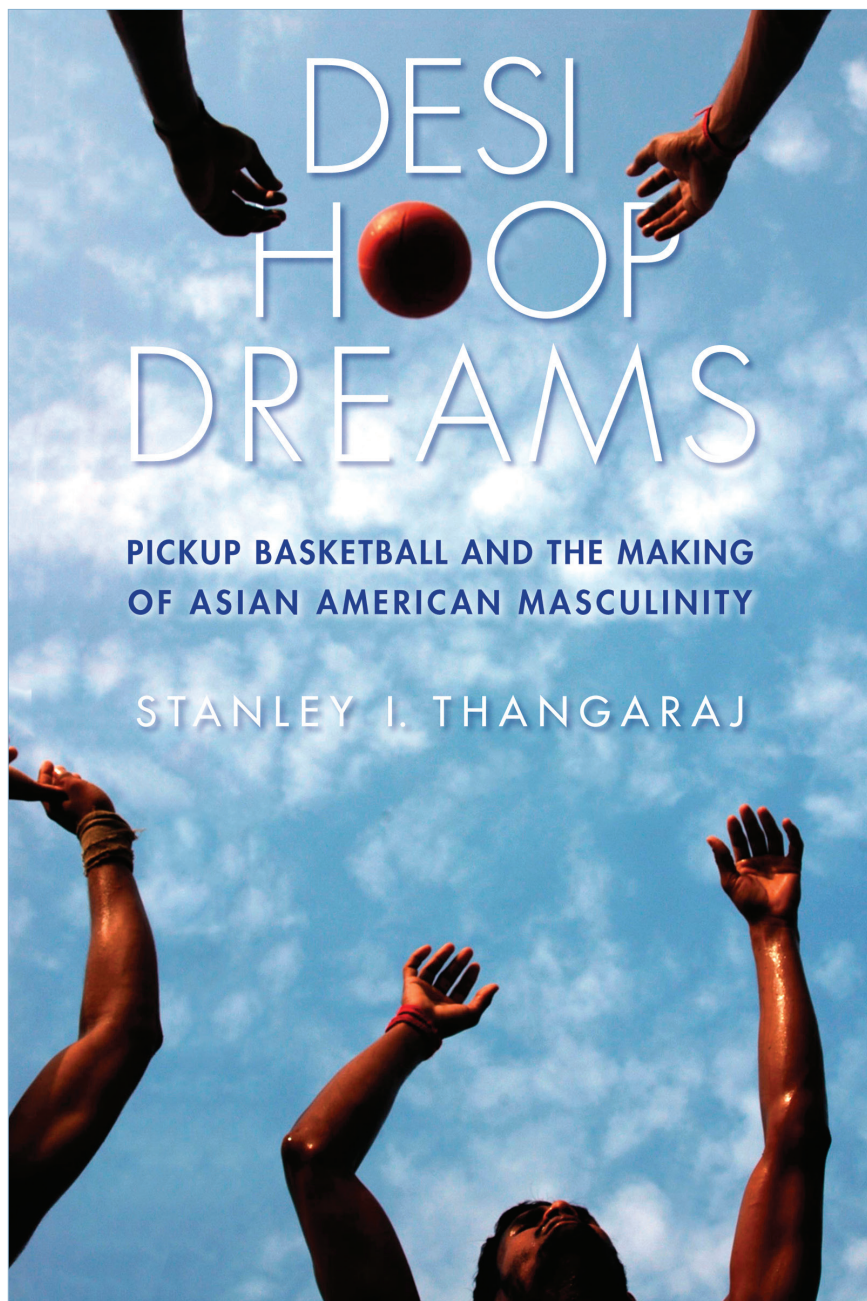


DESI HOOP DREAMS

PICKUP BASKETBALL AND THE MAKING OF SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN MASCULINITY

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



South Asian American men are not usually depicted as ideal American men. They struggle against popular representations as either threatening terrorists or geeky, effeminate computer geniuses. To combat such stereotypes, some use sports as a means of performing a distinctly American masculinity. *Desi Hoop Dreams* focuses on South Asian-only basketball leagues common in most major U.S. and Canadian cities, to show that basketball, for these South Asian American players is not simply a whimsical hobby, but a means to navigate and express their identities in 21st century America.

The participation of young men in basketball is one platform among many for performing South Asian American identity. South Asian-only leagues and tournaments become spaces in which to negotiate the relationships between masculinity, race, and nation. When faced with stereotypes that portray them as effeminate, players perform sporting feats on the court to represent themselves as athletic. And though they draw on black cultural styles, they carefully set themselves off from African American players, who are deemed “too aggressive.” Accordingly, the same categories of their own marginalization—masculinity, race, class, and sexuality—are those through which South Asian American men exclude women, queer masculinities, and working-class masculinities, along with other racialized masculinities, in their effort to lay claim to cultural citizenship.

One of the first works on masculinity formation and sport participation in South Asian American communities, *Desi Hoop Dreams* focuses on an American popular sport to analyze the dilemma of belonging within South Asian America in particular and in the U.S. in general.

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Introduction

SUMMARY

In the opening chapter, we come across the passions young South Asian American men demonstrate during everyday encounters with basketball. These passions and this affinity to this American sport is not a whimsical and irrelevant connection. By examining these ordinary practices within sporting cultures, we can provide extra-ordinary insights into South Asian American life and the gendered identity formations. Thus, we see how racialization is a gendered process where South Asian American masculinity is put in relation to other racialized masculinities. In the process, we see how gender, specifically masculinity, is brought into being through disciplinary and regulating force. To “man up” means that there are various other parallel lines of gender, sexuality, class, and race that must also be created. Furthermore, one must create co-ethnic spaces as the viable means to enter into acceptable terrain of an American sporting masculinity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- With the case of Khan’s quote about masculinity, how can we make sense of how masculinity never exists in isolation and is always in relation to other categories such as femininity, race, and class?
- What are some contradictions you see in the very idea of “browning out to man up”? What does this tell us about conceptions of normative masculinity? How does this relate to “g-man”?

ACTIVITY

- Show clips from Ursula Liang’s movie “g-man” which talks about a different conception of volleyball in New York’s Chinatown.

Everyday Play: The Formation of Desi-Up Basketball

SUMMARY

As the book aims to decipher the everyday practices of South Asian American masculinity, each chapter details one segment and experience of sport and leisure. Whereas pick-up basketball is often overlooked as inconsequential, the commitment young South Asian American men have to it demonstrates key elements of social formation and co-ethnic intimacy in a large multi-racial city of Atlanta. Pick-up basketball presents one way to provide different and differential claims to the city. Through intentionally organizing pick-up basketball games, South Asian American basketball players create opportunities to enjoy co-ethnic socializing while putting into place this alternate time and space outside of their busy work and family lives. We see in this chapter the formation of the team Atlanta Outcasts, their early basketball lives at the mosque, and the ways in which their pick-up games locate these Muslim Pakistani American men into a larger geo-political and racial landscape in the U.S. South. While playing pick-up basketball, they get to indulge in their desires. They also get to partake of practices of toughness and aggression that would not be possible in other social venues. Through such brown out basketball, they indulge in pleasures of co-ethnic basketball. Yet, these pleasures centered in individual moments of one-on-one basketball also take shape by racially regulating acceptable masculinity and distancing from femininity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the possible meanings of Outcasts? How is it related to masculinity and race?
- How does the social network form during Monday/Thursday night pick-up basketball? How does class and race structure this network?
- What are the freedoms of play present in pick-up basketball where Daniel does not have to play a “role”?

ACTIVITY

- All colleges and universities have gyms with basketball courts. The basketball courts are sites of regular interaction between various students, mostly men. Take the class to the gym and observe the dynamics of pick-up basketball. Who are the people there? Is it just students? How are teams assembled?

Who is Desi?: Understanding Organized Brown Out Basketball

SUMMARY

Organized basketball is a level of basketball with much clearer rules, formats, and officials to monitor the play. Unlike pick-up basketball, teams already arrive formed and compete against other teams from around the U.S. and Canada. Within Indo-Pak Basketball tournaments, although certain exceptional individuals stand out in the crowd, it is team-oriented basketball where the stakes and rewards are for teams. Teams manage the larger terrain of South Asian America through complicated social interactions that go across the religious and ethnic diametric oppositions often found back in South Asia. In the process, the teams claim and represent their cities at Indo-Pak Basketball tournaments. While hooping for status as teams and as cities, the very formation of the teams shows shared conceptions of masculinity. Although teams want to separate themselves from each other and show dominance, most teams engaged with various forms of popular culture and popular media to produce team names. Thus, within Indo-Pak Basketball, there are many moments where a kind of experience of sameness as South Asian Americans is facilitated through team names and the intentional structuring of the physical space.

At these moments of sameness, there is still a compelling desire to differentiate teams and individuals from each other. The types of plays on the court, the victories, and the losses serve the purpose of producing multiple performances of masculinity. Players use a wide range of athletic plays and bodily comportment to decode the parameters of masculinity while showing the numerous athletic possibilities of these brown bodies. As they show and take pleasure in physical abilities, the very practice of masculinity also takes relation to certain South Asian Americans who are seen as “blackened” and with the exclusion or policing of certain racialized black men. Thus, even in this co-ethnic space, performances of masculinity are racially coded.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- We see the particular organization of life in Bali through Geertz’s rich ethnographic description of the cockfight, what ways can we then use that Geertzian model and then analyze South Asian American life and corresponding social organization of life?
- What pleasures do participants derive?
- What are the athletic achievements and possibilities at play and how do they relate to corresponding mainstream racializations as “model minority,” or “terrorist”?

ACTIVITY

- Read the chapter on the “Balinese Cockfight” in Clifford Geertz’s (1973) *Interpretation of Cultures*.

Racial Ambiguity: Hoopin' in Other Ethnic Leagues

SUMMARY

South Asian American masculinity takes shape in relation to a wide assortment of racial masculinities. Thus, South Asian Americans do not position themselves only in relation to African Americans. As a result of the racial ambiguity and racial indeterminacy of South Asian Americans, they have various points of affiliation and identification with the categories of “Latino” and “Asian American.” They play in Asian American and Latino basketball leagues. Through such play, South Asian American men adjudicate similarities and difference with Asian Americans and Latinos while at the same moment claiming (partial) membership. The creation of local basketball heroes becomes one moment in which South Asian Americans are dispelled from these categories. Their racial identification becomes clear when creating the templates of ideal Asian American and Latino sporting heroes.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the multiple and contradictory ways that blackness takes shape and form on the Asian American and Latino court?
- In comparison to “9-Man,” what are the origins of such exclusive co-ethnic spaces?
- In what ways does race and gender pop up with relation to culture and with regard to biological classifications of race?

ACTIVITY

- Watch documentary film “9-Man” by Ursula Liang.

Getting “Digits”: Playing with Heterosexuality and Other Sites of Leisure

SUMMARY

South Asian American masculinities are not contained to only the basketball court. Most Indo-Pak Basketball tournaments also contain an after-party and delve into the local nightlife of the hosting city. Thus, the leisure spaces of nightlife provide one important realm where South Asian American men comport themselves similarly and differently than what they did on the basketball court. Whereas there are mostly male-on-male social interactions and physical intimacy on the basketball, the players directly interact with women with parties and local nightlife. At private parties, the dance club scene, and strip clubs, young South Asian American men play with masculinity in direction relationship to sexuality. They perform various mode of “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1991) and aim for sexual encounters with certain types of racialized women. At the same time, there are physical interactions with other South Asian American men at the party scene and it is through fights. The same kinds of physical intimacy cannot be translated onto the dance clubs where it would be read outside the bounds of heterosexual masculinity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the sexualized hierarchies that one sees across the dance party and club scene? How does it relate to Kimberly Hoang’s analysis of the sex industry in Vietnam?
- What are the ways in which the physical comportment at the clubs is carefully managed? How does it differ from the physical interactions on the basketball court?
- With regard to “The Guru,” how can we carefully analyze the image of the new immigrant and Mustafa’s disclaimer about FOBs? How is desi cool then produced by young men like Mahmoud, Mustafa, and Imran?

ACTIVITY

- Read chapters 3 and 4 in Kimberly Hoang’s book *Dealing in Desire* (University of California Press, 2015). Watch the movie titled “The Guru.”

Breaking the Cycle: The Ballplayer Posture and Performances of Exclusion

SUMMARY

We see in chapter four one of the first very clear examples of gender integrated spaces and the formation of South Asian American masculinity in relation to femininity and heterosexuality. As a result, femininity and homosexuality (same-sex desire) are seen as antithetical to South Asian American sporting masculinity. Yet, femininity and homosexuality, contradictorily, are key governing, structuring, and regulating forces of heterosexual masculinity. The young men police their leisure spaces of play and dancing to make sure that women enter only in certain capacities. Gay men are marginalized and excluded from sporting activities as their very presence would dismantle the taken for granted link between male bodies and heterosexuality. With gay men excluded from the sporting space, South Asian American men ironically conjure up gayness in order to give substance to it and to heterosexuality. Practices of “playing gay” destabilizes the very category of masculinity that needs “gayness” as its opposite. In the process of critically examining these practices, we see how same-sex desire and femininity take shape. However, we must not make gay men and women to be powerless dupes in the game of South Asian American masculinity. They find their own ways of finding spaces and expressing agency within that same rubric of South Asian American masculinity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What do you see as the relationships, in lines with Johnson’s chapter, between masculinity and heterosexuality?
- Why does homosexuality exist in this staunching heterosexual space? What does that tell us about heterosexual masculinity in Asian American diasporas?
- How do the black gay men at the Waffle House and the trans people of color in “Paris is Burning” complicate the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality?

ACTIVITY

- Read chapter on sexuality and black men playing gay in E. Patrick Johnson’s *Appropriating Blackness*. Watch the first 45 minutes of movie “Paris is Burning.” Watch the film “Saving Face.”

Conclusion

SUMMARY

There is a link between these co-ethnic exclusive performances of sporting masculinity and the larger dictates in South Asian America and U.S. society about respectable gendered identities. The very exclusiveness of brown out basketball limits its translation to larger social spaces. In the process, the young men, while desiring and taking pleasure in their own bodies, desire a mainstream desi hero who can undo the racializations.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How do race and gender intersect in the longing for a mainstream hero?
- What are the ways in which Jeremy Lin's popularity has racial, gendered, class, and sexual meanings? How is his iconicity positioned in relation to black athletes and in relation to former Chinese NBA player Yao Ming?

ACTIVITY

- "Living with Linsanity" *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

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