who find their communities' histories silenced in mainstream curricula. It means that, in many cases, schools may not be adequately preparing youth to fully expose the discourses shaping their realities (Davies, 2000; Weedon, 1997).

In sum, youths' laughter in the context of accent, dot-or-feather, and arranged marriage narratives could have led to *teacher*-facilitated discussions about the way South Asians are typically framed as forever foreigners (Tuan, 1998), the bearers of consumable "ethnic-chic" (Maira, 2001), and suppressed women of the global East (Ngo, 2008; Said, 1978). Youths' laughter could also have indexed opportunities for teacher-initiated discussions about the historical contexts giving rise to these particular discursive frameworks, and the manner in which they impact youths' daily lives. If critical

educators are not surprised that laughter happens in the context of these conversations or worry that laughter somehow signals that their students are “out of control,” they may be *better prepared* to leverage youths’ humor and it’s “jolting combination of pleasure and critique” to “jump-start” discussions about how power works at institutional levels and how it shapes youths’ personal experiences (Mayo, 2008, p. 244). Janks’ (2002) observation that “working with the pleasures of jokes and the transgressive need not preclude an understanding of what is at stake” is particularly salient in re-framing what critical pedagogy looks like in practice (p. 19).

While humor can be extremely powerful in disrupting the status quo, it can also be leveraged to reaffirm unequal status relationships (Mayo, 2008, p. 245). Next, I illuminate another subtle—but important—aspect of the laughter that occurred in the literature classroom. In particular, I explore moments in which youth invoked the idea of humor in ways that minimized social oppression. I consider how humor—and the discourse of jokes—did not always align with a critical agenda.

## Chapter 6

### The Hot and Cold of Classroom Humor

*Four months into our work together, youth spent a class period discussing how excerpts from Aruna's Journeys related to their lived experiences. I joined Manasa, Maya, and another female youth at a cluster of wooden and Formica desks on the left side of the classroom. The girls were examining an excerpt from the text in which Aruna's cousin, who lived in India, asked her if 'there is a lot of racism against Indians' in the United States' (Sreenivasan, 1997, p. 93). Aruna observed that her father 'said in his university sometimes they don't like to promote foreigners to high positions [...] but I don't notice anything at my school' (Sreenivasan, 1997, p. 93).*

*Racism, commented Mansa, was "always" going to be there. The youth suggested that people joked around and that Indians did not experience any more racism than any other group of people. Maya extended this point by noting that people sometimes made comments about other racial groups. She observed that Indians, for example, might say things about African Americans, while African Americans, in turn, might make comments about white people. However, in saying these things, she explained, people were "not trying to be offensive." Manasa added that she asked her dad about racism and learned that he "doesn't feel it." Rather, people were "just joking" when they asked him questions because he was from India. This was "professional joking," Manasa explained.*

While transformative things *did* happen in the context of laughter and levity within the literature classroom (dominant discourses were exposed and power relationships upended), it is important not to romanticize how youth leveraged humor in

in this space (Ngo, 2010). As Weaver (2011) notes, “humor is incredibly ambiguous” (p. 431), and this was most certainly the case at ICS. In the above vignette, for instance, Manasa and Maya positioned racism as an inherent component of social relationships, but one that was not meant to cause harm to others. The girls invoked the *idea* of humor (joking around) to explain away racism and its impact on individuals in a way that reproduced the “post-racial” (Rossing, 2012) colorblind discourses articulated by Bonilla-Silva (2010) and van Dijk (1992, 1993).

Poststructural theorists have pointed to the “constitutive force of language,” suggesting we draw on available discourses to make sense of the world and our place in it (Davies, 2000, p. 53; Weedon, 1997). Central to this way of understanding language as discourse is that not all discourses circulate on an equal plain; some are more privileged than others. Some discourses are so privileged that they seem to be natural or “common sense” (Weedon, 1997, p. 72). This chapter examines how the privileged “meta-discourse” of joking (Billig, 2001, p. 270) was recruited to occlude moments in which socially oppressive discourses might have been critiqued.

Although scholars have demonstrated how, in general, framing comments as “just jokes” is a rhetorical strategy for distancing the speaker from having serious (and thus hurtful) intentions (Billig, 2001), few scholars, with the exception of Raby (2004), have examined how youth position *others* as “just joking” about socially oppressive discourses, thus, in effect, rhetorically exonerating these speakers from playing a role in perpetuating certain realities that harm people—even if unintentionally. The data I present here spotlight moments in which youth attributed the idea of joking to others and



in which this attribution *nullified* the need to critique socially oppressive discourses. While other scholars have pointed to ways in which minimizing racism through colorblind discourse renders the work of antiracists seemingly unnecessary at the level of policy (e.g., van Dijk, 1992), this study points to ways in which humor, as a rhetorical strategy, operated at the level of classroom discourse to accomplish a similar effect in conversations about racism, sexism, and ethnic teasing—experiences critical educators typically position as being in need of interrogation and critique.

In doing so, this chapter also addresses the ambiguity of confronting humor in spaces of critical learning. I did not push youth to interrogate their use of the “just joking” construct because they ensconced this construct in discourses of familiarity, collegiality, and friendship (i.e. it was friends or colleagues who were joking). I interpreted their talk to mean that the “others” leveraging the oppressive discourses they spoke about could not have had bad intentions because these people were colleagues (in the case of Manasa’s father) or friends (in the cases of Maya and Ravi, as I will illustrate later in this chapter). This way of framing speakers seemed *natural* (Weedon, 1997) and temporarily obscured the existence of subtle racism in the workplace (Khosrovani & Ward 2011; Stevens, Hussein, & Manthorpe, 2012) and the ways in which power and potentially harmful discourses circulate within and through personal relationships (Moje, 2000). What I try to do in this chapter, by drawing broadly on poststructuralism, is to show how language can create realities that cause harm, even if unintentionally—and that saying that people are just joking about racism, sexism, and ethnic teasing is one way this happens (Davies, 2000; Weedon, 1997).

But the trouble—the messiness—emerges when we recognize that sometimes friends *do* leverage oppressive discourses with one another in ways that seemingly do not cause harm and that actually signal that the relationship is *good*, or at least a close one (Hill, 1998; Newkirk, 2002; Smitherman, 1999/2001; Spears, 1997). Sometimes, as Bakhtin (1984) so lucidly illustrates in his interpretation of the popular festival images at work in Rabelais' work, abusive jokes are marked by indelible *ambivalence*, leaving the mistreated in one moment battered, and the next moment “decorated with ribbons” (p. 203). Abuse and praise, for Rabelais, were simply, and importantly, “two aspects of one world” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 198). This chapter is an acknowledgment that these “two aspects of one world” unfold in classroom spaces in ways that make it difficult to spot moments in which language constitutes realities that constrain our identities and experiences.

### **Joking Once Removed: Situating *Others* as Just Joking**

The notion that a joking stance might absolve people from *seriously* subjugating others (Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 2005/2009; Pickering & Lockyear, 2005/2009) surfaced not only in Manasa and Maya's discussion about their experiences with racism, but also in a personal anecdote Maya narrated nearly a month later about her male schoolmates positioning her female peers as belonging primarily in the kitchen. Just prior to her anecdote, youth in the literature classroom had pulled their desks into a circle at the center of the room. Talk had turned to the topic of arranged marriages. Diya asked whether or not youths' school peers routinely asked the boys in the class, like the girls, if they were going to have arranged marriages. What followed was a conversation about

gender roles as youth imagined them operating in (pre)historic times and witnessed them unfolding in contemporary Indian and U.S. societies.

“So like in World History,” began Ramya, “[...] We’re just studying about the ancient, ancient times. And like we’re learning about like *Australopithic*—”

“*Australopithecus*,” offered Manasa.

“Yeah, that,” continued Ramya. “And, um, like since then like, and then you move on to like *Homo sapiens*, and all that stuff. And since then, like the men used hunt and the women used to gather berries and um—”

“There was relative social equality, because they depended on each other,” Manasa inserted.

“Yeah,” said Ramya. “They said that it was mostly equal, but like the men would do all of the physical work and then the women would do the easy stuff—well, ‘easy stuff’—like finding berries and that sort of thing. But then the women still have ideas for like society, so it was fairly equal. But, then again, as you continue on like if you think of a little bit before now, and in like India, it’s kind of like that. Like they still need a woman, because the women do the cleaning and the household and the cooking, but the men do the working and the labor stuff.”

Youth talked over one another, and then Manasa added, “I guess that’s one reason why men are sort of seen as superior is ‘cause the labor that they do is sometimes seen as more important. Like that’s like harder work. So maybe that sort of carried on throughout the years, even from ancient times, I guess.”

“Yeah, I think it’s just as important,” observed a female youth.

“I think it’s equal—” suggested Ravi.

“Yeah,” agreed Manasa.

A bit later, Maya took the floor: “Like in the U.S., of course, like it’s gotten better and like women can have good—Women don’t stay home all the time. But there are people that do. But like they get good jobs and they also contribute. Like it isn’t like the women have to listen and obey the man of the house. And I just like think that, I dunno, that that’s—It’s kinda how it is. In, in the U.S. it’s, there’s nothing like that happening, but there’s always—Like even though it might seem equal that women would do all the housework and then the men would go and earn, it also is kind of—It can also seem more, it can also seem degrading. Because people like, if you see like guys, they’ll say, their big thing is, ‘Oh, women. They need to go make me a sandwich.’ [...] [T]hat’s like all the people in my class. They’re like—”

As if completing Maya’s sentence, Manasa said, “Go make me a sandwich.”

Maya continued: “They’ll be like, ‘Oh, go make me a sandwich.’ Or ‘sammich,’ as they like to say. ‘Cause they think that women belong in the kitchen, they need to like—Well, they don’t like think that. They’re like joking about it. But it’s still like a thing that’s like there, that—”

“Is there is in your mind,” noted Manasa.

“It should be equal,” added another female youth.

“Another thing is, I was at my friend’s house yesterday,” inserted Ravi. “And like he said he likes to cook, so I can just ask him for a sandwich. I mean it doesn’t have to be always a girl making a sandwich.”

“Well, obviously there are exceptions to everything,” noted Manasa, overlapping the end of Ravi’s utterance. “But we’re talking about things in general” (Field note, January 29, 2011).

In her anecdote, Maya depicted her male peers as directing female peers to make them sandwiches, or “sammiches.” Maya noted that this type of comment was made in an offhand way, as if it was already predetermined that the female youth will oblige them. Although Maya acknowledged that the idea “women would do all the housework and then the men would go and earn” might be seen as an equal division of labor (as Ramya insinuated in her narrative about hunting and gathering), she noted that this discourse “can also seem degrading.” Maya exposed what she understood to be the notion behind these requests (that males believe females occupy primarily domestic roles), but emphasized that her male peers were only “joking about it.” They did not *really* believe that “women belong in the kitchen.” Just as Manasa drew on the notion that her father’s colleagues were engaged in “professional joking” when they asked him questions related to his Indian identity, Maya invoked the idea that situating socially oppressive discourses about women as jokes signaled that the discourses were not leveraged in earnest. Her male peers did not actually believe women must do domestic work; they did not have subjugating intentions.

Nonetheless, Maya and Manasa commented that even though people may not intend to be oppressive (i.e. their intentions are innocuous), the marginalizing meaning behind the comment is “still like a thing that’s there [...] in your mind.” They suggested that positioning others as joking did not entirely obscure the feeling that the comments

were still “degrading.” Ravi attempted to minimize the discourse ensconced in the male peers’ joking stance (i.e. that women belong in the kitchen) by noting that he also asked male peers to make him sandwiches, but Manasa rejected this move. She insisted that she and Maya were “talking about things in general.” In other words, she positioned Ravi as an exception, and moved the focus back to what she felt was the wider social discourse shaping how gender roles were read and continually enforced.

And yet, despite the lingering feelings of degradation, Maya did not implicate her male school peers in perpetuating the idea that women’s labor was primarily to serve men. The joking stance she attributed to her male peers seemed to make this critique feel *unnecessary*. This moment caught my attention because it was so very different from other moments in which youth did *not* position others as joking and in which youth unequivocally named others as perpetuating oppressive discourses. Karishma, for instance, during the same class period, articulated how a white man she encountered in a local café perpetuated a discourse of xenophobia when he had a loud conversation with his tablemates about how foreigners did not belong in the U.S. while overtly staring at Karishma and her mother. Karishma noted that the man was with his teenaged son, who was agreeing with his father’s comments. “Just think,” she said. “They’re gonna be passing this [attitude] on for generations” (Field note, January 29, 2011).

Also during this class period, Shobana explicitly acknowledged the reality of racial and gender inequality in the U.S., along with its stubborn persistence: “It’s not just gonna go away,” she noted. “It’s gonna take time to completely remove it. But like it’s not good that it’s still there, but there are still people who think black and whites aren’t

equal, or women and men aren't equal" (Field note, January 29, 2011). Manasa overlapped the last part of Shobana's utterance to say, "There'll always be people that think that way—Cause that's what they grew up with. That's what their parents tell them. People teach their children backwards ways sometimes. We watched a video of the Ku Klux Klan, a documentary of it, a while ago. And it was modern. Like this was in 2006. And there were still rallies going on. And they had a baby. And they were like, 'This is our future,' and stuff. So, that kid's going to grow up and he is going to be a racist" (Field note, January 29, 2011).

Although these moments of naming and acknowledging social oppression were significant given that the more dominant (and closely related) discourses of meritocracy and colorblindness tend to silence such talk in societal-level conversations (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Ullucci & Battey, 2011; van Dijk, 1993), these moments simultaneously spotlighted easily "seen" demonstrations of racial hostility (like actions of the KKK or rude statements said aloud in a café), which reinforced an equally dominant and pernicious perception of racism as being primarily "overt" as opposed to "subtle, indirect, or fluid" (Bonilla-Silva, 1996, p. 468; hooks, 1989). Later, I argue that when the conception of social oppression as obvious intersects with the "just joking" construct, the need to name others as perpetuating these discourses is imagined (*is felt*) to be unnecessary. For now, though, I want to make sense of how it was that Maya's friends were not to be taken seriously when they demanded sammiches, how attributing the "just joking" construct to *others* worked in Maya's anecdote to absolve her friends from perpetuating oppressive talk about women. In other words, like Pickering and Lockyer

(2005/2009), I seek to understand how “comic discourse allows the contraband cargo of the offense to be smuggled aboard” in everyday talk and interactions (p. 14).

Part of the reason Maya’s male friends were let off the hook was because of the “commonplace notion that a joke is *sui generis* and should not be registered with the same schema of understanding as serious discourse” (Pickering & Lockyer, 2005/2009, p. 1). Put another way, jokes are commonly understood to be “essentially harmless” (Weaver, 2011) and “the phrase ‘only joking’ presumes that words can be used without serious intent, and that they are not intended to cause offense” (Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 2005/2009, p. 48). This conception of jokes gets reproduced not only in everyday talk and interactions, but also in scholarship about humor (Weaver, 2011). Weaver (2011), for instance, has illuminated how some scholars position derogatory ethnic and racial humor as ‘just jokes’ and as not real expressions of racism and xenophobia (p. 114). Other scholars, however, have worked *against* the tendency to position humor as innocuous, pointing to how social oppression gets minimized through the rhetoric of jokes (e.g., Billig, 2001, 2005/2009; Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 2005/2005; Weaver, 2010, 2011).

For Billig (2001), the phrase “‘I was just joking’ is both a claim to be doing something permissible (i.e. joking) and a denial of doing something criticizable, which is contrasted to the joking” (p. 270). According to both Bonilla-Silva (2010) and van Dijk (1992, 1993), within the dominant discourse of color blindness, even talking about the existence of race and racism feels morally reprehensible (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Raby, 2004; Van Dijk, 1992). Within a national ethos of equality and meritocracy, we are not



supposed to see, let alone name race and racism. Indeed, Van Dijk (1993) suggests many of the ways in which racism is denied through public discourse reflects a need to “deflect” accusations of possessing racist attitudes: “In general, a denial presupposes a real or potential accusation, reproach or suspicion of others about one’s present or past actions or attitudes, and asserts that such attacks against one’s moral integrity are not warranted” (p. 208). Joking stances allow people to say oppressive things while simultaneously protecting themselves from violating the colorblind code (Billig, 2001; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; van Dijk, 1992, 1992). According to Billig (2001),

If today there are taboos against the outward expression of racism, then the racist joke becomes a way of saying the unsayable. Teller and recipient can deny that they are racist; they can protect their own sense of their non-racist selves claiming that they are ‘just joking.’ (p. 285)

Although Billig’s (2001) work focuses on the intersection of jokes and racism, his insights can also help us make sense of Maya’s “sammiches” anecdote. After the women’s rights movement in the U.S., it became taboo to overtly articulate sexist attitudes that constrain the roles and identities available to women. Because framing comments as jokes (as unserious) can allow people to say things that would normally not be permissible (Bing, 2007; Freud/Strachey, 1960; Swart, 2009), sharing sexist comments in the form of jokes perpetuates these discourses in a way that eludes critique. Feminist poststructuralists, like Davies (2000) and Weedon (1997) would argue that this is problematic because these discourses constrain the subjectivities men and women are able to take up and the ways in which others position them. The “just joking” construct

allows dominant discourses to go unchecked and to continue to occlude alternative ways of positioning others and ourselves.

Just as Ullucci and Battey (2011) suggest “color blindness is a form of storytelling” that “Whites can tell themselves to ‘prove’ the fundamentally fair nature of life in the United States,” positioning others as just joking about socially oppressive discourses creates a reality that unintentionally harms people by nullifying the need to critique these discourse (p. 1203). When youth invoked the just joking construct to explain away racism (in the case of Manasa and Maya) and sexism (in the case of Maya), this was a form of storytelling. This storytelling perpetuated dehumanizing discourses by silencing critical talk about them. The “just joking” moments thus operated at the level of classroom discourse in much the same way that color blindness suppresses talk about racism and its historical roots and contemporary implications in the press and in parliamentary rhetoric (Rossing, 2012; Paguyo & Moses, 2011; van Dijk, 1992, 1993). Expressed in a different way, jokes are not “just” jokes (Billig, 2001, 2005/2009; Weaver, 2010, 2011); as rhetorical strategies, they do *real* work to create realities that can restrict the ways in which we imagine and live out our experiences.

The anecdotes shared by Manasa, Maya, and as I will show later, by Ravi, about racism, sexism, and ethnic teasing add a new dimension to scholarship that attempts to theorize how language and the meta-discourse of joking, in particular, get recruited to minimize social oppression. Unlike the studies conducted by Billig (2001) and Weaver (2010, 2011), which examined racist discourses leveraged in jokes proper (i.e. with punch lines, etc.) on self-proclaimed racist websites, in all three cases in my study, youth did not

frame their *own* comments as jokes, nor did they interpret others to be sharing racist, sexist, or ethnic jokes *per se*. Rather, youth interpreted others to be joking (i.e. not serious) when they said or did things that perpetuated socially oppressive language and practices. That is, they invoked the *idea* of humor to minimize these experiences.

Like Raby (2004), I found that when youth situated others as “just joking,” the discourses at the center of their narratives went largely *unchallenged*. Similar to Bonilla-Silva (2010) and van Dijk (1992, 1993), Raby (2004), who writes about how Canadian adolescent female youths “denied and downplayed racism in their schools,” suggests that because racism is seen as morally suspect within a culture of colorblindness, for youth to acknowledge it as occurring in their schools would be to akin to saying that the unthinkable was unfolding in spaces with which they were intimately associated” (p. 370). In a comparable vein, I suggest youth attributed the “just joking” construct to others to *reconcile* the discrepancy between dominant discourses of post-racialism (and post-sexism) and their lived experiences that bore witness to the problematic partiality of these discourses (cf., Ellison, 1995). Ellison (1995) has argued that “the white American” believes stereotypes about African Americans to “resolve the dilemma arising between his [*sic.*] democratic beliefs and certain undemocratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not” (p. 85). Likewise, I argue that positioning others as just joking when they leverage and perpetuate oppressive discourses is a way to resolve the dilemma of experiencing oppression within a social climate that repeatedly says these experiences do not exist.

What implications does this have for attempting to theorize humor in critical spaces? It means that we need to look beyond moments of *literal* joking to consider how youth are invoking the *idea*, or the meta-discourse of humor, to make sense of the realities they experience. We need to be attuned to how youth position *others* to be joking about oppressive discourses. However, as I demonstrate below, recognizing when the “just joking” construct contributes to perpetuating harm is difficult and never an unambiguous task. It is particularly messy and complicated when the “others” youth say are “just joking” are simultaneously positioned as friends.

### **Joking Around with Friends: They Can’t Be Serious**

As Ellison (1995) has observed, “the essence of the word is its ambivalence” (p. 81). Ellison was speaking of fiction, but, jokes, as I have shown, are also a kind of fiction, or story, “and in fiction [the word] is never so effective and revealing as when both potentials are operating simultaneously, as when it mirrors both good and bad, as when it blows both hot and cold in the same breath” (Ellison, 1995, p. 81). In this section, I consider the hot and cold of joking stances when people youth felt were close to them, or familiar, took them up. During a class session in which youth were engaged in sharing misconceptions people held about Indian identities, Ravi invoked the idea of “joking around” to explain an experience he had playing a video game with “close friends.” Just prior to Ravi’s speaking turn, Savita shared the following story: “I was in third grade and we were playing Bingo and they had those little round pieces and some guy put ‘em on his forehead and he said, ‘Hey, [...] I’m a married Indian woman.’ And I’m just like, you don’t put *bindis* on your forehead if you’re—only if you’re married.”

“Oh, dude!” exclaimed Ravi, as youth in the class talked over one another. “I have a couple misconceptions,” he said. “So, like—”

“Oh, my God!” uttered a female youth in faux exasperation, but Ravi pressed on: “Me and my friends were playing Halo and all that stuff”—The room erupted in laughter and overlapping talk. Amidst the animated conversations, I learned that Halo was an Xbox video game. A key aspect of the game involved blowing up tanks with Spartan lasers. After some time, Ravi, in a pseudo-authoritarian tone, instructed the class to quiet down. This only incited laughter. “Okay, so,” said Ravi. More laughter, at which point Manasa urged Ravi to “just keep talking.”

“Me and my friends,” began Ravi, “My close friends, you know, we joke around and all that, but it’s not actually true, so that, we, were, we were playing Halo. And then I got this Spartan laser, you know?”

The class laughed and Ravi continued: “And I’m like blowing up these tanks, you know?” More laughter from the class. Ravi persevered: “And then they’re like—”

“I know!” exclaimed a female youth, as if to indicate she already knew what Ravi intended to say next.

“No. No,” asserted Ravi. “And so they’re like maybe I should point the laser at your head—” The class burst out in empathetic laughter.

“Oh, my God!” uttered a female youth.

“Because it would make the dot?” I probed.

“Yeah!” confirmed Ravi.

More laughter from the class.

While playing the video game, Ravi's friends jokingly suggested they ought to point a Spartan laser—the same one used to blow up tanks—at his forehead to make him look like an Indian woman. Ravi noted that these were peers with whom he regularly “jokes around” and that what they were suggesting via these jokes was “not actually true.” Like the white, black, and Indian people in Manasa and Maya's vignette, who they imagined to say things about other racial groups, and the male peers in Maya's anecdote who relegated women to the kitchen, but did not intend to be offensive, Ravi's friends were positioned as not *really* meaning what they said and did when they were perceived to be joking.

Although Ravi clearly did not read his friends' comment about making him look like an Indian woman as offensive, as a critical researcher, I found it disturbing that making someone look like an Indian woman would be construed as something amusing (what is wrong with looking like an Indian woman?) and that there was an inherent link between making someone look like an Indian woman and shooting him or her in the head with a violent weapon of war. I found Ravi's story problematic because the playful violence described by Ravi mirrored the history of *real* violence against Indian women and men in the 1980s during the Dot Buster rampages (Maira, 2001), not to mention contemporary practices of discriminating against South Asian people donning ethnic markers, like turbans, and embodying brown identities during our post-9/11 sociopolitical climate (Maira, 2009; Menon, 2006). These ways of framing Indian identities are not jokes; they have real consequences for the lived experiences of South Asian youth and their families (Joshi, 2006; Maira, 2009).

In the case of Ravi's story, it was the "just joking" construct, in combination with the notion of friendship, that seemed to make teasing about ethnic identity markers feel innocuous; put another way, because Ravi's *friends* were positioned as joking, their discourse did not point to "real" oppressive practices. Similar to Hewitt (1986), I found the youth suggested that friends (and colleagues, as we saw in the case of Manasa's narrative about her father) could jokingly leverage potentially oppressive discourses, but outsiders could not. Ravi spoke about this in an interview:

*Sarah:* Sometimes kids in our class are able to laugh and joke about topics that some adults might see as serious. Like stereotypes about Indians, for example. So what's your understanding of this? How or why are kids able to laugh so easily about these things?

*Ravi:* 'Cause like they can make jokes about themselves, but like when other people do it, like I don't get, I don't think it's right. But when you do it to yourself and you're Indian, you know, I guess that seems funny to you. Yeah. But if their best friend says it, I guess that's fine, too, 'cause they're joking, too. Yeah. (Interview, April 30, 2011)

According to Ravi, if people are Indian, they can laugh about stereotypes about Indians: they "can make jokes about themselves." This way of understanding who could laugh about what (and in which spaces) mirrored Manasa's comment in the first chapter in which she suggested youth could make fun of themselves at ICS, like participants did on the My Life is Desi website, because they were "all relating on common ground" (Interview, March 5, 2011).

Similarly, Ramya specifically related youths' laughter during conversations about "Indian" stereotypes to the co-ethnicity of the classroom space. She suggested shared identities facilitated talk *about* those identities and that perceived identity differences added an element of apprehension that had the potential to shut down discussions:

Well, maybe [...] if there was more diversity in, like, ICS – it's an Indian place, obviously, but if it was like, if there was more diversity, maybe more like other ethnic backgrounds or something, then people probably wouldn't be that light about it. People wouldn't joke about it that much, because in school, no one really does that, 'cause like you never know who you're gonna offend. But here, since it's all Indians— like see, we don't really make that many religion comments, because like we don't know what religion people are, [...] like we make different race jokes, 'cause there's not any other race except for Indian and American. Yeah. [...] Yeah, but like we don't – like, religion, well that's kind of a touchy topic anywhere, maybe except like a temple or something, [...] – [A]nd then like 'cause Maya, as an example, she's not Hindu. That's the only one I now of, but yeah, like so we don't really make that many religion comments.

(Interview, March 5, 2011)

Whereas Ramya suggested it was possible to frame talk about racial and ethnic identities as humorous in the space of the literature classroom because youth shared these identities (at least to some extent), she observed that youth "[didn't] really make that many religion comments, because we don't know what religion people are." In a move that pointed again to the centrality of co-ethnic space, Ramya suggested that jokes about religion



might be possible in *co-religious* settings, “like a temple or something.” She then relocated her discourse from the hypothetical to the local by noting that the reason youth did not joke very often about religion in the literature class was because one of the members of the class, Maya, was not Hindu. Maya’s religious identity seemed to signal difference, and it is this difference that made joking about religion risky: youth might offend her if they were to frame issues about non-Hindu religions as humorous. Feeling apprehensive about offending others, according to my reading of Ramya’s response, restricted youths’ ability to laugh about or frame as humorous particular issues that centered on identities they did not share.

Alternatively, Ravi proposed that “best friends,” even if they were not Indian, could also participate in this type of laughter, “‘cause they’re joking, too.” I interpreted his words to mean that *close* friends—those with whom one enjoys an intimate and trusting relationship—do not have bad intentions when they leverage potentially oppressive discourses; rather, they are only playing around. I understood Ravi to mean that in this type of context, joking about difference does not necessarily signal risk and offense.

Sometimes this is true. Spears (1997) points to how obscenities do not always have negative connotations when used by in-group members. Similarly, Hill (1998) draws on the work of Hewitt (1986) and Butler (1997) to suggest, “usages [of derogatory terms] that in some contexts seem grossly racist seem to contain an important parodic potential that can be turned to the antiracist deconstruction of racist categorical essentializing” (p. 685). In other words, in some situations, people use socially oppressive

language with each other in ways that actually re-appropriate the language and signal closeness and belonging (c.f., Young, 2007). Newkirk (2002) points to how this happens in boys' writing that explicitly incorporates violence, noting that far from causing harm to one another, "boys express affection [in their writing] through teasing and shared, often violent action" (p. 126). He draws on Dyson (1993) to suggest that important 'social work' is occurring when boys write each other into and kill each other in their stories. According to Newkirk (2002), these literary acts of "violence" actually signal and reinforce the boys' close relationships. Interpreting Ravi's anecdote and interview excerpts using this lens, we can see how friends might be able to joke about "Indian" stereotypes in ways that do not *intentionally* cause harm and might actually be doing something good for their relationship.

Newkirk also spotlights Smitherman's (1999/2000) work on "old-school snaps" in African American communities. This intricate game of verbal insults, also known as "playing the dozens" helps illuminate how overtly oppressive language can be read in ways that accomplish important positive effects between friends. Smitherman (1999/2000) notes the dozens was played by people who were familiar with each other (p. 227). Importantly, Smitherman (1999/2000) notes, "despite the emotionally charged subject matter, snappin works as a game because it is located within the realm of play. Thus the rule that is most crucial to the game is that the snap must not be literally true" (p. 228). Put another way, the point of the game was not to actually inflict emotional harm on players, but rather to provide "an outlet for what countless blues people and Jess B. Simple folk called 'laughing to keep from crying.' It was a form of release for the

suppressed range and frustrations that were the result of being a Black man or woman trapped in White America” (p. 225).

Similarly, Bakhtin (1984) points to ways in which overtly abusive language and performance in Rabelais’ writing “never assumes the character of merely personal invective; it is universal, and when all is said and done it always aims at the higher level” (p. 212; see also Lensmire, 2011, p. 120). What he means by this is that “behind each victim of abuse and blows Rabelais sees the king, the former king, the pretender” (p. 213). For Rabelais, these pretenders are representative of the Gothic age and its associated claims of absolute moral and intellectual authority (pp. 213 and 268). The purpose of injuring these Gothic king figures was to make apparent—by laughing at them and the injuries inflicted upon them—their “limitations and end” (p. 213). That is to say, the violent laughter of carnival—often aimed like daggers at king figures—was *transformative*.

This laughter was able to exist and do its work because carnival opened a space for people to engage on terms of familiarity (Bakhtin, 1984). According to Bakhtin, “carnavalesque revelry is marked by absolute familiarity. Differences between superiors and inferiors disappear for a short time, and all draw close to each other. Nobody cares what may happen to him, while freedom and lack of ceremony are balanced by good humor” (p. 246). The “mock disputes” and “verbal tournaments” Bakhtin analyzes were ambivalent—both hot and cold, in Ellison’s [1995] terms (p. 247). They inflicted injury, but, with hierarchies temporarily upended, all bodies and identities were on equal levels

with each other—no real harm was done in this “play without footlights” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 268).

It would also be possible to read Ravi’s narrative through the theoretical lenses offered by Smitherman and Bakhtin: Ravi and his friends were engaged in a moment of play (a mini carnival) during the videogame episode, they were on familiar terms, and could thus leverage, what to an outsider might seem like oppressive discourses, but without causing real harm. If we add to this reading Newkirk’s (2002) observation that boys use violence in their writing in *non-literal* ways, we might even say the violence waged on Ravi by his close friends was also a way to signal their acceptance and affection toward Ravi within and through discourses available to boys (or the “boy code,” as Newkirk puts it) (p. 126). The context-dependent ambiguity of teasing, jokes, and laughter is precisely why it is so difficult to know what to do, as a critical educator, when youth position others—especially friends—as just joking about language and discourses that constrain the ways in which they construct their realities and the ways in which their own identities are already constituted by these same discourses (Davies, 2000).

Because in some ways, even if done unintentionally, these jokes still perpetuate constraining discourses (Davies, 2000; Weedon, 1997). Newkirk (2002), although situating boys as intelligent consumers of violence in popular culture, worries. “I worry about bullies,” he says. “I worry about the narrow construction of masculinity in our culture [and] I worry about boys who don’t fit this narrow definition, who are oppressed by the ‘boy code’” (pp. xx-xxi). Likewise, I worry that waging violence—even symbolically—against Indian women (using their own ethnic markers, no less)—

perpetuates dominant discourses that situate Asian Americans as foreigners (Tuan, 1999), and as targets of pre- and post 9/11 suspicion and animosity (Joshi, 2006; Maira, 2001). These discourses are not harmless (Mankekar, 2002; Mishra, 2001).

I also worry that minimizing racism by interpreting friends and colleagues to be just joking when they say or do oppressive things reinforces the idea that social oppression, such as (cultural) racism, constitutes “individual acts of meanness, never [...] invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance [to particular] group[s]” (Bonilla-Silva, 1996; McIntosh, 2006, not paginated). Troublingly, this dominant perspective circulates not only in popular discourse, but also in academic discourses (Bonilla-Silva, 1996). Social scientists, for example, tend to frame people who express racist perspectives as “irrational” and racist acts as “usually involving some degree of hostility” (Bonilla-Silva, 1996, p. 468). Because friends tend *not* to fall into the categories of people who are irrational or would commit individual acts of meanness, they are positioned as exempt from participating in the maintenance of social oppression. But we know that racism and other forms of social oppression are not limited to overt acts and outbursts by irrational people (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; van Dijk, 1992, 1993). Rather, social oppression gets reproduced daily through everyday discourses that make up a type of social “grammar” (Bonilla-Silva, 2012, p. 174), a grammar that makes white privilege and other forms of dominance feel *natural* and *normal* (c.f., McIntosh, 2006).

The dominant perspective that oppression manifests in primarily overt, rather than covert, ways (Bonilla-Silva, 2012) makes it *makes sense* to say that friends, when they leverage hurtful discourses are “just joking”—that they do not mean any harm by what

they say and do. Moreover, the tendency to read oppression as largely blatant, combined with the fact that close friends sometimes leverage oppressive talk in ways that are not literally hurtful, makes it *feel* like critiquing this talk is unnecessary. This helps explain how Manasa's father's colleagues could engage in "professional joking" about his Indian ethnicity, how Maya's male peers could demand "sammiches" and how Ravi's "close friends" could shoot him in the head with a *bindi*-laser with neither the youth, nor I, ever once disrupting the talk to critique the larger discourses at work in the youths' anecdotes. These moments of nullified critique will continue to occur until we better theorize how laughter and humor work in spaces of critical learning.

## Chapter 7

### Insights and Implications

Classrooms have long been patrolled as spaces of rationality (Boler, 1999). In an effort to ensure the orderly functioning of a market-driven educational system, philosophers, scientists, and educators, in different eras, have discursively framed emotions as shortcomings to be ironed-out and as biological states to be mastered and commoditized (Boler, 1999). As schools have largely been imagined as serious spaces with the staid goal of preparing students for the workforce (Lensmire, 2011), laughter in classrooms has tended to be under-theorized in educational research and practice (Garner, 2006; Gordon, 2010; Lensmire, 2011).

Teaching philosophies, such as critical pedagogy, that focus on exposing how unequal power relationships shape youths' social and academic experiences have tended, traditionally, to perpetuate the reason/emotion binary by sidelining emotional responses to social justice issues in favor of rational deconstructions of institutionalized inequalities (Ellsworth, 1989; Janks, 2002; Lensmire, 2011). Some scholars have illuminated the limitations associated with marginalizing emotions in critical spaces (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; Lewis & Tierney, 2011; Zembylas, 2010). Ellsworth (1989) suggests an emphasis on "rational argument has operated in ways that set up as its opposite an irrational Other, which has been understood historically as the province of women and other exotic Others" (p. 301). This discourse, she argues, obscures non-majority voices in critical classrooms and downplays the validity of affective responses to social justice issues that are rooted in learners' lived experiences (pp. 301-302).

Although scholars, such as Zembylas (2010), Callahan (2004), Wang (2008), and Winas (2010) are now giving more attention to emotion in critical spaces, much of their work has tended to highlight the “negative” affective responses that emerge in these arenas. With the notable exception of work by scholars such as Lensmire (2001), Janks (2002), Lewis (2010), Mayo (2006), and Vlieghe et al. (2010), critical spaces have predominantly been imagined and portrayed as serious—and often traumatic—spaces. Certainly, laughter in critical teaching and learning contexts is nebulous, raising questions, such as: Who is being laughed *at* in this context? and Is laughter an appropriate response to social inequities (Lewis, 2010; Morreall, 2010; Sorensen, 2008)? As educators, do we join in the laughter (Lewis, 2010)? What social practices do we condone by doing so? On the other hand, what socially oppressive discourses do we obscure if we do not allow laughter? Given the Western philosophical and religious roots of education in the United States, and laughter’s maligned status within these paradigms (Morreall, 2010), it is understandable why researchers have failed to more comprehensively theorize how laughter and humor might impact students’ critical learning experiences.

It is particularly problematic that scholars have not delved more thoroughly into laughter in critical learning contexts given that laughter, like the emotions with which it circulates, is socially mediated and *mediating* (Carty & Musharbash, 2008; Swart, 2009). That is, laughter and humor reflect, shape, perpetuate and challenge the inequitable social relationships that critical educators work so hard to understand and to unsettle. Laughter and humor have long been leveraged by subjugated people to transform their realities and



to cope with social oppression (e.g., Carpio, 2008; Jones & Liverpool, 1996; Lipman, 1991; Sorensen, 2008; Swart, 2009); at the same time, however, laughter and humor have also been invoked to police identities and to perpetuate social oppression (e.g., Huuki et al., 2010; Kehily & Nayak, 2007; Swart, 2009). If we are truly concerned with teaching for critical consciousness we need to better attend to the complicated ways in which laughter and humor get recruited to both perpetuate the minimization of socially oppressive discourses (Billig, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; van Dijk, 1992, 1993) and to disrupt them (Bakhtin, 1984; Carpio, 2008).

We know even less about the laughter that happens in community spaces in which the children of immigrant parents work, play, and learn, such the ICS literature classroom. Although we know a limited amount about how co-ethnic spaces serve as locations in which these youth cultivate social and cultural capital (Lew, 2006; Zhou & Kim, 2006), we do not have a well-developed understanding of how they make sense of their identities in these spaces, how others read these identities, and what laughter has to do with these processes. It is essential that we tune into laughter in these spaces in order to work against discursive frameworks that cast immigrant youth as passive victims of social inequities. Attending to laughter in these co-ethnic community settings offers educational researchers the opportunity to tap into how youth are disrupting dominant discourses and what they “know about surviving and moving through trouble” (Lensmire, 2011, p. 121).

### **Learning from Spaces of Sameness**

For Ramya, Ishani, Manasa, and Sashi, relating to others' real and imagined experiences was a significant aspect of participating in co-ethnic friendships and spaces. Indian youth were imagined as being privy to similar experiences and larger ways of framing Indian identity politics in the Diaspora. The notion of feeling "got," or understood, by Indian friends was important. Although they did not always agree with the discourses circulating in the literature classroom—or with each other—youth in the literature classroom often seemed to understand the frameworks about Indian adolescence that were talked about in this space. The focus thus was not on explaining these discourses (as Indian youth might have to do for American peers at non-separate birthday parties) but on enjoying the process of extending the discourses, mocking them, problematizing them, etc. The emphasis was on the pleasure behind the discourses, their messages, and the relationships they solidified.

Pleasure can be political (Ahmed, 2004). It can open people up to others, and it can help people assert their identities in physical and ideological spaces (Ahmed, 2004). In Ahmed's words (2004):

[P]leasures can allow bodies to take up more space. It is interesting to consider, for example, how the display of enjoyment and pleasure by football fans can take over a city, excluding others who do not 'share' their joy, or return that joy through the performance of pleasure. Indeed, the publicness of pleasure can function as a form of aggression; as a declaration of 'We are here.' [...] Pleasure involves not only the capacity to enter into, or inhabit with ease, social space, but also functions as a form of entitlement and belonging. Spaces are claimed through

enjoyment, an enjoyment that is returned by being witnessed by others (pp. 164-165).

What I want to draw attention to in this quotation is the idea that *spaces can be claimed through enjoyment*. I argue that in laughing together in the space of the literature classroom, and in the hallways of ICS, youth were *claiming* the space through pleasure. Laughter was a way to “declar[e] [...] ‘We are here.’” Importantly, within the literature classroom and ICS, more generally, Indian youth were simultaneously the audience and the subject of their own conversations, stories, and interactions; they were “at the center of [their own] discourse” (hooks, 1989, p. 15). Put another way, youth were engaging with inside jokes and wider Discourses about Indian identities—not for others, but for *themselves* (e.g., Bing & Heller, 2003).

What is the significance of spaces in which youth are the subjects and the audience of their own discourse? Haymes’ (2003) understanding of what a sense of place means for black communities in metropolitan areas suggests co-ethnic community spaces, in which youth are the subjects of their own talk, may serve as sites of resistance, sites in which social inequities can be challenged and potentially transformed. He draws on bell hooks’ concept of “homeplace” to extend his concept of place making:

As spaces of care and nurturance, homeplaces, according to hooks, are where ‘all black people could be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves dignity denied us on the outside in the public world’ [1990:

42]. The black public sphere is therefore the basis for building a community of resistance (p. 213).

Like hooks, Perez (1991, as cited in Villenas, 1996, p. 718), suggests separate spaces are necessary in order to perform critical work. They provide sustenance and support collaborative social revolutions. Although Reagon (1983) felt coalition work, which she characterized as distinctly “uncomfortable,” could never be fully realized in barred rooms, she, too, highlights the sustaining force of these comfortable spaces. It is in these spaces that people are able to nurture and rejuvenate themselves. Similarly, Evans and Boyte (1992) have conceptualized the “settings between private lives and large-scale institutions” as “free spaces,” or spaces in which people “are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue” (p. 17). These spaces, such as “religious organizations, clubs, self-help and mutual aid societies, reform groups, neighborhood, civic, and ethnic groups,” for Evans and Boyte (1992), are sites of active citizenship and change.

Educational researchers should better attend to how co-ethnic spaces serve as free spaces—sites of resistance and sustenance for immigrant youth and their families (Evans & Boyte, 1992). This is particularly vital given the existence of scholarship that points to the importance of co-ethnic spaces within *diverse* educational settings (Benner & Crosnoe, 2011; Jones & Jenkins, 2008; Fine, Weis & Powell, 1997). Jones and Jenkins (2008), for example, in documenting their experience teaching Maori and Pakeha (white) students in a diverse university classroom in New Zealand, observed that the indigenous students expressed a strong desire to learn in a space separate from their white peers:

Some of our Maori students stated that they preferred to study their histories, knowledges, and experiences separately from their Pakeha (White) peers. They found the development of their own cultural memories was disrupted by Pakeha classmates who, although positively keen to engage with them on the subject of education, generally had a very different view of it. Maori students, often disheartened and weary, had become unwilling constantly to explain themselves, to listen to cultural ignorance, even hostility, and to encounter again and again what they experienced as a disappointing lack of knowledge in many of their Pakeha classmates. (Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 476)

The notion that the Maori students were “weary” from “constantly [having] to explain themselves [and having to] listen to cultural ignorance” speaks to the *labor* minoritized students do in diverse educational settings (Cohen, 1972 [as cited in Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997, p. 275]; Delpit, 2007; Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997; Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 476; Grosland, 2011). It resonates with the sentiment expressed by Sashi—that explaining his cultural customs to an American peer would require giving up a certain amount of privacy. Similarly, the notion of separate birthday parties for Indian and American peers suggested to me that *integrated* birthday parties would require labor on the part of Indian peers—they would have to explain the jokes they shared, the ones American peers would not understand.

Not surprisingly, Jones and Jenkins (2008) noted that “to the indigenous students, the White students seemed to be the sole beneficiaries of sharing” and “that the separation from White peers enabled them to engage more freely in the debates about

Maori education as well as colonization. They enjoyed the opportunity to talk directly with each other, and teach each other, about their experiences [Pihama & Jenkins, 2001]” (pp. 476-477). Fine, Weis and Powell (1997) have also suggested “a flight into sameness by a marginalized group may be essential for and not a distraction from integration” (p. 275). Put another way, spaces of sameness—within diverse educational settings—might be the free spaces in which minoritized students are able to accomplish the essential work of “sift[ing] out what people are saying about [them] and decid[ing] who [they] really are” (Reagon, 1983, p. 351).

We need to better understand the learning opportunities minoritized students might reap from participating in settings in which they are both the audience and the subjects of their own learning. Closely observing free spaces like the ICS literature classroom can help us do this. We particularly need to tune into laughter in these spaces to understand how youth are *claiming* free spaces through pleasure. We need to learn what is happening during moments of laughter in community-based “homeplaces” (hooks, 1990, as cited in Haymes, 2003) so that we can help make “surviving in the world with many peoples” a more equitable and socially just experience for youth (Reagon, 1983, p. 358; also cited in Collin, 2000, p. 208).

### **What’s Laughable, What’s Not, and What’s Space Got to do With It? Extending Our Understanding of Ha-Ha/Aha Moments**

During my interview with Ramya, I asked her to articulate her understanding of youths’ laughter during conversations about stereotypes involving Indians. In her response, she noted that youths’ laughter during these conversations was related to the

*co-ethnicity* of the space. She suggested shared identities facilitated talk *about* those identities and that perceived identity differences added an element of apprehension that had the potential to shut down discussions. Ramya's insights support Janks' (2002) assertion that critical education scholars need to carefully theorize the intersections of identity, space, and laughter in contexts of critical learning. In particular, Ramya's interview excerpt highlights how the identities people share within a space might facilitate laughter—and thus *talk*—about critical issues surrounding those identities. In other words, shared identities may prevent youth from feeling like they might tread on others' subject positions, while perceived differences may make discussions feel less open. What does this mean for performing critical pedagogy within diverse public school settings; spaces in which youth may or may not sense shared identities (Flynn, 2009)? Is shared humor possible in diverse classroom spaces if youth do not sense sameness?

As educators, we need to carefully consider how youth are reading each other's subject positions as we address issues that speak to those identities—and what it means for *who* gets to talk and laugh freely about issues involving those identities. The labor of multiculturalism that falls on minoritized students (Delpit, 2007; Grosland, 2011; Jones & Jenkins, 2008) may also impact who gets to laugh in transformative ways in classroom spaces. Alternatively, looking *to* laughter in diverse classroom spaces might tell us something important about how youth in various ways sense the ideological space fitting *comfortably* with aspects of their complex bodies and identities (Ahmed, 2004). In other words, attending to the complexities of laughter may actually illuminate ways in which youth perceive the kinds of similarities and close relationships (like those spotlighted by

Ravi) that seem to catalyze critical conversations about social discourses. We need more educational research that addresses these complexities.

Attending to laughter that circulates within and through serious conversations in co-ethnic spaces may also help educators rethink how we frame minoritized youths' identities, more generally, within the context of teaching for critical consciousness. As a teacher, and as a member of the dominant culture, I wondered if, in assuming that youth would invoke solely emotions of discomfort (anger, sadness, irritation) to frame discussions about others mimicking Indian accents, I was somehow positioning them as *victims* of the forever foreigner discourse (Tuan, 1998). Did my presumption rely on the notion that this discourse would emotionally hurt them? That their identities depended on how others framed them, and that they would want to lash out about this?

While I am *not* arguing that dominant discourses are not harmful to Indian youth (scholars have pointed to ways in which they *are* [e.g., Joshi, 2006; Maira, 2004, 2009; Verma, 2008; Zine, 2006]), as a teacher, my initial inability to see the nuances of how laughter was circulating within, through, and in parallel with youths' discussions about others' discursive constructions of Indian identities was troublesome. My early reluctance to see humor as a legitimate response to critical issues or as a natural part of serious conversations actually diminished the sense of agency I attributed to youth. The way youth informally re-appropriated socially oppressive discourses through humor (as when Manasa mocked her classmate who made fun of Indian accents) or expressed indifference toward them (as when Ravi laughed off the dot-or-feather motif) dismantles the notion that minoritized youth are somehow "silent others" until critical educators assist them in



expressing their experiences and talking back to dominant discourses (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 308-309).

This is important to think about because immigrant youth, as minoritized youth, tend to be cast as *vulnerable* in academic spaces (e.g., Batchelor, 2006). Significantly, youth in the literature class seemed to situate themselves not as dupes of larger discourses, but as people who could spot and laugh about the ignorance that undergirded others' ways of understanding Indian culture and identities (cf., Newkirk, 2002). Importantly, this way of positioning themselves occurred *without* the assistance of educators. In fact, it often happened in spite of Diya and I, who often failed to read the significance of youths' laughter.

At the same time, though, it is essential not to romanticize what youth are doing with humor in classroom and community spaces. Laughing and joking about oppressive discourses may, in some cases, be a way for youth to re-appropriate and disrupt these discourses (Bing & Heller, 2003; Carpio, 2008; Gordon, 1998), but casting them as “unserious” may also unintentionally keep these ways of framing their identities uncritiqued and in circulation (Billig, 2005/2009; Davies, 2000; Weaver, 2011; Weedon, 1997). An acknowledgement of and commitment to theorizing the ambiguity of humor needs to be central to our continued work in this field.

### **Getting Serious about Theorizing Laughter in Critical Spaces**

My work with youth at ICS suggests that in order to understand how humor works to maintain and disrupt hegemony in classrooms (and beyond), we need to be attuned to not only how youth laugh and joke amongst themselves, but also how they invoke the

idea of jokes and joking to explain (or explain away) *others'* intentions in leveraging oppressive discourses. We also need to look closely at how relationships and friendships create contexts that make it difficult to recognize how oppressive discourses get perpetuated in moments of play marked by familiarity.

In these moments, we need to be aware of the “hot and cold” (Ellison, 1995) of these discourses in order to not overlook how transformative things might be happening alongside unintentional harm (this is messy work, it will never be unambiguous). We need to be attuned to and disrupt moments in which humor gets invoked to perpetuate the notion that social oppression operates primarily as obvious and hostile acts (Bonilla-Silva, 1996, 2012). Above all, we need to interrogate humor that feels *innately* innocuous, bearing in mind that “its power comes from its claim to be natural, obvious and therefore true” (Weedon, 1997, p. 74).

Research is required that explores how humor circulates in and through youths' critical conversations. We need to better attend to how youths' laughter, at different moments, disrupts and perpetuates oppressive discourses. This is particularly important for researchers committed to theorizing critical pedagogies. If we truly want to connect learning to students' lived experiences we need to stop ignoring how their communities use humor in powerful ways to cope and thrive in our sociopolitical climate. We also need to understand how individuals and communities invoke humor to minimize social oppression. In particular, more emphasis needs to be placed on investigating the intersections of humor, colorblind discourses, and classroom talk.

This dissertation study particularly spotlights the significance of *space* in theorizing laughter in critical pedagogy. I suggest that some of the laughter that occurred in the literature classroom and that circulated within and through youths' anecdotes about how others perceived Indian identities, was able to happen because of the co-ethnicity of the classroom space. Youth were already privy to the "inside jokes." As educational researchers, we need to expand the focus of studies in co-ethnic community organizations from social and cultural capital development to also include inquiries about how laughter circulates in these spaces.

I propose there is much to be learned about identities, resistance, and critique in barred rooms (Reagon, 1983). More studies are needed that illuminate how youth are claiming spaces through pleasure (Ahmed, 2004), and how moments of laughter might be considered transformative and aligned with critical agendas. We need studies that conceptualize co-ethnic spaces as places of power, as places in which dominant discourses are disrupted through shared laughter. This will also help us to continue to complicate images of immigrant youth as vulnerable victims of wider marginalizing discourses.

It is particularly important that scholars better understand humor in the lives of immigrant youth because dominant discourses tend to frame these young people as culturally (and thus emotionally) conflicted (Ngo, 2008, 2009) and as academically deficient (Sarroub, 2008). We need other ways of viewing immigrant youth that frame them not as deficient victims, but as resilient people who recognize the incongruities in

their experiences—and make sense of, cope with, and resist those incongruities in ways that “affir[m] their humanity in the face of its violent denial” (Carpio, 2008, p. 5).

We also need to investigate what happens when youth leave the barred rooms of co-ethnic spaces. How does the laughter that happens within barred room transform the status quo outside of these spaces? How does youths’ laughter transform what happens in ethnically integrated spaces? As Reagon (1983) has observed, eventually we need to leave barred rooms in order to engage in the collation work that will transform our realities. Education researchers need to better understand the complexities of coming and going between these spaces, and how laughter mediates these transitions for youth, communities, and teachers.

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## Appendix A

### Sample Youth Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me how long you've been involved with ICS.
2. What different classes have you taken at ICS over the years? What other roles have you had?
3. What classes are you taking now? Please describe how you selected these classes.
4. How does it feel to be involved at ICS? What makes you continue to be involved?
5. What competing roles or interests do you have in your life? Student, athlete, after school activities?
6. Please describe your weekday school (name, grade levels, etc.).
7. I'm going to ask you a few questions about the LC. In your opinion, what is the purpose of the LC? In other words, what do you hope to accomplish by being involved in the class?
8. I've noticed that people laugh a lot in our literature class. Tell me about this. What's the role of humor in our class? What does it do?
9. Sometimes kids in our class are able to laugh and joke about topics that some people might see as serious (like stereotypes about Indians, for example). What's your understanding of this?
10. Who else uses humor effectively in our class? What makes them funny?
11. Do you laugh in other spaces in ICS?

## **Appendix B**

### **Sample Co-Teacher Interview Protocol**

1. Please tell me how long you've been involved with ICS.
2. How did you first become involved? What different roles have you played?
3. How does it make you feel to be involved at ICS? Why do you continue to be involved?
4. I'm going to ask you a few questions about the literature class. In your opinion, what is the purpose, or the purposes, of the literature class? In other words, what do you hope to accomplish in teaching the class? What do you hope students will learn?
5. How would you characterize our lesson planning process?
6. How do youth respond to curriculum that incorporates their lived experiences? How do their responses differ when the classroom discussions do not incorporate their experiences?
7. Think back over the past few weeks to any teaching moments that have stood out for you. Please describe those moments.
8. Describe what it is like for you to facilitate discussions that involve talking about race.
9. How important is it for students to have a place to talk about race in the United States?



## **Appendix C**

### **Sample Adult Interview Protocol**

1. Please tell me how long you've been involved with ICS.
2. How did you first become involved?
3. What different roles have you played?
4. How does it feel to be involved at ICS?
5. Why do you continue to be involved?
6. What competing roles do you have in your life?
7. (Please describe your family's connection to India.)
8. Tell me about the history of ICS. How and why did it begin?
9. How has the organization changed over the years?
10. How do you explain the increase in ICS registrations this year? (100-200 students)
11. How has the increased size of ICS impacted its operations (teaching and learning)?
12. Describe what it's like to hold ICS in a borrowed space.
13. What understanding/knowledge about India is ICS trying to teach youth?
14. Why is this particular kind of knowledge seen as important for the community?
15. Tell me about ACK stories. What significance do you think they have for your children?
16. I notice people at ICS laugh a lot and say clever things. What is the role of laughter and wit in the ICS community?

## Appendix D

### Coding Guide

| Description   | Major, Minor, and Sub-Minor Codes  |
|---|--|
| <p><i>Talk and Interactions in the Literature Classroom</i></p> | <p><b>Belonging and Not Belonging</b><br/>           Actions and Expressions of Affinity<br/>               Wanting to be with Friends<br/>           Comments about Cliques<br/>           Being Apart from the Group</p> <p><b>Being Positioned as Intelligent</b><br/>           Manasa Positioned as Intelligent<br/>           Ravi Positioned as Intelligent</p> <p><b>Cell Phones, Smart Phones, iPods, and Texting</b></p> <p><b>Expressing Pride in Being Indian</b><br/>           Rejecting Aruna from <i>Aruna's Journeys</i></p> <p><b>Classroom Structure and Atmosphere</b></p> <p><b>Youth Managing Each Other</b><br/>           Holding the Floor<br/>           Not Holding the Floor<br/>           Disagreeing<br/>           Helping Others Get Heard<br/>           Youth Policing Each Other<br/>           Instances of Silence or Very Little Crosstalk<br/>           Promoting Interaction or Participation<br/>               Bollywood Film Viewing as Participatory<br/>           Perceived Loudness and Overlapping Talk<br/>           Identification of and Responses to Socializing in the Classroom</p> <p><b>Laughing and Laughter</b><br/>           Laughing in the Context of Critical Issues Talk/Framing Critical Issues as Humorous<br/>               ABCD<br/>               Ambiguous Ethnic or Racial Identity<br/>               Arranged Marriage<br/>               Cultural Identity<br/>               “Dot or Feather”<br/>               Gender<br/>               Indian Accents<br/>               Model Minority Stereotype<br/>               National Pride<br/>               Navigating Parental Expectations<br/>               Others’ Images of and Ideas About Indians<br/>               Race and Racism<br/>               Religion<br/>               The Dot<br/>               What Indians are Like<br/>           Laughing at or through Frustrations</p> |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | <p>Sarah Laughing with Diya<br/>Laughing with Peers</p> <p><b>Promoting Levity or Wanting to Have Fun</b></p> <p><b>Wit, Jokes, Joking, Sarcasm and Humor</b><br/>Ravi Positioned as Humorous<br/>Other Interactions Involving Ravi<br/>It Depends on Personality</p> <p><b>Talking about Critical Issues</b><br/>Ambiguous Racial or Ethnic Identity<br/>Race and Racism<br/>Expectations of Smartness, Grades, and Parents<br/>Religion<br/>Being a Minority<br/>How Indians are Portrayed in the Media and Understood by Non-Indians<br/>Multilingual Identities<br/>Cultural Identity<br/>Reading and Not Reading Books about India and Indians<br/>What Indians are Like<br/>ABCD<br/>The Dot<br/>Arranged Marriage<br/>Gender<br/>Indians Positioned as Foreign<br/>Expressing Stress About Maintaining Culture<br/>Learning Disabilities and Not Fitting In</p> <p><b>Reasons for Participating in the Literature Class</b></p> |
| <p><i>Youths' and Adults' Experiences within the Wider Organization</i></p> | <p><b>Entry into ICS</b></p> <p><b>Family Space</b><br/>Parents as Teachers<br/>Intergenerational Space<br/>Referring to the Organization as a Family</p> <p><b>Creating a “Mini-India”</b><br/>Learning about Hinduism<br/>Making Connections to India<br/>Morals<br/>Promoting Indian Language Education and Multilingual Communication<br/>Multilingual Identities<br/>Promoting Involvement with Indian Arts<br/>Promoting Knowledge of India’s History<br/>Promoting National Knowledge<br/>Expressing Pride in India and Being Indian<br/>Feeling Obligated to Continue Culture</p> <p><b>Having Fun, Promoting Levity, Laughter, Wit, Joking</b><br/>Adults Using Humor and Wit<br/>Promoting Levity through Clothing and Material Objects</p>  |

|   |   |
|---|---|
|   | <p>Skits and Games</p> <p><b>Gendered Spaces</b></p> <p><b>Seeing the Organization as Chaotic</b></p> <p><b>Reaching Out to the Larger Community</b></p> <p><b>The Significance of Participating in a Co-Ethnic Space</b><br/> A Sense of Belonging<br/> Relating to Others<br/> Feeling Relaxed</p> <p><b>Social Networking</b></p> <p><b>Families and Youth Connecting Outside of the Organization</b></p>  |
| <p><i>Youths' Interactions within the Organization, but Outside of the Literature Classroom</i></p> | <p><b>Phones, Devices, and Texting</b></p> <p><b>Having Fun</b></p> <p><b>Not Smiling, Not Having Fun</b></p> <p><b>Boredom</b></p> <p><b>Wit, Humor, and Joking</b></p> <p><b>Laughing with Peers</b></p> <p><b>Dance</b></p> <p><b>Expressions and Actions of Affinity</b><br/> Friendships and Wanting to be with Friends</p> <p><b>Being Apart from the Group</b></p> <p><b>Talking about Critical Issues</b><br/> Indian Parents<br/> Indian Accents<br/> Smart Asians<br/> Identity</p> |
| <p><i>Coping with Contingencies within the Organization</i></p>                                     | <p><b>Borrowed Space</b></p> <p><b>Growing Enrollment within the Organization</b><br/> Attempting to Implement Structure<br/> Explanations of Why the Organization is Growing</p> <p><b>Missed Classes</b></p> <p><b>Competing Activities</b><br/> Scheduling Conflicts<br/> Youth and Busy Outside Lives</p>   |

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  | <b>Perceived Lack of Appropriate Pedagogy or Resources</b>  |
| <i>Youths' Perceptions of their Weekday School Experiences</i> | <b>Being Indian in School</b><br>Highlighting Difference<br>Not Wanting to be Different or to Reinforce Stereotypes<br><br><b>Curricular Marginalization</b><br><br><b>Talking about Race</b><br><br><b>Perceived Stereotypes about Indians</b> |