



Desi Divas: Political Activism in South Asian American Cultural Performances

Christine L. Garlough

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Desi Divas: Activism in South Asian American Cultural Performances is the product of five years of field research with progressive activists associated with the School for Indian Languages and Cultures (SILC), South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), the feminist dance collective Post Natyam, and the grassroots feminist political organization South Asian Sisters. Christine L. Garlough explores how traditional cultural forms may be critically appropriated by marginalized groups and used as rhetorical tools to promote deliberation and debate, spur understanding and connection, broaden political engagement, and advance particular social identities. Within this framework she examines how these performance activists advocate a political commitment to both justice and care, to both deliberative discussion and deeper understanding. To consider how this might happen in diasporic performance contexts, Garlough weaves together two lines of thinking. One grows from feminist theory and draws upon a core literature concerning the ethics of care. The other comes from rhetoric, philosophy, and political science literature on recognition and acknowledgment. This dual approach is used to reflect upon South Asian American women's performances that address pressing social problems related to gender inequality, immigration rights, ethnic stereotyping, hate crimes, and religious violence.

Case study chapters address the relatively unknown history of South Asian American rhetorical performances from the early 1800s to the present. Avant-garde feminist performances by the Post Natyam dance collective appropriate women's folk practices and Hindu goddess figures make rhetorical claims about hate crimes against South Asian Americans after 9/11. In *Yoni ki Bat* (a South Asian American version of *The Vagina Monologues*) a progressive performer transforms aspects of the Mahabharata narrative to address issues of sexual violence, such as incest and rape. Throughout the volume, Garlough argues that these performers rely on calls for acknowledgment that intertwine calls for justice and care. That is, they embed their testimony in traditional cultural forms to invite interest, reflection, and connection.

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