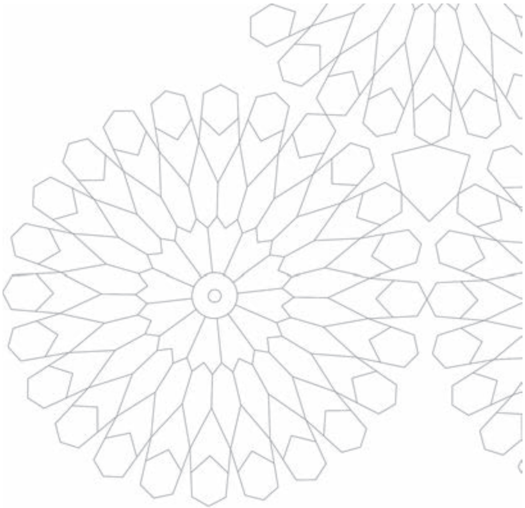
ATTIYA AHMAD

EVERYDAY CONVERSIONS

Islam, Domestic Work, *and* South Asian Migrant Women *in* Kuwait



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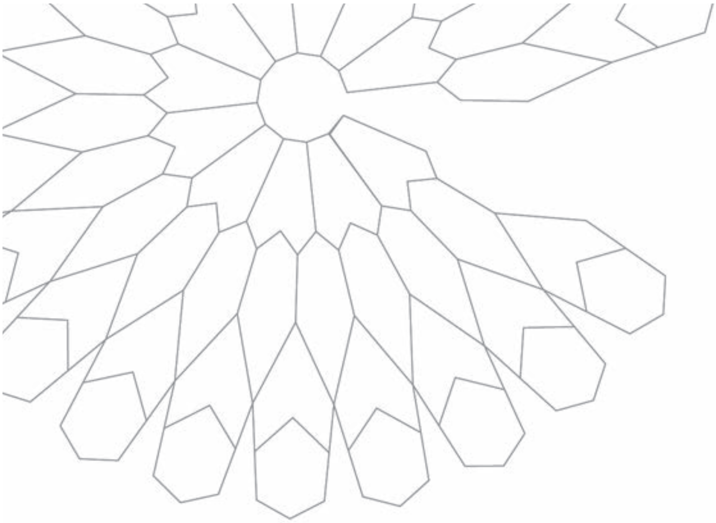

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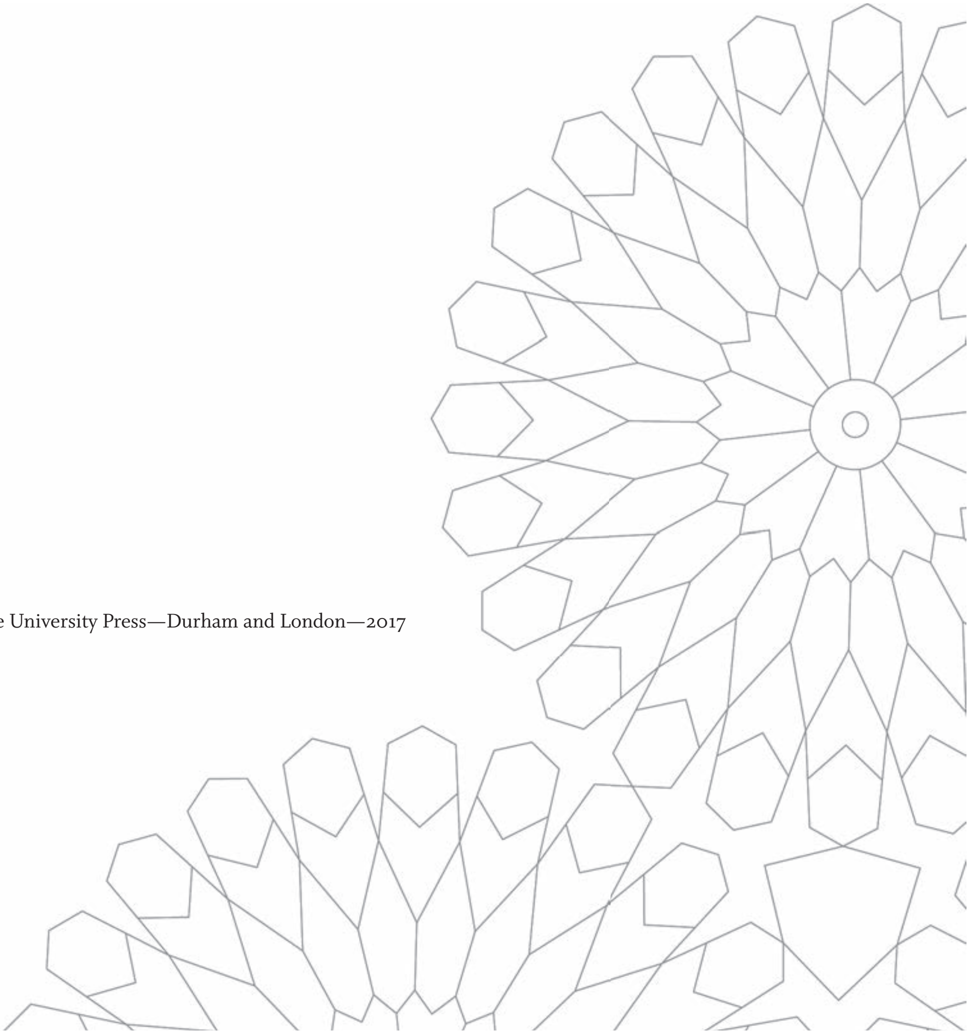

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To Rifat Jahan Ahmad *and* Syed Ishtiaq Ahmad

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Syed Ishtiaq Ahmad landed in Montreal over forty-five years ago in the dead of winter without a coat and a missing ride. Books and trousseau in tow, Rifat Jahan Ahmad joined him a few years later. With quiet determination and integrity the two have endured so much and made so much possible for our family, both in Canada and the always-connected elsewhere. I am grateful to them for *sab kuch*, not least of which are Syed Zulfiqar Ahmad and Salma A. Ahmad, wondrous beings who (mostly) let me share in their adventures, including some recent forays with Khadija Mahmood, Mustafa Thomas, Noor Ahmad, and Soraya Thomas. Ummi and Aboo are the soul of generosity and grace. They have never pretended that hard things are easy, and they have never allowed for complacency of thought or deed—yet they smooth so much in their wake. I have asked and continue to ask so much of them, and they always respond with consideration and unstinting love. This book is dedicated to them both.

The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish. —GAYATRI C. SPIVAK, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

Whatever its other aspects, the everyday has this essential trait: it allows no hold. It escapes. It belongs to insignificance, and the insignificant is without truth, without reality, without secret, but perhaps also the site of all possible signification. The everyday escapes. This makes its strangeness—the familiar showing itself (but already dispersing) in the guise of the astonishing. It is the unperceived, first in the sense that one has always looked past it; nor can it be introduced into a whole or "reviewed," that is to say, enclosed within a panoramic vision; for, by another trait, the everyday is what we never see for a first time, but only see again, having always already seen it by illusion that is, as it happens, constitutive of the everyday. —MAURICE BLANCHOT, *The Infinite Conversation*

INTRODUCTION

EVERYDAY CONVERSIONS

A Moment

An ethnography of South Asian migrant domestic workers' adoption of Islamic precepts and practices in Kuwait, this book begins with a moment of everyday conversion, one leading me to research a reconfigured set of issues I had long been focused on. It was a searing hot July day in 2004. I was seated in the backseat of a taxi on my way to the home of Auntie Anjum, a new contact and potential interlocutor from Pakistan. Jose, a taxi driver from the Philippines and one of my de facto guides was swearing softly under his breath. We were late. The emir's impromptu decision to visit his favorite palace, a sprawling seafront compound on the outskirts of Kuwait city, had left Jose and me idling behind a hastily erected roadblock. Part of an ever-lengthening queue of cars, all we could do was wait. I did my own cursing in the backseat. A couple of weeks into my first trip to Kuwait, I was en route to attending a *dars* (lesson) organized by women participating in Al-Huda, a Pakistani Islamic women's movement. My research on the movement's transnational spread into the Gulf was beginning in earnest—that is, if I ever got to Auntie Anjum's home.

Anxious yet resigned, I looked out my window. A few meters ahead of us in one of the other lanes was a white minibus emblazoned with the logo of one of the largest construction companies in Kuwait. The men inside, wearing identical blue work suits, looked to be South Asian. Sweat-stained, most were slumped in their seats, or sleeping with their heads pressed against the windows, the backs of their seats, a friend's shoulder, or any supportive surface they could find. "They are probably coming back from a construction site," Jose told me. "Look at them, poor devils; look how tired they are! And for what?" Behind the bus was a gleaming SUV. The driver, a stylishly dressed Kuwaiti woman, was using the rearview mirror to adjust her *hijab*. In the backseat a diminutive Indonesian woman was holding a toddler. "Probably going shopping before lunch, and taking her maid," Jose explained, "or maybe on her way to a family member's home. She looks dressed up, but," he added, "I guess they always do." Immediately to our right was a group of young Kuwaiti men who were listening to music and gesticulating animatedly. I could feel their insistent gazes. "Don't look," Jose warned, "they will get the wrong idea. I don't want to have to deal with that. You don't want to have to deal with that." We didn't. The police officers, who, Jose had informed me earlier, were primarily Bedouin, the underclass of the citizenry, had gotten back into their cars. The highway was opening up again.

As we made our way into the labyrinthine streets of Auntie Anjum's neighborhood, I was thinking about what I had just seen: a street scene-cum-microcosm of Kuwait. There was the emir, the sovereign, who generally directed the country from afar, but occasionally, and often unpredictably, punctuated the everyday with his exceptional presence.[1] Then there was the police, an integral part of Kuwait's state apparatus charged with regulating the movements of citizens and noncitizens, whether across roadblocks or borders. And stalled or speedily moving along, citizens and foreign residents, who comprise the majority of the population, were trying to go about their daily lives. As suggested by their dress, activities and vehicles, they shared the road in ways indexing the deeply entrenched asymmetrical political, economic, and gendered relations that comprise Kuwaiti society.

Before traveling to Kuwait, I had read numerous reports juxtaposing the privileges Gulf citizens enjoy with the difficulties the region's labor migrant and foreign resident populations endure. Seeing the politics of the region's migration, labor, and citizenship regimes playing out firsthand through the mundane yet quintessential act of navigating Kuwaiti traffic was striking. Yet at the same time, as I scanned the lettered and numbered street signs looking for the coordinates Auntie Anjum had given me, I was cognizant of how these issues are often examined in isolation from another set of issues that define the Gulf externally. In addition to its petrodollars and vast populations of migrant workers, the Gulf is commonly depicted as a place where puritanical forms of Islam (often glossed as *Wahhabi*) are practiced, traditions of Islam that have become globally pervasive due to the region's oil wealth. Rather than conceiving of these two sets of issues as separate, I had developed an acute sense of their interrelationship through my experiences of living and working in different parts of South Asia and the Middle East, and of growing up in the thick of Canada's diasporic Muslim networks. In these spaces, what was commonly referred to as "Gulf influences" were not only marked by migrants' remittances, conspicuous displays of consumer goods, newly built or enlarged family homes, and their plentiful commentaries about the Gulf.[2] So too were Gulf influences marked by religious changes, including shifts in veiling practices, everyday language practices, gender relations, and religious gatherings.[3] These shifts were not simply unidirectional in nature, marking the ascendancy of "Saudi" or "Wahhabi" forms of Islam, but embedded in longer-term transnational circuits of Islamic reforms movements crosscutting the Gulf, South Asia, and Indian Ocean regions.

Mapped onto broader historical and transnational fields, the interrelation between the Greater Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf Region's (Gulf's) religious movements and its regimes of migration, labor and citizenship, animated my interest in researching Al-Huda's spread into the region—beginning with Auntie Anjum's dars. Finally finding myself in front of her complex, I was relieved to note that other women were also arriving late. Introducing myself hurriedly, I joined them as we made our way up the stairs and into the room in which everyone was assembled. It was large and beautifully appointed: striped silk sofas ringed the walls, the dark wood tables were intricately carved and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and the tiled floors were strewn with plush carpets and even plusher cushions. Once seated and taking in my surroundings, I became increasingly perplexed with what I saw. Was this an Al-Huda dars?

Whether in Islamabad, Dubai or Toronto, the other Al-Huda dars I had previously attended were conducted in Urdu, almost exclusively attended by women of South Asian background, and centered around the recorded lectures of Dr. Farhat Hashmi, the founder of Al-Huda. The scene playing out in front of me was markedly different. In the far corner of the room, seated on a hard-backed chair, a tall spare woman dressed in a dark blue hijab and matching *abaya* (long cloak) was addressing the other women present. Sister Hawa, a woman I later learned was from Egypt, spoke in an English heavily inflected with Arabic, and she was leading the group in Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*). Judging from their attire and appearance, the women listening were of diverse backgrounds. A couple of younger women wore floor-length tunics decorated with embroidery that was distinctively North African. Next to them was a blond-haired, blue-eyed woman who looked to be Lebanese or Syrian. Several other women—who I was to later learn were from Sri Lanka, Canada, Egypt, and the UK—wore black hijabs and *abayat*, or jeans and shirts. Seated on the sofas were numerous South Asian women wearing *shalwar kameez* (Urdu: tunic and loose trousers). And closer to where I sat was a Filipina woman dressed in a lavender and white domestic worker's uniform, and an Indonesian woman wearing a bonnet-like hijab and matching tunic.

Towards the end of the halaqa, an affair at times serene or spirited, Sister Hawa called for the other women's attention. "Sisters," she began,

> today is a day of great *baraka* [blessings]. I know many of you have to get back to your families or pick up your children before the lunch hour, so my words will be short, but *inshallah* [God willing], we can talk of this more, and celebrate this great news next time.
>
> As you know Sister Rosa, may Allah be pleased with her, has been attending our *halaqa* for, *alhumdullilah* [praise be to God], many months now. A few weeks ago she approached me about taking *shahada* [Islamic testament of faith] . . . [*quiet murmurings in the room*] . . . I told her to wait, think about it some more, and talk to her family.
>
> And *mashallah* [God willed it], she is persistent: she asked me about this again two weeks ago. I told her again to wait, think about it, and talk to her mother and father in the Philippines.
>
> And *mashallah* sisters, she is persistent: Last week, she came to me again after class and told me she wants to take *shahada*, and rather than going to the women's center [of Kuwait's largest *da'wa* movement] she wants to take it here with you. And so sisters . . .

She gestured to Rosa, the Filipina woman in the domestic worker's uniform. Rosa approached Sister Hawa and raised her right hand and index finger. Without any further preamble, she recited the Islamic testament of faith, the speech act through which she became Muslim: "La Illah a illullah Mohammedan rasul-ullah."[4]

When most of the other women had left, I introduced myself to Auntie Anjum, a fixture of Kuwait's diasporic South Asian Muslim community. Still a little confused, and obstinately clinging to my initial research lead, I asked Auntie Anjum whether she and Sister Hawa held these halaqa regularly, and whether they were influenced by the lectures of Dr. Hashmi, the leader of Al-Huda. Auntie Anjum wrinkled her brow slightly and paused. Then, realization dawning, she exclaimed, "Oh-ho! Sorry, sorry Attiya-*beti* [Urdu: daughter]. Naureen told me you wanted to come when we listen to Dr. Farhat's lessons. No, no—today is the day of Sister Hawa's *halaqa*." More than any other moment, my going to Auntie Anjum's home, ostensibly on the wrong day of the week, and attending Sister Hawa's *halaqa* rather than Dr. Hashmi's recorded *dars*, defined the course of my subsequent research. It was the first of what was to become many instances in which I witnessed or learned of migrant domestic workers' conversion to Islam.

Over the next several weeks as I continued with my research on Al-Huda, Rosa's story traveled with me. While meeting with long-standing members of Kuwait's South Asian Muslim community, interviewing members of Al-Huda, attending *durus* (lessons), mapping out the group's networks, and developing relations with Kuwaiti families and academics, the issue of domestic workers' Islamic conversions insistently poked its way into our conversation. Many had heard of Rosa's situation, and knowing that I was present when she had recited the shahada, they asked me a series of questions I was in no real position to answer, yet keen to establish connections and credibility as a scholar, that I gamely discussed with them:

- How did she learn about Islam?
- Was she pressured, or did she recite the shahada sincerely?
- Did her salary increase? Did the women who were present give her money or gifts, and if not then, at that moment, perhaps later?
- Can she go back to her family, or will she now stay in Kuwait?
- Will she remain a practicing Muslim when she returns home?

Initially I found these conversations to be an interesting sidenote, if sometimes irritatingly long sidetrack, to my research on Al-Huda. As I was in the thick of learning, migrant domestic workers' conversion to Islam is a widespread phenomenon in the Greater Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf region. Over the past twenty years, tens of thousands of domestic workers—migrant women of diverse ethnonational, linguistic, educational and religious backgrounds—have converted to Islam. Among the region's vast population of noncitizens, groups often referred to as migrant workers, expatriates, and foreign residents, domestic workers are by far the largest group of converts. These women's experiences in the Gulf also contrast with those of migrant domestic workers in other parts of the world, where religious conversions are little reported in what is now a robust body of policy reports and scholarly literature focusing on the feminization of transnational labor migration.

In Kuwait, most people directly knew of or had heard of domestic workers' Islamic conversions—and everyone had an opinion about the matter. Scrawling down my interlocutors' comments and my own scattered impressions—and, later seeing these suffused throughout my notebooks—my fascination grew. Slowly but surely, a new research field was starting to form. Witnessing Rosa's recitation of the shahada was leading to the gradual conversion of my own research. The issues animating my interest in Al-Huda—how transnational processes are reworking gendered geographies of religious piety and belongings crosscutting the Middle East, South Asia and Indian Ocean region—were taking on a new and unexpected configuration, one encapsulated by a question whose constant refrain would weave its way through my subsequent research: Why are South Asian domestic workers converting to Islam in the Gulf?

In this book I argue that understanding the circumstances through which South Asian migrant domestic workers adopt Islamic precepts and practices in Kuwait requires us to bring into focus a realm—the everyday—that is often relegated to the background.[5] The particularity of domestic workers' experiences in the Gulf constitutes a form of everyday conversion, a form of transnational relations marked by emergent subjectivities, affinities, and belongings that complicate conventional understandings of both the feminization of transnational migration and religious conversion. Domestic workers' everyday conversions develop through their gendered experiences of transnational migration and their relations and work centered on household spaces, ones marking the confluence of Islamic ethical formation, the reworking of domestic workers' subjectivities through their affective laboring, and a South Asian gendered discourse of women's malleability (being *naram*). They experience religious conversion not as an eventful moment, but as an ongoing process rooted in the everyday where differences between their preexisting and newfound religious practice, and the outcomes of the conversion process, are not evident at the outset. Their adoption of Islam is not characterized by the rejection or renunciation of their preexisting lives, but as a gradual reworking thereof. Domestic workers' experiences foreground a particular gendered space of the everyday—household relations and activities—as not only productive and reproductive of their existing familial networks and ethnonational belongings, but as also engendering newfound possibilities and transformations marked by their Islamic conversion. These women's everyday conversions constitute a form of transnational subjectivity and belonging that does not supplant but develops alongside and reconfigures their existing familial and ethnonational belongings. Their experiences underscore how transnational processes are marked not simply by the diffusion or extension across borders of kinship networks, ethnonational forms, and religious movements, but how transnationalism constitutes a dynamic field in which gendered, religious, occupational-class, and ethnonational differences are invoked and reworked, configured and reconfigured together, a field generative of everyday conversions. Here the everyday functions not just as a space of routine and continuity, but of contingency, emergent possibility, and ongoing conversion.

The Question of Conversion

Religious conversions beget questions, and religious converts are beset by questions. Why all this questioning? To begin addressing this issue—what I will call the question of conversion, and how to develop an approach attuned to everyday conversions, let me begin by making a general observation: questions are rarely simple matters, not just in terms of the answers they insist upon, but for what they simultaneously reveal and conceal in their formulation. We feel the prick of a question when something surprises or puzzles us, often when it disturbs our taken-for-granted understandings and hegemonic expectations. We pose questions for phenomena that need an explanation, yet under the pretext of wanting to learn more—a projection outward of our not knowing—we rarely examine the underlying reasons why these phenomena need to be accounted for. This is particularly the case with religious conversions. As Talal Asad incisively notes, "religious conversion appears to need explaining in a way that secular conversion into modern ways of being does not."[6] Religious conversions constitute one form of what Hussein Ali Agrama refers to as an "an emergent religiosity . . . seen within social theory as a problem to be explained."[7] Countering and complicating discourses of modernity that posit the decline of religion,[8] as well as secularist discourses that seek to delimit the public and political role of religion,[9] religious conversions underscore the continued salience and spread of religious practice in our world, prompting the need for explanations.[10]

The question of conversion is perhaps most acute with respect to Islam, where hegemonic discourses of modernity and secularism bleed into and are buttressed by Orientalist and Islamophobic ones, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the recent rise of ISIS.[11] These discourses promulgate a generalized understanding of Islam as intrinsically nonmodern, and pious Muslims as recalcitrant toward and inimical to the trapping of modernity, in particular liberal democracy, individual freedom, and the rights of women.[12] Hegemonic expectations of modernity and secularism produce an incitement to questions about religious conversion, in particular Islamic ones, placing the burden of explanation on their occurrence, not on why they are deemed to need an explanation, or the terms through which they are to be explained.[13] In so doing, the question of conversion insistently (and insidiously) ensures the ongoing reproduction of discourses of modernity, secularism, and Islam.

My research on migrant domestic workers' everyday conversions does not elude this incitement to discourse about religious conversion. Ultimately, I have found it impossible to do so, and trying to do so misses an important point. Discourses of modernity and secularism, and the questions of conversion they give rise to, are tacit and globally pervasive. They shape my interlocutors' experiences and utterances in myriad ways that are difficult to disentangle from other dimensions of their lives. As a scholar who is situated within an academy that has developed through and continues to be subject to these discourses, they also shape my renderings of my interlocutors' experiences. Although subject to them, domestic workers' everyday conversions and my research are not determined or reducible to these hegemonic discourses. Both my research and the circumstances by which domestic workers convert to Islam are configured in complex and often contradictory ways in relation to these discourses as well as to other histories, political-economic processes, and interregional relations. Acknowledging what animates the question of conversion rather than taking it for granted, and scrutinizing the terms through which these conversions are to be accounted for rather than reinscribing them, makes it possible to begin examining these configurations.

Discourses of modernity and secularism do not just incite scholarly explanations of contemporary expressions of Islamic piety, they also inform them. To provide an analysis of Islamic practice without recourse to concepts that reproduce discourses of modernity and secularism, one trajectory of ethnographic work has tended to identify their interlocutors and field sites in juxtaposition to these discourses. These works, in particular Saba Mahmood's brilliant study of Cairene women who participate in a mosque-based piety movement,[14] focus on interlocutors who experience their pieties in radically different and incommensurable terms, ones stemming from traditions of Islamic practice. By excavating these terms and painstakingly differentiating them from hegemonic discourses of liberalism, secularism and modernity, these ethnographic accounts help us to better understand expressions of Islamic piety while simultaneously underscoring the misapprehensions and limitations of studies that fail to do so.

Examining phenomena while simultaneously problematizing the concepts through which they are analyzed constitutes a predominant tradition of anthropological work. Rooted in the discipline's formation, this approach is predicated on the positing of binary difference. Anthropology emerged in the nineteenth century tasked with making comprehensible peoples and places that were considered fundamentally different from the Modern West.[15] Although the categories of analysis have changed—the Modern West replaced by hegemonic discourses of modernity and secularism (among others) that are associated with but not tethered to the Modern West, and non-Western others replaced by other discursive traditions such as the Islamic discursive tradition—the underlying binary framework of analysis persists. This approach is characterized by a particular dynamic: the constant tacking back and forth between hegemonic discourses and other discursive traditions; of documenting and making legible other possibilities, and often marginalized ways of being in the world while simultaneously demonstrating that the truths deemed to be self-evident by hegemonic discourses are in fact sociohistorically specific sets of understandings and practices, and not neutral or universal as they are often assumed to be. Contemporary anthropological studies of Islamic pieties link this tradition of anthropological analysis to a broader postcolonial critique. These works not only relativize and provincialize secular modern understandings of subjectivity, agency, and embodied practice. Their critiques also point to how these discourses are universalizing in nature: that their projected universal nature masks the very processes through which these concepts and understandings spread and become the self-evident basis by which Islamic pieties are apprehended and assessed.

This ethnography of domestic workers' everyday conversions develops through yet differs in significant respects from this trajectory of anthropological work. While I seek to examine domestic workers' Islamic conversions in ways that are faithful to their experiences and that are attentive to the hegemonic and universalizing nature of modern secular and liberal understandings, I do so using an alternative framework of analysis. Rather than identifying and juxtaposing differences between discursive traditions, and emphasizing their incommensurabilities, examining the circumstances of domestic workers' everyday conversions to Islam pushes us to consider the complex ways in which discursive traditions are interrelated and historically situated. My analysis draws from transnational scholarship that points to how discursive traditions—both hegemonic and forms designated and differentiated as "other"—have developed through processes of colonial modernity and are the products of entangled rather than distinctive historical trajectories. Anthropological approaches based on the positing of binary differences account for how power relations are produced and perpetuated when differences are obfuscated, yet they elide the processes and power relations through which differences are themselves produced, maintained, and reinscribed.[16] These approaches often conceive of interrelations in terms of hegemony or hybridity; where a particular discursive tradition becomes dominant and naturalized, or two discursive traditions blend together. By contrast, other forms of their interrelation remain little examined, including mutual constitution and self-constituting othering, as well as the sociohistorical circumstances through which discursive traditions become interrelated and are configured together.

Religious conversions constitute one site of interrelation between discursive traditions. Subjects' experiences of conversion involve transformations in their understandings, practices, relationships, sense of self, and sociopolitical belongings that are brought about through their simultaneous engagement, negotiation, and shifting between discursive traditions. As I discuss through an examination of migrant domestic workers' experiences of everyday conversions, processes of religious conversions do not simply entail the rejection or supplanting of one religious discursive tradition in favor of another; rather, they are sites through which similarities and differences between religious discursive traditions are reworked and reconfigured.

Competing Explanations

Debates about why domestic workers are converting to Islam are widespread and vociferous in Kuwait. As a newcomer to the country, I was often struck by the affect animating these discussions. From the cadence and tenor of people's comments, to the emphatic hand gestures and sharpened gazes that accompanied them, it was clear that Rosa and other domestic workers' conversions mattered, yet the reasons why they mattered were not always so clear. While many in Kuwait knew of domestic workers who had converted to Islam, as far as I could discern, these conversions did not affect them in any overt or significant way. In learning more about Kuwait—in particular the country's complex social, political and religious terrain, one shaped by its interregional past and transnational present—I gradually began to understand why. Domestic workers' conversions channeled discussions about some of the region's most contentious issues, providing migrant workers, foreign residents, and citizens alike with an oblique way of addressing them. These groups analyzed domestic workers' conversions in ways inflected by their own understandings, experiences, and often-pointed opinions about the region, in particular migration policies, citizenship rights, gender relations, labor politics, and the role of religion in everyday life and governance.

A proxy for different groups' political preoccupations, discussions about domestic workers' conversions center on two competing explanations for why these women are converting to Islam. In contrast to domestic workers' experiences of everyday conversion—a gradual process rooted in their everyday household activities and relations, a process characterized by a complex configuration of continuity and change—these competing explanations view domestic workers in terms of a linear process of transformation brought about through a subset of factors. These explanations can be seen as similar to materialist versus ideational approaches to the study of religion and Islam that emphasize either political-economic or religiodiscursive factors to account for domestic workers' conversion to Islam.[17] Articulated in relation to the region's politics of belonging and exclusion or its politics of Islamic reform, both explanations are predicated on radically different and incommensurable understandings of subjectivity, agency, religion, and households. These explanations index two distinct visions of political practice: those of liberal-secularists and of Islamic reformers. For groups espousing liberal-secular discourses, domestic workers convert to Islam because of the deeply hierarchical and dependent relationships that exist between themselves and their employers, relationships that index the region's politics of belonging and exclusion. Muslim reformers attributed domestic workers' "becoming Muslim" to the expanding influence of Islamic movements in shaping everyday life, a cornerstone of the region's politics of Islamic reform.

LIBERAL-SECULAR EXPLANATIONS

Liberal-secular explanations circulated among Kuwait's diverse noncitizen populations, members of the country's self-styled liberal movement, local and international human rights organizations, labor agencies, and foreign embassies.[18] These groups analyzed domestic workers' conversions in terms of the region's politics of belonging and exclusion, a framework that underscores the hierarchical relations that exist between domestic workers and their employers. A significant percentage of the Gulf consists of populations who are not citizens and who are unlikely to ever become naturalized citizens. In several states, including Kuwait, noncitizens comprise the majority of the country. State discourses depict these populations as "migrant workers" or "foreign workers": a temporary presence whose status is contingent upon, and whose experiences in the region are limited to, their capacity as workers. These discourses are echoed by international news media accounts and human rights reports that largely focus on labor migrants, in particular male construction workers and female domestic workers' experiences of abuse and exploitation. These hegemonic and popular discourses gloss over a more complicated sociopolitical landscape, one requiring us to place the region's politics of exclusion and belonging in a broader historical and geographical context.

The Gulf countries are situated in the Greater Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf, a region at the crossroads of the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and part of the Indian Ocean. Long before the discovery of oil, the Gulf was enmeshed in interregional relations with the peoples and places of these regions through pearl diving and merchant trade networks, as well as colonial and imperial systems. Gulf citizens comprise a dynamic mix of peoples from throughout the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, and East Africa.[19] Sailors, traders, functionaries, and others contracted marriages among families and communities to bolster and perpetuate the relations that constituted this ecumenical interregional realm. With the advent of the region's petrodollar-driven economies and concomitant state formation, the extent and density of these kinship relations diminished and became publicly downplayed through processes of Arabization, and citizenship in the region became more exclusionary.[20] Gulf citizens began conceiving of national belonging in increasingly racialized terms.[21] For instance, being a Khaliji (term that means "of the Gulf") became synonymous with being Arab.[22] This process was an integral means through which many Gulf ruling families, descendants of migrants from the Najd region of present-day Saudi Arabia, entwined their family mythos with the city-states and nations they had come to rule.[23]

Similar to other Gulf states, in Kuwait citizenship became restricted to those who could prove their residency prior to 1941, those who could trace patrilineal descent from this group, and to women who married into this group.[24] Effectively excluded from these requirements are the vast majority of peoples who have migrated to the region from the early 1950s onward, a population that has played a crucial role in the country's post-oil development. Kuwait's first wave of migrants was predominately Arab. Most came from Egypt, or were Palestinian refugees who had been displaced from their homes after the *Nakba* and creation of Israel. Better educated and trained than the majority of Kuwait's population at the time, they became the teachers, doctors, nurses, and administrators of government-sponsored social institutions, and they were integral to the development of the country's rapidly growing state institutions and oil industry. In the mid-1970s the demographic composition of Kuwait began shifting with increasing numbers of migrants from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Africa moving to the region. Within the span of two decades, Kuwait went from being predominantly Muslim and Arab to becoming religiously and ethnonationally diverse.

Noncitizens have been, and continue to be, disciplined into becoming "migrant workers" and "foreign workers." This disciplining is achieved through a vast assemblage of laws, policies, and institutions.[25] The *kafala* system, the sponsorship system of most states in the Greater Arabian Peninsula—one similar to systems of migrant sponsorship in other parts of the world, most notably Southeast and East Asia—anchors this labor assemblage. In order to work and reside in the Gulf, foreign residents require a residency permit, which they can only obtain by entering into a kafala arrangement with someone who has the right to act as their *kafeel*, or sponsor and guarantor. Gulf states conferred this right upon citizens in good civic and legal standing, and to a far more limited extent, well-heeled foreign residents. A citizen-devolved system of governance, the kafala system has become the primary means of managing and policing the Gulf's burgeoning population of noncitizens.[26] Focused as they are on maintaining the political and economic status quo, and on redistributing their countries' oil wealth to their citizens in the form of services and subsidies, the governments of the Gulf states treat foreign residents as though, with the exception of policing their cross-border movements, they fall outside the ambit of their activities—a further means through which noncitizens' exclusions are enacted.[27]

Developing out of the Gulf states' concerted strategies of simultaneously managing and excluding large swathes of its population, the kafala system constitutes a set of relationships and agreements that fundamentally shape noncitizens' experiences in the Gulf. No matter how long they reside in the Gulf, or whether they are born in the Gulf, or are part of multigenerational families who consider the Gulf home[28]—and regardless of the role they play in these countries' development and prosperity[29]—noncitizens are only allowed to reside in the Gulf on a temporary basis. Their presence remains contingent upon, and policed by citizens or by comprador and well-heeled noncitizens.[30] Noncitizens are allowed to stay in the Gulf for periods of time delimited by the labor contracts they enter into with individual citizens and institutions: their kafeel. Emerging in tandem and parallel to the Gulf countries' state institutions, the kafala system plays an integral role in producing hierarchized differences between citizens and noncitizens and in ensuring the impermanence of the region's noncitizens.[31] This system, coupled with the perception that Kuwait's police and judiciary are favorably disposed toward the country's citizenry, suffuses foreign residents and migrants' everyday experiences with an acute sense of uncertainty and vulnerability with respect to their status.

In relation to that of other noncitizens, the position of domestic workers is precarious in the Gulf. Unlike labor migrants who typically live in dormitories or shared accommodations with fellow migrants, and foreign residents who establish their own households, domestic workers both work and reside within their employers' households, where they are subject to intense forms of surveillance and policing that permeate the most mundane details of their lives. Tasked with cooking, cleaning, caring for children and the elderly, and other work associated with the social reproduction of Kuwait's citizenry, domestic workers are intimately imbricated in Kuwaitis' everyday lives yet they are excluded from kinship and citizenship ties that confer rights. Like domestic workers in most other parts of the world, at the time I was conducting research they did not fall under the purview of the country's labor laws.[32] Few have established networks of family and friends when they first migrate to the country. These factors, coupled with the fact that domestic workers obtain their work and residency visas from their employers, creates a situation of domestic workers' acute dependence upon their employers.

Many groups in Kuwait attributed domestic workers' Islamic conversions to these women's precarious position in the Gulf, and the hierarchical relations that exist between them and their employers.[33] These groups frequently questioned the sincerity of domestic workers' conversions given their marginal status in Kuwait. They maintained domestic workers converted in order to wrest better remuneration and treatment from their employers, or because of the pressure, implicit or explicit, brought to bear upon them by the families with whom they work. The issue of sincerity is important to these groups' determination of whether or not domestic workers' conversions constitute a political issue. Predicated on secular-liberal understandings of governance, in which religious belief and practice is subject to individual choice, and is relegated to the private sphere, these groups regarded religious conversion as an intrinsically private matter, one that becomes a political issue only insofar as it is brought about through pressure or coercion. In such cases, they looked to state or statelike institutions, as neutral moral arbiters, to adjudicate and uphold the rights of domestic workers to their religious beliefs and practices. These groups recognized, however, how difficult this is in Kuwait given the region's politics of exclusion and belonging in which state intervention would necessitate the expansion of state authority and the fraught reconfiguration of governance between citizens and state institutions.

MUSLIM REFORMIST EXPLANATIONS

The second set of explanations for why domestic workers convert to Islam is one espoused by members of Kuwait's myriad Islamic revival and reform movements. They attributed domestic workers' "reversion to Islam" or "becoming Muslim" to the region's Islamic movements, in particular these groups' widespread attempts to promote everyday religious piety and social reform.[34] These groups' understandings of Kuwait, as a space requiring their constant effort at religious reform, contrasts markedly with popular news media reports that depict the region as awash in fundamentalist or Wahhabi forms of Islam that have persisted and spread due to the region's vast oil wealth. These popular accounts gloss over a more dynamic and contested religious landscape, one that can only be understood in relation to historical and transnational processes. Under Ottoman rule from the late seventeenth century through until the early twentieth century, Kuwait was subject to the empire's Majellat al-Ahkam al-Adliya, a codification of Islamic civil law according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence; however, local Sunni rulers adhered to the Maliki school, Shi'a Muslims followed the Jafari school, and Kuwait's minority Christian and Jewish populations had relative juridical autonomy over their communities' internal affairs.

In the late nineteenth century, other groups sought to introduce new juridical and religious orders into the area. The British, who began administering Kuwait as a protectorate in 1899, introduced their own judicial system, one that was primarily used to adjudicate their own officials and subjects. Another group, the Ikhwan, under the leadership of Ibn Saud from the Najd region of the Arabian Peninsula, also sought to gain control over Kuwait. These fighters were followers of the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a school of thought popularly referred to as Wahhabism, which would become the dominant school of Islam in the state of Saudi Arabia.[35] The intellectual tradition of this revivalist Islamic movement was founded in the mid-eighteenth century.[36] Its fundamental precepts are found in the writings of Abd al-Wahhab, in particular his books *The Oneness of God* and *The Removal of Doubts*. Abd al-Wahhab was greatly influenced by the work of medieval jurist Ahmad al-Din Ibn Taymiyya, who argued that religious judgments should derive from the Qur'an, the sunna, or prophetic tradition, and the *ijma'*, or consensus of the first generations of Muslims. Abd al-Wahhab favored direct interpretation of sacred texts over *taqlid*, or following the canonical schools of Islamic jurisprudence.[37] Followers of Wahhabism sought to purify Islamic precepts and practice from what they deemed to be innovations, and return to orthodox Islamic forms as practiced by the first generation of Muslims. In particular they sought to reestablish the primacy of *tawhid*, the oneness of God, and end practices they considered polytheistic in nature, including the veneration of saints and the excessive veneration of the Prophet, which they associated with Sufi and Shi'a forms of Islamic practice.

The Ikhwan were ultimately defeated during the Battle of Jahra in 1920, a turning point in Kuwaiti history marking the country as distinctive and separate from what would become the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In 1961, the British protectorate period ended, and Kuwait's ruler Sheikh Abdullah al-Salim

Al-Sabah began a widespread process of legal and judicial reform. He enlisted the services of Abd al-Razzaq al-Sanhuri, a renowned Arab jurist, who developed a secular legal system based on Egyptian and French civil law.[38] This system of law applied to all matters except with respect to family law, which followed systems of Islamic jurisprudence.[39] This period is marked by the rising influence of liberalism, secularism, and leftist groups, which developed not only through North American and European influence, but also through Kuwait's deepening transnational connections with Egypt, the Mashreq, Iran, and the Indian subcontinent, all of which had developed distinctive trajectories of secular, leftist, and liberal practice. The Communist Party, the Bath Party, and Nasserist groups, as well as pan-Arab movements, spread to the Gulf through Arab and South Asian foreign residents and migrants, and Kuwaiti students who were increasingly being sent abroad for training and education.[40] The influence of these movements was widespread in society, marked by the loosening of gendered segregation, changes in clothing styles (e.g., men wearing suits, women wearing styles inspired by Lebanese and Egyptian fashions), and the spread of discos, of clubs, and of the consumption of alcohol.[41]

Islamic movements also began developing in the mid-twentieth century, and they became increasingly well organized and influential from the 1970s onward. Scholars attribute their rise to several interlocking factors, including the migration and exile of Islamic reformers and leaders from Egypt, Syria and Iraq; transnational networks established by Kuwaiti students and entrepreneurs throughout the region; the Kuwaiti leadership's support of Islamic groups as a bulwark against existing political opponents; and the population's growing disenchantment with pan-Arabism, Nasserism, and leftist movements.[42] Three Islamic movements became particularly prominent. The first, the Islamic Guidance Society, later renamed the Social Reform Society, was established in 1952.[43] This movement developed as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan Muslimin), a transnational organization founded in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna. Influenced by the Islamic reformist teachings of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, members of the Muslim Brotherhood believed that the end of Muslim societies' colonial subjugation and a broader sociopolitical awakening (*sahwa*) would only occur through these societies' return to the teachings found in the Qur'an and sunna. Unlike Wahhabis, members of the Brotherhood do not believe the Islamic discursive tradition is antithetical to processes of modernization and traditions of modern Western scientific thought, philosophy, and education. Members of Kuwait's Shi'a community, who comprise one-third of Kuwaiti citizens, established the second Islamic movement: the Cultural and Social Society.[44] This movement developed in relation to Hezb al-Daʿwa al-Islamiyya, a group founded in Iraq in 1958. To counter processes of secularization in the region, al-Daʿwa sought to develop new modes of religious authority and forms of organizing, one that drew from yet were distinct from traditional forms of Shiʿa clerical authority: the *marjaʿiyya*.[45] The movement developed a party system, and programs of social reform and political activism inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, in particular the writings of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb.[46] The third Islamic movement, the Ancestral or Heritage Society, is associated with the *salafiyyun* (commonly referred to as salafi), a movement that is often conflated with Wahhabism.[47] The two share marked similarities; however, whereas many Wahhabis are followers of the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence, salafiyyun reject *taqlid*, the following of any *madhhab* completely, preferring to interface directly with the Qur'an and sunna.[48] Salafi refers to a distinctive theological group that goes back to the Ahl al-Hadith of the Abbasid period, who concentrated on the study of the hadith, and the example set by the *al salaf al-salih*, the first three generations of Muslims who are regarded as exemplary in their practice of Islam, in order to purge Islamic practice from non-Muslim innovations.[49] Because the movement does not subscribe to or follow traditions of Islamic jurisprudence and scholarship, it is relatively easy to become an authority figure among the salafi. They are relatively open and democratic in their interpretive practices.[50] As a result, the movement is fluid and widespread, with different groups, often with distinctive and contradictory features, developing in different regions of the world.[51]

Kuwait's Islamic movements are doctrinally diverse, and they have different political objectives and projects. Although varied, they share a common underlying goal: promoting Islamic piety and social reform. Cumulatively, their influence has permeated every facet of Kuwaiti life. Members of these movements have been elected to the Kuwaiti Parliament, and have played a significant role in drafting legislation and legal codes.[52] They have become influential in different government ministries, most notably the Ministry of Education and Islamic Affairs and Endowment.[53] In the finance sector, they have developed banks that eschew *riba*, the charging of interest, as well as charitable institutions that collect *zakat* and *sadaqa*. Members have also become influential in Kuwait's education sector, social organizations, including teachers' associations, labor unions, food co-ops, and voluntary associations.[54]

Within this context, many in Kuwait attributed domestic workers' Islamic conversions to these movements' overall success in promoting Islamic reform. Members of these movements viewed domestic workers' "reversion to Islam" or "becoming Muslim" as indexing their movements' success on two fronts crucial to the development of a rightly guided *umma* (community of believers): their success in reaching out to Kuwait's diverse non-Muslim population and in reforming Kuwaiti families and households, two sites Islamic reformers consider to be of paramount importance to the production and reproduction of Muslim subjects.[55] Domestic workers' "reversions" are seen as both resulting from and further encouraging Islamic practice within the household.

Alternative Explanation: Everyday Conversions

The politics of the region's belonging and exclusion, and its politics of Islamic reform, informed much of my thinking when I first began research in Kuwait. As the initial contacts I established with South Asian domestic workers through friends, neighbors, and colleagues snowballed into a network of two dozen domestic interlocutors, and as polite small talk deepened into sustained conversations and visits, I started to develop a textured sense of my interlocutors' everyday lives.[56] Yet, I was impatient about what I was learning—what I often dismissed as tidbits of household gossip and details about their everyday routines. To me this was merely background information. I suspected my interlocutors were prevaricating about the circumstances surrounding their Islamic conversions. With time, as I developed more trusting relationships with them, I hoped they would begin opening up to me in earnest and that our discussions would be more frank and forthright.

I attributed what I took to be South Asian domestic workers' silence about the reasons for their conversions to the different factors that each explanatory frame emphasized. Far from being conspicuous, domestic workers' silence was readily assimilable to the logics of these explanatory frames. Both liberal-secularist and Islamic reformers understood domestic workers' silence as further evidence of the veracity of their respective explanations. For groups who analyzed their conversions in terms of the region's politics of belonging and exclusion, it was clear why domestic workers would not want to discuss their conversions: such discussions would raise uncomfortable questions about the sincerity and motivations for their conversions. Domestic workers' conversions and their silence were both read as symptomatic of the hierarchical relations that existed between themselves and their employers. In this view, they converted because of their precarious positioning, which also accounted for why they would be loath to discuss their conversions. The reason for domestic workers' silence was also obvious to Islamic reformers. These women's becoming Muslim was understood to be an act with its own justification. They had come to understand the truth of Islam, to recognize and return to their *fitra*, a God-given ability to distinguish right from wrong that marked them as Muslim, for which explanations were superfluous.

When I began my research I was looking for materials—responses, comments, stories and observations—that would confirm or counter these two explanatory frames, yet what I was learning from South Asian domestic workers seemed to evade them altogether. It took me some time to realize that in the repetitive folds of their utterances about everyday work, experiences of migration, and transnational networks of family and friends, domestic workers were not being silent or evasive about their Islamic conversions. Rather, they discussed and experienced their religious conversions in a register that was more muted and subtle, one that is easy to overlook, particularly amidst the din of public debates undergirded by liberal-secularist and Islamic reformist explanations. Both these explanatory frames emphasize a particular set of factors to account for domestic workers' Islamic conversions, namely, their precarious positioning and hierarchical relations with their sponsor employers in Kuwait, or the influence of Islamic reform movements in Kuwait. The alternative explanation domestic workers were pointing to pushes us to consider how these factors are embedded in their everyday activities and relations. Migrant domestic workers' Islamic conversions do not develop because of, in spite of, nor do they mitigate the hierarchical relations that exist between themselves and their employers. Their Islamic conversions also do not develop through the direct outreach of Kuwait's Islamic daʿwa movement. Though related to these factors, domestic workers' conversions are not reducible to them. These women's precarious positions and hierarchical relations with their employers, and the activities of Islamic daʿwa movements in Kuwait tell part of the story of their everyday conversions, but not in the ways envisioned by liberal-secularists or Islamic reformers. Domestic workers' conversion experiences point to how these factors come into confluence and are configured by their everyday gendered experiences centered on household spaces and routed through longer histories of interregional connections between the Gulf and South Asia. More succinctly put, domestic workers' experiences foreground a realm—the everyday—as crucial to their Islamic conversions. Their conversions are inextricable from their everyday experiences in ways that necessitate a more expansive understanding of both "conversion" and the "everyday." Their conversions are not marked by an eventful moment, or by an abrupt, radical transformation. Rather, their conversions develop through ongoing processes of transformation, a gradual reworking of their lives embedded in the everyday where the outcomes are not clear at the outset. Domestic workers' experiences push us to consider how the everyday is not just a space of habit, routine and continuity—a space through which discursive and disciplinary regimes are produced and reproduced—but how the everyday also constitutes a space of contingency, emergent possibility, and ongoing conversion.[57]

Domestic workers' Islamic conversions were inextricable from their everyday activities and relations, ones centered on their households—both those in Kuwait and more remotely mediated through letters, phone conversations and occasional visits, the households in the places they had migrated from. Although radically different from one another—one focusing on political-economic factors, the other religious processes, one positing a self-interested, cost-benefit maximizing subject, the other a subject shaped through pious practice—both liberal secularist and Islamic reformist explanations of domestic workers' conversion or "reversion" to Islam emphasize the importance of the household. For groups promoting secular-liberal forms of governance domestic workers' conversions underscore an important yet fraught gendered limit point to state authority and intervention. Among members of Kuwait's Islamic movements, households are considered to be sites of paramount importance to the production and reproduction of pious Muslim subjects. Domestic workers' utterances and my own observations of their experiences in Kuwait highlight the importance of their everyday relations within Kuwaiti households to their Islamic conversions, but in ways that resist reduction to self-interest, pressure or simple assimilation, and that are not accounted for by general public discourse. Households constituted dense and vital spaces of everyday work, intimacy, economic exchange, affect, and hierarchical gendered, aged, raced, and kinship relations through which these women came to convert to Islam—sensibilities and practices through which they then came to reexperience and rework their lives.[58] Routed through the household, domestic workers' Islamic conversions mark the confluence of two realms often assumed to be distinct and separate: the everyday ethical formation of religious subjectivities related to their engagement with Islam,[59] and the reshaping of their comportment and personalities related to their undertaking of affective labor.[60] Their experiences mark the interrelation of political-economic and religious processes without eliding or fetishizing the importance of each to the other. Undergirded by gendered logics and relations, in particular a gendered discourse of South Asian women being *naram*—a Hindi-Urdu word denoting malleability—these processes are reshaping domestic workers' subjectivities, affinities, and transnational social networks. Rather than marking a rebirth or abrupt change in their lives, they experienced conversion to Islam as a gradual process through which they came to reengage and rework their lives. This process was neither unidirectional nor linear, but cyclical and recursive: they apprehended, approached, and actualized Islamic precepts and practices in and through the stuff of their everyday lives, which included their hierarchical and often fraught relationships with their employers; the gendered labor they undertake; and their preexisting languages, religious traditions, familial relations and other forms of belonging, including those based on ethnicity and nationality. Domestic workers' conversion to Islam were marked by emergent relationships and affinities, ones that did not supersede or subsume their existing familial and ethnonational belongings, but developed alongside them, in tandem, and reconfigured them.

Domestic workers' everyday conversions resonate in significant ways with a large body of work in religious studies, history, and anthropology that emphasizes the processual nature of religious conversion. These works challenge the prevailing idea of religious conversion as an abrupt and radical change involving a subject's total transformation and the abandonment of previous modes of living and association. They underscore how this understanding of conversion is, in particular, one associated with Modern Western Christian thought—especially charismatic forms of Christianity—that belies most conversion experiences.[61] Rather than a sudden and dramatic transformation, these works discuss the gradual, ongoing process through which converts' lives are transformed in relation to the religious tradition they are adopting, whether it be Christians in twelfth-century Western Europe or Scandinavian women who are becoming Muslim in our contemporary period. Instead of constituting a qualitatively different type of religious experience involving divine intercession, individual revelation, or visions, religious conversion falls along a spectrum, and is similar to processes of everyday piety; or, otherwise put, everyday piety constitutes ongoing conversion. As Karl Morrison succinctly states: "In fact, all of life, rightly lived, was conversion."[62] In the Gulf, the Islamic reformist discourse of fitra similarly draws a correlation between the cultivation of Islamic piety and processes of Islamic conversion. A universalizing discourse that posits everyone as having the capacity to distinguish right from wrong—a form of moral reasoning that guide's people's actions—this discourse of fitra accounts for why Islamic reformers believe all human beings are latently Muslim, a potential that is realized through constant effort, a constant striving or becoming in relation to Islamic precepts and practices.

This processual form of becoming Muslim resonates with what Gilles Deleuze refers to as an "ontology of becoming." Deleuze's philosophy—or, as he puts it, his "nomadic thought"—is premised on the idea that there are no fixed Platonic forms, ultimate foundations, or original identities. In contrast to this "ontology of being," which assumes the sameness of these forms, foundations and identities across space and time, and that treats difference or variation in them as a deviation or lack, Deleuze's "ontology of becoming" treats difference as primary, and draws our attention to the processes through which forms, foundations and identities are striven for, instantiated, and become a shared or common project. Rather than a fixed state of being, these forms, foundations, and identities are said to be in a constant state of becoming. Or, as Deleuze explains, "it is not being that returns but rather returning itself that constitutes being . . . it is not one thing which returns but rather returning is the one thing which is affirmed of diversity or multiplicity."[63] Similarly, an approach attuned to everyday conversions does not treat or conceive of being Muslim as a transcendent or fixed state; rather, it is something the subject constantly strives at becoming and instantiates through her or his very belief and practice.

This processual understanding of conversion informs Michel Foucault's work on ethics and technologies of the self, theoretical writings on subject formation that underpin recent scholarship on Islamic movements and piety.[64] According to Foucault, techniques or technologies of the self are what "permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain operation on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conducts, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on."[65] As his continuous use of the possessive and reflexive pronouns *own* and *themselves* underscore, Foucault's focus is not on subject-formation as conventionally conceived. The subject here is not merely the product, but also the agent of her subjectivization and subjection. Foucault's deployment of the term *technology* further underscores this point. Usually associated with something external to the individual, here *technology* is used to refer to methods by which the individual acts upon herself. Individuals do not construct these methods by themselves.[66] In an interview he makes it clear that these practices of the self are not "something that the individual invents by himself [*sic*]. They are patterns in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society, and his social group."[67]

Works on religious conversion and ethical self-formation emphasize embodied practice and iterative performance in the cultivation of pious dispositions, affects, acts, and modes of thinking. Individuals undertake these practices and performances in relation to a set of precepts they aspire to and actualize. This process is characterized by a particular trajectory—repetitive performance in relation to a set of principles and goals whose forms are not predetermined but immanent to apt performance. Domestic workers' experience becoming Muslim through their everyday Islamic practice in relation to Islamic precepts yet like other converts and pious Muslims, they enact and actualize their pieties through their everyday understandings, activities and relations, which for them necessarily include their preexisting religious traditions, languages, familial relations and other forms of belonging, most notably those based on ethnicity and nationality. Their experiences of Islamic conversion underscores the importance of examining the everyday not simply as the raw materials or as an inert and undifferentiated mass through which pieties are enacted and actualized, but as substances with their own particularities and vitality that shape the development of piety.[68] Processes of everyday conversion point to how ethical formation not only develops in relation to the religious tradition the convert is being socialized into and striving toward, in this case the Islamic discursive tradition, but also in relation to other discursive traditions and socioeconomic and historical processes. They push us to consider what Eve Sedgwick refers to as that which "lies alongside" or "beside" Islamic ethical formation. In her discussion of how Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity draws from J. L. Austin's work on performative utterances, Sedgwick argues that Butler unmoors "Austin's performative from its localized dwelling in a few exemplary utterances or kinds of utterance and show[s] it instead to be a property of language or discourse much more broadly."[69] Butler places temporal emphasis on the repetition or iteration of gender performance rather than considering what Sedgwick refers to as the ecological field through which it develops.[70] Sedgwick highlights the irony of Butler's antiessentialist project of gender performativity: that it is itself predicated on a reductive essentializing of the process of performativity.[71] Rather than a "paranoid reading" or "strong theory"—that is, an emphasis on one set of factors in our analysis[72]—Sedgwick proposes that we should also be attentive to elements that "lie alongside" or "beside" these factors.[73]

Sedgwick's approach resonates strongly with transnational feminists—and the genealogies of feminist, critical race, postcolonial, historical-materialist, poststructural theories they develop through and contribute to—who have developed modes of analysis that examine the interrelations between discursive traditions, capitalist and colonial hegemonies, and relations of gender, race, class, and sexuality.[74] In contrast to anthropological frameworks that are predicated on the positing of binary difference, transnational feminist analyses attend to how situated differences complicate and challenge universalizing discourses and globalizing processes while simultaneously examining how these differences are themselves produced. An approach that does not reify or fetishize difference, transnational feminism examines how discursive traditions, and categories of identity and belonging, do not just precede but are also produced through their historical interrelations. A transnational feminist approach that eschews "strong theory" raises questions about a dimension of religious conversion often glossed over. Works on religious conversion typically assume existing bases of differences between religious traditions and belongings, and focus on how religious converts reconstitute these forms of difference through their socialization or striving in relation to their adopted religious tradition. The focus is on converts' shift and replacement of one set of religious precepts and practices in favor of another. Except for the fraught liminal period of transition at which the boundaries between religious traditions and belongings become permeable, these works focus on how conversions reconstitute and in many cases reinforce differences between religious traditions. By attending to how religious conversion is informed by other religious and discursive traditions and historical processes, a transnational feminist approach draws attention to the interrelation between these discursive traditions and processes, and to how processes of conversion both presuppose and are a site through which differences are themselves produced. Domestic workers' experiences of everyday conversion were not simply marked by their shift from one religious tradition to another, or by their rejection of their previous lives. Their conversions constituted a more complex process, one characterized by changes as well as by continuities and uncertainties. Instead of reading these continuities and uncertainties as evidence of the incomplete nature of their conversion, as a sign of "bad faith," or as marking a syncretic or heterodoxical form of religious practice, through a transnational approach that does not presuppose difference, this ethnography examines everyday conversion as a site through which similarities and differences are produced. Rather than conceiving of the process only in terms of a shift or transition, this book highlights how religious conversion also constitutes a complex site of interrelation through which religious traditions are configured and reconfigured together.

This approach to religious conversion resonates with works that examine rather than assume the sociohistorical processes through which religious traditions, including what Masuzawa refers to as "world religions,"[75] become differentiated from one another, and that examine the porousness and plurality of practice of religious traditions in the Indian Ocean region.[76] Several domestic workers whose everyday conversion are discussed in this book come from families and communities with histories of religious conversion and whose members' religious practices, subjectivities, and identifications crosscut what are often depicted as distinct "world religions." Their experiences underscore how migrant domestic workers' experiences of everyday conversion index and are shaped by a subterranean stream of South Asian and Indian Ocean history, one examined by a wide range of scholarship, including works on material culture,[77] elite and court culture of premodern India,[78] healing traditions,[79] and instances of women's refusal of, reluctance at, or forcible "recovery" and "rehabilitation" back into what state laws dictated as their "own" communities (i.e., religious and ethnonational groups) in the wake of the subcontinent's partition.[80] These works all point to the porousness and fluidity of the boundaries existing between religious groups and traditions in the subcontinent, whether in the form of intermarriage, shared genealogies, or overlapping ritual practices, religious sites, and religious figures. South Asian domestic workers everyday conversions in the Gulf emphasize a related yet distinct dynamic. These women's experiences are shaped by an underlying gendered discourse of South Asian women being naram—that animates their household relations and work, religious learning and practice, and transnational affinities and belongings, which in turn mark their everyday conversions. South Asian domestic workers' transnational experiences of everyday conversion in the Gulf underscore the importance of not reifying, flattening, or glossing over religious differences, but examining how complex configurations of commonality/contrast, identity/alterity, and resemblance/distinction develop through particular sets of gendered sociohistorical processes, ones situated within and indexing broader currents of regional and interregional histories.

Everyday Conversions as a Mode of Transnational Relations

Domestic workers' conversion to Islam develops through their everyday transnational experiences centered on household spaces, a gradual process that not only complicates our understanding of religious conversion, but also of the everyday. Here, everyday activities and relations are not just spaces through which hegemonic discourses, disciplinary apparatuses, and sociohistorical processes are reproduced or resisted,[81] but where they configured together in complex and contingent ways, leading to newfound possibilities and ongoing transformation. Domestic workers' adoption of Islamic precepts and practices brings into focus the importance of a particular space of everyday gendered relations and activities—the household—as not only productive of ethnonational belongings (including diasporic forms thereof), but also of newfound transnational ones. Everyday conversions complicate our understanding of the feminization of transnational labor migration, in particular the experiences of migrant domestic workers. Cumulatively, scholarship focusing on these migrant women provides an extensive and textured account of transnational domestic work in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.[82] I discuss these aspects in more detail throughout this book, in particular chapters 1, 2, and 3.

Domestic workers' everyday conversions contribute to this literature by underscoring another dimension of these migrant women's experiences: how they develop emergent forms of transnational subjectivities and belongings that are not articulated in terms of diasporic forms of ethnonationalism—forms existing scholarship has largely focused on.[83]

To understand the transnational forms of subjectivities and belongings that domestic workers develop through their everyday conversions, we need to situate their experiences by interrogating—rather than assuming—the household as a site of analysis. As feminist political theorists, historians, and geographers all underscore, households—and the family structures, social reproduction, and gendered roles and relations that comprise them—are often depicted as "private" spaces outside of politics, realms existing prior to, and outside the jurisdiction of modern nation-states.[84] Households are portrayed as the primordial building blocks of the nation, and at the same time, as realms within which states are reluctant to intercede. These depictions naturalize households, placing them, and their constitutive gendered relations and activities, outside of historical and political processes. These accounts do not simply omit or "leave out" households, but obfuscate their social, economic, and political importance to the formation of modern nation-states.[85]

Households are co-constitutive of modern nation-states, emerging in tandem with them through processes of colonial modernity. They are vital biopolitical spaces crucial to the disciplining of individual bodies and the regulatory control of populations that are central to modern forms of governance. Nation-states exercise biopower—the power to administer, secure, develop and foster life, or disallow it to the point of death—through households. Households were, and continue to be, the primary sites in which the citizenry is biologically reproduced; where children are reared and receive their formative moral and intellectual training; and where workers and citizens are fed, sheltered, and cared for, thus ensuring their broader contributions to other economic and political spheres.[86] Colonial/imperial powers as well as anticolonial/anti-imperial nationalist forces throughout the Indian Ocean regarded households as fundamental to their state and national building projects. Through an assortment of welfare, health care, family and educational policies and programs, households have become sites of reform and regulatory control through which modern, orderly, healthy and developed nations are built, and through which other bases of sociopolitical organizing and belonging, in particular familial and tribal networks, are integrated into the nation-state.[87]

The widespread transnational migration of domestic workers throughout the Indian Ocean has redoubled rather than unsettled households as sites of ethnonational formation, indicating how global processes can reinscribe rather than undo national and local ones. Since the mid-1970s, the number of female migrants has risen dramatically throughout the Indian Ocean region. Today, women constitute almost half of the region's overall migrant population, the vast majority of which are domestic workers.[88] The largest destination site is the Gulf region, where migrant domestic workers are a ubiquitous presence. In Kuwait, they comprise one-sixth of the total population and are employed in over 90 percent of citizen households. Marked by the presence of "foreign maids" within Khaliji households, the absence of mothers, sisters, daughters, and other family members in South Asian households—and the cross-border circulations of capital, goods, knowledge, and information—domestic workers' migration may have transnationalized the composition and economies of households through the Gulf and South Asia, but it has not undermined or weakened the household as a site of ethnonational formation and reproduction. The feminization of transnational labor migration has resulted in new territorial configurations of these processes. These processes have been reconfigured and redoubled through, not despite, transnational processes.

The continuity of familial and ethnonational forms does not confirm their primordial quality, or the naturalness of the bonds and loyalty that exist between migrant domestic workers and their families and nation-states; rather, it requires us to examine how households are interrelated with processes of globalization and how states and nationalist discourses are configured into this interrelationship. Similar to how the role of households has been elided in analyses of the formation of nation-states, so too have they been disregarded in accounts of globalization. Numerous feminist scholars, most notably Carla Freeman, have pointed to the gendered nature of existing scholarship on globalization.[89] These works depict gendered subjects, activities, and spaces as being passive, reactive, or incidental to processes of globalization. They do not account for how gendered phenomena such as households are integral to and productive of global processes.

Globalization, most notably huge global disparities in wealth and the international division of labor that have developed through processes of neoliberalization, has not simply caused the feminization of transnational labor migration. These gendered migrations also develop through the complex and often conflicting demands of household labor, childcare responsibilities, and shifting gendered roles and familial relations. In Kuwait, the growing demand for domestic workers is not simply due to the oil boom, but to a concatenation of factors including the shift from extended to nuclear family households, changing patterns of hospitality that are central to Kuwaiti social life, and increased numbers of youth entering into secondary and higher education, as well as greater numbers of women joining the waged labor market. Similarly, the migration of South Asian women to the Gulf does not just come about due to their countries' and communities' impoverishment brought about through the oil crisis, national debt, and structural adjustment programs. They are also spurred by changing patterns of marriage, shifting tastes and consumption patterns, and new understandings of and aspirations to middle-class respectability. Though related, these factors are not reducible to global political-economic processes.[90] They are processes that prefigure and shape domestic workers' transnational migrations, and are not just the effect of them.[91]

State policies and nationalist discourses play an important role in the interrelationship between households and global processes. Although state institutions in the Indian Ocean often represent themselves as having no jurisdiction over migrant domestic workers—either because they are citizens abroad, or are noncitizens who work and reside in private spaces—they do shape these women's migration in multiple ways.[92] State institutions channel who migrates and where through their implementation of partial or full labor migration bans, though not always in the ways ostensibly intended.[93] Government cuts to subsidies and public services (e.g., to public education), and the distribution of welfare services in the form of family or child bonuses, affect household economies, divisions of labor and long-term financial strategies, all of which impact the demand and supply for migrant domestic workers.[94] Immigration and citizenship laws, work and residency visa programs, and migration-processing systems also produce domestic workers' status as temporary transnational migrants. This status positions domestic workers as pivot points in the ongoing reproduction of two sets of households simultaneously—those in their countries of origin and in the countries they migrate to. Their temporary status produces (not merely reflects) differences between domestic workers' "home" and "work" households, and differences between domestic workers and their employers—differences that are articulated in familial and ethnonational terms.[95]

State policies and programs do not simply express but are generative of ethnonational differences between domestic workers and their employers. This includes state mandated predeparture orientation and reentry sessions that emphasize differences between domestic workers and their employers, instructing these migrant women through professionalization discourses "to maintain a 'safe distance' from their employers."[96] Nationalist discourses of moral panic related to migrant domestic workers—of children being reared and sons or husbands being seduced by "foreign maids," or of families falling apart because women are overseas, away from their "rightful" homes and families—do not just index the decline of family values or the dismantlement of households as sites of national reproduction and belonging,[97] but mark attempts to reconstitute and consolidate households in these forms. These attempts are further buttressed by nationalist discourses that hail migrant domestic workers as victims in need of rescuing by the state, or as heroes whose self-sacrifice sustains the nation.[98]

Migrant domestic workers' activities and relations within their work households do not unsettle ethnonational subjectivities and belongings, but further reinscribe them. Their sustained, intimate interactions with their employers do not break down differences, but are constitutive of them.[99] Differences are not only produced through what a domestic worker does—that is, through her laboring, which is socially reproductive of her employers' household members—but in domestic workers' very doing of it—that is, the fact that it is she, the domestic worker, who is undertaking this work, and not her employer.[100] As Adams and Dickey explain, "both domestic workers and employers create opposing identities out of their experiences with one another," with "notions of self and other constructed in relation and opposition to one another."[101] The relations between domestic workers and employers are sites through which hierarchized gendered, classed, and racialized differences are produced—differences that are articulated and mapped onto ethnonational ones.

Domestic workers are crucial pivot points in the ongoing production of ethnonational forms in both the countries they migrate from and migrate to. They are dual agents of reproduction. Yet, they experience their own ethnonational subjectivities and belonging ambivalently. As Nicole Constable incisively points out, domestic workers' transnational migration engenders experiences of "being at home but not at home" in both the states they migrate to *and* from.[102] Their transnational dislocation may redouble their maintenance of familial connections and ethnonational belongings through visits to their families and home communities;[103] maintaining regular communication through letters, phone calls, and social media; engaging with diasporic media forms such as magazines and satellite television;[104] and participating in diasporic community activities and events.[105] At the same time, Manalansan, Constable, and others have highlighted how migrant domestic workers throughout the Indian Ocean and Inter-Asian regions are often hailed in gendered, familial, and ethnonational forms that they do not identify with or experience mixed feelings and misgivings.[106] They may have or develop alternative forms of subjectivity and belonging—ones elided given the hegemonic nature of discourses of gender, sexuality, family, and nation that configure households as ongoing sites of ethnonational production, and domestic workers as transnational nodal points in this process. In the face of the hegemonic nature of these discourses, domestic workers may disavow or avoid discussion of these alternative forms of subjectivity and belonging—for example their attachments to the families they work with or countries they migrate to, "illicit" relationships they develop, their reluctance to return home—out of concern of seeming disloyal, improper, or immoral. Given the equally hegemonic nature of discourses treating migrant domestic workers as a temporary transnational population, others may assume these alternative forms to be fleeting, provisional, and of no long-term significance. Among South Asian domestic workers in the Gulf, the reconfiguring of their subjectivities, affinities and belongings and, concomitantly, their reluctance to overtly demonstrate or "show" these forms also relate to an underlying gendered discourse of South Asian women being naram—the expectation of, and their own enactment of malleability, softness, and adjustment in the face of their changing circumstances—that animates their transnational experiences.[107] South Asian domestic workers enact what they consider to be proper forms of womanhood not only by seamlessly developing newfound dispositions, capabilities and learning in the Gulf, but also by not making these apparent when they visit or "adjust back" to their families and home communities in the subcontinent.

Domestic workers' adoption of Islam in the Gulf constitutes one such alternative and oft-overlooked form of transnational subjectivity and belonging, an alternative that points to households as sites of everyday conversion as well as ethnonational reproduction. Everyday conversions are not characterized by domestic workers' rejection or subversion of their existing familial and ethnonational belongings in favor of Kuwaiti or Khaliji ones. By becoming Muslim, domestic workers do not become more Kuwaiti, either formally through citizenship or, more informally, by becoming part of the families for whom they work. Their sociopolitical situation in the Gulf continues to be shaped by their ethnonational background, occupational status, and status as noncitizens. Their everyday conversions constitute an alternative form of transnational belonging not by supplanting or subverting their existing familial and ethnonational belongings, but by developing alongside and reconfiguring them. The overlapping—rather than antithetical—nature of everyday conversion underscores how households have become spaces of confluence of ethnonational formation, secularization, and Islamic reform in the Gulf. Households are crucial to processes of everyday conversion not because they are sites where domestic workers are pressured or coerced to convert to Islam as liberal-secularists in the region maintain, or because they are natural sites of religious practice as Islamic reformers aver. Through processes of colonial modernity and globalization, households have not only become spaces for the reproduction of national citizens and populations. Concomitantly, through processes of secularization, households have also become designated as part of the "private realm"—the proper locus of religious belief and practice—and through Islamic reform movements, as spaces vital to the development of the umma. While colonial governments and postcolonial states often depict personal status laws (including family laws) as the heart of religious doctrine and practice, a realm within which they are reluctant to interfere, as Talal Asad has noted, this understanding of religion as an intrinsically private matter "is precisely a secular formula for privatizing 'religion.' "[108] These processes are redoubled by Islamic movements' focus on everyday gendered activities and relations centered on household spaces as foundational to their reform efforts.[109]

Moments

Domestic workers' everyday conversions marking their migration experiences underscore incipient transnational subjectivities, affinities, and belongings that develop through an unexpected space—the household—and that take an unexpected form—articulated in relation to Islamic precepts and practices—rather than in terms of liberal subjectivities and globalizing human rights discourses, or diasporic forms of ethnonationalism, forms existing work on the feminization of transnational labor migration focuses on.[110] These women's experiences of everyday conversion are situated at the confluence of two transnational processes—the feminization of transnational labor migration and Islamic reform—that crosscut and knit together the Middle East and South Asia. Their Islamic conversions develop through their everyday experiences within Kuwaiti households, spaces of gendered activity and hierarchical relations that reshape their subjectivities and affinities, and that mark the confluence of processes of ethnonational formation, Islamic reform, and secularization. Domestic workers' everyday conversions index the emergent and contingent forms of subjectivity and affinity that are developing in our unevenly globalizing world, ones marked by the interrelation and complex configuration of gendered, religious, and political-economic processes.

Analyzing domestic workers' experiences in terms of everyday conversion constitutes an alternative explanation not just in terms of the factors that are given explanatory weight for their adoption of Islam, but also in terms of the framework of explanation itself. To fully understand how everyday conversions come about and what they entail, a shift in our underlying conceptual approach to analyzing processes of transformation is necessary. We need to shift from a linear understanding of transformation—with two points at the outset, and a precipitating factor or set of factors leading to a shift from one point to the other—to a more decentered and fluid concept of transformation, one that accounts for the reconfiguration of what are always a dynamic and shifting constellation of factors. Analyzing everyday conversions necessitates an expansive conceptual approach that accounts for possibility as well as continuity within discursive traditions, and for multiplicity and hegemony within sociopolitical groups. It is an approach that is attentive to ongoing transnational interrelations between differentiated discursive traditions and sociopolitical bodies. It does not assume sameness or difference at the outset (whether as ontology or heuristic), but looks to how complex configurations of difference and sameness are produced within particular historical conjunctures—and how these are reconfigured.

Examining the fluid and multidimensional phenomenon of everyday conversions raises a number of epistemological and analytical conundrums: How do we attend to, much less analyze, experiences that are often expressed in an affective register, that slip between and undo distinctions between binarized categories such as the religious and political economic? How do we account for forms of subjectivity and affinity that are fluid and emergent? How do we analyze the slipperiness of everyday experiences, the realm of the seemingly inconsequential and ordinary? In developing an ethnography attuned to entanglements rather than juxtaposition, of confluence and complex configurations rather than binary difference, of the everyday as a site of contingency and possibility rather than just continuity, this book focuses on moments. An emphasis on moments is far from novel or unprecedented in anthropological works. From being pursued by the police on the heels of a Balinese cockfight;[111] having one's father negotiate one's entry into Bedouin life;[112] being told by one's interlocutors who the real cannibals are[113]—ethnographic vignettes have long eased readers into explorations of unfamiliar worlds and have long been used by anthropologists to illustrate and instantiate their arguments. My description of moments is firmly situated within this tradition—and also points to other possibilities. Moments punctuated my fieldwork, moments that were neither marking the ongoing continuation of routine and habit, nor were they of the magnitude of life-altering events. They constituted something else, something in-between, something familiar and strange, blurring the line between continuity and change. These moments intertwined the unexpected with the ordinary. They pointed to how experiences, encounters, situations, utterances, or pauses are not just structured by discursive traditions, disciplinary practices, and ongoing political-economic relations, but also mark instances of everyday conversion, of newfound possibilities, ones just glimpsed, or barely grasped at the time.[114] Moments push us to be as attentive to possibility and contingency as we are to process and continuity, an approach that enables us to account for the novel forms of subjectivity and belonging that are being configured by transnational processes today, everyday conversions that might otherwise elude, or be elided by, our scholarship.

My own research began with one such moment of everyday conversion, the unexpected witnessing of Rosa's recitation of the shahada, which pushed me to begin analyzing a different configuration of issues I had long been thinking about. Like the transnational spread of Al-Huda, domestic workers' Islamic conversions in the Gulf involves South Asian migrant women's pious Islamic practice, pieties that mark the complex interrelation between middle-class aspirations, gendered labor, transnational diasporic formations, and Islamic reform movements that crosscut the Indian Ocean. Yet domestic workers' Islamic conversions raise a further series of questions, ones pushing us to consider the ways in which everyday relations, activities, and laboring centered on household spaces are vital to the production of Muslim pieties, subjectivities, and belongings. Domestic workers' experiences of everyday conversion necessitate our rethinking of how the everyday and the most ordinary of spaces and activities are not just sites of continuity and process, but also of contingency and possibility. Their experiences underscore how transnational processes do not simply mark the diffusion or cross-border expansion of kinship networks, ethnonational forms, and religious movements, but how transnationalism constitutes a dynamic field in which differences are configured and reconfigured, a site generative of everyday conversions. This book maps these transnational processes through moments. Each chapter begins as this introduction does: by narrating and unfurling important moments that comprised, or were recounted to me during my fieldwork, ones that piece together different dimensions of domestic workers' everyday conversions.

The first three chapters map key dimensions of South Asian domestic workers' experiences of transnational migration and everyday conversion. Chapter 1 examines the assemblage of processes, policies, and systems of governance that designate and discipline South Asian migrant domestic workers into a "temporary population" in Kuwait, one that positions domestic workers as dual agents of reproduction. This chapter underscores how domestic workers' "temporariness" is produced amidst—and belied by—ongoing transnational connections. These connections stretch from the past to the present and future, and knit together the Gulf region and the Indian subcontinent. Chapter 1 also examines the gendered juridicopolitical aporias that characterize the transnational domestic work sector, ones placing domestic workers into precarious juridopolitical positions that further reinscribe their "temporariness" in the Gulf. South Asian domestic workers' experiences of migration are further characterized by "suspension"—of their being a part of, yet apart from their "work households" in the Gulf and their "family households" in South Asia. Chapter 2 examines how domestic workers' experiences of "suspension" are produced through a number of macro- and microlevel socioeconomic processes that tether them to household spaces and that further position them as dual agents of reproduction. Yet, as this chapter further explores, South Asian domestic workers' suspension also engenders forms of everyday conversions marked by the development of emergent affinities, connections, and belongings. Chapter 3 focuses on a gendered discourse of South Asian women's malleability or "being *naram*," the intrinsic capacity and learned capability of South Asian women to circulate between and accommodate themselves seamlessly to different sociocultural circumstances. Being naram not only enables these migrant women to be involved in the reproduction of subjects, households, and ethnonational formations in both the Gulf and South Asia, but to simultaneously develop newfound abilities, dispositions and subjectivities, forms of everyday conversions that, as chapter 3 discusses, they try not "to show." Cumulatively, these chapters provide a textured sense of the everyday understandings, activities, relationships, and concerns characterizing South Asian domestic workers' transnational migration experiences in the Gulf. The chapters show how their experiences position them as dual agents of reproduction while simultaneously engendering emergent forms of affinities, subjectivities, and belongings that constitute everyday forms of conversion.

Domestic workers' adoption of Islam constitutes one form and trajectory of everyday conversion. It is an expression and culmination of reconfigurations taking place in these migrant women's sense of self, relationships, and belongings. Chapter 4 examines domestic workers' "housetalk"—how their emergent Islamic pieties develop through their relations and work within Kuwaiti households. Domestic workers' Islamic conversions mark the reworking of their subjectivities, a process that develops through the confluence of affective labor, Islamic ethical formation, and a gendered discourse of South Asian women being naram. To learn more about Islam, many domestic workers obtain learning materials and take classes at Kuwait's Islamic da'wa movement's women's center, the focus of chapter 5. Taught in their first languages, by teachers of similar ethnonational backgrounds, these classes effectively reproduce domestic workers' ethnonational belongings—yet these belongings are suffused with new Islamic sensibilities, understandings, and practices. Emphasizing fluid, student-centered pedagogies, these classes intertwine discussions of domestic workers' Islamic conversions with other changes taking place in their lives, ones existing prior to but further spurred by their migration and everyday life in Kuwait. The epilogue reprises the major themes of this ethnography and, by briefly revisiting the situations of some of my interlocutors, underscores the ongoing nature of their everyday conversions and the fluid forms of subjectivity and affinity they are developing—forms of everyday conversions that are incipient, tenuous, but significant still.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION: EVERYDAY CONVERSIONS

1 Giorgio Agamben, *Homer Sacer*, and *Means without End*.

2 Migrants here include current migrants, returning migrants, and secondary migrants.

3 Shifts in veiling practices include adoption of abaya and nikab. Changes in everyday language practices include shifts in greetings (e.g., from "marhaba" to "as-Sala'm 'Alekum"), and good-byes (e.g., "Khuda Hafiz" to "Allah Hafiz"). An example of shifts in gendered relations is the gendered segregation of wedding ceremonies. An example of shifts in religious ceremonies include the burgeoning of *halaqa* that often replaced "Qur'an Khanis" and "Khatme Qur'an."

4 English translation: There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.

5 Domestic workers of a myriad of ethnonational backgrounds develop Islamic pieties in Kuwait and the Gulf. I focused on South Asian domestic workers for reasons I discuss in appendix 1.

6 T. Asad, "Comments on Conversion," 263.

7 Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*, 9.

8 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

9 Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.

10 Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*.

11 Said, *Orientalism*.

12 For works that critique these understandings, see Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*; Kurtzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840–1940*; Lawrence, *Shattering the Myth*; Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*; Said, *Orientalism*, and *Culture and Imperialism*.

13 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 34.

14 Mahmood, "Feminist Theory," "Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual," "Ethical Formation and Politics of Individual Autonomy in Contemporary Egypt," *Politics of Piety*; and "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire." Also see Hirschkind, "The Ethics of Listening," and *The Ethical Soundscape*; and Henkel,

"Between Belief and Unbelief Lies the Performance of Saat," and "The Location of Islam."

15 Trouillot, *Global Transformations*.

16 Grewal, *Transnational America*; Grewal and Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies*; Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*; Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, and *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*; Trouillot, *Global Transformations*; Van der Veer, "Syncretism, Multiculturalism and the Discourse of Tolerance," and *Imperial Encounters*; Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, and *Uncommon Cultures*.

17 Materialist approaches to the study of Islam include the works of Beinin and Stork, *Political Islam*; Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*; and Rodinson, *Muhammad*. Idealist approaches include the works of Geertz, *Islam Observed*; Gellner, *Muslim Society*; and Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

18 Information gathered from memos, reports, and interviews conducted with officials and volunteers of human rights and domestic work organizations in Kuwait, including Al-Haqooq, the Kuwait Union of Domestic Labor Organizations, the Kuwait Human Rights Society, the Kuwait Friendship Society; U.S. Department of State; Kuwait Annual "Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour" reports 2006, 2007; interviews with officials at the Indian, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Filipino, and Indonesian embassies, as well as the then unofficial representative of Nepali government (in the absence of a consulate, embassy, or official representation at the time my primary fieldwork was being conducted).

19 Al-Hijji, *Kuwait and the Sea*; Anscombe, *The Ottoman Gulf*, and "An Anational Society"; Bose, "Space and Time on the Indian Ocean Rim," and *A Hundred Horizons*; Fuccaro, "Mapping the Transnational Community," and *Histories of the City and State in the Persian Gulf*; Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*; Onley, "Transnational Merchants in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf," and *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*.

20 Dresch, "Debates on Marriage and Nationality in the United Arab Emirates."

21 I use *race*, *raced*, and *racialization* to refer to sociohistorical processes through which (a) differences are produced and reproduced between actors and groups, (b) generalized characteristics are attributed to these actors and groups that are/become naturalized, and (c) these differences articulate asymmetrical power relations among actors and groups. Histories of racialization in the Gulf are distinctive in relation to other sociohistorical contexts (e.g., North America). In the Gulf racialization occurs along ethnonational lines: where ethnonational belongings are sutured to and conflated with occupations and sociopolitical status. Systems of racialization in the Gulf have developed through transnational imperial and colonial histories in which racializing labor regimes were developed and implemented by the British and Americans with the complicity of particular sets of local actors (see Secombe and Lawless, "Foreign Worker Dependence in the Gulf, and the International Oil Companies"; Vitalis, "Black Gold, White Crude," and *America's Kingdom*; and also see chapter 1). Racialized differences articulated in terms of ethnonationalism are also produced by the kafala system (see chapter 1 for further discussion of this) and, in the case of migrant domestic workers, through their everyday relations with their employers (see chapters 1 and 2).

22 Limbert, "Caste, Ethnicity and the Politics of Arabness in Southern Arabia."

23 Crystal, *Kuwait*, 52.

24 Dresch, "Debates on Marriage and Nationality in the United Arab Emirates."

25 This assemblage comprises migration and residency laws in both the Gulf and migrant-sending countries, as well as labor recruitment agencies, embassies, consulates, and state institutions, which include the police, border patrols, and ministries of the interior, foreign affairs, and social affairs. See Crystal, *Kuwait*, and "Public Order and Authority"; Longva, *Walls Built on Sand*.

26 Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf*; *Kuwait*; and "Public Order and Authority"; Gardner, *City of Strangers*; Longva, "Keeping Migrant Workers in Check Gulf"; "Citizenship in the Gulf States"; "Neither Autocracy nor Democracy but Ethnocracy."

27 Crystal, *Kuwait*.

28 Nagy, " 'This Time I Think I'll Try a Filipina' "; "The Search for Miss Philippines Bahrain."

29 Vora, "Producing Diasporas and Globalization," and *Impossible Citizens*.

30 Vora, "Producing Diasporas and Globalization," and *Impossible Citizens*.

31 Gardner, *City of Strangers*; Longva, "Keeping Migrant Workers in Check"; and "Neither Autocracy nor Democracy but Ethnocracy," 114–35.

32 On June 24, 2015, the Kuwaiti government passed a new law giving domestic workers enforceable labor rights. At the time I was conducting fieldwork, domestic workers did not fall under existing labor laws; however, like all other citizens and noncitizens in Kuwait, they could seek recourse through civil and criminal laws. It is also worth noting that with few exceptions (most notably the United Kingdom, and Kuwait more recently), domestic workers are excluded from most countries' labor laws. I discuss these matters further in chapter 1.

33 These groups include Kuwait's diverse noncitizen populations, members of the country's self-styled liberal movement, local and international human rights organizations, labor agencies, and foreign embassies.

34 Information gathered from reports, memos, and interviews that were conducted with members of the Islamic Presentation Committee Ministry of Awqaf officials, including Project Barira members and Grand Mosque of Kuwait's outreach workers, Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, and the Aware Center.

35 Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 4.

36 Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*.

37 Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 4.

38 Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*; T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, and *Formations of the Secular*.

39 Al-Moqatei, "Introducing Islamic Law in the Arab Gulf States."

40 Ghabra, *Palestinians in Kuwait*; Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 2.

41 Ghabra, *Palestinians in Kuwait*.

42 Al-Moqatei, "Introducing Islamic Law in the Arab Gulf States"; Bill, "Resurgent Islam in the Persian Gulf"; Ghabra, *Palestinians in Kuwait*; Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics*; Rizzo, *Islam, Democracy, and the Status of Women*.

43 N. Brown, *The Rule of Law in the Arab World*, 5–6; Ghabra, *Palestinians in Kuwait*; Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics*; Rizzo, *Islam, Democracy, and the Status of Women*.

44 Ghabra, *Palestinians in Kuwait*; Rizzo, *Islam, Democracy, and the Status of Women*, 19.

45 Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 85.

46 Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 85.

47 Ghabra, *Palestinians in Kuwait*; Rizzo, *Islam, Democracy, and the Status of Women*, 19.

48 Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, 2; Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, 42.

49 Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, 38; Meijer, *Global Salafism*, 4.

50 Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, 36; Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*.

51 Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*; Meijer, *Global Salafism*, 29.

52 Al-Moqatei, "Introducing Islamic Law in the Arab Gulf States"; Bill, "Resurgent Islam in the Persian Gulf"; N. Brown, *The Rule of Law in the Arab World*.

53 Ghabra, *Palestinians in Kuwait*.

54 Rizzo, *Islam, Democracy, and the Status of Women*, 19.

55 El Shakry, "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play"; McLarney, "Private Is Political" and "The Islamic Public Sphere and the Discipline of Adab."

56 As discussed in appendix 1, I worked closely with twenty-four South Asian migrant domestic workers, and to varying extents with members of their employers' households, their friends and family members in Kuwait, and in a few cases, in Nepal. My ability to access these spaces was predicated upon vetting processes (most notably ensuring I was a bona fide researcher affiliated with academic institutions in Kuwait and the United States, as well as being vouched for by acquaintances and contacts in my growing network). My ability to access these spaces was also facilitated by my gender, my religious background, and my interstitial ethnonational background. Only in one circumstance was my request to engage with a domestic worker and members of the employers' household declined—for reasons that were not made clear to me. With that exception, employers generously granted me access to their household spaces for myriad reasons: they too were curious or concerned about their domestic workers' Islamic conversions, and they were acutely aware of popular perceptions of Kuwaiti citizen-employers' exploitative and abusive treatment of migrant domestic workers among foreign residents in Kuwait and in international news media reports. These employers were eager to have a "scientifically trained," "unbiased," or "open-minded" scholar who could research the matter. Like the vast majority of ethnographic research—in particular that involving long-term and intensive participant-observation—my interlocutors were largely self-selecting, and amenable to my conducting research with them so long as I remained discreet in Kuwait about their family news, gossip and privacy, and so long as I did not disrupt or interfere with the functioning of their households. My research was further deepened by interviews and research I conducted about the migrant domestic work sector and with "outside" domestic workers (i.e., domestic workers who do not reside with their employers). Incidents of domestic workers' exploitation and abuse are relatively well documented in Kuwait and other countries of the Gulf. My research is not nor should be read as a refutation of the fact that fraught and conflictual relationships exist between migrant domestic workers and their employers in the Gulf. This book discusses and analyzes power relations, moments of frustration, and conflict between migrant

domestic workers and their employers. It also underscores how other forms of relationships develop between migrant domestic workers and their employers in the face—and not despite, or as mitigating against—of hierarchical relations of power existing between them. My work, which includes immersive participant-observation, complements and extends existing research on migrant domestic workers in the region, which is largely based on interviews and interactions with domestic workers outside the households of their employers, and/or has been conducted with the assistance of embassies, human rights organizations, and international organizations.

57 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*; de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*; Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*; Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*.

58 On race, see endnote 21.

59 T. Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, and *Genealogies of Religion*; Henkel, "Between Belief and Unbelief Lies the Performance of Salat"; Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*; Mahmood, "Ethical Formation and Politics of Individual Autonomy in Contemporary Egypt," and *Politics of Piety*.

60 Clough and Halley, *The Affective Turn*; Gregg, *The Affect Theory Reader*; Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor"; Parrenas, *Intimate Labors*; Weeks, "Life within and against Work," and *The Problem with Work*.

61 Asad, "Comments on Conversion," 266; Austin-Broos, "The Anthropology of Conversion," 2; Buckser and Glazier, *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*; Krstic, "Illuminated by the Light of Islam and the Glory of the Ottoman Sultanate," and *Contested Conversions to Islam*; Morrison, *Understanding Conversion*, xii; van Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam," and "Islam Is Your Birthright," 151; Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*.

62 Morrison, *Understanding Conversion*, xii.

63 Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 48.

64 Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 205–27.

65 Foucault, "About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutic of the Self," 162.

66 In other words, Foucault is indicating that his writing on "ethics" is not reintroducing or reinscribing the sovereign subject.

67 Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 11.

68 Deleuze, *Bergsonism*.

69 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 5.

70 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 5, 9.

71 While it is debatable whether Butler's understanding of performance is "essentialist," Sedgwick's critique underscores how Butler's understanding of performance is not as encompassing and individuated as the one Austin presents us with. See Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 6.

72 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 126, 134.

73 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8; also see Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 8–10.

74 Grewal and Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies*; Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, and *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*; Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, and *Uncommon Cultures*.

75 Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*.

76 Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*; Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*; Ricci, *Islam Translated*; Shaw and Stewart, "Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism"; Simpson and Kress, "Introduction: Cosmopolitanism Contested."

77 Flood, *Objects of Translation*.

78 Metcalf, "Presidential Address."

79 Flueckiger, *In Amma's Healing Room*; also see Langford, *Fluent Bodies*.

80 Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*; Hasan, "Introduction: Memories of a Fragmented Nation"; Menon and Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries*.

81 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*; Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*.

82 These accounts include how these transnational migrations (1) mark reconfiguration between global capitalism, gendered relations and roles, household or "private" spaces, and state development and policies (Cheng, *Serving the Household and the Nation*; Huang et al., "Introduction: Asian Women as Transnational Domestic Workers"; Lan, *Global Cinderellas*; Robinson, "Gender, Islam and Nationality"; Sanjek and Colen, *At Work in Homes*; (2) index the increasing global prominence of emotional, affective, and immaterial forms of labor (Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work*; Hochschild, *The Time Bind,* and "Global Care Chains and Economic Surplus Value"; Parrenas, *Intimate Labors*, 3; K. Weeks, "Life within and against Work," and *The Problem with Work*); (3) produce an international division of reproductive labor (Parrenas, "Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers and the International Division of Reproductive Labour," and *Servants of Globalization*); and "global care chains" (Hochschild, "Global Care Chains and Economic Surplus Value," and *Global Woman*); labor diasporas articulated in ethnonational terms (Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization*); and transnational families (Parrenas, *Children of Global Migration*); (4) underscore the gendered nature of migration policies and laws (Oishi, *Women in Motion*); wage-based market labor regimes (Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work*); and state development programs (Cheng, *Serving the Household and the Nation*; Silvey, "Transnational Migration and the Gender Politics of Scale, 1997–2000"); (5) both reflect and produce hierarchical gendered, ethnoracial, and class subjectivities and relationships (see Adams and Dickey, "Introduction: Negotiating Homes, Hegemonies, Identities and Politics"; Cheng, *Serving the Household and the Nation*; Constable, "At Home but Not at Home"; Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Domestica*; Lan, *Global Cinderellas*; Ray and Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude*; Silvery, "Transnational Domestication"); (6) engender ambiguous personalistic/professional and fictive or pseudokinship relationships between domestic workers and their employers (Adams and Dickey, "Introduction: Negotiating Homes, Hegemonies, Identities and Politics"; Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work*; Cheng, *Serving the Household and the Nation*; Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*; Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Domestica*; Jureidini and Moukarbel, "Female Sri Lankan Domestic Labour in Lebanon"; Moors, "Migrant Domestic Workers"; Robinson, "Gender, Islam and Nationality"); (7) rework and mark mixed forms of gendered, familial, and socioeconomic empowerment (Gamburd, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle*; Lan, *Global Cinderellas*; Parrenas, *The Force of Domesticity*); (8) produce and reinscribe normative gender and

sexual relations as well as heteronormative familial forms that are in turn replicated and reinscribed by existing scholarship (Manalansan, "Queering the Chain of Care Paradigm"); and (9) are either animated by religious motivations (Liebelt, *Caring for the Holy Land*; Silvey, "Transnational Migration and the Gender Politics of Scale, 1997–2000," and "Mobilizing Piety"), or engender forms of religious support and solidarity in the face of transnational dislocations (Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*; Johnson, "Diasporic Dreams, Middle Class Moralities" and "Migrant Domestic Workers among Muslim Filipinos in Saudi Arabia").

83 Notable examples are the works of Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization*; and Lan, *Global Cinderellas*.

84 T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*; W. Brown, *States of Injury*, 145–51, 181–84; Cheng, *Serving the Household and the Nation*; El Shakry, "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play," and *The Great Social Laboratory*; McLarney, "Private Is Political," and "The Islamic Public Sphere and the Discipline of Adab"; Silvey, "Power, Difference, and Mobility," "Transnational Domestication: Indonesian Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia," and "Transnational Migration and the Gender Politics of Scale, 1997–2000."

85 W. Brown, *States of Injury*.

86 Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*; Kandiyoti, *Women, Islam and the State*; Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*; El Shakry, "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play."

87 L. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*; al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait;* El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*; Kandiyoti, *Women, Islam and the State*; Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*.

88 Oishi, *Women in Motion*.

89 Freeman, "Is Local:Global as Feminine:Masculine?"; also see Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Blanc, *Nations Unbound*; Grewal and Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies*; Silvey, "Power, Difference, and Mobility," "Transnational Domestication," "Transnational Migration and the Gender Politics of Scale, 1997–2000"; Tadiar, *Things Fall Away.*

90 Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Blanc, *Nations Unbound*; Freeman, "Is Local:Global as Feminine:Masculine?"; Grewal and Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies*; Silvey, "Power, Difference, and Mobility," "Transnational Domestication," "Transnational Migration and the Gender Politics of Scale, 1997–2000"; Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*.

91 Osella, "Muslim Entrepreneurs in Public Life between India and the Gulf"; Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*.

92 Cheng, *Serving the Household and the Nation*; Oishi, *Women in Motion*; Silvey, "Power, Difference, and Mobility," "Transnational Domestication: Indonesian Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia," and "Transnational Migration and the Gender Politics of Scale, 1997–2000."

93 Oishi, *Women in Motion*; Shah, "Relative Success of Male Workers in the Host Country, Kuwait"; Shah and Menon, "Violence against Women Migrant Workers."

94 Cheng, *Serving the Household and the Nation*; Silvey, "Power, Difference, and Mobility."

95 Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization*.

96 Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*, 92.

97 Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization*; Tadiar, *Things Fall Away.*

98 Hondagneu-Sotelo, "Introduction: Gender and Contemporary US Immigration"; Oishi, *Women in Motion*; Silvey, "Transnational Domestication," 499.

99 Lan, *Global Cinderellas*, 17.

100 Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work*.

101 Adams and Dickey, "Introduction: Negotiating Homes, Hegemonies, Identities and Politics," 2; also see Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work*; Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Domestica*, 171; Lan, *Global Cinderellas*, 3, 5, 17; Ray and Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude*; Silvey, "Transnational Domestication."

102 Similarly, Lan, in *Global Cinderellas*, refers to migrant domestic workers as a "provisional diaspora"; Constable, "At Home but Not at Home."

103 Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization*, 37–38; Silvey, "Transnational Domestication," 494.

104 Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization.*

105 Nagy, "The Search for Miss Philippines Bahrain."

106 Constable, "At Home but Not at Home"; Manalansan, "Queering the Chain of Care Paradigm."

107 See chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of this gendered discourse of South Asian women being naram; also see Lamb, *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes*; Raheja and Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words*.

108 T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 227–28.

109 El Shakry, "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play," 127–28; McLarney, "Private Is Political," 135.

110 Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Domestica*; Lan, *Global Cinderellas*; Oishi, *Women in Motion*; Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization*.

111 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture.*

112 L. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments.*

113 Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen.*

114 Both Ernst Bloch and Michel Foucault point to how possibilities of an event or experience are difficult to recognize at the time. In his discussion of the event, Bloch points to their paradoxical nature. The "newness" of events, he tells us, involves both absence and presence, the here-and-now and not-yet, clarity and obscurity. He explains that this has to do with the immediacy and proximity of an event, or "the darkness" of the lived moment, which makes it difficult to recognize or assess its nature at the time (see Geoghegan's discussion in *Ernst Bloch*, 35–36). In his discussion of the experience of writing his books, in *Remarks on Marx* Foucault tells us that "an experience is something you come out of changed" (27) and that experiences are neither true or false, but constructions and fictions that exist only after they are made (36).

CHAPTER 1: TEMPORARINESS

1 Lan, *Global Cinderellas*; also see Constable, "At Home but Not at Home"; Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization.*