

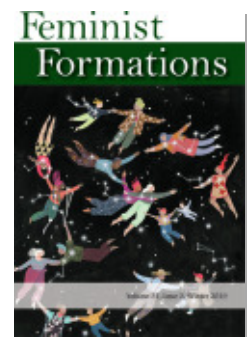


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High-Tech Housewives: Indian IT Workers, Gendered Labor and Transmigration by Amy Bhatt (review)

Soniya Munshi

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the activism she describes while the book itself extends the shared public that anticarceral activists sought to produce by recirculating their work.

All Our Trials is excellent historical scholarship that makes a significant contribution to rethinking feminist history and offers important insights for feminist and abolitionist social movements today. An obvious choice for courses on US women's history, *All Our Trials* is also well suited for any course that grapples with feminist social movements. There are many striking parallels between the prisoner defense campaigns, advocacy for women prisoners, and efforts to create safety without relying on the state that Thuma documents and the work that anticarceral feminist activists are engaging in today, giving the book a broad appeal to a readership that is not just academic. Most importantly, *All Our Trials* is a profoundly optimistic and inspiring book. While Thuma does not shy away from the complexities and difficulties of challenging intersectional structural oppression, she demonstrates the real power of activism and the way that organizations that are often easily dismissed as too radical or utopian can have far-reaching impacts.

Priya Kandaswamy is an associate professor of women, gender, and sexuality studies at Mills College in Oakland, California. Her research focuses on the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class in the history of the US welfare state. Her articles have appeared in journals such as *Sexualities*, *American Quarterly*, and *Radical Teacher*, as well as numerous edited anthologies.

High-Tech Housewives: Indian IT Workers, Gendered Labor and Transmigration by Amy Bhatt. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018, 204 pp., \$90.00 hardcover, \$30.00 paper.

Soniya Munshi

In *High-Tech Housewives: Indian IT Workers, Gendered Labor, and Transmigration*, gender and women's studies scholar Amy Bhatt centers the unpaid and undervalued women's labor that sustains the circulation of Indian transnational migrant (or, transmigrant) information technology workers among different global technology hubs. Through rich ethnographic research that includes formal interviews with almost one hundred respondents, mostly women, in the understudied IT sites of Seattle, Washington, and Bangalore and Hyderabad in India, Bhatt deftly engages the complex experiences of these "embodied subjects of transnationalism" (ix) who are positioned between and across geographic locations, immigration statuses, and company affiliations. Resisting simplified characterizations that valorize or demonize temporary worker programs, Bhatt's nuanced analysis shows that Indian transnational IT workers and their spouses

embrace their liminality. This flexible position informs how they pursue their aspirations and claim the value of their labor while navigating the insecure conditions of the immigration, economic, and sociocultural systems within which they live and move.

Bhatt's research focuses on the gendered dimensions of the H-1B work visa program. Over the past three decades, this program has significantly increased the numbers of migrants working in the information technology sector; in 2017, over 69 percent of the H-1B visa and renewal applications were for technology-based employment. Indian IT professionals—who are primarily young, heterosexual, English-speaking, upper-caste Hindu men—constitute the vast majority of applicants for the visa. Although the H-1B visas are subject to an annual cap, the H-4 visas, which are granted to spouses and dependent children of H-1B visa holders, are not limited. Despite being allowed to migrate, these family members have generally been prevented from formally participating in the labor market. Bhatt focuses on the role that their unpaid social reproductive labor plays in transmigration, specifically through the critical figure of the transnational housewife whose caregiving work enables the cross-border migration of workers.

Bhatt begins her study in the suburbs of Seattle, a technology center developed by Boeing and Microsoft, two of the largest employers in the region and the main draws for Indian IT workers. Through a thoughtful discussion of identity and place-making, Bhatt shows that the transmigrants in her study aspire to be able to circulate among IT worksites. Obtaining citizenship becomes important in the flexibility and mobility that it enables for future opportunities and not necessarily for the sake of permanent settlement away from the homeland. These transmigrants claim their liminality, positioning themselves as ideal immigrants who can blend into local work cultures and leisure activities as well as ideal global workers who will adapt and sacrifice as needed for their employers. Through activities that form local social and professional networks such as volunteering in Indian development NGOs, they position themselves as bridge builders who, by sharing their lessons of neoliberal models of economic change, demonstrate that they are valuable to the Indian nation-state.

In the second and third chapters of her book, Bhatt directly examines how the liminality of transmigration disrupts and reinforces gendered expectations around work, marriage, and family formation, and how women actively navigate these opportunities and constraints. She begins her discussion with examples of women who obtained their own H-1B visas—an overlooked group in discussions of workers in IT industries—and delayed marriage in order to build professional and social lives in the United States. Most women in her study, including the H-1B visa holders, report a frustrating gendered discrepancy: for both women and men, IT education is a mode to improve economic opportunity, including their chances of getting married, because education and professional compatibility are increasingly seen as important matchmaking criteria. Women, however, are expected to give up their career ambitions to follow the patriarchal norms of

heterosexual married life. Thus, many of them become “transnational housewives” with the primary responsibility of care work as well as the reproductive labor needed to create and sustain family units that are both mobile and connected to the United States through birthright citizenship of their children.

The H-4 visa holders in Bhatt’s study are educated women who have been forced out of the labor market because of the conditions of their immigration status. They report struggles with mental and physical health, self-esteem, and defining their worth outside the paid workforce. Yet, through their narratives, Bhatt shows how these transmigrants resist their devaluation as non-economic actors by making meaning of their time in the United States. For example, they participate in community and religious groups, volunteer their time, including in their children’s schools, and solicit “under the table” employment by offering services for other households such as cooking, tailoring, hairstyling, and teaching music, dance, and language. Bhatt’s discussion is a notable contribution as the limited scholarship about H-4 visa holders emphasizes the constraints of their status and related vulnerabilities to domestic violence, risking one-dimensional portrayals of the everyday experiences of these women. Bhatt’s analysis addresses the structural inequality of the visa but also the ways that these visa-holders pursue different aspirations in spite of the limits of the dependent visa.

Bhatt’s ethnographic research extends to Bangalore and Hyderabad, two IT hubs that have become sites of transmigrant communities who return to India, to reveal the continued circuits of transmigration as well as the ongoing reliance upon gendered labor to shoulder the burdens of dislocation. Some women returnees in Bhatt’s study find that their employment of domestic workers allows them to explore pursuits outside the home. However, many returnees face additional pressures, as they are now responsible for managing their households within the context of familial and social gendered expectations and norms. Bhatt brilliantly demonstrates how returnees apply the neoliberal logics of IT corporate workplaces to recast domestic workers from servants or family members to employees. The women in Bhatt’s study use discourses of employer responsibility and employee empowerment to construct their households as sites of trickle-down development. Here, the returnees, and ultimately, the re-migrants to the United States, embody a neoliberal subjectivity through which they make meaning of their liminal positions as neither locals nor migrants by offering neoliberal lessons towards social and economic change. Throughout the text, Bhatt effectively demonstrates that the domestic realm is a critical site for the internalization, circulation, and dissemination of neoliberal logics.

One of the many strengths of *High-Tech Housewives* is that it consistently keeps the voices and narration of transmigrants at its core as it also rigorously analyzes the collective experiences and the structures that shape the conditions within which they circulate. While the homogeneity of representation within the IT industry is reflected in her study, Bhatt aims to include minoritized experiences, such as through a brief discussion of immigration complications

faced by Muslim interviewees navigating the US security state. Bhatt's research also activates curiosity for further exploration about transmigrants located in the margins of the IT sector, such as LGBTQ migrants who may, like others in her study, aim to avoid the pressures of heteropatriarchal norms yet are unable to access the hegemonic place-making and family formation activities of the "IT caste" (55).

This text would be useful in a variety of courses, both in its full form and as stand-alone chapters. Bhatt's lucid writing makes this text accessible for undergraduate students, while its sophisticated theoretical work would be engaging for graduate students, in disciplines including women's and gender studies, Asian American studies, ethnic studies, and sociology or anthropology for topics related to transnational feminisms, gender, migration, neoliberal capitalism, labor/work, globalization, and citizenship. Additionally, as this ethnographic work is located in important but overlooked sites of Indian migration and remigration, it is a welcome addition to South Asian American studies curricula. This text would be useful for a qualitative methods course as a model of a multisited ethnography and, particularly, as an example of a study that engages rich interview data.

Beyond the classroom, this text offers an important contribution to contemporary discourses about migrant workers in the United States, particularly as the Trump administration has aggravated racialized and gendered narratives about the threats that they pose to the US economy and labor force. With its focus on migration of professional workers, Bhatt's research illuminates the layers of insecurity inherent in temporary authorization as well as the privileges of mobility gained through juridical processes such as US citizenship. Bhatt's work points to shared struggles among those with insecure status and the possibilities of solidarities across class and national origin that take into account different desires, interpretations of the meaning of citizenship, and demands of the state.

Soniya Munshi is an associate professor of sociology at the Borough of Manhattan Community College/CUNY, where she also teaches Asian American studies in the Center for Ethnic Studies. Her research on the relationships between the carceral state, public health, gendered violence in migrant communities, and women of color abolitionist feminisms is supported by a Mellon/ACLS Community College Faculty Fellowship. She is also the codirector of the NEH-funded project, "Building Asian American Studies across the Community College Classroom." She can be reached at smunshi@bmcc.cuny.edu.