Introduction

VIVEK BALD, MIABI CHATTERJI, SUJANI REDDY, AND MANU VIMALASSERY

In her painting *Vanwyck Blvd* (2005), visual artist Asma Ahmed Shikoh subtly reworks the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority’s iconic subway map. From afar, viewers might recognize the muted blue, gray, and yellow representation of the city, with boldly colored subway lines coursing like arteries through Manhattan and connecting it to the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island. Stepping closer, they will find that every piece of text across the five boroughs, including place-names, subway stops, and the map’s key, has been rendered into Urdu, connecting this image as much to Pakistan and Northern India as to New York. New York City has been claimed as part of a larger geography—of people, of language, of lives—that stretches outward from the South Asian subcontinent, across decades and across oceans. We begin with this painting because it enacts the kind of intervention that this collection sets out to make, as a countermapping, as a tool with which to read and navigate the scholarship, politics, and subjectivities that have come to constitute the South Asian diaspora in an age of U.S. power.

Maps have played a central role in the imperial expansions that have displaced hundreds of thousands of South Asians over the past two centuries and set them in motion across the globe. For centuries, maps fed the imagining of imperial power as it spread out from continental Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and they continue to function as tools of imperial perception and control. In military strategy sessions, corporate boardrooms, and broadcast news studios, maps mark out the spaces of U.S. geographic knowledge and power, tracing the trajectories of military “surges,” outlining proposed paths for natural gas pipelines, or introducing “new” sites of crisis and concern to the U.S. population, such as Kandahar, Bagram, Kabul, or Guantánamo. Like the navigational charts of explorers and slave-ship
captains in centuries past, these maps do more than plot spaces. They inscribe geographies of capitalist expansion: locations of raw materials, sites of production, networks of distribution, and hot spots of resistance. They also outline racial and imperial boundaries, as walls are erected to secure national borders, and the divisions between green and red zones enable military occupations overseas.²

Colonized and racialized people have long created their own maps to navigate landscapes of imperial power, even if these take different forms from those we expect of conventional cartography. Their maps emerge through everyday experience and are conveyed by word of mouth; they are used to move through and survive in unfamiliar, often contentious terrain. Diaporas produce maps of this kind; they are cartographic processes in their own right, respectively unspooling and connecting people over space. As they move, settle, congregate, and spread, global migrants and their descendants transform abstract and unwelcoming spaces into the embodied places of daily life. They make material, tangible, and rooted their experiences and struggles, their personal and collective gains and losses.

Shikoh’s rendering of the MTA map operates in these ways. The work was created amid the large-scale incarceration and popular demonization of Muslim immigrants, when any “Muslim-looking” person in a public place with a camera or a map was seen as a potential terrorist and risked arrest. In this moment of immobilization and alienation, the painting reinscribes New York City as a space of South Asian Muslim mobility and place-making. Against the enforced monolingualism of U.S. culture, the Urdu that Shikoh spreads across New York’s five boroughs evokes alternate and multiple poetic and religious traditions, histories of migration, formations of neighborhoods and communities, and experiences of racialized subjectivity. Her map suggests places of work and residence linked across boroughs by train lines, locations of mosques and community centers, sites of pleasure and enjoyment, and cultural institutions. It orients passengers who move through networks of surveillance and incarceration, memories and premonitions of traumatic violence, and grounds of protest and resistance. It charts the process of a migrant community making a life for itself—claiming and transforming the city.

Vanwyck Blvd brings up many of the shared concerns of our editorial collective. We came together in the opening years of the twenty-first
century in New York City. As Ashutosh Gowariker’s *Lagaan* filled movie theaters around the country and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Bombay Dreams* hit Broadway, the U.S. public seemed entranced with selective, and primarily Indian, elements of South Asian culture. Magazines like *Newsweek* and *Time Out New York* ran feature stories trumpeting the arrival of South Asians on the U.S. political, economic, and popular cultural landscape, pointing to chai at Starbucks, yoga studios on every corner, and bhangra on *The Sopranos*. They trumpeted a $60,000 “median income of Indian American families” and presented profiles of South Asian success stories in the arts, entertainment, business, and technology. At the same time, the public largely turned away from the experiences of working-class and Muslim South Asians, and from the severe hardships many faced in a post-9/11 environment of increased surveillance, detention, and deportation. These groups became perpetual suspects as the image of the menacing terrorist became ubiquitous on movie and television screens, in national and local media, and in the political rhetoric used to justify the curtailment of civil rights and the prosecution of wars. Each of us engaged this particular moment in multiple ways: as cultural producers, media makers, organizers, activists, community members, and graduate students. Over the ensuing years, what began as a series of casual conversations developed into a shared desire to connect what we saw occurring in the public culture with the intellectual work that was also emerging at this time.

The division that characterized the post-9/11 political climate—between one group of South Asians that was celebrated for its entrepreneurship and “culture” and another that was demonized as a threat to the nation—was stark but not new. This division has existed in one form or another throughout a more than century-long history of South Asian migration to and through the United States. Three signal moments have dominated scholarly descriptions of this history: 1917–1924, 1965, and September 11, 2001. These are each moments of state action: the first marks the era during which a series of U.S. laws and court decisions resulted in the barring of South Asians from entry to the United States and defined them as racially ineligible for citizenship; the second marks the moment that the United States “reopened” its doors for the immigration and naturalization of a large but select sector of highly educated and highly skilled South Asian migrants; and the last
marks the beginning of the contemporary “War on Terror” in which South Asian and Muslim immigrants were singled out for surveillance, incarceration, and deportation. In all three of these instances, South Asia or South Asians became visible in dominant U.S. culture because the state sought to delimit and shape the United States through legal boundaries to entry and settlement (immigration law), and/or through the targeting and deportation of the nation’s others and “enemies.” The implicit subject of a history centered on these moments, in other words, is the U.S. nation-state itself; its imperatives remain the grounds upon which South Asian American stories have been largely told, analyzed, and understood.

The essays in this collection tell a different story; they reframe the study of South Asians in the United States. This volume places immigration laws within a larger context, tracking the global migration of South Asians using frameworks of empire and global power. For our contributors, the South Asian diaspora has been shaped not just by the openings and closures of specific immigration policies but by capitalist expansion, war, militarism, partition, displacement, religious mobilization, globalization, neoliberalism, and political movements. Our goal here is to bring together scholarship that addresses the phenomena that are occurring around us, documents how people are shaping and responding to these phenomena, and illuminates how the current social, cultural, and political moment is connected to the past. *The Sun Never Sets* thus presents a group of writings that challenge the dominant assumptions structuring the field while providing tools with which to understand the contemporary political and economic conjuncture and the places of South Asian migration within it.

The Developing Field

Through the 1970s and 1980s, most scholarly writing on South Asians in the United States took the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act as central—both conceptually and empirically. These works focused on the generation of immigrants who arrived in the wake of the act, and documented that group’s purported economic and assimilationist success. By doing so, they helped to solidify an association between South Asian immigrants with professional and entrepreneurial
backgrounds and the figure of the “model minority,” an association that persists in popular cultural representations of South Asian Americans and continues to be embraced and celebrated by many South Asian Americans.

The work of South Asian and South Asian American feminist scholars marked a critical turn in the scholarship in the 1990s. Building upon the insights of black and Third World feminist activism and critique in the 1970s and 1980s, and participating in the emergence of postcolonial studies and transnational feminism, these scholars—such as Annanya Bhattacharjee, Inderpal Grewal, Sucheta Mazumdar, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Kamala Visweswaran—simultaneously addressed the global and local relations of power that structured what was only then coming to be named the “South Asian diaspora.” Their work placed discussions of “diaspora” and “transnationalism” within the context of shifting regimes of capital accumulation, drawing out a historical continuum moving from territorially based empire to neocolonialism. They revealed the ways that model minority South Asianness in the diaspora was built upon confining women to the role of maintaining an ossified, mythic, nationalist “culture” in the realm of the home, family, and community. They explored the hegemonic and counterhegemonic potential of South Asian diasporic literary and cultural texts and pointed toward the possibilities and practices of transnational political alliances, shadowing and working in opposition to the spread of global capital. Their work was groundbreaking in its insistence on interdisciplinary methodologies, its analyses of the intersections of different forms of power—along lines of gender, sexuality, race, class, nation, and empire—and in the connections it drew between multiple frames of experience and struggle.

During and since the 1990s, several groups of academics, activists, and artists also collectively published anthologies that gave voice to the model minority’s “others”: lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transgendered peoples; survivors of religious, sexual, intimate, and state violence; leftist activists; religious minorities; feminists; workers in “non-traditional fields”; and working-class immigrants and their families. These collections opened the terrain of what could be spoken about, much less published, on South Asian Americans. They aimed for a wider audience than many scholarly works, and they provide a model
for combining creative expressions and political polemics with more traditional scholarly writing. At the same time, much of the work in the edited volumes of the 1980s and 1990s still focused on elite Indian Americans and the racism, sexism, and homophobia they experienced. As Kamala Visweswaran put it in her critical 1997 article “Diaspora by Design,” “The globalization of the bourgeoisie [was] being understood” in the literature “in cultural, racial, or ethnic, rather than class terms.”7 We thus take up the legacy of these edited collections even as we expand upon the forms of “otherness” they addressed, in order to account more fully for the differences in class, region, and religion that mark contemporary South Asian communities.

At the turn of the millennium, Vijay Prashad offered another strident critique of the model minority myth, expanding upon the earlier work of Visweswaran, Mazumdar, and Bhattacharjee.8 In his book The Karma of Brown Folk, Prashad argued that South Asian Americanists and the media had not accounted for the structural engineering behind the idea of the “model minority” and its antiblack, anti-Latina/o, and antipoor agenda. He outlined the ways in which the Hart-Cellar Act contained overlapping provisions that privileged skilled, professional-managerial immigration from Asia in general. These combined with the Nehruvian state’s prioritized training of scientific and medical labor to produce the Indian American bourgeoisie. In piloting this collection, we took our lead from Prashad’s intervention and the work that has followed in its wake.

The past decade has been a critical period for the study of South Asians in the United States not only because of the political and cultural climate but also because enough scholarship has amassed that we can speak of an emerging scholarly field. Scholars have shifted analytical focus, and their work has spoken richly across fields and disciplines. Some standout works have established avenues for the further development of South Asian American studies, and its engagement with other fields. For example, Gayatri Gopinath framed queer diasporic desire and resistance in her contribution to cultural studies and queer of color critique. Jasbir Puar traced the intersecting logics of homonationalism, race, imperialism, and neoliberalism through her interventions in queer, cultural, and political theory. Sharmila Rudrappa’s feminist and community-based ethnographies analyzed ways that state multiculturalism
offers routes to American-ness through the performance of narrowly defined ethnic authenticity. Vijay Prashad excavated South Asian histories of polyculturalism and cross-racial encounter in the Americas, enriching the fields of comparative and relational ethnic studies. Biju Mathew described the lives, work, and cross-community organizing of South Asian taxi drivers, providing a model of urban and labor studies with relevance to the current moment. Monisha Das Gupta compared the organizing dynamics of South Asian women’s, queer, and labor activism in 1990s New York City, demonstrating new avenues for social movement analysis. Sunaina Maira explored the effects of the post-9/11 national security state on Muslim American youth, contributing to the rich literature on the interactions of marginalized young people with state structures and institutions.

The Sun Never Sets builds upon the momentum of this latest turn in the scholarship. The works collected here continue to loosen the hold that changes in immigration law have had on the emerging field. We instead examine South Asian migration through larger histories of imperialism and neoliberalism—and come to a fuller understanding of imperialism and neoliberalism through the histories and experiences of migrants. We conceive of the historical periods organizing the field less around changes in national law than around transitions in global capitalism and imperialism. Critical to such a reframing is a reexamination of “diaspora” as an analytic framework. As we take up diaspora within a context of imperialism, we pay close attention to both the utility and the limitations of its use as it configures certain conceptions of movement, settlement, and the attendant negotiations with power. In what follows we elaborate on how the essays in this volume speak to these interventions and their interrelation.

Shifting Imperialisms and Neoliberal Globalization

The phrase “the sun never sets on the British Empire” was a statement of pride and celebration in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Britain. Here, we have dropped the second half of the phrase in order to mark the questions this collection raises about historical continuities and contemporary relations of global power. While the “empire” most commonly and readily associated with South Asia is that
of the British, the United States has pursued its own major economic and geopolitical ambitions in the region for more than a century and has ultimately achieved significant political and economic power on the subcontinent. Indeed, over the course of the twentieth century, the contours of imperialism changed and shifted; the territorial empire of the British gave way to the spread of U.S.-led globalization. We argue that the increasing flows of people, money, goods, culture, and ideas between South Asia and the United States over the past several decades cannot be considered apart from this shift; they cannot be disentangled from the United States’ long-standing and ongoing military, geopolitical, and economic pursuits in the region.

Our decision to open the collection with a focus on South Asian migration and expatriate radicalism in the early years of the twentieth century is informed by this understanding. We see Britain and the United States in this period as two imperial powers developing in an evolving dynamic of cooperation and competition. From this standpoint, the contributions by Nayan Shah, Seema Sohi, and Vivek Bald significantly expand upon earlier literature on Ghadar radicalism in the United States during the 1904–1924 period. Most of this scholarship, dating from the 1970s and 1980s, viewed the politics of Indians in the early twentieth-century United States narrowly through the lens of Indian nationalism. The U.S. and Canadian West Coast was seen as an overseas outpost for the unfolding of subcontinental politics, and the Indians who became involved in the Ghadar movement there were understood to be primarily engaged in a struggle, from afar, against the British colonial state. Shah, Sohi, and Bald present a different picture of this period. Collectively, their work demonstrates that South Asian migrants were constantly crossing in and out of—and coming up against—both British and U.S. spheres of power as they made their way across the globe to the United States. They had to navigate the surveillance and border regimes that both empires were constructing in parallel and in concert with one another—in Calcutta, Singapore, Suez, the Philippines, Hawaii, Panama, and Belize; at the frontier between the United States and Mexico; in the engine rooms of British steamships; and at the porous docklands of the U.S. Atlantic coast. Once on U.S. soil, these migrants continued to face the power, policies, and pursuits of both Britain and the United States; here, they
were simultaneously challenging their colonization as British subjects and their racialization and criminalization by an anti-immigrant, anti-Asian, antiradical U.S. state.

Sujani Reddy’s chapter on the roots of Indian nurse immigration to the United States approaches this “early” period of South Asian migration from a different angle, that of the movement of U.S.-based institutions onto the subcontinent under the aegis of British colonization. Reddy foregrounds the critical role played by the Rockefeller Foundation in first remaking the global map of colonial medicine, and then promoting India’s first generation of Indian nursing leaders through their access to U.S.-centered models of professionalization. Reddy thus redraws our framework for understanding the arrival of this all-too-often neglected segment of post-1965 professional managerial immigrants, moving us away from explanations that continue to center the machinations of U.S. immigration law (Hart-Cellar), toward one that uncovers the shifting terrain of Anglo-American imperialism in the decades leading up to the Cold War and the onset of American ascendancy.

The United States’ geopolitical involvements in South Asia during this later period, from the 1950s through the 1980s, form the often unacknowledged background to the military, surveillance, criminalizing, and carceral regime that South Asian migrants now face in the post-9/11 world. In the years that we have been working on this project, Afghanistan and Pakistan have been on the front line of U.S. imperial policy. They have been the focus of an intense U.S.-led military campaign to “root out” groups like the Taliban and Al Qaeda, which themselves came into being as a result of earlier covert U.S. military involvements in the region during the Cold War—namely, the provision of U.S. money and arms to proxies fighting the Soviet Union and Afghan socialists and communists during the 1980s. The United States has been deeply involved in the Afghan-Pakistan region since that time, its foreign policy directed by a desire for the stability of, and/or control over, a territory that is crucial for the transshipment of oil and natural gas from Central Asia to Western markets. Years of U.S. support for military and antipopular governments in Pakistan, added to economic policies pushed by U.S. foreign aid and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—from structural adjustment to the mechanization of
agriculture—have also spurred the migration of increasing numbers of Pakistanis to the United States since the 1980s. These imperial dynamics have led us to focus particularly on the Af-Pak region and its migrants in the United States.

In his essay, Junaid Rana discusses how working-class Pakistani migrants in New York found themselves at the center of the domestic flank of the “War on Terror.” While earlier Pakistani immigrants were largely professionals who had benefited from the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act, Rana focuses on a more recent migration stream, made up largely of young, lower-middle-class men who entered the economies of U.S. cities in the 1980s and 1990s as a labor pool for the service sector. As their communities grew in areas like Midwood in Brooklyn, some of these migrants were eventually able to bring family members to the United States, but many more, separated from their biological families on the subcontinent, forged new bonds and affiliations, both among themselves and with other immigrants and workers, across lines of nationality, language, and ethnicity.

In the immediate aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks, as the U.S. state targeted South Asian, Arab, and Muslim men as terror suspects, its actions directly and immediately affected these families, networks of kin, friends, intimates, and neighborhoods. South Asians, particularly Muslims and the working class, saw their lives disrupted by a range of state actions: immigration “sweeps” that disappeared thousands of South Asian, Arab, and Muslim men; the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act and the creation of the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS); federal and local police initiatives to entrap community members in prefabricated terrorist plots; and the continuing detention and deportation of migrants netted through all these programs. The artistic interventions of the Visible Collective, discussed here by Naeem Mohaiemen, foreground the experiences of Muslim and South Asian immigrants who have had to navigate the policing and hypersurveillance of U.S. public spaces in this moment. Their work, alongside Rana’s, helps us understand that the country’s post-9/11 policies have racial and gendered dimensions whose impacts are not captured in official statistics about detainees and deportees. Rana specifically points us to the thousands of “voluntary” return migrants, who left the United States after experiencing the escalation of both everyday
racism and racial violence at the hands of law enforcement. Experiences of imprisonment, deportation, and exile live on far beyond U.S. borders and shape returnees’ understandings of their own global prospects, whether in Pakistan or as migrant laborers in the Persian Gulf and other parts of the world.

Rana’s and other contributions to The Sun Never Sets call into question the notion that the war on immigrants following the attacks of September 11, 2001 constituted a historical break with the past or that the policies that the United States pursued in its wake were exceptional. The system of detention and deportation used and expanded following September 11 is not new, nor is the targeting of South Asian, Arab, and Muslim migrants. Many of the United States’ institutions and practices of inspection, detention, and deportation were pioneered during the turn-of-the-century period of Asian exclusion and antiradicalism. Rather than seeing 9/11 as ushering in an era of disciplining immigrants of color, we instead see it as one moment in a more than century-long history of using incarceration and deportation as ways to police and contain communities of color. This time line includes the federal government’s War on Drugs of the 1980s and the draconian 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) that vastly increased the number of deportable offenses and reduced potential deportees’ legal rights. Soniya Munshi elaborates in this volume on the ways that IIRIRA and the Violence Against Women Act demanded that immigrants fit into specific, preassigned, and one-dimensional subject categories in order to receive benefits from the state: victim, abuser, illegal, or dependent, for example. These demands on immigrants disproportionately affected those most vulnerable to state sanction and coerced immigrants trying to avail themselves of the legal system into working with the criminal justice system.

By the time that Af-Pak became the front line of the U.S.-led “War on Terror”—at home and abroad—neoliberal globalization had altered the political and economic landscape bridging South Asia and the United States. The roots of this phenomenon also go back several decades. The era of Third World decolonization and nonalignment in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s presaged a political-economic backlash from the First World. This pushback culminated in the resurgence of neoclassical economic orthodoxy in the West, implemented in large part through the
structural adjustment programs promoted by the World Bank, the IMF, and architects of the Washington Consensus. A key tenet of these policies has been the assertion that large corporations must be able to seek new markets, sites of production, and workforces over time, in order to maintain or increase their rate of profit. Nations that attempt to shield their economies from foreign competition with protectionist policies, state-run and nationalized industries, or import-substitution industrialization (strategies that Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India all tried in the postindependence period) are considered major obstacles to corporate expansion. Neoliberals argue that such protectionist policies impede the free market and should be dismantled. They also assert that newly emerging markets in former Third World countries, now known as the Global South, provide the greatest opportunities for corporate profit making—in ways that resonate with the earlier imperial mining of labor and resources. International institutions, especially those that lend to southern countries, should therefore work to ensure that these emerging markets open up to foreign investment. This last argument has manifested, since the 1980s, in the IMF’s policies of structural adjustment, austerity programs, and overall liberalization in the South. International lenders, with cooperation from South Asian ruling coalitions, implemented structural adjustment in South Asia in the 1980s and 1990s.

India has figured as a major focus of U.S. capital expansion over the past two decades of neoliberal globalization. It is one of the fastest-growing global markets for U.S. goods, as well as a source of cheap “outsourced” labor for U.S. technology, communications, and legal firms—while simultaneously looming as a potential future economic competitor. Although economic liberalization pursued by the Indian state under international pressure in the 1990s inaugurated this period, U.S. corporate and entrepreneurial capital has been central in this process. The entry of U.S. capital into India has in turn been aided by an Indian American professional class that continued to grow in size and wealth over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. As the U.S.-based Campaign to Stop Funding Hate (CSFH) has revealed, the growing power, influence, self-confidence, and presence of this group of nonresident Indians (NRIs) have not only been evident in a plethora of U.S. media reports celebrating Indian American entrepreneurs and CEOs, heralding India as the next economic superpower, and celebrating the arrival
of Bollywood within U.S. popular culture but also manifest in the quiet flow of hundreds of thousands of NRI dollars to support the violently reactionary Hindu nationalist Sangh Parivar in India.

The rise of an Indian American bourgeoisie has been paralleled by a vast expansion in the number of workers in India itself who have been incorporated into U.S. economic circuits as factory laborers for U.S.-based and multinational corporations or semiskilled workers in technology and outsourcing enclaves in cities such as Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Gurgaon. In his contribution to this volume, Immanuel Ness focuses on Hyderabad as a case study for complicating depictions of the emergence of a globally connected Indian middle class tied to the proliferation of outsourcing. Rather than an uncritical celebration of “India Shining,” Ness’s analysis of shifting labor markets emphasizes that the advantages of neoliberal globalization have gone to India’s capitalist classes. In contrast, neoliberal economic policies have put enormous pressure on the poor and working classes to fend for themselves with little state support in the most basic services, even as they often become the service providers for the new IT elite. Their dislocation and impoverishment have also provided the grounds for many South Asians to risk international migration, increasingly under the terms of short-term, temporary guest worker programs in the Persian Gulf, Europe, and the United States.

While neoliberal policies are affecting subcontinental communities in critical ways, the United States has also been fundamentally restructured. Neoliberal globalization debilitated the manufacturing sector and catalyzed the enormous growth of the service sector over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. Immanuel Ness provides the political-economic context for us to see how South Asian migrants are being called upon to work in insecure and unstable portions of this economy, from trucking to construction. Miabi Chatterji’s essay shows us the ways that South Asian immigrants to the United States have, in the past thirty years, joined the ranks of working-class recent immigrants of color who are asked to perform affective labor for the urban elite. Chatterji focuses specifically on the ways that those immigrant workers in New York's service sector with more cultural capital can use the instability and lack of regulation of the service industry to their own benefit, against the co-ethnic employees that they manage. These work sites bring migrant
workers from the Global South together, at times producing the conditions for affinities and alliances and at other times for workplace division and conflict. Ness’s and Chatterji’s work reveals how economic displacement and divestment from social welfare caused by neoliberal policy continue to pit low-status, racialized workers against one another in the richest metropolitan centers of the global economy. Together, these scholars present the decline of territorially based colonization and the rise of neoliberalism not as two separate and unrelated events but as continuous with one another. They help elaborate the contours of U.S. imperialism—over time as well as in its current phase—and examine how U.S. empire has set particular forms of migration in motion and structured the allocation of labor across multiple sectors, geographic locations, and time periods.

Places and Spaces of Diaspora

As we have elaborated earlier, we treat the growth of the modern South Asian diaspora as part of a long-term process of Western capitalist expansion. Following the British abolition of slavery, indentured migration from China and British India constituted the two largest streams of state-sanctioned labor migration in the world, inaugurating histories of dispersal and settlement that continue today. We understand the South Asian diaspora not as something singular and fixed but as a formation that has been and continues to be in constant flux, and therefore—like its parallel term “nation”—diaspora is also an arena in which meanings and identities are continually articulated and rearticulated, asserted and contested. Our work here is self-consciously part of this contestation. It is an effort to expand who and what constitutes the South Asian diaspora as it has come to exist in the United States—whose lives and experiences, what structures of power and inequality, what dynamics of movement, settlement, struggle, and change we must account for as a starting point toward a more critical and less singularly celebratory representation of “South Asian America.”

In his essay, Nayan Shah describes how South Asian migrants, in the first decades of the twentieth century, evaded structures imposed by the both the U.S. and British empires across the Pacific and Central America and strictures against the immigration of women from their
communities. They developed new routes of migration, new means of avoiding state attempts to prevent their entry, and new forms of intimacy, responsibility, and family, even while they were never entirely able to escape state interventions that required their demonstration of legitimate forms of sociality, domesticity, and livelihood. Shah emphasizes ways that individual South Asian men were able to build and sustain diasporic lives through strategies of elusion and diversion, strategies that Seema Sohi and Vivek Bald also draw out in their essays on South Asian migrations in this period. These essays show that South Asian migrants, in Bald’s words, have “treated laws not as a fixed structure of permissions and prohibitions to be followed but as a shifting field of obstacles and openings to be navigated.” Read alongside the more contemporary analyses of Soniya Munshi and Linta Varghese, these essays describe how some of the most adverse effects of U.S. immigration policies are those hidden from view, in the daily lives of the undocumented, dependent, and newly arrived.

Part of what is useful about diaspora as an analytical tool is its ability to engage the dynamics of migration and settlement, displacement and place-making, at multiple scales of analysis. Here, Gayatri Gopinath’s analysis of “region” in the work of recent queer South Asian diasporic artists provides a rich counterpart to the historical and ethnographic work elsewhere in the collection, providing space to meditate on and critique the affective and aesthetic dimensions of diasporic life, and the ways they reproduce or rub against dislocations of space and power. Raza Mir and Farah Hasan analyze the affective dimensions of religious spaces, which strengthen what they refer to as “coping ability,” crucial for surviving everyday and crisis forms of indignity and brutality that South Asian Shias in New Jersey routinely face. Their arguments provide a point of resonance with Gopinath’s analysis, moving into the realm of community institutions and the adaptation of rituals to new social and political needs. Junaid Rana, in his essay, explores both the affective and disciplinary dimensions of the post-9/11 deportation and imprisonment regime, as experienced by Pakistanis in the United States, as an integral part of current manifestations of Islamophobic racism that fuel the “War on Terror.”

The essays collected here examine not just nations and transnational movement but a range of spaces—homes, workplaces, religious
institutions, neighborhoods, and regions—that are crucial to understanding experiences of migration, dispersal, connection, and rootedness, as they shape the formation of new identities and collectivities. Such “small spaces,” to invoke Linta Varghese’s term, make visible the social asymmetries that structure diasporas—that mark their geographic and subjective maps, their lines of power, inclusion, and exclusion. Collectively, these essays, and others in this collection focus on multiple geographies and scales of diaspora, to bring otherwise unexamined spaces and relationships under scrutiny, revealing, among other things, histories of intimacy, affinity, and affiliation across racialized and diasporic communities.

It is here—at the point where, in Brent Edwards’s and Earl Lewis’s words, “any study of diaspora is also a study of ‘overlapping diasporas’”—that the usefulness of “diaspora” as an analytic framework can also begin to break down. First, because “diaspora” is organized around a linear “homeland-diaspora” model, it privileges those with a direct connection to this “place of origin.” In so doing, it obscures communities with multiple migration histories, for example, or the significance of those members of other racialized/ethnic groups with whom South Asian migrants have partnered in the United States, and whose productive and reproductive labor has been central to the constitution of new affiliations, families, and communities “in diaspora.” Attention to their presence allows our contributors to describe not only histories of migration outward from a shared origin but also the dynamics of circulation—of people, ideas, goods, cultural forms—between multiple points across the globe, and the consequences of encounter, interaction, and intermixing across multiple lines of difference in the varied places in which migrants settle and make new lives.

Because it invariably privileges those who are mobile, “diaspora” also shifts our attention away from “those who cannot move”—the rural and urban poor who are nevertheless directly affected by the same circuits of capitalist imperialism that create international migration. Amanda Ciafone’s essay makes clear that, in this framing of diaspora, we lose sight of groups of people who have raised their voices against the forces of their own marginalization and that of others who are similarly positioned across the globe. Ciafone focuses on the transnational struggle against environmental degradations caused by water
extraction in Coca-Cola bottling plants across India, where local communities have risen up to demand a closure of the plants and a restoration of their water rights. A transnational network of anti–corporate globalization and environmental justice activists have helped raise the profile of these local struggles and begun to fight the multinational on its “home turf” in the United States and across the Global North. Ciafone’s contribution helps us connect the entry of multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola into a liberalizing Indian economy with global struggles of resistance, rather than focusing only on immigration. Her chapter, along with those of Ness and Reddy, historicizes different moments in the movement of multinational and U.S.-based capital onto the subcontinent in ways that are related but not reducible to the movement of labor onto the international market. Their work thus raises questions about how we think and frame “diaspora” as a category of analysis and a lived reality over a century of political and economic shifts across the globe.

Finally, as Manu Vimalassery establishes in his essay, the concept of “diaspora” and the politics stemming from it too often assume terra nullius, that collective delusion of empty land emanating from an inability to see indigenous peoples, a lingering trace of the modern Western imperial project. His essay reminds us that the limits of the nation-state are not to be found solely in immigration law but that the politics of detention and deportation need to be read as part of the longer and continuous history of invasion and military occupation through which the United States has asserted its sovereignty in North America, and in the world at large. The degree to which diaspora analyses and politics lose sight of this is the degree to which they follow the nation’s or, more accurately, the empire-state’s vision of itself. In tendencies to foreground mobility and cosmopolitanism, diaspora analysis can too easily avert attention from prior and ongoing histories of colonialism, and resistance that proceeds from indigenous communities, especially in North and South American, Caribbean, African, and Pacific contexts, all primary sites of the South Asian diaspora. Invocations of “diaspora” that fail to engage indigenous critique can thereby facilitate ongoing imperial projects that efface claims and enactments of indigenous sovereignty and autonomy. In an analysis of South Asians in U.S. global power, we do well to remember that South Asians are a relatively recent
group to have been rendered “Indian” over the long history of imperialism in the Americas.¹⁸

In this vein we would do well to note that Vanwyck Blvd is now the property of the U.S. State Department and is on display at the U.S. embassy in Karachi. There, it performs a very different form of mapping than the one that began this introduction: placing Karachi as an imperial periphery of Manhattan and enacting global power through a knowing engagement with and appropriation of local cultures. This serves as a reminder and caution, present throughout the essays in this collection, that diaspora can serve the interests of imperial power and is not, in itself, a mode of resistance.

Structure

The collection is divided into three parts. Each presents a set of essays organized around a common theme, and each group of essays is meant to speak to the two others that constitute the book. The first part, “Overlapping Empires,” consists of three chapters that explore one of the least emphasized periods in South Asian American studies. Extending from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, they include decades that are all too often overlooked because of the wide scope and supposed strength of immigrant exclusion. In the second part, “From Imperialism to Free-Market Fundamentalism: Changing Forms of Migration and Work,” the contributors examine the workings of the U.S.-led economic order that developed over the latter half of the twentieth century and into the present, focusing on the ways neoliberal globalization has affected, disciplined, and created new circuits of migration for both capital and labor, and the effects of these circuits across social space. The final part, “Geographies of Migration, Settlement, and Self,” reassesses some of the key spatial categories, relationships, and locations that inform studies of South Asian migration and circuits of U.S. power: from region, nation, and diaspora to borders and prisons. Along with the preceding essays, these visions of migration, settlement, and self might help us draw a new map, which not only presents a fuller picture of South Asians in the United States but also helps us to build a politics that is more fully alive to the needs and possibilities of justice in this moment.
NOTES


7. Visweswaran, 11.


10. This section builds on insights found in the groundbreaking collection Labor Migration under Capitalism (1984), in which editors Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich set forth an analysis that challenges the regional compartmentalization of “push-pull” theories of migration, which treated factors in “sending” and “receiving” countries as separate and coincidental. Historian Sucheta Mazumdar’s contribution to the collection presented South Asian labor migration,
specifically, Punjabi immigration to North America, and Western capital expansion—in this case British colonization—as phenomena that should be considered in the same frame of analysis.


14. “India Shining” was a slogan popularized by the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) during the 2004 Indian general elections. Its circulation thus encapsulated the party’s embrace of neoliberal economic policies alongside Hindu fundamentalism.


