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Introduction: Beauty Matters

On September 14, 2013, Nina Davuluri, a twenty-four-year-old Miss New York beauty-pageant queen, became the first Indian American to win the title of Miss America. Within minutes of Davuluri's history-making win, Twitter was abuzz with racist tweets, some calling Davuluri a "terrorist" and a "member of Al Qaeda." Others misidentified Davuluri, a Hindu whose family hails from South India, as both "Muslim" and "Arab," religious and geographic identities that, in the wake of a post-9/11 cultural backlash against Muslim, Arab, and South Asian populations and rampant Islamophobia, were intended to disqualify Davuluri from the title of Miss America—as one racist tweeter put it, "This is Miss America not Miss Muslim." Yet, just as quickly, countertweets came pouring in to defend Davuluri, whose political platform for the pageant was "Celebrating Diversity through Cultural Competency." Rather predictably, these tweets appealed to the multicultural ethos of the Miss America pageant, citing Davuluri's win as evidence of the US nation's embrace of ethnically diverse ideals of "American beauty."

In the days that followed, South Asian American writers and bloggers weighed in as well, many arguing that Davuluri's Indian features productively challenged "euro-centric ideals of beauty" and contributed to "a broadening understanding of Americanness in a space that has historically taken a fairly narrow view of what qualifies as an acceptably American appearance and background" (qtd. in Hafiz). Other South Asian Americans, who were more critical of the sexist structure of beauty pageants, sidelined the issue of Davuluri's beauty and focused on

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the cyber-racism that it incited. The writer Sanjena Sathian, for example, argued that even though Davuluri is neither Arab nor Muslim, even “if she were, people still have no right to racism” (qtd. in Hafiz). Others countered the racist backlash by heralding Davuluri’s achievement as yet another example of South Asian American “model minority” success and hard work. The journalist Sandip Roy jokingly referred to Davuluri’s beauty-pageant win as further evidence of a “South Asian stealth takeover of America—1) Subways 2) Motels 3) 7–11’s 4) Taxis 5) Tech Support 6) Spelling Bees 7) ER’s 8) #Miss America.” Yet even as Davuluri’s Miss America title adds to the list of ways that South Asians are visible in the US public sphere, it also remains distinct within the South Asian model minority narrative. As Ruchika Tulshyan, who wrote an article for *Forbes* magazine on Davuluri’s historic win and the controversy surrounding it, observed, “I wouldn’t be writing this if Nina had won a spelling bee or mathematics competition.” Implicit within Tulshyan’s comment is that, unlike South Asian educational, entrepreneurial, and professional-managerial success stories that reinforce popular representations of South Asians as highly successful minorities capable of achieving the American dream and yet as peripheral to dominant US national culture, and unlike even the culturally degraded labor of South Asian service-sector work that positions South Asians as undesirable and unskilled racial minorities, the crowning of an Indian woman as Miss America suggests that South Asian success in the cultural domain of beauty poses, at least for some people, a threat to American cultural identity. At the very least, it reveals an as yet unexplored facet of what the Latino writer Richard Rodriguez has called the “browning of America” (xiii). What Tulshyan’s comment reveals, in other words, is that despite being a seemingly superficial aspect of mass culture, beauty matters: it has the power to galvanize sentiment and incite passions about race, national identity, and cultural belonging.

The debates that erupted over Davuluri’s Miss America win bring to the forefront one of *Fashioning Diaspora*’s central concerns: the capacity for Indian feminine beauty to animate the social. The backlash against and fascination with Davuluri had to do with how her beauty catalyzed debates about South Asian racial formation, citizenship, and belonging within the dominant US public sphere. *Fashioning Diaspora* builds on and expands the scope of these debates about beauty and belonging, focusing on Indian beauty’s socially animating capacities within diasporic cultural production. One of this book’s main objectives is to show how diasporic subjects engage with and respond to various encounters with subjects, objects, and practices

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of Indian beauty and fashion and how such encounters produce embodied practices of citizenship and belonging.

A second, related concern of *Fashioning Diaspora* played out in a different but simultaneous debate around Davuluri's Miss America win that was taking place within both Indian subcontinental and South Asian American communities and that situated Davuluri's beauty within a transnational frame of analysis. Whereas some Indian nationals saw the US racist backlash against Davuluri as an example of American cultural backwardness, others used it to claim Davuluri as a diasporic daughter of the Indian nation. India's leading newspaper, the *Times of India*, for example, responded to the racist tweets with the front-page headline, "Racist Remarks Sour Indian Girl's Miss America Moment" (qtd. in S. Roy). In another *Times* article celebrating Davuluri's historic victory for Indians, the journalist Chidanand Rajghatta erroneously cited India as Davuluri's "country of origin" (Davuluri was born in the United States, though she was raised in India by her grandparents during her early childhood years). He even went so far as to argue that it was Davuluri's Indianness that "breathed new life" into the Miss America pageant, an American institution whose popularity has been flagging over the past two decades but received the highest ratings in nine years for the 2013 competition. Davuluri also received numerous requests from Indian officials for public appearances in India. Indians' desire to claim Davuluri—and the Indianness that she represented—as their own undoubtedly had to do with India's own recent cultural history as an epicenter of global beauty and fashion. This is a history that, by all accounts, began with the crowning of two Miss India pageant queens, Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai, as Miss Universe and Miss World, respectively, in the 1990s. Sen's and Rai's titles, along with the liberalization of India's economy in 1991, helped to globalize and professionalize the Indian fashion and beauty industries, a phenomenon that I discuss in more detail later in this introduction and in chapter 2. These conversations within Indian and diasporic publics thus linked Davuluri's beauty to the globalization of Indian beauty on the subcontinent.

Yet even as some Indian media hailed Davuluri as an example of the ever-expanding model minority success of Indians abroad, other Indian and diasporic media analysts argued that Davuluri would not have had even a glimmer of a hope of winning the title of Miss *India*—precisely the title that Rai and Sen secured before going on to win international pageants—because she would have been considered too dark-skinned. These writers almost universally invoked the global success of fair-skinned

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Indian beauty—such as that embodied by Rai and Sen—as the national standard against which Davuluri’s ethnically Indian beauty simply failed to measure up. (These observations take on an ironic hue in light of Davuluri’s claims that Rai is also one of her role models.) South Asian Americans, for their part, agreed with their Indian counterparts on this point; but some took the claiming of Davuluri as an “Indian girl” (rather than an American one) as an occasion to then vituperate Indians for promoting a fair-skinned beauty ideal. Asha Rangappa, the associate dean of Yale Law School, observed that while the racist backlash against Davuluri and its pushback by South Asian and non-South Asian Americans as well as subcontinental Indians was intended to “shame” America by revealing the racist underbelly of a liberal democratic nation, such public shaming actually “misses what ought to be the real shame target—India. After all, despite being a country of almost a billion people, India has left it to America to crown the first Indian beauty queen who looks . . . well, Indian.” Rangappa here implies that the Indian light-skinned beauty ideal effectively denies dark skin as a more realistic and democratic Indian ideal.¹ Rangappa thus counters Indians’ finger-pointing at the US racist backlash against Davuluri’s brownness with her own finger-pointing at India’s colorism against the majority of its dark-skinned citizens.

What I find noteworthy about these conversations between and among Indian and diasporic publics is the way that Davuluri’s beauty invites an engagement with definitions of Indianness (and not just the Americanness that her win “officially” represents). Her beauty both dissolves and at the same time delineates a distinction between the categories Indian and Indian American, between nation and diaspora: Davuluri’s beauty is an Indian accomplishment and yet insufficient to the task of representing Indian beauty; it is definitively diasporic and yet in need of Indian beauty as either its foil or counterpart; and if we take seriously Rangappa’s point about skin color, diasporic beauty is more authentically Indian than Indian beauty itself. This constellation of discourses about Indian beauty reveals its transnational dimensions—the way that it occupies a symbolic field that travels between diaspora and nation and the “tense and tender ties”² through which these itineraries of beauty subtend one another, diverge, and converge. These differing opinions about how to frame Davuluri’s success within the cultural domain of beauty thus highlight a second concern of this book—the way that diasporic beauty is marked by, apprehended within, and engages with transnational flows of Indian beauty.

Rather than understand Davuluri’s winning beauty as an isolated or exceptional event, I treat it here as a symptom and a provocation, a point

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of entry into a broader examination of the links between beauty, fashion, femininity, race, diaspora, and the social. *Fashioning Diaspora* maps how transnational itineraries of Indian beauty and fashion shape South Asian American³ cultural identities and racialized belonging, from the 1990s to the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The liberalization of India's economy in 1991 led to the increasing availability of US popular culture in Indian markets through the advent of Indian satellite television and other transnational media, as well as to the growing popularity of Indian cultural forms—namely, in music, food, and fashion—within the US national imaginary. This period is also marked by the Indian state's courting of the transnational capital of elite (and more specifically Hindu) non-resident Indians (NRIs) living and working in the United States, many of whom had migrated to the United States as professional and managerial labor migrants under the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and who subsequently achieved middle- and upper-class status. Finally, some of the period I examine is a geopolitical moment defined by the historical periodization “post-9/11,” during which “allegiances to the nation-state of India are unwittingly or often deliberately rearticulated through allegiances to the United States,” especially as these allegiances require the exclusion of Muslim populations from both US and Indian global modernities (Puar, *Terrorist* 173). During this time, I argue, Indian beauty and fashion have operated as technologies of neoliberal governance, optimized for the cultivation of gendered forms of neoliberal selfhood and for the satisfaction of neoliberal consumer desires, nationally and transnationally.⁴

Fashioning Diaspora also puts pressure on these neoliberal rationalities of the self and the social by deploying transnational feminist critique as its method of examining beauty's force at the level of bodily intensities, capacities, and propensities as it circulates across various diasporic cultural texts. Transnational feminist analysis is a method that typically takes as its object of study the act of migration and the crossing of borders as distinctly gendered processes. However, I adapt this approach to focus not so much on the subjects and processes of migration—though I do attend to these—and more on the operations of beauty within these processes. I foreground how beauty, sometimes through and sometimes despite its associations with neoliberal desires and belonging, also animates the material realities of “race, migration, and political economy” and interrogates “globalism, empire, and the nation-state” (Butler and Desai 2).⁵ That is, I deploy transnational feminist critique as a reading practice that allows me to examine how transnational flows of Indian

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beauty produce racialized and diasporic subjectivities and affiliations and how diasporic subjects at times transform these everyday performances, practices, and goods of Indian beauty and fashion in the process. Rather than designating a predetermined and discrete set of objects or practices, I use the term “Indian beauty” as a conceptual shorthand for a dynamic network of bodies, desires, events, performances, clothing and adornment practices, and commodities that are negotiated within a specific set of conjunctures in diaspora. Though this book focuses on diasporic cultural forms produced within the United States, it also attends to the way that other diasporic national sites, such as Britain and East Africa, actively shape and energize the transnational flows of Indian beauty that it maps. It thus follows Rajini Srikanth’s persuasive argument that “the South Asian American experience is one of diaspora” (2).

Instead of attempting to offer a genealogy of the concept of “beauty” (a highly contested term and a difficult, if not impossible, endeavor), it is more useful to understand beauty as occupying various domains of the social in the diasporic cultural production that I examine. Beauty in this book refers to a mode of aesthetic judgment and a diasporic mode of embodiment—a physical attribute either earned by or conferred on the diasporic subject (in which Indian bodies are seen as possessing beauty or in which the physical attribute of beauty is defined as Indian), sometimes with the goal of producing aesthetic pleasure; and a style or performance of racialized femininity. These modes of judgment and embodiment are at times linked to the way that beauty operates as a form of aesthetic and sexual capital—the possession of beauty as a way to gain access to privilege or prestige. At other times, beauty operates as a form of labor and care—both the labor of self-beautification and the labor and care of beautifying an(other) or others. My purpose in describing beauty as occupying this heterogeneous social field is to emphasize that beauty, while it circulates within other networks of social power and social inequality, is not reducible to them. In an examination of the booming beauty industry in globalizing Brazil, Alexander Edmonds observes that “it is precisely the gap between aesthetic and other scales of social position that makes attractiveness such an essential form of value and all-too-often-imaginary vehicle of ascent for those blocked from more formal routes of social mobility” (20). Beauty, in other words, does not merely replicate other social structures or stand as an “effect” of these structures; beauty has its own internal logic and organization, one that structures the very domain of the social for many racialized diasporic subjects. Thus, although when Tulshyan notes that Davuluri’s success in

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beauty is unlike other South Asian American accomplishments she does not mean so complex a rendering of beauty's social field as I have outlined here, her comment does locate beauty's particularity within this social field, its distinction as a form of prestige within the South Asian American community.

Closely tethered to the social life of beauty is fashion, a separate but related domain of the social that the second half of *Fashioning Diaspora* examines as part of mapping diasporic belonging. By "fashion," I mean both the creative input and economic processes that are required to translate the raw material of clothing into the symbolic meaning of style (fashionability) and the habits of dress and attire that inform everyday practices of self and identity (sartoriality). This conceptualization of fashion somewhat departs from the way that many fashion studies scholars theorize fashion. These scholars tend to view fashion and clothing as two distinct and nonoverlapping domains of culture. For these scholars, clothing is material (it is most often understood as the raw material of fashion) and fashion is immaterial (it is a constructed set of beliefs about the social value and function of clothing that exceeds its use value).⁶ In an overview of the field of fashion studies, *Fashion-ology*, Yuniya Kawamura argues that "a form of dress or a way of using [clothing] is not 'in fashion' until it has been adopted and used by a large proportion of people in a society" (1). Kawamura's distinction between clothing and fashion is connected to her larger project of defining fashion as a system that is the product of a collective belief in clothes-as-fashion. Fashion, in this view, is not just about a fashion designer's individual creative genius but about a larger social apparatus of design, production, distribution, diffusion, reception, and consumption, all of which comprise the "social nature of fashion" (1).

While I am careful to distinguish between the dominant fashion system, which is part of a larger social apparatus of clothing-as-fashion, and clothing in the chapters that make up the second part of the book (chapters 3, 4, and 5), when I talk about fashion in this book, I refer to both fashion and clothing for at least two reasons. First, what counts as fashion in terms of design and consumer markets historically has excluded non-Western attire, which is often distinguished from fashion through the use of terms such as "dress," "clothing," "garments," and "garb." Moreover, the very distinction between clothing and fashion is, after all, also a symptom and marker of modernity—those subjects and cultures that can be fashionable are those marked as having the capacity to enter into a national or global modern. In India, like in other colonized

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nations, fashion was central to the colonial modernizing project (see Tarlo). (Indeed, in chapter 3, I examine how a contemporary diasporic young-adult novel represents colonial ideals of modern Indian womanhood in relation to the consumption of British-made fashions.) Though the dominant fashion system does much work to distinguish between the fashionable and the merely sartorial, the visual artists whom I examine in chapter 4, for example, complicate this distinction by, in part, revealing the racial, gendered, sexual, and colonial economies at work in producing it. These artists represent the bindi as a marker of both an eroticized and culturally backward Indian femininity in tension with the Western fascination with the bindi during the Indo-chic Western style trend of the 1990s. I show how diasporic artists redefine the “social nature” of fashion by making visible the social structures that transform clothing into fashion and by radically experimenting with the materiality of Indian fashion *and* clothing. In doing so, I argue that they create new forms of diasporic feminine embodiment that exceed the gendered and sexualized normativities and orientalisms of fashion.

While fashion and beauty circulate within distinct regimes of value—who or what is considered beautiful need not be considered fashionable, and vice versa⁷—there is at times slippage between the terms. Thus, while the first half of the book focuses on beauty and the second half on fashion, it is nevertheless the case that sometimes these two domains of culture seep into and solicit each other. This crosshatching happens when style makes beauty legible on the body, such as in chapter 1, when a fashion makeover allows the Indian migrant woman to “pass” as an American beauty, and again in chapter 2, when Western attire marks the upwardly mobile diasporic woman’s Bollywood beauty. When I discuss the social structures and socializing capacities of beauty and fashion within diasporic cultural production, I primarily use the term “beauty” as shorthand throughout the rest of the introduction. I do this in part because of the relationality of these terms that I have just outlined and in part to avoid repetitious phrasing. The term “beauty,” then, encompasses a range of material expressions including fashion (both sartoriality and style).

It is worth stating at the outset that my aim in *Fashioning Diaspora* is not to perform an extended analysis of representations of Indian beauty in transnational mass media—the Indian beauty queen, the Indian fashion model, the Indian fashion designer, the marketing and use of skin-lightening creams, or fashion magazines. Such objects and figures constitute perhaps the most visible evidence of the transnational

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circulation of cultural economies of Indian beauty.⁸ Nor is *Fashioning Diaspora* an ethnography of these economies—this is not a study of South Asian American fashion designers, models, or beauty queens or of the beauty and fashion industries per se. This book certainly nods to and even occasionally pursues these economies (the fashion and beauty industries) and the figures (models, Bollywood starlets, fashion designers) that occupy its ranks, but it also expands the concept of “Indian beauty” beyond these economies and figures. If Indian beauty structures the domain of the social for diasporic subjects, then it is also the case that beauty takes on a variety of social forms in *Fashioning Diaspora*.

“Indian beauty” finds expression—and distortion—in diasporic cultural forms that themselves cannot be fully disaggregated from cultural economies of beauty: diasporic literary fiction that invokes the beauty and desirability of the diasporic Indian woman, which are symptomatic of a modernizing India and a growing diasporic bourgeoisie; young-adult fiction that accompanies objects of diasporic material culture such as a “politically conscious,” Indian, anticolonial, freedom-fighting girl fashion doll; a short story about a Miss India USA beauty pageant; a young-adult, ethnic, “chick-lit” novel about an Indian American girl’s desires to become a fashion journalist; and visual and performance art that critically engages with sartorially iconic and politically charged markers of Indian fashion such as the bindi and the sari. As even this brief description of the social forms of beauty reveals, I privilege diasporic Indian *femininity* as the gendered territory of beauty—femininity, in other words, is where beauty *lives* across the archive of diasporic texts that I assemble here. Though “beauty,” “fashion,” and “femininity” certainly are not equivalent terms, the social fields of diasporic beauty that I examine maintain strong attachments to feminine subjects (the immigrant and NRI woman; second-generation girls; the Indian American beauty queen) and to feminized objects of fashion (bindis and saris). There are several reasons for this. First, fashion and beauty are conventionally feminized domains of culture—their associations with the private (versus the public), culture (versus economy), and consumerism (versus politics) marks their “frivolous and casual” (rather than serious and intentional) nature (Tu 9). Recent and emerging scholarship on fashion and beauty reveals that femininity is at the heart of these investigations, whether it is studies of fashion models, the fashion industry, plastic-surgery practices, or cosmetics.⁹

Second, because I am interested in understanding how Indian beauty and fashion are negotiated in a South Asian American diasporic context,

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any engagement with diasporic Indian beauty invites an engagement with the figure of the beautiful Indian woman that has emerged as emblematic of India's entry into global modernity. As I have already mentioned, the liberalization of India's economy in the early 1990s coincided with the rise of the Indian beauty queen onto the international pageant scene, inaugurating images of beautiful Indian women as emblematic of India's global economic reach. Such concurrence is not incidental, as female beauty "often emerges as a key site of the modern—as lure, moral threat, or even liberation" (Edmonds 30). Indeed, within late-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century contexts of global mass media, the Indian woman's construction as beautiful and fashionable has had a central role to play in the definition of India as a globally modern post-colonial nation. The figure of the global Indian beauty queen has been central to definitions of "new" Indian womanhood, a newness marked by a "potential for professionalism in the workplace and through [the new Indian woman's] adherence to an essentialized notion of Indian-ness" (Radhakrishnan 49). The outward projection of this image to the Western world could be found on the covers of three major US magazines from 1999 to 2006. *National Geographic*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* all featured "beautiful" and fashionable Indian and diasporic Indian women—emblematic of the new Indian, female, professional, consumer citizen-subject—on their covers to represent India's emergence into a new global economy. *National Geographic* presented two very different Indian women on the cover of its 1999 "millennium supplement" on "global culture"; one is dressed in a gold-brocaded sari and gold jewelry, and she smiles approvingly at an Indian fashion model dressed in a black-vinyl body suit and gazing boldly into the camera. The juxtaposition of these two contrasting images of Indian femininity captures in visual terms one of the central stories featured within the millennial supplement: India's rapid entry into global modernity. Seven years later, in 2006, *Newsweek* and *Time* followed *National Geographic's* lead by featuring on their covers beautiful Indian women as representative of a global Indianness (in the case of the *Time* image, of India's booming transnational IT industry). In these instances, however, it was the faces and bodies of *diasporic* Indian women—those living outside the subcontinent—that were harnessed to globality. *Newsweek's* cover featured the Indian American actress, model, and television host Padma Lakshmi in a loosely tied sari with her hands clasped together in *namaste* (an Indian cultural greeting), underneath the caption, "The New India" (6 Mar.). The ornamented face of the UCLA Indian American business student

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and classical Indian dancer Gunjan Thiagarajah graced the cover of the *Time* issue, accompanied by the caption “India, Inc.” (26 June). In both of these mass media, photogenic, diasporic Indian women represent the globally modern Indian nation, displayed as global corporate brand.¹⁰

These feminized representations of Indianness in some ways hark back to earlier nationalist ideologies that positioned the Indian woman at the center of anticolonial nationalist discourse in the nineteenth century. In this discourse, the middle-class Indian woman’s “essential” spirituality within the home—one that was opposed to Indian men’s susceptibility to the necessary but “corrupt” material and rational social order outside the home—became central to anticolonial and postcolonial conceptualizations of modern nationalism (see Chatterjee). *Fashioning Diaspora* zeroes in on the particular uses of beauty in shaping both this inward and outward projection of Indian womanhood, inquiring into the way that this traditional-but-modern notion of Indian femininity is recycled, revised, and reassembled within the diasporic imagination.

Third, while beauty and fashion as feminized cultures are typically framed as reflecting the twin oppressions of patriarchy and profit—they “keep male dominance intact” (Woolf 3), and they drive consumption and exploit labor—it is also possible to imagine beauty and fashion, by virtue of the feminized economies in which they circulate, as allowing for an agential femininity, one that embodies and can express “diverse aspirations for self-transformation, social mobility, and sexual pleasure and power” (Edmonds 30). If diasporic Indian beauty lives, as I say, in femininity, then *Fashioning Diaspora* shows that these are social domains that locate diasporic femininity as, more often than not, challenging dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies of gender and sexuality. Within these ideologies, Indian femininity merely “represents” an Indian national global modern tied to historically male domains (the public sphere, techno-scientific labor, and social progress) that is then reproduced in diaspora. As Gayatri Gopinath has argued, the very concept of diaspora is most often rooted in narratives that privilege “bonds of relationality between men” and in ways that “invariably displac[e] or elid[e] female diasporic subjects” (*Impossible* 5). Gopinath points specifically to the “prosperous, Hindu, heterosexual, NRI businessman” (10) who is at the heart of Indian nationalist conceptualizations of diaspora, so that even when diasporic narratives represent women, they often do so in nationalistic terms, as “the borders and boundaries of communal identities” of the nation (9).

Gopinath’s characterization of diaspora’s genealogies of heteromasculinism is useful for my purposes because it points to how, even

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when Indian femininity is used to represent Indian global modernity and despite the existence of a critical mass of cultural production by and about diasporic women, such representations may ultimately do little to disrupt the reproduction of capitalist heteropatriarchies in national and diasporic public cultures. I forward the analytic of “fashioning diaspora” to bring into view diasporic female subjects—and, more importantly, diasporic femininity—as central to narratives of South Asian diaspora and racial formation. This is not to make an essentializing claim that the social domain of beauty somehow inheres in the concept of “diasporic femininity” or that all diasporic women are folded into its social logic (again, beauty, fashion, and femininity are not equivalent terms). But it is to say that beauty offers one way—and, given the proliferation of images of Indian beauty across global mass media that mark the Indian global modernizing project, perhaps one of the most visible ways—to illuminate how femininity produces racialized subjectivities and diasporic affiliations that have remained below the threshold of dominant male-centered narratives of diaspora.¹¹ Put another way, “fashioning diaspora” gives vitality to mass-media images of Indian/diasporic femininity by recognizing that these are not merely images but also embodied and desiring *subjects*, bodies with flesh and bones.

The concept of “fashioning diaspora” makes two overlapping interventions into existing discourses about nation and diaspora. First, it takes seriously that representations of Indian feminine beauty have, however problematically, come to stand in for—dare I say, even to supplant—the figure of the “new” Indian woman that has come to represent India’s entry into global modernity, such that the consumer practices and forms of neoliberal capitalist mobility that produce this figure have trained their focus on her relation to and apprehension within beauty. Whereas Indian beauty might thus be said to merely represent a range of other forms of neoliberal selfhood and national identifications that constitute new Indian womanhood, *Fashioning Diaspora* examines beauty as an important, timely, and severely underexamined one. It also recognizes that this particular articulation of Indian femininity has social lives beyond the Indian nation-state. Its attachments to mobility, pleasure, desire, consumption, labor, and commodification are part of neoliberal subject formation and practices of belonging in the diaspora, and at times these attachments redound on neoliberal practices of belonging within the Indian nation.

The story of diasporic embodiment and belonging that I tell is not just about women and girls, though these subjects do occupy the greater

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part of the book's critical attention. Even as beauty resides within and attaches to ethnically Indian feminine subjects and feminized objects, its socializing force exceeds the habitus of diasporic female subjects to operate on a range of diasporic and, in some cases, nondiasporic subjects. As I will show, encounters with Indian feminine beauty and objects of fashion in the cultural production that I examine point to possibilities for affiliations between and among diasporic women and girls—including undocumented migrants and sexual minorities, mothers and daughters, but also white women, South Asian immigrant male service-sector workers, and middle-class South Asian men. In mapping beauty's capacities to produce diverse and heterogeneous forms of embodiment, affiliation, and attachment, my aim is not to construct a coherent story about diaspora. Rather, in using beauty as an analytic for examining diasporic life-worlds, I conceive of fashioning diaspora as a "practice of diaspora," a way of identifying diasporic embodiment, affiliations, and attachments that can still account for the "constitutive differences" (Edwards 11) of diasporic racial formations—differences of nationality, gender, class, generation, citizenship status, sexuality, and region. Stuart Hall conceives of this concept of diaspora-as-practice as an "articulation," a "complex structure' in which things are related, as much through their differences as through their similarities" ("Race" 33). The idea of Indian beauty as a practice of diasporic articulation—one that, even as it is rooted in diasporic femininity, operates on a diverse range of bodies and subjects—allows us to see how beauty produces multiple spatial scales of social belonging, affiliations across multiple forms of difference, and multiple forms of embodiment that are not reducible to a single kind of diasporic subject or a unified way of imagining diaspora.

Reassembling Beauty's Neoliberal Attachments

What do the social domains of Indian beauty in South Asian American diasporic cultural production look like? What forms of attachment, affiliation, and embodiment do they produce? Across what forms of difference? How and why is it Indian beauty that provides the occasion for these attachments? To get at these questions, it is first necessary to address the way that beauty generally and Indian beauty specifically most often circulate within neoliberal political rationalities and reproduce the neoliberal values and ethos of the new global economy. Wendy Brown defines neoliberalism as more than an economic process or policy that designates the retreat of the welfare state from providing social services

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for its citizens and the privatization of state forms of care. Neoliberalism, according to Brown, is a form of governmentality, a political rationality that reaches beyond the state and the economy so that “all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality” (40). Beauty fits easily into the market rationalities of neoliberalism. Whether understood as physical attributes, commodities, or creative industries, beauty traffics in beliefs about the market logic of liberal democracy (e.g., the democratic “right” to consume and accumulate beauty commodities as part of consumer citizenship) and social transcendence and self-transformation through the accumulation of objects of beauty. Beauty thus traffics in a “lifestyle politics of neoliberalism, which emphasizes rational consumption, privatized modes of self-care and self-management, and the optimization of individuals’ health, wealth, and happiness” through an unregulated global market (Pham, “Blog” 16). Beauty, it would seem, is tailor-made for neoliberalism.

Indeed, whether explicitly or implicitly, fashion and beauty cultures have been at the center of many convergences between consumer cultures and definitions of democratic citizenship within 1990s Indian neoliberalism. Whether defined in and through the terms of middle-class Indian women’s increased consumer spending on products to enhance their physical appearance, the increased availability of full-service beauty salons and skin-lightening products and procedures, or aspirations to fashion design and modeling as career choices for urban girls and women, Indian beauty is connected to neoliberal practices of citizenship.¹² More recently, we are witnessing the influence of India’s beauty boom and the global visibility of Indian beauty taking on new forms and formats within national and diasporic media. Bollywood films such as Madhur Bhandarkar’s biopic *Fashion* (2008), featuring the 2000 Miss World title holder Priyanka Chopra, chronicles the rise and fall of an Indian supermodel—allegedly based on the real-life rise and fall of the Indian supermodel Gitanjali Nagpal—who becomes an overnight success as a lingerie model but quickly enters a downward spiral of sexual affairs, drugs, and alcohol, only to realize the error of her ways in time to walk the Paris runway during Paris Fashion Week. The popularity of skin lightening among middle-class urban men has been the subject of another Bhandarkar film, *Traffic Signal* (2007), and a national and diasporic outcry erupted in 2012 over an Indian television ad for Clean and White Intimate Wash, a product that promotes the virtues of “vagina brightening” or lightening among young, upwardly mobile Indian women. Rupal Oza describes what she calls “the making of neoliberal

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India” as involving the arrival of the Indian beauty queen onto the international pageant scene and a concomitant “beauty boom” that gave rise to expanding global markets for Indian beauty products and services.

Indian fashions, too, have become highly visible in the form of coveted commodities within the global fashion industry. Even before the rise of global cities such as Bangalore, Mumbai, and Delhi made India a global fashion destination and the site of a new creative economy of fashion industrialists, Indian-inspired fashions, known as Indo-chic, took the global fashion industry by storm in the 1990s. Indo-chic later came to define the fashion landscape of India as well, as Indian fashion designers found that they could use this style aesthetic to cultivate a sense of cosmopolitanism among elite and urban Indian consumers. Defined as the marketing and consuming of Indian-inspired style commodities during the 1990s through the first decade of the new millennium, Indo-chic marks a new phase and form of orientalism, distinct from and yet continuous with its colonial-era predecessor, that can be found in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century popular forms, such as fashion, music, and media, that have proliferated under late global capital.¹³

The increased production and consumption of women’s lifestyle magazines on the subcontinent in the late 1990s prompted the production of similar magazines, such as *Anokhi*, *Nirali*, *Sapna*, and *Nirvana*, for South Asian American women at the beginning of the new millennium. (*Nirvana* was discontinued in 2004 but bore the same overall visual aesthetic of India’s best-selling women’s beauty magazine, *Femina*, which began publication in 1959.¹⁴) In addition to providing South Asian diasporic women with the latest fashion and beauty buzz on the subcontinent, these magazines regularly feature profiles on South Asian American models who are entering the US fashion industry, such as Sonia Dara, who became the first Indian American female model to grace the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue in 2012, and the Indian American model Melanie Kannokada, who became the face of the global skin-care line Bare Essentials in 2010. And we can now add to this list Nina Davuluri, Miss America 2014.

Such Indian and diasporic media forms and figures of Indian beauty are themselves symptomatic of the convergence of Indian and US neoliberalisms. Indian beauty, in the diasporic context, is not just a result of Indian neoliberalisms but intersects with neoliberal practices of citizenship in the United States, which stress liberal individualism through professional achievement and participation in the global marketplace. As Bakirathi Mani has observed, the hegemonic narrative of South

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Asian American identity as defined by upwardly mobile and professionally skilled legal immigrants is one that is produced out of and in turn reinforces neoliberal formulations of US multicultural citizenship, a way of “managing racial and class difference within the state” even as its “color-blind society purports to move beyond race” (*Aspiring* 6). Multicultural citizenship is a practice of neoliberal belonging that allows South Asians in the United States to continue to think of themselves as model minorities, a racial formation rooted in an ideology of liberal autonomy and individual achievement that belies the actual class heterogeneity of South Asian Americans as an immigrant group. The model minority narrative of South Asians as hardworking, successful, and upwardly mobile dovetails with the emergence of neoliberal citizenship practices on the subcontinent. As Mani argues, “the flexible operations of multiculturalism and its alliance with narratives of upward mobility [among South Asians in the United States] reveal unexpected linkages between domestic ideologies of nationhood and transnational practices of citizenship” (6), as elite diasporic subjects, like their elite subcontinental counterparts, participate in transnational circuits of capitalist accumulation and consumption. It becomes easy to see how diasporic beauty cultures traffic in the neoliberal ethos of social transcendence, liberal individualism, and class mobility that has become central to hegemonic definitions of both Indian and South Asian American belonging. Within a framework of intersecting Indian and US neoliberalisms, Indian and diasporic articulations of beauty can allow South Asian American consumer identities and practices to be recruited into the neoliberal logic of the nation-state—and vice versa—because they participate in “the proliferation of market-based notions of individual autonomy” (Mani, *Aspiring* 7).¹⁵ Such intersections are what allow, for example, Davuluri—a subject on whom the official conferral of beauty constructs her as a model minority subject—to become a diasporic daughter of the Indian nation despite having very few material links to the homeland (and despite her less-than-ideal Indian beauty).

In the chapters that follow, I focus on diasporic negotiations of Indian beauty, which have remained virtually unexplored within feminist scholarship on beauty, fashion, race, and globalization,¹⁶ examining the strength of beauty’s neoliberal attachments. As should by now be clear, within a neoliberal framework, beauty produces a social field that is structured not by collectivity or collaboration—socialities that have been integral to theorizing Asian American and diasporic racial formations—but rather by greater individualization as beauty circulates

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as forms of individual fitness under capitalism. Upon first glance, then, beauty seems antithetical—perhaps even hostile—to these more politicized ways of thinking about the social. Within consumer cultures, beauty is most frequently understood as a commodity and thus as a dematerialized aesthetic object or disembodied aesthetic practice. Even as an object of philosophical inquiry, as in liberal humanistic discourse that claims it as a transcendent, universal social good, beauty generally appears devoid of historicity and materiality.¹⁷ Beauty, in short, “seems to offer itself as a quintessential object of fetishization” (Cheng, “Wounded” 202). Given the centrality of femininity and racial difference to genealogies of the fetish, popular understandings of racialized feminine beauty tend merely to reinforce their fetishistic associations with objectification and commodification. Beautiful women of color or non-Western women are either a much-needed corrective to white, Euro-American-centric models of beauty, making these women “better” fetishes than their white female counterparts, or their racialized beauty is particularly tragic evidence of the fetishization of feminine beauty.¹⁸ Even if we concede that cultural or racial differences influence standards of beauty, such a concession does little to displace the question of what or who is considered beautiful. While definitions of beauty might remain elusive (what makes a person or thing beautiful remains to some extent highly subjective even though there are certainly historically agreed-on conventions, even when it is relegated to the domain of aesthetic inquiry) and thus frustratingly immaterial, beauty operates as a regime of value with material effects. Put crudely, even if many of us might argue over what beauty is, just as many of us would be hard-pressed to deny that there are certain forms of power to be gained from possessing it and even certain forms of power to be lost from lacking it. Feminist inquiries into beauty have deemed beauty either punitive (beauty as undemocratic, elitist, and sexist) or recuperative (beauty as salutary and democratizing). My aim in this book is neither to punish nor to celebrate beauty, since both of these approaches can remain caught within or reproduce the very capitalist heteropatriarchal frameworks that they seek to contest. Rather, my aim is to show that the practices associated with beauty are socializing in the way that they make possible new racialized subject formations, affiliations, and forms of diasporic belonging.¹⁹

My hope is that the concept of fashioning diaspora can help us to think differently both about beauty and fashion as domains of the social and about diasporic articulations of belonging. I thus aim to shed light on two interrelated processes. First, I hope to show how and under what

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conditions beauty produces diasporic embodiments and affiliations that put pressure on and even fracture the coherence of neoliberal practices of belonging. Second, in animating the social domain of beauty in diasporic cultural forms, I hope to help us to think differently about beauty, not simply as dematerialized, overly commodified cultural practices that work seamlessly in the interests of globalizing capital but as social domains that can be radically material and that articulate South Asian American racial formations and cultural identities through embodied practices of citizenship and belonging. These forms of the social challenge existing frameworks for theorizing diasporic belonging, insofar as nation-as-homeland sustains the “imaginary coherence” of diaspora (Hall, “Cultural” 224). Rather, in this book, it is the social domains of Indian beauty that provide the occasion—the material substrate even—for diasporic articulations of belonging, rather than the strength of material or political ties to India.

This is not to say that beauty is simply an imaginary construct. Indeed, it is to say precisely the opposite: that diasporic beauty possesses a materiality that in turn has real effects: producing culturally “inauthentic” modes of diasporic embodiment and generating attachments that are incomplete, partial, and emergent. Such forms of embodiment and affiliation draw attention to diaspora not as constituted by a coherent cultural identity but as a concept that recognizes how migration and settlement produce a diasporic culture marked by “heterogeneity and diversity” (Hall, “Identity” 235). Nor is it to say that India is merely a phantasmatic region in the cultural texts that I examine; indeed, in every chapter of this book, India is a very real place—a diasporic homeland, an NRI tourist destination, a place of out-migration, a site of outsourced global labor, a place that inspires global fashion. Yet beyond India as a material site, it is the “idea of India”²⁰—an India feminized through Indian beauty’s materiality and through material objects and goods of Indian fashion—that captures the diasporic and, in some cases, even the nondiasporic imagination. One of the gambles that this book takes, then, is to showcase what affiliations, intimacies, and embodiments emerge when we prioritize Indian beauty as a material and affective force over identity as a representational politics in analyzing South Asian American cultural forms. As it turns out, beauty is a force that generates partial, incomplete, and emergent national and transnational attachments, and intraracial, interracial, transclass, and feminist and queer generational affiliations and embodiments.