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On no man's (Is)land: futurities at the border

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on communities that, displaced by riverbank erosion, relocate to the islands formed by silt sedimentation in the middle of the Ganga, along the stretch of the river that coincides with the international border between Bangladesh and India, this paper examines the constitutive contradictions of citizenship and alienness. Analyzing Sourav Sarangi's documentary …*Moddhikhane Char*(aka *No Man's Island*, 2012) along with its conditions of production, the paper isolates an *aesthetic of precarity* that enables the filmmaker to challenge a statist *spectacle of border control* while participating in a global documentary humanitarianism. The paper also engages in more speculative contemplations on environmental shifts, the beleaguered status of the common, and the futures of frontier communities. At stake is a nuanced understanding of emergent forms of political agency that subvert, and threaten to displace, classical paradigms of citizenship and political participation.

What happens when, instead of people traveling across borders, the border 'crosses' a population? Imagine a scenario in which a new borderline cuts across a stationary community, unsettling the latter's presumptive moorings, inducing disorientation and dislocation. As long-entrenched affiliations get rearranged in the push and pull of estrangement and belonging, and political and property rights are restructured, segments of the now-fissured community gain in power even as others lose their social foothold. Competing entitlements and legal institutions brush against such knotty experiences of loss to intensify the innate contradictions that haunt all configurations of citizenship as well as of its negation, foreignness. To bring the underlying analytical issues into sharp focus, this paper explores a particularly fraught situation in which, because of geophysical and biopolitical factors, the new borderline proves to be radically unstable: it literally meanders, mutates, andmoves over time, carving a fickle frontier in its wake. The conjunction of a dramatic topography with strikingly incongruous imperatives of local governance accentuates the connections between the constitution of borders, the interpellation of citizens and aliens, and the organization of resource pools. Drawing on … Moddhikhane Char (aka No Man's Island, Sourav Sarangi, 2012), this paper examines the ways in which contemporary documentary modalities explore

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such connections, enframing them within certain globally legible narratives. The paper also engages in more speculative contemplations on environmental shifts, the beleaguered status of the common, and the futures of frontier communities.

I. The biopolitical border

The modern conception of the border between nation-states conveys a certitude not quite consonant with the messy reality of borderlands. That confidence is crucial because borders drawn on maps have a performative role: while documenting a country's expanse, they command territorial sovereignty into being. That sovereignty, in turn, provides the basis for a range of biopolitical interventions, involving mechanisms among which inclusion/exclusion is the most ubiquitous. The gesture of drawing borders is a gesture of power, working in consort with the political, economic, and legal organization of labor, natural resources, and potentialities in the service of a capital–state nexus. Borders do not simply mark out political units: they also apportion, enclose, and privatize the common.

Borders as a biopolitical technology have a history much longer than Michel Foucault's influential exegesis on modern biopower would have us believe. Early couplings between borders and proto-biopolitical systems were forged well before Europe's Age of Reason, in the great civilizations of Asia and the Americas. Perhaps the most spectacular early instance of such linkages was the Great Wall of China, assembled in the late third century BCE by the first Emperor of China. A public project to safeguard the Middle Kingdom, the Wall was a supreme Qin dynasty achievement alongside other bureaucratic advances (including weights and measure standards, a common system of writing, a common currency, land reforms with rewards and fines to promote peasant productivity, laws pushing early marriage, and tax laws encouraging multiple offsprings). While much has been made of the eighteenth century shift in the sovereign's power from an absolute capacity to kill to the more tempered objective of 'making live and letting die', it is possible to discern elements of enlightened statecraft within 'despotic' Asian empires over the past two and a half millennia. In South Asia, the Maurya emperor Ashoka (third century BCE), Sultan Muhammad Bin Tughlaq (fourteenth century CE) and the Mughal emperor Akbar (mid-sixteenth to early seventeenth century CE), engaged in a mix of armed campaigns and diplomacy in order to expand and safeguard their empire's borders, while investing in substantial infrastructural projects and administrative reforms to consolidate imperial control and to improve the lives of their subjects. In Asia (as, indeed, in most parts of the world), traces of these older linkages have persisted alongside modern administrative innovations.

Circumscribed by British colonialism, the experience of South Asian modernity was profoundly unsettling: if the ruptures were particularly disruptive, the continuities were just as obdurate. When independence arrived after nearly two centuries of British domination, a searing rift marred that much-anticipated moment. The birth of the nation-state degenerated into a collective cataclysm, producing two discrete countries. The Radcliffe Line, imposed overnight in August 1947 to separate Pakistan from India, was emblematic of what Cosgrove (2003) has called an Apollonian cartographic reason detached from ground realities; it also reflected the simultaneous opportunism and apathy that marked the endgames of empire. While truncating the entire country,

Partition also cut up Bengal and Punjab; the two now emerged as frontier provinces, the former in the east and the latter in the west. If this conjuncture gained a traumatic singularity from the vicious riots and massive population movements that accompanied it, the scission itself was not an altogether novel experience for Bengal. The province had been subjected to an earlier truncation in 1905, ostensibly to promote governability; but in mobilizing the concept of a political minority on the basis of religious creed, this first division of Bengal presented the blueprint for the mid-century national partition.[1]

Scholars have been carefully recording and analyzing the prehistories and fallouts of 1947 in the densely populated lower Gangetic plains of Bengal (Chatterji 2002; Sengupta 2015); autobiographical writings, fiction, and cinema bear witness in more expressive terms (Bagchi and Dasgupta 2003; Samaddar 1997; Sarkar 2009). In this layered discourse, one particular narrative about the arbitrary and abrupt nature of the imposed border keeps surfacing and circulating, stressing how, overnight, the familiar turned into the foreign. Apparently in some areas, the Radcliffe line cut through neighborhoods and even homestead courtyards: siblings, cousins, and close friends suddenly found themselves to be citizens of two different countries.

One salient manifestation of Partition's unfolding legacy is a protracted state of confusion and contention in the Bengal borderlands. The material contiguities of the natural landscape threaten to erase the lines of demarcation: there are some 54 rivers that flow from India into Bangladesh (East Pakistan until 1972); some more streams flow the other way, while yet others 'weave in and out of the two territories' (Nurul Islam Nazem, paraphrased in Van Schendel 2004, 74, n.9).

Then there are the *chhitmahals* (literally, cut-piece lands), one country's enclaves within the other's territories, with their nested counter enclaves, and a unique counter-counter enclave. Traces of the ambivalent loyalties of local landlords and royal families at the time of Partition, they number around 175, and resist easy assimilation (Ghosh 2016). As many commentators have noted, the Bengal borderlands, in their aporetic demarcations of 'domestic' and 'foreign', remain a zone of vital propinquities, exchanges, and interdependencies. Within an affective horizon shored up by overarching idealizations of a 'common' Bengali people (*bangali jati*) and a 'shared' cultural imagination, the borderlands constitute a haptic interface that allows/blocks all manners of passages including informal social visits and tourism trips with or without visas, migration of seasonal workers, contraband trafficking, dissident or opportunistic claims to property and civic rights, and even cross-border fraudulent voting (Banerjee 2012; Samaddar 2013; Van Schendel 2004).

My point here is that the Bengal borderlands have a historicity of which 1947 is just one watershed moment; this historicity is tangled up with the long-term trends and materialities of resource management, labor exploitation, and environmental depredation.[2] In spite of its limited scope, this piece about contemporary life in the Bengal borderlands is haunted by many intertwined histories: of land settlement and tenancy acts, from the Permanent Settlement of 1793, a colonial version of the English enclosure of the commons,[3] to the postcolonial land redistribution measures of mid-20th C, to the more radical *Operation Barga* launched by the Left Front administration of West Bengal in the late 1970s to promote sharecroppers' rights; of peasant movements, from the Indigo Revolt of 1859, to the sharecroppers' *Tebhaga Andolan* of the 1940s, to the more recent popular uprisings in Nandigram and Singur protesting government acquisition of land to set up SEZs; and of disastrous famines that ravaged the Bengal countryside, including the Great Famine of the

early 1770s that allegedly killed nearly 10 million, and the Famine of 1943 in which over 2.1 million perished. While engagement with these critical moments in the evolution of biopolitical regimes in modern Bengal is beyond the scope of this paper, they are constitutive of the borderland phenomenologies that are my focus here.

II. Thinking through the border

To think the border, and to think what borderland futures might hold, one needs to move away from inert cartographic idealizations and, instead, dive into the volatile histories and saturated geographies of this *terra infirma*. It entails pondering whether its innervated profusions might not add up to local, emergent materializations of larger geohistorical processes. Perhaps the border – understood as a buzzing, thick, and dynamic terrain – is where new social relations, economic arrangements, and cultural energies often get worked out: it is where emerging orders struggle to become legible.

It is precisely such an approach that Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson articulate in their recent book, *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor* (2013). For them, the border is not so much a research object as a perspective, an aperture to the conditions and processes through which the global order is getting refigured. Beyond the checkposts, fences, and walls, the exclusionary architectures that are more salient in the popular imagination, the border also *includes*, rearticulating affiliations and agencies. In that sense, the border is a productive force, shaping new social relations more in tune with contemporary financial capitalism. This is why borders are actually proliferating now, argue Mezzadra and Neilson, going against the prevalent idea that globalization is pushing us towards a borderless world. Clearly, they are working with a far more capacious concept than the modern 'international border', whose reductive demarcation of an inside from an outside does not live up to the more flexible, complex and multiscalar arrangements that global capital requires now.

For Mezzadra and Neilson, these plastic border configurations – which intensify and diffuse the categories and hierarchies of labor, and allow work to intrude on and occupy other aspects of life – lead to a 'multiplication of labor'. Addressing contemporary modulations of the organization of labor, this formulation updates *and* supplements the more archaic 'division of labor'. It provides these thinkers with a basis for exploring the possibility of political subjectivity in these baffling times, and of forging a common ground across struggles that remain contingent, disparate, and dispersed. Such a project of imagining, acting, and living in common seeks to counter the opportunistic dissection, bundling, and capitalization of shared resources – to oppose the foreclosure of potentialities.[4] But simple equivalences or a habitual universalism will not do: instead, Mezzadra and Neilson seek a 'new conception of the common' through the intricate work of translation between singular, seemingly untranslatable struggles. And the practice of translation will need to draw on those 'subjects in transit' who, in the course of their quotidian life activities, transgress, contest, and rearrange borders of all types, scales, and scopes.

The balance of this paper dwells on an extreme instance of life at the Bangladesh–India border, a life whose fraught material contingencies limit, if not deflate, the very ideas of potentiality and futurity. Extreme, but not exceptional: similar contingencies

are playing out right now in various parts of the world, the Mediterranean and the US–Mexico border being two of the more studied examples. While the work of translation that Mezzadra and Neilson call for is beyond the scope of this essay, I will refer to literature on the Mediterranean refugee 'crisis' to underscore structural similarities.

III. Terra infirma

The borders foisted in 1947 did follow natural topography in a few areas, more for convenience than to lessen the violence of the new covenant. One such stretch was the course of the river Ganges between the Rajshahi district of East Pakistan (currently Bangladesh), and the Murshidabad district of the Indian province of West Bengal, which both countries accepted as the international boundary. But even such a 'natural' border could not stem processes of dislocation and disorientation. As discourses of the anthropocene tell us, nature's mutations in geological time have been speeded up and made capricious by purposive human action. In this case, the tussle for water between the two countries produced the conditions for such dramatic acceleration. In the 1960s, the Indian government initiated the Farakka Barrage project slightly upstream from where the Ganges and the international border coincided. The declared objective was to maintain a steady flow of water and flush out excess silt along the Bhagirathi–Hoogly distributary to sustain the port city of Calcutta. Seen alongside the frequent border skirmishes and two all-out wars in 1947 and 1965, Farakka also constituted a power maneuver on the part of India, the upper riparian side. Fixated on the control of water volume, the project ignored its broader environmental impact. While construction started around 1961, actual operations began in 1975. Meanwhile, East Pakistan was liberated as Bangladesh with India's help in 1971; but that did not stop a Long March on the eastern side of the border, organized in 1976 by Maulana Bhasani to protest Farakka's water politics.[5]

The mighty river was always prone to causing erosion and flooding in its lower deltaic stretches; over the centuries, it had shifted its course, creating ox-bow lakes, revealing fertile silt tracts, engulfing once-arable land, moving away westward from the medieval port city of Gaur. Now the engineered interruption at Farakka has formed a lake upstream from the barrage, increased water pressure, and shifted fluid directionality in unanticipated ways, heightening soil erosion and silt management problems. While floods in the neighboring states of Bihar and Jharkhand have become more frequent, the populous city of Malda in North Bengal is under serious threat of being washed away. To the south of the barrage, channel morphology has been even more fitful: locals liken the river to a snake held at its neck, flailing its tail in fury. Hundreds of square kilometers of riverbanks have been eroded, washing away entire villages, arable land, people, and livestock, forcing many communities to move multiple times. Drawing on the growing archive of data generated via satellite remote sensing, experts like Rajiv Sinha and his associates have assembled stunning time-lapse maps of the shifting Ganges, tracking the appearance and disappearance of sand bars and silt islands in the middle of the shifting river channel (Sinha and Ghosh 2012).[6] These scientific mediations provide the larger geomorphological context for the palpable experiences of loss and displacement on the ground.

Figure 1. Border control.
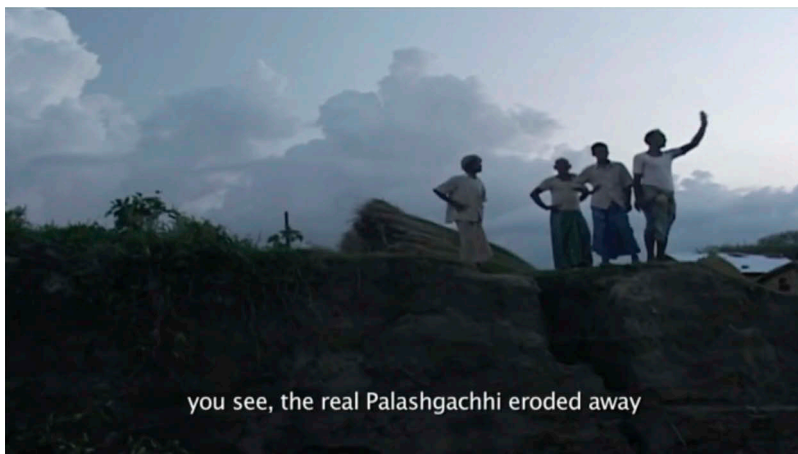

you see, the real Palashgachhi eroded away

Figure 2. Palashgacchi, lost and found.

The official response to the devastations has been to spend hundreds of millions on reinforcing riverbanks with boulders, cement, and sandbags. Scholars and journalists have learnt from on-site research and interviews that this largely doomed strategy creates plum assignments for corrupt contractors with connections in the administration. Laws stipulate official aid for earthquake, cyclone, and flood victims, but not for those ruined by riverbank erosion. Local activists have been demanding that the state take over the distressed areas and rehabilitate the displaced folks elsewhere, but to no avail (Kumar-Rao, n.d.). The stalemate is compounded by the international water tussle between Bangladesh and India, and the interstate dispute between Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. Kalyan Rudra, an expert of hydrology and river ecologies, argues that downstream from Farakka, the Bhagirathi–Hooghly is a tidal estuary: the saline water flowing in from the Bay of Bengal brings huge amounts of silt, far larger in volume than the monsoon freshet silt that the project planned to regulate (Rudra, n.d.). The problem of a clogged riverbed at Calcutta could never be 'solved' by the sluicegates of Farakka. In 2017,

Figure 3. State surveillance.

Figure 4. Precarity visualized.

Nitish Kumar, the Chief Minister of Bihar, put forth an outright demand for decommissioning Farakka.[7]

Over time, the sedimentation of boulders, silt, and debris have caused sandbars and island-like formations to appear in the middle of the river channel. Referred to as *char* locally, this new archipelago in the middle of the river is literally on the international border, a proverbial 'no man's land'. And yet, the emergent topography inspires cosmological thinking: locals speak of divine restitution – what nature takes away, it also gives back. As the displaced move to the islands in search of a new home, they end up stranded between two countries. All of a sudden, they find themselves suspended from the ennobling teleologies that classical political theory promises its idealized 'people'. Instead, as embodied vexations to canonical notions of citizenship and rights, social service and security, these refugees become an epistemological, social, and legal-

Figure 5. a & b: Real-time erosion.

Figure 6. Everyday harassment.

Figure 7. Multiplication of labor in the informal economy.

Figure 8. Icon for a possible future?.

juridical 'problem'. Considered superfluous, threatening, and foreign, the stateless *char* communities are subjected to constant surveillance.

IV. An aesthetic of control, an aesthetic of precarity

Sourav Sarangi's 2012 documentary ···*Moddhikhane Char* (aka *No Man's Island*), referred to as *Char* in the balance of the paper, adopts a participant-observer mode; it focuses on two teenage boys, Rubel and Sofi, and their displaced families to tell a larger story of dislocation, privation, and abandonment.[8] While the larger sociopolitical context is alluded to in sporadic voiceover narration provided by the filmmaker (who remains off camera, even as he speaks in the first person on occasion), the documentary presents a human-interest story of survival in the face of insurmountable odds, with a

sympathetic protagonist (Rubel) at its center. Rubel's dad is too sick to work, Sofi's was felled by a bullet. Many of the men have moved away in search of jobs, leaving the women and the youngsters to fend for themselves. Slender teenagers smuggle large bags of rice, weighing up to 30 kg, across the marshlands. Taking advantage of the fact that they cannot be body-searched by the male patrolmen, women smuggle bottles of the cough syrup Phensedyl under their saris. Locally known as 'dyl', the medicine is in high demand in 'dry' Bangladesh for its inebriating effects. Life on the chars is perilous: the refugees are caught between the constant patrol of the paramilitary Indian Border Security Forces and the Border Guards of Bangladesh (Figure 1), and the brawls between local gangs. Displaying an unassuming, lyrical sensibility, Sarangi captures the daily anxieties and struggles of squatters' lives, haunted by loss, with compassion and understanding. When Sofi is late in coming home one night, the family's apprehensions bring back memories of the night when the boy's dad was shot dead.

In another poignant sequence, the filmmaker is on a moving boat, his camera trained on a group of men on the sandbars. When asked the name of the place, they first tell him it is Palashgachhi. In the course of the conversation, one of them gestures toward the river (Figure 2) where the original Palashgachhi now lies underwater: 'so this is Palashgachhi now.' All the same, they insist it is the same place.

The green hue and eerie contrast of several extended night scenes, shot with image intensifying modules, enhance the surreal ambience of this amphibian landscape to conjure tense warzones. This deliberate aesthetic strategy underscores an affective world forged by a vast border control apparatus, seen in action during raids when daily migrant laborers are lined up for inspection or when strong searchlight beams hover across marshes, dunes, and reeds in search of potential infiltrators. 'Border control' becomes the trope via which detection and blocking are legitimized as necessary for securitizing citizens on both sides, and gives rise to what Nicholas De Genova (2013) calls, in the context of the Mediterranean, 'border spectacle'. Analyzing this maritime frontier's on-edge 'aesthetic regime', media scholars Heller, Pezzani, and Stierl (2017) have noted that the underlying goal is to detect – shed light" on – every act of unauthorized border crossing 'in order to make the phenomenon of migration more knowable, predictable and governable'. Clearly, Sarangi deploys visual enhancement to document an analogous aesthetics of everyday agonistics in the Bengal borderlands. Categorized as 'foreign elements' by both states, the interstitial *char* dwellers pose a potential threat, and make containment a security obligation. The daily rituals of inspection, the stealthy patrol boats, and the probing searchlights depicted in the film comprise an apparatus of control that seeks not only to detect actual trespassers, but also to visualize and stage the possibility of illegal crossings. (Figure 3) The sheer spectacle of security renders potential intrusion into something of an objective fact that, for all its virtuality, feels no less real: spectacle performatively turns border control into a societal compulsion.

Even without image intensification, the shifting stretches of land and water are daunting at night. In one memorable sequence, a monsoon storm rages across the river islands. Lightening rends the night sky, etching the contours of rain-swept trees and huts: an epiphanic flash, an elemental 'visual effect', highlights the fragility of the makeshift hamlets as gusty winds threaten to blow away their roofs and flood waters rise all around them. As families huddle up, waiting for the storm to subside, Sarangi

again resorts to the 'night vision' effect. (Figure 4) Linking an impassive nature and an equally uncaring state as the two key scourges in the lives of char squatters, the chromatic accent musters a compelling aesthetic of precarity. This is a world whose very visibility makes it vulnerable to the threat of erasure; it is a world perennially on the verge of disappearing.

Documenting moments of bank failure in real time, Sarangi elaborates his aesthetic of precarity beyond the optical enhancement. The uninterrupted recording of phenomena unfolding in time is a thoroughly cinematic gesture: directing attention to the spatiotemporal integrity of its referent, reel-time *qua* real time invites audiences to *endure* screen projections of real life experiences in their indexical richness. Not only does this formal choice present the possibility of a more

contemplative spectatorial mode, but also it offers a portal onto a sensorium of textures and colors, sounds and motions, accidents and enchantments. Several of these long takes, each lasting around a minute, generate tense anticipation in spite of – or, perhaps, precisely because of – their preordained denouements. (Figure 5) One of the earliest scenes in *Char* depicts the slow slide of sludge into the water, taking along a palm tree: the gradual tilting of the spikey trunk across the screen frame produces the paradoxical impression of a stretched-out temporal experience, compelling us to take in the fact and enormity of the ongoing devastation. In a late segment, a crack appears on the ground; barely discernible at first, it widens little by little, until massive chunks from the exposed face of the riverbank cascade into the waters. While invoking the imperceptible passage of geological time, such measured shots also communicate a desperate urgency. Yet another example appears early in the film: as mud and swamp bushes vanish into the swirling waters, tiny birds flutter up from among the drowning reeds, their harried flight intimating a world on edge. As the film unfolds, this entanglement of torpidity and acceleration emerges as a constitutive element of the phenomenology of continual disruption that it seeks to document. And yet, the temporalities that arise from such incompossible juxtapositions challenge human capacity for inhabiting and surviving time, clouding the possibility of a future. The calm resignation with which onlookers watch the 'natural' spectacle of disappearing riverbanks suggests two distinct possibilities: an affirmative interpretation might find stoic endurance and a will to survive on the part of the displaced; a more bleak reading would focus on their weary helplessness and submission to an inscrutable eschatology, of *bhagya* or fate.

Subtly counterpoising an aesthetic of precarity to the more hawkish security aesthetic, Sarangi places Bangladeshi and Indian border vigilantism under interrogation. At least two important critiques can be inferred from this strategy. First, the paradigm of security that underwrites border control is driven by an inordinate fear of the foreign other, even when that other is barely distinguishable from an imputed domestic self, and is consumed by a struggle for mere survival. Squatters on the international border – unhomely doubles of legal citizens from both sides of the border – are treated as alien threats, rather than as displaced refugees requiring assistance toward rehabilitation. That many of these *char* settlers lost their land, livelihood, and home as a direct consequence of an official project of river water management, makes the Indian state's response, veering from callous apathy to aggressive containment, more unconscionable. Second, the presumption that border control mechanisms – fences and checkposts, searchlights and identity cards – serve the interests of 'the people' is subtly challenged.

As Samaddar (2017) reminds us, there is a vast chasm between the nation's 'people' idealized as the locus of popular sovereignty, and the more instrumental, sociological conception of the 'population' as the target of statist policies and programs. The aesthetic regime that shores up border spectacles seeks to securitize the national citizenry from distinctive population groups, both beyond and within the nation's borders, that are seen as backward, recalcitrant, and prone to volatility, hostility, even criminality. From the state's perspective, illegal foreigners from neighboring countries and domestic groups that are categorized as the internally displaced (subaltern communities, marginalized minorities) present similar problems of governance. Touted as the subjects of development who need to be trained, educated, and turned into contributing members of society, both groups are subjected to unduly invasive regimes of control. The slightest pressure on an inherently fraught social equilibrium can tilt the balance of official intervention from humanitarian dispensations to draconian exercises of power.

It is noteworthy that legal residents of the border region evince a markedly different orientation towards the unsanctioned intruder, the vulnerable other who physiognomically, socially, and culturally seems more or less indistinguishable from the self. In an essay provocatively titled 'Who is Afraid of the Migrants in Bengal?' Samaddar writes about a commandant from West Bengal 'complaining about the lack of cooperation from the local people in detecting illegal immigrants' while simultaneously acknowledging the dearth of options available to these border communities. Lacking 'roads, schools', other capacity-building infrastructures, and 'means of decent livelihood', they 'look to transborder communication as means of support' (Samaddar 2013, 64). Claiming that the 'government does not exist for them so much as the reality of the border', Samaddar concludes that the legal residents of the Bengal borderlands are not afraid of the migrants, legal or illegal, since the domestic and foreign positions are often interchanged via bilateral border crossings. The bracketing, at least in this essay, of religious and caste-based affiliations, the dual post-Partition histories of constitutional secularism and creed-based discrimination, and the opportunistic conversion of religious communities into electoral vote banks, seem all the more curious as these factors ought to matter to the central question of Samaddar's current research agenda: what forms of political subjectivity and agency are emerging from the flux of the Bengal borderlands?

V. Labor mobility and the antinomies of inclusion

For a politics of the border, circles of exclusion and inclusion overlap to produce more complex iterations of foreignness. Being inside the border does not ensure a strong sense of belonging, or an incontrovertible set of political rights, or developed capacities for a productive life. As Mezzadra and Neilson argue, regimes of 'differential inclusion' can be just as violent as overtly exclusionary policies, and more insidiously disenfranchising (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 157–166). Conditions enabling differential inclusion are built into border control systems: alongside the highly visible rituals of securitization, more clandestine circuits and tactical modes allow unsanctioned crossings and the subsequent integration of migrants into local economic systems and political processes. Such duplicitous arrangements produce what De Genova (2013, 1180) calls the 'scene of

exclusion, the obscene of inclusion'. The inclusion and 'objectification of "irregular" migrant workers' are ensured via a 'discursive separation – producing people as "illegal" in utter isolation and disregard for the legal production of "illegality" itself' (1185–1186). Elaborate detection and deterrence mechanisms, in producing the impression that unsanctioned border crossings are practically impossible, make illegal migrants disappear, while masking those opportunistic forces that assimilate and exploit these 'foreign' workers. Like most sites of regulation, the border produces opportunities for rent-seeking: bribes, services, and favors are ineluctable parts of life here, and security personnel frequently engage migrants in their own ventures or organize cheap labor pools in the service of local entrepreneurs.[9] (Figure 6) While Sarangi does not show such unofficial arrangements explicitly, the scenes of the women's interaction with the security forces – coy banter and flirtation giving way to frustration – gesture towards multiple levels of transactions, including human trafficking.[10]

In presenting life on the river islands at the Bangladesh–India border, *Char* ends up documenting local materializations of a larger pattern characterizing contemporary global capital. As global circuits, institutions, and processes become central to the operations of capital, borders emerge as the key site for managing labor mobility. Alongside burgeoning border security regimes, yet another kind of proliferation enables more intensive expropriations of life as labor power: Mezzadra and Neilson refer to this phenomenon as the multiplication of forms of labor. As Mezzadra (2013) puts it in an interview, 'what is at stake at the border is the production of labor-power as a commodity – as well as of the subjects constructed as "bearers" of labor power, as Marx would have it'. The regulation of migrant workers, refugees, and asylum seekers – via checkpoints and immigration centers, passports, and visas, and differentiated categories of 'model' and 'liability' immigrants – is a crucial element of late capitalism. The profusion of categories of foreign workers and work visas points to a calibrated gradation that responds to capital's need for more exhaustive market penetration and resource extraction. As Mezzadra and Neilson argue, a focus on the border as a technology of labor management allows for a more nuanced understanding of 'the changing nature and composition of labor', while offering fresh perspectives on ongoing 'transformations of power' and emerging structures of exploitation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 95–130).

What do these new configurations of labor, power, and exploitation look like at the Bangladesh–India border? In their radical dislocation, the *char* refugees put the categories of 'citizen' and 'alien' under erasure, provoking wariness from the two states; as the stateless, they embody a vulnerability that is at odds with official perceptions of their threat. In their rootlessness, they amplify the condition of mobility to its limits, exhausting all its presumed possibilities; being stuck on an international border, on 'no man's land', they exemplify mobility's extreme attenuation, to the point of its negation. In this liminal zone, capital's formal modes cannot function optimally; so it adapts, reinventing itself as numerous hands-on and stripped down fragments, mobilizing low-investment, low-tech, improvisational enterprises in the informal and 'grey' sectors. These emerging nodes allow capital to penetrate untapped domains and scales, forge tactical exchange relations and markets, and escalate surplus extraction to previously uncharted intensities. (Figure 7) Lacking the protections accorded to regular citizens, the stateless remain exposed to absolute forms of exploitation: they become the utterly disposable. Precarious life, precarious labor: this could well be the tag line for

Sourav Sarangi's film about displaced squatters on the silt islands at the Bangladesh–India border.

VI. Crisis documentaries and the global humanitarian complex

In taking an instance of environmental emergency as its focus, *Char* activates a classic trope of documentary cinema: a narrative built around a crisis. Production of knowledge, promotion of social justice, bearing witness to experiences commonplace and extreme, ethical evaluation of events and actions, or at least some modest form of reckoning: these are the avowed goals of documentary. Crisis documentaries make explicit yet another objective that generally remains recessed: the harnessing of dramatic possibilities inherent to the subject, to produce embodied forms of knowledge that do not shy away from emotional and affective intensities. Running across distinct domains of crisis (crimes and scandals, wars and natural disasters, pandemics and famines) is the figure of the vulnerable, the precarious, the endangered: the famished child, the wasting AIDS patient, or the drowning refugee. A figure so abject and helpless that it elicits as response a muddle of conflicting emotions – outrage, anxiety, and pity – suggesting a fuzzy awareness of our silent or unwitting complicity in its systematic privation; and an obligation to act in aid of the needy – to volunteer in relief organizations, or to give to charity. In triggering humanitarian urges in audiences near and far, this figure at risk emerges as the pivot for a new register of cosmopolitanism that involves, in Boltanski's (1999) memorable phrase, 'distant suffering'. Now the common target of global altruistic largesse, the vulnerable figure presents us all with the prospect of reaffirming our habitually dormant capacity for care. That sometimes the figure is not even human – recall the iconic image of the hapless polar bear perched on a mass of melting ice – only confirms the world-embracing capacity of 'our innate humanity'. At the center of this liberal–humanitarian complex is what Pooja Rangan calls the 'humanitarian documentary impulse'. Instead of asking what documentary does for precarious life, which would lead only to well-rehearsed homilies about the salvific functions of the genre, she begins with the question 'What does endangered life do for documentary?' This reversal enables her to launch a compelling critique of the interventionist impulse underlying humanitarian documentary: 'endangered, dehumanized life not only sustains documentary, but supplies its *raison d'être*' (Rangan 2017, 1). Documentary could not have attained its worldwide currency without the compelling drama of life at risk; in a sense, documentary has had to invent the figure of the disenfranchised, the vulnerable, in terms of elaborate humanist tropes to secure legitimacy for its own operations. As Rangan puts it, 'the perception of humanity at risk drive[s] the production of humanist aesthetic forms that *produce* the "humanity" that they claim to document' (2).

To what extent does Sarangi partake in this global project of producing crisis documentaries centered on subjects in peril, but addressed to audiences that are already constituted as humanitarian in disposition? The long list of international funding agencies acknowledged at the beginning of the film signposts its conditions of possibility; not all conditions are financial, and some expectations remain tacit. For instance, the IDFA or the International Documentary Film Festival, Amsterdam, whose Bertha Fund is 'designed to stimulate and empower the creative documentary sector in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Middle East and parts of Eastern Europe by supporting innovative documentary projects by talented filmmakers from these regions'[11]; Visions Sud Est

which, backed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 'supports film productions from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, aims at making them visible worldwide and guarantees their distribution in Switzerland'[12]; and the Norwegian South Film Fund, whose objective 'is to stimulate the production of films in developing countries where such production is limited by political or economic causes'.[13] Other co-funders include Danish, German, and Italian agencies. For one, a majority of the funders are from northern and western Europe, advanced societies that pride themselves as the champions of civil society (democratic rights and structures; peace and reconciliation processes; global economic equity and social justice). Indeed, these European funding agencies would identify themselves, with a measure of smugness, as organs of a global civil society.[14] The stated missions on the agency websites invoke regional backwardness and 'political or economic' limitations as roadblocks to creativity and innovations, while implying that the same constraints produce historical contexts with endless material for the kind of films these bodies want to support. This conjunction is particularly felicitous for humanitarian causes: creativity that is precarious can now be resuscitated through the funding of projects that align with humanitarian missions. A rather particular orientation towards the global, unproblematically derived from post-Enlightenment thinking about modern society and subjectivity, political community and agency, and universal principles and teleologies, informs the modalities of funding and the regulative, if well-intentioned, expectations about the selected projects. The implicit assumption is that through its documentary projects, progressive Europe will lead the rest of the world into a better future.

Two major Asian players in the global market for socially conscious media production also get credited as co-producers: Japan's established public broadcasting organization NHK, and the Asian Network of Documentary, based in Korea. The latter, a subsidiary of the Asian Cinema Fund associated with the Busan International Film Festival, is deeply invested in the promotion of regional cooperation in support of quality independent filmmaking, including documentaries. While these Asian agencies are likely to work with their distinctive understandings of the global, the differences have to do mainly with the regional focus, scope, and scale of their operations: here too, the specter of global civil society as an essential component of a universal cosmopolitan modernity looms large. Moreover, in calling out 'New Asian Cinema' as its targeted beneficiary, the Asian Cinema Fund deploys the rhetoric of novelty to mark not only emergent creativities but also a temporal rupture, thus aligning its 'indie' activities with Asia's resurgence over the last few decades based on an enthusiastic realization of the logics of neoliberal capital. The new funding structures, distribution networks, and exhibition platforms have been a boon for Asian documentary and independent filmmakers, but they are cut from the same philosophical and technoeconomic fabrics that shape the material conditions of exploitation and immiseration which then become the preferred subjects of sponsored films. The laudable aspects of cultural initiatives–building capacity for inventive expressions of engaged and critical perspectives, and for media advocacy of behalf of marginalized communities–need to be assessed in relation to the simultaneous sourcing and commodification of local creative talent for the global market.

One of the core components of contemporary documentary support systems is the organization of clinics and workshops for developing projects and pairing them with

potential producers and distributors. In 2009, I attended *DocEdgeKolkata: Asian Forum for Documentary*, an annual event during which some of the biggest names in documentary mentor filmmakers from the region on their new projects. Local filmmakers pitch their projects to an international panel of foundation operatives and broadcasters, receiving extensive feedback and, occasionally, funding. Over two days, I became aware of certain institutional parameters and normalizing expectations that now shape globally funded documentary practice. These include: length (will it fit into the one hour block of television broadcasting?); balanced viewpoints; human-interest narratives; stories of individuals against strong social backdrop; sympathetic characters; stories with a clear global hook. One panelist asked a filmmaker if her focal characters were exceptional enough to be the subjects of a documentary; another complained the idea was not dramatic enough; yet another wondered if there was anything new in a pitched concept.

Sourav Sarangi, who I met for the first time at the DocEdge event, makes films that clearly fit many of these stipulations. *Bilal* (2008), his previous film, documents the daily struggles of an unusual family: a five or six year-old boy, the film's namesake; his younger brother; and their parent, both blind. It clearly presents a 'human interest story' with a series of dramatic situations arising from the parents' disability and the care of the children. *Char*, as we have seen, focuses on a few individuals while documenting a fringe social milieu. Rubel, the main protagonist, has a photogenic face and is certainly 'sympathetic'. With population displacement reaching record levels in recent years, and hordes of refugees braving death in their bid to cross over to safer grounds, the story of the wetlands squatters has a strong 'global hook'. *Bilal* won awards at the Yamagata Documentary Film Festival, while *Char* was feted at the Dubai International Film Festival and at Munich's DOK.fest. Sarangi clearly deals in images of human suffering, and remains open to the charges that get leveled against documentary's universalized humanitarian impulse.

However, the critical apparatuses I have drawn on thus far presume a global horizon; the documentary institutions, proclivities, and patterns that I have interrogated here become legible mainly from a global vantage. It is possible to propose more immanent analytical perspectives, rooted in local lifeworlds, from which *Char* opens up to a different set of questions. If we think of Sarangi's filmmaking as an immanent practice whose constitutive elements emerge in response to its spatiotemporal setting, albeit circumscribed by a tactical recourse to international affordances, then other dimensions of the film's productivity – especially how it *matters* within the Bengali social and cultural milieu that remains its immediate addressee – come into view. In a sense, the documentary is part of a local public discourse whose participants include scholars, journalists, activists and politicians; as a film, perhaps it is able to generate a more affective mode of engagement. *Char* begins with an animated 'satellite' view of the shifting river channel, with islands emerging and disappearing in the middle of it. The animation then mimics a camera tilt, bringing the frame to the level of the ground: a slick edit takes us into a live action shot. For the rest of the documentary, viewers follow the filmmaker and his protagonists among the crumbling riverbanks, the sandbars, and the modest huts on stilts: they are literally transported from a remote aerial perspective into an immersive experience of a world on the brink. A series of choices helps Sarangi ground his documentary within the quotidian granularities of this milieu: there are no authoritative 'talking heads' here, no experts or officials, only people in conversation mode (the notable exceptions being the two boys, Rubel and Sofi); the Farakka

barrage is shown rarely, and only from a distance (eschewing the triumphant monumentality conveyed in Films Division documentaries about dams and industrial projects, which Nehru consecrated as the 'temples of modern India'); actions begin *in medias res*, mostly without establishing shots. Scenes of riverbank erosion, checkpost harassment, and unending struggles of the displaced induce an undeniable sense of urgency not only in film festival audiences but also in viewers from Bengal, possibly prompting more immediate and intense affects. The filmmaker's empathy, the familiarity and the trust that he has established over a period of time, as well as the filmed subjects' resilience: these affective registers have to matter for Bengali publics in ways that, notwithstanding differences of class, creed, and micro-local affiliation, pierce the insulations of distant suffering.

VII. Futurities

The documentary ends with a rather quiet sequence. We see people going about their daily business: devotees pray at a Muslim shrine on the char; as parts of the riverbank cascade into the river, unperturbed fishermen cast their nets nearby. The filmmaker chats with his favorite protagonist as the latter gently steers their boat through shallow water reeds. In earlier scenes, we see Rubel be his family's breadwinner, make arrangements for his father's surgery, and raise his sister's dowry; in the face of such grownup responsibilities, the 16-year old gives up on school. Sarangi asks Rubel what he expects of the future. While the young man seems pretty sanguine that the char has no future, he is hopeful that somehow something will work out for him. (Figure 8) As he reiterates this tenuous faith, the boat clears the rushes: the camera faces a clear swath of water stretching to the horizon, its iconic expanse conjuring an unbound optimism. The exchange may have been scripted; nevertheless, Rubel's optimism communicates a measure of resilience on the part of the char dwellers. But resilience itself is double-edged: if it involves an ability to negotiate adverse situations, it also suggests a resignation without resistance. What form of agency is possible in such circumstances? This is where the question of futurity at the borders becomes as murky as the muddy waters swirling all around.

One way to gain traction is to consider the circumscribed agencies that emerge in these borderlands: consuming pirated media (Rubel gets songs downloaded on his phone); trafficking (foodgrains, 'dyl'); getting paid off by various political parties to vote fraudulently in elections. In their continual churn, the borderlands are reminiscent of the tidal zones of indistinction between land and sea that put territorial sovereignty under question, so that a chasm opens up between what is instituted as the Law and what *is felt* to be legitimate. A range of piratical practices emerges in such gaps between legality and legitimacy (Sarkar 2016): poaching, smuggling, counterfeiting, and even militant activities labeled as rioting or terrorism. Border-thinking allows us to locate such clandestine emergences, even if slight and circumscribed, as legitimate claims to a global common, and as intimations of future forms political agency.

Perhaps this is the kind of 'translation' that Mezzadra and Neilson have in mind in their project of locating new forms of political agency in 'subjects in transit', thereby resuscitating a common. While such a project holds great appeal in its radical, life-affirming utopianism, it remains a kind of magical thinking on behalf of progressive politics. For all their resourcefulness, the inhabitants of the Bengal borderlands do not exactly *resist* the multiplication of labor: rather, they participate in such a process by

subverting it for their own purposes. Their opportunism, as well as their instrument-alism, sits uncomfortably with the idea of a common of open, unbound, endless potentialities. If it has become impossible to return to a prelapsarian plenitude of the common, if the concept functions mainly as an aspirational ideal, what can we still say about the realpolitik of agency on the *char*, along the borders, or on the streets?

In recent years, several political theorists have made similar gestures of imagining political subjectivity and agency from the remainders of established political orders. Residual domains that, in their sheer expanse and force, should constitute the mainstream of political energies, but that continue to be marginalized because of the representational clout of dominant ruling blocs. For Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno, these are the spaces of the multitude. Virno, in particular, speaks of 'exit' from dominant orders as a strategy whereby the multitude wrest arenas of power for themselves via 'unrestrained invention which alters the rules of the game' (Virno 2004, 70). Studying various groups living in Zomia, specifically their search for self–determination outside the state system, Scott (2010) locates an 'art of not being governed' that presents alternative possibilities for political community. Within the context of the Global South, drawing on his research on political agency in Bengal, Chatterjee (2004) has argued that whereas the institutions of civil society were expected to promote democracy in an earlier era, the former are now widely regarded as tools of regulating more volatile popular agencies. Chatterjee posits 'political society' as the arena in which the disenfranchised multitude – the 'governed' in most of this world – are refiguring the modalities of democratic participation, often via the deliberate vitiation of civil society institutions. Samaddar (2007) extends the insights of Chatterjee and Virno to argue that the Bengal borderlands demonstrate forms of politics on the ground that are not 'modeled and bound by governmentality', but that claim autonomy in spite of the overwhelming nature of state power. An excess, a 'supplement that remains' after governance has been achieved, autonomy in its various manifestations points to 'the course which politics may take in the future', allowing for 'new forms of contestation' and 'the possibility of disentangling [⋯] democratic theory from its close association with the dominant organization of power' (141). Or, as Gaonkar (2014) puts it, with the unraveling of various fictions underlying recognized political projects addressing 'the people', we now have the multi-tude in a more shambolic 'drift towards a politics given to exploring the possible – the good, the bad, and the ugly – rather than mastering the habitual and the probable'. In short, the aporias of modern political organization become the conditions of possibility for future modes of doing politics.

Circumscribed by the civil society agendas of its financial backers, Sourav Sarangi's ⋯ *Moddhikhane Char* (aka *No Man's Island*) tows a liberal–humanist line, focusing on the plight of the dispossessed at the Bangladesh–India borders, documenting their daily struggles of making a living, while skirting more direct attempts at political organization and resistance. All the same, it leaves us with intriguing questions about the fragmented, improvisational, and canny forms of agency that emerge in these riverine borderlands–forms whose illegitimacy arises in their divergence from accepted ways of doing politics, and whose unfamiliarity may well mark their potentiality as political modes of the future. Could it be that in the Bengal borderlands, as in many hotspots of the contemporary world, the political future is already upon us in the guise of foreignness?

Notes

1. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Bengal had become a hotbed of militant anti-colonial insurgencies. In 1905, the British Raj decided to bifurcate the unwieldy province, supposedly in the interest of administrative efficiency; but the more pressing motive was to drive a wedge in the incipient nationalist movement by exploiting the differences between a Muslim-majority East Bengal and a Hindu-majority West Bengal. While this executive split was rescinded in 2011 following a massive and sustained popular mobilization against it, the capital of British India was also moved from Calcutta to Delhi at the same time, thereby shifting the center of power away from Bengal. Meanwhile, the seeds of communal paranoia had been sown permanently in South Asia, and the logic for the future scission of India along a majority/minority calculus had also been put in place.
2. Indeed, situating 1947 in the context of these enduring processes forces us to move beyond the consecration of Partition as a singular traumatic event consisting of murderous riots, communal schisms, and refugee dislocation of proportions never encountered before. The move allows us to recover the historicity of 1947, expanding the field beyond the experiences of refugees, and acts of memorialization and mourning.
3. Local landlords (*zamindars*) were given long-term rights to collect tax revenues at fixed rates, while retaining their feudal power and prestige. Thus the reforms provided them with solid incentives to take care of the land and become effective administrative intermediaries for the Company.
4. See, in this context, Uncertain Common (2013).
5. For a discussion of the effects of Farakka on Bangladesh, see Kawser and Samad (2016).
6. I am grateful to Professor Rajiv Sinha for bringing this work to my attention.
7. 'No benefit from Farakka, time to decommission it: Nitish', *Hindustan Times* 21 February 2017. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/no-benefit-from-farakka-time-to-decommission-it-nitish/story-luNPe0sY3zFsG7heCsFuzL.html .
8. I use 'abandonment' in the sense developed by Povinelli (2011) as a neoliberal strategy of simultaneous neglect and surveillance.
9. It is possible to argue that border security personnel, overworked, underpaid, and subordinated to the Armed Forces, negotiate their own marginalization and exploitation by the state via the canny bending of legal structures.
10. For an analysis of human trafficking across the Bangladesh–India borders, see Banerjee (2010), especially 114–127.
11. https://www.idfa.nl/en/info/idfa-bertha-fund (accessed 2 February 2018).
12. http://www.visionssudest.ch/en/informations (accessed 2 February 2018).
13. http://www.filmfrasor.no/sorfond/sorfondplus (accessed 2 February 2018).
14. It is the kind of self-congratulatory smugness that allowed the Norwegian Nobel Committee to award the Nobel Peace Prize for 2012 to the European Union.

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