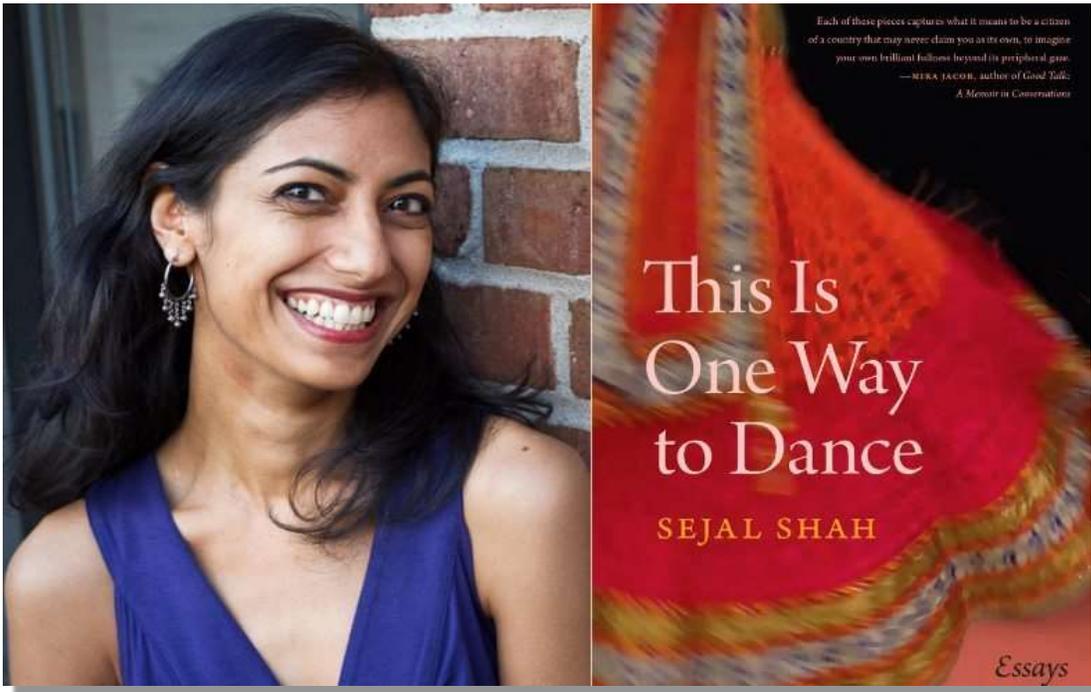


Dancing in Plain Sight

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"The world is full of paper. I am writing now. I am writing to me. I am writing to myself and others like me," author [Sejal Shah](#) professes in an essay "*The World is Full of Paper. Write to Me*", which is featured in her debut collection, [This Is One Way to Dance](#).

When asked to review this collection, I remembered [Shah's](#) piece in an anthology I'd reviewed fifteen years ago, [Under Her Skin: How Girls Experience Race in America](#) (IC, April 2005). In that particular piece, "*Betsy, Tacy, Sejal, Tib*", [Shah](#) imagines a childhood in which girls read books about characters who looked like her, and life was perfectly normal, even outside the walls of her home in a predominantly-white neighborhood bordering Rochester, New York.

Like that piece, her collection is an exploration of the sharp corners of the hypervisibility and invisibility she bore—identity, race, acceptance, foreignness in her own country. "*Dance*" offers twenty-five of [Shah's](#) writings and is chronicled by the year written (1999—2019). The result is an inspiring autobiographical search for identity in her birth country, a country that prides itself on its diversity yet persists in designating "Other" to strip away one's non-white distinctiveness.

The daughter of Gujarati immigrants from India and Kenya, [Shah](#) is the only person in her immediate family who was born in America and grew up in western New York. She was 19 when she first visited India. Still, travel is an important method of seeing herself as she moves from Rochester to Amherst, Brooklyn, Decorah, the Bay Area, and the desert of Nevada. We follow her as she moves to college, teaching positions, fellowships, residencies, and Burning Man. She travels to France – and reminisces about a dear friend lost to suicide – and to Sicily – and unexpectedly befriends an Indian family of vendors.



Sejal Shah, Author of This Is One Way to Dance.

[Shah](#) guides the reader through skillfully written examinations of dancing and weddings (her brother's, friends', hers); her sense of place and belonging (contrasting the contentment of her parents' circle of friends with living in numerous places where her comfort level varied); her challenges as an American of color ("Where do you come from?" people ask her, expecting an answer different from "Upstate New York"); frictional pop culture (*The Simpsons'* Apu character voiced by a white man); microaggressions (encountered too regularly); and food (it means home no matter where she dines).

[Shah](#) is a poet, short story writer, and essayist. "*Dance*" is the canvas upon which she has successfully discarded rules, choosing instead to marry the three in a genre-mixing volume that shows her talents and voice at their best. As a poet, too, she brings a lyricism to her prose, an economy with hard juxtapositions, and an open, welcoming door into her thoughts and life. At times, it reads like a journal, a diary, those most intimate keepers of one's emotions.

Her introspective, thought-provoking, often-humorous essays laced with frustration and joy, sadness and discovery give rise to seeing life through her eyes, then reflecting on one's own. Her writing reveals an individual and offers no template for a large group of people. Instead, it is personal, honest, and hopeful.

[Shah's](#) essays are springboards to conversation. They are reminders that under the broad umbrella of race, each person sheds light on as many unique facets of life as there are colors of skin and ways to dance. In a period during which race finally has moved forward in the national spotlight, these essays should be required reading.