To “do” basketball means to go beyond the simple playing of the game toward performing a basketballer identity: choosing the clothes, language, and other cultural vestments of basketballers. Stanley Thangaraj’s argument in Desi Hoop Dreams hinges on the point that South Asian American men “do” basketball for a specific purpose: to claim identities as American citizens through their racialized masculinity as performed in and around basketball. The men featured in this ethnographic study are not just playing a game; for them basketball is a conscious choice because of its position as a very American sport. By performing as basketballers they are then able to have power within the sport to reposition basketball and the racializations they encounter within it.

Desi Hoop Dreams focusses on Atlanta-based pick-up and competitive teams from South Asian (Indian-, Pakistani-, Sri Lankan-heritage) American communities with whom Thangaraj played during the 1990s. The book provides an account of a community of basketballers who play for two main reasons: Some of us come to develop our skills as we train for tournaments, and some come to take pleasure in socializing with co-ethnic peers through basketball activities … In the process, the athletes produce their own acceptable cultural arrangements of South Asian American masculinity. (28–29)

“Man up” is a phrase that can be commonly heard in and around men’s sport. It takes on specific, South Asian American meaning in this book. Here, “manning up” means the performance and definition of masculinity by South Asian American men, through their acts in multiple sites – including but not limited to the basketball court. Thangaraj carefully weaves a narrative of South Asian American men negotiating their masculine embodied performance and identity in line with, and yet in opposition to, a white and black binary of masculinities. The spaces in which they do this remain exclusionary because homophobia, sexism, and racism (towards black men) are frequently found. Thangaraj problematizes South Asian American basketballers’ use of black style and culture, noting that South Asian American men want their own identities opened up while they contribute to essentializing and excluding African American identities. Remaining unacknowledged is whiteness as dominant, privileged, and neutral. Nevertheless the complexity of racial/ethnic identities and performance of masculinity is powerfully put.

Theories of gender performance and the concepts of normality, identity, place, space, performance, and intersectionality are central to understanding the narrative here. Readers will benefit from being familiar with these. To these theories, Thangaraj adds ideas of citizenship, education, and class. While readers familiar with the history of American sports, including basketball’s place in American popular culture, will be comfortable with references to such, other readers would benefit from seeing a bit of basketball history to frame the importance of this sport over others. This is not something Thangaraj provides, although he frames South
Asian American men’s involvement in basketball in relation to British sports like cricket and football (soccer) to highlight common stereotypes of South Asian men’s sport participation. He notes that when others define South Asian American men through cricket, their masculinity is constructed as static and irreconcilable with American-ness. Thus the South Asian American men in this study are rendered other or illegible;¹ that is, not legible as athletes, masculine, American; but nonathletes, non-masculine, and noncitizens. They take control by writing their own stories, but as Thangaraj suggests, their stories are written in reaction to the dominant stories. Desi Hoop Dreams offers us a way to understand the imprecision of binary thinking about black and white, male and female, South Asian and American.

Thangaraj demonstrates that South Asian masculinity is even more complex in relation to class and migration patterns in the twentieth century, by highlighting how the immigration of the 1960s was predominantly of skilled engineers, scientists, and medical doctors whose sons have had particular education and other opportunities that contrast with those of more recent migrants who have entered the USA (and Europe) in more hostile economic and political times. It is predominantly the former who populate the basketball teams that Thangaraj follows. He demonstrates how important it is to situate these stories in their geographical and political localities, as a central aspect of an intersectional analysis of masculinity and sport. Highly valuable in this book are these complex class, educational, and racial factors that Thangaraj uses to explain the nonhomogeneity of South Asian American masculinity.

I felt that the South Asian American men’s basketball culture represented here seemed a little unreconstructed and normative. Thangaraj acknowledges this in the Conclusion, saying that the culture is race- and gender-exclusionary. This is not a story of South Asian American men’s marginalization in broader sporting cultures, but of their creation of a space for themselves. This space nevertheless marginalizes the players while they are in the act of trying to include themselves, precisely because it is so exclusionary of others. Ultimately, Thangaraj seems to suggest that South Asian American basketball needs to be more inclusive, at the risk of being excluded from American masculinity, in order to survive.

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