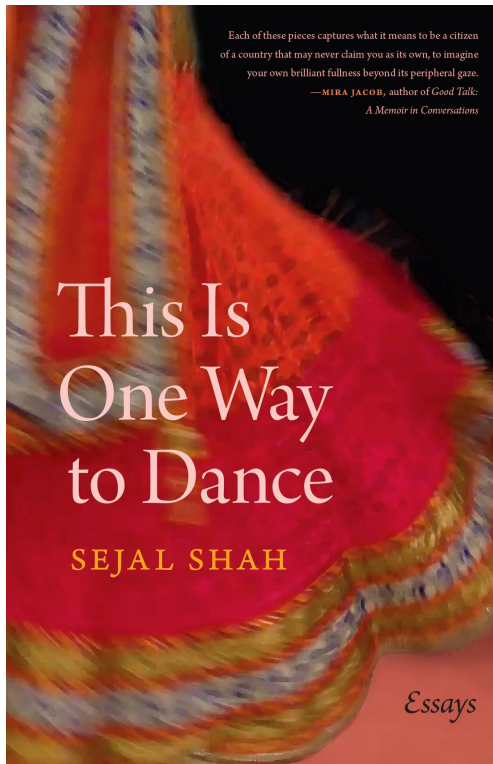


***This Is One Way to Dance: Essays* | University of Georgia Press
Sejal Shah | 2023 Discussion Guide: Book Club & Teaching Resources**

“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](#)

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I. Catalog of Essays by Topic/Form:

I've classified the essays in my book into categories for use in teaching and book club discussions. Categories include brief lyric essays, list essays, travel narratives, essays about the writing life/writing mentors, ekphrastic essays, essays about objects/personal artifacts, essays about race, essays about depression.

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. 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 used in the classroom similarly to how I have taught the essay form using other writers' essay collections.

Brief Lyric Essays / Prose Poems:

- "Prelude" (p. 1) & "Voice Texting with My Mother" (p. 162)
(opening and closing poems)
- "Skin" (p. 3) ([recorded reading on "Connections," beginning at 13:00](#))
- "Walking Tributaries" (p. 82)30
- "Castle, Fort, Lookout, House" (p. 86)
- "Curriculum" (p. 89) ([read online in *Conjunctions*](#))
- "Thank You" (p. 109) ([read online in *Brevity*](#)):
- "Things People Said: An Essay in Seven Steps" (p. 124) ([recorded reading with AAWW, beginning at 11:30](#)) ([read online in *Brevity*](#))

Ekphrastic Essays:

- "Curriculum" (p. 89) ([read online in *Conjunctions*](#))
- "Street Scene" (p. 71) ([read online in *Kenyon Review*](#)) ([recorded reading with Literati, beginning at 3:50](#))

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” (p. 89) ([read online in *Conjunctions*](#))
- “Deluxe” (p. 105) ([Read online in *Kenyon Review*](#))
- “Kinship, Cousins, & Khichidi” (p. 56) ([recorded reading with *Books are Magic*, beginning at 0:55](#))
- “Things People Said: An Essay in Seven Steps” (p. 124) ([recorded reading with *AAWW*, beginning at 11:30](#)) ([read online in *Brevity*](#))
- “Ring Theory” (p. 142) ([read online on *Lit Hub*](#))

Immersion Essay:

- “Matrimonials: A Triptych” (p. 6) (taught in a class at the University of Michigan on Immersion Writing, Spring 2021)

Travel Narratives:

- “Who’s Indian?” (p. 23) (Sicily)
- “Your Wilderness Is Not Permanent” (p. 91) (Burning Man) ([read online on *Longreads*](#))

Essays about Race:

- “Skin” (p. 3) (taught at Amherst College, Fall 2020) ([read online on *Route Nine*](#))
- “Who’s Indian?” (p. 23)
- “Betsy, Tacy, Sejal, Tib” (p. 39) (taught in a graduate education class at the University of Rochester) ([read online in *Guernica*](#))
- “Things People Said: An Essay in Seven Steps” (p. 124) ([recorded reading with *AAWW*, beginning at 11:30](#)) ([read online in *Brevity*](#))

Essays about Objects & Artifacts:

- “Curriculum” (p. 89) (objects from the narrator’s mother’s childhood in East Africa) ([read online in *Conjunctions*](#))
- “Temporary Talismans” (p. 126) (postcards) ([read online in *Kenyon Review*](#)) ([recorded reading with *VCCA*, beginning at 14:05](#))
- “Ring Theory” (p. 142) (rings) ([read online on *Lit Hub*](#))

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

- “Matrimonials” (p. 6)
- “Married” (p. 33) ([read online in *Waxwing*](#))

- “Things People Said: An Essay in Seven Steps” (p. 124) ([recorded reading with AAWW, beginning at 11:30](#)) ([read online in Brevity](#))
- “Ring Theory” (p.142) ([read online on Lit Hub](#))
- “Saris & Sorrows” (p. 150) ([recorded reading with IAAC, beginning at 44:40](#))

Essays about Place:

- “Who’s Indian?” (p. 23)
- “Kinship, Cousins, & Khichidi” (p. 56) ([recorded reading with Books are Magic, beginning at 0:55](#)) ([read online in The Massachusetts Review](#))
- “Bird” (p. 78) ([read online in Kenyon Review](#))
- “Your Wilderness Is Not Permanent” (p. 91) ([read online on Longreads](#))
- “365 Pelham Road” (p. 112) (childhood home / architecture / ranch houses) ([read online in Mason Street Review](#))
- “There Is No Mike Here” (p. 116) (Western New York) ([read online in The Margins](#))
- “Six Hours from Anywhere You Want to Be” (p. 131) (Western New York as Midwestern)

Essays about Food:

- “Kinship, Cousins, & Khichidi” (p. 56) ([recorded reading with Books are Magic, beginning at 0:55](#)) ([read online in The Massachusetts Review](#))

Essays about Depression / Managing a Mood Disorder:

- “Kinship, Cousins, & Khichidi” (p. 56) ([recorded reading with Books Are Magic, beginning at 0:55](#)) ([read online in The Massachusetts Review](#))
- “Your Wilderness Is Not Permanent” (p. 91) ([read online on Longreads](#))
- “No One Is Ordinary; Everyone Is Ordinary” (p. 137) ([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 Mentors/Professors:

- “The World Is Full of Paper. Write to Me.” (p. 47)
- “There Is No Mike Here” (p. 116) ([read online in The Margins](#))
- Recent essays available online (written after *TIOWTD*):
 - “Tracing Literary Lineage”: a conversation with my editor, Valerie Boyd ([read online in Creative Nonfiction](#))
 - Tribute to Valerie Boyd ([read online in Lit Hub](#))

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](#) interview w/ editor Sari Botton on place, home, race, culture, dance, objects, 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 about craft
- [Literati](#): In conversation with Eileen Pollack and Donovan Hohn
- [IAAC Literary Festival](#): In conversation with Geeta Kothari

- [Skylight Books](#): Small press publishing w/ Deesha Philyaw & Colette Sartor
- **For Creative Writing Classes: Craft Essays**
 - ["Notes from the Cutting Room Floor"](#): (on endnotes & 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:**
 - ["Finding Friendship in Pandemic Collaboration: Sejal Shah on Making an Illustrated Playlist with Shebani Rao"](#) in *Lit Hub*
 - ["Tracing Literary Lineage: A Conversation with Valerie Boyd"](#) in *Creative Nonfiction*
 - [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" (w/ Ansley Moon)
 - [Guernica](#): "All my life, I've been biking with brakes on" (w/ Kelly Sundberg)
 - [Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies](#) (longer, in-depth interview) (w/ Sayantani Dasgupta)
 - [BOMB](#): "A Voice That Will Carry a Feeling" (w/ Rudri Bhatt Patel)
 - [LitHub](#): "On the Tricky Work of Giving Shape to an Essay Collection" (w/ Anjali Enjeti)
 - [Kenyon Review Online](#) (w/ Amy Wright)
 - [Works in Progress](#): with Sejal's "famous" aloo chole recipe (w/ Leslie Pietrzyk)
- **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” and defines the essay as queer and nonbinary. *This Is One Way to Dance* has been described as an essay collection as well as a memoir in essays. Five of the essays were once stories. Does this history change how you read the text?
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?