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The appearance of a man dressed as Jesus on the sidewalks of Devon Avenue in Chicago broke everyone’s rhythm on a languid Saturday in August 2009. The man was dressed in a long white robe and a golden cape. A giant cross hung from a chain around his neck, and he held a bound book called *Povitre Pustok*, a Konkani Bible written in Kannada script. In his right hand he carried a spear, the weapon of choice of Hindu gods. Almost everybody who passed the man skipped a beat in their step, stopped, turned, and stared, if only for a fraction of a second. His appearance generated so much interest because popular representations of Jesus in the United States are almost always white, sometimes blond and blue-eyed—not brown and swarthy with curly black hair.

The man walked over to a parade float sponsored by the Saint Thomas Syro-Malabar Cathedral of Chicago. There, other members of the congregation waited dressed in traditional costumes: the men wore the white *mundu*, a long, unstitched cloth wrapped around the waist; the women were clad in white and pale yellow silk saris with red and gold ornamental borders. The men seemed restless as they practiced playing their traditional *chenda* drums and as the women gathered in front or sat on the float holding brightly colored *muthukudas*, or festive umbrellas. Their garments and accoutrements represented a proud regional, linguistic, and religious heritage. The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church is one of the oldest Christian organizations in India, claiming as its
origin the landing of Saint Thomas the Apostle on the western Malabar Coast of India in 52 C.E. While in full communion with the Catholic Church, this eastern ecumenical organization has retained unique and distinct visual and material cultures and ecclesiastical practices. The immigrant community in Chicago actively maintains relations with the mother church in Kerala.

Devon Avenue was waking up that day in preparation for the India Independence Day Parade, an annual event that brings in large crowds and turns the street into a theatrical stage where choreographed activities honor the statehood of this South Asian nation. The parade celebrates ethnic unity and singularity, but its “perfect landscape” also renders visible the operations of power and social conflict that underpin immigrant life along Devon Avenue, including divisions of gender, age, ethnicity, class, and religion. In his performative moment, the man dressed as Jesus temporarily created a space in which he
presented a hybrid and partially indigenized image of Christ. He and his coreligionists were participants in a transnational presentation of complex identities held by immigrants from the South Asian diaspora—a performance involving multiple forms of belonging that transcended conventional borders of nation, geography, politics, and identity.²

This essay focuses on the India Independence Day parades in Chicago in 2009 and 2010 in order to explore questions of transnationalism, urbanism, identity, performance, and material culture. What *is* transnational identity, and how is it expressed in the space of the city? How do immigrants practice and reproduce complex subjectivity in everyday life? I am not as concerned about the production of transnational architecture or urbanism as I am interested in understanding how city spaces influence the crafting of transnational identities and practices: How can a quotidian street setting in Chicago actively shape the production and negotiation of belonging and peoplehood among
immigrants? I also explore embodied and sensate practices that took place during these events because focusing on the micropolitics of the parades reveals how material culture, activities, and experiences frame the participants' national and transnational identities. Indeed, individuals participating in this parade negotiate their identity in ways that complicate the very concept of "transnational" in studies of urbanism.³

A key aspect of my analysis is an examination of how the audience participated in this parade in diverse ways and how such participation rendered a very complex reality. First, as I carefully unravel and dissect these engagements, I hope to identify a complex choreography made of intentional, unintentional, accidental, and habitual acts. These acts, where the human body, the material world, activities, and events combined in contrapuntal motions, mediated the complex reality of the parade. Second, I examine the ethnic store-fronts and neighborhood block parties laid out within the strict organizing geometry and rationale of the American urban grid. How do we account for the location, the parade route, and the physical landscape in this story? What roles do the city streets, with their close-knit urban fabric and familiar parade material culture (floats, flags, fans, handouts), play in this account of place and identity? The material world remains central to this discussion because the physical setting of Devon Avenue speaks of values, cultural forms, and practices that are intensely local, while the rhetoric and name of the parade refer to a global diaspora. Third, in order to excavate beyond the binaries of transnational thinking—that is, to go beyond a conversation around "nation one plus nation two"—this chapter switches its scale of analysis from the national to the intimate, focusing on tempo, pace, rhythm, and sensory atmospheres around everyday urban presentations of ethnic identity by immigrants. Such a focus begins with the somatic and affective engagement of the human body with its near environment. Granted, such a discussion may sidestep processes and powers that are larger than the individual—capitalism, neoliberal politics, and transnational economic and legal structures. Indeed, while these structural issues frame how everyday life is experienced and practiced, our focus on the body mediating these larger forces will help us focus on nitty-gritty issues of how transnational identities are produced, practiced, and sustained.

What is at stake here? What does this discussion tell us that accounts of transnationalism and everyday practices may not? My primary goal is to examine the unevenness of transnationalism. Different social groups and stakeholders do not share transnational urban practices in uniform and equal ways.
I also want to point out how the transnational framework renders certain in-group differences and social inequities invisible to us—contradictions that may be unveiled when we see this parade, or any event, through the frame and scale of the human body. Finally, I want to underscore that talk about transnational urbanism has always been about the social, the political, and the psychological. It has been about how human agents belong within multiple locales and how they re-create their worlds in more than one national space. The built environment typically enters this discussion as a by-product of culture, an artifact, or an empty container where life drama plays out. In this chapter, I intend to consider the built environment as an active agent, an “American actor” in an ever-evolving life drama.

The India Independence Day Parade

The India Independence Day parades are just the most recent incarnations of a long history of ethnic parades in Chicago; as early as 1843 the Saint Patrick’s Day parade became a regular event in the city. Annis Sengupta argues that parades like these have served as “an integral part of Chicago’s urban life,” offering “a window into the transformation of nationalism among America’s immigrant populations.” The rationale and choice of parade routes have changed over time, reflecting the development of immigration and ethnic demographics in the city. Current neighborhood ethnic parades are part of a post-1965 trend that exemplifies a distinctive form of “transnational political activism” among contemporary immigrants in Chicago. Comparing current parades to those in previous eras, Sengupta asserts that recent parades are mostly located in ethnic neighborhoods. These events “embody the transnational aspirations of local ethnic communities” and “showcase the desire of ethnic communities to maintain dual national loyalties and retain transnational citizenship rights.”

In order to explain how the location of the parades and the rationales for organizing them changed over time, Sengupta identifies three distinct historic periods of parading in Chicago. The first era, which began around 1860 following a surge in immigration and urban population growth, often “highlighted immigrant participation in military and civic organizations and associations,” as well as “promoting national aspirations for their homelands modeled in part on the American revolutionary experience.” By the year 1900 there were recurring parades celebrating European ethnic groups, and three
among them—the Irish, Italians, and Greeks—paraded downtown. For many of these groups, including the Irish and the Norwegians, parades demonstrated their national identity and their political aspirations for their homelands; but they also used displays of ethnic militia and police and fire departments to highlight their groups' contributions to life in Chicago. These parades therefore became a way for European immigrants in the twentieth century to advocate for greater inclusion in the host society.7

The second era of parading began in 1950 and continued into the 1960s. During this second period, Mayor Richard Daley promoted downtown ethnic parades in order to project Chicago as a multicultural, multiethnic metropolis. As a result, such parades proliferated, and according to Sengupta, this "also meant that the ethnic identity expressed in the parade was largely divorced from the community boundaries within which ethnic cultural identity was being preserved such as neighborhoods, religious organizations, families, and cultural associations."8

The third era was characterized by a resurgence of parades that took place in neighborhoods and were predominantly organized by the nonwhite ethnic communities whose populations exploded after the 1965 immigration law removed exclusionary rules that had sought to keep nonwhite immigrants from entering the U.S. mainland. Newcomers from East Asia, South Asia, Mexico, and Central and South America have since settled in Chicago neighborhoods and organized their own ethnic parades to mark their presence. By showcasing community business leaders, many of whom are leading organizers and sponsors, these parades highlight the economic power of the community and advertise ethnic businesses. Local government officials join these parades, their presence legitimizing the visibility and power of the parade organizers and sponsors. In this way, neighborhood parades continue to serve as visual displays of immigrant assimilation into American life.

What makes this third era distinct is the transnational politics of the parades. The organizers of neighborhood ethnic parades commemorating India Independence Day or Mexican Independence Day also invite cultural and political leaders from their native countries, consulates, and embassies. Sengupta's research demonstrates how parade organizers of the India Independence Day Parade often coordinate visits to India by Chicago government officials, influence and fund Indian political parties, and conduct transnational economic and trade transactions between India and the United States. Their transnational activities occasionally lead to conflict, as was seen during the 2009 parade when tension between the organizers, the Federation
of Indian Associations (FIA) and the Indian Consulate General in Chicago, led to the absence of any official representation from the Indian consulate in the event. The following discussion of representations, activities, and social dynamics during the India Independence Day Parade therefore serves as a good case study of the transnational politics, culture, and identity of contemporary Indian immigrants in Chicago.

The Devon Avenue India Independence Day Parade started in 1995 after the event moved from its original downtown location. This northward shift to the West Ridge neighborhood corroborates Sengupta’s periodization of Chicago parades. By the 2000s, the parade had become an extraordinary display along Devon Avenue, the center of Chicago’s most prominent South Asian immigrant neighborhood. The procession was routed as a national day celebration rather than as an ethnic, cultural, or religious event. However, the floats said nothing of the political, economic, or military might of the Indian state. Instead, they represented businesses, religions, languages, and cultures and emphasized the transnational and global networks that sustain the Indian diaspora. If this public celebration of Indian nationhood seemed ambiguous, odd, or out of place, the rationale behind the event got murkier as the parade paid tribute to forms of identity and served a variety of purposes that may have had nothing to do with what it purported to commemorate.

For instance, the 2009 and 2010 parades were filled with advertisements for banks, international airlines, money exchange companies, and travel agents—all of which stridently and persistently addressed their audiences as global or diasporic consumers rather than as immigrants from India. The placement and presentation of these businesses’ floats were part of a carefully crafted project to encourage the immigrant audience to become loyal customers irrespective of where they lived. Western Union claimed to keep immigrant families connected across distances: “Yes! I can send money to my loved ones from anywhere!” (emphasis mine).9

The parade was also part of the social life of a local marketplace. Just as transnational corporations sponsored floats, nearby stores used the event to attract customers, many of whom had come from the Greater Chicago region and from the neighboring states of Wisconsin, Iowa, and Indiana. Street-side activities and storefront decorations addressed the local ethnic consumer, and a careful examination of these spaces showed the role of “ethnic entrepreneurs” in the success of the parade.10 Yet the transactions in this marketplace went beyond the formal business conducted in the stores and included the informal transactions and street-side conviviality of peddlers,
hucksters, and hawkers. This juxtaposition of ethnic stores and informal hucksters, as we shall see, provided a glimpse into alternative practices in the marketplace during the parade.

Within the political context of Chicago, the parade also appealed to the audience as potential voters within the municipal polity. Local politicians courted the audience with flyers, showered them with gifts, and eagerly shook their hands during the parade. Audience members sportingly played the role of citizens within a body politic as they chatted about civic issues and governance. The parade was a site for intragroup politics as well. The parade organizers were movers and shakers within the immigrant community, and their presence in this parade as leaders and power brokers was not lost on the audience.

And then the people, the bodies, the masses: the appearance of so many people of color in ethnic dress was a sight that was out of place for most generic Chicago neighborhoods. And as if on cue, neighborhood groups made up of white middle-class residents set up stalls to connect with their “new” neighbors. They were a well-meaning lot, but the messages that their activities sent out were clearly didactic and spoke of assimilation, homeownership,
conviviality, and domesticity. Others present at the parade—the Mexican food vendors, the Muslim women in hijabs, and the elderly—seemed out of place for different reasons: because their presence questioned the framing of this event as prosperous, youthful, culturally homogeneous, and predominantly Hindu.

Devon Avenue: The Role of the Physical Context

The site and location of the parade are essential elements in understanding its many meanings. Devon is often portrayed as a homogenous ethnic enclave—Little India, an urban village or a territorially defined neighborhood where one group of immigrants have concentrated their residential, cultural, economic, and political institutions. But this is a description of a fictitious landscape that merely organizes an untidy reality for tour groups and parades. It does what social categories and cultural landscapes often do: hide the messy underbelly of belonging and identity under neat categories and ordered geographies.

After major changes in U.S. immigration laws in 1965, immigrants from the South Asian subcontinent were admitted into the country in far greater numbers, and by the 1990s Devon Avenue was known as an ethnic Indian retail
street. But the physical character of this street had for many decades been conducive to immigrants and ethnic groups because it accommodated streams of new residents and supported a variety of startup businesses typical of neighborhoods that serve as immigrant ports of entry. The street was heavily Jewish until the mid-1960s, and remnants of Jewish delicatessens and synagogues pepper the neighborhood. The buildings have been reoccupied and repurposed by newcomers, and by the 1980s, the neighborhood's older Jewish denizens had moved to the adjacent suburb of Skokie or to the northern edge of West Ridge, to be succeeded by South Asian immigrants.\textsuperscript{11} Despite a large number of South Asian immigrant stores, this street remains, in reality, a more multicultural and multiethnic space. Within a decade, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian Jewish émigrés arrived and opened newer stores. One also finds more recent businesses with proprietors who hail from Mexico and Central America, as well as older Assyrian cultural institutions. The street's abundant signage, which clamors for the attention of the "shopper in a car," is heavily South Asian, rendering these other groups largely invisible. But if one looks at Devon's people and storefronts more carefully, from the vantage point of a pedestrian—what I will call the street-side view—then the current diversity of residents becomes evident.\textsuperscript{12}

Today, the urban grid, landownership practices, and tax financing have accentuated the presence in one neighborhood of multiple conflicting worlds—a multiethnic marketplace, a white middle-class residential bungalow district, and an ethnic residential enclave. Often these different worlds coexist with limited interaction. The area's longtime white residents frequently speak of a lack of interaction between the neighbors and the immigrants. They protest that storeowners are focused on their businesses and have no respect for the residents living north and south of the retail district. These residents also complain to city authorities about the absentee landlords and crowded rental units along Ridge Avenue, arguing that the conditions of life and living in these spaces are incompatible with the family-oriented, domestic gentility of the Rogers Park and West Ridge communities.\textsuperscript{13} (These grievances are not new; they existed when Jewish stores lined the street and middle- and upper-middle-class Jewish families lived on different sides of California Avenue.)\textsuperscript{14}

Meanwhile, the internal diversity of South Asian immigrants is hidden by the visually homogeneous character of store signage along Devon Avenue. If you ask a local storeowner about the street's demographics, the stock answer is that everything east of Western Avenue is Pakistani and everything
west, between Western Avenue and California Avenue, is Indian. Even the City of Chicago has used this logic in vesting honorific titles along the street, and the neighborhood’s parades reenact this mythical geographical logic that divides the street along national lines. The India Independence Day Parade route begins at the crossing of Western Avenue and Devon Avenue and terminates on California Avenue and Devon Avenue. This stretch of Devon Avenue was given the honorary designation of “Gandhi Marg” in 1991 following an ordinance sponsored by Alderman Bernard Stone to honor Mahatma Gandhi and to acknowledge the presence of the Indian immigrant community. Immediately following this renaming, the stretch of Devon Avenue between Western Avenue and North Damen Avenue was named after Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder and first governor-general of Pakistan. The Pakistan Independence Day Parade courses its way on the opposite end of Devon, beginning at Ridge and ending on Western. More than sixty years after independence, on a street thousands of miles away from the South Asian subcontinent, the geography of the parades resurrects the fratricidal divide that partitioned the two countries in 1947.

This is particularly ironic because the cognitive map that divides Devon between Indians and Pakistanis is factually incorrect. Neither the national origins of storeowners nor the constantly changing demographics of the street organize themselves so neatly. There are Indian American stores on the eastern side and Pakistani American stores in the western section; and more recent Bangladeshi-owned stores appear and disappear with regularity along the street.

Nationality is not the logic that explains the layout of Devon Avenue. Rather, the layout is the product of immigrant cultures driven by automobility and class mobility. The street’s concentration of South Asian stores is patronized by middle-class and well-to-do South Asians who live in the suburbs. Many off-site customers also come from Wisconsin, Indiana, and Iowa—a dispersed middle- and upper-class landscape of the kind that Wei Li describes in her work on ethnoburbs. However, a large number of newly arrived, economically vulnerable, working-class South Asians live in the adjoining neighborhood. They are seldom mentioned in studies and academic accounts of Devon Avenue, and they remain invisible in community events and celebrations. Since the 1980s a large number of Muslim immigrants from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have migrated into this neighborhood and joined the many South Asian elderly who were already present in the area. The allegiances and origins of all these residents and property owners cut across
multiple permutations—Indian American, Indian Pakistani, Pakistani American, Bangladeshi American, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi. The list is never-ending and a single individual or family may display multiple backgrounds and origins.

Ultimately, the frequency of business turnover, store size, and real estate prices determine the geography along Devon Avenue. The distinctive elongated, gridded layout of the properties along Devon Avenue distinguishes the grain of the street from that of the adjacent neighborhoods. The residential grid remains disconnected from the street grid because they are dimensionally different from each other. By that I mean that Devon Avenue is made of property lots whose rectangular footprints are deeper than the bungalow lots along the neighborhood streets. The upper stories (if any) of the buildings located on Devon Avenue house apartments, and the street level is rented out

Figure 8.5. This “figure-ground” diagram shows the footprint of buildings in black and streets and open spaces in white. Such a diagram helps understand the built and unbuilt fabric of the city. It shows that the shapes of buildings facing Devon Avenue are rectangular and elongated, with the narrow sides facing the main street. The homes along the interior streets are smaller in size and produce a different pattern. Figure-ground by Kelly Adrian with assistance from faculty and students participating in the 2008 Devon Avenue studio as a part of Architecture 855 (Spring 2008), University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.
to stores. The frontage width of a store is narrower than the apartments above, and as a result each building has multiple store spaces. When a business grows and prospers, the storeowner tends to take over the next-door space, spreading out in the process. Thus the street itself accommodates multiple forms and sizes of businesses. Smaller sandwiched stores are run by new and poorer entrepreneurs, while corner properties and large blocks are owned by more established businesses. In the last decade many recent immigrants have used this neighborhood as a launching pad for their lives in the United States, and as a result there is a constant turnover of immigrant residents in the area. The newcomers live in affordable housing rented out from landowners and slumlords also of South Asian origin. The landlords and storeowners have moved up in the class hierarchy by migrating out to Greater Chicago suburbs while renting out their properties along Devon Avenue.

In order to understand this more disarrayed reality, we will need to change our point of view from the organized perspective of a map—a view from the top—to the more intimate standpoint of a human bystander on the sidewalk watching the parade—the street-side view. From this vantage point, national identity and transnational belonging seem more complicated. It is a point of view that will let us into a "dance of life" that unfolded along this street.

The Street-Side View: The Experience of the Parade

During the 2009 parade, the floats were ready and waiting an hour before noon, decked with green, white, and orange vinyl floral sheeting representing the Indian tricolor. The floats were generic American parade material culture rented out for a day; the following day, during the Pakistan Independence Day Parade, the same floats would reappear decked in the green of the Pakistani flag. The importance of these generic elements of American parade culture in re-creating this ethno-national moment is part of my argument about transnational practices. The plastic flags, vinyl tents, Greek Ionic facades on the floats, and street-side crowd-control railings made this event little different from a local Fourth of July parade. The street setting previously described resembled any American ethnic retail street, such as nearby Argyle Boulevard. What, then, made this parade Indian? I argue that it was the lived ambience of this event, produced by the acts, behavior, appearance, and pace of the parade participants, that made it an Indian parade.
People wearing traditional costumes and ethnic dress stood in front of the floats taking photographs, chatting with friends, and filling water bottles to last the entire eight-city-block-long route. There were floats representing specific regional, religious, cultural, and linguistic groups from India and its diaspora. Floats sponsored by airlines, money transfer agencies, insurance companies, and banks advertised transnational businesses catering to immigrants. They included social services, nonprofit groups, and travel services to India. Also present were floats sponsored by medical and immigration law firms advertising their services to the local community. Elected representatives, local politicians, officials from the aldermanic district, and judges also joined the parade. The pace on the street was different today as storeowners opened their shutters late and carefully laid out chairs in front of their storefronts for family members and visiting friends to watch the parade. By noon, the sun was high. Crowds of bystanders collected in front of the stores along the sidewalks. Many leaned against the rails along the sidewalks, while others stood under awnings. These rails were put in by the city, and paid for by the parade organizers, as crowd-control measures. On the street, at the crossing of Western and Devon Avenues, grand masters, parade coordinators, community leaders, and anxious organizers tried to begin the procession. The crowd was getting restless since there was no sign of the advertised grandmaster.

For the previous few months, posters and advertisements had declared that the parade’s grandmaster would be a famous Bollywood superstar named Sharukh Khan. Snaring him was quite an achievement for Niranjan Shah, CEO of the Chicago-based Globetrotters Engineering Corporation, and Dr. Hyder Mohammad, president of the FIA, since Khan’s presence would give legitimacy and visibility to the event they had planned and the organizations they led. An emerging rivalry between various ethnic associations in Chicago had come to the fore that year. A splinter group of the FIA had attempted to host a parallel parade, but was denied permission by the City of Chicago; they threatened to take legal action. In a departure from past practice, Indian consular officials were missing from this parade due to the misunderstanding mentioned previously. Meanwhile, another group, the Association of Indians in America, had organized a rival India Independence Day event a few days earlier in Chicago’s downtown. State political bigwigs and consular officers from countries such as Serbia, the Czech Republic, Honduras, the Philippines, and Ireland had attended that event.

Soon the word passed that Sharukh Khan would not attend. He had been temporarily detained at New York immigration a day earlier, held and
questioned because of his Muslim name. This profiling event created a firestorm of sorts between the United States and India. It was part of the new regime of border control and racial profiling that emerged after 9/11, a sign of a new world of transnational politics and border control that sought to limit the freedom and mobility of migrants. It ultimately turned out to be a case of mistaken identity: Khan, whose name is very common among South Asians, was held because that same name appeared on a no-fly list. The larger world of geopolitics and national security had thus impacted the performance of identity and belonging on Devon Avenue.

The problems would soon multiply. Governor Pat Quinn would gently refuse to serve as a grand marshal, and Niranjan Shah would be tainted by Governor Rod Blagojevich’s corruption scandal. Nevertheless, the Federation of Indian Associations would once again show its political and economic clout
by getting Alexi Giannoulis, Illinois state treasurer and U.S. Senate nominee, to lead the parade at the last minute.

As the day proceeded in 2009, individual floats moved sequentially from Western Avenue along Devon Avenue. The National Republic Bank of Chicago float rolled by. A group of animated elderly South Asians waved miniature Indian flags, and another group made up of young adults and children held up a banner advertising a local nonprofit’s offerings in immigration, citizenship benefits, legal services, and English language classes for new and elderly immigrants. An older man shouted nationalistic phrases from the float as it approached and went by, his piercing slogans including “Bharat mata ki jai,” “Bande Mataram,” “Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai,” “Sardar Patel ki Jai,” and “Jai Hind” (Salutation to Mother India; Long live mother; Victory to Mahatma Gandhi; Victory to Sardar Patel; Victory to India). Some, as if by rote, returned his gesture or completed the last part of the slogan. Another float sponsored by Globetrotters Engineering Company also shared space with Metropolitan Asian Family Services senior center members. Large swatches of bright tricolor enlivened the visual field while another animated older man walked alongside the float waving a big Indian national flag. He moved toward the audience, bringing the swirling, swooshing, vortex-like banner close to the bystanders lined up along the street. He came up to them and shouted partial and incomplete slogans, then made eye contact and waited in anticipation of a response from someone in the crowd. And someone always obliged; they responded to him with a cheer, a slogan, or a wave. It was as if the crowd had been waiting for this interactive drama.

Blaring Bollywood movie music appeared next, punctuating the soundscape. The float from the local grocery store chain Dominick’s had young adults and children dancing to Bollywood music. The “Big Cinemas” float, sponsored by a movie theater that shows Indian movies, passed by, blaring songs from films such as Kaminey and Do Knot Disturb, and some in the audience hummed along. Other floats followed, including those from linguistic subgroups such as the Gujarati Patidhar Samaj and Maharashtrian Mandal, generating their own interactive soundscapes. Dressed in colorful costumes, members shouted out slogans in their native Gujarati and Marathi languages. The Saint Thomas Syro-Malabar Cathedral float, which showcased the man dressed as Jesus, also sported a local Kerala chenda drum band, adding a smooth, syncopated beat to the drawn-out sloganeering as it faded in and out, matching the speed of the gliding float. Another Keralite drum band appeared at a short distance on the All American Bank float.
Figure 8.7. A senior participant from the Metropolitan Asian Family Services senior center shared space with the Globetrotters Engineering Company float. He walked alongside the float and engaged sidewalk audiences by shouting slogans and waving a giant Indian flag. Photo by author.

Unlike the previous one, this group drew attention to a worldlier domain of money and loans.

The sounds came in waves; the loud chants of slogans creeping up slowly, capturing the atmosphere for a few moments only to fade away as a new float with different sounds appeared. Sometimes the pattern broke and a quiet moment established its presence. The crowd palpably felt that momentary silence as a break from the cascading soundscape. One float, promoting Judge Yehuda Lebovits, passed by silently after a particularly cacophonous moment. It was an odd juxtaposition: a restrained Cook County Ninth Judicial Subcircuit contender following a loud nationalist performance. A man stood below the outsize banner behind a large muddy-colored American eagle. He chatted quietly with his colleague. Adults and children on the float wore T-shirts featuring the judge and displaying an Indian flag logo on the breast pocket. I asked the bystanders if that was indeed the judge and at least seven
of them thought it was: "How do we know what Judge Lebovits looks like?"; "He looks Jewish to me!" But this was not Judge Lebovits—it was merely a stand-in, an ambiguously brown and ethnic-looking placeholder.

Like the judge's float, the floats from Etihad Airways and Air India were distinctive by their silence. Other than Indian and American flags, Etihad's float was devoid of the milling humanity that occupied the preceding display platforms. Two lone women dressed in airline uniforms stood smiling as the float glided silently by. A man wearing an Etihad T-shirt walked alongside the float handing out paper fans with airline advertisements to onlookers. These floats were distinct from those sponsored by the ethnic and cultural groups because, rather than yelling slogans and chants from the float, individuals communicated with people lined up along the sidewalk by coming into direct contact with them while passing out flyers, baseball caps, water bottles, and hand fans.

The more tactile exchanges involving a handshake, a touch, or the offer of a flyer seemed to dominate groups that were not connected to the audience via common cultural and religious backgrounds. Thus, while the first set of floats merely needed to communicate aurally from the street to the sidewalks, the latter groups were engaged in more physical interactions. The second set included American politicians, who were preceded by South Asian "handlers" who handed out symbolic gifts: typical parade paraphernalia such as wristbands, fans, flyers, and cards. Most people did not seem to read the materials but accepted them nevertheless, and as the parade moved on, shimmering fans animated the visual field as people fanned themselves to escape the oppressive midday heat. Local politicians, especially the ones standing for upcoming elections, were making direct contact with the audience as they moved to the sidewalks. They shook hands, posed for photos, and chatted with bystanders about neighborhood services, parking, and city politics. In 2009 Dorothy Brown, the circuit court clerk, was physically present, while a group of volunteers carried the "Oberman for lieutenant governor" and "David Orr for Cook County clerk" banners. Bernard Stone, the alderman and vice mayor, was present too. He did not get down from his fancy convertible sedan. Stone was not standing for election and thus did not need to shake hands, but he has been a familiar fixture in the Devon Avenue Indian and Pakistani Independence Day parades since their inception, and his absence would have sent the wrong message. So Stone participated just like every other year.

In the following year, 2010, despite the problems discussed previously, the number of American politicians doubled because of impending elections. Local
electoral cycles brought out new politicians intent on appealing to the ethnic vote bank lined up along the street. Present were Joe Moore, alderman for the Forty-Ninth Ward; Toni Preckwinkle, current Cook County Board president and a former alderman in the Chicago City Council representing Chicago’s Fourth Ward; David Miller, candidate for the comptroller of the State of Illinois; and Steve Kim, the Republican nominee for attorney general of Illinois. In 2010, Grand Marshall Giannoulis, who had served as Illinois treasurer from 2007 to 2011, was running a losing battle for the U.S. Senate as the Democratic contender. Giannoulis ran up to the sidewalks at cross
streets at a sprightly pace, shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries with curious, and sometimes astounded, bystanders. Audience members standing on the sidewalk moved forward to take photographs with the candidates. There was always a South Asian aide who walked behind the politician introducing him or her to the audience. In the case of Steve Kim (who was of Asian origin), the aide shouted to the audience that Kim was one of them—“Hamara aadmi hai” (He is our man), or “Yeh apne a jaise hai” (He is just like us). Many bystanders did not know who Kim was, but they nevertheless leapt forward for a handshake or a photo opportunity. One onlooker explained to me that “it really doesn’t matter who is on the street.” Giannoulias lost and Kim won the elections that followed. But here, for a moment, when their sweaty hands pressed in an awkward handshake with a stooped Indian Muslim man in a salwar kameez (a body shirt and baggy pants), the audience experienced political theater at its very best. At this moment their specific political persuasion did not seem to matter to anybody. What mattered was that photo opportunity. It would become a moment that would live in perpetuity in albums, storefront advertisements, and sales counter displays. The photos would spur conversations about a public encounter with an elected official.

Local community leaders, professionals, businessmen, and members of the Federation of Indian Associations such as Rohit Maniar, Babu Patel, Anil Pillai, Veer Doshi, Kanti Patel, Sohan Joshi, Dr. Kamal Patel, C. K. Patel of the Asian American Hotel Owners Association, and Anil Patel from India got to walk with the elected officials and be seen with them. The following week, local ethnic news media would splash their images across the newspapers, and their high visibility next to political bigwigs would be worth all this effort. The sight of families, youths, and the elderly, the sounds of Bollywood music, the beat of ethnic rhythms, nationalist cheers, vernacular-language slogans, and the advertisements of nonethnic regional and global businesses created a unique intertwined juxtaposition of multiple worlds—domestic, community, secular, sacred, regional, global, local, and transnational.

Mimicry: The Performative Logic of the Independence Day Parade

Transnational identities are identities in motion, constantly formed and reformed by the context within which an individual body meets the sensate world. It may be simply unproductive to catalog static dimensions of such
identities because they change from place to place, moment to moment, activity to activity. A fine-grained description of this parade shows how in a given moment multifarious identities are negotiated and reproduced like an unfolding drama.

The spatial affect of transnational urbanism translates very differently for different immigrant groups. Significant work has been done on Latino (mostly Mexican) and Chinese transnational urbanisms and their impact on the physical landscapes of their respective countries. When we talk about transnational urbanism in the case of India-born immigrants, we are talking about a situation that is very different from the former groups. Although immigrants from the entire South Asian subcontinent and the extended global diaspora are numerous in the Chicago area, they have rarely transformed urban physical space by building new edifices. Except for places of worship, usually located outside city limits, immigrants from India have not altered the urban spaces of North America architecturally. But if we look at place making as a performative and embodied practice in which individuals deploy their bodies, often transiently and temporarily, in order to create a sense of place and location, then transnational urbanism takes on a very specific relevance for immigrants from India.

Examining how identity was negotiated during the parade, from moment to moment in theatrical sequences, gives us a glimpse into the making of transnational selves. Place and setting were important variables in this story of tempo, rhythm, and sensory atmospheres, and a carefully rendered thick description of the spatiotemporal attributes of this parade captures the nuances of this ephemeral performance. The reflexive relationship between identity and everyday practice suggests that daily life and behavior, repeatedly enacted and practiced under similar circumstances over time, can influence our identity. As this parade recurs every year, the same practices are repeated over and over. Transient but habitual somatic experiences—sounds, smells, textures, tastes, and sights—allow users to organize, differentiate, and re-create their familiar worlds. These events and performances imbue the street with new meaning through intangible practices, behavior, and use, a veritable habitus, as Bourdieu would term it. Indian movie stars, popular culture, music, and images mix with American street patterns, parade paraphernalia, Chicago politicians, and their advertisements, while global corporations and businesses promote their goods beside fluttering U.S. and Indian national flags. Transnational identity is a product of such complex and contradictory life experiences.
Maurice Merleau-Ponty shows us that the corporeality of our bodies frames and determines our experience and engagement with the external world. Thus, the way we situate ourselves within a collective is not merely via cognitive acts described by speech and writing, but by spatial experiences that depend on our embodied engagement with the world. If transnational subjectivity is a creative reenactment of a series of culturally embodied practices, then such performances are acts of mimesis. Individuals mime and perform multiple possible roles as Indians and Americans, each slightly different from the others. The term “mimesis” itself has been used within diverse contexts, mostly referring to actions of copying practiced by a mime. An act of representation through imitation is generally seen as a playful act, not meant to be real or authentic, often producing caricatures of an original. According to Michael Taussig, mimesis also involves adaptive behavior during which humans become like others through assimilation and play. The presumption is that individual subjectivity and identity are malleable, and mimesis allows one to negotiate that porous and flexible boundary between self and other. Michelle Puetz, explaining the term in the “Keywords Glossary” of the University of Chicago’s Theories of Media website, states that “rather than dominating nature, mimesis as mimicry opens up a tactile experience of the world in which the Cartesian categories of subject and object are not firm, but rather malleable; paradoxically, difference is created by making oneself similar to something else by mimetic ‘imitation.’ Observing subjects thus assimilate themselves to the objective world rather than anthropomorphizing it in their own image.” Mimesis, to Puetz, involves a humble dissolution of the self into something else. This term is often applied in the context of colonization. Mimicry allows the colonial citizen to resemble her colonizer only partially. Due to their racial and ethnic difference, the attempted mimicry remains incomplete, rendering visible the very failure and ambivalence of such an attempt.

In the current context, however, “mimesis” refers to the enactment of cultural practices in diaspora. It refers to acts that retain, resuscitate, and reproduce contextually appropriate identities, practices, and traditions from both the past and other places. My use of the term “mimicry” is different from that of individuals who apply it within a colonial or postcolonial discourse. I argue that the act of mimesis not only allows an individual to mime the other, as is seen by a colonized individual’s attempts to mimic the colonizer, but also gives her an opportunity to reenact her own complex subjectivity with subtle adaptations and creative modifications to suit her purpose. Sometimes these
immigrants act as Indians, adapting practices, behavior, memories, and experiences that make them distinct and different from native-born Americans. At other times they blend in or assimilate as new Americans. None of these performances is ever perfect—they are not expected to be so. Their ambivalence emerges from the fact that there is no perfect emulation and no seamless assimilation possible. Yet this perpetual performance of subjecthood and belonging is central to the experience of being an immigrant.

One may wonder how individuals routinely maintain this constant chameleonlike appearance and behavior, and with such efficiency. They are able to do so because mimetic behavior is generally automatic and routine, not premeditated. Mimesis is generated by its context. Mimicry becomes second nature; a presentation of self sans deliberations. Mimicry allows an immigrant to reproduce myriad expressions of Indianness while simultaneously expressing a sense of belonging as an American.26 While, in theory, mimicry could be intentional, Tanya Chartrand and John Bargh argue that the “chameleon effect refers to nonconscious mimicry of the postures, mannerisms, facial expressions, and other behaviors of one’s interaction partners, such that one’s behavior passively and unintentionally changes to match that of others in one’s current social environment.”27

As a mimetic act, ethnicity is a social construction. The category “Indian” is never fixed; its autochthonous origins are always questioned. The contexts of the 2009 and 2010 parades triggered such performance acts. (My references to immigrant adaptability and performance should not be read as fungibility; rather, being Indian in the Independence Day parade was constrained by larger social structures, strictures, material culture, and rules governing parades.) The parade was a site of multiple performances of overlapping mimetic acts, and such acts had their own hierarchical spatial logic. If, for the sake of discussion, we simplified and disassembled this very complicated event, we would find four performance stages with distinct physical dimensions, participating actors, and acts.

First, the street with moving floats and its soundscape served as a front stage. Each float carried with it a primary spatial bubble that reached out to the bystanders along the sidewalk and engaged those who shared some commonality with the message. Loud noise, music, large waving flags, posters, and richly dressed bodies painted the sensory contours of this stage. The sounds and images were discursive currency of this space that produced particular performative responses.28 Scholars of parades have described the spatiality of such front stages in great detail.29 Crowd behavior invokes mimetic responses
that emerge from "incorporating practices" or "affective responses to the environment generated from internalized values, accepted maxims, and customs that are deeply cultural in nature." Along Devon Avenue, the drums, slogans, and music reminded some in the audience of familiar cultural practices, and when they hummed back they unconsciously mimed that identity and sense of self that made them part of an imagined community. Others were spurred by the nationalist actions of the parade participants, and displayed a sense of Indian peoplehood.

The space between the street and the sidewalk, which was traversed by politicians, people handing out flyers, and mobile vendors, produced the second zone. It generated purposeful and interactive performances addressing the bystanders as consumers and active agents within economic and political systems. This space also encouraged acts that Michel de Certeau would characterize as poaching or tactical in nature. For instance, the occasional tinkling of ice cream pushcarts punctuated this sensory environment in order to declare the arrival of some very enterprising entrepreneurs who were taking advantage of the parade to engage in informal commerce. These mobile vendors were nimble, weaving in and out of the parade. The carts were from Paleteria Jalisco, a store that supplied ice cream to many Mexican pushcart vendors in this area, as well as the Albany Park neighborhood. Another enterprising vendor from Central America was able to use her brown skin color in order to merge into the crowd and poach space. She tactically took over an Indian restaurant sign and advertised her wares: fresh corn, fresh juices, chicharrones (fried pork rinds), and tamales. The stall did brisk business. The presence of these Hispanic immigrants was a reminder that this neighborhood had become very culturally diverse.

The third stage involved the sidewalks along the parade route, a transient setting for momentary transactions. Customers collected along this and other olfactory nodes, drawn by the smell of food, to consume hot tea, samosas, and water. Others stayed back and chatted with storeowners and complete strangers around special sales racks brought out to the sidewalk for the occasion. This was not a static space, but one of intense transactions and intimate interactions. It involved buying and selling, reading storefront sales posters, and occasionally being handed a handbill by hustlers while in motion. Men solicited religious literature and handed out sales announcements. One hawker gave out empty plastic bags with a store’s name on them. These momentary exchanges seemed habitual, automatic, and routine. People would take a handbill and then drop it in the garbage a few steps away. Few would look at
it; others would fold it and keep it. The sturdy plastic bags seemed odd. But the person handing them out explained to me that they were not for the casual suburban visitors. Instead these bags were for local residents who had practical use for them. They used these as shopping bags and for storage.

Seamless choreographed performances animated these spaces. One's eyes, hands, and ears voluntarily (and often involuntarily) participated in a series of acts that were geared toward hearing, speaking, buying, selling, and desiring merchandise sold in the streets and on pushcarts. These interpersonal exchanges were taking place at more intimate personal and social distances. According to Edward Hall’s definitions of proxemics, distances of 1.5 to 12 feet involve increased bodily engagement and sensory exchanges, reflected in the interactions between the sidewalk audience and the parade floats. People stood close to each other and engaged in face-to-face exchange. At such proximity, bodily odor, temperature, and facial expressions were discerned.
Figure 8.10. Ice cream carts selling *paletas* (popsicles) from Paleteria Jalisco weaved in and out of the side streets. The sounds of their cart bells punctuated the sensory environment of the sidewalks. Photo by author.

Culturally acceptable codes of the visual, thermal, olfactory, tactile, and auditory took effect. This zone produced an active sense of being-in-the-marketplace, an experience that Miles Richardson describes in his study of plazas in Costa Rican cities.34

The fourth stage was located along the side streets lined with residential bungalows. Here, interactions were neighborly, domestic, and family oriented—a completely different form of belonging and socializing. For instance, the Talman Avenue Mela (fair) was set up along a residential street perpendicular to Devon Avenue. The typical material culture of parades, including plastic tents and folding tables, held food stalls, portrait artists’ stands, children’s game tables, raffles, balloons, and hand painting stalls. Local residents wearing shorts and T-shirts chatted with young girls wearing headscarves, *salwars* (pants), or skirts. The number of immigrant women and
Figure 8.11. An enterprising vendor from Central America was able to merge into the crowd and poach space. This image shows how she used an Indian restaurant sign to advertise her wares: fresh corn, fresh juices, chicharrones, and tamales. Photo by author.

children (many of them Muslim) exceeded that of men. The demographic diversity of the neighborhood was also evidenced by the friendship stands set up by the neighborhood’s white residents in hopes of connecting with their low-income Muslim neighbors. It was a moment that brought together two groups who seldom met otherwise.

These four stages were not inhabited by different groups of people. They did not take place separately. Rather, the same crowd participated almost simultaneously in each staging. The crowd presented a high level of comfort and ability to negotiate these multiple scenes—effortlessly becoming ethnic, American, consumer, neighbor—with multiple spatial personas fading in and out as they negotiated the world around them. These seamless mimetic
performances produced a symphony of human bodies synchronously engaged in what William Forsythe describes as contrapuntal motion. This ability to perform in multiple worlds, simultaneous social events, and to act out different personas describes immigrant world making on Devon Avenue. This theatrical whole—people, situation, site, context, actions, emotions, meanings—is key to understanding immigrant identity within a transnational framework. It allows us to capture malleable immigrant subjectivities as individuals straddle multiple worlds, near and far, intimate and large, tangible and abstract.

What does this microanalysis of the India Independence Day Parade tell us? The parade communicated myriad messages of nationalism, consumerism, global business practices, information and media products, local politics, and neighborhood conviviality. The parade also revealed sights that remain hidden otherwise, akin to Victor Turner’s anthropological accounts of public rituals. The appearance of the Mexican pushcart entrepreneur and the Central American chicharrones stall gave us a glimpse into the multiethnic nature of this street and the existence of a vibrant Mexican and Central American
population that remains invisible in popular accounts of Devon Avenue. The presence of large numbers of elderly people gave us a glimpse into the low-income, aged residents of Devon Avenue, many of whom live here because they do not know English, are unable to afford higher rents elsewhere, or need culturally sensitive social services not available in other parts of the city. The parade revealed the presence of grassroots institutions, local immigrant self-help organizations and nonprofits such as Zam’s Hope, the Medinah Society, and the Indo American Center. These organizations are important to this neighborhood because they provide essential social services, legal advice, English language courses, and citizenship classes to newly arrived immigrants, the elderly, indigents, and minorities within the South Asian community. As a model minority, the members of the economically well-off South Asian community reside in the upmarket suburbs of Chicago. Most discussions of the South Asian community focus on the latter’s economic success and assimilation into American society. Yet the South Asians residing around Devon Avenue challenge this assumption, and the presence of these grassroots organizations reminds us of the less well-off and less valorized members of this community. The events in the neighborhood block parties also rendered visible some of those neighbors whom we almost never see—veiled women, elderly individuals, and immigrant children from poorer households living around Devon Avenue.

What About Transnational Urbanism?

The Indian man dressed as Jesus on the 2009 Saint Thomas Syro-Malabar Cathedral float was doing more than simply role-playing the Christian messiah: he was borrowing from a hybrid system of representation that circulates in global and transnational circuits and defines immigrant identity and diasporic geographies. Despite the global nature of this system of representation, context matters in the way representations in specific urban locations produce unique and locally inflected meanings. Jesus in Chicago is different from Jesus in Ernakulam, Kerala. This man’s appearance alongside other symbols, signs, images, and ephemera marked a unique moment in time and space that bridged myriad national geographies and diverse cultures. It also delineated a geography that, although made of global and diasporic images, was nevertheless local, nuanced, and urban. The India Independence Day Parade demonstrates how culture and difference are reproduced in contemporary global cities.
The notion that ethnic enclaves are circumscribed geographies of cultural difference has captured the popular imagination for decades. Countless representations of ethnic enclaves have incorrectly suggested that these neighborhoods were and are homogeneous "geographies of exclusion," ignoring these neighborhoods' internal diversity or not accounting for dispersed ethnic communities. Twentieth-century portraits of Chinatowns, Little Italies, and Irish enclaves with well-ordered social, political, and economic organizations are etched in our minds. This false isomorphism of place and culture has political implications because the assumption of ethnic homogeneity has rendered in-group differences invisible, producing singular narratives of class, gender, and peoplehood. Indeed, cities such as Chicago have used the trope of ethnic enclaves to promote certain neighborhoods as exotic tourist destinations and economic generators. Yet Devon Avenue has resisted attempts by local politicians and business groups to promote the neighborhood as a homogeneous enclave. Around 1997, after trying to find a way to market and brand the street, the West Ridge Chamber of Commerce acknowledged its cultural diversity and settled on banners advertising it as an "International Marketplace," not a Little India or Little South Asia. According to Padma Rangaswamy, ex-alderman Bernard Stone, who represented the neighborhood for many years, promoted Devon Avenue "as an international rather than a South Asian marketplace. The upshot of this international identity is that City Hall has little interest in improving or reshaping the built environment since, unlike Chinatown or Bronzeville, it does not fall neatly into an identifiable ethnic category. The residents of West Ridge are well aware of these anomalies, which make them a part of Chicago but also distinguish their neighborhood from others."

Today, the street remains a ground for multiple groups and nationalities to enact their own sense of identity and peoplehood through parades and other forms of representation. The City of Chicago, too, has marked the neighborhood streets with at least twenty-two honorary street names acknowledging the presence of Indian, Pakistani, Jewish, Assyrian, Bangladeshi, and other ethno-national groups. The Bangladesh Day Parade, Assyrian New Year Parade, India Independence Day Parade, and Pakistan Independence Day Parade take place in these honorary streets on different days.

In his article "Ephemera, Temporary Urbanism, and Imaging," J. Mark Schuster argues that urban ephemera or "organized, momentary, repeated urban public presentations" such as parades contribute to the image of the city. According to him, "Being together in a large public space with other
people may be a defining characteristic of signature ephemera,” and makes a place distinctive. Parading on Devon Avenue does precisely this, and what is interesting about this contemporary ethnic procession is that its identity and symbolism draw widely from pop-culture imagery, sensory cues, symbols, and representations from multiple diasporic locations: music from global Bollywood popular culture, logos of the national airlines of the United Arab Emirates, parade paraphernalia made in China but typical of North American ethnic parades, Mexican popsicles, the built form of Chicago’s retail streets, and a kaleidoscope of ethnic clothing and racialized bodies. Thus the social construction of a uniquely local and parochial ethnic street is actually a complex process that draws on globalized imagery.

The twenty-first-century ethnic enclave represents a transnational urban geography. The term “trans” produces, simultaneously, the greatest intellectual challenge and potential for a new scholarship on immigration and urban immigrant cultural landscapes. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “trans-” refers to a sense of “across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another.” In their seminal 1992 article, anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson explained the impact of cultural practices performed by people who straddle multiple worlds, cross boundaries, and occupy more than one national space. The authors argued that a generally assumed, but mistaken, isomorphism between nation, culture, and place should unravel in new scholarship. According to them, erstwhile assumptions that national cultures were located within the physical boundaries of nation-states (Chinese culture from China, Indian culture in India) were being rendered irrelevant in the context of diasporas and within the context of the increasing mobility of people, ideas, money, goods, and technologies across national borders. Since then, terms that emphasize the transnational such as “diasporic landscapes,” “suburban Chinatowns,” “ethnoburbs,” and “networked urbanism” have become part of our lexicon. Scholars who use transnational frameworks of analysis demonstrate that immigrants make new spatial forms and transform built environments across social, national, and geographic boundaries.

Devon Avenue therefore marks a self-consciously multiethnic, culturally diverse, and cosmopolitan geography representative of emerging pluralistic ethnic geographies of the twenty-first century. It also raises issues of attribution and authorship that lay behind the question, Who builds our environment? Historians traditionally ascribed the built environment to those who built it—architects, business interests, government agencies, policy makers,
urban planners. The new scholarship argues that while histories of the physical construction of buildings, streets, and interiors are important, accounts of rituals, performances, behaviors, and other sensate and transient acts of world making and place making are equally relevant. Users and immigrants remake place by taking over existing sites and by “bringing places to life,” as we observed during this parade. Accordingly, the transnational turn in thinking about urban geographies requires a broader and more fluid understanding of culture as dramaturgical, place based, mobile, and mutable—a paradigm shift that requires us to rethink our methods of studying the cultural production of urban immigrant geographies.49