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Producing Diasporas and Globalization: Indian Middle-Class Migrants in Dubai

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Abstract
Through ethnographic examples, I explore two modes of diasporic subjectivity that I observed among middle-class Indian migrants in Dubai—racial consciousness and consumer citizenship. However, I argue that the alignment of academic and diasporic informants’ understandings of mutually exclusive domains such as culture, nation, economy, and state lead to the relative invisibility of this large population in most literature on South Asian diasporas, and I point to a need to theoretically and methodologically begin our anthropological research with how and when domains become distinct for migrant subjects, rather than taking them as a priori forms. [Keywords: South Asian diasporas, subjectivity, Dubai, race, consumer citizenship]
Introduction
Academic investigations of diasporas and transnational networks often consider how economic factors enable forms of movement and identity. In the case of South Asia, scholars have traced how migrations based in indentured labor, trade, and employment opportunities, usually from the Indian subcontinent to the countries of the global North, have produced diasporic populations (Appadurai 1996, Leonard 1997, Raj 2003, Shukla 2001). The relationship between the economic and the diasporic, particularly in the South Asian context, is therefore usually cast as a causal one—diasporas exist because economic necessity made people move out of their “homeland” to another destination where they put down roots and produced a unique, hybrid form of cultural identity. While South Asian diasporas are a significant presence in the literature on diasporas and transnationalism, it is notable that South Asians in the Gulf Arab countries, whose migration increased dramatically directly following the discovery of oil, are almost completely absent from this body of scholarship. In this article, I argue that this absence is the product of a set of assumptions about the nature of modern belonging and identity embedded within the concept of diaspora itself, particularly as it is used in the South Asian context, and often mirrored in the narratives and identifications of the subjects that academics consider to be “diasporic.” In particular, I explore how what I call “domaining” practices result in the emergence of South Asians in the Gulf as non-diasporic.

Bruno Latour argues that anthropological as well as other scholarship is built upon the assumption that modern societies have learned to separate the world into distinct domains, such as the economy, society, and the state. We “moderns” presume that we are therefore unlike the subjects of much of our research, who are not modern due to their inability to distinguish between domains (Latour 1993). Building upon Latour’s arguments, I favor a methodological and theoretical approach that focuses on how domains are produced in particular contexts rather than beginning with the assumption of distinct abstractable forms. Thus, this article intends to suspend the assumptions in much South Asian diaspora literature about the distinctness of economy and culture, and of the economy as the foundation upon which diasporic populations and cultural formations exist. It is the very assumption of this distinctness that erases migrant populations in the Gulf from the South Asian “diaspora,” for because they cannot formally settle in the Gulf, they are relegated exclusively to the domain of the economic, which, unlike “culture” and “nation,” is not considered central to identity or belonging.
I consider below, through an exploration of the narratives and practices of middle-class Indians in Dubai, the ways in which diasporic populations themselves enable the emergence of a globalized economy that appears to be distinct from the UAE nation-state and from Indian "culture." My field research in 2006 among middle-class Indians indicated that the process of migration in fact changed their identities—they articulated their differences from people in India, and performed and narrated subjectivities that emerged in the particular context of Dubai.

In this article, I explore two forms of diasporic subjectivity among middle-class Indians in Dubai—racial consciousness and consumer citizenship. These subjectivities produced unexpected forms of belonging while also rehearsing certain domaining practices that make non-citizen belonging in the UAE appear to be impossible. Middle-class Indians exhibited a racial consciousness through their narratives about systematic discrimination and racial hierarchies in Dubai. However, while they experienced discrimination based on race and nationality, they displayed a very particular middle-class subjectivity that relied upon the belief in a globalized free market economy. Their experiences of racism in Dubai, while seemingly contradictory to the idea of a "free" market, actually catalyzed their production of the economy as distinct from the nation and from culture.

Indians in Dubai also exhibited forms of consumer citizenship, creating belonging through practices of consumption. However, consumer citizenship also worked toward producing the economy and the nation-state as distinct. Consumption practices, while staking claims to Dubai and changing subjectivities, were considered to be purely economic, and therefore outside of the purview of the nation. Expatriate consumer citizenship, while seemingly a form of belonging that exceeds and challenges the nation-state, was actually an integral part of the production of the UAE nation-state as distinct from other states, and as distinct from the economy.

Indians in Dubai, even though they do not have formal access to citizenship and are segregated from Emiratis and other expatriate groups, provide examples of new subjectivities enabled by migration, and in so doing, challenge conceptions of belonging as based in liberal notions of rights, citizenship, and cultural assimilation. However, without a focus on the boundary-making practices that diasporic subjects and diaspora scholars have in common, diaspora theories more often than not reinforce modern assumptions about identity in which belonging for migrant populations is always derivative of "true" belonging based in either land (territory) or
blood (race). Thus, the inability to “naturalize” places Indians in Dubai outside of diaspora. Within this framework, they can never be important to diaspora scholars, for economic belonging is considered fleeting and outside of identity. Instead, my research indicates that the focus of diaspora scholarship should be on the conditions of possibility that make diasporas emerge as bounded units in particular contexts, and on the ways in which diasporas enable the emergence of states, economies, and cultures as distinct domains.

Economic Migration and Narratives of Non-Belonging

“Dubai is like a bus, an air-conditioned bus. Get onto the bus. Don’t bother if you get a seat or not. Then gradually you will settle down, things will move on.”

The middle-class salaried workers and their family members that I spoke to narrated their presence in Dubai and any changes in their experiences of living there over time almost entirely in economic terms. Even as they felt restricted in Dubai and described experiences of discrimination, they often praised the leaders of the UAE for creating an environment where foreigners have many opportunities to accumulate wealth. For example, one informant told me:

…if you have the money and if you have the confidence, you can open a business. It is very easy to open a business over here, and make the money if you have the ability to. But that is not being an Indian. You can be anybody. Dubai welcomes anybody who has the finances to do that.

However, middle-class Indians in Dubai usually do not own businesses, and their residence in the country is most often dependent on temporary work visas that are issued by Emirati kafeels (sponsors). Residency visas in Dubai can only be obtained through four possible avenues—from an employer, as a dependent family member, as a business owner, and as a benefit of owning freehold property. Most foreigners in Dubai fall into the first category and their contracts range from one to three years, after which they have to be renewed by the employer. In order to reside with
one’s family in Dubai, a man has to make a minimum income of 4000 dirhams a month, or 3000 if he lives in company provided housing.\textsuperscript{5} Women cannot sponsor spouses or children except in certain professions, such as medicine. Therefore, most foreign families living in the UAE are nuclear and patriarchal, with one or two wage earners, and sometimes with children, who, regardless of whether they are born in the UAE, retain the nationality of their parents.\textsuperscript{6} My informants were both single and married, with and without children, and hailed from a range of fields, such as advertising, aviation, marketing, IT, education, human resources, administration, management, and media. They all had income levels that allowed them to have families in the UAE if they wished, and that provided them with at least a modest amount of disposable income. Most importantly, they all self-identified as middle-class, and distinguished themselves from Indian elites and from low-wage laborers and service workers. All of my interviewees explained their migration to the Gulf as economically driven, or in the case of some women, as a result of their husbands’ economically driven migration. They all defined themselves as Indian, and their plans for the future did not include staying in Dubai indefinitely—they mostly stated a desire to return to India, or in some cases, to move on to a “Western” country like Canada, Australia, England, or the US, where they thought they could find greater economic opportunities and more rights, often in the form of citizenship. Rohit, a Punjabi man who has been in Dubai for over 20 years and raised two daughters there, summed up these sentiments:

I say I am an Indian. I live and work in Dubai. People say we have immigrated. I always say, “no, we have not immigrated.” I am here as an economic immigrant. I came because opportunities are here to make money and save money. I work here and that is why I live here. All human movement and immigrations are based on economic factors. Very few—US is different because they give you professional enhancement—but this place is all economic immigration.

Because they narrated their presence in the Gulf as temporary and based on economic reasons, these Indians felt they did not belong. They expressed their identities as Indian, and in terms of their regional, linguistic, or religious backgrounds. However, they did not consider themselves “Emirati” in any way, nor did they have any desire to be Emirati. They felt Emirati citizens
had many advantages, and they expressed ambivalence towards these advantages. On the one hand, they believed that the welfare benefits that come with citizenship in the Gulf are undeserved, and on the other, they wanted access to the preferential treatment they saw Emiratis and elite expatriates receiving. The benefits of citizenship or elite status were mostly seen as economic, and my informants said they were not willing to accept them if it meant sacrificing their Indian identities or even their Indian passports. Neil, a software engineer from New Delhi, explained:

I might hate Indian politics, but I am fiercely patriotic when it comes to India. I love India. That is where I want to die. God forbid if the Emirates takes sides. I would be with India…I would never renounce my Indian citizenship. If they have dual, great. But citizenship would be like a membership card, like you are a member of an automobile club. Not something that would change your identity.

The Emirates, in these accounts, was something outside of Indian identity, and inaccessible in any way except through the economy. It would seem, then, that these Indian expatriates, like the Emirati government, and like many academic accounts, did not consider themselves as “migrants” at all, but rather as temporary workers. My informants, therefore, rehearsed particular domaining practices through which Dubai’s economy, the Emirati state, and national cultures were mutually exclusive. However, my interviews contained a number of ambivalences and contradictions surrounding Dubai that undermined a clear distinction between India and the Gulf, and between economic and other forms of belonging.

For example, while described to me as a place they did not belong, Dubai was simultaneously something my informants did not consider as outside of their cultural identities. In fact, even as they narrated their non-belonging, middle-class Indians laid claims to Dubai as an “Indian” cultural space above all else, and therefore described their reasons for being in the Gulf and their experiences there as impacted by more than just their jobs. One informant told me, “to fly from Delhi to my hometown it will take almost a day, half a day. From here, within five hours I am home. This is closer to home than some parts of India. For me it is an extension.”

Dubai as a whole, and especially particular neighborhoods of Dubai, are considered “Indian” by Indian expatriates, and by other groups as well. In fact, many people told me that it was precisely the lack of difference
between India and Dubai that made it a favorable destination for migration. Thus, while Emirati national identity and citizenship were considered to be inaccessible, it was the access that middle-class Indians had to cultural and social resources in Dubai, and the sheer number of South Asians in the city, that made moving there seem less like international migration and more like being in another part of India. While Dubai was an Indian cultural space for my informants, they also expressed its difference from India. This difference was mostly experienced in terms of increased luxuries (like air conditioning and 24-hour electricity), better roads, greater safety, and cleanliness. However, middle-class Indians also mentioned to me that they had more political rights in India, and faced less discrimination there. For the most part, though, the differences between India and the UAE were considered to be economic. Because they felt Dubai was an “extension” of India or a “clean Bombay,” middle-class Indians felt they were unchanged by the process of coming to Dubai. But, for them, Dubai as an Indian cultural space easily co-existed with their belief in their non-belonging.

This may seem like a contradiction—Dubai is so Indian that it does not feel like a different country, yet people are only there temporarily to earn money and do not experience any form of belonging. However, my informants did not experience this as a contradiction because they themselves participated in producing the economy as distinct from Indian culture and from Emirati national identity. Indians were capable of participating in the “free” market economy and could belong culturally in certain enclaves in the city, but they were not part of the Emirati nation (in terms of citizenship and rights), and therefore did not feel they belonged. Their cultural belonging also meant that they were segregated from other groups. Self-segregation among and between national, ethnic, class, and racial groups in Dubai is extremely prevalent, and the different salaries that people earn based on their passports, their accents, and their skin color compounds this segregation. In addition, because the citizen/non-citizen binary is so salient, and because Emirati national identity is perceived as impenetrable by expatriates, non-citizens tend to define themselves through their various modes of foreignness, such as their country of origin, their language, their skin color, and where in the city they live and spend their leisure time.

The geographical segregation of Dubai into different ethnic spaces coincided in my informants’ narratives with a more recent influx of “European” expatriates and the development of expensive residential
areas outside of the old city center, in an area that used to be barren but is now called New Dubai. “European,” as used by my informants, translated to white, and could refer to white people from European countries but also from Canada, the US, South Africa, and Australia. Often, companies offer these expatriates free accommodation and other perks in addition to their salaries in order to lure them to Dubai, but Indians and other Asians usually have to pay their rents out of pocket. This contributes to a lower proportion of Asians in the expensive communities of New Dubai and the ghettoization of older, more congested parts of town.

My informants attributed these changes to the functioning (and failure) of Dubai’s market. They felt that, as Dubai grew, it was becoming a more attractive destination for Westerners. They also felt that this was part of a “bubble” that would have to burst and come back to something similar to what it was before. They attributed their current conditions and hardships to mismanagement of Dubai’s economy, and its failure to integrate into a globalized world where economic opportunities were merit-based and superseded the boundaries of national belonging. The main way in which Dubai was seen as a deteriorating space of economic freedom was through experiences of racial discrimination, which I explore in detail in the following section. Racial consciousness was something that emerged through the context of migrating to Dubai. It can therefore be considered a diasporic subjectivity that comes about through the experience of migrating from India and forming new communities elsewhere. As I explore below, my informants’ racial consciousness relied deeply on neoliberal understandings of the market and on middle-class identification. It was therefore a subjectivity that, instead of indexing the impossibility of “free” markets devoid of social power dynamics, reified a global economy and presented racism as a failure to integrate into that economy.

**Locals and Goras—the Failure of the Free Market**

“It is racist, horribly racist. Not the locals. It is the whites who come here, British most of them. They come here and make rules for their benefit. It is not the locals. The locals are very accommodating.”

Indians who had been in Dubai for several years or decades almost always spoke about their daily experiences negatively. Their descriptions
of living in contemporary Dubai revolved around workplace and other forms of discrimination, not by Emirati nationals, but rather by newer white expatriates. Middle-class Indians felt that Emiratis favored them because of cultural similarities, trusted their work ethic, and treated them with respect because of connections with South Asia. But, my informants also felt that the special relationship Indians had with Emiratis was deteriorating. They often told me that many Emiratis have been “corrupted” by Western culture and therefore were mimicking the racist attitudes that whites (and sometimes other non-Gulf Arabs) had against Indians.

Middle-class Indians used a range of terms to describe the group they felt was responsible for the majority of the discrimination they faced, especially in the workplace—European, Westerner, British, and, most often, *gora*, which literally translates in Hindi to “fair-skinned” or white. They felt that goras treated them with less respect, were outright racist at times, and made generalizations about all Indians. The discrimination Indians encountered from other expatriate groups and from locals was not simply based on racial stereotypes. Discrimination is embedded into the employment structure of the UAE and most Gulf countries: companies often advertise for specific nationalities only, turn down Indians (even those educated in the UK or US) because they supposedly do not have proper English skills, reject non-white Westerners from consideration for jobs advertised as “Western-educated only,” and base salaries and perks on the nationality of the employee. In addition, Indians and other Asians, unlike North Americans and Europeans, cannot enter the UAE without a visa (others can receive a visa upon arrival). Therefore, they have greater insecurity—if their job is terminated they have to leave the UAE and cannot return unless they get another job or a visit visa from India. This is compounded by the fact that many companies, if employees break contracts or have to be terminated, put them on a “blacklist,” which means they are ineligible for employment in the UAE for six months. For my informants, then, discrimination was experienced systematically as well as through individual incidents, leaving them with the feeling that they are “second-class” in Dubai, no matter what their jobs, salaries, or achievements. The following quotes are examples of the types of discrimination described to me by Indian middle-class employees in Dubai:

The same job that we do the foreigner is always given more money for that. Like if I earned for six thousand, the person from US or UK will always get 10 or 12 thousand, almost double. They get all the perks,
like if we apply for leave once a year they question us like “why do you want to go now?” Like if we want to go in December they say, “it’s a busy period,” but if a foreigner wants to go at that time during Christmas they can go. Everywhere they are given preference.

—Joyce, a South Indian Christian who works in real estate

There is a person in the office. She doesn’t even have a degree—from London—doesn’t have any real experience, and she gets paid as much as I do. It makes you wonder. I am a manager and she is supposed to be helping me with my work. It makes me think if they can pay her so much, and she just started, why can’t they pay me? We have editors in the office, Indian and English. There is a big difference in the way they are paid. You could see when my husband was going for interviews, racism is a big problem. They would say, “you don’t speak Queen’s English,” and he would say, “well you can’t say that,” but they do it.

—Padma, born and raised in Dubai and working for a magazine

I deal with some customers. We go into meetings with a gora manager. You know they are talking rubbish in the meeting. You are trying to convey the right message. They will shine you up.¹⁰ They make it like you are not important, if there is another gora in the same grade and same category, if I say something he will shine me up, but if he says something it is acceptable. Performance appraisals, you will get a good, they will get an outstanding. If you go and complain or ask they say they will look into it, that’s all.

—Charlie, an engineer from Bombay who works for Emirates Airlines

These quotes convey a number of attitudes toward the discriminatory and hierarchical system of expatriate work in the UAE. The first quote from Joyce is interesting in that she is referring to whites but she refers to them as “foreigners.” White expatriates are not part of her shared sense of non-belonging with other expatriates in Dubai, but rather direct contributors to her experience of being overlooked and taken for granted. She is a Christian, and therefore the Christmas holidays are also the most important time of the year for her, but she feels that her managers consider the needs of “foreigners” much more important. These managers, in fact, are often also white, and are therefore blamed for discrimination
more than Emiratis, who are the official owners of companies, or Arab and Indian elites, who often fill some of the high level positions in well-established local companies.\footnote{The other complaint I often heard from Indians is that they are not paid based upon their education or skill set. In addition, many companies are happy to employ less educated and less-skilled Europeans because they think it improves their image for clients and customers. Padma's quote about lower-level Europeans earning more than she does was something I heard many times in my interviews. Many people would actually tell me that they were working in jobs they were overqualified to do, simply because higher-level jobs were not slated for Indians or other Asians. And, just as they claimed that whites got more pay for less skills, my informants also related many incidents in which the standards that white and Emirati workers were held to were much lower than those expected from Indians, something that is reflected in Charlie's comment above about evaluations.}

I experienced firsthand the high expectations placed on Indian workers when I stayed with my cousin, his wife, and their young daughter for the first few weeks I was living in Dubai. My cousin works in IT for a local airline. Technically, all employees are entitled one round-trip ticket back home every year for themselves and their immediate family members. However, because most employees of this airline (and most residents of Dubai in general) are Indian, the flights to India are very full, and employees are given lowest priority for getting seats. The company has done nothing to alleviate this problem, and for the past several years, my cousin's family has been paying out of pocket to return to India on other carriers.

My cousin's vacations were never fixed, either. While my American and Canadian friends always knew months in advance when they were going to be taking their Christmas, Eid, or summer holiday, my cousin would always have to postpone his holiday plans at the last minute in order to accommodate his managers and co-workers while they were away. This meant that he often missed Diwali and other important festivals in India, and also that he had to remain alone in Dubai while his wife and daughter went to Mumbai on summer holiday. He would often work over ten hours a day and on weekends as well. While almost all of the expatriates I met in Dubai from many nationalities were overworked, Asians had the least ability to negotiate or protest against company demands due to their higher levels of job and visa insecurity. This frustration and sense of being trapped and
underappreciated was at the core of every conversation I had with salaried middle-class Indians in Dubai. They felt they were exercising free market choice in coming to Dubai to work, but their direct experiences of racism created the feeling of not having the ability to choose or negotiate.

While in the workplace Indians were most disdainful of racism from whites, they also attributed the racial and national hierarchy in Dubai to government institutions, and to other Asian and Arab expatriates, who participated in keeping Indians out of certain spaces and certain positions. My informants reported that, while in government offices customers are now automatically assigned numbers, previously “the westerner would literally be invited to the front of the line,” and that Emirati government officials would “throw” passports and documents at them instead of handing them over politely. They described many incidents with police in which Europeans and Arabs were automatically given the benefit of the doubt. They remembered when the Dubai airport used to have separate lines for Asians and Europeans. And they reported a number of cases in which they or their friends were not allowed into bars or nightclubs, or were ignored in restaurants and shops. Often, the bouncers and servers that treated them this way were also Indian, something that my informants attributed to rules passed down from non-South Asian “higher-ups.”

Thus, the feelings of racial discrimination extended out of the workplace into all aspects of my informants’ lives. They did acknowledge that the government had done a lot over the last few years to systemize bureaucratic processes (through number systems and enforced lines, for example), and they were also happy that the local English media had started to actively “name and shame” establishments that did not allow single South Asian men. However, they felt these moves were minor and did not alleviate their feelings of being “second-class” in Dubai. In fact, they felt that discriminatory practices had actually increased as a direct result of the influx of more multinational companies and more whites into managerial positions, and as a result of changes among Emiratis, who have turned away from India as a cultural center and are now oriented toward the West. The globalized free market that is supposed to offer opportunities for everyone remained something that my informants expressed a strong belief in, however. They considered their negative experiences of being Indian in Dubai to be indications of the failure of Dubai’s free market and a foreshadowing of imminent collapse or a burst of Dubai’s bubble, due to the free market forces that were being impeded by whites and locals.
Racial Consciousness and Narratives of Self-Management

I argue that my interviews and conversations with middle-class Indians in Dubai revealed a new subjectivity that was a direct result of their migration—racial consciousness. Their identities were in fact changed by their experiences in Dubai, and they were able to identify with other South Asians (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan) as one subcontinental group unified through the treatment they received in Dubai due to their place of origin and their skin color. However, even as Indians exhibited a racial consciousness that was particular to the Dubai context, they also reified certain divisions among South Asians based on class, region, nationality, religion, and language. And they continued to rehearse many neoliberal discourses of self-management and personal responsibility. In fact, their ability to simultaneously exhibit racial consciousness and distinguish themselves from “other” Indians worked to solidify their belief in market opportunity—their middle-class status became something they had earned, and they were therefore able to deny their own participation in the boundary-making practices that uphold a racialized and classed social hierarchy in the UAE. My informants’ experiences of racism and practices of differentiation resonate with other accounts of middle-class diasporic subjects in places like the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Grewal 2005, Ong 1999, Raj 2003). It is therefore the conjunction of my informants’ domain of the economy, academic definitions of diaspora which separate the cultural from the economic, and Emirati state discourses about migrants’ temporary status that makes Indians in Dubai appear to be unlike South Asian migrant groups in other parts of the world.

Shared experiences of discrimination among Indians in Dubai led to shared identities. One informant, who is also an academic, summarized:

…the sense of identity is strengthened because there is a sense of discrimination against all Indians simply because a good number of Indians here are unskilled and not too well qualified and get paid less. So I tend to get the feeling, the discrimination that I sense makes me want to identify as an Indian, to show them that India is not what they think it is, that there is a lot of diversity. For every two people who are unskilled there could definitely be at least one Indian that is very skilled. And there is definitely a difference in the pay structure in the region, where you have Westerners getting very good pay, followed by Arabs and nationals, then followed by Asians. All that makes me want
to identify more as an Indian, so when I get the opportunity I try to make it a point to say that I am Indian...

The quote above contains many themes that were present in my other interviews as well, themes that both reinforce and undermine a shared identity. Middle-class Indians felt connections to South Asians from other countries, such as Pakistan. While Pakistan and India have a long history of adversity and many Indians in India openly despise Pakistanis and vice versa, in Dubai both Indians and Pakistanis told me that they were essentially one culture. But within this sense of connection, my Indian informants also made distinctions between themselves and Pakistanis. Non-Muslim Indians often told me that Pakistanis get better treatment in the Gulf because they are Muslim, and particular groups of Pakistani men (like Pathans and Baluchis, as well as Afghans, who were included within “Pakistani” by many Indians) were singled out by middle-class Indians as dangerous. For example, a distant relative who lives in Dubai told me that I should not take taxis alone at night because of “Afghani” drivers. I was also in a car with an Indian family when a man in traditional Pakistani dress (light-colored pajama-kurta and skullcap) walked by. One of the young children in the car yelled out, “Pathan!” and was immediately shushed by her parents. These are terms for ethnic identities but are often deployed as insults, and it was clear to me that many of my informants were educating their children or at least exposing them to their own prejudices against Pakistanis.

Similarly, middle-class Indians also expressed solidarity and compassion for Indian laborers, who hail mainly from the state of Kerala and along India’s Malabar coast. Many people told me they could not help but feel angry when they saw the working conditions of Indian laborers, and that locals or other expatriates would not feel as bad because they are not Indians. But, middle-class Indians also attributed some of the racism they experienced in their lives to laborers, arguing that because uneducated and unskilled workers constitute the majority of Indians in the Gulf, people assume that all Indians are uneducated and unskilled. Therefore, my informants’ racial consciousness was always qualified by an assertion of middle-class status, a status that they used to claim that they deserved less racism than laborers, and a status that made them feel superior to lower-paid Indians.

Embedded in this process of differentiation was also the idea that Indians bring discrimination upon themselves. Many suggested that if
only they practiced self-management and greater self-respect, the system might not be so discriminatory. Thus, while criticizing a racist system, my informants also put some of the blame for that racist system on Indians themselves, but only on certain groups of Indians who they counted as distinct from their own identities, subjectivities, and levels of achievement and status. "Indian" could mean a multitude of things in any one interview, I quickly learned. It could indicate a sense of shared racial identity, it could indicate a stereotype that others had of Indians, it could indicate "those" Indians (the ones responsible for the stereotype), and it could also indicate a sense of non-belonging in Dubai. My conversation with a married couple, Rami and Ritu, who had been in Dubai for 20 years and had spent several years in Bahrain before that, exemplifies the ambivalent and multiple uses of "Indian" in my interviews with middle-class migrants. Ritu is Hindu and Rami Muslim. They both work as administrators in higher education in Dubai:

NV: Tell me about Indians in Dubai. What kinds of jobs do they usually have?
Ritu: Indians. There are too many here and in every job, from cleaning the roads, clearing garbage, to bank directors, biggest doctors. I think in all the fields Indians are more prominent.
Rami: Because most of them are laborers and low-category employees so people think Indians are all poor and illiterate and good for nothing.
Ritu: Yeah, like they will take any sort of thing. Without questioning, they will accept it. They will not be like Britishers.
Rami: and we accept anything so we get that treatment. But there is discrimination in my workplace.

As the conversation continued, I asked Rami and Ritu whether discrimination was common in Dubai, and they said yes, and then explained to me why:

Rami: As long as Indians don’t respect themselves there will be no respect for them. We accept anything. We accept any salary, we accept any job, we accept any crap, and we are responsible for it. We have lowered our levels. We have lower-level standards, and that’s what we are paying for. You won’t find a white man sweeping the
roads or cleaning the drains but Indians will willingly do it. And 10
guys will do it cheaper than 10 other guys.
Ritu: Maybe he [the white man] is a taxi driver over there, but over
here he won’t show that. He won’t be a driver over here. There are
too many of them [Indians], that is the reason. Keralites all of them.
Rami: We have lowered our standards all over the world. It is com-
pulsion. They are compelled to get out of the country, compelled to
take whatever they get, so there is no future for Indians in this coun-
try. It will get worse.

The constant slippage between “we” and “they” when Rami and Ritu
described Indians indicated that while there were certain modes of shared
identity, middle-class Indians perpetuated some of the very stereotypes
about Indians that they did not like. In doing so, they removed themselves
from the production of a system in which Indians get lower salaries and less
respect. Instead, they lamented the fact that they were forced into a system
which “other” Indians helped to create. It was because other Indians did
not manage themselves in terms of challenging the system that my inform-
ants were stuck in a system that they themselves could not challenge. This
roundabout logic was brought about by the simultaneity of two contrasting
modes of identification among the Indian middle-class—as neoliberal par-
ticipants in a free market economy, and as a systematically oppressed and
disenfranchised racial group. Thus, the necessity to distinguish among
Indians was just as strong as the necessity to identify with them. Most often,
since laborers were from South India and supposedly all spoke Malayalam,
they were referred to as “Maloos.” Again, this is an ethnic term deployed by
many Keralites to describe themselves but it also takes on a derogatory con-
notation in the Gulf because it is infused with assumptions of class, lack of
education, and lack of self-respect. For example when I asked Simi, a
research assistant for a think tank, about the positives and negatives of
working in Dubai, she said:

Positives, we are the majority. Every second person you meet. It is
easy to communicate from a taxi driver to a grocery shop to a
restaurant. Everyone is Indian so you feel at home. This is like a sec-
ond home and nowhere else but the UAE is like that. Negatives,
because Indians have been so dominating, they have had enough of
Indians. That feeling, they generalize about Indians, all laborers, all
Maloo. Not all people, a lot respect, but there are segments of people that have this thing about Indians.

Because Simi herself is South Indian, she felt the stereotypes about “Maloo” very strongly and constantly separated herself in our conversations from other South Indians by focusing on her cosmopolitanism, education, and self-motivation. The idea that all South Indians are uneducated laborers is something that was repeated especially in my conversations with North Indians. Rohit, the Punjabi architect who I quoted in the beginning of the article as a self-described “economic immigrant,” told me why he is always reminding people that he is North Indian:

Whenever some discussion comes up, especially with Western expats, you have to identify that you are a North Indian, because the mindset mostly with Western expats is with the South Indians, because they are the majority here and unfortunately they are doing the menial work, the low strata, so to the Western expat everybody is a typically South Indian—Maloo, Malabari. I have nothing against them but this is a mindset of a Western expat and even Arab expatriates. That everything is from the lower stratum. So you have to say yes, I am from up north, I am a professional.

Not only did middle-class Indians distinguish themselves from low-wage laborers through ethnicity, education, and region, they also felt that they were quite distinct from the Indian elite in Dubai. Elites were seen as part of the oppression of other Indians because they were employers, and there were ethnic parameters to middle-class understandings of who constitutes the Indian elite in Dubai as well. Elites were seen as less hard-working than middle-class and lower-class Indians and resting on their longevity in the Gulf and their connections, and thus not fairly participating in Dubai’s free market. This is an excerpt from my conversation with Charlie, the engineer for Emirates Airlines. I asked him whether Indians were particularly prominent in certain industries:

Charlie: Sindhis, Punjabis who are here, they are here for donkey’s years. If you look at the gold market, if you look at the stock market, it is all them. It is like a mafia. Nobody can even enter it because they are here for 40 years in the same business. There are
also Indians who own shops in their own name. Normally, you can’t have a shop or business in your own name.

NV: How do they have that?

Charlie: Because they have been from so many years over here. Like the guy who was the leader of Mont Blanc, the shop is in his name only. He is not an LLC. He’s got no Arab partner. No partner.

These elite Indians were also seen as “corrupted” by Western lifestyles and money, and therefore they were not self-managing subjects in the eyes of my informants. Simi spoke about the sexual promiscuity of elite girls, and of the excessive drinking among elite groups:

If you see the business community they have a different way, the Sindhi and Guju business communities living a very different life, and their daughters are having a very different lifestyle and culture. So you cannot say that all the Indians are having the same culture, no.¹³

The stereotypes of Indian elites were very similar to the stereotypes about Emiratis—that they were excessive consumers, lazy, did not want to work hard, and unfairly got wealthy off of the labor of others.¹⁴ Within these discourses, middle-class Indians in Dubai reified neoliberal technologies of belonging and subjectivity in which the ideal citizen is supposed to be an entrepreneur of himself, and that under the conditions of free markets, states should see “self-governing subjects as preferred citizens” (Ong 2006).

This goes along with a shift in global discourses and technologies of governance from biopolitics to ethico-politics, which focuses on risk-taking, enterprise, and self-management (Rose 1996, Ong 2006). Belonging among this group, then, is claimed on two levels—they see themselves as the ideal subjects of Dubai in that they are hard-working, self-sufficient, and educated, but they also see themselves as part of a racialized majority that is not treated equally, and therefore exhibit a subjectivity based in shared oppression and hardship that comes directly out of the particular context of Dubai.

The common complaint of mistreatment in Dubai was accompanied by explanations of why Indians could do nothing about this mistreatment. However, many of my informants leveraged certain forums to register their discontent with the “system” and acted in ways that can be construed as resistance. They showed that their feelings of being “trapped” in Dubai were results of practices of calculated risk and self-management, which made
them stay in Dubai despite racist hierarchies instead of returning to India or moving elsewhere. My informants’ narratives often stressed the superiority of India over Dubai in terms of economic opportunities. Middle-class Indians constantly referred to India’s economic boom and many told me that they could probably earn more money in India now than they are earning in Dubai. They also told me that newer Indian migrants are “not allowing themselves” to get stepped on because they are not as desperate to leave India. But my informants, for the most part, had no immediate plans to move or change jobs. They asserted their options, even as they complained about Dubai, as a way to showcase their choice and agency as self-managing subjects who participated in creating their current life conditions. The things that were wrong with Dubai did not negate their belief in Dubai as a potentially free market that could offer extensive economic opportunities. Instead, they criticized the actors, institutions, and practices that were impeding upon making Dubai’s potential a reality. And in so doing, they not only exhibited belonging through public forms of critique and resistance, but also as members of Dubai society, in the present and also in the future—a future that would self-correct (as all markets supposedly do) through a burst or a collapse and finally even the playing field for Indians.

Racial consciousness that came out of experiences of discrimination, therefore, was a new subjectivity for middle-class Indians in Dubai, but it was not a challenge to their middle-class identifications or to their belief in a free market economy. In fact, racism, as it was attributed to the failure of globalization in Dubai, was a catalyst for even further domainining the economy as distinct from culture and society. Identity and social relations got in the way of Dubai’s free market and therefore impeded upon market fundamentalism, but not at the cost of a belief in the market as the driving force in the contemporary world. Through a racial consciousness that was firmly rooted in middle-class identification and a neoliberal representation by my informants of themselves as “self-managing” subjects, middle-class Indians in Dubai actually produced a globalized economy that was distinct from race, nationality, culture, and the state. In so doing however, they also asserted a form of belonging that could not be contained by economic definitions, and included staking geographical, historical, and cultural claims to Dubai.

In the following section, I consider a second subjectivity that emerged among my informants as a result of migrating to Dubai: consumer citizenship. Unlike their narratives about racism, consumption was considered a
solely economic practice and in some ways a sign of market success. However, through their narratives and their practices, Indians in Dubai created forms of belonging to Dubai and the UAE through consumption, and distinguished themselves from Indians in India through commodities. While consumption would seem to be a practice that reifies a globalized economy and disrupts the boundaries of nation-states, consumer citizenship practices among middle-class Indians in Dubai actually worked to reinforce territorialized identities and produce the UAE nation-state as distinct from the economy and from other nation-states.

**Consumer Citizenship**

As I noted above, Indians mostly expressed the differences between India and Dubai in economic terms. They told me about the conveniences and luxuries they had in Dubai, like air-conditioning, better cars, cleaner restaurants, better electronics, lower crime, and well-maintained streets. In my interviews I regularly asked if India felt different now when they returned for visits, and most people said yes, focusing on the difficulties of readjusting to blackouts, the lack of air-conditioning, overcrowding, the chaotic roads, the beggars, and the attitudes of their friends and relatives, who expected money and gifts. For example, Bharati said:

> I know people who absolutely love Dubai and they are used to the comfort level. You know, like there are no power cuts, any other problems, no water problem, you can still have a housemaid, you can use a/c 24 hours and not worry. From that point of view you are comfortable. It is difficult to move back to India once you get used to this. People have difficulty adjusting.

I argue that reading these narratives solely in terms of the “economic” constitutes participating in the very domaining practices that remove expatriate subjects from the possibility of belonging in the UAE. In fact, each and every one of my informants expressed a change in their own subjectivity through a reference to Dubai’s “conveniences.” These conveniences were not outside of their sense of self but were forms of difference between themselves and the people they had left behind in India, and their conceptions of India itself had changed through the process of experiencing and consuming Dubai’s “convenience.”
My informants often felt that Indians in India, most often members of their extended family, did not understand them—family members assumed that because they lived in Dubai they were well-off, pressured them for money, and did not realize the hardships of living in the Gulf. Informants also told me that they had become more open-minded since coming to Dubai because of the exposure they had to other nationalities and cultures, an exposure they often described through references to international products and services. Because of this exposure, they now felt greater difficulty relating to the close-mindedness of friends and family back “home.” This change in subjectivity comes about through the practices of consumption and the interactions between people and their material surroundings (Appadurai 1986, Gottdeiner 2000, Miller et al. 1998). My informants expressed their belonging to Dubai through their patterns of consumption, both of Dubai’s luxury goods, and also of Dubai’s “cosmopolitan” atmosphere.

In liberal theory, the assumption is that identity is based on citizenship in terms of rights and territorial belonging to a nation-state (Anderson 1991, Turner 1993). However, as Grewal argues, contemporary identities are often transnational and defined through consumer practices—in the 1990s, consumer culture made certain subjectivities possible for South Asians in the US, for example, and “discourses of individuality yoked freedom to participation in consumer culture and associated political freedoms with self-improvement” (Grewal 2005). Similarly, middle-class Indians in Dubai associated consumption with “freedom.” My informants argued that rising costs in Dubai made remittance more difficult. While this is true, the rise of consumer culture in Dubai through branding, shopping festivals, and lotteries has made consumption and consumer culture a more central part of people’s lives, and disposable income a mode of freedom. However, instead of producing transnational or cosmopolitan identities, consumption patterns among expatriate Indians simultaneously reified national identities while also producing forms of belonging to Dubai.

When I visited Dubai for the first time, the only person I knew there was my cousin. His wife and family were in India for the summer, and he was working most of the time. However, he found a few evenings to show my husband and myself around Dubai. Every evening we spent together, he took us to a shopping mall and showed us what was on offer in Dubai. He told us about lotteries in which people buy in for 500 dirhams (a lot of money for middle-class Indians) but have good chances of winning a kilo.
of gold, a BMW, or free rent for a year. He often participated in these lotteries (though he had never won), and his friends and colleagues did as well. For my cousin, driving us around Dubai and showing us shopping malls and luxury hotels was a form of hospitality—he was showing us his city. And he insisted it was his “home” we were visiting, and therefore, even though he was clearly overworked and underpaid, he refused to let us pay for any meals or drinks or even souvenirs.

Other informants similarly took me to shopping malls for weekend outings and told me about the various products I could buy in Dubai. Showing one’s Dubai life to outsiders is done through showing off the possibilities for consumption. But most people could not afford to consume the things they were showing me. They took me to malls with designer European labels but rarely entered shops, or they drove me past fancy hotels but did not take me inside. Consumer citizenship was a way in which my informants asserted the possibility of their equality—they showcased the options, but rarely partook of them; and the spectacle of consumption constituted a practice of belonging in and of itself. My informants consumed the consumer culture of Dubai and formed their belonging through this culture, even more than through the actual consumption of material goods. Yes, they did spend money on children’s toys, eating out, movies, and clothes—money that they would not have been able to spend in extended family situations in India, but their belonging to Dubai was to a site of consumption rather than to the commodities themselves.

Friends and family back in India also considered Dubai a site of consumption, which was part of the reason migrants felt increased pressure to bring back commodities like electronics, clothing, and gold jewelry as gifts. Dubai’s brands and shops are so well known in India that family members ask for them by name. Many scholars of migration have noted how the consumption of Gulf culture in the form of commodities and remittances is changing social status and family relationships in India (Kurien 2002, Nambiar 1995, Osella and Osella 2001, Sekher 1997). As one of my informants told me, “Kerala is very much Dubai and Dubai is very much Kerala.” This contributed to the claiming of Dubai as an Indian cultural space by my informants, but also created a tension between their own desire to consume and their sense of material responsibility for remittance.

Dubai’s consumer culture also provided ways in which middle-class Indians could be in public without having to feel that they were excluded due to a lack of resources. In fact, the only real “public” spaces in Dubai
are shopping malls. They are the only major places people can congregate without having to pay money. Coffee shops require that one make a purchase, and even parks cost money for entry, and are therefore not “public.” For example, Za’abeel, a new extravagant park near my apartment with light-up sidewalk tiles, 20-foot tall animal balloons, and a gigantic children’s play area, cost five dirhams for entry. Therefore, during cooler evenings, many South Asians exercised by taking walks around the perimeter of the park, the only way they could walk outside without having to contend with traffic signals and cars. Public space and consumption are therefore inextricably connected, and my informants’ practices of consumption constituted a mode of public belonging in Dubai.

**Gendered Belonging**

Middle-class Indians particularly differed in their experiences of consumer citizenship based on gender. Women had less negative things to say about migration and described to me more often how Dubai offered them increased “freedom.” This freedom was twofold: first, they felt physically safer and this increased their mobility and independence. For example, Shalini, who is divorced and lives alone, told me: “It is very safe compared to other countries. I feel Dubai is really, really safe. We used to go for movies before marriage and never had any problems, second show after we finished work in the hotel...we used to go just girls and come back—absolutely safe.”

The increased independence and mobility women felt in Dubai was also due to the lack of extended family, who they felt often kept an eye on them, did not let them go out as much, and criticized their actions. Being in the Gulf was a way for some women to work outside of the home, have access to new experiences, and keep disposable income for themselves and their immediate nuclear family. Salih, in a study of Moroccan women workers in Italy, argues that commodities create home spaces for Moroccan women, who think of Morocco as home when in Italy but do not feel at home when there (Salih 2002). Thus, practices of consumption can highlight tensions of where home really is. And, as Johnson has documented in the case of Filipina workers in the Gulf, the consumption of certain commodities (like clothes and fast food) is an assertion of identity, and oftentimes, a form of resistance against other kinds of consumption that imbricate women into particular gender and family dynamics (like
the buying of gold and gifts for family members back home) (Johnson 1998). For women, therefore, certain forms of consumption provide ways of gaining personal power, and many of my female informants echoed this sentiment. In the case of Dubai, many middle-class Indian women also reported not feeling at home in India, and they purchased commodities that reflected a tension about where home really is. They often purchased brand name clothing and other items for themselves and their children, and ate out in restaurants with their families, but at the same time they spent a lot of money building and furnishing a house back in India that they rarely got to see, and a lot of time collecting gifts to distribute when they returned to India.

Sometimes, the very things that women found liberating were things that men had difficulty with, and some men told me about how Dubai, because of its material “freedoms,” put pressure on families. Charlie, who had divorced after his migration to Dubai, told me that living in Dubai is especially stressful for men:

…that stress as such, and a lot of guys that want to make money they keep their families back so that is also a lot of stress. And I know a lot of families breaking up here, more cases of Indian marriages not working out. It is very open market here, it is very free, and people get into all sorts of stuff, and back home they are sending money and they get used to that. I know loads of people that have changed after coming here.

Men and women both lamented the fact that Dubai had fewer “family values” than India, pointing out the prevalence of prostitutes, the number of people they knew who were having affairs, the lasciviousness of Arab men, and the promiscuity of European and East Asian women as threats to the family. However, this was less of an issue for women and they were more inclined to tell me about the good things Dubai offers. While men’s narratives revolved more around racial consciousness and shared experiences of discrimination, middle-class women more often asserted consumer citizenship as a form of belonging. I asked a married couple in a joint interview, “where is home?” The husband answered, “back home in India I feel home,” while his wife simultaneously said, “I feel quality of life over here is much better than back at home.” This was a common difference between men and women.
However, men as well as women practiced consumer citizenship in numerous ways, and all of my informants were in a struggle between a sense of responsibility and obligation to family members in India and a desire to assert their independence through practices of consumption. Their understandings of consumption were also through a middle-class neoliberal subjectivity that focused on choice and management. They were therefore constantly focusing on the need to self-manage disposable income, and they often critiqued other people’s consumption in terms of a lack of self-management—for example, they focused on how Emiratis were “wasting” their wealth on cars and designer clothes instead of responsibly investing it.

Emiratis themselves also practice consumer citizenship, but their assertions of propriety over the UAE as a country are made in terms of formal citizenship—rights, welfare benefits, and territoriality. This reifies the Emirati state and separates it out from the economy. However, by asserting their own belonging in terms of their passports, and by denying the social and cultural aspects of consumption, middle-class Indian expatriates also produce the UAE nation and national identity as based in rights and territoriality. Consumption for my informants was seen as part of their participation in neoliberal market practices and not as a form of belonging to Dubai. However, as I have explored, there were many ways in which middle-class Indians staked claims to Dubai through its consumer culture.\textsuperscript{16}

Consumer citizenship and racial consciousness simultaneously produced diasporas, nation-states, and a globalized market as distinct domains. But in so doing they also created forms of belonging for Indians in Dubai. These forms of belonging exceed and undermine definitions based on separate abstractable domains, and thus require the constant performance and reiteration of the boundaries around economies, cultures, states, and nations. Emirati governmental institutions, citizens, and expatriates all participate in these processes. To take the assertion of “economic” migration and passport-based belonging at face value is to therefore ignore the ways in which the narratives and practices of Indians in Dubai produce economic migration and passport-based belonging, while also exposing the instability of these structures. It is important for theorists of globalization, therefore, to consider their informants not as outside of their own theoretical frameworks (as “objects” of study), but rather as co-producers of those very frameworks. In the case of diasporas, middle-class migrants and academics deploy very similar vocabularies, and have overlapping domaining logics.
Conclusion: Rethinking Diaspora

The varying experiences, subjectivities, and forms of belonging among and between different groups of Indians in Dubai highlight the difficulty in studying diasporas as bounded socio-cultural units. There is no one Indian diaspora in Dubai, and often, the subjectivities of Indians were formed directly through the exclusion or denial of other Indians. For example, as I have explored in this article, many middle-class people used “Indian” as a political consciousness that they posited against whites and Arabs. However, their racial consciousness also relied deeply on separating themselves from both working-class laborers and elites. The racial consciousness of this group is inseparable from class, and in fact is something that is based fully upon a sense of middle-class identity and a belief in middle-class values and practices. My informants believed in market fundamentalism and the possibility of economic success based in meritocracy, and they policed their own and others’ practices in order to be self-managing subjects. They were neither “those” Indians who took abuse and worked in demeaning positions, nor “those” Indians who flaunted their wealth and were corrupted by the materialism of Dubai.

Practices of consumption were also very important to my informants’ lives in Dubai, but they were constantly working within a tension which allowed them to assert consumer citizenship in the UAE and independence from family in India, on the one hand, and to fulfill the economic responsibilities and obligations of migration, on the other. In fact, it was the ability to manage this tension and not be overcome by it that contributed to middle-class Indians’ understandings of themselves as self-managing subjects. However, consumption was seen as an economic practice that was separate from UAE national identity, and from other social and cultural identities. This contributed to furthering the distinction between the economy, the nation, and their own cultural communities—reinforcing the notion that belonging in the UAE (and everywhere else) is passport-based and territorial. The globalized economy for my informants was distinct from and not a challenge to nation-state sovereignty. However, the economy was also the foundation upon which my informants understood other domains such as society, culture, and the state.

We need to rethink diaspora in the literature, but the question of how to rethink it is not through new definitions of who and what counts as diasporic. I find arguments about the definition of diaspora to miss the point—diasporas as bounded groups are impossible to abstract out of
their particular contexts or to consider more generally as one transnational formation. But the concept is also not one that has no academic value. Instead, I have focused in this article on considering a range of subjectivities and practices that I call “diasporic,” not bounded by identity and nationality, but rather enabled by migration to Dubai and the experiences of living there (Siu 2005). I have explored how my informants themselves define home and belonging, the contradictions and alignments between their narratives and practices, and their role in producing the very domains that South Asian diaspora literature often takes for granted—the economy, the state, the nation, and culture.

ENDNOTES

1 Another way in which diasporas are connected to the economy in academic literature is through an exploration of commodities and their role in the production and reproduction of culture. Commodities such as Bhangra music and Indian food, for example, through their production, circulation, and consumption, enable new forms of identification among South Asian diasporic populations and transnational networks. See for example Gopinath (1995) and Mankekar (2002). Here again, there is a presumed causal relationship in which cultural formations emerge out of something called the “economic” and yet are distinct from it.

2 In this case I am drawing upon Spivak’s critique of postcolonial scholars, who, she argues, do not recognize that they themselves are complicit with certain diasporic populations that share their assumptions about mobility and identity in rendering other less-privileged groups non-diasporic (Spivak 1996).

3 Recent statements by the Emirati government emphasize that foreigners, who make up over eighty percent of the population and over ninety percent of the work force, are not “migrants” but rather “guest workers,” and proposals have been made to limit the tenure of foreigners, particularly those from Asia, to a maximum of six years. In addition, foreigners in the UAE rely upon work visas for their residency, and there are no formal processes of naturalization for non-Arabs (except in some cases of foreign women marrying Emirati nationals). South Asians constitute the largest population in the UAE, and are estimated to make up over half of the population. Most academic accounts of South Asian migration to the Gulf, like state discourses, portray it as a result of oil wealth accrued in the late twentieth century, and therefore recent and temporary. However, there is a long history of South Asian trade and settlement in the region, and particularly in Dubai, that predates oil and even the British colonial presence. Under the British Raj government, these earlier trade connections were intensified and the Gulf was administered through Bombay, increasing the connections between the Subcontinent and the Gulf. Some scholars argue that it is actually this trade and the smuggling industries (especially around gold) that developed after Indian independence that are responsible for Dubai’s current wealth and “free” market model, not oil (see for example Al-Sayegh 1998, Das Gupta 2004).

4 This article is based on data collected from semi-structured interviews with forty-two Indian nationals whose tenure in Dubai ranged from five years to over thirty. This research was conducted in Dubai between January and December 2006.
5 One dollar is approximately 3.65 dirhams, so 4000 dirhams is about 1095 dollars.
6 Emirati citizenship is patrilineal. One can only be an Emirati citizen if born to an Emirati father. In some cases, Emirati women can petition for citizenship for their children if the father is unknown or has abandoned the family. Migration law also follows a patrilineal model—children born in the UAE are automatically considered to be the nationality of their fathers, and their visas are tied to their fathers as well.

7 Emirati citizens receive free health care, subsidized housing, free education (including higher education abroad), guaranteed jobs at higher pay scales, money for marriage expenses, and access to government loans.

8 Even though I am an American of South Asian origin, my informants did not consider me to be “Indian” like them; however, they also did not include me in the category of “European.”

9 Salaries in the UAE and other Gulf countries are usually set based on the nationality and race of the employee, and not on skill-set. Generally, Emiratis are paid the highest salaries, followed by white Europeans and North Americans, followed by foreign Arabs, with South Asians, Africans, and other Asians earning the lowest salaries for the same jobs. Whites from non-Western countries like South Africa, Australia, and the former Eastern bloc are also routinely paid less than whites from England, Canada, France, or the US. The justifications given by employers for these practices is that most foreigners (especially those coming from impoverished countries) remit, and the standard of living is lower in their home countries than in the UAE, so the money goes further.

10 “Shine up” means criticize/berate.

11 While my informants did describe some experiences of racism from local Arabs and Arab immigrants, the majority of their focus when it came to racial consciousness was on their standing vis-à-vis whites.

12 “Asian” in Dubai and other parts of the former British empire usually refers to South Asians, and many of my informants used it in this way. However, when I use this term, I am referring to all migrants from Asia, including those from the Philippines and East Asia, who face similar hiring difficulties and visa restrictions as South Asians.

13 Sindhi and Gujarati are ethnic/regional groups that constitute much of Dubai’s Indian elite, and have long-standing trade and business relations with the Gulf. “Guj” is a colloquial (and sometimes derogatory) way of speaking about Gujaratis.

14 While Muslim Indians sometimes expressed a sense of shared identity with non-Muslim Indians and sometimes told me about how they were not self-managing enough, Hindus and Christians often told me that Muslim Indians get preferential treatment because of their religion, and that they start acting more pious in the Gulf, both because it is easier to be Muslim there, but also because it gives them privileges which were construed as “unfair” by non-Muslims.

15 There has been some scholarly attention to the role of commodities and consumption in the rise of middle-class identities in South Asia (see for example Liechty 2001, Mazzarella 2003).

16 For many Muslim Indians, consumption was part of the practice and performance of Islam as well. Some of the women I interviewed had adopted abaya after coming to Dubai (abaya is a distinctly Gulf Arab form of Muslim dress) and told me that it was easier to be “truly” Muslim in Dubai than it was in India, even though it was simultaneously difficult to be South Asian. The practices of consuming Islamic dress and other religious products and services constituted a type of consumer citizenship that staked claims to Dubai and also to a larger sense of a transnational Muslim community (ummah). Osella and Osella have also noted how, for many South Asian Muslims, the Gulf is considered a reference point for their understandings of how to practice an
Islamic modernity (Osella and Osella 2001). The narratives of Muslim Indians in my interviews for the most part were very similar to those of Hindu, Christian, and Sikh Indians. However, the particularities of the way Muslim Indians imagine the Gulf in terms of notions of Islamic modernity and ummah warrants further attention, but is outside of the scope of this article.

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