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South Asian women in the diaspora

Nirmal Puwar and Parvati Raghuram (editors); Berg, Oxford and New York, 2003,
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Work on women of South Asian origin in diasporic communities is a vital and growing area of research for the important challenge it poses to both feminist scholarship and diaspora studies, and the edited volume, *South Asian Women in the Diaspora*, is an excellent example of this contribution. Nirmal Puwar and Parvati Raghuram's collection of 13 essays span a range of disciplinary approaches and topical issues that make it clear that South Asian diasporic feminisms open up questions for several fields, including area studies, cultural studies, critical ethnography, and work on production and consumption. There are some interesting contradictions and gaps in the book as well, which are revealing and as useful to consider as the provocations and insights the collection offers.

The theme of consumption and commodification of South Asian culture and representations of South Asian women is a focal point in three of the book's chapters, and touched on in others as well, highlighting the importance of questions of consumption and production to studies of South Asian diasporic culture. The essays by Bakirathi Mani and Parvati Raghuram address the politics of style for South Asian women, using well-worn examples such as the film *Mississippi Masala*, as well as fresher discussions of cross-dressing South Asians and biographic accounts of South Asian women fashion entrepreneurs. All three essays offer their own theoretical perspectives on the linkages between production and consumption, attempting to integrate a materialist analysis of capitalist production and commodity flows with a cultural analysis of meaning making and female agency. In addition, Puwar's essay addresses the consumption of representations of South Asian women and scholarship itself in the academy, which is an important reflexive theme that runs through the book. Perhaps one of the questions that could have been explored more explicitly in these essays and others in the book is the comparative national contexts of multiculturalism, feminist politics, racialization, and class models in the US and UK. Nirmal Puwar and Parvati Raghuram address this in their introduction and allude to the traffic in scholarship on South Asians in the UK by US-based scholars (it would have been interesting to reflect more on why this is so and what the implications of this phenomenon are). The collection itself sheds light on the ways in which South Asian women, and South Asian

feminist academics, negotiate particular national ideologies of difference and contexts of commodification. While Mala Pandurang's essay mentions briefly the emergence of Canadian studies in India, it would have been interesting to explore the Canadian context more, given the collections's triangulated focus on the UK, US, and South Asia. In addition, Fauzia Ahmad's essay on South Asian Muslim women in Britain discusses some important issues of representations of Muslim womanhood (and masculinity) after September 11, 2001 in the UK, as well as state policies targeting Muslim subjects that show the continuities of national agendas that have to do with class and race as much as religion. This is an important area of comparative research that would benefit US-based scholars greatly from in the current moment, given the near absence of critical discussion of South Asian Muslims in the US.

The contributions of the book to transnational analysis also suggest that it would have been worthwhile to interrogate more the implications of 'diaspora' as a rubric for the work presented here. What does it mean to label subjects 'South Asian women in the diaspora' as opposed to 'British Asian' or 'South Asian American' women? What are the different valences of the label 'desi,' a term increasingly adopted by second-generation South Asian-American women? And perhaps, what of women who do not even identify with the pan-ethnic label South Asian? The term diaspora exists in relation to an originary nation-state and is often used within an area studies framework that posits diasporic subjects as where they are *not*, or where they have left *from*, rather than where they live. Yet the book implicitly interrogates this connotation of 'diaspora' by including three essays in South Asian studies (by Nandi Bhatia, Nayanika Mookherjee, and Hasmita Ramji), an innovative move suggesting that perhaps South Asia itself is one node of the diaspora rather than a fixed point of origin. However, it would also have been interesting for the editors to somewhere address the relevance of other concepts such as transnationalism and to address more explicitly their understanding of globalization, which clearly underlies many of the essays in the volume.

Clearly, no collection can encompass all questions, and the strength of this book is that it raises some fascinating and timely questions. The four essays in the concluding section, 'Engagements,' each deal with women's interventions in local spaces, from Samina Zahir's essay on a community arts project in Birmingham to Rani Kawale's chapter on queer women's public spaces in London to Hasmita Ramji's discussion of Gujarati Kutchi Hindu women in London. While some may read these essays as 'grounded' case studies for the more theoretical chapters in the other sections, I found these chapters to offer some fascinating and nuanced insights that complicate the questions of reflexivity, feminism, and multi-culturalism raised in the earlier chapters, while the theoretical discussions help address the contradictions in the politics of representation and consumption that were in some cases underexplored in this section.

Nearly all the chapters dealt with the issue of researcher reflexivity, some with varying degrees of humour about and frustration with the racism and hierarchy of the academy. The frustration is useful to note for it pushes toward a structural analysis that is important for analyzing issues of reflexivity in feminist research, since reflexivity must mean more than self-referentiality. Another important contribution of the book is the discussion of institutional contexts of knowledge production, in the introductory chapter as well as the other essays. The editors are very self-conscious of this text as a theoretical intervention, a commodity, and a performance; on all these levels, this is a timely, critical project that raises important academic, political, and cultural questions.

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Reading Sex and the City

Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (editors); IB Tauris, London, 2004, ISBN 1 85043 423 9, £12.95

In the Introduction to *Reading Sex and the City*, the authors state that one of the central aims of this anthology of 17 thematic essays 'is to locate new ways of speaking and thinking about a popular cultural text that continues to be a site of contestation' (p. 7). This book is a timely assessment of *Sex and the City* and the essays read very much like 'a work in progress' with all of the interrogative perspectives being located under a specific section. The impact of feminism, as discussed in the essay by Astrid Henry, has indeed enabled the very context and content of this series, and it would be impossible to position this product without the multi-faceted feminist debates having been had.

Its narrative focus is the single woman, sexually active, careerist and consumer. However, its content returns us to well-established generic conventions about gender roles. The self-perceived narrative radicalism of *Sex and the City* unfolds in two ways. It explores both the celebration of the changing social and economic shifts experienced by some working women, while also providing us with a platform through which to consider how these very changes have led to complex and contradictory constraints. Capitalisms' ability to absorb these shifts formulates the narrative drive of this series, with desire and gratification being at the centre of every episodic turn. Social and economic contradictions are addressed only through fantasy. Escapism and compulsion are the categories through which we are asked to investigate both femininity and masculinity. Compulsive modes of behaviour, with body adornment being the major source of gratification through shopping for shoes, clothes, perfume, eating or having sex, are all represented through the experience of excess. This excess focuses the narrative 'realism' of each episode and all feminine characteristics are judged through the over