

## Chapter Three

# Dangerous Precarity

## *Sexual Politics, Migrant Bodies, and the Limits of Participation*

Radha S. Hegde

The immigrant presence is always marked by its incompleteness: it is an at-fault presence that is in itself guilty. It is a *displaced* presence in every sense of the term (Sayad 2004, 283).

Nationalist ideologies have historically fired up claims about the proclivity of certain groups to dangerous and deviant behaviour. While the nature of these claims and the groups targeted have shifted over time, their role in securing the vision of a homogenous national community has endured. Across spatial and temporal contexts, the sexualized and racialized body of the migrant is often evoked in order to mark the outsider as the one who disrupts the national equilibrium by unsettling the ideological balance of hegemonic structures. Nation-states, as well as hard-line nationalist groups, strategically deploy arguments about race and sexuality to naturalize the connection between immigrant pathologies and criminality. Stories about the sexual crimes committed by migrants circulate in public discourse, contributing to the production of moral panics about their seemingly dangerous presence.

This sustained focus on the undesirable alien, who stands in sharp contradiction from the rightful native, plays a significant role in maintaining a coherent normative script of national identity and citizenship. The terms and conditions of who rightfully belongs and who can claim legitimacy to be seen, to be heard, and to participate in political discourse have become a focal point of national contestation, especially with the widespread resurgence of populist anti-immigrant resistance. With immigration being easily the most divisive subject on national agendas in the West at the present moment, the manner in which this subject comes into public view impacts how migrants can position themselves in order to participate in the societies to which they

about citizenship and voice, *participation*, while variously defined, remains a politically charged and contested term that is tightly secured by logics of sovereign power and nationalist ideologies.

Relevant to the subject of migration is the fact that participation is highly dependent on the manner in which populations are culturally sorted and legitimized. In the context of migration in particular, any discussion of the right and the ability to participate must also attend to parallel processes of disqualification and thus to the discrediting of the imagined prerequisites deemed necessary to claim voice, visibility, or eligibility. Sexuality is one of the key sites where an agenda of discreditation enforced on the migrant body is mobilized to secure public consensus about hegemonic notions of citizenship. Bodies become culturally intelligible only within frameworks that classify and contain the normative and legitimate sexual citizen.<sup>2</sup> The complex pathways of the global precariat have fuelled the xenophobic imaginary and renewed its preoccupation with the intersection of race and sexuality. As Sab-say (2012) notes, we need to pay attention to how bodies become the locus of political practices of citizenship beyond liberal and Orientalist presumptions. In addition, media technologies have intensified modes of communication and accelerated the circulation of populist ideologies that promote racialized visions of bodies and geographies through the logic of deviant sexualities (Puar 2007; Hegde, 2011). The mediated circulation of nativist ideologies reproduces visions of an injured nation by criminalizing migrants and classifying them as pathologically inclined to sexual deviance and violence. This marking of the migrant body, mobilized and aggressively circulated in anti-immigration discourse, works to progressively limit, exclude, and ultimately erase the presence of migrants and their potential to participate in any manner. For critical media scholars, the challenge is to grapple with the complex ways in which communication technologies and the infrastructures of information reinforce racial and sexual construction of the legitimate national subject.

Informed by feminist and postcolonial theoretical perspectives, this chapter advances a discussion of how the image of the migrant body as a site of unrestrained and dangerous sexuality is reproduced in order to fortify exclusionary boundaries and undermine the eligibility of migrants deemed to be worthy of participating in the national community. With the global growth of nationalist movements and the rise of anti-immigrant politics, we need to engage with the manner in which media technologies actively reproduce exclusionary paradigms of citizenship. The term *post-migrant* foregrounded in this collection signals the need to pay attention to the presence of migrants and the limits of what constitutes democratic participation. Responding to the challenge, this chapter, organized in four sections, elaborates on (1) bordering practices as racial regimes of exclusion that instrumentalize migrant

figures, inherently regressive, barbaric, and dangerous. The restrictions and the biopolitics of the border ultimately consolidate the racialized dominant mythology of the nation, its rightful insiders, and its expendable outsiders.

At the edge and within state territories, bordering regimes and mythologies of nationalism mutually sustain each other by connecting scripts of citizenship, race, gender, and morality. Borders, as Khosravi (2010) writes, are not only racialized; they are also pre-eminently gendered and sexualized. Border crossers have been subject to sexual violence in various parts of the world in flagrant demonstration of masculinist exceptionalism (see Luibhéid 2002). These experiences of terror and trauma have become banal realities within the colossal spectrum of migration regimes, where individuals are rendered vulnerable as they seek entry into national spaces. However, this part of the narrative does not gain as much publicity as the imagined danger that lurks in the fleeing body of the migrant. As Haddad (2007) writes, things that cross the border are frequently imagined to have the capacity to 'pollute' the inside, undermine the border's authority, and weaken national identity. In this discursive logic, the racialized migrant subject is now the dangerous outsider who does not subscribe to nationally upheld values, is further perceived to be incapable of assuming those values, but rather has the potential to destroy or contaminate the nation.

Bodies perceived to be high risk and dangerous to the nation are made visible as objects of scrutiny that need to be contained and excluded. Part of the border security operation's strategy is to maintain, produce, and renew a state of ongoing anxiety and a pervasive culture of fear. The trope of oversexualized black and brown men from whom white women must be saved has served as the grounds to legitimize imperial projects of expansion, justify racial segregation and colonial projects, and, in the past as well as in the present, the invasion of nations (see Hegde 2011). The racial profiling of perpetrators of sexual crime has existed across nations and time periods, and the fear gets seemingly more intense with each new group. Stereotypical media representations of the sexual aggression of particular immigrant groups and exaggerated crime statistics have also contributed over the years to reinforcing the image of the uncontrolled sexual body of migrant men, whether they are South Asians, North Africans, Middle Eastern, or Latinos.

In the United States, Donald Trump evokes the subject of sexual crime, extremism, and migrant men repeatedly in different contexts. This was most flagrantly expressed in his infamous ban on Muslims entering the United States, but has been common to his rhetoric on the campaign trail and in the Oval Office. For instance, in a political rally in 2016 in Minnesota, where there is a visible Somali immigrant community, Trump commiserated with the locals that they had 'suffered enough' due to taking in Somali refugees (Jacobs and Yuhas 2016). Earlier in 2015, Donald Trump launched his presidential

The figure of the violent migrant has been revived in public discourse in order to maintain a populist focus on the deviancy of bodies that desire entry into the exclusivity of the national domain. Regimes of border control define the conditions and terms under which citizens are constituted within very rigid assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality. In the name of securitization, however, raced bodies and social identities are selectively evicted from the possibility of citizenship and inclusion. This highly stratified bordering creates what Balibar (2002, 82) terms 'a world apartheid, or a dual regime for the circulation of individuals.' This colour bar, Balibar (2002) argues, no longer now merely separates "centre" from "periphery," or North from South, but runs through all societies, reinforcing the racialization of national insecurity.

While border regimes employ elaborate procedures to surveil the inclusion of migrants and other noncitizens, they also, as De Genova (2013) argues, almost universally impose a susceptibility for deportation as a defining horizon for migrant status. This serves to make the spectacle of border enforcement 'a persistent and pernicious reminder of the extraordinary vulnerabilities that suffuse the migrant predicament' (1188), long after terrestrial borders have been crossed. As we have witnessed recently with the increase in refugees and asylum seekers, the media and the state continue to frame the subject of migration as a crisis and an economic and security threat that needs to be contained, halted, and evicted. It is also an intensely heated subject that is used to gain political clout and following in both the United States and Europe. In this production of state vigilance at the border, the politics of citizenship is embedded within a disciplinary calculus of race and gender. Sexuality is the site where citizenship, hegemonic visions of racial homogeneity, and morality are firmly interconnected and where the criminalization of raced bodies is justified. A plot line is created, and the victims and criminals are arranged while allegorically pitting good against evil, purity against danger, in predictable sequences of purported common sense.

These narratives and discursive structures are particularly well evidenced in Donald Trump's electoral rhetoric. In a 2016 campaign speech on immigration delivered in Phoenix, Arizona, Trump made the case for securing the border between the United States and Mexico by raising the spectre of what a reduction in immigration enforcement would lead the country to in his view: 'The result will be millions more illegal immigrants, thousands of more violent, horrible crimes, and total chaos and lawlessness. That's what's going to happen, as sure as you're standing there' (*New York Times* 2017). In these comments, Trump capitalized on the shooting of a woman on a pier in San Francisco by an undocumented immigrant who later was acquitted when it was proved that it was an unintentional ricochet shot that killed the woman. Immigration or legal status was not an issue in the trial, but in Trump's use

border policing and securitization. Fears about changing demographic and racial compositions of the nation are also being digitally reignited with the speed and volatility of media technologies. The rapid transfer of information via social media fires up xenophobic rage and rescripts the performance of a strident patriotism. Conservative media outlets and websites go into high gear, inciting fear about migrants. For instance, alt-right news sites track crimes by undocumented migrants, seeking to find connections between local crime, global connections, and ideological affiliations. For example, after the 2013 bombing at the Boston Marathon, the police solicited the help of the public to identify suspects from surveillance video. A hysteric reaction spread among networked publics, whose highly active but faulty detective work reinforced the stark divide between citizens and noncitizens. In the discussions and viral flow of information that followed, the binary separating of those who belong and those who do not qualify to belong were reiterated (Hegde 2016, 43). Then, and now still, the digitally isolated and decontextualized figure of the dangerous migrant serves as the provocation for public vigilantism against the unworthy and undesirable.

These narratives of the dangerous Other abound in small towns in the United States where the news of one crime can lead to the rapid cascading flow of negativity about immigrant groups. The presence of refugees and migrants is changing the social dynamics in formerly insular communities, often sparking rumours and scapegoating techniques that brand migrants as potentially violent or as rapists. Their beliefs, behaviours, activities, rituals, and morality are fitted into a racialized narrative about unwelcome outsiders. For example, this trajectory has played out in numerous small towns including most recently Hazelton, Pennsylvania, with Latino immigrants, and in Lewiston, Maine, with Somali immigrants (see Finnegan 2006; Longazel 2016). Such rage about the arrival of newcomers includes and relies on the belief that these migrants diminish the national culture. This incendiary politics of Othering has taken some new global and mediated turns, reinvigorating the strategic production and circulation of the inherently violent thesis about certain migrant groups.

A very recent event in Idaho exemplifies this coming together of social media, networked publics, refugees, and the role that sexual politics plays in the framing of immigration. In June 2016, the quiet, peaceful town of Twin Falls was reeling with news about the alleged assault of a young girl by 'foreign' perpetrators. This occurred during the U.S. presidential election, when immigration and national borders were being vigorously debated on the political arena. News began to fly around Twin Falls that three juvenile Syrian refugees had raped a five-year-old girl at knifepoint and had urinated on her naked body. It was also rumoured that the attackers' parents had celebrated

When embedded within a social media ecosystem, such story lines are rapidly transformed into campaigns of fake news and conspiracy theories. The immediacy and circulatory reach of these intense exchanges of resentment serve to forge a strong group identity in opposition to immigrants. The networking constructed along these affective lines leads to the formation of ideologically connected groups that further reinforce the white gaze and perspective that rape is typical of less civilized cultures (Block 2001). These digital networks become in turn mobile infrastructures that materialize informational borders that contain, classify, and exclude racialized migrant bodies from the national polity.

### PARTICIPATION AND THE POLITICS OF LIMITS

Migration is a touchstone of national debate, a controversial subject that stirs dissent and intense affect. Every day, there is news about some crisis erupting about migration, migrants, and the pathways and politics of their journeys and destinations. Framing the migrant presence as a threat is becoming a well-rehearsed global response. The accompanying and unceasing focus on sexuality magnifies local anxieties and, in turn, reinforces racist, patriarchal, and heterosexist assumptions of the nation. As the discussion in this chapter observes, the image of migrants as rapists is one that seems to travel across time and space. For instance, only recently, a centre-left politician in Italy was at the middle of a controversy when she said that sexual violence is especially reprehensible when it is committed by people who had been granted asylum in Italy (Rome 2017). The granting of status to migrants is regarded here as an act of benevolent sovereign power that requires the gratitude of the recipient. Immigration is the site of exceptional sovereign power where the vulnerability of the precariat is made 'spectacularly visible' (De Genova 2013, 1181). When the migrant precariat becomes the object of the state's disciplinary gaze and moral repugnance directed at entire communities, the very basis of articulating a civic identity and negotiating terms of participation is foreclosed. Marking groups of people as being inherently violent sets them apart from the rightful citizens who deserve protection from the state. The excessive visibility from these skewed angles effectively makes the more structural and transnational instabilities of migrant life invisible to public view. The media play a major role in this oscillation from visibility to invisibility. As Bigo (2002, 81) writes, 'giving a face to crime is therefore giving the migrant a face.' In turn, such discourse also serves to give the nation a face—one with a racialized and

identities serve as the fulcrum or, as Gilroy (2005) writes, supply 'the single homogenous and unchanging centre of social life and moralized community' (124). The claims of migrants in global locations are real, demand imminent political attention, and are a serious alert for scholars to rethink the politics and conditions under which bodies that matter are marked and registered. Concepts like participation, while capacious, are highly charged and circulate within a matrix of assumptions about the conditions of belonging to the nation. When dominant visions of community are narrow and insular, the criminalized migrant body is denied recognition and hence permanently assigned the precarious and devalued status of outsider. In the cases discussed here, the distance between rightful citizens and the precariat is maintained and surveilled through sexual and racial boundaries that work together with territorial boundaries. As Butler (2009a, ii) writes, precarity designates a 'politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection.' Once seen as flawed, the body of the migrant merits no protection but only constant exposure as an invasive and unwelcome Other, an identity that then is mobilized to demarcate the limits or even the impossibility of participation.

The reiteration, reproduction, and normalizing of these limits and exclusions reveal that while we might term societies *post-migrant*, we are neither in a post-feminist nor post-racist world. Media technologies today add familiar and sometimes new creases to the narrative of migration and its complex intersections with race, gender, and nationalism. On a hopeful note, communication technologies and digital platform do offer the potential for migrant voices to be heard. To media scholars, the challenge is to generate innovative questions about the enactments of power and the mediated structures of complicity through which the social and political vulnerability of the precariat is perpetuated.

## NOTES

1. See Jenkins and Carpentier (2013); Pateman (1970).
2. See Butler (1993) on the idea of cultural intelligibility.
3. For information that refutes Trump's claims regarding Mexican immigrants and crime, see <https://cis.org/Report/Immigration-and-Crime>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/us/trump-illegal-immigrants-crime.html>.