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City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain

Abstract

{Excerpt} Unpacking and applying the concept of structural violence is one of the principal tasks of this book. To be clear from the outset, however, in lodging the experiences of the men and women I encountered in the larger rubric of structural violence, I do not intend to imply that we should ignore the agency exerted in the scenario I've just described, or in the scenarios that litter this book: we ought not ignore the basic fact that these scenarios are composed of humans choosing to abuse, exploit, maim, and dominate other humans. Rather, I seek to couple that basic fact with an analysis of the structural forces that cause, permit, encourage, or are in some other way involved in the production of violence between citizen and foreigner in Bahrain. In the final accounting, the episodic violence levied against foreigners in Bahrain becomes one facet of the more comprehensive structural forces that govern foreign labor in the Gulf states.

The central mission of the anthropologist remains explication, and typically the explication of lives distant and different from those of the intended reader. The conceptual framework of structural violence, which I explore in detail, provides an analytic foundation from which I work outward in scope and, to some degree, backward in time. From that foundation I peer at the decisions and contexts that brought the men and women I came to know from India to the Gulf, at their experiences upon arrival in Bahrain, and at the strategies they deploy against the difficulties they face while abroad. I also examine the contours of the Bahraini state itself, the ongoing articulation of a particular idea of modernity in the Gulf, and the intricacies of the concept of citizenship as they have evolved in dialectic with the extraordinary flow of foreign labor to the island.

Comments

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CITY OF STRANGERS ..

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Gulf Migration and the
Indian Community in Bahrain

ANDREW M. GARDNER

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*For S. K. and my parents,
Gordon and Janice Gardner*

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In anthropological parlance, “key informants” are those individuals native to the communities we study who emerge as integral to the anthropologist’s inquiry. Although I found many individuals willing to share their time and thoughts with me, I hesitate to call them “informants,” for that title somehow seems too formal and oddly traitorous to stand for these relationships. There were many individuals whose contributions were essential to the writing of this book, but those who proved most key were foremost my friends, and our afternoons and evenings spent drinking coffee, carousing through the nightlife of Bahrain, sharing a meal, walking along the corniche, or smoking sheesha yielded a lively intellectual atmosphere that made my time on the island all the more enjoyable. With that caveat in mind, I foremost thank S.K. for taking me under his wing. A pharmacist by training, he was born with a seemingly boundless desire to make the world a better place, a trait readily apparent in his unyielding penchant for service to those less fortunate. This book would not have been possible without his help. I also thank Ashish Gorde and Dhafi al-Mannai, both good friends, and Naman Arora, a student at the Indian School who somehow found the time to serve as my field assistant. Many others helped me along the way: Dr. R. K. Hebsur, Pragati, Mohammed, Earsil, Veena, Joel, Timothy, Aisha, Suresh, Vani, and all the students in the 2003 ILA English course I taught.

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the opposite. Nagy's mentorship, guidance, and friendship have been an enduring and invaluable part of my life since arriving in Bahrain.

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CITY OF STRANGERS

1 INTRODUCTION

Structural Violence and Transnational Migration in the Gulf States

In the early months of 2006, newspaper headlines in the Kingdom of Bahrain reported that police, officials from the Indian embassy, and a collection of human rights activists, after receiving a tip from an undisclosed source, had converged on a scrap yard in the suburb of Hamad Town, a government-constructed quarter in the Manama suburbs where significant numbers of the citizenry's lower middle class make their home. The owner of the garage and scrap yard, it seems, had sold a work visa to an Indian laborer by the name of Karunanidhi for BDI,200 (1,200 dinars), the equivalent of US\$3,189. Although many of the details remain unclear, indications suggest that Karunanidhi then paid another individual to replace him at the work site, a move that angered the owner of the establishment and issuer of the work visa. The Bahraini owner grabbed Karunanidhi—in other words, moved him by force—and put him under an overturned bathtub in the scrap yard. He then parked his jeep over the bathtub, trapping Karunanidhi underneath, locked the vehicle, and departed for Manama, the central and singular urban center on the small island. In Manama, the scrap yard owner found his way to the flat that Karunanidhi rented with a large group of other Indian men and somehow kidnapped six of the Indian laborer's roommates. Returning to the scrap yard with the men, he locked them in a large freezer, where they remained until the loose amalgamation of help—the aforementioned police force, officials, and activists—came to their rescue. All the men were freed, although their fate in the agencies and courts that govern the foreign population on the island remains in limbo. The scrap yard owner was briefly jailed and then released.

In the Gulf newspapers that carried this story, many of the articles and letters framed the case as atypical—a sponsor “gone bad”—or as the worst that might be faced by a member of the large transnational labor force on the island, while seeking a better life in the petroleum-rich nations of the Arabian Peninsula. In 2002 and 2003, however, I spent a year in Bahrain collecting ethnographic data that sought to explore the intricate matrix of relations between citizens and foreigners on the island. I spent countless hours in the labor camps, most of which are located on the distant periphery of the city, and in the decrepit urban flats, like the one described in Karunanidhi’s story, that now comprise much of the central city. The story I have just related—from February 2006—fits seamlessly into the tapestry woven by the many migration narratives I heard on those evenings in the labor camps and urban flats. These narratives, along with the newspaper clippings I have collected since departing the field, abound with accounts of stabbings, murders, rape, deportation, confinement, physical abuse, confidence games, extortion, suicides, suicides under suspicious circumstances, workplace injuries, debilitating illness, and more. Moreover, although there are certainly religious, gender, and class aspects to this violence, the most reliable pattern underpinning these events pits citizens against foreign laborers.

Sadly, reliable statistical data concerning the scope of this violence are not available.¹ In the hallway outside my university office, however, I have a large bulletin board, perhaps four feet by six feet, on which I maintain a testament to the comprehensive violence committed against Indian laborers in Bahrain. The board, comprising a subset of the newspaper clippings I amassed from the local papers during my year in Bahrain, hints at the scope of the almost daily violence that plagues the Indian population of some 140,000 who make their home, however temporary, on the island. In light of this small edifice to the Indian experience in the Gulf, the case with which I began this volume is but one episode in the ongoing, commonplace experience of foreigners on the small island, and hence is in my mind far from anecdotal. Rather, the case of Karunanidhi and his time under a junkyard bathtub is symptomatic of the *structural violence* endemic to the system by which the large transnational labor force that currently works in the Gulf is managed and controlled in Bahrain and all the Gulf states.

Unpacking and applying the concept of structural violence is one of the principal tasks of this book. To be clear from the outset, however, in lodging the experiences of the men and women I encountered in the larger

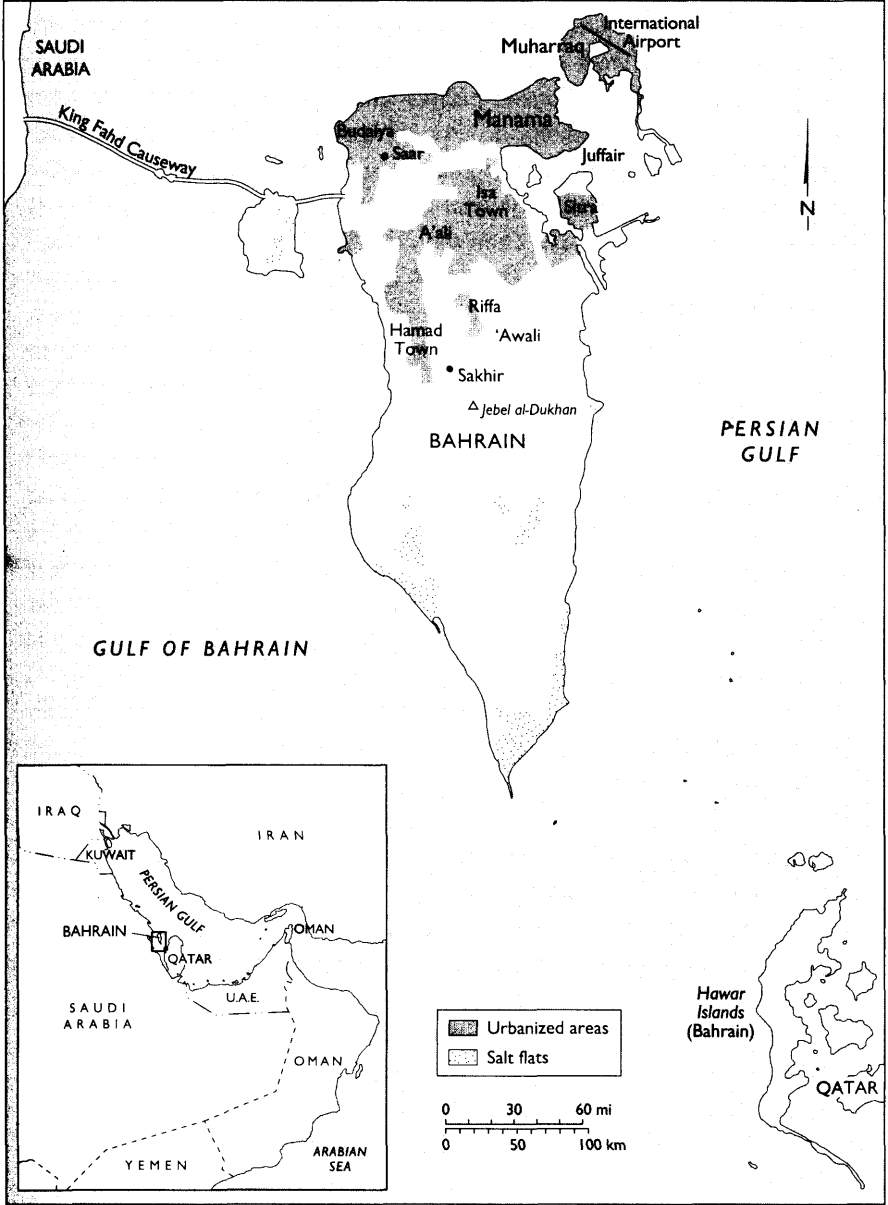


Figure 1.1. Map of Bahrain.

rubric of structural violence, I do not intend to imply that we should ignore the agency exerted in the scenario I've just described, or in the scenarios that litter this book: we ought not ignore the basic fact that these scenarios are composed of humans choosing to abuse, exploit, maim, and dominate other humans. Rather, I seek to couple that basic fact with an analysis of the structural forces that cause, permit, encourage, or are in some other way involved in the production of violence between citizen and foreigner in Bahrain. In the final accounting, the episodic violence levied against foreigners in Bahrain becomes one facet of the more comprehensive structural forces that govern foreign labor in the Gulf states.

The central mission of the anthropologist remains explication, and typically the explication of lives distant and different from those of the intended reader. The conceptual framework of structural violence, which I explore in detail, provides an analytic foundation from which I work outward in scope and, to some degree, backward in time. From that foundation I peer at the decisions and contexts that brought the men and women I came to know from India to the Gulf, at their experiences upon arrival in Bahrain, and at the strategies they deploy against the difficulties they face while abroad. I also examine the contours of the Bahraini state itself, the ongoing articulation of a particular idea of modernity in the Gulf, and the intricacies of the concept of citizenship as they have evolved in dialectic with the extraordinary flow of foreign labor to the island.

Perhaps the greatest danger with the thesis this book presents rests in its potential to fall in lockstep with the Orientalist punditry recently resurgent in Western public discourse. I am particularly concerned with potential misreadings of the theses presented here that suggest that the source of the structural violence I describe somehow inheres in the culture or character of the peoples of the Gulf. Instead, the political economic framework at the core of my analysis should make clear that although the structural violence I describe draws on the particular history and cultural framework of the Bahraini people, its ultimate source has more to do with the extension and expansion of a global labor market and neoliberal ideology to the Gulf states than with any particular qualities of Bahraini culture. The fact that structural violence seems to accompany the increasing proliferation of transnational movement should be a point familiar to scholars whose work concerns the United States' southern border, or African migration to Europe, or the countless other movements that have come to typify the contemporary historical juncture.

For much of its early history, the discipline of anthropology was principally concerned with the forces and social components that constructed and replicated harmonious and stable societies. For Émile Durkheim and other functionalists, the organic analogy provided the foundation for their understanding of society: particular aspects of society—religion, an educational system, family and kinship, and so forth—were viewed as analogous to organs of the body, working together to produce a static equilibrium. In functionalist analysis, each of those social components plays some particular role in the survival and replication of the social whole. Deviance, violence, and other nefarious social forces were seen as abnormal, as a breakdown in the status quo, or as circumstances produced by an unusual set of external conditions.

In that light, the shift of the anthropological lens to power and violence can be seen as the culmination of a disciplinary corrective, one that moves away from idealistic portraits of harmonious social forms and directly addresses the dilemmas, social problems, and rampant poverty observable in the contemporary world. The exertion of power and the resulting violence that oftentimes accompanies it are no longer portrayed as strange or extraordinary circumstances but rather have become essential focal points in the analytic mission of contemporary anthropology. In addition to positing ruptures and social dissonance as a seemingly constant facet of human life, this corrective also challenged the underlying functionalist premise that societies were best comprehended as unconnected, discrete social wholes. Eric Wolf, Sidney Mintz, and a strong cohort of other anthropologists working in the second half of the twentieth century built upon a political economic framework in arguing that change and interaction, often on a global scale, were central facets of the historical period. These approaches remain key in understanding the transnational context of the contemporary era.

Many of these ideas were distilled by William Roseberry, a scholar who envisioned an anthropology that manifests “an intellectual commitment to the understanding, analysis, and explication of the relations and structures of power in, through, and against which ordinary people live their lives. . . . The routes toward an analysis of power can be various, from the political-economic analysis of the development of capitalism in a specific place, to the symbolic analysis of the exercise of power in

a colonial state, to a life history of a person who experiences power from a particular position, in a particular way” (Roseberry 1996, 6).

The concept of structural violence provides one of many possible pathways to these goals. First purveyed by Johan Galtung (1969) as a way of connecting the poverty and inequality experienced by legions in the world to the intricate mechanics of the global political economy, the concept’s key components remain in place today. That extreme poverty and social marginalization characterize the lives of those peoples traditionally found in the anthropological lens has been observed by Farmer (2004, 307) but was perhaps most eloquently stated by Bourgois when he said that, “with few exceptions, the traditional, noble, ‘exotic’ subjects of anthropology have today emerged as the most malnourished, politically repressed, economically exploited humans on earth” (1991, 113). As a conceptual framework, structural violence provides a tool for connecting the everyday violence of those conditions with their systematic and broad sources.

As Farmer states, the concept of structural violence is configured to examine the social machinery of oppression (2004, 307). Within this larger framework there are slight variations in focus. For Philippe Bourgois and Paul Farmer, the focus remains squarely upon the political economic relations that render these structural, violent results. For Nancy Scheper-Hughes, structural violence points to more discursive and ideological terrain—to the processes by which everyday violence is normalized and naturalized in public consciousness. She targets “the invisible social machinery of inequality that reproduce social relations of exclusion and marginalization via ideologies, stigmas, and dangerous discourses . . . attendant to race, class, sex, and other invidious distinctions” (Scheper-Hughes 2004, 13). Alternatively, for Daniel Goldstein (2004) the violent lynchings he observed in Cochabamba City, Bolivia, were best understood through their performative function as public spectacles through which community and collectivity were delineated. In spite of these differences, these and the many other texts concerned with theorizing violence are a testament to the diverse paths to the analysis of power sketched by William Roseberry. All share a concern for power, inequality, and the backdrop of a global, capitalist political economy that renders a particular terrain of suffering.

Discussions of structural violence often elide Eric Wolf’s contribution to the topic—a contribution that I find particularly clear. In his final book, Wolf described power in terms of four valences, or modalities, woven into social relations. The first is the power that individuals bring to their interactions with other individuals in the world. The second is the “power manifested

in interactions and transactions among people and refers to the ability of an *ego* to impose its will in social action upon an *alter*" (Wolf 1999, 5). For Wolf, the third modality of power consists of the ability to manipulate and control the contexts and settings in which those interactions occur, a mode he refers to as organizational or tactical power. Working outward in scope, he concludes with a description of structural power, or "the power manifest in relationships that not only operates within settings and domains but also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves" (5). It is this notion of power, and particularly the notion of a set of forces *orchestrating* relations between foreigners and citizens, that guides my analysis in this book.²

Wolf's valenced conception of power provides the impetus for the theoretical revision I use in this book. For the progenitors of the concept, structural violence is typically distinguishable from other forms of violence, and particularly from the everyday, interpersonal violence that purportedly inheres more closely to the agency of those who deliver that violence. This rendition of structural violence is entirely useful: it is adept at connecting broad structural forces and political economic conditions to the suffering that we increasingly encounter in the regions and places where many anthropologists work.³ The same rendition of structural violence helps delineate the forces that push many of the men and women described in this book out of India and across the Arabian Sea, for their journey and the suffering they often endure while abroad are, certainly, part of a coping strategy connected to forces well beyond the ambit of their everyday lives. But Wolf's notion of the orchestration at work in this process also provides an opportunity to connect the everyday, interpersonal violence and suffering many of the foreign workers in the Gulf states endure with the structural arrangements that so intricately construct, limit, and govern their existence in the Gulf. This marriage of Wolf's notion of structural power with structural violence opens another path to examine "how power operates not only on the global scale but in the daily lives of the people with whom anthropologists work" (Green 2004, 319).

SOCIAL RESEARCH IN THE GULF STATES

My interest in transnational migration first bloomed during a two-week stay in Jeddah, the cosmopolitan hub of Saudi Arabia perched on the shores of the Red Sea. There I was the junior member of a team of ethnographers commissioned to examine the impact of the 1991–92 Iraqi conflict on the

Bedouin nomads of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. When the team arrived in Jeddah, we discovered that the various bureaucracies overseeing our work had yet to procure the money and documents necessary for our trip to the remote deserts to the east. The government offices seemed to close around one in the afternoon—or at least the individuals we needed to speak with were absent after that—so in the afternoons I wandered the center of the city, strolling through the winding streets and alleys of the central souk, or marketplace, and basked in the air-conditioned environs of the modern shopping malls that had arisen around the aging center of the city.

In those first days in the Middle East, I was astounded by how infrequently I encountered Saudis in Saudi Arabia. In the stores of the souk I met Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi merchants; in the hotel the Filipino concierges greeted me in English. One evening, near the city center and in search of an Internet connection, I found my way to a large bowling alley and, just before the doors were locked for the evening prayer, I dodged inside. There I found myself amid the playoffs of a Filipino bowling league. By the time we left Jeddah for the deserts to the east, I had met men from a dozen different nations, all there to make a better life for themselves and their families back home. Yet my first look into the world of Gulf migration hardly ended at the city limits. In the weeks that followed, we spent our days on the dirt tracks that lace all points of the eastern deserts together, building an ethnographic foundation for a project I later described in two articles (Gardner 2004; Gardner and Finan 2004). Here we found migrant laborers alone on the sands of the desert, enmeshed in the livelihood systems of the Bedouin nomads, tending herds of sheep, goats, or camels for Bedouin families now relocated to nearby towns.

It was a small set of memorable experiences—speaking with two Sudanese men alone at a gas station waypoint in the middle of the great eastern deserts of Arabia, and then again with a particular pair of Indian shopkeepers of central Jeddah—that first spurred my interest in this flow of transnational labor. In its original form, the research proposal I configured to the Fulbright Program proposed a project in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. After two or three months of work on the proposal, I began communicating with my professional contacts in the kingdom, and they rapidly noted the naiveté of the document I had constructed: they informed me that the Saudi government would never allow this research to be conducted. Under the guidance of my advisers I reworked the proposal for Oman. Meanwhile, on the heels of two months of intensive language training in the United Arab Emirates, I prepared a second proposal to the

Wenner-Gren Foundation to conduct research in Dubai, the cosmopolitan and transnational apex of the contemporary Gulf (and a city where, according to my contacts in Bahrain, expatriates outnumber citizens ten to one).

Despite the fact that my proposal was initially approved by the U.S. Fulbright Program, a month later I received word that the program's regional administrators were unable to find an institution in Oman willing to sponsor this particular research. Rather than decline the proposal altogether, a senior administrator had taken a personal interest in my project, and through her efforts the Fulbright Program "shopped" my proposal to the other petroleum-rich Gulf nations, all of which hosted large foreign communities. Two months before my slated departure—and amid my comprehensive exams—I was informed that although the University of Bahrain had also declined to sponsor my research, the director of the Bahrain Training Institute (a former Fulbrighter himself) would provide institutional sponsorship for my study.⁴ In that same window of time, I received word from Wenner-Gren that they too had approved my proposal for research in the United Arab Emirates. After a brief discussion with them about the status of my Fulbright proposal, I reconfigured the Wenner-Gren proposal to cover some of the ancillary operating costs and expenditures not covered by the Fulbright grant and secured their permission to conduct my research in Bahrain. With less than two months to spare, I began checking out books from the library about Bahrain and pored over the brief chapter on Bahrain in the *Lonely Planet* travel guide.

Although my literature review prior to departure was piecemeal, I was surprised to discover that I was not the first to follow this circuitous path to Bahrain. In the early 1980s, Robert Lee Franklin, an anthropology student at Harvard, configured a research project to be conducted in Iran. When the revolution broke out, he shifted his destination to Bahrain, a safe haven in the Gulf where he might study the large Shi'ite community, many of whose members continue to identify themselves as ethnically Persian. Amid the tensions between the Sunni leadership and the Shi'ite majority (ongoing to this day), the government of Bahrain deemed this topic too sensitive. Franklin reconfigured his research project and emerged with "a study of the foreign communities in Bahrain, and of the Indian community in particular" (1985, 1), producing what is to date the sole ethnographic portrait of the Indian community in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

It was only upon my return from the Gulf, and through the slow process of preparing my conclusions, that I came to realize how the story of my own research project fits within the larger framework of the social



Figure 1.2. South Asian laborers fill the streets of Manama's central souk on Friday afternoons. Photograph by Kristin Giordano.

sciences in the Gulf. This framework can be grasped as a set of three interrelated factors that, together, are responsible for the dearth of ethnographically informed literature concerning the transnational populations in the Gulf states (see also Dresch 2005, 1). First, many of the nations in the Gulf have a reputation, partly deserved, for being inhospitable to social science research. As my own experiences suggest, funding and support—and particularly support from local institutions—remain relatively difficult to secure. Combined with the fact that few of the Gulf states release basic demographic data concerning the scope and constitution of the foreign populations at work there, the handful of scholars who remain focused on transnationalism in the region have struggled to construct a basic foundation from which research might build.

Second, the nations of the contemporary Gulf have long been viewed as an exception to the norm of the Middle East. As wealthy, highly urbanized, and cosmopolitan global crossroads where transmigrant populations constitute a majority of the workforce and, in some instances, an absolute

majority of the population, the sociocultural matrix of the Gulf states fits poorly with the popular image of Middle Eastern heritage and culture, a portrayal that recycles Orientalist tropes through its typical focus on the rural Bedouin traditions of the region. The fact that the stagnant cultural images of camel herds, woolen tents, and coffee pots predominate in the way the Gulf states represent themselves only further confuses the issue and yields some insight into the processes of auto-Orientalism that accompany Asia's increasingly dense interconnections with the global system (see Mazzarella 2003, 138–45).⁵ Rather than view the contemporary Gulf as an opportunity to redirect Middle East studies, many scholars seem content with the ongoing marginalization of the Gulf states in the literature. Study of the Gulf states remains overshadowed by work on the Levant and North Africa, and what analyses of the Gulf do exist are dominated by political scientists, economists, and security specialists, all to the exclusion of a robust and detailed analysis of everyday life in the cities of the Gulf.

Finally, the extraordinarily transnational character of Gulf societies has produced a unique set of difficulties in the development of a cohesive social science literature. On the one hand, the foreign populations in the Gulf states are itinerant and rapidly shifting. Both these conditions quickly render synchronic portrayals of Gulf society obsolete, as the basic geography of the global labor supply streaming to the Gulf has continued to shift rapidly over the past decades. At the same time, ethnographic literature concerned with those populations at work in the Gulf is often distributed across the transnational divide. A small handful of scholars have explored the lived experiences of transnational laborers in the Gulf states (Longva 1997; Nagy 1998; Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999; Leonard 2002, 2003; Strobl 2009). More common are ethnographically informed works that peer at the experiences of those in the Gulf from the communities and regions from which they come (e.g., Gamburd 2000; Osella and Osella 2000a, 2000b; Silvey 2004).

All of these factors have conspired to marginalize social scientific analyses of the Gulf. The dearth of ethnographically informed work has also truncated its contribution to the burgeoning literature concerning transnationalism and globalization. These latter topics have emerged as central in anthropology and related social sciences, yet the bulk of the ethnographies and case studies that inform that literature concern populations and processes with one endpoint in the developed and democratic states of the global north. For vast numbers of people in the contemporary world, however, the Gulf states represent the singular and most important

transnational node in their livelihood strategies. Estimates from 1997 suggest that the Gulf Cooperation Council states host well over 10 million foreign workers (Kapiszewski 2001, 39; 2006, 4). The transnational movement behind this number involves millions and millions of families and countless communities in South Asia, Africa, and other points around the globe. Foreign labor constitutes a majority of the workforce in all the Gulf states, and an absolute majority of the population in Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Moreover, the movement of people to and from the Gulf states was produced in dialectic with the processes and forces that have now lodged the cities of the Arabian coast as truly global cities—as central nodes in the Asian financescape and as important locations in the production of global culture. Raising the profile of the Gulf peoples and cities in the ongoing assembly of a literature concerned with transnationalism can be seen as another undergirding purpose of the ethnography presented here.

LANGUAGE AND FIELDWORK IN BAHRAIN

Seminal anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's call to render the "verbal contour of native thought as precisely as possible" represented a watershed moment in the development of a codified set of anthropological methods (1922, 23). Gone were the days of the armchair anthropologists and their theorizing, reliant as it was on the secondhand observations of missionaries and colonial emissaries. Soon the days of anthropology from the colonial verandah, an enterprise that brought only fleeting contact with the peoples anthropologists sought to study, would also end. Malinowski's sentiment, reinforced by W. H. R. Rivers and Franz Boas, emerged as central to the journey anthropologists take, a journey outside the synergy of the anthropologist's native language and thought, and into the mental worlds of those they wish to know. The conviction that language is central to the sentiments, expressions, emotions, thoughts, and behavior of human beings remains a cornerstone to the discipline. The case of my work in Bahrain is a caveat to this tenet, but a challenge to its underlying premise—that the boundaries of language neatly coincide with the boundaries of culture. In Bahrain, a regional hub of transnational migratory conduits for centuries, complex and varied patterns of language use mark the island as a bellwether to linguistic shifts now endemic to capitalism's expansion around the globe.

The official language of the Kingdom of Bahrain is Arabic. Although I was never fluent, my own abilities in that language were at their zenith upon arrival on the island. Yet from my first moments on the island, my greetings in Arabic commonly drew an appreciative smile from locals, followed by a reply in English. In fact, English is commonly spoken in many of the transnational spaces and places where foreigners and citizens interact. The prevalence of English certainly owes much to the dominion of the British Empire, for Bahrain played a central role in what James Onley (2007) has described as British India's "informal empire." The bureaucratic hallways of the quasi-colonial apparatus brought English to the island. Furthermore, because Bahrain's relations with the British Empire were managed through British India, Bahrain also drew colonial transmigrants from South Asia. Indians arrived to serve as clerks, accountants, quartermasters, and security guards in the second wave of migration at the turn of the nineteenth century. The language of that bureaucracy and those early colonial transmigrants carried English to the streets of Manama.

In the 1950s and 1960s, as Bahrain parlayed its role as the nexus of relations between the Gulf and the West into its position as the center of Gulf finance and management, the predominance of English was again reinforced. The nation's movement into the English-speaking financescapes of the now-global political economy coincided with the increasing reach of global mediascapes: English and American television programs, movies, and news permeated the lives of those on the island.⁶ Today, the impact of global culture on Bahrain is pervasive. In my year in Bahrain, the sounds of the street included Eminem's Detroit-based rap and the mesmerizing buzz of British-born Panjabi MC's "Mundian to Bach Ke," featuring Brooklyn-born Jay-Z and a prominent sample from the television show *Knight Rider*, the David Hasselhoff series that so captivated my younger brother in the early 1980s. LaserVision, the DVD store around the corner from my flat, was widely known to have one of the best collections of new American movies, and at night cars from around the island blocked the narrow streets around its entrance as Bahrainis and expatriates selected the latest releases from the United States and other points abroad.

Although the predominance of English owes much to the historical processes I've described, perhaps the strongest argument rests in the transnational milieu itself. In a context in which nearly half the population are foreign-born expatriates, including Indians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Filipinos, Indonesians, Nepalese, South Africans, Egyptians, Britishers (as they are called on the island), Americans, and countless

others, English is increasingly the basic means of communication among foreign communities. All members of the professional class of the Indian diaspora speak English, and its influence now reaches into the laboring class. Midway through my time in Bahrain, I volunteered to teach an introductory English course to Indian laborers as part of the community service organized by the Indian Ladies Association. Before the first class was held, dozens of laborers had to be turned away, and for the eight-week duration my classroom was always full.

At the same time, the predominance of English on the island should not eclipse the other important and interesting patterns of language use concurrent with the processes I've described. Bahrain, like all the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, is ruled by a Sunni elite.⁷ Only in Bahrain, however, does that Sunni elite rule over a Shi'ite majority, many of whom trace their familial heritage to Iran. Powerful Shi'ite families still foster their Persian identity, and Persian is widely spoken within this subcommunity. Moreover, the long-standing connections between Bahrain and the Indian Subcontinent have lodged both Hindi and Malayalam in the linguistic palette of contemporary Bahrain. The popularity of Hindi movies and other media, the historic presence of Hindi-speaking bureaucrats and merchants, and the presence of Hindi- or Malayalam-speaking housemaids and nannies in Bahraini households have pushed these languages to prominence as well.

Even within the expatriate labor camps (where the largest and poorest contingent of the Indian community lives), rapid changes and linguistic struggle seem to be characteristic. The majority of Indian laborers who arrived over the last two decades come from the southern state of Kerala, where Malayalam is the predominant language, and few of them are entirely fluent in Hindi. Upon arrival, many begin to pick up bits of Arabic and English in order to communicate with sponsors, bosses, managers, and customers. Owing to the Keralites' numerical prominence within the larger Indian community, those from other Indian states might begin to learn Malayalam. Malayalam is predominant enough that many Bahraini government documents have been published in Arabic, English, and Malayalam.⁸

Among the elite classes of the Indian diaspora, altogether different forces are driving linguistic change. Unlike the transnational working class, most members of the diasporic elite arrive on the island with families in tow, and regardless of their state of origin their children are taught in English and Hindi at the various Indian schools on the island. Often their mother tongue is consciously spoken in the household—the only refuge from the confusing plurality of languages in the city outside. Conversely, a handful

of the most powerful Indian families have attempted to master Arabic as part of their attempt to secure Bahraini citizenship.⁹

In the complex linguistic terrain of the contemporary Gulf, I ended up conducting a majority of my interviews in English. If I used a translator, that translator was also Indian, so in the final form all the interviews were recorded in some version of English. I toyed with the idea of cleaning up the grammar and syntax of these quotes to better fit the American ear, but in the end I decided to reproduce the quotations much as I received them. Reading over the interviews, there are few junctures where the meaning is not clear, and with the larger topics of transnationalism and globalization lurking behind this ethnography, the point is this: the “verbal contour of native thought,” to again quote Malinowski, is in linguistic flux, a process wrought by the transnational processes described here. The inability to communicate, the struggle to learn the necessary bits and pieces of three or four different languages—these processes characterize the mental worlds of all inhabitants of the small island, and particularly those of the many diasporic communities that make their home in the city.

RESEARCH METHODS

Like most anthropologists before me, those first weeks in the field were a bewildering experience. I spent many of my nights alone in my small flat, or, alternatively, on long walks through the city. Peering into shop windows or restaurants, I saw men from around the world immersed in conversations, yelling and laughing, arguing, engaged in life. Outside that window I was not only outside their “culture,” but I was also beleaguered by my anthropological lens, whose gaze is at once on others and on oneself. By day I struggled with real dilemmas of conducting research in Bahrain: my visa status, arranged by the Fulbright Program and the Bahrain Training Institute (my host institution), was classified as a tourist/visitor, forcing me periodically to fly to Qatar and back for renewal. This situation was finally remedied after four trips to and from the airport in Doha. With nothing but a temporary visitor’s visa, I was unable to obtain the Central Population Register card, or CPR, the keystone to one’s bureaucratic identity on the island and necessary for day-to-day activities such as paying bills, purchasing a mobile phone, and securing utilities.

All of these problems were eventually solved, and it was only then that I began to realize that the issues I had faced—the feelings of homesickness,

the struggles to work through the government's bureaucracy, the feeling of being an outsider to the thousands of urban lives going on around me—were actually an important form of participant observation unique to the transnational milieu I was studying. On an island like Bahrain, where hundreds of laborers and professionals from around the world arrive and depart every day, the experience of finding one's way into the cultures and communities of the island is as much a part of the transnational experience as actually "belonging."

My participant observation included numerous other activities. Shortly after arriving on the island, I joined the Manama Toastmasters, a cosmopolitan group of mostly professionals who sought to improve their "leadership skills, self-confidence and communication through public speaking," a journey they take in English.¹⁰ I also joined the Riffa chapter of the Lions Club, a group of mostly Muslim Indian and Pakistani men (and several women) committed to improving the health and welfare of those less fortunate. I spent countless hours at the many Indian social clubs on the island, including the first and largest of them all, the Indian Club. I attended numerous parties and events organized by these clubs for the laborers, and in conjunction with the Indian Ladies Association I taught the aforementioned introductory English course to expatriate Indian laborers. Eventually, these associations and institutions emerged as one of the focal points of my research on the island.

I also got to know many of the expatriate instructors at the Bahrain Training Institute, who, in somewhat ironic fashion, serve on the frontlines of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs' attempts to forge an educated and skilled workforce capable of replacing the large contingents of foreigners on the island. Through all these channels, I seemed to have an endless list of people to interview, most of whom belonged to the diaspora's middle and upper class—the successful businessmen and, less frequently, professional women, as well as the merchant families with long-standing ties to the island. All of these interviews were conducted in English. In my first visits with participants I used a semistructured interview format that explored a sequence of topics, including the basis of their decision to migrate, recollections of their arrival in Bahrain, a description of their participation and membership in social clubs and other organizations, the primary challenges they face, narratives about their experiences of periodic trips back to India, and their aspirations for the future. The bulk of the interviews I recorded were what Karen Leonard (1999, 45) calls "experience narratives," emphasizing family and individual migration experiences.