

Author: Michael Rotstein

Title:

**About the
Author:**

Keywords:

Abstract: Michael Rotstein
Rhet 105, Section M1
Instructor: John Griswold

Who: For my research in the project, I will be studying the University of Illinois' Raas Team

What: the Raas Team is one of the University's Indian Cultural Dance Group

Where: In order to best understand this subculture, I will be meeting them where they have their practices at various places in Champaign including Gregory Hall and Lincoln Hall.

When: Sundays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays from 9:30p.m.- 12:30a.m.

Why: This subculture that I have chosen does what they do in order to spread a piece of their Indian culture in the United States in the form of dance. I have chosen to research them because I would like to learn more about a culture that is far from any part of the world that I have ever been near.

**Initial
Exercises:** Michael Rotstein
Rhet 105, Section M1Q1
Instructor: John Griswold

Artifact Analysis/ Site Description Essay

As I walk through the front doors of the building, I can hear the clear, somewhat creepy creaking of the hinges on the doors. I come into a medium sized auditorium. The room is old with the wallpaper peeling off all over. I walk down the aisle between the seats and make my way down as it leads me to a small, narrow stairway that brings you up to the stage. On the stage stands a group of about fifteen people, talking to each other before practice begins

about anything and everything that happened that day. Once 9:30p.m. comes around, suddenly everybody is completely focused on the task at hand and they all form a large circle on the stage and begin their stretches. Together they count to ten for each stretch, and together at the end of each stretch they conclude with a clapping of their hands simultaneously. After a very thorough stretch, one of the team members goes to get his laptop and puts it down in the center of the stage. The rest of the team gathers around the computer and they all study these different videos, showing examples of other performances similar to theirs. They study different sections of many videos to help them better understand the motions that they need for all the moves they will have in their final dance routine that they will perform. While they all sit and watch, everyone is quiet except for some comments by the leaders, pointing out things in the videos that they can fix in their own routine. The rest are quiet, all eyes glued to the screen. After doing this for a little while, they are now ready to practice. The music begins, and everyone is already in formation at their respective positions ready to go. On cue, the routine begins. Suddenly, before you even have a chance to adjust in your seat, they start constantly running around perfectly together. In order to avoid confusion between them because it is so quick, they have the guys all wear white shirts and the girls wear orange. The music plays, but the stomping of their bare feet on the ground and the hitting of their sticks together creates a song of its own, and the energy they

bring heats up the already very hot auditorium. Although the section of the full routine that they are practicing now is only two minutes, the constant 120-second sprint proves its difficulty as a much needed water break is taken every few times go through it. After repeating all this a few times, the team then breaks down the dance into separate, smaller parts to practice. Amazingly, they are told to repeatedly practice these smaller sections with their eyes closed, to better understand their movements and positions on the stage in order to perfect the routine. After hours of repeated, tedious work and practice, the team is slowly able to piece together a more perfected two-minute section of the future full routine that they will perform in competitions later on in the year. As they all prepare to go back home once practice is done for the day, everyone feels relaxed and happy and they go back to talking about anything and everything that happened that day.

Question: Michael Rotstein
Rhet 105, Section M1
Instructor: John Griswold

**Positioning Yourself as a Researcher:
My life vs. Raas?**

In many more ways than I could ever know, my parents are what shaped the man I am today and will be the rest of my life. I grew up a boy, with a twin brother, to two people who had childhoods that make the middle-class life I live a complete fantasy. As a boy, my father lived in a small home in Israel with two parents who had survived the most horrible mass killing of human life that we call the Holocaust of the Jews in World War Two. After losing their whole families, my father's parents no longer knew what love was, or if it even existed. Completely lifeless in their personalities, my father had a parentless youth even when they were around him. In his youth was where it ended when at the age of 14 he was sent to boarding school for high school, leaving him alone. He never did come back home after serving his time in the Israeli Army, and then leaving the country to travel the world doing odd jobs in foreign lands, until word came that his parents were sick and he stayed with them until they eventually passed. Only truly having known his loveless parents, after the experiences they had been through,

rubbed off on the man and the parent he would eventually become. Although this life made him want to be everything his parents weren't, my father still shows similarities in the, one might say, traditional style of parenting that he follows.

My mother was born to a somewhat wealthy Iraqi family in Baghdad. Under the power of a terrible ruler, her family, along with many other Jewish families, were sent to live in Israel. With all their money, property, and citizenship taken from them like candy from a little kid, my mother was left at three months old to live in a tent for three years with her very poor family of seven. She would live in the lower class until she ended leaving her family to marry my father years later where they ended up coming to America together to start new lives, but with her came a college degree.

Even after my brother and I were born, they were still trying to figure out a way to get by. My father put all the money my parents had saved for their new lives in America into trying to start a valet parking business. For the first couple years of my life my brother and I grew up fatherless because he couldn't pay people to

work for him so he was never around to help my mom take care of us. When the business eventually failed and all the money my parents saved for years was gone, I lived many of my first years learning to appreciate the money we did have, and not feeling upset as I always questioned my parents on why they couldn't spoil me as I saw how many of my friends were growing up.

Now, into my eighteenth year of life, I look back at the childhood I had and the culture I grew up with, and I realize that it was the only culture I ever really experienced. Because my parents lived nearly their entire lives in Israel, they were always surrounded by people with the same culture, religion, and backgrounds as them. Because of this, coming to America and being exposed to so many different cultures made it a very difficult transition for them. It doesn't help when you have a grandmother who strongly feels that I should hate Muslims because of the conflict going on in the Middle East. In the end, this made it harder for my parents to accept me befriending other kids in school from different backgrounds.

The reason I chose to do my field study on the University's Raas Team is because I always wanted to understand another culture from a different part of the world than I have been used to spending time with. Even in my high school, where it seemed as though half the kids were from some sort of Indian background, I could never feel as comfortable being friends with them because of the way my parents raised me. But now, after leaving home, I find that with this independence I can also choose to interact with whichever culture I wish, and learn all the things about them that I never had the chance to learn before.

Plan: Michael Rotstein
Rhet 105, Section M1Q1
Instructor: John Griswold

Interview Assignment

M: Hello

Z: Hi

M: What is your name and what is the name of the group that you are with?

Z: My name is Zahid Lodhia, and I am a member of the UIUC Raas Team.

M: What grade are you in?

Z: I am a freshman

M: What is Raas?

Z: Raas is a traditional Indian dance.

Z: It is performed with sticks called Dandiyas.

M: From where does the dance originate?

Z: The dance originated from a state in India called Gujarat.

M: How many people are on your team?

Z: [Umm....]There are a total of 16 people, 8 boys and 8 girls on the team. We also have 1 alternate for each gender in case anyone gets hurt.

M: Is the team made of up mostly upper-classmen?

Z: In the past years it had been mostly upper-classmen. However this year, many freshmen made the team.

M: How many freshmen make up the team this year?

Z: Including the alternates, there are a total of 10 freshmen.

M: How does it make you feel being one of so many under-classmen in such a highly selective group?

Z: Well, it really pushes me to work harder so that we can be as good, if not better than the teams before us.

M: What type of success has your team experienced in the years before?

Z: 3 years ago we made it to the national competition. In the past couple of years, we have done well at the competitions we applied to.

M: Do you feel like it puts a lot more pressure on you, along with the other freshman, to try and get back to the national stage?

Z: Yes, it definitely does. UIUC has a very strong reputation and is known for their Raas team. We have strong energy and a unique vision. Hopefully we can maintain that status in this upcoming year.

M: What made you decide to join the Raas Team when coming to the University?

Z: Well one of my friends told me about how good the Raas team was, so I decided to audition because I wanted to be a part of a successful team.

M: Now, I know you guys practice three days a week, for three hours each time. How are you able to balance Raas practice with school and how difficult is it for you?

Z: Well, being on the Raas team has really taught me great time management skills. I finish my homework in the afternoon because I'm always too tired to work on it after I get home.

M: How well do all the members on the team work with each other?

Z: The team dynamics are very good. Although we may all have slightly different ideas, our coordinators do a great job of keeping us in check and organizing the practice.

M: Do the differences in ideas ever cause conflict on the team?

Z: [Uhhh...]No, everyone listens to the coordinators who incorporate all the different ideas into one.

M: How often does the team compete over the course of the year?

Z: Well we apply to several competitions that take place in either January or February. Depending on how we do, we can qualify for nationals which is sometime in April.

M: Do you look at the Raas team as more than just a dance group, but also as a social club and connection that you have to meet new people as you experience the new life of college?

Z: Yes, the people on the team are really nice and we end up hanging out outside of practice despite seeing each other so many times a week. I can say I've definitely met a lot of new people through this team.

M: Well Zahid, I want to thank you for taking the time to sit down with me to answer some questions about your experience as a member of the University's

Raas team. I hope you enjoy the rest of the year and good luck in the competitions.

Michael Rotstein

Rhet 105, Section M1Q1

Instructor: John Griswold

Interview Narrative

Hi, my name is Zahid Lodhia, and I am a freshman member of the UIUC Raas Team. Raas is a traditional Indian dance that is performed with sticks called Dandiyas. The dance originated from a state in India called Gujarat. There are a total of 16 people, 8 boys and 8 girls on the team. We also have 1 alternate for each gender in case anyone gets hurt. In the past years [the team] has been mostly upper-classmen. However this year, many freshmen made the team. Including the alternates, there are a total of 10 freshmen. [But being one of so many under-classmen] really pushes me to work harder so that we can be as good, if not better than the teams before us. 3 years ago we made it to the national competition. In the past couple of years, we have done well at the competitions we applied to. [Our team's past success] definitely does [put a lot more pressure on us freshman to get back to the national stage]. UIUC has a very strong reputation and is known for their Raas team. We have strong energy and a unique vision. Hopefully we can maintain that status in this upcoming year. [I first heard about the team when] one of my friends told me about how good the Raas team was, so I decided to audition because I wanted to be part of a successful team.

[Because of the long practice hours every week], being on the Raas team has really taught me great time management skills [in order to be able to balance practice and school]. I finish my homework in the afternoon because I'm always too tired to work on it after I get home. [But] the team dynamics are very good. Although we may all have slightly different ideas, our coordinators do a great job of keeping us in check and organizing the practice. Everyone listens to the coordinators[,] who incorporate all the different ideas into one.

We [will] apply to several competitions that take place in either

January or February. Depending on how we do, we can qualify for nationals[,] which is sometime in April. The people on the team are really nice and we end up hanging out outside of practice despite seeing each other so many times a week. [In the end] I can say I've definitely met a lot of new people through this team.

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Rhet105, Section M1Q1

Instructor: John Griswold

Analysis of Fieldwork Essay

As I sit here thinking of every little bit of information that lies in my binder, I can't help but think, along with the other Rhet teachers of the horrid question "So what?". In my opinion there really is no real answer to this question, or so far through my research at least. Instead, all I can do is explain the analysis of all the papers we were supposed to write for our fieldwork. By doing this I would show the reasoning as to why I chose the subculture that I did, and what I have slowly but surely been learning about them over time as I observe them more and more, whether it is through a paper positioning myself as a writer, or a description of the site I meet my subculture at.

In the "Positioning Yourself as a Researcher" paper, the assignment was to write a three-page essay talking about "you in relation to others", how we are different from the subculture we have chosen to research. We were to talk about the subculture, and describe the myths and stereotypes we know about coming into the project that surround this group. While I was writing this paper, I began by thinking I was going to write a little bit about my background, growing up in Skokie and being raised by my parents, just talking about the effect their difficult, if even existent youth, would have on me. But I knew that this was not something that would take up a few sentences, or even a couple paragraphs, and I quickly realized the majority of my paper was a somewhat vague description of

how I feel about my childhood with them. Soon enough I realized I had gone slightly off topic and hadn't really talked as much about the subculture, so I was ready to delete some chunks when it hit me, even though none of this has to do with my group I wish to research, this is what made me the person I am today, and the researcher I will be.

Our next assignment was to write a four-page "Artifact analysis/site description" essay. This paper demanded that we focus our attention less on ourselves as researchers and people, and more on the group we have chosen to study and the place in which they do whatever task their group was made to do. Before writing this paper, I started by first going to observe my subculture, the University of Illinois Raas Team. It was there that I learned of a whole new culture that I had no idea existed until only days before, which originates from a state in India and this team performs a traditional dance coming from there. As I sat in this very got auditorium in Gregory Hall, I looked around the entire room and couldn't help but be amazed at the intricate artwork and detail surrounding the entire place. I then watched the team practice only to be even more amazed than I was before. In a single hour of completely focusing myself on this group and the surroundings they put themselves in at practice I learned so much about a piece of the world I knew close to nothing about to begin with. From this first meeting and on, by watching the team practice, I gained a whole new respect for this group of people. When people hear about what the Raas Team does and what they are all about, they receive the common label that all Indians do when they dance is stand and bob their heads from side to side and do an Egyptian type of motion with their arms above their heads. I found that I myself did not have any such labels for them mostly because I had no idea what to expect in the first place, but when I went to watch them dance I did find that it was unlike any stereotype I heard, aside from a little head bobbing that goes with the traditional piece of their work. What nobody realizes though is how hard the team works. Three times a week they have three-hour practices filled with very intense exercise with all the running that is included in their routine. Just for me to sit there a couple hours was exhausting, making me really respect what they do. After that first day I now had a real answer to give people when I tell them about

what the Raas Team does.

Following this came an "Interview Assignment", which asked that we interview a member of the subculture that we are researching. For this assignment I interviewed a freshman member of the Raas Team. When I sat and spoke with him about the team, I found that he had many good things to say about it. It was then that I also learned a few more facts going a little deeper into the history of the culture. He also spoke to me about the team dynamics, and how well the team members get along with each other, giving them a certain flow as they perform their routine in practice. He also told me that he is one freshman of a team made up of more than half underclassmen. I think what interested me the most though was that the member of the team that I interviewed was not even from any part of India, but of Pakistani descent. This showed me that a dance group originating not just from India but from a specific state in India was still very accepting of someone who had no connection to their background. The reason this surprised me was because when I first went to observe them I was very nervous because even though they permitted me to do the project on them, I wasn't sure if the group as a whole would be so accepting of me watching them, possibly looking at me as an outsider. But even then I was proven wrong.

After multiple hours of watching this group of people that I had nothing to do with even before coming to this school, I learned many new things about a different culture, and at the same time met a lot of interesting people that I may not have met otherwise. To answer the question "So what?", I really don't know if I can find the right words to describe it, but then again, so what? In the end the field study is not about proving labels and stereotypes wrong, but really it's learning about a new culture that you know nothing about and finding its importance to the world. No matter if positive or negative, it's about the experience of surrounding yourself with a new culture.

Michael Rotstein
Rhet105, Section MIQ1
Instructor: John Griswold

Annotated Bibliography

Penn State Ghaamudyaz. Raas Chaos 2006. 18 November 2006. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjb37ImSdt4>>

1. The team isn't really together in parts of the performance. Different people doing things on wrong beats.

Duke Raas Team. Raas Chaos 2006. 18 November 2006. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyRHueaiUmo>>

2. Some props used to make dance like some kind of a play or musical.

Rutgers University Raas Team. Raas Chaos 2006. 18 November 2006. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_VPY4Rc9rs&feature=related>

3. Incorporates stage-play and traditional dancing. Clothing very different.

Edmonton Raas Team. Vancouver 2007. 25 November 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax7vyWV5_kc&feature=related>

4. Very detailed and intricate. Always stay together, pretty much perfecting the dance. Deserves the first place prize received at the competition this video was filmed at.

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor Raas Team. Dandia Dhamaka 2007. 20 February 2007.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6_RR8nMDH4&feature=related>

5. Extremely upbeat. Does a good job of putting the men and women together in parts, as well as separating them in other parts. Routine seems similar to that created by the UIUC team that I have observed.

<http://www.international-travel-tours.com/india/gifs/mahalaxmi-temple.jpg>

6. Cool, colorful, traditional clothing worn by these women performing Raas.

“Raas”. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 19 October 2008.
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dandiya>>

7. A lot of good information on the history and background of Raas. Helps me to better understand where Raas comes from, why they perform it, and how it is performed.

Dandiya

Raas. [Bharatonline.com](http://www.bharatonline.com). <<http://www.bharatonline.com/gujarat/dance/dandia-ras.html>>

8. Talks about a festival in India where Raas is performed. The festival takes place over the course of nine days, to pay tribute to the nine incarnations of Mata Amb, the Mother Goddess. People observe fasts during the nine days of the festival and also make visits to temple for prayers as well. Raas uses the colorful sticks, usually made of bamboo, called Dandiyas, which is how it coined the term “Stick Dance”.

<http://www.bharatonline.com/gujarat/pics/dandiya-raas-gujarat.jpg>

9. Very cool color of clothing, and interesting formation of group.

Raas Chaos 2008. [RhoVisions.com](http://raaschaos.com). <<http://raaschaos.com/>>

10. Website for the biggest Raas competition in the Washington D.C. area, presenting nine Raas teams from around the nation.

11. <http://festivals.iloveindia.com/navratri/dandiya-raas.html>

12. <http://www.studentorg.umd.edu/desi/article84.htm>

13. <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Dandiya>

14. <http://sumesh.wordpress.com/2006/09/29/dandiyathe-great-indian-group-dance/>

15. <http://wht-blk.blogspot.com/2005/10/navratri.html>

Michael Rotstein
Rhet105, Section M1Q1

Instructor: John Griswold

The Raas Way

Being on the University of Illinois Raas Team has many different meanings. It proves to be a success in the art that it performs, but is also the social gathering of a group of young college students bringing back their foreign culture to the very culturally diverse United States. Originating from a state in India called Gujarat, Raas is a traditional Indian dance performed using sticks called Dandiyas. "...this dance form is actually the staging of a mock-fight between the Goddess (Durga) and Mahishasura, the mighty demon-king, and is nicknamed 'The Sword Dance'. The sticks of the dance represent the sword of Durga," (Nationmaster). The team here at UIUC has performed this dance for a few years now, and has already experienced success for they had gone to the national competition only a couple years ago, and still continuously qualify for national level competitions in states including California and Florida.

I never knew what Raas was until a few weeks into this first semester of my college experience. I first heard about it when I heard a friend of mine from high school was going to try out for the team. Raas comes in two forms, Dandiya and Garba. "Dandiya and Garba are the featured dances of Navratri evenings in Gujarat. Originated as devotional Garba dances, which were

performed in the honor of Goddess Durga...” (Festivals). Of the two forms of Raas, Dandiya is the one performed by the team here at UIUC. “While Garba is performed exclusively by women, men and women join in for Dandiya,” (Festivals). As I was being told all about it, I couldn’t help but ask my friend that annoying question like some 6-year-old, “Why?”. The only thing running through my head was hearing that they practice three nights a week from 9:30 at night to 12:30 in the morning. Again, why? Why stay up so late three nights a week for some Indian club? What about homework and studying? What about sleep? Why? After asking this question so many times I eventually came to annoy myself as well, and at the same time realized this was something I really wanted to find out more about.

Every time the members of the Raas team meet for practices, they begin each one with the same routine. They all gather around, talking to each other about the small things that happened, and get into appropriate clothing for the night. Soon after, they come up the steps that lead to the stage, one by one, and naturally form a big circle on the stage in the big auditoriums they practice in. Standing up there, tiny groups form in the circle. A couple people crack some jokes with each other, some other small groups gossiping, and others talking about classes and the extremely difficult test they had that day. But once everyone is up there and the time hits 9:30, the focus in each one’s eyes is

completely focused now on the coordinators and the task at hand. Almost automatically, the group begins a stretching routine that they do every practice before they officially begin. One member begins the count, “1, 2, 3, 4 ...” and the rest follow the pattern to ten. With power and excitement, together they count for each stretch, and together they end each one with a clap, showing unity in the team. “Right arm...left arm,” the captains yell out the stretches and the rest follow. You can feel this excitement with them as it radiates the auditorium. After a thorough stretch, it’s go time and now the hard work begins.

A lot of the times when they practice, the team will come together as a group in the center of the stage after they finish stretching and take some time to look at videos of them in previous practices on a computer. By doing this they can see every move they made in their rehearsals of the dance routine they will end up performing, thus being able to find mistakes they made and figure out a way to correct them. While they watch, I can see a few of them doing small motions with the video, trying to help themselves figure out their part. To each member of the team, perfection is key in order for them to win again on the national stage. Anything less is unacceptable, and just to be the one watching them makes you realize how hard it really is for such success to be achieved.

Success, in all of its meanings, is extremely hard to come by. In many more ways than I could ever know, my parents taught me this to eventually

shape the man I am today and will be the rest of my life. I grew up a boy, with a twin brother, to two people who had childhoods that make the middle-class life I live a complete fantasy. As a boy, my father lived in a small home in Israel with two parents who had survived the most horrible mass killing of human life that we call the Holocaust of the Jews in World War Two. After losing their whole families, my father's parents no longer knew what love was, or if it even existed. Completely lifeless in their personalities, my father had a parentless youth even when his parents were around him. In his youth was where it ended when at the age of 14 he was sent to boarding school for high school, leaving him alone. He never did come back home after serving his time in the Israeli Army, and then leaving the country to travel the world doing odd jobs in foreign lands, until word came that his parents were sick and he stayed with them until they eventually passed. Only truly having known his loveless parents, after the experiences they had been through, rubbed off on the man and the parent he would eventually become. Although this life made him want to be everything his parents weren't, my father still shows similarities in the, as one might say, traditional style of parenting that he follows.

My mother was born to a somewhat wealthy Iraqi family in Baghdad. Under the power of a terrible ruler, her family, along with many other Jewish families, were sent to live in Israel. With all their money, property, and citizenship taken from them like candy from a little kid, my mother was left at three months old to live in a tent for three years with her very poor family of seven. She would live in the lower class until she ended leaving her family to

marry my father years later where they ended up coming to America together to start new lives, but with her came a college degree.

Even after my brother and I were born, they were still trying to figure out a way to get by. My father put all the money my parents had saved for their new lives in America into trying to start a valet parking business. For the first couple years of my life my brother and I grew up fatherless because he couldn't pay people to work for him so he was never around to help my mom take care of us. When the business eventually failed and all the money my parents saved for years was gone, I lived many of my first years learning to appreciate the money we did have, and not feeling upset as I always questioned my parents on why they couldn't spoil me as I saw how many of my friends were growing up.

Now, into my eighteenth year of life, I look back at the childhood I had and the culture I grew up with, and I realize that it was the only culture I ever really experienced. Because my parents lived nearly their entire lives in Israel, they were always surrounded by people with the same culture, religion, and backgrounds as them. Because of this, coming to America and being exposed to so many different cultures made it a very difficult transition for them. In the end, this made it harder for my parents to accept me befriending other kids in school from different backgrounds. Because of all this, I always had that need to know more.

The reason I chose to do my field study on the University's Raas Team is because I always wanted to understand another culture from a different part of the world than I have been used to spending time with. Even in my high school,

where it seemed as though half the kids were from some sort of Indian background, I could never feel as comfortable being friends with them because of the way my parents raised me. But now, after leaving home, I find that with this independence I can also choose to interact with whichever culture I wish, and learn all the things about them that I never had the chance to learn before. For me, through the Raas Team I can experience that piece of the world I always wanted to be more a part of and learn the differences and similarities between me and them.

In order to understand and know their culture better, observation is very important, but very nerve-wracking when you are going to observe another culture that you have no connection to. As I walked through the front doors of the building, I could hear this clear, somewhat creepy creaking of the hinges on the doors. I came into a medium sized auditorium in the Lincoln Hall. The room is old with the wallpaper peeling off all over. I walked down the aisle between the seats and made my way down as it leads me to a small, narrow stairway which brought me up to the stage. On the stage stood a group of about fifteen people, talking to each other before practice begins about anything and everything that happened that day.

Once 9:30p.m. came around, suddenly everybody is completely focused on the task at hand. "Everybody get on stage and start stretching," one of the coordinators yells out. Right on command they all form a large circle on the

stage and begin their stretches. Together, like always, they count to ten for each stretch, and together at the end of each stretch they conclude with a clapping of their hands simultaneously. After stretching, one of the team members goes to get his laptop and puts it down in the center of the stage. The rest of the team gathers around the computer and they all study these different videos, showing examples of other performances similar to theirs. They study different sections of many videos to help them better understand the motions that they need for all the moves they will have in their final dance routine that they will perform.

While they all sit and watch, everyone is quiet except for some comments by the leaders, pointing out things in the videos that they can fix in their own routine. The rest are quiet, all eyes glued to the screen. After doing this for a little while, they are now ready to practice. The music begins, and everyone is already in formation at their respective positions ready to go. On cue, the routine begins. Suddenly, before you even have a chance to adjust in your seat, they start constantly running around perfectly together. In order to avoid confusion between them because it is so quick, they have the guys all wear white shirts and the girls wear orange. The music plays, but the stomping of their bare feet on the ground and the hitting of their sticks together creates a song of its own, and the energy they bring heats up the already very hot auditorium. Although the section of the full routine that they are practicing now is only two minutes, out of a total eight minutes of the complete routine, the constant 120-second sprint proves its difficulty as a much needed water break is

taken every few times go through it. After repeating all this a few times, the team then breaks down the dance into separate, smaller parts to practice. They go over these smaller sections slowly, looking closer at every angle and movement of every arm and leg.

Amazingly, they are told to repeatedly practice these smaller sections with their eyes closed, to better understand their movements and positions on the stage in order to perfect the routine. “Again,” the coordinator says. “We don’t stop until it’s perfect,” she adds. After hours of repeated, tedious work and practice, the team is slowly able to piece together a more perfected two-minute section of the future full routine that they will perform in competitions later on in the year. As they all prepare to go back home once practice is done for the day, everyone feels relaxed and happy, smiling and laughing, and they go back to talking about anything and everything that happened that day.

Zahid Lodhia, who coincidentally happens to be an acquaintance of mine from high school, is a freshman member of the UIUC Raas Team. His family comes from Pakistan on his father’s side and the Philippines on his mother’s side. Even though Raas is originated from the state in India called Gujarat, his place on the team was still well accepted. To the team, a member’s different backgrounds have no bearings on their decision to choose people during team auditions, but it was all a matter of talent. This proves the true drive of the coordinators to manufacture a team of success, and by doing this also trying to rebuild the team for the future as well. On the team there are a total of sixteen

people, eight boys and eight girls on the team, and then there is also one alternate added for each gender in case anyone gets hurt, all out of a total of about 75 people who tryout at the auditions held in the beginning of the school year.

In the past years the Raas team has been mostly consisting of upper-classmen due to need for experience in the dance of Raas. However this year, many freshmen made the team as part of the rebuilding plan. Including the alternates, there are a total of ten freshmen. In an interview with Zahid he said:

“Being one of so many under-classmen really pushes me to work harder so that we can be as good, if not better than the teams before us. Three years ago we made it to the national competition. In the past couple of years, we have done well at the competitions we applied to (still qualifying for regional competitions to compete for spots at Nationals). Our team’s past success definitely does put a lot more pressure on us freshman to get back to the national stage.”

The Raas Team is more than just a gathering of a culture, but it is also training for a national level competition as part of pride for a large group of people in a piece of the world that to a lot of the rest of it knows little about. By achieving national status, the Raas Team can help spread the knowledge of their culture to others. Zahid later went on to say:

“UIUC has a very strong reputation and is known for their Raas team.

We have strong energy and a unique vision. Hopefully we can maintain that status in this upcoming year. I first heard about the team when one of my friends told me about how good the Raas team was, so I decided to audition because I wanted to be part of a successful team.”

Everything we do in our professional lives has one motive behind it: success. We could hear the word over a million times in our lifetime, but even then that would never be enough because of its importance. But with success comes a lot of hard work. Although it is extremely tiring to have practice at such late hours so often as they do, it is also very good for them. Because of the long practice hours every week, being on the Raas team can teach excellent time management skills.

While talking with Zahid I couldn't help but find the need to ask him how in the world he can do all this. He simply answered me by saying, “In order to be able to balance practice and school, I finish my homework in the afternoon because I'm always too tired to work on it after I get home.” When you watch the team practice, you can see so clearly that their team dynamics are very good. Although you can tell that they all have slightly different ideas, the coordinators do a really great job of finding a way to keep the rest of the group in check and organizing the practice. They make it so that the differences don't cause conflict, and by doing this you can see that they all truly respect the upperclassmen. “Everyone listens to the coordinators, and in the end they incorporate all the

different ideas into one to make the best routine they can,” he said.

The Raas Team participates in many competitions that take place at some time in January and February which they have to apply to and send in audition tapes to compete with hundreds of other universities nationwide in order to be able to eventually make it up to the national competition, which, depending on how they do at the others, will take place sometime in April. At these competitions, the members of the team have to wear traditional Indian clothing, “The women wear traditional dresses such as colorful embroidered choli, ghagra, and bandhani dupattas dazzling with mirror work and heavy jewelry,” (Nationmaster). Part of what makes the team so great is that they all have an understanding of each other and get along so well. They find each other’s faults and help each other by pointing out any mistakes when needed. The members of the team are also friends outside of practice, showing that the Raas Team is more than just a cultural dance group, but also a social sort of gathering and real opportunity to meet new people, which makes the transition from high school to college much easier.

To sit here and think of every little bit of information that I have learned about the Raas team over the course of this semester, I can’t help but think, along with the other Rhet teachers, of the horrid question “So what?” In my opinion there really is no real answer to this question. Instead, all I can do is

describe my feelings on the observations I made as I spend many hours watching the UIUC Raas Team practice. As a researcher studying this subculture, I went to the field site completely unsure of what to expect. After all, what can you expect when you don't really even know much about them to begin with? This question makes the field study so scary, yet in its own way exciting to have the opportunity to go out and learn something new.

How are we different from the subculture we have chosen to research? We all come from different backgrounds, different cultures, and different religions. For me growing up in Skokie and going to one of the most culturally diverse high schools you can find didn't make it very easy for me or anyone to be able to become a part of all these different cultures. Coming into this project I felt a certain type of fear of what I would find out. Whenever you don't know actual facts about another culture, a lot of what you do know is all the stereotypes and labels that you hear about them. The one thing I knew I wanted to do before doing my project on the Raas Team was to completely ignore every single stereotype I may have heard or hear about their culture because I knew I needed to make those conclusions on my own after my own observations of them.

After all the anticipation and preparation, when the time finally comes to go to that first meeting, the next thing to do is leave all the fear behind and just go with it. You walk into the big room, you know nobody, and no one knows you, making it equally strange to both sides. The ones that don't know what you're doing there just glance over, wondering what this random Jewish guy is

doing in their practice. Even though I knew the coordinators permitted me to come, I still had that thought in the back of my head thinking the whole group would look at me as an outsider. Palms sweaty, legs a little shaky walking down the aisle, every thought about what they think of you runs through your head, and telling yourself you weren't going to be afraid completely goes to waste. But when you end up watching them, it really doesn't matter anymore because a feeling of amazement is the only glow in your eyes as you can't take your eyes away from the hypnotizing movements.

9:30 p.m. and it all begins. As I sat in this very hot auditorium in Gregory Hall, I looked around the entire room and couldn't help but be amazed by the intricate artwork and detail surrounding the entire place. I then watched the team practice only to be even more amazed than I was before. In a single hour of completely focusing myself on this group and the surroundings they put themselves in at practice I learned so much about a piece of the world I knew close to nothing about to begin with. From this first meeting and on, by watching the team practice, I gained a whole new respect for this group of people. When people hear about what the Raas Team does and what they are all about, they receive the common label that all Indians do when they dance is stand and bob their heads from side to side and do an Egyptian type of motion with their arms above their heads. I found that I myself did not have any such labels for them mostly because I had no idea what to expect in the first place, but when I went to watch them dance I did find that it was unlike any stereotype I heard, aside from a little head bobbing that goes with the traditional piece of

their work. What nobody realizes though is how hard the team works, how intense the exercise is in their practice with all the running that is included in their routine. Just for me to sit there a couple hours was exhausting, making me really respect what they do. After that first day I now had a real answer to give people when I tell them about what the Raas Team does. I could see that they didn't think of me as an outsider, because to them the outside was something they want to bring in to be able to show the other cultures what they are actually about.

After multiple hours of watching this group of people that I had nothing to do with even before coming to this school, I learned many new things about a different culture, and at the same time met a lot of interesting people that I may not have met otherwise. To answer the question "So what?", I really don't know if I can find the right words to describe it, but then again, so what? In the end the field study is not about proving labels and stereotypes wrong, but really it's learning about a new culture that you know nothing about and finding its importance to the world. No matter if positive or negative, it's about the experience of surrounding yourself with a new culture. After all is said and done, you can finally truly be able to put those labels away and make your own conclusion about the subculture, and to go through the process of finding it is part of what makes it exciting.

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Michael Rotstein
Rhet105, Section M1Q1
Instructor: John Griswold

Self- Reflective Essay

During my experience observing the University of Illinois Raas Team, I found my opinion to be somewhat mixed. Although part of me felt as though I were being pulled into the experience with the subculture, I also felt a lot of “resistance” to the project.

When it comes to the positives of the field study, although I didn't feel pulled into the subculture as much as I wish I would have, I did feel some success and a lot of enjoyment throughout the process. During my observations, I was always extremely impressed with how hard the team worked to perfection, repeatedly going over every little detail of their routine trying to perfect it for when they perform it in competitions. In all honesty, I really expected a lot less going into it, because I really had no idea what to expect. I will always remember the first practice I went to, watching the team stretch for a while, and just thinking to myself that it wouldn't see anything too special. Out of nowhere they begin just a 2-minute piece of the routine, and right away I was in awe. My eyes were glued to the dancers, running around in circles, stomping their feet, banging the Dandiya sticks. It all looked so artistic how they formed these different patterns so quickly as they all circle all over the stage. After looking so intensely after a while it almost in a way began to feel a little hypnotic to watch them. I thought it was interesting that the dancers are forced to smile at the "audience" constantly during the routine to add to the emotion. I was also interested by the tradition behind the dance, where it comes from, why they do it, and other things like the colorful and vibrant traditional clothes they wear when the dance is performed.

The first practice I will always remember as nothing less than amazing, after immersing myself into a new culture and feeling the excitement of learning something new. But after a few more visits, I couldn't help but feel that every practice was the same. Nothing seemed to change and seeing the same old thing

time and time again began to make the experience boring, making it harder for me truly feel that same excitement every time as I did the first. This also made it much harder to do things for the study such as writing field notes, because I would always feel like I was writing the same things each time as I did the practice before. This caused a lot of resistance for me because it would only make me feel like I didn't need to visit the field site as often if the notes would end up the same. This would also lead to me feeling less engaged and more bored of the subculture.

I remember a time when I finally saw something new, but in a negative way. For the whole hour I went to watch them practice, all I saw was a group of people messing around, not taking the club that they are a part of at all seriously. I stayed a little extra time, thinking this may change soon, but when it didn't I finally decided to leave, having wasted nearly an hour and a half of my time. The next day I bumped into one of the members of the team where I would find out that the last hour of the three was the most productive one they had all year. This made me a little bitter, but more disappointed than anything that I couldn't find the excitement in the artistic dance that so intrigued me the first time I observed them. This practice also happened to be the last that I would observe.

After looking through my mapping sheets, not only did I notice the more negative feelings towards the field study beginning to build, but it was noticing negativity in the group itself. In a way, this may have been something that kept me pulled into it, being able to see a little bit of the team drama slowly unfold on stage in front of me. This "drama" on the team seemed to stem from the

impatience with the team's weak link by the rest of the group. The weakness definitely showed in practices during rehearsals of the routine, and for a team who holds perfection to such high regard this caused a lot of frustration to build up because they want so badly to succeed in their competitions, which even qualifying for is never a given.

All this got me to think about the difference between the last practice I observed and the first. I remember being extremely nervous walking in the first time, but they seemed just as nervous to have someone watch them, which put a little pressure on them to look good. I felt like they were trying extra hard to impress me on that first day that I observed them. What made the experience a little more negative was how quickly the team became more comfortable with letting me see how they would be if there wasn't someone observing, whether it's losing focus and wasting valuable practice time, or slacking during rehearsals and not trying as hard to keep with the pace. This was something that maybe should have flattered me knowing that this group of people was so comfortable with me being there, but instead disappointed me to see a lack of productivity when I was there.

After all is said and done, I do take away a good lesson with this experience from observing the University's Raas Team. I am glad I was able to observe and learn the history and meaning of a culture I had never known until now. I feel that by doing the ethnography field study I have really grown as a writer since the beginning of the semester.

Data: FIELDNOTES

10/14/08 Fieldnotes:

Before practice everybody is sitting around, getting ready, talking to each other about many things. Right at 9:30 p.m. one of the leaders calls out for everyone to get on stage and together everyone walks up the five steps and get into a circle. Once everyone is up, they begin their stretches. Like usual, they count to ten on each stretch and end each one with a simultaneous clap. The practice today is in the Lincoln Hall. The auditorium there is very similar to that of Gregory Hall where they practice on Wednesdays. After stretching, they all talk to each other about the dance and go over small parts with themselves. The music plays, and everybody is focused, studying in position waiting for their cue to begin. They start their routine and this goes on for a few minutes. When they stop, a couple members of the team who were sitting in the seats watching tell a couple people on the team some things to fix to help better the performance. They then start the routine again. After this time, they go for a long waterbreak while the two observers go more into depth about more things they need to fix as a whole team. They talk about these corrections for a while, then right away go back to their formations and start again without the music to go over exact movements on exact beats. They repeat this multiple times until they feel like they are getting down the right motions.

10/22/08 Fieldnotes:

Everyone arrives to the auditorium. They stand around, talking, getting ready once again for a night of Raas practice. Once everyone has gotten there and is ready to go, they all go up the steps in the front that leads to the stage. Everyone gathers in a large circle covering the entire stage. Split evenly, the girls are all wearing orange and take the right side, while all the guys wear white to take the left, and quickly they begin their usual stretching routine. During this time, one of the alternates sits by me and asks me how I feel about the Raas, and why I chose to study them. We talk for a couple minutes when the team ends their stretch and gather by the center of the stage, so she goes to be with the team. They all sit around one of the team member's laptops and watch videos of themselves taken at previously recorded practices. In the

meantime there is another team member trying to find a way to somehow be able to get into the balcony so they could use the video camera that sits at the top. After a brief adventure of one team member trying to climb the wall to get up, they get back on track, also realizing how dangerous the idea was. Giving up on the video for now, they begin to practice different pieces of their routine. The team splits by gender after a little while and they go on to get more precise work that both sides need to get down in certain sections that still need work. This part of the practice goes on to last about another hour.