rapper, the comedian, and the filmmaker were talking about racial profiling, war on terror, civil liberties. The rest of the conference seemed to be on a planet called "Spelling Bee Champion Honors Student Most Likely To Succeed." High-profile speakers included a former White House CFO, bankers, TV reporters, and a physical trainer. This half of the conference stayed on message: We're not just gear-heads in Bangalore call centers. We can do anything. "It's the best time for South Asians in America," one speaker said.

A triumphant narrative of a dream life. No time to talk about the other half of South Asian America. No space given to conflicting narratives.

Still there were some moments of unintended comedy. The former White House CFO gave the keynote and talked about how "decisive" George Bush had been since 9/11. A few moments later, the Muslim comedian followed and started railing against the "war on terror." An awkward silence descended on the room. A lone smile on my face.

Later, I searched through the speaker bios and organizer names. There were hardly any Muslim names. Of course my Muslim-dar is hardly foolproof. Before it became the vogue at the turn of the century for Bengali Muslims to have identifiably Muslim (read: Arabic) names, most people had Bengali names rooted in Sanskrit. Then there is of course the sizable Arab Christian population, perpetually mis-categorized. But with all those caveats, I felt reasonably certain I could identify Muslim students here by name.

I tracked down the one Bangladeshi student on the organizing committee -- one of those solitary Muslim names.

"Where are the Muslims on campus? Aren't they involved with these events?" I asked.

"Well there are a lot of competing organizations and events. This conference is called 'South Asian' but the Muslim students see this as an Indian thing. So they just stay away and do their own events," he replied.

Self selection, I thought, further back into self-imposed ghettos. On their way to becoming a permanent underclass. And why did the Muslim students feel 'Indian' meant it wasn't their space?

Scanning the conference catalogue for Muslim names felt like an unexpected act of essentialism. Growing up in Bangladesh, religion is linked in my psyche with obscurantism and repressive state power. If you were a progressive of any stripe, religious parties were the enemy. You identified as Bengali or *manush* (human) first, not as Muslim. You said goodbye with *Khoda Hafez*, not the Arabicized *Allah Hafez* (although only in Bangla politics would such a trivial difference even matter). But transplanted across the globe, and facing many other cultural-ethnic vacuums that have developed over the last three decades, many Asian migrants seem to have slowly slipped into "Muslim" as a form of supra-ethnic identity.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the under-class positioning of Muslim migrants is even more sharply visible. A 2005 survey found British Indians and West Indians outperforming their white working-class peers in education and jobs. This was especially visible for the "1.5" generation, children of the great wave of post-colonial migration. But in the same survey, two other Asian groups came in at the bottom: Bangladeshis and Pakistanis.

The Michigan episode seems trivial, but when I look at those students, I see contours of the future "best and brightest," and there are no Muslims in sight. Pre-law, pre-medicine, or pre-business by their second year, they are preternaturally professional and self-assured. A "summer job" is an internship at top-of-the-heap consulting firms like McKinsey. In fifteen years, these over-achievers will be running corporate America. But the missing names on that roster make me wonder who is being left behind.

Or are they leaving themselves behind?

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Pop-sociologists look to religion for an easy formula to explain the stratified Asian underclass. But these equations obscure more than they clarify. In London, Bengali women