Domestic Work, Affective Labor, and Social Reproduction in South Asian America: A Tribute to Laxmi Soni

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Like my parents, many post-1965 professional Indian migrants to the United States brought with them live-in domestic workers who were formative in the raising of second-generation South Asian diasporics like myself, often referred to in the literature as ABCDs, or “American-Born Confused Desis.” Yet, both in explorations of second-generation South Asian diasporic identity and in more recent work that implicates class in the formation of NRI (Non-Resident Indian) subjects, this population has received little to no attention. Weaving together autoethnography with scholarly literature on both diaspora and domestic work, this article explores the role of domestic work and affective labor in the social reproduction of the Indian American diaspora through the story of Laxmi Soni (via my recollections), who worked as a nanny in my family for over eighteen years. I suggest academic approaches to nannies and other care workers that complicate the class- and race-based analyses that currently exist within the literature on globalization, the feminization of labor, and the so-called “chain of care.”

Keywords: affective labor / Asian American identity / autoethnography / domestic work / South Asian diaspora

Introduction

Laxmi Soni, or Laxmiben as she was known in my family, passed away on October 26, 2009 in the apartment she owned in Dahisar, a suburb of Bombay.1 She had been bedridden for over two months due to a stroke. According to her US green card, she was born on October 15, 1924, but according to her relatives...
she was 90 years old and was both born and had passed away auspiciously during the same Satyan of the Hindu lunar calendar.\(^2\) Laxmiben left behind a sister-in-law, a nephew and his wife, and two grand-nieces, who called her Dadi (grandmother). Her brother had passed away a few years prior, and she had lost three sons in infancy many decades ago, along with her husband soon after. She died surrounded by her closest remaining family members, whom she supported with her savings from the eighteen-plus years she had spent in the United States working in my family's home, raising me and my younger brother and taking care of the household while my parents—also immigrants from India—worked long hours as medical doctors in suburban New Jersey. Laxmi Soni died in October 2009, but I did not learn of her death until three months later when an aunt mentioned it in passing to my parents on their annual trip to India. My parents relayed the information to my brother and me upon their return to the United States. My parents had no other details, nor did they seek them out; to them, she was a former employee, someone for whom they had a certain fondness, but also someone who was no longer a member of the household. They did not grieve for her. For me, Laxmiben's death was the most profound loss I have experienced, both because of her immense impact on my life as my primary caregiver until age 18 and of the conditions through which I learned of and processed her death.

In 1974, Laxmiben boarded a plane in Bombay, where she had been working as a servant in my maternal grandfather's home, and arrived at JFK airport in New York, her first time in the United States. I was 15 days old at the time. From that moment on, she changed my diapers and, four years later, my brother's. When we were a little older, she walked us to the bus stop every morning and waited for us every afternoon, even in the cold winter months when she had to put on thick socks with her chappals (sandals) and a coat over her simple white cotton widow's sari. A devout Hindu vegetarian who prayed twice a day, she would regularly make my brother and me bologna or tuna fish sandwiches for our lunch boxes, even though she was visibly repulsed by the meat. When I was a young child, she would often open the door to her bedroom, where I had gone to cry after having a bad dream, to find me curled up asleep with my “blankie,” and she would bring me into her bed with her. When I was a teenager, she would tell me in Gujarati that I was “eating her brain” when I talked back to her, and she would make disapproving clucking sounds when male friends came over. Laxmiben was sometimes my ally during those teen years, listening to me as I cried about how my parents misunderstood me; and sometimes she was their ally, snooping in my room for cigarettes or alcohol at their behest. My relationship with her, and her role in our family, was unlike anything I saw among my American friends.\(^3\) I gave her Mother's Day cards every year, but alternated between describing her to others as my “housekeeper” or my “grandmother.” The love and affection that my brother and I shared with her was palpable, seen on her face when we skinned our knees or got bullied at
school, on our faces when she left us to go visit her “real” family on trips back to India, and at that final airport goodbye when she left her American life for good to build a new one in the land she still considered home.

But we were also vividly aware that she was an employee in the family who was paid for her affective labor, and who was working to remit money back to her surviving relatives. I did not know the names of her three sons who had died in infancy or of her late husband, nor do I recall ever asking about them. Laxmiben only learned enough English during her years in the United States to say “please call back later” on the telephone. Unable to drive or communicate, she was homebound during the day except for the walks she took around the neighborhood or to fetch us at the bus stop. She had no friends to interact with outside of the other nannies and servants we would occasionally meet when our circle of Indian friends got together. And she was an avid fan of the television soap opera *Days of Our Lives*, which she watched every day without fail from 1:00 to 2:00 in the afternoon, the only hour she took time off from work except for when she was praying in the early morning and at night.

I saw Laxmiben only a handful of times after she returned to India and purchased a flat with the money she had made in the United States. I was unable to navigate the polluted and crowded working-class neighborhood where she was finally a landowner, and I found myself uncomfortable in the tiny, two-room flat she shared with six family members. I was acutely aware of the gulf in class and nationality privileges that separated us. In addition, I knew that, although I thought of her as a member of my family, she did not reciprocate that identification. I was unable to observe her rapidly deteriorating health on every trip without breaking down, and, to be brutally honest, I was afraid to drink the *chai* (tea) made from unfiltered tap water that was offered to me or use the hole in the floor that served as a toilet. The last time I saw Laxmiben, in April 2009, she barely recognized me and was very disoriented. Her head was shaved because she had developed a rash on her scalp, and she was experiencing severe asthma and diabetes symptoms. I remember my anger at her sister-in-law that day for laughing at her when she misremembered her age, my intense desire to do something to improve her living condition, and the despair I felt knowing that I held no claim over this person who had been the most important figure in my life.

My academic career, in countless ways, has been shaped by my experiences as a second-generation South Asian American subject in a predominantly white community; as an upper-middle-class student who had access to excellent educational opportunities; and as a young woman whose two greatest role models growing up—my mother and Laxmiben—exhibited strength, care, and work ethic in conflicting as well as complementary ways. As I developed into a scholar, these experiences informed my work: I dealt with South Asian college women and identity issues for my BA thesis; I explored “ethnic” commodities and their production within the South Asian communities of the San Francisco
Bay Area for my master’s research; and my PhD work led me to investigate the experiences of belonging and citizenship among Indians in Dubai. During this latter fieldwork, I noticed that Indian foreign residents in Dubai and other cities in the Gulf States were, unlike South Asians in North America and Europe, understood primarily through a lens of “labor”—as temporary, transient subjects who were only in the country for economic reasons and thus did not belong either legally or affectively to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) nation. My book, *Impossible Citizens: Dubai’s Indian Diaspora* (2013), which is focused on middle-class communities in the downtown core of Dubai, argues, in part, that this rubric of labor—especially as it is used to produce construction workers and maids as the quintessential South Asian migrants to the Gulf region—participates in eliding forms of belonging, claims to the city, and the social, cultural, historical, and affective ties that many Indians from all occupations and class levels rehearse within the city, thus rendering them more than just “migrant labor.” Interestingly, however, even while I argued that South Asian diaspora scholarship is complicit in the erasure of Dubai Indians in that it relies upon the assumption of settling, of a permanent or semi-permanent heteronormative middle-class nuclear family migration to the Global North, I did not connect the hyper-presence of domestic workers in the literature on South Asian migration to the Gulf States with their almost complete absence in US South Asian American scholarship. The presence of domestic workers as members of diaspora groups and their crucial affective labor in reproducing Indian community formations in diaspora came into relief only through connecting my personal journeys of inclusion, exclusion, identity, and loss with those of my interlocutors.

After the events surrounding my learning of Laxmiben’s death, I turned to feminist scholarly investigation to understand my shattering grief, guilt, resentment, and confusion, and to better explore my fraught relationship with both her and my parents. In particular, I wanted to unpack my memories and emotions surrounding Laxmiben’s role in my upbringing through an academic framework, in order to better understand how those memories and emotions are both personal and enabled by particular historical circumstances and social relations. There is obviously a reason why so many scholars of diaspora are members of the very groups we study. Scholarship is about personal journeys and our own political investments, and feminist scholarship in particular has evolved from a refusal to adopt what Donna Haraway (1988) has called a “view from nowhere” in favor of embedded, situated, and reflexive knowledge production. In many ways, Laxmiben’s positioning in the household did not allow for sanctioned and nameable forms of affection and love; and the love I felt for her, while indeed very real, was also messy and fraught, like all affect, with power imbalances.

Building on recent scholarship, particularly within feminism and queer studies, the memories and emotional accounting I present in this article are a deliberate academic contribution to the messiness and public aspects of domestic emotions, and to the gendered, raced, and classed politics of affective labor and
domestic work in the formation of second-generation South Asian diasporic subjectivities. Through an autoethnographic mode of writing, which can access the intricacies and tensions of my relationship with Laxmiben in ways that other academic scholarship cannot, I claim and interrogate my own complicity within these uneven power relationships as part of a larger commitment to intersectional and situated feminist scholarship.

Situating the Diasporic Domestic Worker

Following the 1965 amendment to the Immigration Reform Act, Asians were, for the first time in almost a century, allowed to migrate to the United States. While the new immigration policy was aimed at growing the number of US professionals in a time of Cold War anxiety, many Asians also brought with them unemployed or unskilled family members and employees, such as nannies and housemaids. The scholarly literature on South Asian American diaspora blossomed during the 1980s and '90s as immigrants and their children entered academia and began exploring issues of identity, racial discrimination, gender roles, biculturalism, and community formation. The academic scholarship on this diaspora has tended to focus primarily on these post-1965 arrivals, and in so doing, as many authors have argued, has produced a picture of South Asian America as one that is middle class, heteronormative, structured around the nuclear family, and mostly Hindu (Bhattacharjee 1999; Grewal 2005; Spivak 1996; van der Veer 2005; Varghese 2006). By now, we know much about how the diaspora literature produces these normalizations and exclusions, particularly through the figure of the ABCD (American-Born Confused Desi), who supposedly embodies the issues of biculturalism and identity that typify diaspora populations (Dhingra 2008). The exclusions enacted by the diaspora literature are also found in community organizations as well, which often rely upon what Annanya Bhattacharjee (1999) calls a patriarchal “bourgeois” attitude that prevents discussion about class and gender in particular. While diaspora as a concept has been used to critique the assimilationism of US immigration studies, it relies upon privileged forms of settling and being transnational at the same time (Siu 2005; Vora 2013).

While there is some research on South Asians who arrived in the 1800s to work on railroads in the American West and their descendants (Leonard 1997; Lowe 1996), and a growing body of work that addresses working-class struggles, structural violence, and hate crimes against South Asians, especially following 9/11 (Maira 2009; Puar 2007; Rana 2011), none pays significant or sustained attention to domestic workers and their experiences. In fact, the literature—even that attuned to class- and gender-based analyses—is mostly complicit in the erasure of nannies, housemaids, the elderly, and other homebound diasporic individuals whose vantage points might provide an altogether different picture of immigration and diasporic life than the one we now have. For example, in
the last three decades, South Asian American women have made many con-
tributions to the canon of literature and scholarship about identity, migration
experiences, and issues of gender and race (and more recently class) both within
South Asian communities and at large (see Dasgupta 1998; Divakaruni 1998;
Mukherjee 1999; WOSAD Collective 1994). This work does much to highlight
how women in diasporic communities are expected to be “culture bearers,”
and how their actions and sexualities are policed in order to reify ideas about
so-called traditional family structure and “proper” femininity. It is surprising,
then, how little attention is paid in these volumes to the experiences of South
Asian domestic workers, particularly since they could be considered the culture-
bearers par excellence within the middle-class South Asian American family.
Also, migrant domestic work is part of the “outsourcing” of social citizenship
under new neoliberal models in the West (Stasiulis 2008). However, very few
scholars have studied what it means for migrant families themselves to employ
domestic workers from their countries of origin. Linta Varghese’s (2006) work is
a notable exception. Her ethnographic research within a worker advocacy group
for South Asians, Workers’ Awaaz, revealed that South Asian women domestic
workers were most often employed by other South Asians, and that many of
the problems they faced were the result of exploitation that was enabled by the
compatriot relationship. It was the “representation of the South Asian com-

munity as a solidly middle-class, professional community,” she argues, that made
South Asian domestic workers particularly invisible (197). In fact, through this
process, one could argue that Laxmiben and those similarly situated are not only
integral to the social reproduction of middle-class, high-achieving professionals,
but are also—through their invisibility within the community— inadvertent
producers of the “model minority” rhetoric that defines Indian communities in
the contemporary United States.

When embarking on this project, I did not know through which channels
Laxmiben arrived in the United States, nor whether her employment was legal
or semi-legal. Based on the immigration laws at the time, her immigration story
could have taken several paths, all of which would have put her in a position
of vulnerability and invisibility vis-à-vis the US state, the Indian immigrant
community, and my family. In the 1970s, Laxmiben could have been sponsored
either as a domestic worker or as a family member by my parents, who had both
obtained permanent resident status soon after migrating. The shifts in visa
regulations since the 1970s showcase attempts by the government to curb the
ways in which immigrant communities were bringing over, by several means,
domestic employees, unskilled family members, and other compatriots through
semi-legal channels. It is, for example, now illegal for a green card holder to
sponsor a domestic worker, and, since 1986, the Immigration and Naturaliza-
tion Service (INS) has become stricter in asking employers to prove need for
migrant employees and to verify their qualifications through an I-9 form.8 In
addition, since 2005, domestic work is no longer a viable category for migrants
from the Philippines, China, and India, which represent the three largest Asian American communities in the United States.

Keeping in mind that narratives are situated, that memory is constructed differently over time, and that my parents are invested in highlighting the ways in which they improved Laxmiben’s life, instead of how the employer/employee relationship put them in a position of power over her, I nonetheless called them one Sunday afternoon for an impromptu interview. I wanted to know which of the migration channels available to them at the time they had used to bring Laxmiben over, how she had ended up getting her green card (which she maintained for several years even after she moved back to India), and what legal processes were necessary for a permanent resident from India in the 1970s to sponsor a compatriot domestic worker. Prior to migrating to the United States, Laxmiben was working in my maternal grandparents’ home as a housekeeper and, at times, a nanny for my aunt’s young child. On a return visit to India, my parents jokingly asked her if she would be interested in coming to the United States to work, and she seemed interested. Realizing during her pregnancy that she would need child care and household help, my mother thought it would be a good idea for Laxmiben to come and try out a living situation in New Jersey. Assisted by my grandparents in India, Laxmiben obtained a visa to visit the country for four months and came for a trial period right after my birth. My father told me that she grew so attached to me during this visit that she did not want to leave. My parents, both medical doctors with full-time jobs, probably got quite attached to her during that initial period too, but for different reasons: Laxmiben was not only caring for their infant while they worked long hours, but also maintaining the household. Her housework made a home for my newly migrated parents, for Laxmiben had an understanding of Indian food practices, social customs, and languages that my parents might not have found elsewhere in the foreign spaces of 1970s suburban New Jersey.

In order to hire Laxmiben to work in their home, my parents had to prove that she had specialized skills that were not available in the local community. With the advice of a lawyer, they placed an ad in the paper for someone who spoke Gujarati and could cook Indian vegetarian food. Not surprisingly, the ad went unanswered and, after the obligatory period, my parents filed paperwork stating that Laxmiben ran a vegetarian canteen in India and that she was the only qualified person they could find for their advertised position. Thus, nanny work was not the official job she was hired to do in the eyes of the state. Through this employment strategy, my parents applied for a work permit on her behalf, which would lead to her permanent residency. My father opened a bank account in her name, paid her a salary (the amount of which is unknown to me), filed her taxes, contributed to an IRA in her name, and ensured that she was set up to receive social security benefits after working for forty quarters in the United States. To my parents, they did right by her in terms of securing her future, but whether this was the means through which she would have managed her
money is unclear. Her job duties were never delineated, she worked almost all of the time, and she had little access to resources outside of the home. Folded into a discourse of “family,” she was cared for but also exploited, treated as a maternal force in the home but also infantilized as someone who could not manage on her own. And her positioning, despite my desire to exceptionalize her and her place in my life, was—as much of the literature on domestic work highlights—relatively ordinary (fig. 1).\textsuperscript{9}
What are the interstices between the profound and the ordinary when it comes to domestic work, affective labor, and the social reproduction of people like myself, South Asian American middle-class diasporics? In the following sections, I consider Laxmiben’s positionality through various modes of approaching domestic work and diaspora in the literature, arguing that new modes of analysis are required to avoid reproducing certain gender, sexuality, and race paradigms through which much of the feminist scholarship on this topic operates.

Feminist Scholarship, Globalization, and Affective Labor

A range of feminist scholarship has attempted to understand women’s labor (both reproductive and productive) within the domestic sphere, and, more recently, to think about how race, migration, and class are implicated in the labor of domestic workers—maids, nannies, caregivers—who most often migrate from the Global South to work in the homes of those in the Global North (Anderson 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Weeks 2007). These scholars have explored how, for example, domestic workers allow for women in the Global North to enter the workforce in greater numbers; thus, the supposed “liberation” of first world women rests on the exploitation of third world women and women of color. Some authors take this critique so far as to claim that domestic work is a new form of “slavery” under globalization (Zarembka 2002), while others have criticized the language of slavery and trafficking for the ways in which it elides agency, produces women as victims, and ignores the specific histories and conditions of daily life during the slave trade itself (Maddawi 2011). One major way that contemporary feminist scholars of transnational migration and the “feminization of globalization” have understood someone like Laxmiben’s structural position and subjectification is through a model called the “global chain of care.” Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (2002) describe the global chain of care as a process through which women from third world countries effectively produce a “care drain” for their own children as they leave them behind to work as nannies and domestic workers in the homes of first world women, who are increasingly entering the marketplace. Affect in this framework is conceptualized as a displacement of maternal feelings from one’s own children who are left behind onto the children one is paid to raise and look after. The “chain of care” model allows us to understand how imperial relationships between first and third world, and patriarchal assumptions about gendered labor in both sending and receiving countries, are producing this phenomenon of care drain and the feminization of transnational labor migration. “In this sense, migration creates not a white man’s burden,” Hochschild writes in her coedited book Global Woman, “but, through a series of invisible links, a dark child’s burden” (27).

As a dark child growing up in white suburban America, Hochschild’s statement does not fully account for my privilege or my racial positioning in the
United States, nor does it adequately allow us to understand Laxmiben’s social positioning. She was a domestic servant in India, assuming a range of activities in my grandfather’s home: cooking, cleaning, occasional child care, serving at table, taking care of the dog, and overseeing the work of other servants, to name but a few. However, her need to work in someone else’s home did not require her to abandon her children to others; rather, the loss of her husband and children both necessitated that she become, and freed her to be, a wage-earner for her family. In addition, while the chain of care model develops a framework to understand the gendered uneven relationships of power between Global North and Global South that may have had some bearing on both my parents’ and Laxmiben’s migration choices, her meaningfulness in our family and the affective diasporic labor she performed cannot be contained within a model like the chain of care. As someone who taught me Gujarati, showed me how to cook Indian food, comforted me when I came home crying so many times after being bullied for being a “brownie” and “dot-head” at school, came to visit me at college, intervened in fights with my parents, and continued to ask about me, my husband, my brother, my nephew, and our family friends in the United States in her regular letters from India after she left, Laxmiben did not neatly fit into either the category of laborer or family member. She was integral to the social reproduction of my brother and me as second-generation Indian-Americans who maintained our native language and a sense of connection to Indian culture and tradition, while also performing well in school and integrating to some degree into the white suburban mainstream. Laxmiben also shared the newness of migration and adjustment to American life with my parents, which they regularly discussed together, and she was a co-parent that my mother turned to not only for help but also advice as she navigated being a mom of children growing up in a way altogether unfamiliar from her childhood. In those moments of racism and culture shock that we regularly experienced while navigating white America, which neither Laxmiben, my mother, nor I could name at the time, our intimacies and our asymmetrical relationships were brought into relief in ways that highlighted both our racial sameness and the vast gulf between us in life prospects, age, wealth, and status.

Laxmiben accompanied us on our biennial trips to India, and she was treated increasingly like a guest in the homes of the paternal side of my family during the times that she was not with her own, though while there she also performed gendered domestic labor alongside my mother and my aunt. I remember the months of planning for those earlier trips “home”: the excitement in the house as my mother and Laxmiben plotted the best packing strategies, shopped together for gifts to take back, and went through the cupboards to make lists of spices and other supplies to stock up on. Her Indianness and her diasporic migrant status, not as essentialized aspects of herself but rather as a shared experiential and sociocultural frame, made her connection to our family deeper, both intensifying our intimacy and her precariousness. Through my
adult reflections on those moments of packing with my mother, for example, I can recognize how Laxmiben’s ability to go back to India and visit her family rested on the goodwill of my parents and their employment, and how she simultaneously became a close ally and shared the gendered expectations and experiences of navigating between the lost homeland and the new host nation with my parents—a host nation that was imagined by those in India as one where diasporic wealth would return to them not only as cash, but also in the form of luxury brand-name consumer goods: Revlon makeup for the aunties, Barbie dolls for the kids, Hershey’s chocolates to give at homes we visited, and Levi’s jeans for the teenagers.

The historical circumstances, sociocultural spaces, and forms of cosmopolitanism that framed both Laxmiben’s, my parents’, and my daily experience are part of a transnational assemblage that cannot be contained or accounted for under the rubric of labor—a rubric that, as feminist scholars since Engels have pointed out, is always already gendered in ways that erase or elide women’s activities (Ahmad 2012; Weeks 2007). Atiya Ahmad’s (2012) work on South Asian domestic workers in Kuwait, for example, pays particular attention to the intimacies and connections (especially surrounding being Muslim), kin formations, and forms of social reproduction that South Asian housemaids in Kuwaiti households experience and produce. These shared histories and intimacies are not adequately captured by the category of labor, neither within scholarship on Gulf migration nor in the Gulf States’ own discourses and practices, which exclude domestic work from labor laws. Ahmad argues, then, that attempts to make labor laws more inclusive cannot address the particularities of how domestic work is deeply gendered and also exceeds labor itself: “Socially reproductive work, in other words, has historically eluded commodification, exchange through market economic relations, and legal recognition. The work that comprises and is centered on the household, social reproduction has historically exceeded and been excluded from waged labour” (29). Building on Ahmad’s work, I consider social reproduction and affect as central components of domestic work in order to understand the situatedness of domestic workers in the family, in their immigrant communities, and in relation to both their “home” and “host” nation-state. I consider, therefore, the broader transnational assemblages that shape the daily lives of South Asian domestics in many parts of the world, and for the purposes of this article, in the post-1965 United States. I do so by challenging some of the elisions that are built into both the concept of chain of care and into the scholarly assumptions about South Asians who migrate to various parts of the world.

There are two main aspects of the chain of care paradigm that prevent it from being an analytic through which we can fully account for Laxmiben’s role in our family: first, the naturalization of heteronormative and biological maternal gender as the site of affect in affective labor; and second, the assumption of a racial divide between brown third world employees and white first
world employers. As Martin F. Manalansan (2008) has effectively argued with regard to the former, scholarship that naturalizes maternal affect as somehow more “authentic” risks eliding other forms of gendered affective labor. He writes that “as a feminist and queer studies scholar, my intent is to unsettle the seemingly logical and natural symmetry of this rather static formula that reads as follows: domestic = family = heterosexual woman = care and love” (2). In so doing, Manalansan points to other gendered affective migrations, particularly those found in the film Paper Dolls (2006), directed by Tomer Heymann, which follows Filipino male to female transgender care workers in Israel. He cites the care work done in this film—care for elderly patients, care for one another, and care of the self—as forms of affective and intimate labor that play out in several arenas and trouble the public/private binary on which the chain of care model relies. This troubling can also be extended to consider affective labor in other spaces, such as call centers, sex work, nail salons, and drag shows, for example. All of these forms of affective and intimate labor can be found within the South Asian diaspora in the United States, and domestic workers often participate in several forms of them through the course of their stay. To privilege the domestic as the site of affect, and mothering as authentic “care,” reinscribes the heteronormative—and I would add nuclear family—gendering that Manalansan so effectively challenges in his work. The nuclear family, in particular, as the “natural” site of care is troubled in South Asian domestic configurations, as well as those of many other sending countries, and these carry over into the diaspora. Thus, the idea that affect and care are solely located within the biological mother is something that the chain of care paradigm has not adequately addressed, thereby inadvertently privileging the white first world family that scholars try to critique through this literature.

The racial assumptions of a Global North/Global South divide are also troubled in the case of South Asian diasporic elites and upper middle classes, who often bring family members or servants in the migration process to work for them, or seek out domestic help and other intimate labors from the South Asian networks that are established in the towns and cities where they settle. Given the extent to which domestic service is normalized within South Asia itself, these networks are both local and transnational in their scope and specificity, and they thicken with multiple migrations and exchange of information and capital. However, it is these very assemblages that serve to make people like Laxmiben invisible both to the South Asian community and the state.

While literature on South Asian domestics in other parts of the world abounds, particularly in the Gulf Arab States where I do the bulk of my research, this is not the case in the United States. South Asian migrants to the Gulf, as discussed above, are analyzed primarily through a rubric of labor and not as diasporic subjects with affective, legal, or historical ties to the region. In the United States, however, we think of South Asians as occupying a particular positionality, one that assumes a post-1965 migration history, middle-class “model minority”
achievement, and some form of permanent settlement (Vora 2013). Scholars have argued that this formulation of the South Asian diaspora also assumes a Hindu patriarchal normative subject who experiences identity pulls from two distinct cultural backgrounds, in addition to the generational tensions of raising children in a new country (Grewal 2005; van der Veer 2005). The heavy focus on identity in US diaspora scholarship from the perspective of middle-class families, combined with the transnational labor assemblages that allow for South Asians to employ and exploit their less privileged compatriots, leads to the invisibility of domestic workers within the diaspora. Moreover, they are not always legible to the state (home or host), regardless of whether they migrated through legal channels. This is a condition that Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2001) has referred to as “partial citizenship,” and it is deeply gendered in its impacts on migrant women workers (see also Stasiulis and Bakan 2003). However, partial citizenship is also inflected with the power dynamics of diasporic labor assemblage and adds to the precariousness of South Asian domestic workers in the United States.

Domestic workers and others who are not fully legible to US state, non-state, or other organizations due to their confinement to the home, their quasi-legal status in the country, or their lack of English skills and mobility could be conceived within South Asian diasporic formations through what Aihwa Ong (2006, 121) has referred to as “latitudinal citizenship.” Latitudes refer to transnational structures of cultural practices and ethnicized power relations. “Latitudinal citizenship,” she writes, “refers to both the spatialities of market rights and deterritorialized ethnic power to constitute labor relations across national borders.” Ong’s work on Asian transnational migration (1999) investigates the differences in status and experience between wealthy elite “astronauts” who hold multiple passports and can easily move between spaces, and low-wage migrants and refugees who are unable to navigate to their benefit the exclusions and laws of various nation-states. The analytic of latitudinal citizenship allows us to better understand how many domestic workers are not being exploited by the imperial and racist relationship between Global North and Global South so much as they are by the latitudinal hierarchies of migration and capital that are often easily engaged by ethnic power relations. This requires a nuanced view of power, the role of states, and the complicity of elites in the Global South in the processes of transnational migration and its abuses.

In the remainder of this article, I introduce two possible alternative frameworks that might help us to better understand the positionalities of South Asian domestic workers and nannies like Laxmiben in the United States and their participation in the production of diasporic communities and subjects, as well as the NRI (Non-Resident Indian) and ABCD as cultural products and sites of middle-class desire that travel around the diaspora and are consumed in India and other locations. In fact, I argue, the social reproduction of diaspora hinges in many ways on the affective and other labor of these women, both inside and outside of the so-called domestic realm.
New Approaches to Diasporic Domestic Work

The personal accounts I present here highlight how it was and remains impossible to cleanly delineate moments of affect, work, servitude, kinship, and intimacy from within my family's experiences of migration, employing a care worker from India who was also a mother figure, and building a life in a new country with its own race- and class-based exclusionary practices. The relationships among all of us were constituted and negotiated through our transnational mobility and through power differentials of gender, generation, class, language, and education that permeate and in many ways define South Asian America. And, while many of the incidents I recount here are full of contradictory emotions and dissonances, they also seemed quite ordinary as we lived them. After layers of socialization in the United States, in diaspora, through transnational circuits of mobility, and through scholarly distancing practices, these moments became infused with new meanings, new politicizations, and new questions about Laxmiben as a person, a migrant, a diasporic, a domestic worker, a family member, and, eventually, a return migrant landowner in India. These intimacies, responsibilities, rhetorics, affects, and forms of care are what inform the scholarly and personal stakes of this project. These are excesses that cannot be contained by structural explanations of race and class, nor by the paradigms of gendered biological motherhood that the chain of care model privileges. However, these excesses are also elided when they are romanticized into a space of nonpolitical, unproblematic “love,” as I found myself attempting to do both in the years following Laxmiben’s departure from the United States and after I learned of her death.

On my first trip to India after Laxmiben had returned there permanently, I was most eager to meet her again. I had been having difficulties getting along with my parents after she left, and I was going through a huge shift in my understanding of identity and self, having entered college and been exposed to more diverse students, identity politics, and feminist theory. For the first time, I was learning to deal with and articulate the racism I experienced growing up in a small white community through these new vocabularies, and this “awakening” also triggered a desire to place Laxmiben in the exalted maternal position that I felt my mother was not fulfilling for me at the time. Going to India at that time in my life was an emotionally volatile enterprise, as it was full of romanticized expectations of discovering roots, filling up psychic voids, and connecting more fully to this budding sense of identity that my college life was cultivating. I hounded my mother for weeks before the trip to contact Laxmiben, to let her know we were going to be in town, and to set up a meeting. I expected a grand reunion with cheerfulness and hugs and tears between us, my mother included. My mom's discomfort with my need to see Laxmiben and what seemed to me like her resistance to make firm plans with her fueled the tension between us, and I was more convinced than ever that she was not only not a good mother
(and not as “true” or “pure” of a maternal force as Laxmiben), but that she was, in fact, jealous of my feelings for Laxmiben and thus was thwarting my enthusiasm. Of course, not having grown up in India, I did not understand that plans are never made so far in advance, that Laxmiben’s flat was a short riksha ride away from my grandfather’s home, and that my parents were already planning to see her in order to deliver gifts and conduct financial business regarding her accounts in the United States.

A few days after our arrival in Bombay, when we went to visit my maternal grandfather, my mother informed me that Laxmiben was coming for lunch. I was both overjoyed and anxious; after all, in my mind, seeing her was the main reason I was in India. At that point, I had not seen her for over two years and was brimming with emotion, loss, and bitterness toward my parents. That visit was, I was convinced, going to fix all of my problems. However, our reunion did not fulfill my expectations at all. Laxmiben promptly headed to the kitchen after she arrived in order to help the cook prepare lunch. She was very distant and reserved with me throughout her visit. She refused to sit with my grandfather and the rest of the family at lunch, and when I protested my mother claimed it was uncomfortable (and possibly even improper) for both Laxmiben and my grandfather to sit for a meal together because they were in different class and caste positions and also were formerly employer and employee. So Laxmiben and I sat alone eating lunch after everyone else had finished, my 20-year-old activist self grumbling more about caste politics in India and the lack of freedoms in relation to the United States (I mean, we always sat together for dinner there!) than enjoying the limited time we had together. After that short visit with Laxmiben, I began to think that the romanticized space of maternal love that I had created was a myth. Her relatives in India—her brother and nephew—constituted her “true” family, and she was finally home with them. What I could not see at the time was that affect and social inequality were not opposing frameworks for approaching my relationship with Laxmiben, but rather were inextricable and co-constitutive.

In “Traveling Cultures of Servitude,” Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum (2010) consider what happens when what they call Kolkata’s “culture of servitude” becomes transnational through families that relocate to New York City. The authors explore how, in India, servants are simultaneously essential to a well-run household, part of the family, and part of a distinct category or class of people. However, the structural inequalities between servants and employers are masked on both sides by what they call a “rhetoric of love,” which encompasses relationships and affects that extend beyond the contractual understandings of work that we conceive of in the United States, while also perpetuating an embedded system of inequality. Through interviews with employers and employees in New York City and the “betrayals” and conflicts that often arose between them, the authors explore the negotiations of employment of servants within the frame of transnational migration from South Asia to the United States. South Asian
employers, they argue, “choose similarity” (106) in employing South Asian domestic workers as part of the transfer of culture to their children. Domestic workers often find working in South Asian households preferable as well due to culinary, religious, and linguistic similarities, and because of concerns about their immigrant status. But, the authors also found that South Asian employers took more advantage and paid less than non–South Asian employers, often utilizing a rhetoric of family to mask relations of exploitation, such as not wanting to pay the minimum wage or give days off from work. Conflicts arose when the culture of servitude that employers expected came into contact with US employment discourse: many employers reported a sense of betrayal when servants demanded rights and benefits. In many ways, then, both American notions of workers’ rights and extended versus nuclear family relations convened on the body of the domestic worker and in the way that her intimate labor was reconceived through the process of transnational migration. The concept of culture of servitude is useful in marking not some essentialized difference in cultural attitudes about class and labor in India vis-à-vis the United States, but rather as a marker of difference that gets negotiated and rehearsed in the process of transnational migration and circulation.

In fact, many of the findings of Ray and Qayum’s work resonate with both the autoethnographic moments in this article and with my own work among Indian elites in Dubai, where I found a similar preference for perceived same-ness in employment practices (both in businesses and within the home) and rhetorics of familial care and responsibility that masked the power differentials and modes of exploitation that occur within Indian diasporic latitudinal citizenship in Dubai (Vora 2011). In relation to Laxmiben’s circuit of migration and my family’s movement back and forth between the United States and India, we can see the recuperation of discourses of fictive kinship and ethnic sameness at certain moments that not only exert power but also mark intensified intimacy, responsibility, and desire for the social reproduction of Indianess within conditions of diaspora. The diasporic woman “culture bearer,” in my case and in the cases of the families that Ray and Qayum (2010) interviewed, was, in fact, more often a nanny than a middle-class mother in a nuclear family, thus challenging the established understanding within diaspora scholarship of gender roles, migration, and kinship.

Overlapping to some degree with Ray and Qayum, Lawrence Cohen’s (2011) research on kidney transplantation provides another interesting point of access into understanding intimacies of labor, commodification of care, and diasporic connectivity. Cohen traces the rise of transnational “body supplementarity” through organ transplant and argues that the relationships formed through the process of transplantation reorder both the familial and the global. India became a destination for medical tourism and five-star hospitals in the early 2000s after Indian liberalization, and many NRIs now travel to India for both cosmetic and life-extending procedures, including kidney transplants.  

There
have been Indian laws in the past few years to delimit kidney transfer to kin relations, which forces people to perform social sameness and affect. This, combined with the racialized/nationalized genetic framework in the United States that prevents NRIs from readily accessing kidneys in the communities where they live, leads them to India. Cohen connects migrant supplementarity to diasporic belonging in his article by pointing out narrative themes in his interviews with NRIs in the San Francisco Bay Area that also emphasized a focus on sameness and difference—patients sought an Indian donor though not one in their family, for that would be too much of a sacrifice to expect. However, kidney purchase was tied up with a rhetoric of moral responsibility and care that framed the relations of structural inequality within which organs became commodities. Cohen tracks how diasporic patients “adopted” the children of their donors, paying for their education and providing other forms of care that extend beyond the monetary transaction of the kidney itself; thus, the kidney is never just a commodity in Cohen’s conclusions, but a producer of new forms of transnational relationality that exceed class and migrant status. Nor are these modes of care simply a justification for accepting a transplant; rather, they are tied to notions of homeland responsibility, ethics, transplant relatedness, and affect, producing what Cohen calls “new mirror relations, children for children” (45), “in which transnational diasporic supplamntarity sets up a new form of obligation, expressed as being parallel to the kin relation that prevents one’s own children from becoming bioavailable” (46).

In ways that parallel my critique of the chain of care, Cohen wants to avoid claims that kidney transplant is all just a “vampire economy” of the wealthy feeding off the bodies of the poor, or of elite white Westerners exploiting the third world. There are two tales of asymmetry in his article that are interlinked: one is the obvious body supplementarity that diasporic NRIs can engage because of the bioavailability of less privileged nondiasporics in India; but the other, equally important though elided, is the unavailability of organs in the United States to Indian migrants despite their wealth due to a racialized system of medical care and genetics that does not make kidneys and other organ transplants accessible. Through these transnational purchases and the affects they are tied up with, Cohen argues that “a relationship [is] being crafted between supplementarity and humanitarianism as dual conditions for the life of persons in relation to more marginal others” (ibid.). Taking and giving here, while enabled through asymmetrical global capitalist relations, are irreducible to commodity chain or vampire economy narratives; they could also signify the biologization of diasporic return or the biological supplementarity of diaspora as a parallel to its social reproduction, through the very asymmetrical relations I have been tracing here—relations that are not contained within narratives of globalization, racial exploitation, or the chain of care.

The articles by Cohen and by Ray and Qayum allow for a consideration of affect, kinship, and migration that is neither divorced of class, gender, and race
nor determined by it. Combined with the autoethnographic moments of this article, they provide new ways of thinking about transnational relationships of power as ones that cannot be reduced to structural inequality. Soon after that visit to India when Laxmiben did not openly reciprocate my affection and sense of loss, I learned that she had insisted on naming her first grandniece Neha, naming being her right and obligation as the matriarch of the family. My namesake. While Cohen’s transplant recipients had recounted adopting the children of donors as a form of new transnational relationality, Laxmiben had produced her own version of transnational relationality by grafting the emotional impact of raising me onto the children who represented the fulfillment of her successful return migration. She had not abandoned me, but rather reconfigured her new family as one that could never be truly separated from her employer family in the United States. How do we account for this naming moment within the logics of global capitalism, inequality, and feminized labor? We cannot. The messy excesses produced by affective labor and social reproduction in diaspora are simultaneously and paradoxically contradictory and ordinary in ways that are difficult to capture through scholarship that looks either at the “maid trade” or at diasporic community formations as separate realms of inquiry. These excesses are about sameness and difference simultaneously, and they can help us to understand why bringing Laxmiben on a “family vacation” but refusing to sit at a dinner table with her are logical within the context of transnational latitudinal citizenship. They can also help us to understand why there is an Indian girl whom I will never know who has my name and who is about to enter college (the first in her family) due to Laxmiben’s hard work in raising me until I myself went to college. These moments are overflowing with both emotional impact and scholarly import, and the autoethnographic feminist recounting I have presented here represents an effort to open space for new examinations of diasporic intimacies within conditions of gendered latitudinal citizenship and racial and class precariousness.

Conclusion

Laxmi Soni died in October 2009. With my rusty Gujarati language skills and their broken English, I pieced together, over the course of several telephone calls to her family in India, what details I could of the last months of her life and the events surrounding her death. They had tried several times to get in touch with us in the United States, Laxmiben’s sister-in-law told me, “I had no idea you didn’t know until now.” This woman, whom I have met once or twice and whose name I cannot remember, listened calmly to my sobbing and assured me that Laxmiben spoke of me often and that I was like a daughter to her. Her reassurance, combined with my knowledge that Laxmiben had named her grandniece after me, could have led me to recuperate a form of love that was able to transcend the deep class, national, and education divides
between Laxmiben’s family and my own. In this article, I have attempted to avoid representing my relationship with Laxmiben either as a form of authentic emotion or as one that can be reduced to commodity logics and the racial geopolitics of transnational labor migration. In fact, her relationships with me, my brother, and my parents were full of excesses and asymmetries that resist both of these readings—readings that, as I have argued here, are too frequent in the scholarly literature on globalization and almost entirely absent from the literature on diasporic subjectivity and experience. What this article points to then, building from the examples of Cohen (2011) and Ray and Qayum (2010), is a need for new models of thinking about intersectionality and transnational assemblage in diaspora that incorporate both difference and sameness, affect and asymmetry, and the inability for us to carve out unproblematic relations of kinship, care, or love.

In writing this article, I was very aware of questions about authorship and who can undertake it, especially diasporic authorship (Spivak 1996). In many ways, Laxmiben was not “she who could become diasporic” because her positionality made her, in life and in death, so invisible, so unimportant to the diasporic community within which she resided for over eighteen years. Her death brought no condolences, no flowers, no sanctioned mourning period for those she raised in the United States. In a sense, then, she was ungrievable. Her death was a lonely pain that made me question the meaning of loss and family, and to think of her life as a tragedy. In many ways, however, she was a successful NRI, to which her status as a landowner and matriarch in her family, along with her savings and remittances, attested. Can we call that a tragedy? And if so, whose tragedy is it? Would she consider her own life a tragedy, and what violence do I do to her life when I am tempted to think of it as such? The autoethnographic mode that I have chosen for this article pushes a centering of the privileged subject (me) and a silencing of Laxmiben’s voice in ways that may undermine the stakes of this project. In fact, I have no recollections of conversations with her about these issues, nor did I ever interview her or ask her to share her migration stories in any depth. She is, therefore, visible to the reader only through me—the privileged diasporic academic—and she ultimately resides in this piece only as a specter.

However, the personal recounting that I have, through a rather painful grieving process, put to paper here also allows us to access affect, contradiction, reconstituted memory, and pain in ways that other forms of scholarship cannot. Thus, the autoethnographic mode, although potentially problematic in itself, is necessary to contribute to our understandings of affective labor and social reproduction within the diaspora. Affect may not be authentic, it may not be clean, and it may not be so easy for us to look in the eye as scholars and feminists, particularly when we consume the products of others’ intimate laborings, however unwittingly. But if the feminist project is about acknowledging genealogy, then as diasporic subjects and scholars we have to acknowledge ours
in full, including those we make invisible through our very definitions of family, diaspora, culture, and community. This tribute to Laxmi Soni, however fraught, has been my attempt to do just that.

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Notes

1. Adding “ben” (literally “sister” in Hindi and Gujarati) to the end of a name is sign of respect, formality, or elder status.
2. A hindu holy time period observed by the family.
3. American was the term used in my family and in our Indian circle of friends to refer to white people.
4. For more on affect as generated by and generative of historical and social relationality, see Sara Ahmed (2004), Ann Cvetkovich (2012), and Annelies Richard and Daromir Rudnyckyj (2009).
5. For more on autoethnography, see Carolyn Ellis (2004) and Garance Maréchal (2010).

6. Between the passage of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act and 1990, it is estimated that 1 million South Asians emigrated to the United States (University of California, Berkeley library, “Overview of the South Asian Diaspora,” http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/overview.html). While I could not find figures for South Asian domestic workers during this time period, several advocacy groups, including Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union, have noted that the majority of domestic workers in the United States are female, of color, and immigrant. In addition, the presence of organizations like Worker's Awaaz in New York City, which organizes around South Asian domestic worker rights, indicates a critical mass of this demographic. My own experiences growing up in an extended Indian professional community in the New York/New Jersey area also indicate that it was common practice for Indian families to employ live-in co-ethnic domestic workers, particularly to care for children.

7. There has been, however, an attempt by scholars and community organizers to attend to the high rates of domestic violence within South Asian immigrant families and the ways in which being home-bound and isolated (for example, without a car, passport, language skills, and so on) compound women's experiences of violence and their inability to leave.

8. For more on these requirements, see the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website at http://www.uscis.gov/.

9. This photograph of Laxmiben was taken by one of my parents in front of our refrigerator in our New Jersey home. She is standing in front of a drawing by my brother that has won a ribbon prize. This image shows the mundane aspects of domestic family life, but also indicates that my parents regarded her as somehow sharing in our upbringing and achievements, although it was in the space of the home and not at a school awards ceremony or other public event.


11. For more on assemblage, see Aihwa Ong (2006) and Jasbir K. Puar (2007).

12. Domestic work not falling under the category of labor is common in most countries around the world, the United States being one exceptional case.

13. See also Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2010).

14. For other critiques of the chain of care model, see Eleonore Kofman (2004), who argues that skilled migration is also necessary to include in our understandings of female labor migration; and Nicola Yeates (2004), who argues that care work needs to be expanded to include nondomestic employment, such as nursing.

15. Martin F. Manalansan IV makes this argument, as does Kathi Weeks (2007) in her exploration of affect in “pink collar” work.

16. See also Thrity Umrigar (2007) for an excellent fictional account of the gendered intimacies and contradictions that frame the experience of employing domestic workers in India.

17. For a scholarly account of the “micropolitics” between mothers and nannies, see Cameron Lynn Macdonald (2011).
18. NRI (Non-Resident Indian), a category of citizens defined by the Indian state as living primarily outside of India, is used colloquially in India and transnationally to refer to all members of the Indian diaspora in wealthier Global North countries like the United States, regardless of whether they still maintain Indian citizenship.

19. We can also see these kinds of preferences in transnational adoption, where Indian diasporic (often second-generation couples) will adopt from India over other places.

20. Here, I borrow from Judith Butler’s observations that some lives are more grievable than others; see Udi Aloni, “Judith Butler: As a Jew, I Was Taught It Was Ethically Imperative to Speak Up” (2010).

References


