The Queer Narrator: Violence, Ethics, and Sexuality

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The Film

The 2012 Bollywood film *Agneepath* (*The Path of Fire*), directed by Karan Malhotra, has a scene in which a villain is auctioning the hero's sister as a sex slave. His dialogue—addressed to nobody in particular—informs us that he is doing so to avenge the death of his son who was murdered by the hero. Suddenly, the scene breaks off to show hijras armed with swords and butcher knives running toward the villain and the crowd of bidders and henchmen around him (fig. 1). They start hacking and killing, quickly carving a path through this mob to allow the hero to reach the villain with relative ease. But there are so many immoral people either facilitating the auction or clamoring to bid, all ignoring the pitiful cries and pleas of the young girl, that neither the hijras nor the hero get the job done quickly. The next scene shows hijras forming a protective circle around the hero, and they move in tandem rhythmically, killing and hacking everyone surrounding them, and eventually killing the villain and saving the innocent virgin (fig. 2).

In India, *hijras* is now translated as "transgenders" in popular English-language dailies; but at various points during the colonial regime of policing, the term has also been translated as "eunuchs," "hermaphrodites," and "sodomites." Hijras have been and continue to be identified as the "third gender" in scholarship that has studied ideas of sex and gender in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religious texts. The exigencies of the HIV epidemic brought hijra bodies and practices into secular understandings of disease and risk. Moreover, epidemiologists and public health officials identified hijras as a "high risk" population and absorbed them into the category of men who have sex with men (MSM). Concomitant with these understandings of hijras has been their absorption as historically and religiously legitimizing figures into LGBT politics in India. The various myths associated with

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Figure 1. Hijras entering the scene and hacking the immoral crowd. Screenshot from *Agneepath* (dir. Karan Malhotra, 2012).

Figure 2. Hijras forming a protective circle around the hero and they move toward the villain. Screenshot from *Agneepath* (dir. Karan Malhotra, 2012).

hijras in the various recensions of the two great epics of India, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, have laid the groundwork for them to make religious claims of citizenship on the Indian state.

The current moment of Hindu nationalism, often shorthanded as "saffronization," has also resulted in the state's attempting to absorb the figure of the hijra. The aim of this ostensibly sympathetic stance is to reframe hijras as evidence of Hinduism's long history of tolerance and celebration of gender variance, in contrast to Muslim intolerance and violence. The recent spate of legislative actions concerning hijras is often presented as a remarkable coming of age of Hindu liberalism, but a close reading shows this to be nothing but alibis for increased policing of a population that has historically proved resistant to being cleaved for surveillance and discipline (Saria 2019).

The scene described from *Agneepath* stands out from previous depictions

of hijras in Bollywood films because it shows their participation in an economy of violence and because it reflects a larger shift in the relationship between violence, ethics, and the state. There have been two distinct ways that hijras have been deployed that reflect the moral universe of the Bollywood cinema. The first has been didactic—to preach an idealized moral order of syncretic democratic liberalism through Gandhian notions of tolerance, peace, and coexistence. Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995) has a hijra sheltering a child from religious riots, followed by a form of platonic dialogue in which the hijra observes that religious riots are politically orchestrated and violence is therefore pointless. Moreover, the hijra explains that Hinduism and Islam are both different ways to reach god and, hence, are essentially the same. Films that have used hijras as comic relief tend to prevent the jokes from becoming cruel by invoking their sacred powers to bless good fortune. *Maine Pyar Kiya* (*I Fell in Love*) (1989) is a good example of this trope.

The second way in which hijras have been deployed is as villains who deal in violence and psychic threats and thus as figures who must be defeated. Two films from the 1990s, *Sadak* (*Road*) (1991) and *Sangharsh* (*Struggle*) (1999), present the death-dealing and threatening hijra. The evildoer in *Sadak* is Maharani, a brothel owner, who does not think twice about trapping, trafficking, and torturing young women and who will go to any length, even murder, to prevent any girl from escaping her clutches. The villainous hijra in *Sangharsh* is a cannibalistic, child-sacrificing Kali worshiper.

To put it another way: hijras have been depicted either as life-affirming (because of a certain ethic of nonviolence), or as death-dealing (because they are morally corrupt and pathologically aggressive). This difference is erased in *Agneepath*, where participation in violence ends up being a life-affirming choice. Participation in violence is presented as the only moral action to take to establish sovereignty, and to be life-affirming is presented as the only way to be queer in India. Tracking the change in the ethical and moral work the hijra does by dispensing violence reveals the theological underpinnings of contemporary popular Indian political life.

The Song-and-Dance Number

A song from the Bollywood film *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) provides one of the most iconic representations of hijras. Akbar, the hero, dances with hijras singing "Tayyab Ali Pyar Ka Dushman" ("Tayyab Ali is the Enemy of Love"), while hijras join him in the refrain "*hai hai*," which is a curse. Akbar and hijras are swearing at Tayyab Ali because he will not let his daughter marry Akbar, who is her sweet-

heart. William Elison, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Andy Rotman's 2016 monograph on this landmark film examines the complex moral position put forward by the song and dance: that only poor hijras and poor lovers can see, understand, and expose the "shameful truths" of our hypocritical society.[1] They write:

> Having assembled his scandalous chorus of hijras, the poet hero calls out the [father of his girlfriend]. Tayyab Ali's [self-presentation] is revealed to be false on two counts. The outwardly respectable businessman is himself a lover. And beyond that, he can't recognize the right of those humbler than he to experience love, because the very pride and comfort that come with his social standing have blinded him to their plight. (112–13)

The song was recreated for the film *Once Upon a Time in Mumbai Dobaara* (2013). While the film's narrative and the song's lyrics were changed, the hijras' refrain was kept intact. More than four decades later, hijras are still seen as truth-telling figures, ever ready to side with lovers and to curse the enemies of love. What has changed, though, is that hijras no longer function as comic relief. They are given a certain dignity, to the extent that they facilitate heterosexual coupling by holding out for an ideal of love that can conquer, defeat, and overwhelm anything that stands in the way.

We can see this in *Tera Kya Hoga Johnny* (*What's Gonna Happen to You Johnny*) (2010), which has a hijra character, Begum, who is not a brothel madam but, rather, runs an agency for domestic workers. The narrator, a young boy forced to sell drugs as well as coffee on the streets, explains that when he came to the city from his village all he had was the contact of Begum, and through her he got a place to stay and a job to support himself. The work was not very nice, he reveals, but Begum "gave [him] the love of a mother." The film depicts the morally dubious acts the various characters have to perform to fulfill their desires in the cutthroat competition that defines modernity and Mumbai. Begum is one of the few characters who is not seen as morally compromised, and that is because she functions as a person in love. Although her boyfriend is violent toward her, she is kind toward everybody, including the drug-selling street urchin. Her lover eventually kills her when she tries to break up with him, after catching him cheating on her.

Tera Kya Hoga Johnny is an anomaly in that it gives a lot of screen time to Begum and makes the hijra a prominent character in the story, thereby illustrating her life-affirming position. The elaborate song-and-dance routine and the morality of maternal/feminine tenderness are often condensed in other films into a few scenes, rendering the clarity and durability of the life-affirming position of

the hijra in narratological codes. For example, in the film *Tamasha* (*Spectacle*) (2015), the protagonist's offer of marriage and gift of a diamond engagement ring are refused by the heroine because the suitor is an unexciting product manager. Sad and melancholic, he usually ignores the hijra who knocks on his car window every day when he is on the way to work. Begging for alms, she teases him, pleads with him, taunts him, "Oh, hero, today also won't you give anything," and "I'll pray from my heart for you to get your favorite heroine," and "don't you have a heart," and "when will you give me something." These blink-and-miss scenes serve to communicate the boring quality of the hero's corporate life; the only break in the repetition comes from the hijra's various one-liners and tones. One day, we see the hero ignoring her while he is on the phone trying to persuade the jeweler to let him return the rejected diamond ring for the same price he paid for it. The hero's argument with the jeweler drowns out the hijra's begging. We hear him making the case that the manufacturing charges should not be deducted, since the jeweler will sell the ring to the next buyer at the same price and hence will recuperate those charges. The next day, when the hijra comes knocking, the heartbroken man impulsively gives her the ring without even looking at her. In their next interaction, she is not knocking on the car window and begging; instead, she is standing in front of his car, praying and then blowing the blessing (*barkat*) his way, removing the evil eye. A while later, after the hero seems to have conquered his personal demons and regained his equanimity, he once again encounters the hijra. She then retrieves the diamond ring from a knot in the corner of her saree and returns it to him. She tells him, "Nobody has ever given such a big gift. I was so happy, but what will I do with it? The ring will fulfill whatever desire is in your heart." The hero takes back the ring, and soon wins the heart of the heroine.

The hijra's role in *Tamasha* is so minor that the hijra does not even get a credit or a name, and the character visually communicates nothing beyond an anthropological reality of India that hijras beg on the streets. Yet the fact that a poor hijra who earns her livelihood by begging at a traffic stop claims to have no use for a diamond ring besides a sentimental one throws the entire moral universe of the film into relief. Indeed, her actions illuminate the hidden gaps between value, price, profit, and loss and their relationship to moral personhood, all of which the hero learns eventually in order to win the heroine and live happily ever after. The hijra in *Tamasha* carves a space for the truth of living one's dreams, even if they do not entail bringing home a corporate salary. She represents a life-affirming principle in the context of the everyday capitalist realities of India.

The Action Sequence

The villain in *Murder 2* (2011) is a man whose modus operandi is to hire, trap, and murder "call girls"[2] while dressed in full feminine attire, including jewelry and makeup. His weapon of choice is the *chimta*, a popular musical instrument associated with groups of folk, ascetic-mystic, wandering singers and performers, of which hijras are members (Hinchy 2014; Roy 2016). The villain's hijra-ness seems to be further consolidated when he reveals that the goddess came to him in a vision and told him to castrate himself, citing the myth of origin for hijras. He then goes to a hijra called Nirmala Pandit, who is also an elected politician, and asks to be castrated. Nirmala Pandit depicts one of the many elected hijra politicians who have won offices on the basis of the ascetic incorruptibility that hijras claim, especially during election campaigns (L. Cohen 1995, 2004). It is the juxtaposition of these two individuals that differentiates the real hijra from the fake.

After the villain is arrested as a serial killer and is in prison, Nirmala Pandit sends lawyers to rescue her presumed sister/friend/community member. In fact, Nirmala goes to the police station herself and threatens the police officer, saying, "You are making a mistake by trapping the goddess's disciple. I will curse you so that you won't be able to piss properly. I am going to take her with me. And close that case of murdered girls. Remember, I too have a red beacon on top of my car."

After using her political connections and power to get the villain released, Nirmala and the villain go to a temple together to pay their respects and gratitude to the hijra goddess, Bahuchara Mata. At the temple, the priest informs them about the serial murderer, and the politician starts putting two and two together. It is noticeable that she immediately starts referring to the villain using masculine pronouns and his male names, asking him, "Boy, have I unwittingly/unknowingly committed a sin in rescuing you?" The villain then murders Nirmala. The short exchange in the temple saves Nirmala from accusations of moral corruption. Regardless of what she did to save a fellow disciple of the goddess, Nirmala knew that killing women was evil and that saving a serial murderer of women was a sin. While she was not beyond ignoring due process—very much like the typical hero—she was looking after her people and her community, a familiar way of doing politics in India (Witsoe 2011). The fact that she dies at the hands of the villain, in the temple of the hijra goddess, further cements her authenticity as an ascetic hijra. Like the murdered "call girls," she too is an innocent victim, taken in by the tricks of an inauthentic hijra who both hates and desires women. The villain's addiction to/obsession with women eventually causes him to feel powerless, and he cannot find a cure besides castration. But after he commits the bloody act, his desire remains; he can find no way to slake it besides murder.

Murder 2 illustrates a crucial fact about how contemporary liberal hijra personhood has become delinked from their castrated status. Both the villain and the hijra politician are without male genitalia, but it is the nature of their desire that defines them. The villain's emasculation results from his murderous desire for women, whereas the hijra politician's status and sense of self are defined by asceticism. Along with their asceticism and incorruptibility, it is also a desire *to be* women that defines hijras, as opposed to a murderous desire *for* women. This distinction is carried over when popular Indian dailies refer to hijras as "transgenders," which reflects a liberal aspiration to make hijras respectable and to solder the local to globalizing categories rather than to a universal understanding of transgender women (Valentine 2007). Such homonationalist aspirations explain the seamless shift from the historic definition of hijras as men who have been castrated to one of persons desirous of gender affirmation surgeries.

In other words, the translation of *hijras* as "transgenders" is dependent not only on redefining castration from a status that makes hijras but also on a desire for gender-affirming body modification. This resignification of castration is most clearly seen in the film *Mom* (2016), about a stepmother who avenges her stepdaughter's rape and battery. Devki, the titular mom, who is a high school biology teacher, also teaches hijras on the side as part of her "social service." These hijras tell Devki that it was because of her gift of education and respect that they are now independent and running their own tie-and-dye business. Devki first seeks justice by following the rule of law, but her stepdaughter's rapists are so rich and powerful, and the world is so corrupt, that they are able to tamper with the evidence, buy themselves the "not guilty" verdict from the courts, and get off scot-free. In her pursuit to deliver divine justice, Devki starts killing the rapists one by one. A bit of dialogue in the movie goes:

Devki: God cannot be everywhere, Mr. DK.

Mr. DK: I know, that's why he created mothers.

For the first murder—that of the watchman, Baburam—Devki is aided by her hijra students. While Baburam is drunk, they seduce and kidnap him. The next morning, he wakes up with a hangover, assaults his wife, and then goes to the bathroom to pee, but can't find his penis. He sees he has been castrated and starts screaming. He punches his image in the mirror, slips on the bathroom floor, hits his head on the water tap, and dies.

Hijras in this film are worthy and deserving social citizens who can run respectable businesses with the help of allies. They desire a more globalized version

of corporeal modification, and their identity extends to their desire for transformation, even when the film repeats an old trope of rape and revenge that centers on castrating men against their will. The scene in which hijras seduce the drunk Baburam emphasizes their breasts and femininity. It seems to be inserted in the film for the purpose of clarifying that castration does not make a man into a hijra, nor is a hijra merely a castrated male. The colonial imagination argued that, since no man would willingly undergo such a corporeal transformation, hijras were kidnapping and forcibly castrating young children and hence needed to be criminalized. Hijras in *Mom* are not men who have been castrated against their will, and in their castrating a man who later dies, *Mom* argues that castration does not make a man into a hijra; rather, hijras are those who desire a more globalized version of this corporeal modification. But men like Baburam die of it. This change is clearer when we compare *Mom* to the 1988 film *Zakhmi Aurat* (*Wounded Woman*) (1988), which also portrays a group of women castrating men. The castrated men in *Zakhmi Aurat* cannot bear the shame of being emasculated, and they come close to becoming unwilling hijras, whereas *Mom* makes sure to point out that castrating men does not make them into hijras. Rather, hijras exceed castration—both physically, as the presence of their breasts on screen show, but also psychically, as they are not made or unmade by it. It is no coincidence that this liberal recognition of hijra interiority comes freighted with their willing participation in delivering divine justice in India. In other words, hijras become trans citizens, but they remain life-affirming ascetics, and their participation in violence must be to restore the moral order of the universe.

The Role

The small roles that hijras play in these films are analogous to the ones enacted by the figure of the *sutradhar* in Sanskrit drama, which has been carried forward in modern theatre. The meaning of the word *sutradhar* as holder (*dhar*) of the strings (*sutra*) of the dramatic elements refers to the puppeteer as well as the architect, or master builder, who measures and thus formulates the plot. He is the "one who knows," who "'carries,' (has memorized) the rules" (Steiner 2012: 6, cited in Binder 2015: 21). This moral duty of the sutradhar makes it possible for the figure not just to narrate the play for the audience but also to participate in the drama, bringing the text or the drama to the correct moral ending if the narrative threatens to deviate otherwise. Robert P. Goldman (1986) gives us some nuanced understanding of what a sutradhar does; more specifically, of their position in the eighth-century play *Uttararamacarita* (*Rama's Last Act*) by the Sanskrit dramatist Bhavabhuti. The sutradhar interacts not just with the audience but also with the play's characters

to influence their decisions. Using the trope of a play within a play, Rama hears about Sita's despair from the sutradhar in Valmiki's play, which is being performed in Bhavabhuti's play, and reunites with his wife. Sheldon Pollock (2001: 197) writes that the dramatic narrative must unfold in such a way that all unpleasant realities and conflicts are resolved, and a single moral vision of the world stands out. He quotes Bhoja, an eleventh-century philosopher: "In literature if not in life . . . 'it must be the good guy, not the bad guy, who wins.'" One of the quandaries of the dramatic narrative is that in order to make the hero heroic, the villain must equal him in all respects but moral high-mindedness. Both author and reader must remember that they must not be like the villain in desiring the morally improper object but rather like the hero. This lesson is important because it allows for the sacred to absorb the profane, even if only for a short duration.

Pollock masterfully traces how the languages of the hero and the villain must have the same *rasa* (aesthetic sensibility) but must also differ in their ethical positions and have opposing goals—that is, moral and immoral. Once again, however, the difference cannot be sustained due to the chance that the object might not be inappropriate, as in the case of unrequited love that a villain might harbor. One of the possible solutions is that the responsibility for recognizing the intensity of the passion (and also its inappropriateness) must be shared with the *rasika*, the knowing reader. The text must then have a larger point (*mahavakyarth*) that works through suggestion and that requires from the reader an "innate receptivity" (*upahitasamskara*) about right and wrong. This, in turn, requires yet another, larger realm of meaning that the reader and the text share, *paro mahavakhyaikarthah*.

Interpreting the hijras' presence in the films discussed above as similar to that of the sutradhar explains not only the films' moral and ethical burden but also how queer figures have been understood in the context of contemporary Indian liberalism. Their role is somewhat similar to that of the Greek chorus: unrelated to the narrative arc yet a crucial element for driving home the moral message of the film, making hijras figures of interruption. They appear as a form of parabasis at moments when the protagonist, who must deliver justice, is painted into a corner, defeated, and possibly dead. Yet to understand why hijras are particularly suited to play their singular role in the economy of violence, we must turn to myths from the Indian epics.

Two myths from the epic *Mahabharata* have striking similarities to the scenes of life-affirming violence in the films discussed earlier. Wendy Doniger (2009: 23) gives us a helpful, if ironic, summary of the epic:

> The bare bones of the central story (and there are hundreds of peripheral stories too) could be summarized like this, for our purposes: The five sons

> of King Pandu, called the Pandavas, were fathered by gods. . . . All five of them married Draupadi. When Yudhishthira [the eldest of the five] lost the kingdom to his cousins in a game of dice, the Pandavas and Draupadi went into exile for twelve years, at the end of which, with the help of their cousin the incarnate god Krishna, who befriended the Pandavas and whose counsel to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra is the Bhagavad Gita, they regained their kingdom through a cataclysmic battle in which almost everyone on both sides was killed.

One of the many myths concerning hijras involves Arjuna killing his grandfather/great-uncle, Bhishma. Bhishma had abducted three princess sisters to get them married to his half-brother. The eldest of the princesses, Amba, is in love with another prince. She convinces Bhishma's advisors that she should not be forced to marry the half-brother. Her request is granted, but her lover refuses to take her back. Shunned by everybody, Amba vows revenge on Bhishma and is born a man, Shikhandi, in her next life so that she can fight, defeat, and kill him. During the battle that eventually ensues, Bhishma refuses to fight Shikhandi since they both remember Shikhandi's female past, and Bhishma cannot pick up a weapon against a woman. To finally defeat the great warrior Bhishma, Arjuna hides behind Shikhandi and slays him.

Shikhandi, described as the "man child who is a woman," is seen as one of the prototypes of hijras—men who are women—and is often cited as a figure of religious and historical importance to hijras (Custodi 2007). What is intriguing in this myth, and what has gone hitherto unremarked, is the participation of Shikhandi in this economy of violence. In an episode very much like the scene in *Agneepath*, Shikhandi helps the morally righteous hero, Arjun, fight against an equally strong but morally questionable villain. Yet another popular myth that has over the last thirty years become increasingly associated with and celebrated by hijras also takes place during the great war of the Mahabharata. As Alf Hiltebeitel (1995: 453) explains, Aravan, son of Arjuna, has agreed to sacrifice himself and die a heroic death, but:

> Aravan does not want to die a bachelor, since dying unmarried would prevent him from receiving the ancestral rites of a "Father," or Pitr. Krsna, asking, "Who would marry someone just about to die," solves this difficulty by taking the form of Mohini, the Enchantress, and marrying Aravan in a last-minute wedding. This is the version of Aravan's marriage reported in scholarly literature on South Indian popular Hinduism.

During the festival of Koovagam, hijras perform a ritual enactment of Mohini's marriage to Aravan and then of her subsequent widowhood. By doing so, they make not only a place for a form of god that was male and then female but also an argument for their position in the Hindu cosmology. It is intriguing that the context of war once again crops up in this myth, together with the relationship it signals between violence and masculinity as brokered by and through hijra personhood. As before, the hijras facilitate the morally correct conclusion for a hero, and the sacrifice and the violence are for the victory of the greater moral good.

Statecraft

The myths associated with gods who transform from one gender to another allow hijras to be recognized in religious and historical registers. The frequent citation of this recognition is seen in the roles that hijras play in films and is made possible only through a particular understanding of contemporary life in Indian politics. It is no coincidence that the various versions of the Transgenders Rights Bill that has been rattling around the various houses of parliament also cite these myths to make a case for ensuring that trans persons are equal citizens and should thus enjoy the same rights as everybody else. Yet the allegory presented in the films and myths goes deeper: hijras gain a certain salience largely because of the flexing of the Hindu right-wing muscles in the political arena. The rereading of Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* (2005) and its modification for the non-Christian context allow us to understand the allegory of violence that Bollywood reflects, if not represents. In his writings on Schmitt, Hent de Vries makes the case that, rather than repressing its theological foundations, worldly politics was always about the theological. Talal Asad's (2011) recuperation of political theology by way of cautioning against reducing secularism to Christianity is particularly helpful in unpacking the secular understanding of queer citizenship that the enactment of morally justified violence elides in the case of hijras. He writes: "If I am skeptical of the claims made for secularism's essential roots in Christianity, this is not because I argue that its *real* historical roots lie elsewhere, that secularism has no connection with Christianity whatever, but because I don't think we are entirely clear about what we are seeking to explain with such confidence" (673). Several scholars have attempted to understand the theological underpinnings of sovereignty in postcolonial contexts as laboring under other burdens, such as moral striving (Khan 2012), polytheism (Singh 2012), and everyday life (Das 2004, 2011). Building on these interventions, we can begin to understand the presence of hijras vis-à-vis sovereignty in India

as reflected by the recursive tapping into the mythic register in various domains, including films, lives, and legislation.

In January 2019, news broke that Laxmi Tripathi, a familiar face of queer rights in the media, had reached the banks of the Ganges in the city of Allahabad (now known as Prayagraj). She was staking a right to participate in the Kumbha Mela, one of the most important pilgrimages for Hindus, which takes place every three years in one of the four holy sites by the river Ganges. One of the rituals of the Kumbha Mela is the *Shahi Snan*, the first dip into the holy river, and the various religious orders (*Akharas*) of the various sects (*sampradaya*) proceed in sequence to bathe in the holy river. Laxmi demanded recognition for her order, the *Kinnar Akhara*,[3] which she established to reclaim the importance of the religious position of hijras and to which the Hindu nationalist discourse had hitherto only been paying lip service. The body that governs the thirteen orders, the *Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad*, refused to recognize Laxmi's order and forbade her from taking part in the ritual dip. Laxmi, deploying an impressive political tactic, convinced the largest of the orders, the *Juna Akhara*, that joining forces would be in the best interest of everybody. Thus she managed to take a dip along with the others in the procession, achieving a historic victory and consolidating the recognition of hijras as religious figures. Laxmi's act and the recognition of her order were celebrated by the liberal media as well as by the religious groups in an uneasy alliance (fig. 3). Laxmi was well received by the conservative Hindu religious groups because she no longer tied either her political aspirations or the political emancipation of her community to the political Left or to leftist discourse.

Seizing the political opportunity that the religious groups had made available to her through their recuperation and citation of the myths associated with the hijras, Laxmi made many people in the nascent queer rights movement uncomfortable with her alliance with the Hindu right-wing parties. She supported their demands to build a temple on the site of a mosque that been destroyed by hardline Hindus in 1992. The demolition of the mosque and the ensuing riots that took thousands of lives have seared themselves in the social, cultural, and political consciousness as an emblem of postindependence India. Laxmi is quoted in the *Hindustan Times* (2019) as saying, "Where my Lord Ram was born, there the temple has to come, [The Mughals] brought [the temple] down, and then they enslaved us all." The sovereign power exhibited by the state under the burden of creating a Hindu nation created opportunities for Laxmi and her followers not only to demand their place in the political order that was citing them but also to link their personal

Figure 3. Laxmi at the Kumbha Mela. *Hindustan Times*, "Kumbh 2019: Inside the Unique Kinnar Akhada," YouTube video, 3:35, February 12, 2019. www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdW4VJLoWCM&list=LL1tngTOXbI1zpOu2DKeO04A&index=27&t=0s.

ambitions to this project. The presence of hijras and their participation in violence to balance the world's moral ledger gains a "resonant meaning" (Das 2016) only when considered together with these other discourses about political life in India.[4]

The other great epic of India, *Ramayana*, has consistently provided ample material to fashion political sovereignty in India. The epic has made particularly felicitous the modern narrative of a mythic Hindu kingdom that was and is the Indian state and that must be saved from the constant defacement by Muslims that began in premodern India and continues today (Mehta 2015). Pollock (1993: 264) writes that the *Ramayana* offers "unique imaginative instruments—in fact, two linked instruments—whereby, on the one hand, a divine political order can be conceptualized, narrated, and historically grounded and, on the other, a fully demonized Other can be categorized, counterposed, and condemned." The condemned Other in the current political climate in India is the Muslim, usually the Muslim male, as a result of which hijras have been appropriated into the "divine political order." Yet this appropriation has not been without its tension, since the canniness of this political maneuver is difficult to hide, given the widespread violence, discrimination, and poverty that hijras suffer on a daily basis. Hijras have seized the opportunity that current statecraft offers to make demands for various types of recognition—political, religious, and economic.

The Field

The relationship presented in the films and the myths gives us a glimpse of how hijras brokered violence to create victorious heroes. The mythic role of hijras is baked into contemporary understandings of "transgenders," as revealed in the films, and this seamless transition is made possible by the resounding encouragement that hijras receive from Hindu religious groups. Actual lived realities were also sutured to this understanding of hijra desires; in other words, this role of consolidating masculinity was also how hijras formulated ordinary ethics and crafted everyday lives. Based on fieldwork I conducted in India between 2008 and 2018, in the rural districts of Bhadrak and Bhawanipatna in the eastern state of Orissa, a very specific reasoning emerged among hijras regarding their participation in the economy of violence that kinship, masculinity, and patriarchy entails. One day in 2012 there was great excitement in the hijra community in Bhawanipatna because of the visit of Julie, a petite and pert-looking hijra and a cause of good-hearted teasing because she insisted on wearing very high heels, which made her totter and trip all the time. Julie also had a speech impairment, and since she had grown up with some of the other hijras, learning the tricks of sex work together, they had developed a language of their own—partly sign language and partly grunted-out words—that was comprehensible because of their shared world of abject poverty.

Julie's way of speaking was not the only reason she attracted a large amount of good-hearted teasing. Someone would say, "She is so short, the men treat her like a doll. They just carry her off to fuck in the middle of the night." Someone else would say, "She is mad. She has no fear at all. She goes wherever she wants to, with whomever she wants, without any worries as to what might happen to her. At night, after our work, we would look for her, but we could never find her. In the morning we would ask her where she was last night, and she would say, 'Oh a group of truck drivers picked me up and took me away.'"

Julie's face, hands, and body were covered with scars. She showed and counted them for me, there were twenty-seven in total. I asked her for the story behind them, and she told me that groups of drunken men would just carry her off in the middle of the night and, while fucking her, they would stub out their cigarettes on her body. I learned that this was a common act of violence many men meted out to hijras. I asked her why she kept on going with these men if they harmed her, and she replied, "It's okay. They do it because they are drunk. When they sober up, they are very sorry—they give me food, money, and sweets—they are so loving." At that point in the narration, Jasmine, who was acting as translator between Julie and me, started laughing hysterically with the other hijras. She

said, "then later that night they get drunk again and carry her off again and stub cigarettes out on her body again" (pers. comms., December 4, 2011).

Hijras did not see the men's violence as a legal or moral wrong but rather as an inextricable variable of masculinity and not necessarily one that could be controlled. The men in these villages did not consider the women they were married to or courting correct or proper recipients of this form of violence. But that is not to say that other forms of domestic abuse were lacking in this poor village. For example, one of the ways hijras would amuse themselves was by watching a woman scream at and beat her husband in the morning when he was sober, and then watch the husband scream at her and beat her in the evening when he was drunk. There was a way in which the hijras recognized and controlled the inescapability of the violence of kinship, either by colluding with sisters and sisters-in-law or by taking care of the widowed women of the family, the aged, and the orphans. They would put up with a lot of violence by the men in their lives as the inherited moral responsibility of the feminine, excusing and explaining it as one of the painful conditions of life and love rather than deeming it illegal and remediable.

Hijras would often amplify the masculinity of a man they were trying to seduce by complimenting him on his penis, his prowess, and his virility (Saria 2015). Their desires as seen in the films, myths, and personal narratives were not antinormative, and this largely explains their absorption in the universe of the Hindu Right. Cathy J. Cohen (1997: 442), in what would become a foundational text of queer theory, asked, "How would queer activists understand politically the lives of women—in particular, women of color—on welfare, who may fit into the category of heterosexual, but whose sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral or worthy of state support?" In other words, Cohen shifts the division between normative and queer sexualities from the hetero-and-homo binary to the racialized relationships that the state has with its citizenry. Borrowing this analytic move, we may then see that the relationship that the Indian state has with hijras has not pivoted on their queerness or pathology at all but on their religious significance and import that can be mined for nationalism (Saria 2019). The new role of hijras in the political sphere builds on an older history of the hijra politician who because of their asceticism was also incorruptible. Given the emphasis on the purity of the state as a Hindu nation, it is not surprising that various claims of incorruptibility and ascetic ethics have been pressed into service.

The current moment of globalized sexual categories and identities might allow us to celebrate the forms of visibility that I have discussed above. However, the different histories of trans people across cultural contexts give very different valences to these visibilities. Andrea Long Chu (2018: 10) writes, in the context

of "sissy porn," that "most disruptions do not have the patina of the political." I would like to argue that the reverse can also hold true; in the films, the myths, and hijras' own desires, the patina of the political makes us believe that there is disruption at work. And perhaps there is—it is just not the kind of disruption we wanted or expected. The paradoxical role of hijras—as those who are beckoned to fix the breaches in the social fabric and as those who themselves never acknowledge the violence the social order inflicts on them—is better understood not through an ontological notion of generosity but through the moral position of the sutradhar. Their participation in the economy of violence must not be seen as a political problem to be overcome or explained away but as an instantiation of how queer and political theologies can come together in deeply unsettling ways.

Notes

1. The issue of class is crucial for hijras to be recruited in shameful truth-telling. The film *Kunwara Baap* (1974) has a particularly poignant song-and-dance routine in which the hijras come to the protagonist's house to collect alms for a newborn baby. When they find out that the baby is an orphan who has been adopted by the protagonist, the lyrics of the song are changed to make "the street" the orphan's mother.
2. "Call girls" perform sex work, but they also signal a very particular intersection of class and sexuality and hence reveal emerging anxieties of middle-class respectability endangered by young women expressing the sexual freedom offered through internal migration to urban centers.
3. *Kinnar* is a term that has come into use in the last fifteen years and is replacing *hijra* in order to accrete respect to hijras, given that the term *hijra* is also used as a pejorative, sometimes by hijras themselves. Though *Kinnar*, too, is contested by some as evidence of the saffronization of hijra identity and politics.
4. Veena Das (2016) studies a famous passage from tenth-century scholar Abhinavagupta that has been widely studied, including by Jacques Lacan, to argue that the grammar of poetics makes sense or gains life because of "resonant meaning." Also see Jean-Luc Nancy 2007 for another interpretation of resonant meaning.

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