

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nayan Shah. *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West*. American Crossroads Series. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. xiv + 347 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-27085-5; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-27087-9.

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## A Novel Approach to Migration, Race, Intimacy, and Law

In his second deftly researched and compelling book, Nayan Shah shines light on stories long obscured. Through descriptive writing and sharp analysis, he tells a fascinating wider tale of migration, intimacy, and survival in the North American West. Focusing on South Asian male migrants and the myriad intimate ties they forged with others, the book draws on a rich body of legal material in the United States and Canada, as well as elsewhere. It critically analyzes state records, using them to show how migrants were both tied to and living outside the limits of the nation-state. Shah complicates the historiography on migration and sexuality by putting in conversation literature on interracial ties and same-sex relations, which have rarely converged in scholarly inquiries.

By centering on alternative socialities and intimacies, the book highlights how the middle-class white family became the dominant norm. Heteronormative policies and traditions in the United States and Canada have erased an array of social and domestic arrangements. Bringing them into sharp relief, Shah tackles sexuality in its messiness, recognizing the impossibility of categorizing sexual identities before the mid-twentieth century, and in some ways into the present. The book does away with the normal/pathological binary and destabilizes notions of the settled nuclear family and sexuality that have driven most scholarship on migration to date.

In the first section on migration, capitalism, and

stranger intimacy, Shah follows international migration patterns, showing that South Asians were drawn by labor opportunities in cities and rural areas of the North American West since the 1790s, though the book focuses on the early twentieth century, when perceptions of these migrants shifted. If a migrant had no family it did not necessarily mean he was alone. The book mines cases of sodomy, vagrancy, and public indecency to examine how migrants created alternative socialities. It tells fascinating stories of relations between men in saloons, rooming houses, barns, rural living quarters, and elsewhere. Exploring racial, sexual, and intimate borderlands, Shah demonstrates that South Asian men formed diverse ties across various lines of difference.

Illustrating that South Asian migrants were perceived as racially and sexually threatening to the national polity and local communities, the book describes instances of horrific individual and mob violence. For example, in 1907, in Bellingham, Washington, a gang of white men chased two South Asian men onto the tidal flats of Bellingham Bay. While one of the men fled, the other suffered humiliation and violence at the hands of the gang; they beat him, stripped him of his turban and clothes, and chased him into the water. Later that night, the attackers came back together. Eventually numbering five hundred, the mob broke down the doors of South Asian boardinghouses, pulled men from their beds, and burned their possessions, running some of the migrants out of town. In this and other instances, politicians defended

and later justified mobs. Powerful political forces ultimately erased the brutality of anti-South Asian mobs from public view.

Like the Japanese and Chinese before them, South Asians faced profoundly negative perceptions and severe racial persecution. Shah points to similarities and differences in the experiences of Japanese, Chinese, and South Asian migrants. He demonstrates how anti-Asian politicians located the “Hindu” under the umbrella of the “undesirable Asian” by the early twentieth century. Drawing productive connections between the experiences of distinct ethnic groups, the book helps further ground historically the formation of the category “Asian.”

In the second part on intimacy, law, and legitimacy, Shah draws the focus away from legal records shedding light on spatial borderlands to legal knowledge intervening in social problems. The book underscores how the presence and activities of South Asian migrants played a key role in the ways officials and legal bodies interpreted and created laws around intimacy and age of consent. Shah introduces the concept “legal borderlands” to signal that assessments of criminality, consent, and human relationships were unclear and in flux at the same time that authorities tried to define “normal” and “proper” behavior and ties among people.

Legal cases indicate budding notions of “normal” masculinity in the early twentieth century. South Asians were perceived as dangerous for the male-male and heterosexual intimacies in which they engaged, and in particular those that transgressed racial lines. White male honor became a focal point. Shah demonstrates that South Asian migrants’ intimate ties both challenged and upheld emergent social norms.

In the last section on membership and nation-states, the book describes the dramatic state interference in migrants’ lives. As the United States and Canada coordinated their efforts, systemic regulation crystallized. Both governments sought to prevent permanence and stabil-

ity among South Asian migrants. The book examines the fundamentally different ways in which governments viewed the dependents of migrants from Asia and Europe.

Preventing South Asians from gaining citizenship, U.S. and Canadian governments read migrants through new divisions of “white” and “non-white.” Punished for entering into cross-racial marriages, American women lost their citizenship for marrying Asian men, who were barred, in the early twentieth century. The book shows that stories of elite white women who had lost citizenship rights gained attention, while those of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and African American women went unnoticed.

Although the body of laws and practices that systematically denied South Asians the ability to marry, own property, immigrate, and naturalize began to dissolve after the 1940s, the nation still required normalcy in the form of middle-class family life, as well as proof of nationalization and patriotic loyalty. Shah argues that the traditional family became central to the functions of U.S. and Canadian states and points to the ways newcomers were forced to fit themselves into the mold. In this vein, Shah offers a critical discussion of civil unions, domestic partnership, and same-sex marriage, drawing connections with racialized and gendered notions of gay identity.

Shah’s brilliant and far-reaching second book offers a fresh take on intimacy and everyday life for migrants in cities and rural areas in the United States and Canada before the mid-twentieth century. It uncovers hidden queer socialities and links them to interracial relationships in the era, as well as the study of these themes in the present. Shah makes a key contribution to literature on cross-racial intimacy and transnational queer studies, joining two growing scholarly fields that generally have remained separate. The book’s lucid prose, vivid stories, and gripping analysis make it a great read for both academic and general audiences interested in migration, intimacy, and the West.

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