Chapter 2
Spelling Otherness:
Indian Americans as the “New Model Minority”

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ABSTRACT
In the last 15 years, as many as 11 young Americans of Indian descent have won the Scripps National Spelling Bee. This pattern of one small community’s dominance in academic competitions has been seen not just in the spelling bee but also in geography bees, math competitions, and science Olympiads. This has led mainstream media to resurrect the notion of the “Model Minority,” with Indian Americans becoming the new holders of this eponym. This chapter analyzes the discursive construction of Indian Americans as racial emblems in media reports and online message boards. Using Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s notion of “color-blind racism” and Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism, the chapter discusses how these children have become exemplars of racial assimilation even as they are indelibly marked as “forever foreign,” and why Indian-Americans feel the compulsion to attempt to conquer “the master’s tools.”

INTRODUCTION
In May 2013, after winning the 86th National Spelling Bee, 13-year-old Arvind Mahankali stood impassively on the stage holding aloft the championship cup while confetti rained down all over and around him. The image of a bemused and bewildered youngster winning a prize of $30,000 quickly became an Internet meme.
While some remarked about another brown body usurping and interloping on the national stage, others commented on the parenting results of yet another obsessive Asian “Tiger Mom.” Still others read in Mahankali’s remarkable orthographic skills a story of hard work and discipline. Picking up on this, mainstream media resurrected and forwarded a decades-old pernicious narrative in a new garb—that of the “good immigrant” playing by the book of the dominant culture. In this narrative, Indian-Americans were anointed the “new model minority” for the new century.

Journalists pointed out that Mahankali had become the eleventh American child of Indian descent to win the Scripps contest in the last 15 years. Felicitating this achievement, they reported that spelling bees were not the sole academic competitions where Indian-American children had excelled. In fact the same year, one fourth of the top 40 finalists in the Intel Science Talent Search Competition, formerly known as the “Junior Nobel Prize,” were children of Indian-American parents, as were the winners of the Siemens Talent Search. On the National Geographic Bee stage too, they pointed out, five out of the last 8 winners were of Indian descent (Hyman, 2013; Simpson, 2014; Tandon, 2014). Using these achievements, reporters and media commentators forwarded the idea of re-casting immigration policy to restrict migrants from some parts of the world and increase immigration from others—restrict the entry of low-skilled workers and invite high-tech workers into the country because, as one writer put it, “children of highly skilled immigrants become exceptional Americans” (Nowrasteh, 2011).

Why have these children become a pawn in the economic and political debates that form the basis of United States’ immigration policy? How have winners of academic competitions become exemplars of racial assimilation even as they themselves are indelibly marked as “forever foreign?” Are Indian-American children really outperforming children of other immigrants groups? Are there socio-political reasons for this? In what ways does the Indian-American community perform as America’s “new model minority?” Using these questions as a framework, this essay analyzes mainstream media reportage and online discussions of the disproportionate success of Indian-American children in one academic pursuit. Through this close textual reading, it attempts to enter larger debates about citizenship, resource allocation, racial disenfranchisement and national anxieties at a time of economic stress. I argue that the vagaries of United States’ immigration policies and the prevalence of what has been termed “color-blind racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) have necessitated the formation of an assimilative Indian-American identity that is predicated on, to paraphrase Audre Lorde (1984, p. 112), acquiring and mastering “the master’s tools”—not to dismantle the master’s house, but simply to get a place at the table. In other words, the status of Indian Americans as United States’ newest “model minority” has been carefully crafted through the vicissitudes of immigration history and the disciplinary apparatus of modern racism.
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Néstor Luis Garrido (2014). New Media and Communication Across Religions and Cultures (pp. 191-219).

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