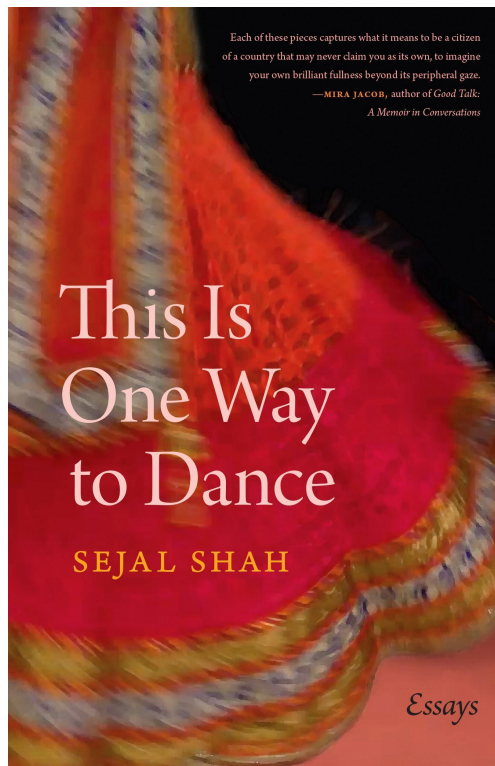


***This Is One Way to Dance: Essays* | University of Georgia** **Sejal Shah | Teaching Resources Guide (August 2021)**

“The route is often associative...and the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight.” —Claudia Rankine



“Spanning two decades, Sejal Shah’s essays meditate on the Asian American bodily experience, drawing out specific issues of racialized hypervisibility and hallowed invisibility

within a larger racial discourse. The form of these essays —lyrical, discerning, intimate, full—allows Shah to ask not just how bodies move but, rather, how they dance, without limit, among the traditions, realities and dreams they inhabit. ”

— [Chicago Review of Books](#) **“Nine Works of Criticism You May Have Missed in 2020” (Clancey D’Isa)**

“The collection, as a whole, could be a course on form in the way it exemplifies so many different approaches to the essay.” — [Holly Wren Spaulding](#), Director of [Poetry Forge](#)

Potential Course Adoptions: American Studies | Anthropology | Asian American Studies | Asian Studies | Contemporary English Literature | Diaspora / Ethnic Studies / Ethnography | First Year Seminar or Writing 101 | Writing Craft Courses (Creative Nonfiction, Lyric Essay, Memoir, Travel Writing, Flash Prose, Narrative Journalism / Immersion Writing) | Women and Gender Studies

Contents:

I.	Catalog of Essays by Topic/Form	2
II.	In the Classroom & Writing Exercise	5
III.	Resources & Reading List	6
IV.	Discussion Questions	7
V.	Themes	8

I. Catalog of Essays by Topic/Form:

I've classified the essays in my book into categories that might be helpful for teaching. There are brief lyric essays that also read as prose poems. Other categories include list essays, travel narratives, essays about the writing life/writing mentors, ekphrastic essays, essays about objects/ personal artifacts, essays about race, essays about depression.

I've also included ten pages of notes at the back of *This Is One Way to Dance*, which give more background about most of the individual essays. I wrote this book with the hope that it would be taught and used in the classroom similarly to how I have taught the essay form using other writers' essay collections.

This Is One Way to Dance was named an all-college Common Read at SUNY Geneseo for AY 2021-2022. Professors and teachers have taught this book in a variety of classes at schools including Amherst College; Monroe Community College; Mount Holyoke College; Pacific Lutheran University; Pittsford Sutherland High School; St. John Fisher College; The College at Brockport, State University of New York; the University of Michigan; Wayne State University (a graduate course on essay collections); and Wellesley College. *Dance* was also chosen as a 2020 core text in the Farleigh Dickinson University MFA program.

Some essays are followed by links where you can find an online version of the essay or recorded events in which I read from the essay.

Brief Lyric Essays / Prose Poems:

- "Prelude"
- "Skin" ([recorded reading on "Connections"](#))
- "Castle, Fort, Lookout, House"
- "Curriculum" ([read online in *Conjunctions*](#))
- "Thank You" ([read online in *Brevity*](#)):
- "Things People Said: An Essay in Seven Steps" ([recorded reading with AAWW](#)) ([read online in *Brevity*](#))

Ekphrastic Essays:

- "Curriculum" ([read online in *Conjunctions*](#))
- "Street Scene" ([read online in *Kenyon Review*](#)) ([recorded reading with Literati](#))

Longer Lyric Essay / Essay about Grief:

- “Street Scene” ([read online in Kenyon Review](#)) ([recorded reading with Literati](#))
*Poet and Educator Holly Wren Spaulding writes: “Over the years I’ve taught Shah’s essay “Street Scene,” finding it useful when it comes time to consider how we approach difficult subjects through indirect means, in this case, a painting. “Street Scene” allows me to introduce **ekphrasis** as a method, and our conversations about Shah’s relationship to questions, memory, friendship, and travel, usually lead to strong writing from my students.”*

List Essays:

- “Curriculum” ([read online in Conjunctions](#))
- “Deluxe” ([Read online in Kenyon Review](#))
- “Kinship, Cousins, & Khichidi” ([recorded reading with Books are Magic](#))
- “Things People Said: An Essay in Seven Steps” ([recorded reading with AAWW](#)) ([read online in Brevity](#))
- “Ring Theory” ([read online on Lit Hub](#))

Immersion Essay:

- “Matrimonials” (taught in a class at the University of Michigan on Immersion Writing, Spring 2021)

Travel Narratives:

- “Who’s Indian?” (Sicily)
- “Your Wilderness Is Not Permanent” (Burning Man) ([read online on Longreads](#))

Essays about Race:

- “Skin” (taught at Amherst College, Fall 2020) ([read online on Route Nine](#))
- “Who’s Indian?”
- “Betsy, Tacy, Sejal, Tib” (taught in an graduate Education class at the University of Rochester) ([read online in Guernica](#))
- “Things People Said: An Essay in Seven Steps” ([recorded reading with AAWW](#)) ([read online in Brevity](#))

Essays about Objects & Artifacts:

- “Curriculum” (objects from the narrator’s mother’s childhood in East Africa) ([read online in Conjunctions](#))
- “Temporary Talismans” (postcards) ([read online in Kenyon Review](#)) ([recorded reading with VCCA](#))
- “Ring Theory” (rings) ([read online on Lit Hub](#))

Weddings as Cultural Events, Sites of Resistance, & Community:

- “Matrimonials”
- “Married” ([read online in Waxwing](#))
- “Things People Said: An Essay in Seven Steps” ([recorded reading with AAWW](#)) ([read online in Brevity](#))
- “Ring Theory” ([read online on Lit Hub](#))
- “Saris & Sorrows” ([recorded reading with IAAC](#))

Essays about Place:

- “Who’s Indian?”
- “Kinship, Cousins, & Khichidi” ([recorded reading with Books are Magic](#)) ([read online in The Massachusetts Review](#))
- “Bird” ([read online in Kenyon Review](#))
- “Your Wilderness Is Not Permanent” ([read online on Longreads](#))
- “365 Pelham Road” (childhood home / architecture / ranch houses) ([read online in Mason Street Review](#))
- “There Is No Mike Here” (Western New York) ([read online in The Margins](#))
- “Six Hours from Anywhere You Want to Be” (Western New York as Midwestern)

Essays about Food:

- “Kinship, Cousins, & Khichidi” ([recorded reading with Books are Magic](#)) ([read online in The Massachusetts Review](#))

Essays about Depression / Managing a Mood Disorder:

- “Kinship, Cousins, & Khichidi” ([recorded reading with Books Are Magic](#)) ([read online in The Massachusetts Review](#))
- “Your Wilderness Is Not Permanent” ([read online on Longreads](#))
- “No One Is Ordinary; Everyone Is Ordinary” ([read online in Kenyon Review](#))
- “Even If You Can’t See It: Invisible Disability and Neurodiversity” ([read online in Kenyon Review](#)) **this essay was not included in Dance, but Shah has often been asked to speak about it and the larger context it gives her essay collection.*

Essays about Writing and Writing Mentors/Professors:

- “The World Is Full of Paper. Write to Me.”
- “There Is No Mike Here” ([read online in The Margins](#))

II. In the Classroom:

Writing Prompt: [“Word as Image: How “Thank You” Originated” \(Brevity Blog\)](#)

This epistolary writing exercise can be used in creative writing classes (ekphrasis, unsent letters) and is based on the essays [“Thank You”](#) and [“Street Scene.”](#)

“Word as Image” has been used as an in-class writing prompt or as take-home assignment in various creative writing or first-year writing classes.



Maurice Utrillo, “Street Scene” (from the collection of The Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester)

III. Resources & Reading List:

- **Video Resources:**
 - [Lit Hub TV / Personal Space](#) with editor Sari Botton on place, home, race, culture, dance, objects, and the process of putting together a book
 - The [Asian American Writers' Workshop--Racing the Essay](#): with poets and essayists Cathy Park Hong and Aimee Nezhukumatathil in conversation about genre, craft, literary lineage, and the book as a performance
 - [Literati](#): In conversation with Eileen Pollack and Donovan Hohn
 - [IAAC Literary Festival](#): In conversation with Geeta Kothari
 - [Skylight Books](#): On Small Press Publishing with Deesha Philyaw and Colette Sartor
- **For Creative Writing Classes: Craft Essays**
 - ["Notes from the Cutting Room Floor"](#): (on endnotes and ghost manuscripts)
 - ["Feel Your Way"](#): (on dance & structuring & ordering the book)
 - ["Break It Down or Shorter Forms"](#): (on making a project manageable)
 - ["Breaking Genre"](#): (on publishing as a writer of color & hybrid work)
- **Supplemental Reading List:**
 - [A Reading Guide on the Asian American Experience](#) in *LA Times*
 - [Women of Color Tell Their Own Stories about Mental Health](#) in *Electric Lit*
 - [Legacies of the 1965 Immigration Act](#) in SAADA
- **Dance:**
 - [Garth Fagan Dance](#)
 - ["Indian Dance Classes on Zoom Lifted the Heaviness I'd Been Carrying"](#)
- **Select Interviews:**
 - [Hyphen Magazine](#): "I'm Never Not Thinking about Home and Kinship"
 - [Guernica](#): "All my life, I've been biking with brakes on"
 - [Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies](#) (longer, in-depth interview)
 - [BOMB](#): "A Voice That Will Carry a Feeling"
 - [LitHub](#): "On the Tricky Work of Giving Shape to an Essay Collection"
 - [Kenyon Review Online](#)
 - [Works in Progress](#): Interview and Sejal's "famous" aloo chole recipe
- **Reviews:**
 - A complete list of [reviews](#) of *This Is One Way to Dance*

IV. Discussion Questions:

1. **On Genre: How do Shah's essays complicate the idea of genre and categories?**
In her introduction, Shah writes, "I do not subscribe to fixed genres." *This Is One Way to Dance* has been described as an essay collection as well as a memoir in essays.
2. **On Place: How does place operate as an instrument of self-definition in the book?** In "Who's Indian?" the author writes that travelling allows us "to feel the edges of ourselves simultaneously sharpened and blurred" (25).
3. **On Microaggressions: What does it mean to ask someone where they are from?**
Shah posits that it matters how one is asked the question, and in what context. When is this question a microaggression? Is it always?
4. **On Race, Community, and Kinship: What does it mean to be Brown in America?**
Asian Americans have often been posited as a model minority; this stereotype flattens a range of experiences, emphasizes adjacency to whiteness, and discourages Black and Brown alliances. How can Asian American writers and artists actively choose to be anti-racist and support Black writers and artists and the Black Lives Matter movement? [Shah made a [reading list](#) as part of answering this question for herself.]
5. **On Titles: How does the title, *This Is One Way to Dance*, inform your reading of the book?** In the introduction, the author tells us that *Things People Say* was the book's original title.
6. **On Form: How did the ordering of the essays influence how you read?**
7. **On Notes: Did the notes in the back of the book and time stamps after each essay influence your reading of the essays?** *This Is One Way to Dance* is composed of essays that were written across twenty years. Shah provided notes and context for some essays. Bracketed years mark the end of each essay.
8. **On Favorites: Which essay stood out to you the most and why?** How do the other essays in the book resonate with or echo this essay in your reading?
9. **On Identity: What are the tensions between belonging and individual identity?**
In *This Is One Way to Dance*, the author considers her individual stories and what it means to be an Asian American, to be American, to be brown, in a country grappling with race.

V. Themes:

Erasure: Asian American identity (also Indian American and South Asian American) is often invisible or disregarded in conversations about race and immigration that focus on or are framed only as Black, white, Latinx, documented and undocumented.

Geography: Specificity matters—i.e. not just Indian but Gujarati or Tamilian; Western NY versus New York City. What do we lose when specificity is ignored? What does the formation of ethnic identity look like in small towns and cities in the US?

Dance: The relationship between dance and culture. Shah studied with [Garth Fagan Dance](#), a modern dance company associated with the Black Arts Movement. She credits Fagan technique, which draws from American modern, Afro-Caribbean, and ballet, and movement vocabulary as an important aesthetic influence on her writing.

Representation: From *Monsoon Wedding* to the names of NPR reporters, from Nancy Drew to Jhumpa Lahiri, what are the images we see or don't see of people who look like us and how does this shape who we are? What stories are championed and why?

Weddings: Shah examines weddings from a variety of angles, writing about how they were a place to be unselfconsciously Indian, and also that “I did not want getting married to be the greatest achievement of my life.” What are some of the tensions between belonging and individual identity?