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Citation:

Ishan Ashutosh, *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America*, 47 INT'L MIGRATION REV. 779 (2013).

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Tue Jun 11 13:36:17 2019

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Book Review

Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America.
By Bakirathi Mani. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. xii, 311 pages, \$27.95.

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In *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America*, Bakirathi Mani examines South Asian diasporic cultural identities and community formation by applying anthropological theories of transnational locality. Mani critiques Asian American and diaspora studies on the grounds that they have framed diaspora through tidy narratives of resistance or assimilation. In the process, she suggests, such perspectives elide the intricate geographies of diaspora that move across time and space, between colonial and post-colonial migrations triangulated at the very least among Britain, the U.S., and South Asia. By adeptly interweaving post-colonial theory, histories of South Asian migrations to the U.S., and close readings of popular South Asian diasporic literary texts with a decade-long ethnography of South Asian diasporas in urban centers in the U.S., Mani suggests that the South Asian diaspora negotiates and reproduces, rather than transcends, nationalisms in the U.S. and South Asia.

Mani's provocative argument, which seeks to examine how diaspora is shaped through and across national contexts, acts as an important rejoinder to narratives that encapsulate diaspora as an inherently subversive form of community and identity. Instead, she stresses, South Asian diasporic communities are articulated from *within* national multiculturalism and neoliberal state formation. Although Mani contends that South Asian diasporic communities are produced by a "back-and-forth movement between assimilation and resistance, as well as between nationalist discourses in the U.S. and on the subcontinent" (p. 15), her findings show that the processes of these transnational movements result in

the reproduction of dominant conceptions of nation, ethnicity, and immigration, be it in the U.S., South Asia, or in both contexts. The fact that the South Asian diaspora reflects hegemonic constructions of national identity furthermore marginalizes the heterogeneity of South Asia and the histories of South Asian migrations to America. This aspect of Mani's analysis is crucial to understanding how relations of power are embedded within constructions of community and, in the case of South Asia, involve an Indo-centric hegemony aligned with the neoliberal Indian state. Furthermore, Mani compellingly points to a key disjuncture overlooked in accounts of diasporic solidarity: the distinction between identifying *as* South Asian versus identifying *with* South Asia. While the former process is shaped by the contexts of race and class in the U.S., the latter is constructed through colonial legacies and post-colonial nationalisms. Mani underlines the dissonances between South Asian identities under multiculturalism and South Asia as an imaginative geography of migration and empire that now extends to the U.S.

Mani's theoretically informed analysis uses mainstream diasporic cultural productions as an entry into discussions of U.S. immigration policies, as well as the shifting discourses on national belonging in the U.S. and India that generate South Asian localities. Following the introduction that places her analysis of the South Asian diaspora within a broadened conception of Asian American and post-colonial studies, Mani focuses on the temporal dissonance between South Asia and the U.S. in the popular fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri. Jhumpa Lahiri's stories have been seen as reinforcing model minority stereotypes of upward class mobility that characterized South Asian immigration in the immediate aftermath of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act. Nevertheless, Mani attempts to resuscitate a diasporic reading of Lahiri's texts by arguing that the contradictions of belonging narrated throughout her work, from temporal

dissonances between South Asia and the U.S. to different histories of migration and post-colonial displacement and attachment, constitute the basis for South Asian diasporic localities. Chapter 2 examines documentary films on Indian immigrants and the second generation that focus on diasporic subjects marginalized in Lahiri's accounts, especially working-class immigrants and Indian immigrant adoptees. These films, however, position the U.S. as the exemplary site of First-World development and as the liberating space of autonomy, freedom, and belonging. Here, Mani engages with post-colonial theorizations of the imbrications between gender, colonialism, and the nation-state. The gendered constructions of national and diasporic communities are further elaborated on in Chapter 3, which examines the Miss India USA pageant, an event that is used to convey the ways in which diasporic localities are embodied and incorporated into American multiculturalism, while simultaneously aligning with Indian neoliberal state ideologies. The final two chapters trace the development of South Asian arts festivals as they are transformed from a consciously political project of diasporic solidarity to multicultural consumption. The trajectories of these festivals, from the activist and resistant stance of Toronto's now defunct *Desh Pardesh* to the multicultural spectacle (and commercial failure) of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Bombay Dreams*, represent the contestations over the formation of diasporic notions of belonging.

By the end of the book, there appears to be little scope for narratives of resistance or, indeed, for the construction of a South Asian diasporic solidarity predicated on difference. The focus on Indian hegemony within the South Asian diaspora provides what I hope will be the central concerns of relations of power and divergent transnational ties that shape diasporic identities. Mani's work demands that our attention turn to the heterogeneities that all too frequently are flattened in the production of narratives of community and solidarity.

Aspiring to Home offers a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding how diasporic cultural productions can be read transnationally for both their convergences and their dissonances that produce notions of home, community, and belonging. Because the book engages with a broad set of theories and methods, in addition to immigration histories and local contexts, it cuts across divides between approaches in social sciences and humanities on immigration. It is essential reading for scholars interested in diaspora, immigrant community formation, transnational migration, Asian American studies, and applications of post-colonial theory. Select chapters of this book would also work well in the undergraduate classroom, particularly alongside the fictional and documentary texts analyzed by Mani; and I highly recommend the entire book for graduate seminars focusing on migration and diaspora.