Downwardly Global

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Published by Duke University Press

Ameeriar, Lalaie.  
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I don’t think of nation-states as land, it’s where your people are. The Prophet Muhammad taught loyalty to whichever land you’re living in, it’s your moral duty.
—INTERVIEW WITH SAFIA

On one of my last visits to the Scarborough housing projects I visited a Pakistani woman I had come to know well during my fieldwork. In her sixties but unable to retire, she was working as a cashier, although she had been a teacher in Pakistan. I was horrified when I saw that she had become accustomed to the very large rat that was living in the apartment and even said she found it funny, calling it her “friend.” After I gently suggested that she did not have to live like this, and that rats were dangerous disease carriers, it became apparent that she was afraid to complain for fear of eviction. I was incredibly moved by this incident, which stood in stark contrast to the ways the South Asian diaspora was understood in the Bay Area, where I had been living. Images of the successful Indian businessman or entrepreneurial dot-com worker were prevalent in Silicon Valley; emblematic of “flexible citizens,” they were meant to represent the new global order. In Toronto, I was confronted again and again with the dark underside of global processes that produce both these figures. On one end of the spectrum of the South Asian diasporic experience is the Indian dot-com worker, seemingly secure in his upward mobility, while on another end of the spectrum exists the marginally employed Pakistani woman too afraid to complain about her living conditions for fear of ending up on the street.
This final chapter explores the anxiety, desperation, and lived experience of existing in a state of precarity, particularly when that precarity is gendered. Throughout this book I have largely focused on theories ranging from the anthropology of the state and neoliberalism, to critical studies of multiculturalism, to those of citizenship and belonging; this last chapter focuses on the embodied experience of precarity. Precarity invokes a moral and ethical register of individual responsibility that I have thus far attributed to neoliberal practice, but it is also important to consider the affects that accompany notions of individual responsibility such as anxiety, uncertainty, and desperation. Precarity is an affective register that itself signals a range of states. These precarious states exist in and through the sanitized sensorium, a consequence and an effect of the making of citizens and subjects. This chapter examines what it means to live in a state of precarity as a subject of globalization and late capitalism. It explores what living in precarity can say about the interface between the government, the market, and the social world in which we must live.

Accompanying neoliberal economic transformations that began in the 1970s in the global market which emphasized market competitiveness and labor-market flexibility was the rise of increasing insecurity for workers and the emergence of the “precariat,” which refers to a worker without economic stability (Standing 2011). While the notion of precarity indexes a particular conception of work that is secure, it fixes a kind of identity and lifestyle (Allison 2013), “linking capitalism and intimacy in an affective desire for security itself” (Berlant 2011, cited in Allison 2013: 7). Thus, precarity refers not only to unstable work conditions but to the accompanying social world that feels uncertain or unstable. Throughout, this ethnography has sought to bring together the political economic with the intimate and affective, examining how bodies are gendered and racialized in the context of global capitalism—in other words, how it feels to be a problem (Du Bois 2008).

To examine ethnographically the lived experience of precarity, or more precisely in this case, the gender of precarity, is to think through the affective dimensions of living in a seemingly permanent state of insecurity, to ask again how women react to the sensorial regimes of belonging. Like resources, precarity is also distributed unevenly. Judith Butler (2009) suggests that some people are more vulnerable to precarity because of factors such as gender, class, or race, and urges us to think of precarity not as an existential condition, but rather a social relationship: “The differential distribution of
precarity is at once a material and a perceptual issue, since those whose lives are not ‘regarded’ as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death” (25). Thus, the precariousness of certain kinds of gendered and racialized bodies is mediated by and through social processes which render a hierarchy of value mapped onto individual lives.

There has been important work on the relationship between precarious labor and one’s gender in different historical moments (e.g., Boris and Parreñas 2010; Ong 1987; Parreñas 2001). For instance, Ong (1987) demonstrates the ways Malaysian peasant women became cheap transnational labor in the late twentieth century, exploring the “deconstruction and reconstruction of gender in the shifting webs of agency and domination within the family, the labor system, Islam and the wider society” (219). The phenomenon of women becoming precarious workers is not a new one, and needs to be understood in a longer range of capitalist historical practices that have hindered women’s economic security. The foreign-trained-professionals problem is a contemporary manifestation of this social phenomenon that produces precarious workers.

Reading women’s life stories allows for an examination of the lived experience of precarity, which is not only an economic condition but a sensorial experience. These narratives demonstrate the sensorial and affective registers by which people come to understand their belonging or not belonging, and how they respond to the sensation, the incommensurability that marks them and attempts to interpellate them as second-class citizens. Despite a loss of prosperity after leaving Pakistan and in the face of this economic marginalization, I was surprised to find that the women I spoke with affirmed their desire to stay in Canada and rejected the idea of returning to Pakistan. Instead, they were actively invested and engaged in claiming citizenship as a Canadian subject. How do we understand this inherent paradox in which there is an affective attachment to a good life involving secure work and upward mobility, while being violently excluded from it? Women’s understandings of citizenship, identity, place, and belonging are critical in understanding how these affective attachments to the good life are political. In their stories, women invoke discourses of a promising future in order to understand their liminal and marginal position; and in so doing, position themselves as good citizens deserving of full participation in the nation-state.
If inclusion in the state entails economic participation, then unemployment represents a kind of failed citizenship; therefore, the mobilization of Canadian citizenship (which emerged in conversations) is a form of agency that they reimagine in the face of economic marginalization. Embedded in the narratives presented here are strains of hope and optimism, which illuminate important features of the affective dimension of precarity. José Muñoz has theorized hope “as pointing from the past’s unfinished business to a future beyond the present to sustain the (queer) subject within it—he explicitly frames the present as a prison” (Muñoz 2009, cited in Berlant 2011: 13). In Berlant’s reading of Muñoz, “The present is more or less a problem to be solved by hope’s temporal projection” (Berlant 2011: 13). Building on this, Berlant argues, “Optimism is not a map of pathology but a social relation involving attachments that organize the present” (13). In the examples provided in this chapter, hope or promises of a better life provide a means out of the catastrophic present—a present that includes unemployment, underemployment, misidentification, racism, and violence.

**The Race and Gender of Precarity**

Precarity has been theorized as a social condition arising from fluctuating market conditions and resulting in increasing instability, both economic and social; but it is also a gendered and racialized phenomenon. Understanding the explicit way these processes impact the lives of women is necessary for grasping the ways global processes are not only imagined, but configured and enacted. For instance, David Harvey’s (1990) analysis of culture in the period of late capitalism has been extremely influential in understanding the shifts in the ways humans experience time and space. Geographer Dorinne Massey (1994) has effectively critiqued this work by drawing attention to the role of gender. Massey asks the critical question, who experiences time-space compression? In her analysis of social mobility, she counters the claim that capital is the only determinant of one’s ability to move, and suggests ways that gender also becomes a powerful limitation. For example, women’s mobility is limited not only by capital, but by threats of “physical violence, being ogled, or made to feel out of place” (2), thus suggesting a power differential in time-space compression. Therefore, the precarity that emerges through processes of globalization is also a gendered and racialized one.
One way to see this gendered and racialized precarity is through examining the relationship between globalization, transnationalism, and labor. There is a sizable literature on immigrant women, labor, and the global economy. For instance, Rhacel Parreñas (2001) examines Filipina domestic workers in the global economy who must leave their own families to do care work for other families. These workers experience downward mobility to do menial labor in the global economy at the expense of caring for their own children and families at home, working in uncertain conditions for unfair wages and limited job security. Immigrant women’s access to employment and work stability is circumscribed by their gender and race as their bodies, affects, and dispositions are coded on the global job market. Settlement-services workshops, as we have seen, produce normalizing discourses and behaviors around cultural and bodily difference that are marketed as the solution to unemployment and precarity.

Examining the work experiences of immigrant women of color highlights the need for an explicitly transnational or global frame in order to understand the feminization of certain kinds of labor and the accompanying affect required to make women workers legible on the global market. This is one way that processes of global labor migrations produce racialized and gendered national subjectivities. In “Is Local: Global as Feminine: Masculine? Rethinking the Gender of Globalization” (2001), Carla Freeman reimagines Catherine Lutz’s (1995) question, “Does theory have a gender?” to ask about the gender of globalization. Freeman argues that not only has globalization theory been gendered masculine, but also the very processes defining globalization (e.g., the spatial reorganization of production across national borders) have been. She provocatively asks about the implications of a divide between “masculinist grand theories of globalization that ignore gender as an analytic lens and local empirical studies of globalization in which gender takes center stage” (1008). An account of the gender of globalization thus would take seriously the feminization or masculinization of particular processes, while not privileging grand-scale theories over localized examples as more serious social theory. Thus, an explicitly global framework would take seriously the ways that large-scale processes result in the feminization of labor and the systematic marginalization of women of color from participating in the global economy, and would not simply dismiss examples of women’s experiences as localized, but as real evidence of the ways globalization operates. As such, gender is central
to understanding elements of the global economy and cannot be considered in isolation of structural arrangements. A focus on highly skilled laboring women demonstrates the particular ways immigrant women’s skills are devalued, forcing them into low-wage labor and unemployment.

Yet despite their downward mobility after leaving Pakistan and their economic marginalization, the majority of the Pakistani women I spoke with reaffirmed a desire to stay in Canada and did not want to return to Pakistan. They did not want to go back and were actively invested and engaged in claiming citizenship as a Canadian subject. Responses to my question, “What made you decide to move to Toronto?” ranged from “There were too many riots and killings at home” and “I was tired of the pollution and the violence” to “I heard the health and education system would be better for my daughter” and “I wanted to push for the future of my kids, and I’m uncertain about the political situation in Pakistan. I wanted a secure future.” These narratives invoke a sense of security in which home is a site of violence and danger, and Canada is a place imbued with hope and possibility. Sacrifice then becomes a means to produce a hopeful outcome for the next generation, and thus living in a state of precarity in Canada is less precarious than living in a state of precarity in Pakistan.

Living in Precarity

Zainab and Parveen were both in their thirties. Of the stories I retell here, these two most closely represent the numerous narratives I heard in the field. Zainab was a thirty-nine-year-old Pakistani woman I met at the Center. Though she had worked as a doctor in Pakistan, she was unemployed in Toronto. She had migrated with a husband and young daughter, but the pressures of migration put undue stress on her marriage, which eventually ended. When she and her husband (both doctors) first moved to Toronto two years before I met her, they expected a different quality of life. After the first six months, they spent the $10,000 they were required to bring as part of their immigration process; most went toward paying for first- and last-months’ rent on a small basement apartment in a low-income neighborhood in Scarborough, Ontario. Zainab went to all the relevant settlement-services agencies she qualified for, learning her rights as a new, permanent resident. She contacted the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO), the governing board that regulates the practice of medicine in Ontario. She was referred to “Career Transitions for International Medical Doctors,” a
government-funded resource for internationally trained doctors to find alternative careers in health care. She also learned that she effectively would have to begin her training again to work as a doctor, and even an alternate career in healthcare would require additional (and expensive) training. Eventually, she abandoned the idea because of the tremendous added financial cost. After Zainab separated from her husband, she moved into government housing with her child. This was a good alternative for her because the rent was contingent upon her salary; if she were to suddenly lose a job, they would not end up on the street.

In the contemporary moment there is a collective mourning for the promise of the good life—middle-class aspirations, including a nice place to live and stable work—that has failed to come to fruition (Berlant 2007). The affects that emerge signal a longing for a time in the past, or a frustration with the failure of a promise. Zainab was living on money she had borrowed from her brother, but was adamant that she did not want to go on welfare. She told me, “I came here because I wanted to work, not to live off the government. They need to recognize my credentials. I don’t understand why they don’t and why I have to go back to school. I’m a doctor.”

Zainab had always had a lot of friends in Pakistan, but in Toronto she found herself socially isolated. She had tried making friends with other women she met at local settlement-services agencies and at the mosque she attended every Sunday, but she ended up having to spend all of her time either at settlement-services agencies or caring for her child—and in more recent months, dealing with the details of her divorce. She even found it increasingly difficult to speak with her relatives back home because she was embarrassed. The process of immigration had taken a psychological toll on her as well. “I wasn’t this nervous before,” she once told me. “I used to trust people, but now it’s hard—you just don’t know where you stand in this country.” When I asked her what she meant, she said, “Everyone at the centers is competing for these small jobs, and you don’t know who is going to sabotage you.” These issues of trust in the workplace have lasting effects on one’s psychological well-being, contributing to depression and anxiety.

In later conversations, when I asked her about why she stayed when she could go back to her life as a doctor in Pakistan, she asserted a discourse of future success—not for herself, but for her daughter. “I know it’s not perfect here, but it’s better for her here than in Pakistan. There are better opportunities. She’s Canadian. We’re both Canadian now.” Later, when I
asked her how she self-identified (as “Pakistani, South Asian, Pakistani-Canadian, Canadian, or something else”), she firmly said, “Canadian.” This assertion never failed to surprise me, and so when I pushed further and asked her whether she thought of herself as Pakistani, she said that while it was her background, she was now Canadian. In Michèle Lamont’s (2000) study of working-class American men, she asserts that they “dissociate socioeconomic status from moral worth. . . . They contradict the classical view that American workers are deprived of dignity because they are unable to live the American dream” (3). In Zainab’s case, even though she, a trained doctor, was unemployed, her expectation was that this would not be the case forever. Either through her daughter, or her own future prospects, she believed she would eventually gain standing in the country to which she now claims national affiliation. Her ongoing criticism of the credentialing process for foreign-trained professionals served as a critique of the state’s practices, suggesting that in order for this change to happen—for skilled immigrants like her to achieve full freedom—the entire state has to reform. Considered this way, her demand for a Canadian shift is not a modest one; it asserts a kind of identity-rights claim to resources that are not available to those living in Pakistan.

Parveen, a young woman in her thirties, had only just arrived in Toronto when we met. We met at the Center, where she seemed shy and nervous about speaking with me, but also eager to help. What I was doing was something of a mystery—kind of a student, kind of a volunteer, maybe someone who had access to resources—so I was also something of a curiosity at the Center. While her English skills were good, we conducted some of our conversation in Urdu, which seemed to make her more relaxed and speak with more ease. Parveen had moved to Toronto from Karachi three months earlier. She spent a lot of time telling me about her husband and his arrival in Toronto from Karachi via Sweden, where he stopped to complete his education in communications. It was not until we had been speaking for a while that she revealed that she had been a surgeon in Pakistan. When I asked what precipitated her migration to Toronto, she suggested it was her husband’s choice and said that they both wanted to leave Karachi because of a climate riddled with “pollution and violence.”

Parveen said, “I was initially bored here because I was busy there, and I miss my parents. Now I get two kinds of depression: home depression and snow depression,” she told me with a laugh. O’Neill (2014) has written on the violence of boredom, and the fear that the unemployed have of
boredom. Taking boredom as an everyday affect (Stewart 2007), O’Neill explores not only downward mobility but the ways that boredom “registers within the modality of time the newly homeless’ expulsion to the margins of the city. In this sense, boredom is a persistent form of social suffering made possible by a crisis-generated shift in the global economy, one that has forced tens of millions of people the world over to come to terms with diminished economic capacities” (11). Boredom, then, is not something to be taken lightly, but rather an affective disposition that can do violence to one’s sense of self. Also important is the second part of Parveen’s statement about the transition from one climate to another, from the heat of Pakistan to the bleakness of a Canadian winter and everything that comes with it. A Toronto winter can be isolating for those unaccustomed to the rhythms of the city. The sociality of Toronto is predicated, for those raised there, on being outside regardless of the weather. Even now on trips home during the winter, no matter how far a destination, from half a mile to several, I simply wear my parka and submit to the weather. For Parveen, and indeed others at the Center, that kind of a walk would seem absurd in the winter. I lived what to me was walking distance from the Center, a walk I happily did no matter the weather, and yet the women I met saw it as strange, their incredulity often followed by a statement like, “You’re a real Canadian.” These kinds of moments illustrated the cultural distance between myself and the women I was supposed to be studying and the everyday ways that belonging is registered. I had that elusive cultural capital and those unmarked benefits because of my upbringing in Toronto, things they were reminded daily that they lacked.

Parveen learned that in order to become a doctor in Canada she would need to complete another internship following two to three years of study—in effect, completing medical school again. She expressed frustration at the process because the year before she had been a resident medical doctor in cardiac medicine, and working in a hospital’s intensive care unit, but in Toronto she would have to begin again. She would have to be reeducated, take medical exams, and redo her residency, which would qualify her to work again in four years. After extensive online research and speaking to other practicing doctors, she found that even if she becomes accredited, it is likely that as a foreign-trained doctor, she will be sent to a relatively remote area of Canada to practice. She told me that if she cannot get her credentials recognized, or if she decides to give up, she has thought about pharmacy work or something else related to health. “As long as it’s in health, I’m happy.” I was always surprised at her level of optimism in the midst of such
struggle. Parveen was relatively new to Toronto and was still weighing her options, but because her finances were limited, she was already experiencing downward mobility. It is quite likely she will not end up working as a doctor in Toronto. She, like most of the women I interviewed, was not financially stable; they found their lives completely disrupted, their savings obliterated, and their credentials ignored.

To grasp this experience of precarity, it is also crucial to understand the gendered dimension of unemployment. In the Fordist-Keynesian context, the assumption of a heteronormative, patriarchal family structure with a male breadwinner who is responsible for the family formed the foundation for state policy concerning employment and welfare (Fraser 2009). These persistent assumptions around masculinity seem to assume not only a heteronormative, but also reductionist model of familial relations in which economic stability rests entirely on the shoulders of an imagined husband. For instance, Collins (2003) has argued that these gender ideologies frame practices by U.S. corporate managers who oversee women factory workers in the Global South. She writes, “In the cruelest of ironies, gender ideologies permit managers to use the insufficiency of the maquiladora wage against women workers. Factory owners have pointed to the fact that household members pool their incomes to argue that women's earnings in the maquiladora are only ‘supplemental’” (Collins 2003, cited in Tsing 2009: 162). Thus, women's earnings are imagined to be part of a whole, while men's earnings are imagined to support entire families, despite the realities of any given family structure.

These gender ideologies frame a variety of capitalist practices pertaining to women's wages. High rates of women's unemployment somehow do not seem to register in the cultural imaginary at all. This is despite the fact that in Canada, the unemployment rate for women and men in 2013 was almost equal (6.6 percent for women, 7.5 percent for men); however, these numbers change when race and ethnicity are factored in. For instance, in 2009, the unemployment rate for Indigenous women was 12.7 percent and 15.1 percent for Indigenous men. In the United States, in 2013, the unemployment rate for adult women (over twenty years old) surpassed that of adult men. Recovering from the 2009 economic collapse, male-dominated industries (including construction and manufacturing) improved, while female-dominated industries (in the public sector) have been in decline. Yet, in this context, there is simply no language to understand women's unemployment, as women are imagined to be able to rely on the economic
fortunes of men. Women’s economic burden is somehow now secondary to men’s suffering, or this “crisis of masculinity.” Yet, women continue to do a disproportionate amount of housework and childcare in addition to needing to supply a steady source of household income. As the case of Zainab demonstrates, after her divorce, she is also responsible for childcare and is the primary breadwinner in her home, performing what Hochschild (2012) calls “the second shift.”

As already demonstrated, this process of transnationalism serves to gender these women as workers, funneling them into lower-paid, contingent labor; and thus, women have borne a particular burden in these global transformations. In the context of my research, while women and men were both underemployed or unemployed, the kinds of work opportunities afforded to women pay less. Thus, being “flexible” for women has economic consequences. For instance, while a Pakistani man and woman may both enter as highly skilled engineers, once they try to find work in Canada they are funneled into very different kinds of work, such that women typically earn substantially less. However, rather than an aberration, these differences according to gender are central to the functioning of late capitalism. For instance, Anna Tsing (2013) has argued that the performance of gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and citizenship is fundamental to supply-chain capitalism (subcontracting, outsourcing). She theorizes “super-exploitation” to understand a form of “exploitation that depends on so-called noneconomic factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexuality, age and citizenship status” (158). Thus, in certain contexts “diversity” is central to the functioning of capitalism. While I have argued in this book that racialized Otherness is an impediment to be trained away in some circumstances, there are other forms of “diversity” that are central to the capitalist project, such as being able to pay women less for their labor.

**Histories of Precarity: Bushra**

Bushra’s story illustrates a longer history of the foreign-trained-professionals problem; she was among the earliest migrants I interviewed, having moved to Toronto in 1975. The current state of unemployment for those with foreign credentials is sustained and naturalized at the intersection of competing forms of governance, which have turned toward neoliberal strategies since the 1990s. The current plight of unemployed, skilled workers has been further impacted by ever-growing numbers of immigrants from Asian
countries, and the problem is particularly pressing since the numbers of the unemployed continue to grow. However, as Bushra’s story demonstrates, the Canadian state has a long history of policing regulated professions, and the racism and discrimination that undergird this unemployment have much deeper roots.

I met Bushra while I was working with an organization for senior Muslim women, here called Dosti (which translates to female friend), whose acting executive director was a woman from Pakistan. It was a smaller section of a larger foundation that was established in 1999 as a nonprofit organization, with support from the Don Mills Foundation for Seniors Inc. and the Ontario Coalition of Senior Citizens Organizations. A 2012 study by Ryerson University found that a majority of Muslim seniors living in Scarborough felt “abused, neglected and angry.” Among the 203 seniors interviewed (61 percent South Asian) at the North American Muslim Foundation and at four local mosques, most were living with family and thus were not socially isolated, but they did feel emotionally isolated. Sixty-eight percent felt appreciated and 79 percent felt respected; however, 87 percent felt neglected, 72 percent felt powerless, and 83 percent felt abused by their family or friends. The concerns of Muslim seniors are often elided in discussions of citizenship and belonging. With particular concerns and needs, their experiences are often imagined as a special case, rather than as central to questions of migration.

The Dosti foundation worked to counter the isolation many Muslim seniors felt. It was not a nursing home, but a drop-in group where Muslim women could spend the day socializing and participating in volunteer work, such as raising money for Pakistani causes. One attendee told me that she used to go to the Croatian Islamic Centre regularly, but once she “heard men talking about women, saying they are like this . . .”—trailing off, not wanting to repeat what she had heard—she decided she was more comfortable praying at home. She gained her sense of a diasporic Muslim community through her activities at Dosti instead. It was a pleasure to attend their meetings, as they often involved storytelling; in these contexts I did not mind being configured and understood as “daughter” but rather embraced the sense of community produced in these encounters.

Bushra was in her sixties, and the most vocal member of Dosti. I met her at the recommendation of another member. I was sitting at one end of their large conference table, speaking with another woman about her experiences living in Toronto; embarrassed by her own story, the woman repeatedly
told me that I should be speaking to Bushra instead. At the end of our con-
versation, she gently pushed my rolling chair toward Bushra and walked
away. I rolled over to Bushra and the small group of women she was speak-
ing with, a little embarrassed myself. I needn’t have worried; I was imme-
diately welcomed by the women. I waited quietly until they finished their
meeting, at which point Bushra turned to me and smiled. Bushra was a
small woman with big hair; I can only describe her as wonderfully sprightly
and outgoing. She was known throughout Dosti for being completely out-
spoken and utterly charming. She was incredibly self-assured and confident
despite the considerable challenges she had faced.

Bushra was trained as a doctor in 1959 at Fatima Jinnah College in La-
hore. She moved to Karachi as a young doctor in order to establish her own
hospital, and worked in the maternity ward. Not only was Bushra among
the first women doctors in a major Karachi hospital, to her substantial
credit she had also volunteered with underprivileged groups in Pakistan
and worked primarily in clinics in the slums of Karachi. In 1967, she moved
to Bahrain, where she worked as a doctor until 1971, at which point she
moved to London. She had no problem getting her Pakistani degree recog-
nized in Bahrain or the United Kingdom, where she specialized in obstet-
rics and pediatrics. In describing her experience in Bahrain, she said, “The
patients [in the Bahrain hospital] who needed blood transfusions asked
for British blood [instead of Arab], and I said you don’t want it—it’s full of
alcohol. The nurses would tell the patients with a wink, ‘Don’t mess with
this doctor.’”

It bears taking a moment to reflect on this desire for “white blood,” a
visceral and bodily manifestation of a racist politics that presumes contami-
nation from a racialized Otherness. In this moment, racial discrimination
does not end at the skin—the limit proposed by Sara Ahmed (2000) in her
analysis of slime as the space between self and alien Other—but in this case
permeates that barrier and the accompanying ideologies of difference and
contamination. Bushra met this threat of contamination with humor; in-
stead, she invoked another racialized and cultural stereotype to counter the
patient’s racism and discrimination, that of the drunk British. She turned
the question around, effectively arguing that Arab blood was healthier and
not contaminated. The ways one managed racism and sexism varied ac-
cording to context. For instance, foreign nurses were taught to deal with
disrespectful or angry patients by walking away and managing their own
affects, as a move toward professionalism. In those workplaces the display
of certain kinds of affects, such as anger in the face of outright racism and sexism, is considered unprofessional, forcing a kind of performance of politeness onto the subjects of discrimination. In a very different context (and speaking as a doctor, not as a nurse) faced with a request for “white blood,” Bushra made a joke to sweep aside the patient’s racism.

In 1973, Bushra moved to Nigeria and worked in a family health clinic sponsored by Johns Hopkins University. Two years later she left Nigeria for Toronto, and immediately thereafter her only son began experiencing seizures. He was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, which put a strain on her marriage and her day-to-day life. In Toronto, she discovered that it was unlikely she would be able to work as a doctor. She did begin the process, however, and in fact passed all the exams necessary to practice medicine, but there was no one to care for her son while she did her internships. She could not afford the expense of essentially being retrained without any social or financial support, and so ultimately made the decision to leave medicine. In order to provide for themselves, she and her husband opened a dollar store that eventually closed down due to financial difficulties. Her marriage could not last through the strain, and they separated. Her son now lives in a daily care facility since she is no longer able to care for him. Bushra said she “has a great regard for this country because everyone was so helpful in [her] worst times.” She no longer worked but was by no means retired. She volunteered with the Red Cross, the Daily Bread Food Bank, Dosti, formerly with the Easter Seal committee, and was also learning Italian.

When asked about her feelings about Pakistan, Bushra revealed to me, “In Bombay, I grew up in violence. My father felt we Muslims were trapped because every few days there were riots between Hindus and Muslims. He thought we would get out of this with Partition. We had the British rule and the Hindus treated us like this—what would it be like when we were ruled by Hindus? But Pakistan is terrible now.” Bushra was twelve years old during the Partition of India. Her father worked for the Muslim League, and she recalled fondly that as a child she would stand on a chair to tell people how to vote, an act which bonded her and her father. In January 1948, her family moved by ship to Karachi. She had not been to Pakistan in many years, and described it as “a carcass [from which] people are trying to get what they can.” In Canada she felt that she was among her people, and she never thought about returning to Pakistan. “I decided to leave the day after the second war with India ended. I used to imagine retiring there, but not now.
After I’m home for a few days, I’m claustrophobic. I live in Canada now. I’m a Canadian.”

Bushra’s description of Pakistan as a “carcass” is telling. A carcass is the dead body of an animal, a corpse, the remains, the leftovers. A carcass is the discarded remains of something that has been used up. Her use of the word to describe Pakistan represents perhaps her own past disappointments with what she perceives as the failed project of Partition, the emptying out of the remains of the British Empire, and the failures of Pakistanis to take on the making of a new nation-state. She lived through it. Her experience of Partition was about her own experience of violence and abjection. The promise of a future and the failure of the project are mirrored in her own experiences of migration.

Narratives of diaspora have described a particular kind of temporal orientation in which those “living in diaspora” are inextricably tied to an imagined homeland located in the past. Brown (1999) contends that these kinds of approaches to diaspora tend to take the moment of dispersal as the starting point of analysis, “rather than examining how historically-positioned subjects identify both the relevant events in transnational community formation and the geographies implicated in that process” (293). Brian Axel (2002) has questioned the constitution of the South Asian diaspora as necessarily linked to a particular place, more specifically, a “place of origin.” Using the example of the Sikh diaspora, he posits the notion of the “diasporic imaginary” to conceptualize the formation of diaspora through temporality, affect, and corporeality. For Bushra, in contrast to many narratives of diaspora in which home is a site of eventual return or is yearned for through nostalgic longing, Pakistan is a place best left in the past.

Bushra’s story is compelling in its historical sweep: she lived through Partition, the post-1965 transformations in immigration law and practice, and helped transform the gendered dynamics of the field of medicine. In addition, she had to deal with day-to-day racism and violence throughout her life, such as having a white British patient ask for another doctor, or request “white blood.” Despite her expertise and training, various forms of sensorial phenomena marked her belonging and nonbelonging in the eyes of patients, other professionals, and the Canadian state. Despite these accounts, multiple migrations, and downward mobility, the identity marker Bushra ultimately settled on was “Canadian.” Bushra’s case is different, however, from the others described here in one key way, which is that she
migrated at a different historical moment and was able to access services that later migrants could not benefit from. Her story details and illustrates the long, historical roots of the devaluation of immigrant labor in Canada, while also demonstrating the everyday struggles people encounter in the process of global migration.

Like Zainab, Bushra also asserts a Canadian citizenship and identity in the face of economic marginalization. This assertion is a form of agency, but it manifests differently in the context of Bushra’s life. Her story demonstrates a long-term commitment to resistance as a process. Having lived through so many historical contexts, events, crises, and ruptures, she is now older and revered by other women, held perhaps as a kind of elder of this community of immigrant women because she has a history and perspective on struggle. For Bushra, struggle is something that people do not experience only once, but something they live with. Even though she no longer wants to return there, she is not disconnected from what is happening in Pakistan. She has clearly performed her allegiance to the hurt and sick in Pakistan, just as she understands and articulates issues of trauma and justice in Canada. Her life struggles did not stop when she moved to Canada, because her life has always been about resistance, which also illuminates a commitment to resistance that is not particular, essentialist, or singular, but rather an ongoing process. She understands that being in Canada is not about retiring from struggle; rather, in Canada she continues to fight against oppression. Her ongoing commitment to resistance is not just about individualistic gains, but is always communal and based on the contingencies she experiences.

In understanding the production of precarity for these women workers, it is also important to examine the cultural meaning of the term security, and what it means to live in security. Bushra’s story illuminates questions of safety and security during Partition, when mass migration was accompanied by mass violence. After the 9/11 attacks, the term security has been singularly equated with the cultural response to terrorism led by Homeland Security. This culturally inflected version of security has taken on international significance for instance in the Global War on Terror and the justification for the war in Iraq, events that have had material consequences for Pakistani migration. Security in this sense indicates national security from terrorist threat and has largely eclipsed the concept of human security, as described by the United Nations Development Program to mean “freedom from fear and want” (King and Murray 2001). “Freedom from
fear” has infiltrated North American foreign and domestic policy, to the marginalization of “freedom from want.” Michelle Lowry (2002) has argued that Canada’s immigration system creates human insecurity for new immigrants. Security has been discursively constructed as a category that works against Muslim immigrant women, instead of a category that forwards their interests.

Bushra’s story also demonstrates several ruptures that mark living in a state of precarity. For instance, her multiple migrations (post-Partition Pakistan, Bahrain, United Kingdom, Nigeria, Canada) illuminate the different ways history and cultural context shape migration experiences. In the 1970s, she had no trouble working as a doctor in Bahrain, the U.K., and Nigeria, but when she moved to Canada in 1975 she learned that she would not be able to do that work unless she went back to school. On the global market, at any given moment, one’s skills and experience can be differentially valued or legitimated and despite qualifications, training, and experience, one’s livelihood can be taken away.

_Histories of Precarity: Abida_

This section reveals Abida’s experiences of precarity as manifested through her multiple migrations. Beginning with her experience of Partition, her migrations have had long-term effects on her self-understanding as South Asian and Muslim in diaspora. I met Abida through mutual acquaintances who first brought me to Dosti. Abida migrated to Canada in 1962, and had been active in the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, the All Pakistan Women’s Association, and Dosti. After arriving in Canada she did her teacher’s training and worked for over thirty years before retiring in 1998. She began the All Pakistan Women’s Association (APWA) in 1995–96, and served as president of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW). When we met, APWA was working on a project to fund Pakistani high school students who wanted to go on to higher education. “These are bright kids with unfortunate circumstances,” she said. It was clear that for Abida, her nonprofit work was critical to her identity and self-understanding as a citizen.

Abida felt her job trajectory did not reflect those of others because she went to teacher’s college in Canada. She described how she wore a sari to an early job interview, where she was asked, “Are you going to wear saris in class while teaching?” She said “Yes, when I open my mouth people will
know I’m not from here,” meaning that attempts to hide her perceived foreignness were futile because of her accent. They hired her anyway. She said being Muslim on the job did affect her. For instance, she did not mix socially with the other teachers since she did not drink alcohol and their sociality was predicted on social drinking at local bars. They were sensitive to her, she said, refraining from vulgar jokes if she was in the staff room.

She used the term South Asian or Muslim to describe her identity. “Sometimes people ask if I’m Italian, but I say I’m Pakistani. People from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, all those countries, Afghanistan, Iran, are genuine people.” For Abida, her South Asian identity was deeply tied to her childhood experience of Partition. She moved to Pakistan in 1948, while in high school. Growing up she lived in a big house and had Hindu and Muslim friends.

In 1947 there were riots and I was scared. I learned how to use swords and guns when I was ten to twelve years old. My brothers all got training. I was too young, I didn’t really know about the problems. I wasn’t really scared, but saw tanks and people with guns. Then trains came with refugees. We helped to bring people to their home who [had] lost everything. Girls drowned themselves so they wouldn’t be taken by Hindus and Sikhs. There are examples of very good people who protected others. The masses went haywire, they didn’t know what was right or wrong. It didn’t matter who they were. The rapes . . . very unfortunate. Whenever there’s war, there are not very civilized people doing things, even though religions teach differently. . . . My parents were in the movement and believed it was good for people to keep their identity in their own way. There was friendliness, but there still used to be communal riots. . . . People had motivation [for an independent Pakistan] to have an Islamic state to govern the way they wanted. There was lots of patriotism and spirit.

I later asked Abida about her personal experience of migration during Partition. She told me the following:

We traveled in 1948 from Aurangabad to Bombay on train; from there we took a ship to Karachi. My two brothers came first, then relatives started coming, they stayed with us until we found places for them. The ladies and children used to live in two rooms, and a washroom and a kitchen and balcony, the men slept in the garden.
People thought it was better for the ladies to go into the house and for men to guard them. We did this for a few months. We didn’t take much with us. I was told I could only bring a few things that were really important to me. I used to collect chocolate wrappers. I took the wrappers and a shirt I liked.

Abida laughed and said, “It’s funny how beautiful I thought those wrappers were.” The image of beautiful, shiny chocolate wrappers was to me a shining example of hope in the face of uncertainty, the emblems of a child who wanted to keep something familiar and beautiful with her.

In contrast to Bushra’s experience, Abida was very fortunate financially. She was trained in Canada and therefore able to use her training to support a middle-class life in Canada. She originally studied in Karachi and London, eventually earning a master’s degree in zoology and microbiology, before moving to Alberta in 1962 as a student. She moved to Toronto because of the larger Muslim community. She also remained married, which helped her financially and emotionally support herself and her family. Abida’s story is interesting because of the ways precarious past migrations inform present circumstances and self-understandings. Her experience of Partition was of leaving home as a child with few belongings, and of being a refugee confronted with stories of rape, violence, and war. Her use of the self-identifier “South Asian” is interesting in this context because it represents her effectively undoing Partition, or putting the country back together. Identifying herself as Muslim represents her commitment to religious affiliation and meaning making. While Bushra described Pakistan as a “carcass,” Abida told fond stories of Hindu aunties and uncles; thus her use of the term “South Asian” attempts to resolve the precarity produced by historical events.

Precarity as Loss

Manar was a young Pakistani woman working at a pro bono South Asian legal organization in Toronto, located in a large concrete building downtown. The institutional architecture was at odds with the warm and welcoming atmosphere in the building. We had corresponded over e-mail and she agreed to meet me at her office downtown. She was still busy working when I arrived, so I waited in the lounge. Manar was the project director for the Toronto region of this particular South Asian organization, and she consulted extensively with Pakistanis who were not able to work in their
chosen professions. She also spoke to these issues from personal experience; although she had been a lawyer in Pakistan, she was not able to act as legal counsel in Toronto because she was not accredited to practice law in Canada. She could only advise and counsel informally. When we met, she was having trouble making ends meet. Manar spoke to me at length about her personal history.

I grew up in a conservative environment in Pakistan. I was married at twenty-four and we lived in Karachi. In 1996, my son was diagnosed with a heart condition. It was for him that we wanted to move. I applied first for a visitor visa to England for his medical treatment because it would take so long to immigrate abroad permanently. I had been to England, but at customs, they said they didn’t know why I wanted to take my son and my husband with me. It took so long, but finally they approved me. We were going to go on December 13, but my son died on December 12. If we lived in a developed country, my son would have had a better chance. On January 6, we were in a car accident and my husband died in my arms. I paid my taxes in Pakistan, but when we went to the hospital, we were not treated like human beings. I felt disappointed in the system.

Manar stayed with her mother-in-law in Pakistan while she waited for a visa to get in to the United States. She had practiced law in Pakistan, but in the United States she worked on and off at a gas station in North Carolina, which led her to feel like she was drifting through life. Consequently, she applied for and received a full scholarship to study in London for a master’s degree. She had to fly back to Islamabad from the United States to obtain her British visa for school, as one has to go through the immigration interview in the country of application. Her visa process was slowed due to a coup in Pakistan, but eventually it was approved; she then had five or six days to move before her visa expired. She finally made her way to Britain to study, and later migrated to Toronto.

I really liked Manar. In fact, I looked up to her; I thought she was really cool. I had recently returned to Toronto for the first time after living in the United States, away from my family, and because of the nature of my fieldwork I was forced to confront my own feelings about my relationship to Islam. Manar and I would meet periodically throughout my time back. Once I was at an Ifthar party, which is a party to break fast during Ramadan. We were waiting patiently, watching the minutes pass on the clock. I wasn’t
fasting regularly, but I thought out of respect that I would fast on that day. Unaccustomed to not eating, I was starving and having trouble paying attention to anything but the time. As we were comparing watches, Manar said, “Look, I don’t think God’s going to begrudge us a few minutes.” It was the first time I had heard someone talk like that. In my family, there were aspects of my religious upbringing that had been very strict. Breaking the fast was one of them. This moment was meaningful to me because it revealed that Manar would not take herself or her religious practice so seriously that it was removed from the practicalities of life. God wouldn’t begrudge a few minutes.

When I first met her, Manar had been in Toronto for two-and-a-half years. When I asked if she liked living in Toronto, she told me she loved it because of her independence. When Manar arrived in Canada, she immediately began attending job-search workshops. Every day she aggressively sent résumés, thirty to forty applications she said. It took her a year and a half to find a law-related job, and she was still not able to work as a lawyer. Her personal life had been going well. Manar had been dating someone and was thinking about getting married. I asked her if she ever thought about moving back. “Pakistan feels so distant,” she replied. “I don’t want to. Maybe I’ll go back when I’m older. Right now, I have no desire to visit Pakistan. I can’t be a lawyer here per se, but I hope things will get better. I know things will get better.” When I asked her how she self-identified, she said, “I’m a Pakistani-Canadian, but Canadian first.”

Manar’s narrative suggests two things. Outside of Pakistan, her presence is a site of contestation; but despite everything she has suffered, she is happy to assert a Canadian identity. While it may be easy to dismiss her assertion as resulting from her experience of trauma, it must be taken seriously as her attempt to fashion a sense of place, and an effort to be somewhere else that might benefit herself and her family. Instead of reading her story as one of defeat, I interpret her narrative as a real articulation of her desire.

Bushra views Pakistan as a carcass of corruption and finds herself claustrophobic upon return, suggesting a deep disappointment with the postcolonial state and a sense of disillusionment that perhaps compels her identification with Canada. How is this sense of disappointment with or betrayal by Pakistan—especially for those who thought Pakistan would give them the equality and dignity they were denied as Muslims in India, or for women like Manar who felt they were not treated as human—reconciled with the humiliation and frustration of poverty and racism in Canada? In a
way, this apparent insistence on claiming Canadian-ness can be thought of as a way to resolve earlier disappointments with Pakistan.

Narratives such as Manar’s life story suggest the deep, affective purchase of why women change their lives and persist in their struggles, even when the results are not what they expected or even necessarily wanted. Although a trained lawyer, Manar spent time working at a gas station, and although she is now settled in Toronto, she still cannot counsel people according to her level of education and expertise. Her claim to Canadian citizenship can be read as a place-making activity that critiques the differences between living in more- and less-developed countries. It is not a stretch to believe that she continued to think in the back of her mind, “If I had just lived in Canada, my son would not have died.” She invoked the notion of freedom in her conversations with me, but it was about freedom from living in a state of abjection. The predicament of postcolonial migrant lives operates under a number of logics: abjection, disposability, or precarity (Rodriguez 2010; Tadiar 2009). It is not surprising that one solution for Manar would be to relocate herself to a place where she imagined there would be regular access to good health care. In these stories, citizenship and security are necessarily and tragically linked. Pakistan arose as a place of the past; even dead and picked over, in Bushra’s imagination. With ongoing violence, poor access to health care, fewer resources, limits on women’s mobility, and an unstable government, they not only felt disadvantaged as women in Pakistan but also that their overall quality of life was better in resource-filled countries like Canada.

Precarious Citizenship

Gulnaaz was from Karachi and had been living in Canada for a year and a half when we met. She had been a working lawyer in Pakistan for five years before moving to Canada. She moved independently, although she has a brother in New York who helped her while she was unemployed. In order to work as a lawyer, she would need to write “papers” (her term for exams). She was in the process of receiving an evaluation of her credentials from the National Accreditation Committee, which takes approximately six months to one year. The accreditation of foreign credentials is big business in Canada—a feature of the neoliberal state—and, as I explained earlier, there are so many different companies with almost no standardization that professional organizations often do not recognize evaluations, rendering them effectively
useless. Once Gulnaaz receives her evaluation, she will be able to take the bar exam, which should take another year. In total she has to take twelve exams at a cost of approximately $600 each, which will take an additional year and a half. An alternate path suggested to her was that she return to university. After being in Canada for eleven months she got a job as a legal assistant, but ultimately left due to harassment from her employer. When she first arrived in Canada she tried odd jobs, including making kebabs. “It was my choice to move here, so I’m still giving Canada a chance.” When I asked her whether she also identified as Pakistani, she said, “I was Pakistani, and my origins will always be Pakistani, but I’m a Canadian now.”

The sovereignty of the state in an era of global migration has been understood as inextricably bound to questions of territory (Gupta and Sharma 2006); the boundaries of the nation-state become reified through the everyday ways citizens make claims to citizenship. The question of state sovereignty in an era of globalization and global migration has undergone considerable debate in the anthropological literature (e.g., Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 2002). As Gupta and Sharma (2006) have argued, globalization is imagined to compromise the national state since it challenges two features that are central to the idea of a national state: territory and sovereignty. The nation-state is imagined to be porous, and those permitted entry are thought to have real and imagined ties to communities elsewhere that would compromise their loyalty. Authors have countered such images of the equation of territory with “a people” (e.g., Appadurai 1996; Gupta 1992). For these women, being unemployed represents a failure of social inclusion, a kind of failed citizenship predicated on the notion that inclusion encompasses economic participation. I referred to this kind of citizenship, one that goes beyond legal papers, in detail in the previous chapter as cultural citizenship, in an attempt to understand the different kinds of claims that immigrant and minority communities make beyond the realm of legal recognition. Early theorists of cultural citizenship stress the necessity of inclusion in multiple spheres of public participation (e.g., Flores and Benmayor 1997; Ong 1999; Rosaldo 1994). The women I spoke with invoked discourses of promise and a better future for their children to understand their liminal, contingent position, sometimes understanding their economic failure as a failure of the state to properly integrate foreign labor, thus critiquing the state, and sometimes blaming themselves. This discourse of promise and a better future for their children indexes a hope in the state with which they still identify. In so doing, they position
themselves as morally right, good citizens deserving of full participation in the nation-state.

Precarity throughout this chapter has emerged as a social condition of the contemporary global era. In all the narratives presented here, a socio-economic state of precarity was accompanied by a similar feeling in their social worlds. Berlant (2011) asks, “What does it mean even to propose that a spreading precarity provides the dominant structure and experience of the present moment, cutting across class and localities? . . . To what degree [is precarity] an economic and political condition suffered by a population or by the subjects of capitalism generally; or a way of life; or an affective atmosphere; or an existential truth about contingencies of living, namely, that there are no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built” (192)? Gendered narratives of precarity illustrated here demonstrate the ways global processes and social inequality are unevenly distributed. Yet, in the face of this precarity women had a desire to persevere and to survive.

*Imagining a Better Life*

Shabana tells me,

Canada has been good to me, because in Pakistan if I had a daughter and my husband left me with nothing, I would have been ruined. Here I had housing, they paid for daycare; Canada helped me. In Pakistan, maybe there wouldn’t have been any help for me—the government wouldn’t have been there to help me find a home, or help me support my child. . . . There are other things, my mother would have helped at home, but the government there, they don’t have the resources, there are no daycares or housing like this [government housing]. It’s a third-world country. Even if I had a job, I would have been struggling all my life.

She explains her Canadian nationalism in relation to the differences between living in the global North versus the global South. Not only does daily life have a different quality, but there are resources available to her in Canada that she would not have had in Lahore. However, it is important that we not read these narratives as celebratory accounts of the global North rescuing women of the global South. The wealth and power of the global North is maintained at the expense of those living elsewhere, and
often living right there in the global North, contributing to society and perpetuating the nation but undocumented or underpaid.

In the context of Toronto, one must also remember that women like Shabana moved to Canada because they were living in a state of abjection in Pakistan; but then, having moved to Canada, they were victimized again by an inequitable system that marginalizes them economically. Master narratives such as globalization or capitalism tell stories of progress and of becoming, but they also represent a disaggregated set of practices with local manifestations and cultures. One enduring story of capitalism is that of progress, or forward movement, of success and accomplishment based on a meritocracy, a story challenged by the experiences articulated here. In the face of economic and social precarity, when Pakistani immigrant women claim Canadian citizenship it becomes a way for them to imagine their worlds differently. This portrayal of national allegiance represents a very definite understanding of material and economic differences between life in Canada versus life in Pakistan. Questions of belonging exceed the discourse of the nation-state; we need ways of knowing that account for loss, as Manar’s story demonstrates, but we also do not want to absolve the state of responsibility for the blatant disregard of life, both within its borders and outside of them. These women’s claims to citizenship also stem from a kind of desire—a desire for support or welfare from the state, for equality, and for dignity. The structural context in which this desire emerges complicates the standard narrative of “migrating for a better life.” I asked numerous women why they chose to stay and whether they ever thought about returning to Pakistan. I most often heard some version of the following: “I came here for my kids—I hope my children will do better than me.” This imagining of a better life for their children was a narrative that appeared throughout my time in Toronto. These kinds of statements could be read as reproducing aspects of the promise of upward mobility inherent in discourses of global migration and multiculturalism, a kind of “Canadian dream.” However, I believe that these kinds of hopes function instead to make sense of a precarious and even catastrophic present, a hope of something better for generations to come.

These hopes are not inconsequential; rather, they are political perspectives that provide a kind of commentary on contemporary social life in late capitalism. As Berlant so aptly writes in Cruel Optimism (2011), “For many now . . . the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work,
in intimacy, politically—are crumbling at a threatening pace” (5). People’s everyday existence is now “shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on” (8). The attachments people forge to an idea of the good life can perform the work of cruel optimism, a hoping for something that is no longer possible. As the process of capitalism figures in the annihilation of the promise of a good life, creating precarious situations for women and their families, holding on to hope is a means to understand and survive the catastrophic present.