CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Pleasures of Castration: The Postoperative Status of Hijras, Jankhas and Academics

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Introduction

This essay contrasts three groups who represent and reenact a castration. Two of the groups are in the city of Varanasi, in north India, and the third is more globally situated:

1. Hijras may undergo castration and penectomy—often while possessed by a goddess—in becoming what they and others term a third sex or third gender, “neither man nor woman,” to use the expression cited by the anthropologist Serena Nanda (1990). A minority of hijras are congenitally third. The analgesic trance of the operation is but one strand of the dense relationship between hijras and their powerful goddess; through her, hijras bring fertility when they dance for gifts at births and weddings. Hijras are organized into households with a hijra guru as head, into territories delimiting where each household can dance and demand money from merchants, and into larger regional and supraregional associations or pancayats linking them to other cities across South Asia. Nanda’s work on Indian hijras, challenging decades of sensationalist description by non-hijras through her close attention to hijra narratives, inaugurated a flood of sympathetic dissertations, documentaries, news reports, and other professional writing. Hijras became canonical inclusions in representations of international gay and lesbian studies (Abelove, Barale, and Halperin 1993) and in discussions of an increasingly global category of “third gender” (Herdt, 1994).

2. Jankhas are men who sometimes dress like women and dance like hijras but who do not elect castration. They are more frequently called zenanas in literature on hijras; by any name, they have not been appropriated into a metropolitan canon as have hijras. Jankha itself is a term denoting effeminacy, applied to these men by other men in their neighborhood. Jankhas occasionally use jankha or zenana but far more often just speak of themselves as part of a group of girlfriens, or sahelis. Harriet Ronken Lynton and Mohini Rajan (1987) mention a group of zenanas in the south central Indian city of Hyderabad; the authors speak only with hijras, who discuss their dislike of zenanas for trying to pass themselves off as hijras and stealing business. Nanda in her work reports a similar divide between the two groups, but documents occa-
sional alliances between some zenanas and the more marginal of hijras. But much of how jankhas in Varanasi live and perform and experience gender is not mimetic of hijras. Their training in dance and gender performance is tied to a tradition of urban low-caste burlesque performance.

3. Academics are persons of various genders who sometimes utilize conceptions of third gender as metaphors in social theory. But though third gender is good to think with, its theorization is often exquisitely insensitive to the bodies with which it plays. Much is at stake: some metropolitan academics have earned part of their living as gatekeepers, using their cultural capital as sex experts to decide the fate of others who would surgically transform their bodies. On the world’s peripheries, much else may be at stake.

This essay is concerned with newer, more subtle forms of gatekeeping. It is about what it means to make sexual difference matter—through various surgical, sartorial, or discursive tactics—in terms of other forms of social difference: class-based, caste-based, metropolitan, and patriarchal. Following hijra practice, it re/members castration as a bloody act and takes the violence as central to these representations of thirdness.

Castrations are routinized as enactments of signification and of culture itself in both 1950s Culture and Personality anthropology and in contemporary psychoanalytic cultural criticism; they become signs displaced from the possibility of the act in itself. Castrations and castrati are discovered everywhere, and particularly in social settings characterized by extreme political domination and marginality. Thus a repeated metaphor in colonial and postcolonial literature on the Indian subject, by definition male, is of a castration resulting in the loss of true manhood, the latter measured against some projection of “Western” masculinity. This metaphor was naturalized by such Culture and Personality anthropologists as G. M. Carstairs (1957) and such clinical psychoanalysts as Sudhir Kakar (1978). Both these authors construct developmental schemas of culturally located psychopathology (mother too close, father too distant) to explain why the Indian (male) subject desires his political domination.

Though the heyday of these sorts of exegeses has passed, Ashis Nandy in The Intimate Enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism (1983) argues that Indian (still male) subjects remain interpellated within an emasculating and now internalized colonialism. Nandy’s solution is to disengage the violence of this internalized castration not by inverting it (thus the martial hypermen which now circulate through the iconography of the Hindu right in India) but by renegotiating it with a different and more empowering form of androgyny, a Gandhian figure who eschews the violence. As in hijra discussions of zenana identity, two figures circulate in Nandy’s argument, one false (the colonial eunuch) and the other authentic (the Gandhian androgyne). All thirdness is not alike.

This point cannot be overemphasized. There is more at stake in castration
CHAPTER THIRTEEN than the maneuver of writing, dislocating, and rewriting the phallic signifier. As I began composing this essay, a disturbing account appeared in the Indian media of the forcible castration of Bishambar, a poor, low-caste man jailed for falling asleep by the roadside on a bed that was owned by a wealthy upper-caste man. Bishambar was beaten by the police and tied down; a bribe was solicited from his family. When it did not appear, he was tortured and eventually castrated. The case was leaked to the press and became a cause célèbre. The police contended Bishambar castrated himself (with a rusty blade he found in a garbage heap) to avoid arrest for theft (Tejpal 1992).

Against the circulation of castration and third gender as scholarly markers of both the violence and pleasure of signification, I want to locate the materiality of gender within what is differentially at stake for people. The other text I take up in juxtaposition to that of Nandy's, Marjorie Garber's Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and cultural anxiety (1992) offers a celebration of the possibilities of gender performativity. A disembodied notion of gendered liminality suffuses the text, linking very different sorts of bodies and ignoring questions of violence and authenticity critical to both hijra and postcolonial projects. By playing on the hijra claim that there exist both real and spurious projects of materializing gender, I would like to trouble the project of privileging gender fluidity that I read in Garber's book and hear reenacted in diverse academic fora.

There is of course a danger in writing against fluidity and appropriating a category of inauthenticity. Against the hijra critique of spurious gender, the narratives of jankhas challenge their being relegated to any position of spuriousness and their being represented as in any way exploitative. Jankha identity not only challenges any quick reading of India as having a three-gendered "system," it pushes us to avoid enlisting groups like hijras or jankhas in grand touristics of gender difference without challenging what is at stake for each in gender. That my own text here is implicated in the sort of writing which worries me is inevitable.

Two prefatory remarks, on terminology and location.

Terminology. I collapse the terms sex and gender here, for two reasons. First, in listening to and representing the stories of Banarsi hijras and jankhas, I am confronted with narrative and language which resists any a priori divisibility into embodied sex and expressive gender. Second, I follow the concern articulated by Judith Butler in Gender Trouble (1990), who suggests that the move to denaturalize much of sexual difference through the creation of a category of socially and individually constructed gender difference is less liberating than it initially appears to be. By splitting biological sex from socially constructed gender, it maintains and paradoxically legitimates a residual category of indubitable and unambiguous biological difference. A critical analysis which would refuse to take the biological for granted—which would leave no intractable point beyond critique, in Butler's phrase—must in its practice resist the easy possibility of any such naturalized realm. In this reading of Butler I am
not suggesting the impossibility of a biology or of the differences which constitute it. I suggest, rather, that as such differences can only be made to matter through languages, narratives, and contexts which are inextricably social, critical engagement with these representations must at every point interrogate the obvious.

Not only are the bodily facts of sex thoroughly social, however; all social constructions of sex, as they are articulated by embodied actors, are rooted in the body's corporeality (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Csordas 1990). Any theory of gender which is not rooted in this corporeality of lived experience must misrepresent it. Neither "the social" nor "the bodily" can be maintained as an independent analytic realm without a close examination of their rootedness in one another.²

Location. The ethnographic part of this essay comes from work in Varanasi, a city and metropolitan area of about one million people in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, conducted informally while engaged in other formal research from 1988 to 1990, and formally in 1993. Much has been written on Varanasi in the past few decades, including some work on the body, gender, and gender ambiguity (Searle-Chatterjee 1981; Prasad 1987; Kumar 1988; Parry 1989; Alter 1992). This research is based in four neighborhoods in the south and west of the city, primarily in Asi but also in Sigra, Karanandi, and Nagwa.

Two dangers still lurk in a short essay on hijras: (1) To frame a discussion of sex and sexual difference in South Asia in terms of hijras works to maintain an exoticizing gaze. Hijras—like sati, sacred cows, fakirs on beds of nails, and "the caste system"—becomeessentialized icons of India. The hijra as sign of essential Indianness affirms the colonial splitting of Indian male sexuality into the despotic hypersexual pederasty and unresistant homosexual or eunuch penetrability that Nandy addresses. Thus hijras literally embody Carstairs's diagnosis of Indian male psychopathology (boys who lack the psychic resources to challenge too-distant fathers and who retreat into lifelong oedipal deferral) by deferring phallic privilege forever. (2) Hijras often stand for "the Indian homosexual" in compendia of cross-cultural sex. The relationship between hijra desire and male same-sex desire is complex; writing about hijras without locating them within such contexts further routinizes and disembodies the specificity of their sexual difference. To illustrate the problem of location, I construct a vignette expanded from field notes. The vignette also helps locate myself and a few of my own various projects and artifices in relation to what follows. I have maintained the narrative flow of the notes at the risk of derailing the project slightly.

Idyll: the Varanasi park hustle as told by men like this

Three of us are walking through Maidagin Park at night, eight-thirty or thereabouts. It was once called Company Bagh, after an earlier regime, and it still sits across from the Varanasi Town Hall and other places of authority here.
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The police make periodic sweeps through the park, harassing and blackmailing loitering men, but they usually come later in the evening and right now the park feels safe, expansive. My friend Pramod is on my right, and to his right is his friend Guddu, with whom we’ve just hooked up.

Maidagin’s my favorite of the three large city parks; it surrounds a big square tank filled with slightly algae-clotted water, and at night cool breezes blow across the tank and onto the lawns and winding paths where people stroll or sit on the grass or benches. All sorts of people, during the day: athletes from a wrestling akhara who each morning work out in the mud by the muscled image of Lord Hanuman; a few families; boys playing games or practicing martial arts; men playing cards, chewing paan betel or intoxicating bhang, or snoozing; women and men crossing the park on the way to and from errands and work; the gardeners and their assistants; and groups of old men, talking or sitting. In the evenings Maidagin is less crowded: the old men are still there, some of them, and the sleepers. But the men who come in the evenings to wander—the Hindi verb, ghumna, is more expressive of the pleasures of going nowhere with friends—are aisa or aise, “like this,” “like that,” or “like these,” and they come to cruise for sex or for other pleasures and to talk with aise others.3

In Hindi-speaking places like Maidagin Park, many strolling men who like to have sex with men identify friends and prospective friends through the language of similitude—aise and jaise, like this, like these, this way—and shared play (being khel main, in the game). The language of aise and khel is not a label or a fixing of essential identity in the different but parallel ways the utterance of khush or hijra often demand. The “these” of aise’s “like these” is contingent, reflexive, and dialogic, pointing not to some category or class out there but to what is being enacted by the very encounter of speaker and listener together in the park at night. Thus language points inward—being “in the game,” identifying the coherence of desires through their being located in the park—and is momentary. A confessional imperative—Foucault’s “regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse” (1978)—seems absent. Yet against the lack of a sexual science, in Foucault’s sense, aise indexes no subterranean and esoteric world of pleasures, no Orientalist vision of the ars erotica Foucault presents as historical predecessor and structural Other to sexual science. Neither is aise’s obliqueness a political silencing of a love that dares not speak its name. The repressions in Maidagin lie elsewhere.

Guddu agrees that Maidagin is the best park: it has the most men. He breaks into a laugh as he tells us about parks in Calcutta where there are hundreds of men, like this. Pramod has never been to Calcutta, and when I am there it is inevitably in the company of myriad adopted aunties, so we listen in delighted half-belief. Pramod doesn’t agree—about Maidagin that is; he prefers the new park in Sigra, surrounded by wealthier residential colonies. There is less trouble from unsavory types in Sigra, he argues, whether gunda thugs or swishy lachak-mathak Number Sixes.
A young man passes us, tall and well-built, his eyes resting on us summarily, not with the slight pause that usually constitutes the park glance and which signifies the identity of its pleasures as surely as locutions like aise. “Who is—” I begin, but Pramod cuts me off. “He’s bad, a gunda [tough guy]-type, one of the Harischandra college boys. Leave it alone.” Harischandra is an inter-college with many village guys who don’t get in to more prestigious places; its students have a reputation among men like this for extorting money from them, usually after demanding and engaging in oral sex or a hand job on a darkened bench.

Pramod and I had come to the park that night to do AIDS outreach work; we split up and began canvassing other men. I ran into the gunda, and for all the wrong reasons unmindful of my friends’ advice, I began to talk with him about AIDS. We walked around the tank talking, but when we reached the far end of the park he pushed me roughly towards a bench. “Karte ya karwate hain?” he demanded: Do you or are you done to? It’s a frequent park question, along with other similarly paired verbs: lagne ya lagane?—stick it or get it stuck in?; lete ya dete?—take it or give it away?

It’s frequent enough that for many men who ghum in the parks of the city, aise—the possibility of shared desire—initially refers to the realization of one or the other of these positions, narratively coherent through joking and insulting terms heard since boyhood which suddenly take on new meaning: one is either a gandu—one who is done to, up the ass—or a londebaaz—one who delights (baaz) in doing young men (londe). Some men, particularly infrequent park visitors, remain on one side or the other; others go more to extremes, like both the “gunda-type” londebaaz who had just sat me down and like the Number Sixes I introduce below. But for most men who are, like Pramod and Guddu, aise, early park encounters lead to a set of friends characterized less by what they want than by where they are: together, here, in the park, aise. Doing and being done to are usually distributed by relative age but renegotiated as the play of a tryst shifts into the longer-range intoxication of pyar mohabbat or deep love.

Guddu saw me with the gunda; he gave a low whistle of warning. I said to the gunda: “Neither,” but he grabbed my thigh tightly and demanded money. With Guddu nearby, I felt safer, despite having been roughed up once by Delhi gunda-types for refusing to pay up. I refused again, and asked him why he tried to coerce money from men in the park. He said it wasn’t coercion, but quid pro quo: “I’m from a small village; we don’t have much money, but we have good land and air and eat right. So I’m strong. These city boys, these sons of great Seths [a merchant caste] come with their fathers’ money but are weak. They take my strength [referring to his semen] and I receive something in exchange.” I escaped. I should have listened when earlier Pramod said “leave it.” Then the three of us had kept walking, around the circular flower bed in the center of the park and towards the west gate, away from the gundas. At the gate, Pramod laughed. “This is where the Number Sixes come in,” he said, referring to the other kind of park hustler.
Like *hijra* and *jankha, chah nambar*—number six—and *chakka*—a sixer—are epithets in north India thrown at effeminate-seeming men, at *jankhas*, and at *hijras*; they are also used as general insults or joking terms between close male friends.

We leave Maidagan by the west gate, and grab some tea at one of the shops which line the periphery of the park before Pramod and I take our leave of Guddu and flag down a rickshaw. It is late, but along the storefronts of the Chowk market street men are seated outside drinking tea and hot milk, talking. "There's another Number Six, a *jankha*," Pramod says, pointing to a young man swaying his hips and trying to catch some tea-drinker's eye. I mull over Number Six as we head home toward Asi and home. Pramod leaves me at the head of my lane, a shadowy figure is seated near my door. "It's your neighbor," he snorts. "He's dirty. The *jankha*.

I walk the rest of the way alone. Pramod was right; the figure is indeed Kamal, my neighbor, whom I've known for several years. He sleeps outside his family's house in the lane; he is the youngest of several brothers, who are mostly tailors; he has held several jobs during the time I have known him; he has been fired from a soap factory and now works on odd tailoring jobs with his brother and several other tailors; he supplements his meager income, as before, by cruising street corners in this part of the city, in men's clothes but with a bend of the waist—*lachak*—and jiggle of the bottom—*mathak*; he hangs with a group of *sahelis*, who often dance for weddings in saris, somewhat like *hijras*. "They do births; we do weddings," Kamal once said of the difference between him and the girlfriends on the one hand and *hijras* on the other.

"Where are you coming from?" he laughs. I evade his question, and tell him his friend Ram Prasad, whom he sometimes calls Rita, has been bothering me, stopping me on busy roads in broad daylight and making passes. With *sahelis*, Kamal calls himself Kamala. "And what am I called?" I once pleaded somewhat pathetically, afraid to be out of the loop. "You, you're called my husband," Kamala returned.

"But I don't want to be your husband."
"Yes, you do, of course you do. And what else could you be?"
"Your friend . . . your *saheli*."
"You can't be my *saheli*, you're too *siddhe-sada* [straight and regular]. . . ."
I perhaps misread "straight," and responded:
"What do you know? I have a husband in America."
"Oh, that again."
"Why won't you believe me? I do."
"You really want to be a *saheli*?"
"Do I look like I want to be your husband?"
"Well. We'll see. We'll call you Anita. Anita Devi."

Rita, for her part, has never pleaded with *siddhe-sada* types, she seduces quite brazenly. Kamala laughs again, and says about her: "that's why the *hijras* don't want to take him. He's very bad." I am surprised: "I didn't know the *hijras*..."
often refused people.” “The hijras here have gone away to a pancayat meeting where they will discuss whether they have to take him,” Kamala confides. “Ram Prasad is always going up to men in Asi crossing and making remarks, offering to eat them, he always wants to play like that. That’s not like hijras.”

**Hijras and Jankhas**

What is like hijras, and who are jankhas? A household of three hijras lived a few lanes over from Kamal and Ram Prasad’s neighborhood, on the edge of an untouchable slum. A fourth hijra, Ganga, lived by the slum with her husband, and came by early each morning. The four spent the day “dancing”: traveling to the homes of the newborn to dance and sing and to bless them with fertility, looking for more newly born children to visit, and when all else failed making the rounds of merchants in their territory of the city, threatening to pull up their saris and reveal their postoperative genitals, the sight of which is said to make a man impotent, in a sense a hijra himself. A fifth hijra lived nearby as well, but she lived with her family of birth. Pramod first noticed her when he went up onto his landlord’s roof; she lives next door. The other neighbors confirmed quietly that there was indeed a hijra on the lane, living with her family, but that she never went out. When I asked Pramod once whether hijras ever altered their bodies surgically, he deferred answering but said of this neighbor: “that one was born that way.”

The multiple relationships and spaces in which hijras may live in one neighborhood suggests the difficulty with an overly essentialized vision of third gender. An acquaintance in Sigra, to the north of Asi, lived near another group of hijras and took me to meet Rani, a hijra guru there. Rani was out dancing, and I sat with her brother and brother-in-law awaiting her return. “Her” was for me only—for her family, she was chachaji, a friendly paternal uncle. Like Arjuna in the Mahabharata, Rani was for her family gendered through her role as a famed dance instructor—the fact of her being neither man nor woman was sidelined by their lifelong sense of her as he, but a complex dance-teacher sort of he.

Hijras occasionally are born “neither male nor female,” or within the more binary possibilities of biomedicine, intersexed. Far more frequently, hijras are born as phenotypic males who in adolescence or young adulthood realize that they are essentially neither male nor female and join a community of hijras; full adoption of hijra identity often involves castration, penectomy, and one’s dedication to the service of the goddess. As her vehicles, they bring fertility when they come to dance and collect gifts at births and weddings. Pramod, from a poor petty-bourgeois family, once said to me that as a rule hijras are born third, discovered by other hijras when they come to see newborn babies and examine their genitals. Middle-class men and women I knew from Varanasi often said hijras were never born that way nor did they elect an operation, but were kidnapped and sold into a sexual slave trade for which purpose they
were castrated and penectomized. Men across class also said *hijras* were impotent men, literally non-men, and that their thirdness was secondary to their inability to please a wife.

The question of who *hijras* are has long sparked controversy. A debate raged in the pages of the *American Anthropologist* in the late fifties between Carstairs (1957, 1960) and Morris Opler (1959, 1960) over the definition. The two agreed that *hijras* were castrated and penectomized men who dressed as women, but differed on almost everything else. Carstairs held they were prostitutes; Opler that they were ritual specialists, devotees of the goddess Bahu-chara Mata, who through her conferred blessings on newborn sons and newly-wed couples. *Hijras* may be both, and the debate spun around a hermeneutic circle in which the sexual marketplace and auspicious ritual were too cleanly opposed.

Another older but equally circular debate on *hijra* identity framed the essential question as that of religious etiology. In Richard Burton's famous "Terminal Essay" to the *Arabian Nights* (1885), *hijras* were signs of the licentious comradery of the Islamic world, the narrative center of his vision of a Sotadic Zone, a tropical space of blurred gender and sexual relations. In the text attributed to the Abbé Dubois (1899), the early nineteenth-century missionary and ethnographer, *hijras* were signs not of the fluidity of Islam but of the hypocritical propriety of Brahmanic Hinduism, a religion preaching celibacy but tolerating unlimited perversity. In the twentieth century, this etiologic debate has become a set of competing apologetics. The last princely ruler of the south Indian state of Hyderabad banished *hijras* from his court in a move to purify his Islamic regime from regional and Hinduized degenerate culture (Lynton and Rajan 1974). Hindu apologists, including some contemporary Indologists, in contrast see *hijras* as an Islamic importation, reading the gender play of gods and epic heroes and particularly that of Arjuna and Sikhandin as having no connection to the origins of *hijras*; popular narratives, *hijra* and non-*hijra*, which do read divine and epic androgyny in terms of a *hijra* role are seen as contemporary bricolage. In practice, *hijras* are both Hindu and Muslim, sharing joint devotional practice to the goddess as central to their identity as well as having distinct rites of passage within their respective religious communities. The debate on religion disguises a move of erasure.

A third and very current debate on *hijra* origins takes up the question of coercion. A recent article in the *Lancet* (Allahbadia and Shah 1992) documents the existence of (1) the sale (by indigent parents) of their boys, or (2) the kidnapping of boys, and their forcible castration. The authors assume—against overwhelming narrative and ethnographic evidence (Sinha 1967, Lynton and Rajan 1974, Anderson 1977, Preston 1987, Sharma 1989, Nanda 1990)—that most *hijras* are forced into castration and third-gender identity. The sale, most frequently in impoverished rural sites of endemic famine, of boys as well as girls into the sex trade certainly occurs; with the increasing corporatization and
dominance by international crime cartels in the control of sectors of the Bombay sex trade it may well be growing, though this has not been documented. But as in the case of popular Indian literature on female prostitutes, stories of selling and kidnapping children disguise other far more common but less palatable reasons for sexual difference: in the case of women, escape, economic necessity, and institutionalized misogyny (Oldenberg 1992), and in the case of hijras, desire. Hijras themselves often construct a narrative of their abject origins, explicitly for the consumption of nosy outsiders.

Jankhas or zenanas are often represented by social scientists as incomplete or preoperative hijras. The hijra whose experience Lynton and Rajan relate in their history of Hyderabad is beaten as a young boy by his uncle because he did girls' work and dressed in saris; he runs away to the zenanas where he hears of the hijras and begins to dance with the latter group. The narrative of her move from son to zenana to hijra offers two readings of the difference between the latter two groups. The first story centers on the presence of the penis and on the transformation of castration:

> When I joined the Hijras I had, just as a man has, everything. So I thought I would live like that with the Hijras, wearing a sari and going to dance, still keeping all that. But there are some women, if they call us to dance, when we dance they also dance. While they are dancing they twirl money over their heads to avert the evil eye and give it to us. So if an elderly woman is there, while we are dancing, suddenly—gup! she puts her hand there to see if one is a true Hijra.

> With me it happened like this. . . . I used to go to the villages nearby and ask [for money or other gifts]. Now in every village there are one or two smart alecks who say, “If you are a Hijra, show us.” In that village also there was one. So no one in the village would give me a single paisa because they said, “What kind of Hijra are you? Get out!” . . .

> So I got into a fury . . . I went into the jungle between the two villages and I had a knife with me. . . . (1974: 195–96)

The unnamed hijra castrates herself, invoking the goddess to aid her healing, and returns to the same "smart aleck" to reveal her wound dramatically.

In narratives of this sort, the castration is social (proof to the heckling crowd), symbolic (giving up the position of having “just as a man has, everything”), and often physiological. Castration is necessary physically to change internal gender. Through the bleeding, maleness flows out, femaleness flows in; mixture results. Hijras from Baroda explain to Vyas and Shingala that “maximum blood should be poured out of the body during the castration ceremony. . . . the castration ceremony carries away male blood out of the body. And fresh blood . . . is of a female body” (1987:39).

The second reading of the move from zenana to hijra precedes and encompasses the castration. Lynton and Rajan follow their hijra informants and Morris Opler in describing hijras as asexual ritualists; zenanas are the prostitutes:
Born as males, the Hijras rejected sexual activity of all kinds but indulged their preference for the clothing, the cosmetics, and the domestic activities of women. Without the Hijra community to shelter them, they would have no choice but to become zenanay, practicing homosexuals, who were cast off by their families, despised by society, and used by any male with a taste for pretty boys. But there was a difference, for the zenanay made up their eyes and wiggled their hips when they walked in order to advertise their availability, but the true Hijra was incapable even of desire. With one door after another closed against him, the Hijra turned the violence born of his agony against himself and cut off his external genitalia. (ibid.: 191–92)

The unnamed hijra contrasts zenana and hijra life:

I lived with the zenanay for some time. Having begged, I would return and it would be nighttime and some rough fellow who had been drinking would catch me and pull me about, slap me, show me a dagger or a knife. Then he would take me off and when once or twice I had been spoiled, I said to myself, “Creature, this is no good.” . . . Those zenanay people also used to say: “Hijras live there. They do like this; it is like that with them. One has to live respectfully with them. If one goes there they close the door like a prison. At nine o’clock the lock falls on the door; nobody can go and come there.” (ibid.: 194)

In this reading, hijra life is ordered, respectable, asexual, and safe; zenana life is chaotic, indulgent, homosexual, and dangerous. Becoming a hijra is represented as a move through a liminal phase characterized by homosexual rape into a controlled sexuality where sartorial gender, rather than genital sex, constitutes essential difference. Here castration is a social necessity, the violent performance of hijra asexuality, but not a transformative moment—which long precedes castration. According to some of the Asi hijras with whom he had hoped to move in, Ram Prasad was unsuitable. His behavior demonstrated he was not like a hijra. Others concurred. “He’s too forward,” said Kamal in retrospect. “He’s just a jankha,” said Pramod.

Zenanas are not only represented as overly and deviantly sexed precursors to hijras but as competitors. Nanda underscores the concern with authenticity by the audiences for whom hijras and zenanas dance, as well as the economic concerns of hijras themselves:

These other people, who imitate us, they are real men, with wives and children. They come to join us only for the purpose of making a living. How do we know what a person is when he comes to join us? Just recently there was a case in our group. This man’s name was Hari. He was the father of four children and he dressed up as a woman and put on a woman’s hairstyle. He behaved like a hijra and danced at people’s houses, disguised as a hijra. One day we caught him red-handed. We beat him up bodily and handed him over to the police. It cannot be allowed for someone to take our place as it deprives us of our right and our income. . . . I thought to myself, I am so different from them, like the earth and the sky; these people are men whereas I am neither a man nor a woman. (1990:11–12)
How the *zenana* was caught red-handed is unspecified, but whether his difference was demonstrated through the revelation of a penis or through *zenana*-type rude and oversexed behavior is unimportant. In either case, the revelation leads to an affirmation of the reality of *hijra* gendering: *zenanas* occupy a two-gender system (men “dressed up as a woman”) and *hijras* occupy a three-gender system (“neither man nor woman”). Though elsewhere *hijras* may frame themselves within a binary language (we are born boys but act like girls; we castrate ourselves to let the male blood flow out so we can become female), against *zenanas, hijras* articulate themselves here as unambiguously third.

In Varanasi, Kamal and Ram Prasad called each other *saheli*, girlfriend. They called themselves *hijras* sometimes, and at other times differentiated themselves from the *hijras*. Two lanes over from where Kamal and I lived was the household of *hijras* that Ram Prasad had wanted to join. When he was refused admission by the *hijras*’ *panchayat* (council) meeting in another city, the *hijras* did not discuss his case with me. Ram Prasad himself claimed he had changed his mind: “I don’t want to be with them; I want a husband.” Having a husband did not seem to be a barrier to becoming a *hijra* in Asi; the *hijra* Ganga lived with a husband. But Ram Prasad now identified being a *hijra* with celibacy and, like Kamal, said he wanted a “macho-macho” and “siddhesada” man, straight and plain and not *chah nambar*. Neither of the two *jankhas* was yet married; neither had plans to get married nor—or so they claimed—were their families pressuring them to do so.

Both men were very poor and low-caste, and had grown up in communities with drama troupes which played drums and performed satiric skits with female ingenue roles often played by *lachak-mathak* young men like themselves. Dressing in saris and dancing was not only a sign of gendered difference but part and parcel of local subsistence. The two men shared a guru, a dancing teacher who had several young men he both trained and directed in performance at weddings and communal celebrations. Both in adolescence had been introduced to sex by other men, and both had become informal sex prostitutes. Ram Prasad’s parents had died and he had no siblings in the city; Kamal helped his family with his tailoring work, particularly the wife and children of his eldest brother who was sick. Kamal slept on a neighbor’s stone verandah, never in the house with his family.

Both men talked occasionally of joining the *hijras* or called themselves *hijras*; another *saheli*, who no longer hung out with the others in the drama troupe, lived in the Chamari untouchable colony a kilometer south. Birju denied he was either a *hijra* or wanted to become one: “I’m a man.” Like Kamal, he had been introduced to *nautak*—drama—by a neighborhood drummer and guru. Pramod and Guddu called him *chah nambar* and *jankha*, but Birju resisted the labels, sometimes playfully and sometimes angrily. He seldom danced, and only turned tricks when forced to, probably by one of the senior police officers at the local station. Youngest son of a poor father in an untouchable slum, Birju had his father’s welfare on his mind much of the time. At one
point his father had arranged a marriage for him, around the time he had been
admitted to an intercollege (two-year preparatory college). College and mar-
riage had fallen through; Birju says there was not enough money for either,
particularly after a robbery and the theft of his late mother's jewels.

After the marriage fell through, Birju continued to spend time with his lover,
a married tailor with a shop near the slum, and to call himself the tailor's sec­
ond wife. The tailor's son would tease Birju by calling him “uncle,” at which
Birju would playfully hit the boy—“what's my name, what's my name?”—
until the boy would yell “stepmother, you're my stepmother.”

Like Ganga, Birju wants a husband; like her, he refuses to define his desire
in the manner of Kamal or Ram Prasad. But he still on occasion talks of getting
married not to his tailor but to a woman. Pramod begrudgingly admits Birju is
different than some of the other Number Sixes. Kamal knows him, and says
that he too is a saheli. Birju does not deny being Kamal's saheli, but unlike his
girlfriend he is adamant about not being a hijra.

Ram Prasad and Kamal cruise street corners looking very lachakmathak in
the evenings, looking for men who will pay them for sex, and in Kamal's case
looking for husbands. Other Banarsi men from slightly more well-off petty
bourgeois families also play at street corners with glances and lachakmathak
body movement, but seldom trick quid pro quo for cash or gifts. Halfway be­
tween the slum and Maidagin is the main crossing of Godolia. Raju is a Bihari
villager who came to Varanasi for work five years earlier and got a job selling
ladies' clothing at a discount store there, Bombay Sale. When Pramod got a
job at Bombay Sale, he and Raju became friends. Pramod would see Raju at
another of the city's parks, or sometimes in the evenings at Godolia crossing,
acting slightly lachak and catching the eye of older men. Raju would joke with
his coworkers at the Sale, making coded references to his boyfriends and sex,
playing with words like saheli. But his friends weren't sahelis in the more for­
mal sense that Ram Prasad used the word, living life with girlfriends. Raju
played with words, including terms ordinarily far more violent and abusive
than Number Six, such as gandu (someone who takes it up the ass).

Raju's lovers came and went, usually going with violent consequences: jeal­
ous Ashok, who let Raju sleep at his paint shop (his wife and children were at
home) as a kept man until he heard false rumors of Raju's infidelity and threw
him out; portly Khansahib, who came on sari business monthly from Bombay
but liked to get drunk and finally used Raju so brutally that Pramod had to take
him to the hospital for stitches; and currently Dasgupta Uncle, who took Raju
in as a kept man and stepson in a flat next to his own family's house. Dasgupta
was different than the others: “He loves me!” Raju exulted, avoiding the unnec­
essary question of whether he returned the sentiment. With Dasgupta, Raju
was no longer the ubiquitous queen of the crossing; there was hardly a trace of
the old lachakmathak when he would return to Godolia on errands.

Pankaj was a low-level government bureaucrat who rented a one-bedroom
flat near Godolia. He, like Raju, used to meet men at the crossing more often than in the parks; he was more subtly lachak-mathak than Raju when he met younger men's gazes in the rush of the evening crowds. "I want poetry," he always lamented. "There's no poetry in this city." Pramod called Pankaj jankha and Number Six: "He is impotent, and can only have it done to him. He has secret [venereal] diseases from every man doing him." For Pramod, Pankaj's consistent position of being done to, places him bodily outside a framework of play: he has diseases, and is impotent. Pankaj neither sees himself as having much in common with hijras or jankhas nor with the men who are aise, words he would not use. "I am a gay," he used to say, "and there is nothing for me here in Varanasi." He took frequent trips to Delhi and cruised its much larger parks, looking for more poetic and educated men. Through these connections he learned of Trikone, a magazine for South Asian gays and lesbians produced in the United States, and through personal and pen-friend ads in Trikone met friends and lovers in other north Indian cities. When a group of older gay men established their own newsletter and organization in the city of Lucknow, Pankaj quickly became involved; and he took the earliest opportunity to get a transfer out of Varanasi, a city perhaps "like this" but not terribly gay.

Two Appropriations of Third Gender

Concomitant with the dubious achievement of a diagnostic category is the inevitable blurring of boundaries as a vast heteroglossic account of difference, heretofore "invisible" to the legitimate professions, suddenly achieves canonization and simultaneously becomes homogenized to satisfy the constraints of the category. Suddenly the old morality tale of the truth of gender ... becomes pancultural in the 1980s ... the berdache and the stripper, the tweedy housewife and the mujerado, the mah’u and the rock star, are still the same story after all, if we only try hard enough. ("A Posttranssexual Manifesto," Stone 1991)

Sandy Stone writes the above in showing how American professional authority through the medicalization of "transsexuals" comes to demand a single narrative of transsexual experience, rooted entirely in an asexual articulation of gender. Individuals must perform culturally feminine gender to assure the gatekeepers of sex of their naturally female self; personal testimonies of transsexual identity must contain a total identification with culturally readable femininity and a lack of any male genital investment. In highlighting what she terms a preoperative ritual—"wringing the turkey's neck," one last jerking off before penectomy—Stone suggests the inadequacy of the official binary logic of transsexualism and offers the possibility of myriad gendered trajectories in her "post-transsexual" manifesto against Raymond's critique of male to female transsexualism as the ultimate patriarchal appropriation.8

The homogenization of gender transformation is not restricted to medical authority or a certain style of radical feminist critique. "Third gender" has
become a key site in several academic debates. It invokes a global semantic network (encompassing caricatures of transsexual, berdache, xanith, hijra, mah’u, androgynous, hermaphroditic, and often gay and lesbian experience) invoked to demonstrate the possibility of collapsing boundaries of all sorts: cultural, political, patriarchal, biological. I turn to two such debates that fail to engage what is at stake for many who articulate a gendered identity which is neither female nor male. The first debate is located primarily within American feminism and literary theory: Is transsexualism a subversion or an extension of a binary and patriarchal economy of gender? Against positions like Raymond’s, Garber in *Vested Interests* argues for the necessity of liminally gendered figures in establishing and maintaining the very possibility of gender difference, a “center-out-there” argument structurally similar to the anthropological approach of Victor Turner. Rather than the villainous undercover agent of patriarchy, the cross-dressed or the transgendered body here has a more critical role in relation to patriarchal structure.

Garber’s scope is encyclopedic; she explores the deployment of gender liminality not only in representations of, and by, transgendered, third-gendered, and cross-dressed persons, but also in *Peter Pan, Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the styles of Elvis, Madonna, Liberace, Josephine Baker, and Valentino, Freud’s analysis of Schreber, Little Red Riding Hood’s wolf, and the stories of the Chevalier d’Eon and the Chinese opera singer upon whom *M. Butterfly* is based. These last two are the sorts of narratives she handles to best effect, stories in which each successive revelation of the real truth of gender dissolves into a further surprise. The text has been celebrated as a validation by many—particularly middle-class—members of transsexual and transvestite communities in the United States.

One problem with the text is its unflagging functionalism, in which third-gendered desire is ultimately explained in terms of its function: maintaining a society’s system of gender through the demarcation of the boundaries. Individual and socially located desire is deprived of its specificity in Garber’s reading of myriad lives in terms of a single narrative. The bodies in her text lack any pleasures in and for themselves; they point only to the boundaries. Ultimately, each incarnation of gender dissolves painlessly into the next: there is no materiality or historicity to the radically regendered body, and no blood of castration auspiciously or terrifyingly marking the vestments which litter the text. Transgendered bodies signify their difference alone; there is never any there there. Thus when politics do enter the text, as in Garber’s discussion of African-American cross-dressing and drag, the principal of difference invoked by the examined body shifts from one totalized conception (gender) to another: race. Again, what is at stake for individuals elides the possibility of their own located desire: black drag is primarily “the translation of a mode of oppression and stigmatization into a supple medium for social commentary and aesthetic power” (1992:303). The relationship between the body of a desire and a cultural politics of social difference is not engaged.
I juxtapose *Vested Interests* with a very different sort of text, Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy*. A psychologist by training who became a cultural critic and political analyst in Delhi, Nandy examines transformations of Indian and British selfhood through their colonial engagement (1983). Reminiscent of Fanon (1967) and Said (1978), Nandy focuses on the internalization and continual reification by a generalized but male- and bourgeois-inflected Indian subject of his colonial construction as both infantile and emasculate. Nandy discovers the origins of representational emasculation not only in the choreography of oppressor and oppressed but also in the hermeneutics of cultural contact. The British, Nandy suggests, misread a local Indian ethic of the good self as sexually balanced and androgynously experienced and found Indians unmanly. Given both their lack of a valorized cultural category of gender neutrality and their displacement of colonial inhumanity onto the bodies of the colonized, Nandy's British read the majority of their subjects as what he terms hypomasculine and a minority as hypermasculine martial races.

Nandy develops the figure of the hypomale at considerable length. Indians continue, he argues, to structure themselves against an internalized sense of unfulfillment, desiring wholeness as violent hypermasculinity. His response to this gendered colonization of the self is to reclaim a "precolonial" transcendant androgyne over and against the effeminate male or the hypermale. This authentic, Gandhian androgyne is offered as a bridge transcending gendered difference—here the fragments of a colonized and divided self—and freeing the self from hypomasculine identification and hypermasculine fantasy. Implying not object choice but self-construction, Nandy terms the liberatory self bisexual: it encompasses sexual difference rather than standing for it. Like Garber, Nandy offers a sexually liminal figure as a liberation from binary political structures, but as political difference is central to his project we are left with mirror figures—the true and the false androgyne—rather than a single celebratory gesture which acknowledges other forms of difference but resists acknowledging their desire.

Both Garber and Nandy downplay patriarchal difference: perhaps in response to Raymond, Garber submerges the specificity of a body marked female at birth within a narrative that focuses overwhelmingly on bodies initially marked male. Both of Nandy's androgynes—the emasculate and the encompassing—respond to the specificity of a male colonial subject. Androgynes, Wendy O'Flaherty notes, classically have offered the possibilities of plurality inscribed on an initially male body (1980). The political metaphor Nandy offers cannot easily represent the experience of women. Yet Nandy's discussion of postcolonial desire and the need to rethink the subjectivity of the Other has had an impact for elite critics, women and men, far outstripping the masculine confines of the imagery he offers.9

A second and subtler exclusion is class-based; the harmoniously balanced androgyne Nandy offers as political redemption draws on an elite aesthetics, not limited to India, of representing the self as lacking explicit sexual signifi-
cation and the subordinate Other as hypersexual. Nandy offers a liberatory poetics of encompassment and balance. His androgynes eschew extremes. But there are multiple aesthetics of the political body. I offer the example of the moustache.

Pramod once offered another term to explain Number Six: munchmunda—being without a moustache. Young men in Varanasi inevitably have moustaches, which they grow marking their ascension to young manhood, much as shaving seemed to mark a parallel move where I grew up in the United States. Moustaches are an explicit sign of mardhana, of masculine power, and in parts of India are associated with the phallus through double entendre and codes of upturned versus downturned moustaches as status markers. In several, particularly high-caste Hindu traditions, a son cannot shave the moustache as long as his father is alive. Guddu, Pramod, and several friends experimented with shaving their moustaches only when away from the city, looking elsewhere for work.

Fathers, however, wear their patriarchal authority differently. A term like munchmunda has less salience. In Varanasi, men often shave moustaches in their forties and onward, marking in a less narrativized fashion than the growth of a moustache a movement into a different universe of political representation. Moustaches thus signify masculine presence doubly: young men wear moustaches, marking the bodily strength of young manhood but not the social and political domination of middle age; older men may shave a moustache without the threat of appearing munchmunda. Generationally, a man moves from a position of explicit phallic signification toward one of submerged, pseudo-androgynous sexuality. Yet, while Pramod would tease a munchmunda friend of similar age, he did not conceptualize older men without moustaches as being munchmunda.

Most young men in the city had moustaches; those who didn't, in my experience, were either elite middle-class young men or, in the slum, jankhas. Pankaj had a mustache, but many of his friends in government service did not. One young engineer, Bishwanath, spoke of shaving his mustache as a matter of hygiene: "it feels dirty." Models for advertisements appealing to the "common man" are always mustachioed, selling fertilizers or family planning. Models for advertisements for luxury products are often not mustachioed, particularly if the pitch is to the aesthetics of the male body. The advertisement for Aramusk soap in 1990 pictured a clean-shaven male model glaring moodily at the camera: the caption announced the class location of the product and its requisite body: "extravagantly male." A 1991 advertisement for a New Delhi luxury barber shop, Villa Appearances, shows a photograph of a clean-shaven young man staring out at the reader and resting his head on an embroidered pillow, the photo framed by the legend "Come Indulge Yourself." Against a Banarsi male aesthetic which equates munchmunda with being a Number Six, many elite young men can construct a sartorial style with an encompassing aesthetic, the powerful pseudo-androgyny of generational authority. Bishwanath's shave
is—against Pramod’s reading—no castration at all, but rather an ascension to
the encompassing authority of the subtle phallus, the position of indulgence.
The androgyne that Nandy imagines draws on a Gandhian vision, but overlaps
uncomfortably with the aesthetics of the Aramusk body. What is or is not
at stake in being *munchmunda* is different, powerfully so, across class in the
city’s streets.

**The Reification of Third Gender**

I have chosen to imagine all too briefly the pleasures of several men and *hijras*
at a given time in their lives; I do so to write against the easy reading of either
*hijras* or *jankhas* as just third gender. One could construct an Indian edition
of *Vested Interests*, encompassing not only all that which might be conveyed by
*hijra*, *jankha*, *chah nambar*, *saheli*, *londa*, *lachakmathak*, and *zenana*, but also
mythic figures like Arjuna, Sikhandin, and countless other sex shifters and
androgynes; religious festivals, performances, and sites of possession where
men cross-dress, often possessed by a goddess or other female presence; the
possession of women by male spirits and ghosts; the spring carnival of Holi
when magazines cross-dress most major politicians and actors; the occasional
news stories of girls who were school friends and run off together, one having
a sex change operation to marry the other; devotional Hindu *bhakti* and Islamic
Sufi religious and poetic practice through which a male devotee or poet loses
himself by becoming the female lover of God as a young male; the film star
Sridevi dancing as Charlie Chaplin in the film *Mr. India*; Ayurvedic medical
and Jain religious texts detailing elaborate cosmologies of sexual difference;
religious and political leaders who play with conventions of gender, and from
Ramakrishna and Gandhi to Uma Bharati and the career of former prime min-
ister V. P. Singh’s on-again, off-again moustache.

At best, the exercise would iterate Garber’s point, that of the centrality of
gender liminality to cultural production. At worst, a colonial image of India as
the tropical ground of gender muddle—Carstair’s vision—would resurface. In
either case, how speaking of *sahelis* and loitering at street corners differs for
the marginally subsisting *jankhas* and their still poor but relatively more secure
petty bourgeois shopkeeper and ready-made salesmen neighbors is avoided.
The radically different choices and outcomes for persons who have operations
to become male, *hijra*, or female are erased (Mahurkar 1990, Rodrigues 1991).
To read what’s at stake in projects of regendering in terms not only of some-
thing called “gender difference” but also of a more generalized recognition of
the embodiment of other forms of social and economic difference is critical.
The appropriation of “neither man nor woman” as a metaphoric strategy for
antinomian empowerment by academics may evade precisely what is most at
stake in sex—the embodied terrain of pleasure and affliction (Abramson and
Pinkerton 1995).

The invocation of socioeconomic difference can become as easily reductive
as that of patriarchal difference, as it did in responses to an article in the journal *Man* (an irony noted by Garber) by the anthropologist Unni Wikan. Wikan presented a description of a “transsexual” Omani gender category, the *xanith*, as part of a three-gender system: “not merely women and men, but also male transsexuals” (1977). Wikan’s effort is to understand *xanith* identity not in and of itself but in terms of a *systemic* analysis of gender: “I seek to develop a role analysis which does not see the transsexual in artificial isolation, but confronts the role in the context of the reciprocal roles of man and woman.”

Wikan’s article led to several critiques: I focus on a debate with Gill Shepherd. Shepherd uses her fieldwork in coastal Kenya comparatively to suggest that Wikan downplays the economic roots of male prostitution and reads what is fundamentally economic as gender difference (1978a, 1978b). Wikan responds, arguing against the easy comparison of their respective data and against any reductionistic economic rationales for *xanith* roles (1978a, 1978b).

Shepherd, in suggesting the equivalence of *xanith* and male prostitute roles and the economic roots of male prostitution in unemployment, suggests that “poverty” explains the need to become a transgendered prostitute. Wikan points out that most poor men do not become *xanith* and that not all *xanith* are destitute; no simple correlation between any degree of economic marginality and becoming a *xanith* exists. Rather, she emphasizes the Omani narrative that sexual potency is the principal marker of male-*xanith* difference.

This “cultural” explanation is not much more satisfying than the crude economic one Wikan refutes. Wikan’s emphasis on systemic coherence in the construction of cultural roles may have caused her to offer a narrative of *xanith* origination as an ideal “cultural” structure. Despite her insistence on approaching *xanith* identity from the inside, Wikan does not offer a very thick reading of *xanith* experience from a *xanith* perspective. Her potency narrative parallels a common South Asian narrative of *hijra* origin—*hijras* are impotent and useless as husbands, so they castrate themselves to attempt productive roles as auspicious vehicles of the Goddess—as well as the American clinical construction of legitimate transsexuality—the denial of penile pleasure that Stone challenges in mentioning “wringing the turkey’s neck.” Both *hijras* and transsexuals reproduce this narrative—Stone reminds us that transsexuals have little choice but to mark themselves as unambiguously third to utilize the apparatus of bodily transformation—but beyond the gatekeepers, the clients, the police, and the enthusiasts, their own lives and pleasures may offer other stories than those possible within the hegemony of a cultural system, however triune.

The Wikan-Shepherd debate maintains itself through an unhelpful distinction between sexuality and poverty: Either one is *xanith* because one is sexually different or because one is poor. That both sexual and economic difference integrally shape who and how one is *xanith* is not taken up. Shepherd’s resistance to the possibility of any *xanith* desire not rooted in the direst of necessi-
ties suggests unexamined phobia; Wikan's reading of *xanith* in terms of a gender system assumes not only that the gender categories and narratives of the majority of Omani are adequate glosses to the lives of sexual minorities, but that sexual identity is a distinct realm from other aspects of embodied experience. An overly harmonic and seamless vision of Omani gender relations is used by Wikan to legitimate reading *xanith* experience through dominant constructions of male and female gender. The problem is in part the notion of system. Analyses which locate the *xanith* in terms of a system of genders presume that being *xanith* is essentially about gender and preclude alternative approaches. The local pleasures and afflictions of *xanith*—the specificity of the body—is peripheral to discussion.

One must take up Shepherd's suggestion—that economic marginality is not irrelevant to the construction of sexual difference and sexual desire—without reducing desire and difference to utilitarian schemas and without erasing the pleasures of inalienable difference. My suggestion is that sexual difference is experienced and enacted through other forms of hierarchical social difference, that it gives meaning to and takes meaning from other hierarchies: patriarchal, racial, economic, generational, national, and so forth. The superimposition of multiple frames of difference upon the body creates an analytic challenge: on the one hand, the need to defer efforts to read the etiology of the sexed body in terms of the primacy of either cultural system or political economy or to reduce it to biology or psychology, in favor of an analysis which locates the body within a *multiplicity* of differences; on the other hand the need to listen to the obviousness and necessity of sexual identities and embodiments, and not to drain the corporeality of embodied experience by forcing it to stand for difference and difference alone.

The Blood of Castration

*Hijras* distinguish between true and false androgynes, between the pretense of claiming gender difference and the proof of being able to pull up your sari. Yet the absent phallus is an inadequate marker of authentic gender; *hijras* locate their essential difference processually, along a path of self-awareness. In interpreting this path through the rereading of *hijra* narratives, I face an interpretive dilemma. *Hijra* voices in Nanda's ethnography present themselves as having always been *essentially* Hijra; the traumas of becoming are practical—the indignities of prostitution, the danger and cost of the operation. Meera, a *hijra*, notes:

> As early as 4 or 5 years old, whenever my parents went out, I would put on bindi and would imitate the work of the women. I would pretend I was a girl and put a sway into my walk. Because I was an only child to my parents, they didn't object when I wore bindi and dressed up in girl's clothes. They said I could lead any life which suited me.
Desire similarly unfolds just-so:

As I got older, sometimes boys would come and ask me out for a picture, and so we would go. And when we went for a picture, the boy would take me and kiss me. . . . At first I was scared of men, but after the first scare I started to get interested in them.

In its benign character, Meera’s narrative parallels that of Adi, an upper-class Parsi from Bombay who was interviewed in 1991 in the monthly magazine *Society* as “a man who’s changed his sex.” The article, in which Adi describes being “trapped in a wrong body,” has no mention of *hijras*:

> Around the age of four, I discovered that my preferences, my thinking, and behavior were different from those of other boys. My physical mannerisms and, above all, my inner being, were womanlike. . . . When my mother went out, I would wear her dress and raid her cosmetics, for which acts the servants would get blamed. . . . Before I went in for a change, I had no choice but to be gay. (Rodrigues 1991:22–25)

Becoming a *hijra* is a more ambivalent and complex process in the narratives retold by Lynton and Rajan, Vyas and Shingala, and Sharma, other ethnographers of the Hijra. Violence and exploitation are central to these testimonies, but in very different ways than the bourgeois kidnapping stories. Thus, an unnamed *Hijra* in Baroda challenges Vyas and Shingala’s portraying him only in terms of essential thirdness, angrily denying the ease of transformation that the *Hijras* who speak through Nanda evoke:

> Saheb, how little you know the world. A damn sodomite in the [house] in which I lived misused me even before I had grown a moustache. He buggered me by force and often. After a while I began liking it too. When I was 21, I was glad to get myself castrated [sic]. (Vyas and Shingala 1987:45)

My reading of these narratives remains one of suspicion, *Hijras* dialogically constructing their experience in terms of the expected coercion narrative of their interlocutors. This hermeneutic was reinforced for me by the authors’ generally insensitive translations; “sodomite” and “buggered” do not reflect the very different semantic loads of the several terms they may be standing for, and they carry a set of gratuitous nuances.

Yet violence is central in a very different way to the signs and enactments by which *hijras* are known: the paradigmatic act of pulling up a sari. The pulling of the sari appears in two sorts of narratives: someone, often an old woman, challenges the *jankha’s* or not-yet-castrated *hijra’s* authenticity and thus auspiciousness by pulling up her sari. Or a *hijra*, either jokingly but far more often threateningly, pulls up her sari when a merchant or other expected patron has refused to give her money on her rounds of the market. The sight of the post-operative hole—the seal of the *hijra’s* impotence—is paradoxically potent, causing impotence in the man who is exposed to it. The ability to threaten by
pulling their saris up differentiates hijras from jankhas. The violence of the gesture recreates the violence of castration, but—in revealing the site of the operation and in causing impotence, the simultaneous cause and effect of the operation—it displaces the violence onto the other, here the householder, the male shopkeeper.

Being a hijra seems rooted both in this narrative of having always been hijra and in a continual reenactment of the moment of becoming—the gesture of castration. Hijras ground who they are in both the simple and essential facticity of their gendered identity as neither men nor women and in an ambivalently understood loss of masculine identity and a socially constituted will to castration. Hijra essentiality and constructedness—the ubiquitous poles of writing on sexuality—are united in the cultural figure which constitutes their recognition: the lifting of the sari, the showing of the “hole” which simultaneously proves that they are true and not false and yet bloodily constructed androgynes.

The tactics of hijra survival—the relentless demand for money from shopkeepers, to the piercing rhythm of the hijras’ clapping alerting passers-by to their presence—depend on a powerful rhetoric of entitlement. Hijras reiterate laments to outsiders:

Look at me. Have a good look.
Neither man nor woman that is my curse... and it is the so-called normal people, respectable people like you [who] have made us thus.
[You] put [your] unsuspecting wives to sleep and then come to us, to embrace this bag of [shit]. (Vyas and Shingala 1987:43)

Along with the lament comes a demand for citizenship and state support. One of the Banarsi hijras, according to a friend of Pramod’s, pointed toward her hole and laughed, “All-India pass.” With the pass, some men in Asi say, hijras can board trains anywhere, even to Pakistan. Claims for state recognition appropriate any and all nationalist symbols; when an Indian cosmonaut went into space along with a Soviet crew in 1984, the president of a large Delhi hijra organization wrote to Indian and Soviet leaders, requesting that they “give parity to the sexually under-privileged and socially neglected persons of the ‘Third Sex’ by sending at least one of this group in to space in future ventures” (“Clapping demand” 1984).

Hijras are represented in popular Indian media in terms of a second hole, the anus penetrated by powerful men. In the best-selling Indian English novel Delhi, the author Khushwant Singh narrates a love affair between a semi-autobiographical character and his mistress, a hijra named Bhagmati (1990). The narrator relishes detailing his sexual conquests of various women; Bhagmati, repeatedly abused yet always coming back for more, is the ultimate foil to his position as sexual conqueror. The novel tells the story of Delhi over the ages, its multiple sackings and destructions; Bhagmati becomes a symbol of the city and her people, repeatedly humiliated and yet always unbowed, ever
demanding, always able to turn a rape of one hole into the defiant revelation of
the other.

Similarly, in the Bhojpuri film Mai a young village man flees his native place
for the city of Patna to escape the repeated assaults on his family by their
villainous and lustful feudal landlord, or zamindar. The young man plies a
rickshaw in the city, but his conscience gets the better of him and he returns to
his mother in the village, to certain destruction. He survives by disguising himself as a hijra, the ultimate sexual object; seeing him, the zamindar must have him. Zamindars and hijras are dramatic foils in oral narratives in the area: the unlimited desire of the former mirrors the unlimited availability of the latter. One is all take, the other all give—the ultimate park hustle. Once inside the landlord's apartments, the hero entraps the villain with his newfound hijra wiles and then kills him.

In these texts, becoming a hijra not only marks but transforms the hierarchy
of victimization: the hijra is the body with nothing left to lose, and is thus capable of losing everything and surviving. Far from occupying a space be-twixt and between, the representational hijra occupies the far edges of possibility. She is perhaps no closer to the real lives of hijras than are the forced castrati of the Lancet article; yet her offering of an utterly abject yet indestructible and ultimately triumphant body may be closer to a more marginalized male desire than is the disembodied munchmunda Nandy offers against colonial losses.

In Varanasi, the feudal countryside to the east in Bihar is said to be rife with
the rape of men and boys by landlords and their henchmen. The hijra as landlord-slayer offers the impossible solution to the loss of male peasant sub-jectivity: impossible, as it remains a fantasy position reflecting options neither open to nor desired by most men or for that matter hijras. Unlike the fantasy androgynes of the academics, the fantasy-hijra can only be envisioned through a reenactment of the violence of everyday life. Without castration and its consequent hemorrhage—without the violent embodying of the truth that phallic power is not uniformly distributed—one has not paid the necessary price to transform gendered dominance into intergendered, auspicious, and playful thirdness. Castrations are not playful matters; any claim that the Lancet over-states its case must be well documented. But the blood of castration—its violence—is the point, central to the narrative structure of becoming a hijra long before the moment of castration.

Two Versions of a Conclusion

Hijra conclusion

In Varanasi, relations between hijras and jankhas vary from limited alliances
to suspicion (by the former of the latter). For hijras, Ram Prasad and the zenanas or jankhas of the ethnographic literature are not sisters in abjection; when
they pull up their saris, there is nothing at stake. They lack gender: they lack a committed body. The parallel desires, origin narratives, class positions, and adjectival styles of hijras and jankhas are not enough. Jankha practice challenges the possibility of hijra essentiality; it suggests that anyone can become a third gender without fundamentally challenging the binary and hierarchical regulation of bodies. If gender is disembodied, there need be nothing at stake in gender. Through castration, through the denial of any intractable point—anatomical or social—eluding transformation, hijra practice demands that all gendered and sexed positions be viewed ultimately in terms of what's at stake.

Like jankhas as understood by hijras, Nandy and Garber utilize the semantics of androgyny without renouncing a gendered superordinate position. Garber offers transgendered experience as a liminal but sexless idyll; its analytic thinness ultimately replicates the surgical gatekeeping structures that Sandy Stone challenges. Nandy's project engages political difference, splitting the androgyne, but the “bisexual” man-plus-woman he invokes to transcend the colonial gendering of Indian elite men as effeminate maintains their position vis-à-vis women and subordinate men. On some level, these authors fail to engage the body in the gender. But when they lift up their saris, what's at stake is revealed.

**Jankha conclusion**

Everyone in the slum where Birju lives knows that since childhood he has played with the girls and acted like them. His neighbors and cousins protect him against the slurs of outsiders. Birju's father is a widower and a well-respected teacher, and unlike his siblings Birju has devoted himself to caring for his father, feeding him and keeping house. Sitting at home, cleaning and cooking, Birju wears a worn-out shawl, its initial color indecipherable from its threadbare state. He keeps another shawl, a bright red "ladies" fabric, for special occasions. When he was a londa, a cross-dressed dancer for a nautaka troupe from the slum, his guru had lent him a sari and accessories. Birju would play the young women's parts in satirical dramas, mocking the chastity of upper-caste women and the piety of their husbands, or he would dance obscene and comic numbers, like the infamous "Chicken."

In Birju's slum, culture—the world of Brahmanical purity and temple ritual and Sanskrit text so lavishly present in Varanasi—is so much performance, or nautaka. Drama, dancing, and drumming troupes form a significant part of the slum economy. Most men in the slum have a guru, an older man versed in three sorts of arenas: dramatic performance, Chamar ideology (Birju's untouchable caste), and ojha power (the undoing and casting of spells to win allies, make love, and destroy enemies). Birju was trained by his guru from boyhood in how to dance as a londa, a cross-dressed boy. In performance he
would dance with two women, prostitutes from the city. Some of the londas acted in comic troupes, playing a young wife cuckoldling her elderly husband with a temple Brahman. Some londas turned tricks themselves.

Most londas ceased to be lachakmathak as they grew older. But for Birju, the meaning of nautaka and the dance are central to the path of his desire and his difference: having a husband and step-son, keeping a home for his father, knowing how to dress. Being what some would call jankha is not a way station on the road to becoming a hijra but a coherence to pleasures which grow out of his community's performative traditions. Birju, for his family and neighbors, occupies a desiring position whose meaning is encompassed though never exhausted by the body of the slum.

Birju no longer dances, and no longer wears his saris and bangles. He no longer hangs out with jankha sahelis like Kamal. He struggles to get by, spends time with his husband the tailor when he can, and takes care of his father. He keeps his red shawl for special occasions.

When I first started learning from and reading about hijras, I was struck by the centrality of the rhetoric of the false hijra, and of the power of this hijra insight in writing against the appropriation and misreading of the radically regendered body by those with perhaps less at stake. A set of gestures, bound up in the reenacted violence of pulling up the sari, helped bring together a framing of sexual difference which could take on the circular debate of the xanith controversy.

But just as hijras are not the disembodied liminal markers of thirdness of academic texts on gender, jankhas are seldom the conniving pseudo-hijras that hijras often experience them as being. Both the hijras and the jankhas of the city were associated with their own brands of nautaka which in different ways ran against the grain of local constructions of patriarchal difference. Against the pulled-up sari of the hijra, throwing its observer into a space of sudden thirdness, is the unrelenting nautaka of the Asi jankhas, in which gender, caste, and other materializations of the lived body are mocked and again exploded.

Another evening: I am on the road to Asi. Ram Prasad is pedalling his heavy trolley filled with coal to be delivered. Ram Prasad is heavily muscled and looks like a gunda, a neighborhood tough. Kamal just told me Ram Prasad didn't get accepted by the hijras. I ask him what happened. He smiles, and offers a husky falsetto: "I don't want to be a hijra, beautiful. I just need a husband, and I like to play. Husband, wife, hijra, macho-type, foreigner, Indian. Let's go play."

But Kamala, to me: "You really want to be a saheli?"

Notes

I am grateful to Alissa Ayres for discussions of her own work (1992). The persons I call Guddu, Pramod, Kamal/Kamala, Ram Prasad/Rita, Birju, Raju, and Pankaj let me
THE PLEASURES OF CASTRATION

transgress the bounds of old friendships and acquaintance when I began the dangerous alchemy of turning life into research. Anne Ogborne has begun to challenge my working assumptions regarding transgendered politics with her trenchant and thoughtful criticism. This essay is of course indebted to the work of Serena Nanda, to Gil Herdt for suggesting that I write it, and to Paul Abramson for infinite patience.

1. I.e., from Varanasi.
2. There is a danger in this collapse of sex and gender, if it is read as turning our attention away from a systematic history of gendered violence by men against women. One strand of feminist critique challenges deconstructions of sexual difference as erasing the ubiquity of gendered violence. Catherine MacKinnon questions the historical contingency of “sexuality” and sexual politics and the chain of epistemic breaks posited by Foucault, placing against these a continuity of gendered oppression and sexual violence (1991). Janice Raymond, in The Transsexual Empire: the making of the she-male, challenges the claims to feminality of male-to-female transsexuals, reading their move as the ultimate male appropriation of female space (1979). Though MacKinnon sidesteps and dramatically misreads Foucault’s project and Raymond phobically refuses to engage the possibility of a transgendered subject position, much writing by academics—including aspects of the work of Garber and Nandy—on third-, cross-, inter-, or trans-sexualities or genders does erase political differences between male and female experience. It does so when it (1) highlights male to female or male to third shifts and downplays female to male or female to third shifts, (2) assumes that much the same is at stake for initially “male” as for initially “female” bodies, and (3) upholds an opposition of binarily gendered versus third-gendered subjectivity in which the former implicitly stands for a male (as opposed to a female or male) position. Ultimately, much writing on “third gender” by nontransgendered persons works with a two-gendered system, male and third, in which the female position has been erased.

To write against this sort of erasure by insisting on the fixedness of male and female subject positions substitutes a parallel erasure and reaffirms the sexist deployment of biology that Butler reminds us is sustained by such essentializing language. To confront the prevalence of both embodied and epistemic violence against women without maintaining an essentialized and ultimately violent delimiting of the category of “women” is a challenge on many fronts of contemporary feminist debate. Here I will attempt a provisional terminology, refusing to imagine gender or sex as useful binaries in the way I will deploy class, yet maintaining a category of patriarchal difference to represent the real and ubiquitous oppression and violence MacKinnon and others continue to point us to.

3. One will not find words like aise in articles or books on homosexuality or transgendering in South Asia, or more generally in the catalogues and compendia of the varieties of sexual experience globally. Two terms predominate: hijra and khush. The “India” sections of international atlases of sex exhibit the figure of the hijra, alternately translated as eunuch, homosexual prostitute, transsexual, gender-transformed, or third gender, along with the boy prostitute (Ellis 1921; Greenberg 1988); the implicit but unsignified third in such discussions is a presumed Oriental appetite for pederastic pleasures. In the 1980s, South Asian activists articulated another identity, khush (literally: pleasurable, happy, or gay) as simultaneously an appropriation of the homoerotic in South Asian traditions and a response to the political and semiotic exclusions of gay
and lesbian social movements and categories identified with the West (Parmar 1990, Bombay Dost 1993). Khush, lesbian, and gay South Asian organizing was initially located in expatriate communities and subsequently in South Asian metropolitan centers. Central to one of the most visionary of the khush activists, the late Siddhartha Gautam, was a politics based on an alliance between hijras, lesbians, and gay men; other Delhi activists have argued and still argue that class differences between hijras and the semi-organized gay male community and political differences between hijras and lesbian and feminist communities render a common agenda unlikely.

4. Unless otherwise noted, all field-note quotations are not word-for-word transcriptions but recollections two hours to a day after the conversation or interview.

5. Arjuna is the central hero of much of the Mahabharata: he receives a curse from a celestial damsel whose attentions he spurns because he knows her, despite her youthful beauty, to be his ancestress and the union to be incestuous. The curse would emasculate him, but its sting is softened and Arjuna is doomed only to spend a year emasculated. When he and his brothers and wife are required to spend a year in exile incognito, he disguises himself as a cross-dressed dance teacher and receives a position in the women's apartments of a king. The text is somewhat ambiguous about whether the curse has transformed Arjuna genitally as well as sartorially. Sikhandin is a brother-in-law and ally of Arjuna in the great war of the Epic; he was in a former life the princess Amba who had been spurned by Bhisma, the eldest warrior of Arjuna's lineage. Amba received a boon from the god Siva to be reborn as a man who would be responsible for killing Bhisma. She is reborn as a girl; but her father is instructed to raise her as a boy and train her as a warrior. She is married to a princess, with disastrous results. She flees to the forest where she meets a supernatural being who takes pity on her and agrees to change sex with her temporarily. Genitally a man, Sikhandin returns to his wife. Despite the complexity of Sikhandin's move from male to female, he was described by most Banarsis (who had limited familiarity with the Sanskrit version of the epic) as a hijra, and portrayed in the televised version of the Epic as a lachakmakath effeminate man.

6. I follow the usage of several Banarsis in speaking of hijras in the feminine and junkhas contextually in both the feminine and masculine; I have varied the pronomial reference to given individuals as their gendered identification shifts.

7. Ayres (1992) has noted this always located ambiguity of binary and third gender.

8. See n. 2 above.

9. I make this assertion, though it is difficult to document, based on conversations with numerous colleagues and interlocutors in India and abroad over the years since The Intimate Enemy was published.

10. See also Freeman (1979).

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