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BAKIRATHI MANI
PHOTOGRAPHY, REPRESENTATION, SOUTH ASIAN AMERICA

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A CAMERA OBSCURA BOOK

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PHOTOGRAPHY, REPRESENTATION,
SOUTH ASIAN AMERICA

i n g

BAKIRATHI MANI

e m p i r e

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FOR MARIO,
AND FOR THE INFINITE LOVE
WE SHARE WITH OUR SON,
AMAR

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I have been nourished by the women who joined me from preschool through high school at the International School of the Sacred Heart, Tokyo, and I want to acknowledge two in particular here. While writing and revisiting the events of chapter 1, I could not forget the irrepressible energy and laughter of my classmate Rahma Salie, who died on September 11, 2001. In all our years together, Marlisa Okamoto Butler lifted me up with her strength, intelligence, and poise. Her death on August 16, 2018, came just as I finished a draft of this book. I cherish and deeply mourn the forty years of friendship that Marlisa and I shared.

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Because this is also a project about archives, I record here the lives of my grandmothers, both named Bhagheerathy. Both of my grandmothers had an elementary school education; both were married as young girls, my maternal grandmother at age nine and my paternal grandmother at sixteen; and both my grandmothers lived their entire lives in rural Kerala, raising nine children each in the decades before and after independence. Neither of them left behind an archive of any kind, save for a few photographs that are held close by my extended family. Though I knew

one grandmother for just a few months and the other for twenty years, I miss them both. It is a deep and abiding privilege to be their namesake. I honor as well my mother-in-law, Rojelia Ruiz, whose formal schooling ended in fourth grade but whose compassion runs so vast that it is truly an education to learn from her. My mother and father, Pushkala and A. P. S. Mani, have modeled ways of being that I could not otherwise conceive of. My father's enthusiasm for being photographed resulted in thousands of family photos, taken in cities and studios across Asia. My mother worked with these images to create an extraordinary collection of bound albums, numbering over one hundred. These photographs are the only documented archive of our family's life in Tokyo between 1976 and 2010. My parents' joint investment in photography is how I came to understand the ways in which we create narratives of identity, memory, and history through images. The photos and videos of my sweet niece, Amita Ohyabu, are the latest addition to this family story. To my mother, I owe everything. Her unshakable belief in me is why I have been able to live three continents apart from her; her deep faith in the value of the work I do is what love looks like.

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Plate 1 Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Fabricated Memories* (detail), edition 1, 1997–2000.
Polaroid transfer on paper in artist book with metal box (4.75 × 5.5 inches), 6 × 4.5 × 220 inches
at full length. © ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, COURTESY SEPIAEYE.

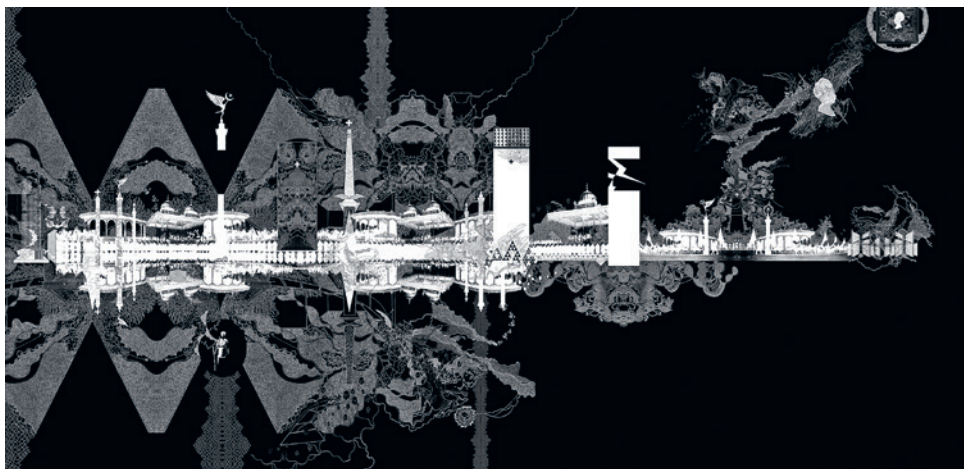


Plate 2 Seher Shah, *Geometric Landscapes and the Spectacle of Force*, 2009. Archival giclée print, 58 × 119¾ inches, edition of 3. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



Plate 3 Seher Shah, *Geometric Landscapes and the Spectacle of Force* (detail), 2009. Archival giclée print, 58 × 119¾ inches. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

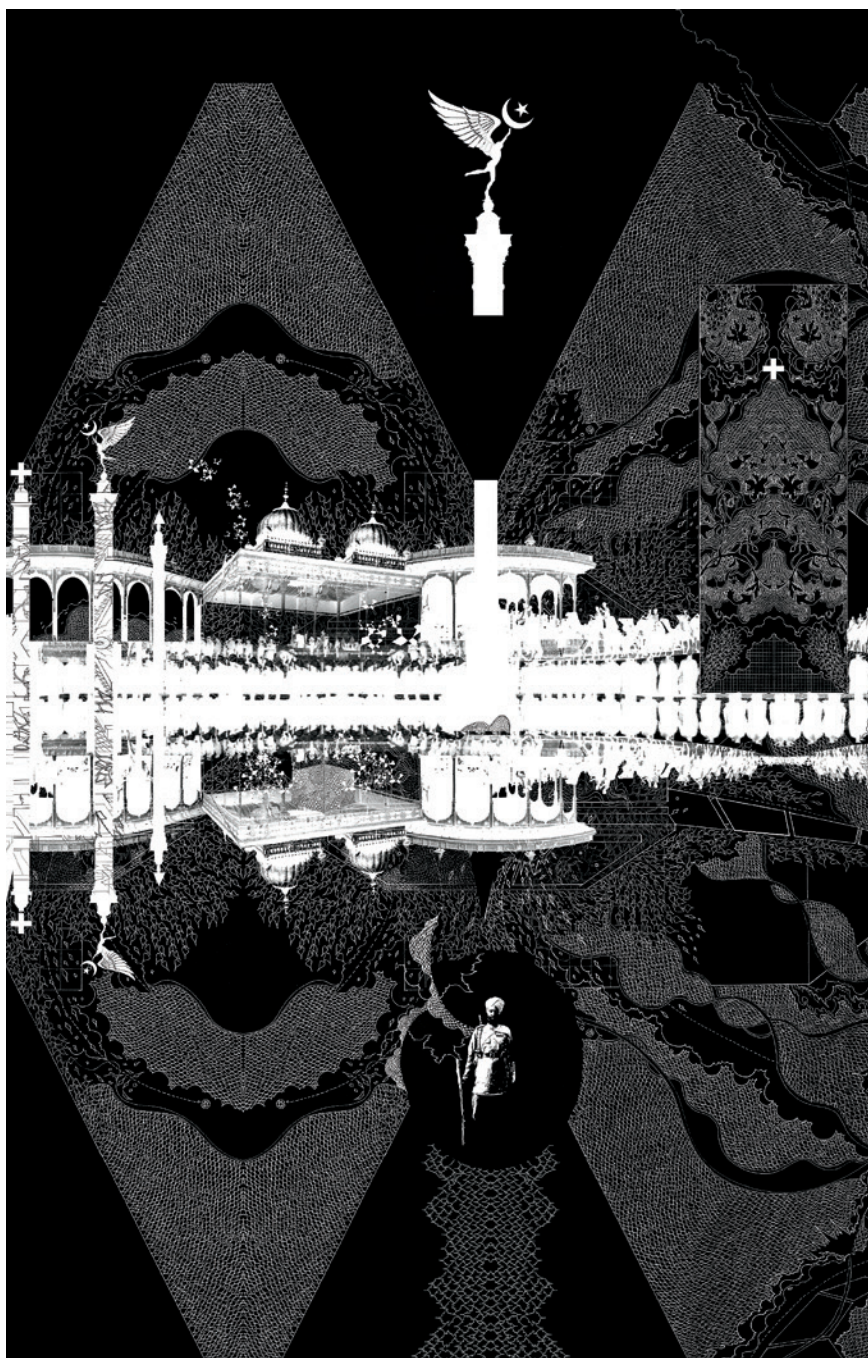


Plate 4 Seher Shah, *Geometric Landscapes and the Spectacle of Force* (detail), 2009.
Archival giclée print, 58 × 119¾ inches. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



NAVAJO SMILE

Photograph by E. S. Curtis



MALAYALEE SMILE

Photograph by A. P. Matthew

Plate 5 Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Smiles*, from *An Indian from India* series, 2001. Portfolio 1, 24 × 30 inches, archival pigment print. © ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, COURTESY SEPIAEYE.



Photograph by S. A. Gifford



Photograph by A. P. Matthew

Plate 6 Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Madonnas*, from *An Indian from India* series, 2001. Portfolio 1, 24 × 30 inches, archival pigment print. © ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, COURTESY SEPIAEYE.



NOBLE SAVAGE

Photograph by E.S. Curtis



SAVAGE NOBLE

Photograph by A.P. Matthew

Plate 7 Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Noble/Savage*, from *An Indian from India* series, 2001. Portfolio 1, 24 × 30 inches, archival pigment print. © ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, COURTESY SEPIAEYE.

Plate 8 "Besting the Bee." Installation at *Beyond Bollywood*, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, 2014.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR.



Plate 9 "Who Belongs in America?" Installation at *Beyond Bollywood*, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, 2014.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR.





Photograph by J.N. Choate, *Protophonia*, before 1882
TOM TORLINO, NAVAJO,
ON ENTRY TO CARLISLE SCHOOL, CARLISLE, PENNSYLVANIA



Photograph by A.P. Matheson, *Protophonia*, before 1983
ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, INDIAN
ON ENTRY TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Plate 10 Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Tom & Annu Before*, from *An Indian from India* series, 2001. Portfolio 2, 24 × 30 inches, archival pigment print. © ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, COURTESY SEPIAEYE.



Photograph by J.N. Choate, *Carlisle, Carlisle, Protophonia*, after 1883
TOM TORLINO, NAVAJO
THREE YEARS LATER, CARLISLE



Photograph by R.P. Matheson, *Providence, Rhode Island*, after 2000
ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, INDIAN
NINE YEARS LATER, PROVIDENCE

Plate 11 Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Tom & Annu After*, from *An Indian from India* series, 2001. Portfolio 2, 24 × 30 inches, archival pigment print. © ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, COURTESY SEPIAEYE.



Plate 12 Gauri Gill, *Laljibhai and his wife Pushpa Ben Patel work as cleaners at Days Inn West. Knoxville, Mississippi 2004*, from *The Americans*, 2000–2007. Archival pigment print, 16.5 × 50 inches, edition of 7 + 1. AP. COPYRIGHT GAURI GILL.



Plate 13 Gauri Gill, *Brahmin thread tying ceremony for Silicon Valley professionals in a local strip mall. Fremont, California 2002*, from *The Americans*, 2000–2007. Archival pigment print, 16.5 × 50 inches, edition of 7 + 1. AP. COPYRIGHT GAURI GILL.



Plate 14 Gauri Gill, *Software engineer Alok Patel-Pareek; business owner, Sumati Patel-Pareek. Silicon Valley, California 2001*, from *The Americans*, 2000–2007. Archival pigment print, 27 × 40 inches, edition of 7 + 1. AP. COPYRIGHT GAURI GILL.



Plate 15 Gauri Gill, *Yuba City, California 2001*, from *The Americans*, 2000–2007. Archival pigment print, 16.5 × 50 inches, edition of 7 + 1. AP. COPYRIGHT GAURI GILL.



Plate 16 Gauri Gill, *Taxi driver Prem Kumar Walekar, 54 was shot dead at a gas station in Rockville, Montgomery by a sniper. Seen at right is his son. Maryland 2002*, from *The Americans*, 2000–2007. Archival pigment print, 16.5 × 50 inches, edition of 7 + 1. AP. COPYRIGHT GAURI GILL.



Plate 17 Gauri Gill, *Bonnie Singh at home*, Bonnie is a cook at Taste of India restaurant. Nashville, Tennessee 2004, from *The Americans*, 2000–2007. Archival pigment print, 16 × 24 inches, edition of 7 + 1. AP. COPYRIGHT GAURI GILL.



Plate 18 Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Fabricated Memories*. Installation at *Ruins and Fabrications*, Twelve Gates Arts, 2015. © ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, COURTESY SEPIAEYE. PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVEN M. FALK.



Plate 19 Viewers at *Ruins and Fabrications*, Twelve Gates Arts, 2015. PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVEN M. FALK.

INTRODUCTION

The Work of Seeing: Photography and Representation in Diaspora

In the spring of 2005, I walked down the worn wooden off-ramp of a subway station in Queens, New York, through the leafy boulevards of a public park, to reach *Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now*, an exhibition on view at the Queens Museum. In a sunlit space on the mezzanine floor, I came across a low tabletop encased in glass. Within that rectangular vitrine was a series of faded snapshot photographs, featuring a cherubic little girl standing in a verdant garden; a husband and wife facing the camera wearing stylish sunglasses; the girl wrapped in the arms of her father, ensconced in a carousel ride. Opened out as an accordion-folded book, the images were embedded in a pile of loose tobacco that, despite the glass case, gave off a powerfully smoky scent in the hallway (figure I.1). This was my first encounter with *Fabricated Memories*, by the artist Annu Palakunnathu Matthew. Glancing at her birth date and birthplace, I assumed the installation was autobiographical, a narrative of her family's experience as Indian immigrants in England in the 1960s. The photographs took on the quality of snapshots that filled my own family albums: faded, in parts overexposed, each image depicting a cherished child and a loving family. I hovered over the glass box trying to make out the words inscribed alongside the photos, but the glare of sunlight obscured much of the text. Distracted by the profusion of artworks within the gallery space, I turned away from the



I.1 Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Fabricated Memories*. Installation at *Fatal Love*, Queens Museum of Art, 2005. © ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, COURTESY SEPIAEYE. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF QUEENS MUSEUM.

installation to see life-size portrait photographs of South Asian immigrants that hung from the ceilings; digital animations of Muslim and Hindu mythology; figurative and landscape paintings; and plastic *lo-tas* that created soundscapes by the bathroom. Standing on the scuffed hardwood floors, I was captivated by the visuality of each of these aesthetic forms, which in turn made real and visible my own experience as a diasporic subject.

A decade later, in the fall of 2015, I once again came across Matthew's photo-based art, this time at a solo exhibition of her work at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada (figure I.2). Within this elegant and spacious setting, inhaling the scent of tobacco leaves demurely collected in a separate vitrine, I realized with a start that the images were not autobiographical but generated entirely through Matthew's digital assemblage. As I moved alongside the glass case, following the stream of text that threaded across the creased pages, I saw how *Fabricated Memories*