Refractions of the Field at Home: American Representations of Hindu Holy Men in the 19th and 20th Centuries

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December, 1985: A man squats on a bed of nails. Head turned sideways, he grins out of the smudged greys and blacks of the newspaper page. His matted hair is wound like a turban above his bearded face, and his bare limbs are smeared with ash. "Some people could care less about the cushioning in the 735," proclaims a caption above his head. Beside him, positioned at the same angle as his bare feet, is a running shoe identified as the New Balance 735.

This is a page from *The New York Times*. It has been spread out on the kitchen floor for an incontinent collie by the friends with whom I am staying when, after a second bout of fieldwork with a Hindu holy man in western India, I return to Berkeley to reconstitute my American academic life. Looking down at the newspaper, I find it disorienting and wickedly entertaining to see a fragment of India—a shard of my fieldwork interests—repositioned in such an inglorious fashion. The same general figure I have just encountered as a site of sacredness is here used to market running shoes and by implication, beautiful bodies; the same figure I have seen worshiped in altars is implicated in canine toiletry. I stare at the holy man in the advertisement, noticing that he has not been identified in any way. It appears that the allegedly endemic Hindu ascetic practice of lounging on a bed of nails is so familiar to the American public that there is no need for an explanatory note.

As anthropologists spanning at least two cultural domains, there are many moments when we spot fragments of one culture repositioned with new meanings in the other culture's semiotic field.¹ If such juxtapositions occur during the course of fieldwork, recent theoretical challenges to the boundedness of cultural units and static representations of the Other have made it acceptable to work such observations into our written texts:² as implicit irony, as humorous anecdote, or as fuel for theories of syncretism, colonialism, and transcultural flows. On the other hand, if we should confront our fieldwork interest in the context of everyday personal or professional lives outside the experiences bracketed and

valorized by "being in the field," there are few acceptable avenues for an intellectual exploration of these encounters. Whether we are Africanists questioned by friendly travelers about cannibal witch doctors, Native Americanists asked in class about the ecological wisdom of noble tribes, or Melanesianists viewing airline advertisements celebrating South Sea sexuality, we look on these popular images as such an acute anthropological embarrassment that we tend to suppress them in our written productions.

This essay argues that popular images of an alien culture are valuable sources of anthropological understanding on several fronts. First, the history of such images reminds us that anthropologists are not the only brokers of cultural representation; even as we affirm or challenge other sources of representation, we can never entirely exorcise their presence in the world preceding and extending beyond academe (Said 1978; Trouillot 1991). Geographical areas of which we are specialists are not merely contained in the bindings of ethnographies or journals; they surface also in magazine articles, postcards, tourist brochures, and cartoons. In fact, since such images may unconsciously inform scholarly representations, it is instructive to scrutinize rather than ignore them. Second, indigenous dimensions of meaning may be drained out of such images when they travel. Strategically manipulated by a variety of groups within a host culture to make points that may only tangentially refer to the implicated Other, such images are recast around internal cultural debates. Third, tracing popular images of a particular distant Other through time and across space reminds us that transregional flows of "public culture" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1989; Appadurai 1990, 1991) have been a powerful force in both the representation and constitution of cultures in both colonial and postcolonial times. Richard Fox's reflection that at this historical moment "the close-to-home constantly intermixes with the far-from-home, and often it is not worthwhile deciding which is which" (1991:5) may actually be extended back to eras which were not as self-consciously postmodern. Reminding us that cultures have never had clear-cut boundaries, traveling images break down rigid binary oppositions between "home" and "the field," "Us" and "Them," "Self" and "Other" as spatially segregated locales (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Mohanty 1989).

To demonstrate these propositions, I turn to the Hindu holy man as he is encountered in American popular culture and intellectual life since the 19th century. This image has surfaced in other historical times and places, but I have followed its trail in North America as this is a place I currently consider to be *home* insofar as it constitutes the base from which I research and write.³ The image of the Hindu holy figure is largely male rather than female because of biases within the Hindu tradition that render Hindu holy women rare even as it reflects the androcentrism of Western discourses on religious figures. While scholars of South Asia have recently foregrounded the privileged place of caste in outsiders' representations of India (Appadurai 1988; Cohn 1987; Inden 1986, 1990), they have glossed over the longstanding Western fascination with the holy man. Indeed, anthropological accounts of the Hindu holy man have coupled Western preoccupations with caste with Western images of a lone religious figure to

characterize the holy man as a “renouncer” (Dumont 1970b) defined by his position outside caste society. While there is a growing body of excellent ethnographic accounts on the complex variation in practice and belief between different sects of Hindu holy men and women,⁴ the sociohistorical repercussions of the West’s interest in such figures has been given more than a passing reference only in Charles Brooks’s *The Hare Krishnas in India* (1989) and my own *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels* (1989).

Contemporary discussions of Hindu renunciation, in short, have largely lost sight of the fact that accounts of Hindu holy men—called gymnosophists by the Greeks—have been circulating in the Western world since at least the fourth century B.C. (Drew 1987:85–113, 143–182; McCrindle 1926:97–107, 120–129; Weinberger-Thomas 1988:16–21). As Jean Sedlar has pointed out in *India and the Greek World* (1980:68–74, 235–251), these holy men’s reputed ascetic detachment from the body most likely inspired Manichaeist doctrines that in turn influenced Christian asceticism. In medieval Europe, holy men, called Brahmins, were among the only positive constructions of the Other. Emblematic of detachment from the body, they personified a philosophy in which forms were an illusion transcended by the soul (Boas 1948:140–151; Drew 1987:143–182; Rau 1983:198–199). Yet, as Britain’s colonial relationship with India became consolidated after 1757, the Hindu holy man became increasingly saturated with negative meanings, his “self-torturing” practices an illustration of India’s spiritual and moral backwardness.

As Milton Singer has argued in his groundbreaking article on images of India in the Western imagination, “Americans tended to take over and exaggerate. . . the prevailing European images of India” (1972:21; cf. Stern 1956). At a remove from extended interaction with holy men in their Indian setting, American images have borne a stylized form that allows for efficient manipulation by the positioned interests of different groups of Americans. The travels of the Hindu holy man through the American imagination reveals processes involved in the domestication of strangeness apparent in an Other’s religion: derogation through resort to difference, and appreciation through the negation and assimilation of difference (Todorov 1984:42). The holy man’s body became a site in which cultural difference was first derisively emphasized and then commodified for entertainment. Alternatively, when he was admired, his body as a medium of spectacular and bizarre difference tended to be bypassed, and his philosophical concepts were coopted instead. As traveling images and concepts have given way to actual flesh-and-blood holy men, the United States—a nation historically hospitable to utopian communities—has been in the forefront of Western popularizations of gurus as sources of wisdom.

This essay, then, follows the travels of the Hindu holy man backward from contemporary surfacings in the United States. I write as someone who stands at the intersection of several competing definitions of identity. With one “American” and another “Indian” parent (themselves more culturally complex than these essentializing labels allow), I am also a postcolonial product of British education and a member of an American anthropological cohort who came of

age during the 1980s crises in ethnographic representation. My dissertation explored the multifaceted images of Hindu holy men in the folktales told by one old holy man in western India (Narayan 1989). So, in tracing the Hindu holy man to America, I am not only continuing a longstanding scholarly interest but also drawing on a hybrid position to question enshrined anthropological dichotomies (see also Abu-Lughod 1991; Kondo 1986; Narayan 1993). In what follows, I supplement encounters from everyday life with library research to retrace the movements of Hindu holy men—as images and as actual individuals interacting with these images—in America. In my conclusions, I return to a discussion of how attention to such images sheds light on the practice, and underlying assumptions, of anthropology as a discipline predicated on cultural difference.

Migratory Beds of Nails and the Fakir/Faker

March 1987. A man reclines, reading, on a spiked cot, as a cow curls domestically by his feet. His matted locks are wound up around his head, and he wears only a cloth draped around his loins. He examines his book, oblivious to the camera. Another bearded man poses, grinning at the camera, his matted locks trailing to the ground. With bags over his shoulders, and a gourd waterpot in hand, he is apparently ready for travel. Yet another man squats, withered arm raised high above his head, his fist clenched so tight that his nails have grown straight through the skin to the other side. A man and woman, stark naked and ash-smeared, sit cross-legged in the sun beside a fire, beads roped around their necks and the title “HINDU FAKIRS” inscribed beneath them.

These are a few of the black-and-white postcards mailed to the Bay Area from India during the first few decades of this century. Keeping good company with cards of the Taj Mahal, of lines of sari-clad women engaged in picking lice out of each other's hair (“The Madras Hunt”), of dancing girls, and of a scrawny man wheeling a rickshaw bearing a plump, turbaned character (“Cruelty to Animals”), these postcards of holy men have found their way into the albums of Shafi Hakim. Born in India and now settled in San Francisco, Shafi has spent much of his spare time collecting Western representations of India from varied sources. He gives me and my sister a tour through the collection after dinner. While horrified by the overtly racist comments labelled under some of the postcards, we laugh together at the absurdity of many of the others. Flipping through the heavy albums of cards, I reflect that by reclaiming and reframing a heritage distorted through an alien gaze, Shafi has defused these images of ugly intent, turning them into a source of delighted whimsy.

When I first viewed Shafi's colonial postcard collection, I was still writing my dissertation on multivocal indigenous representations of Hindu holy people. As I knew from fieldwork and excavations into scholarship, there are many sects of Hindu holy men (*sādhus*) and renouncers (*sannyāsīs*) who have stepped aside from entanglement with worldly life to be initiated by a spiritual teacher (*guru*) and to pursue spiritual goals. As a cultural ideal, the enlightened holy person or renouncer should live a detached life, celibate and possessionless, devoting him- or herself to achieving union with divinity. One of the important ways of achieving union is through the disciplines of *yoga*, hence the word *yogi*. There have also been Muslim holy men in India, called *fakīr* (“poor” in Arabic). Par-

tially on account of a fluidity in respect for both Hindu and Muslim religious figures at a folk level and partially because of the construction of a generalized "Oriental" religious figure, Muslim fakīrs have often been confused with Hindu sādhus, making for what strictly speaking constitutes an oxymoron the "Hindu fakir." In fact, in America, fakīr (pronounced "faker") became the most popular term used for Hindu holy figures through the early decades of this century.

Western accounts of gurus, sādhus, sannyāsīs, yogīs, and fakīrs often employ these indigenous terms, but when a translation is required, the word *ascetic* is frequently set to use. In anthropological writings, the words *renouncers* or *monks* appear, but *ascetic* also remains in currency. Like many English translations of Others' religious terms, the word *ascetic* is accompanied by distorting Christian connotations. Desert fathers, flagellation, and hair shirts lie coiled up in the word *ascetic*, unfurling in the impression that all holy men are involved in nothing but spectacular mortifications of the flesh. From the largely Protestant perspective of British and American writings, representations of world-rejecting asceticism may further conjure up the "internal Other" of Catholics who acknowledge the efficacy of Christianized bodily penances, as opposed to the internalization of asceticism in sober, worldly Protestantism (Weber 1958).

There are certainly indigenous Hindu practices that can be grouped together as *tapas*, the Sanskrit and north Indian word used for austerities which include "degrees of fasting, chastity, silence, meditation, breath-control, and difficult postures, usually practised in solitary vigil" (Knipe 1987:336). There are many mythological and folkloric precedents for *tapas*: producing heat and great power, it allows sages, seers, demons, and gods to recreate, reorder, and transcend established realities (O'Flaherty 1973). It is thus different from *penance*, which once again conjures up images of early Christians flagellating themselves for their sins. *Tapas* can be spectacular, as with painful bodily postures, or muted, as with silence or meditation. It is spectacular *tapas* which has most engaged the Western imagination. While some individuals and sects of holy men have indeed engaged in striking *tapas*—standing on one leg, never lying down, keeping an arm aloft, hanging upside-down over fire, and so on—they have hardly constituted all of the population or even the majority. Nonetheless, these spectacular practitioners of *tapas* have been highlighted in Western representations, pushing others who simply meditated or chanted straight out of view. As with many constructions of the Other, unquestioned biases served to translate partial truths into generalized facts. Joining multiarmed idols, snake charmers, widow burnings, and bejeweled maharajas, the bizarre, "self-torturing" holy man became a stock character in the landscape of difference mapped onto India by the Western eye.

Arjun Appadurai (1988) has identified three trajectories in Western thought that underlie Orientalist constructions of the Other: the urge to exoticize, to essentialize, and to totalize. These urges are well illustrated in a 1913 article from that venerable institution of pop-anthropology, *National Geographic*. Entitled "Religious Penances and Punishments Self-Inflicted by Hindu Holy Men" and written by one Reverend Zumbro (1913), this article brings together

an extravaganza of startling customs: men with arms withered from being raised for years, foot-long fingernails, and trailing matted locks. A variety of beggars and street performers are mixed in, mistakenly identified as wise beings worshiped by the populace. The holy man engaged in such forms of *tapas* is *exotized* as the source of India's difference from all other countries: "While penance is found in all countries, there is no country in the world where it has become so universal or is carried to such a degree of intense suffering as in India" (1913:1267). As an idealized figure whose ascetic values are viewed by brahmanical texts as appropriate to the fourth stage of life for all twice-born, upper-caste men, he becomes *essentialized* as the key to Eastern culture: "The very spirit of the East, its subtle philosophy, the incarnation of its deepest desire, the product of its age-long effort, all are embodied in the Indian Sadhu and his self-inflicted penance" (1913:1270). Worshiped as a living deity by pious Hindus, he becomes *totalized* to stand for the entire country: "In India the ascetic and his self-inflicted torture is ubiquitous . . . the Sadhu . . . is the fitting emblem of the people, as he is their most cherished ideal" (1913:1259).

National Geographic may seem a sitting duck for accusations about Orientalist discourse. Yet I would argue that anthropologists may benefit from pondering over such popular sources. Not only do they shape the average person's awareness of other cultures, but they also form a backdrop from which we often draw our knowledge of places that extend beyond our areal specialties. While constituting knowledge, such popular images also derive from other ideological formations that reflect and reinforce power relationships across national boundaries. For example, the *National Geographic* representations of the holy man as a bizarre, misguided icon of Indianness—as with the popular postcards—played on stereotypes already forged from at least three separable but closely intertwined sources: colonial British writers, Christian missionaries, and popular entertainers.

British Colonizers

Representatives of the East India Company (Marshall 1970:118; Mill 1826:352–353; Tennant 1804:159–160) and British civil servants (Macleod 1938:196) alike, regularly pointed to the Hindu holy man to argue that Indians were immoral and unproductive, in desperate need of colonial intervention and social reform. Many of these attitudes were summarized in John Campbell Oman's 1905 classic, *The Mystics, Ascetics and Saints of India*. Oman was a British professor of natural science in Lahore who wrote quasi ethnography, quasi travel accounts. His influential book on holy men bore a variety of plates, some of which were reproduced from earlier sources like the 16th-century French gem merchant Bertrand Tavernier's well-known engraving of naked ascetics under a tree. "The very spirit of the East is embodied in the *sādhu*," asserts Oman at the start of his book (1905:6), going on to round up existing writings on the many sects of Hindu *sādhus*, to entertain the reader with lively tales of meetings with *sādhus*, and to spell out in his conclusions how "*sādhui*sm" has been central to religious, social, political, intellectual, and industrial life of In-

HINDU ASCETICS.

Figure 1

Frontispiece from John C. Oman, *The Mystics, Ascetics and Saints of India* (London, 1905).

dia. This book proved so popular that a second edition was issued in 1905; it continues to be cited by many scholars writing about Indian asceticism to this day. Oman remarked on the widespread images of Hindu holy men in the Western world which were already circulating at the turn of the century (see also Figure 1):

Sādhus are and have always been too conspicuous figures in India to escape the notice of any intelligent European traveller in that country . . . and their accentuated outward peculiarities have proved so attractive to the ubiquitous camera-man that his photographs and snapshots reproduced in popular pictorial magazines have made them, at least in their more uncouth forms, familiar to the Western world. [1905:3]

Like many other British constructions of India, Oman's characterizations of holy men spilled with ease into America. Indeed, in Reverend Zumbro's *National Geographic* article, most of the four and a half pages of text of the 56-page article are virtually taken from Oman. Despite *National Geographic's* avowed intention—spelled out clearly in 1915—not to print anything of “partisan or controversial nature” (Abramson 1987:63), the political implications embedded in this view of religious India are not glossed over. Zumbro follows Oman to state quite explicitly that it is because of the sādhū's detachment from worldly affairs that the country has been colonized (Oman 1903:275; Zumbro 1913:1287). He ends with the wistful hope that Indians remain frozen in a way

of life that emphasizes spiritual pursuits over attention to their material well-being (and we may add, exploitation).

Indeed, when one remembers the industrialism of the West, its vulgar aggressiveness, its sordidness, its unscrupulous struggle for wealth . . . one cannot but wish that the people of India may long retain enough of this spirit to hold them true to the simple, frugal, unconventional life of the fathers and keep the emphasis on the value of the spiritual and unseen things of life above the material and sensuous. [Zumbro 1913:1291, rephrasing Oman 1905:282–283]

While it is tempting to characterize all British depictions as sharing the same distortions, many early Orientalist writings in India were actually sympathetic. A revealing example of how an image first forged in a spirit of nonjudgmental interest may later acquire differing meanings is to be found in the case of the man on the bed of nails.

The first known man on a bed of nails accompanied an article by a colonial administrator in Benares, Jonathan Duncan. Entitled “An Account of Two Fakeers with their Portraits,” this article had been published in *Asiatick Researches* (1798), a journal put out by the Asiatic Society of Bengal, founded in 1784 to promote Indological learning. Duncan identified “Purram Soantuntre Purkasanund Brehmchary” and declared him noteworthy “principally on account of the strange penance he has thought fit to devote himself to, in fixing himself on his *ser seia*, or bed of spikes, where he constantly day and night remains . . .” (1798:47).

In the article, Duncan included Prakashananda Brahmachari’s rationale for his practice: that it followed the mythological precedents of three preceding ages, particularly that of Bhishma, who in the *Mahabharata* epic lay on a bed of arrows that had been shot into his back (Duncan 1798:51). Yet with the reproduction of the image, the dimension of indigenous meaning—sought out so sympathetically by early Orientalists in India—dropped out of sight. Prakashananda Brahmachari recurs, unnamed and unexplained in diverse sources, still holding his book, and redrawn to different proportions. The art historian Mildred Archer cites Charles Gold’s *Oriental Drawings* as one site where this image has been reproduced (1982:61). I have also found this man reproduced in British Reverend Tennant’s *Indian Recreations* (1804:161), the American missionary William Butler’s *The Land of the Veda* (1872:186), and in the Massachusetts-based *Missionary Herald* (1833:47–48). (See Figures 2 and 3.) In all these cases the image is used to illustrate India’s moral backwardness, a point that was not implied in Duncan’s original article. Furthermore, with the introduction of photography in India in the 1840s, subjects and conventions already established by British artists were widely adopted for photographic use (Worswick 1976:1), making the man on the bed of nails a popular subject for photographs on postcards, travel books, and stereoscopic cards. Men looking almost exactly like Prakashananda Brahmachari—head toward the right of the page, legs outstretched over spikes, book in one hand—appear in a photograph from *National Geographic* (Zumbro 1913:1268) and in one of Shafi’s postcards.

A DEVOTEE at BENARÉS.

Figure 2

Reprinted from Rev. William Tennant, *Indian Recreations* (London, 1804).

Monthly Paper

OF THE

AMERICAN BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS FOR FOREIGN MISSIONS.

No. XII. June, 1833.

HINDOO DEVOTEES.

Figure 3

Reprinted from *Missionary Herald* (1833).

Such photographs, selecting subjects and stances from a field of possibilities, remind us that what is supposedly objective, in fact derives from a positioned gaze that highlights, circumscribes, and is implicated in a system of power-laden social relations (Tartakov 1979). Following this *sādhū* through texts and across continents is a reminder that Orientalism is not only “a system for citing works and authors” (Said 1978:23) but also a machinery for reproducing powerful visual images through space and time. As Malek Alloula has observed in reference to French colonial postcards of Algerian women, “colonialism is, among other things, the perfect expression of the violence of the gaze” (1986:131).

Missionaries

The author of the *National Geographic* article was a reverend. Though no further information about him is available in this piece, the work does stand on a continuum with earlier missionary rhetoric about *sādhūs*. Diatribes against holy men in the works of British missionaries like Reverend Tennant (1804:159–160) and Reverend Ward (1824:420–429) were echoed by the American missionaries who started arriving in India in 1813. As Milton Singer states, “India was one of the great fields for American Protestant missionaries throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (1972:21). The first example of American missionary presentations of *sādhūs* that I have been able to find is in an article called “Hindoo Devotees” from the 1833 issue of the *Missionary Herald*, a journal published in New Salem, Massachusetts. The unnamed author starts by drawing on hair-raising descriptions of extreme physical practices of *sādhūs*—supplemented by woodcuts from British sources—to back an exhortation for missionary support. As the author states:

These are specimens of the numerous forms of self-torture practiced by the thousands of the poor, deluded worshippers of idols in Hindoostan. . . . How debasing, how cruel is idolatry. Let us not despise, let us pity, let us exert ourselves to enlighten and save, its miserable votaries . . . [Missionary Herald 1833:47]

The second part of this article traces the stories of three *sādhūs* who have indeed been “saved.” All three stories follow the same narrative structure. First, they are engrossed in idolatrous practices; second, they come into contact with the Bible or a missionary; third, they are converted and preach widely to their countrymen; and fourth, they die so immersed in Christ that their last sufferings are insignificant (1833: 47–48). While highlighting the importance of suffering in the Christian tradition, this macabre emphasis on the converted *sādhūs’* slow deaths can also be interpreted as an unconscious understanding that to convert people is also to encourage them to “die” to a certain way of life.

Another vivid example of the way *sādhūs* are presented to American Christians is that of a book by Caleb Wright which came out under no fewer than four titles between 1851 and 1862, with the last printing alone amounting to 38,000 copies (Stern 1956:17). The first three engravings in the book portray holy men

engaged in ascetic practices. Wright had traveled through India expressly to collect materials for this book. He returned to lecture extensively in churches, illustrating his talks with engravings which were reprinted in the book. Writing of *sādhus*, Wright observes that “the number of mendicants in India amounts to many hundreds of thousands. As a religious duty, they forsake their families and friends, renounce every useful occupation, and wander from place to place, begging their food” (1854:69). Hinduism, in short, is equated with irresponsibility. In the descriptions that follow, filth, nakedness, and delusion are added to the list of their shortcomings (1854:69–78).

Yet as in the *Missionary Herald* accounts, salvation, accompanied by dominant Western standards of hygiene, lies within view on the horizon. In Plate 33, Wright contrasts a naked ascetic (prudently positioned behind a bush) with a wild growth of hair, and a traditionally dressed, clean individual identified as “Purisuttema, an individual with whom I am well acquainted” (Wright 1854:70). Purisuttema, it turns out, had been a *sādhū* for seven years but had had the good fortune of coming across a Christian tract, “A Precept to the Inhabitants of this Part of the World, by the Missionaries,” which induced him to give up Hinduism immediately and become a preacher of the Christian gospel (Wright 1854:70). *Sādhus* as indigenous teachers were thus viewed by missionaries as potential propagators of Christianity, foreshadowing the Christian *sādhū* movement suggested by some missionaries in the early 20th century (Pennell 1909:302–304; Streeter and Appasamy 1921). And the power of *sādhus* within their own traditions was in this way defused in two moves: first, through the denigration of their beliefs and practices, and second, through the assertion that, given the chance, they would readily and rationally shift religious affiliation.

Other missionaries viewed *sādhus* as beyond the pale of redemption and a likely source of all anarchy on the subcontinent. An example is William Butler’s *The Land of the Veda* (1872). An American Presbyterian missionary, Butler had survived the 1857 Indian and British confrontation called variously The Sepoy Rebellion, The Mutiny, or The First War of Indian Independence, depending on one’s perspective. Butler rails at length against the rowdy fakirs:

Of all the curses under which India and her daughters groan, it may safely be said that this profession of the Fakirs is one of the heaviest and most debasing. The world has not often beheld a truer illustration of putting “darkness for light” than is afforded in the character and influence of these ignorant, beastly-looking men—fellows that in any civilized land would be indicted as “common vagrants,” or hooted out of society as an intolerable outrage upon decency. [1872:191]

The fakirs, he darkly avers, were central to the sepoy conspiracy: traveling between different parts of the country, they formed, he contends, a “secret service” network to transmit messages to scattered rebels (Butler 1872:191, 206–207). While there may be historical validity to this accusation, Butler sees these activities as evidence of the conspiracy of evil he attaches to holy men. With such ruffians around, colonial rule is *necessary*, he argues, to maintain law and

order (Butler 1872:204). Echoing earlier British missionary and utilitarian views that Indian ascetics were a drain on the national economy, he calculates that \$12 million per annum was lost in supporting them (1872:204; cf. Ward 1824:428). This point was twisted still further by Katherine Mayo in her influential and venomously derogatory *Mother India*, in which she dismisses all sādhus as “religious beggars” contributing to the country’s miserable poverty (1927:406, 422). It is no small wonder, then, that many churchgoing Americans formed an impression of sādhus as spectacular, but essentially depraved, characters.

Popular Entertainers

The *National Geographic* is a magazine the existence of which hinges on being entertaining to its readers. This suggests that Zumbro’s article can be located within the larger context of the entertainment industry in search of an exotic product thrilling enough to gain an audience of buyers. The first American film about India was a 1902 Edison documentary, oxymoronically entitled *Hindoo Fakir* (Jones 1955:51–52). Postcards, which used photographs on a large scale only after the turn of the century (Corbey 1988:75), regularly depicted bizarre holy men, as Shafi’s collection evidences. When Robert Ripley of “Believe it or Not!” visited India to collect oddities for the 1933–34 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago, among the displays he requested were “ascetics and fakirs, men who hold up their arms, sit on beds of nails, gaze at the sun, hang upside down, etc.” (Isaacs 1958:259). An undated advertisement sheet at the Baribou circus museum reveals that, on occasion, holy women also surfaced within the world of popular entertainment. The Danish Tanit Ikao—a name that carries no Indian resonances at all—was proclaimed The Great Woman Indian Fakir on a tour of the United States during what was likely the 1930s. First on her list of acts labeled Fakir Experiments is “walking and jumping with shoes consisting of pointed nails”—a creative adaptation of the bed of nails image into a mobile performance! Indeed, circus acts involving a contortionist “fakir” or “yogi” wearing a loincloth and turban are popular to this day.⁵

Travel writing for children and adults alike also mixed all the staple fare of the mysterious East with accounts of grotesque and sensationalistic sādhus. E. Alexander Powell of Chevy Chase, Maryland, for example, in *The Last Home of Mystery*, asserts that the holy men he observed on his travels to Pashupatinath in Nepal resembled “the Mendicant friars of the Dark Ages who roamed the highways of Europe and followed the Crusades” (1929:159). After making this jab at detractors from his Protestant Christianity, Powell goes on to describe sādhus in ways that evoke the naked savage in general, and Native American tribes in particular:

Many of them wear nothing save half a gourd tied inplace by a cord about the loins—their bodies smeared with ashes and cow-dung, their faces streaked and dotted with scarlet, white, and ochre, their matted beards straggling over hirsute chests, their long hair dyed orange or vermillion and twisted into topknots wound

with strings of charms or beads, these holy men were as grotesque and horrible as the creatures of a disordered brain . . . filthy and hideous beyond the imagination of decent men. [1929:159–160]

Since different sects of holy men sport a variety of insignia, it is indeed possible that Powell saw what he describes. His value judgements, however, transform the description into a racist diatribe predicated on a vast gulf between “grotesque, horrible, filthy, and hideous” Others, and their “decent” civilized Western observers.

That little effort was made in these descriptions to elicit the views of either sādhus or lay Hindus in a sympathetic manner is demonstrated in a copiously illustrated book meant for children or young adults entitled *Seeing India with Lowell Thomas* (1936). Here, the chapter on Benares is entitled “Saddhus and a Sacred City” and is accompanied by a photograph of not just one but two holy men, sitting side by side on their beds of nails. The radio commentator and prolific travel writer, Lowell Thomas, explains in a light and mocking tone:

This is a saddhu [*sic*]—a holy man, a wise man, so *he* says—lying on a couch of spikes, wearing nothing but a skimpy loin cloth. How really uncomfortable! . . . There are many other saddhus, self-deformed, smeared with ashes and filth, doing grotesque, painful things that will excite the sympathy and admiration of the pilgrims who flock to Benares by the hundred and thousands every year. In theory, these holy saddhus believe that if they torture their bodies sufficiently they will not have time to commit sins, and when they die they will go directly to Nirvana. And in practice, they know that the more painful their form of torture appears to be, the more readily will the pilgrims shower them with offerings of food and money. [1936:70–71]

While reproducing the standard arsenal of negative images, Thomas also comes up with a novel explanation that mixes Christian concepts of sin, the Buddhist doctrine of nirvana, and a show-business appreciation for packaged acts that might bring in money! Ironically, Thomas and other popular writers appear themselves to have been stuck on discursive beds of nails, chained to the widespread American expectation that an adequately entertaining account of India would necessarily include a freakish holy man.

I now leave this domain of negative and sensationalistic imagery to move on to more glowing idealizations of India, in which it nonetheless remains an essentially *spiritual* land, with the sādhu as its metonym.

Wise Himalayan Masters: Cultural Critique and Disembodied Romanticism

May 1988. Revising my dissertation for publication, I receive a long typed enclosure with a letter from my German-American mother in India. She explains that this is a diary entry she had written on the festival of Divali in 1956: five years after she had left Taos, New Mexico, to live with my father's joint family in Nasik. She found it in a trunk filled with old papers and thinks it will interest me as it records a glimpse of Swamiji, the holy man with whom I have done

fieldwork, before he was formally initiated into the order of ochre-wearing *sannyāsi* renunciators.

"Today it is Diwali. . . . festivities are in full swing but Egypt and Israel cast a gloom over our mood. This morning I drove into the bazaar, which is crowded with peasants shopping for the holiday. . . . The morning air was specially cool, and the sunlight was pale, casting deep shadows. As we crossed the bridge over the Godavari . . . the view to the open country at one side and the *ghats* to the other seemed, in this particular light, to resemble the early English etchings of India: baroque, irregular, and intricate with each figure, each tree, an elaborate chiaroscuro pattern casting a sharp, somewhat romantic shadow, in contrast to the even light of the hot season that reveals the serene symmetrical India of her own art.

Today this alien India, as seen by the early European eye, reminded me in turn of Bible illustrations, and the tremendously long lineage of the present violence. As if to match this inner picture I saw a *sādhu* who wears white robes, one wound as a skirt, one thrown over his strong shoulders, his hair growing to his shoulders, his medium beard the strength of his erect and dignified bearing, the hair, the beard, the costume, the regular elongated face with a prominent nose and piercing eyes, reminded me of Jesus, who must indeed have been just such a man as this, barefoot, standing somewhat aside, and radiating assurance and inner poise."

Reading this letter, I see that there are two Indias in this account: the India of colonial engravings of the sort that produced beds of nails, and the India represented in Indian art. I understand that my mother's sense of the coexistence of two imaginative landscapes reflected her own situation as a German-American foreigner turned sari-clad Hindu wife. Nasik becomes part of a Biblical world, Swamiji becomes like Jesus, linking the politics of the present to an ancient past. As with the men popularized through their ascetic feats, this is a frozen image: the *sādhu* does not move or speak; he stands aside. Yet this picture is romantic and complimentary, emphasizing positive inner qualities—dignity, assurance, inner poise—over outer form.

Through the 18th and 19th centuries, an alternative attitude toward Hinduism was emerging with the advent of Hindu scriptures into European languages. These translations inspired what Raymond Schwab (1984) calls "the Oriental Renaissance" in Europe. German Romanticism in particular celebrated a lofty Indian spirituality (Sedlar 1982; Willson 1964). In mid-19th-century America, the Transcendentalists such as Emerson, Thoreau, and to some extent Alcott, celebrated Hindu scriptures and concepts (Jackson 1981:45–84). At the end of the 19th century, the Theosophists, too, raised a strident voice for Hindu wisdom. When my mother held to a romantic vision of Indian spirituality in her diary entry, she was partially reproducing expectations from both her German and American backgrounds. She was also echoing an entrenched Western interpretive tradition that reduces the Other's present to a reenactment of a lost Western past (Fabian 1983; McGrane 1989). Though her diary entry is not "popular culture," it reflects the cultural understandings accessible to an individual of her background.

In their eclectic mixing and matching of diverse traditions, the Transcendentalists drew primarily on British (rather than German or French) Orientalist translations of Hindu sacred texts and Sanskrit literature (Christy 1932:42–43).

The Bhagavad Gītā had become highlighted in European scholarship as a key, Bible-like Hindu scripture (Bharati 1970:274–277) and was among the books most ardently read by Transcendentalists. A distinction was drawn between the yogī— one engaged in transmuting himself to achieve union with the highest reality as described in the Bhagavad Gītā—and the sādhu or fakīr as practitioner of the penances popularized from other quarters. If the self-torturing holy man was denigrated in his embodiedness, the yogī was a disembodied textual ideal. As the transcendentalist Moncure Conway admitted after he had traveled to India, “the yogi is much more attractive in the verse of Kalidasa than when seen near to” (1906:240).

The Transcendentalist attraction to asceticism was most pronounced in Thoreau’s writings. Having withdrawn from the social hubbub to live a simple, unencumbered life, Thoreau echoed the Hindu sannyāsī’s world-renunciation, an analogy lost neither on his contemporaries (Conway 1882:280), nor later on commentators (Christy 1932:185–233). As Thoreau himself wrote in a letter, “Free in this world, as the birds in the air, disengaged from every kind of chains, those who have practiced the yoga gather in Brahma the certain fruit of their works. . . . To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogīn” (cited in Campbell 1980:65). Yet despite this appreciation, the yogī remained a metaphorical character kept apart from actual Hindu individuals who bore the capacity to speak for themselves. At the same time, Thoreau was well aware of negative images of Hindu holy men. In the opening pages of *Walden*, he writes:

I have travelled a good deal in Concord; and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. What I have heard of Bramins [*sic*] sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun; or hanging suspended, with their heads downward, over flames; or looking at the heavens over their shoulders “until it becomes impossible for them to resume their natural positions, while from the twist of the neck nothing but liquids can pass into the stomach”; or dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree; or measuring with their bodies, like caterpillars, the breadth of vast empires; or standing on one leg on the tops of pillars; even these forms of conscious penance are hardly more incredible and astonishing than the scenes which I daily witness . . . I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of . . . Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born? [1906(II):4–5]

Here are the familiar images of sādhus’ penances, but infused with an altogether different meaning. Rather than being manipulated to restate the superiority of Christianity or the West, these practices are summoned to fuel a critique of everyday life in America. Bodily contortions, Thoreau seems to say, are no less bizarre than the ways in which American lives are unquestioningly contorted by materialism and convention. Stereotypical images are evoked to pass judgment not on the Other from which they supposedly stem but on the Self that smugly bears witness.

The Theosophical Society was another source for romantic images of the Hindu holy man. Founded in 1875 by Madame Helen Blavatsky, a Russian émigré, and Henry Olcott, a retired American colonel, theosophy stood in the lineage of Western occult traditions, while also drawing much of its inspiration and identity from Eastern sources (Campbell 1980; Elder 1970:53–57). Early on in the development of the Society, Blavatsky and Olcott almost merged their fledgling organization with the Arya Samaj, a Hindu revivalist movement. While they decided to remain an independent entity, they nevertheless moved their headquarters to India in 1879, where they proceeded to condemn Christian missionaries as misguided meddlers and to encourage educated Indians to take pride in their own religious past. The Theosophists also fed into the Indian nationalist cause: A.O. Hume, founder of the Indian National Congress (1885), believed that his work had the sanction of the theosophical masters (Campbell 1980:82); and Annie Besant, the first woman elected to serve as Congress president, professed that she was actually following the instructions of an ancient Hindu sage, Rishi Agastya, “the Regent of India in the Inner Government” to campaign for Indian Home Rule (Campbell 1980:122–123).

“Masters” or “mahatmas” who dispensed their teachings from faraway Tibet appeared in theosophical doctrine after Blavatsky and Olcott’s move to India. The masters were not presented as exclusively Hindu, and in fact, their activities—which included materializing letters and making mysterious visitations—put them more in the tradition of spirit guides, trance mediums, or the adepts of Rosicrucianism (Campbell 1980:56). Yet the very word *mahatma* means “great soul” in Sanskrit, and the two most important masters, Koot Hoomi and Master Morya, were Indian. With these masters as guides, Hindu holy men were allowed the symbolic freedom to leave their beds of nails and take off for the spiritual heights of Himalayas. Simultaneously, these positive representations paved the way for a sympathetic response to actual gurus traveling to America.

Hail Columbia! Flesh and Blood Gurus in America

October 1988. A colleague who teaches the anthropology of religion knows of my interest in Hindu holy men. Greeting him in the hall en route to our respective offices, I tell him of my forthcoming presentation on gurus in America at the American Anthropological Association Meeting. He tells me a joke:

“There’s a guru up on a mountain top, somewhere in India, and there’s a long line of people who want to speak to him. A woman rushes up and tries to get to the head of the line. There are a couple of people controlling the mob and they say, ‘You have to get to the back, you have to get to the back.’ ‘Just five words,’ she says, ‘I only have five words I want to say to him.’ So they let her go on up. And when she gets to the guru she says, ‘Come Sidney, come home already!’ ”

Laughing as he repeats the last line, my colleague (who is Jewish) points out that this is actually a Jewish joke, playing upon upper-middle-class Jewish involvement in Hindu sects. He points to Richard Alpert turned Baba Ram Dass as an example. I have actually already heard this joke in 1985, from a Zen monk in California. In the previous version, the guru in question was not in the Himalayas, but Florida: a “swami from Miami.” His mother who braved the officious guards flung herself at the guru, demanding “Sheldon, why don’t you

come home?" In both variants, the Jewish man has become a follower of an alien religion, and a woman (wife or mother) must push through a phalanx of devotees to reclaim him.

Unlocking my office and taking out notes for class, I reflect that the humor of this joke might derive from the anxiety of American parents that their children will be swept into Hindu "cults" coupled with pride that they rise to the top even in a different milieu—"my son the successful guru." (Years later, my students correct me, saying that the humor lies in the clash between the exotic locale and the ordinary man's name: while one is prepared for the woman to ask this presumably detached religious figure a profound question, this expectation is subverted by the mundane plea that the man come on home.) By freely interchanging the locale between the Himalayas and Miami beach, the folklore variants touch on the global nature of Hinduism today. They also reveal that the Hindu holy man is becoming a complex cultural hybrid, both Indian and American in his guises.

In 1893, Swami Vivekananda traveled to America, providing the first concrete illustration that the Hindu tradition was not just frozen in misshapen forms or buried in lofty texts but continued to be transmitted by living teachers. Vivekananda had had a British education before coming under the influence of the traditional saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa; he judiciously mixed revival and reform. He came to Chicago to attend the World Parliament of Religions held in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition that celebrated the 400th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas. Delegates from many of the world's religions were gathered together to present speeches open to the public, and Vivekananda spoke before packed audiences. A mixture of popular acclaim and disdain surged through the press. "The impertinence of sending half-educated theological students to instruct the wise and erudite Orientals was never brought home to an English speaking audience more forcibly," wrote an onlooker who had attended the conference (Burke 1958:85). "Give Us Some Miracles!" demanded the more cynical *Evening News* in Detroit a few months later, advising Vivekananda to "put up or shut up" (Burke 1958:211).

The very names used for Vivekananda indicate some of the popular images of Indian holy men circulating at the time (Burke 1958:64–65). He was variously called "the Brahmin monk" (though he was originally of Kshatriya caste), "the Indian raja" (no doubt on account of his regal turban and the association of India with fabulous wealth), "the high priest of Brahma" (recalling Emerson's poem, "Brahma"), "the Buddhist priest" (echoing the popularity of Edwin Arnold's poetic narrative of Buddha's life, *The Light of Asia*, which came out in 83 American editions in the 20 years following its first American release in 1880 [Isaacs 1958:255–256]), and "theosophist" (showing that this movement had become equated with things Eastern in general). Furthermore, with the bodily emphases of earlier images carrying over, Vivekananda's physical appearance was repeatedly discussed, with particular emphasis on what he wore.

The spirit of camaraderie which Vivekananda radiated at the Chicago parliament was not uniformly sustained throughout the rest of his stay. The controversy in the press, and the defense of Hinduism he made against prevailing missionary-based views, instigated an often sarcastic rebuttal. For example, an

excerpt from the diary of one Mrs. John Henry in 1894 shows Vivekananda drawing on American images of heathen Hindus only to turn them back against Americans and their Protestant Christian heritage.

Thursday [May 10]. Vivekananda spoke at the Round Table at Mr. Collidge's in Boston. He again amused himself by making flings at the Americans. Witty, bitter, sharp slings that were all deserved, all neatly done, all to the point, but the man has it in him to do higher things. He looked very picturesque in his yellow turban and scarlet robe, and he spoke with a great deal of dignity. Reproached the country for its plutocracy, its bad morals, its lack of religion.

"When *we* are fanatical," he said, "we torture ourselves, we throw ourselves under huge cars, we cut our throats, or lie on spiked beds; but when *you* are fanatical you cut other people's throats, you torture them by fire, and put *them* on spiked beds! You take very good care of your own skins! [cited in Burke 1958:385]

Here, then, is an example of colonial and missionary discourses about Hindu religion appropriated and inverted with a nationalist slant. A 19th-century Indian, for a change, has seized the opportunity to rail at Western morals, Western lack of religion, and Western fanaticism. Images of penance, Jagannath's car, suicides for Kali, and the irrepressible bed of nails are accepted and then turned around to evoke Salem witch hunts, self-righteous colonial expansion, and even perhaps the conceptual entrapment lodged in stereotyped images. A similar inversion occurred in the Indian press accounts of Vivekananda's trip. On his return in 1897, one newspaper crowed, "The tide of conversion seemed to have rolled back from the East to the West—the tables were completely turned—and the Hindu mission to the West was crowned with a greater and more glorious success than what had ever been vouchsafed to the Christian mission in the East" (*Indian Mirror*, January 21, 1897, cited in French 1974:69).

In the rousing finale of Vivekananda's celebrated address at the World Parliament of Religions, he saluted America for the role she would hereafter play in a transcultural religious understanding:

Hail, Columbia, motherland of liberty! It has been given to thee, who never dipped hand in neighbor's blood, who never found out the shortest way of becoming rich by robbing one's neighbors—it has been given to thee to march on in the vanguard of civilization with the flag of harmony. [cited in Ellwood 1987:61]

This portrayal of a noninterventionist, nonimperialist United States mocks history. It ignores the bloody conquest of the Americas. Ironically, moreover, just five years after Vivekananda spoke, the United States would acquire the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and also Hawaii in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War of 1898. Nonetheless, Vivekananda's emphasis on America's acceptance of imported religions is in many ways prescient. Despite the claims of Indian newspapers, Vivekananda did not convert vast numbers of Americans, but he did occupy an important historical position as the first guru to accept Western disciples, thus inaugurating a reverse transcultural religious flow (Mlecko 1982:53). He founded the Vedanta Society in New York in 1895,

and monks of his order have presided over the Vedanta Society centers in different parts of the United States since then. Furthermore, before the passing of the Oriental Exclusion Act in 1917, other gurus of different sectarian affiliations also made their way to the United States. Additionally, Americans who adopted spiritual titles like Swami Ramacharacka or Oom the Omnipotent began dispensing Hindu teachings (Melton 1989:79–84).

Neither contorted bodies nor disembodied loci of Eastern wisdom, the flesh and blood gurus who arrived in America after Vivekananda also had to navigate through elaborate webs of suppositions spun out of preexisting strands of discourse. Missionary and administrator accounts of the adverse effects of sādhus on the Hindu social body were echoed in diatribes about the dangers borne by sādhus for the American social body and, in particular, female bodies. Writing in 1914, Elizabeth Reed warned that “the insidious emissaries of the East have already penetrated our body politic” (1914:iv). Her book *Hinduism in Europe and America* purports to be an accurate introduction to Hinduism culled from scriptures in translation, composed expressly to counter spurious versions circulated by Hindu teachers plotting to lure Americans away from Christianity. American women are singled out as the most susceptible to the “Swami, Gosain, or Guru . . . now quite at home in both Europe and America. . . . Many a desolated home lies in the trail of his silken robes” (1914:131). With allusions like “the whole ceremony,” “the terrible penalty,” and “a horrible secret,” she broadly hints that women are induced to engage in sexual relations with their gurus (1914:127–133). Furthermore, she charges, these gurus are of a decidedly materialist bent: “It is surely a wonderful change from their native poverty, to Western wealth and luxury. Squatting in a loin-cloth at the gate of a heathen temple . . . is not nearly so attractive as sitting in luxurious furnished parlours, while their dupes bring in their delicate and valuable offerings” (1914:130). “Silken robes,” “parlors,” “delicate offerings”: apparently the bright, draped garments of holy men coupled with their frequently long locks had made for a clear association with women, even if the relation was seen as one of possible exploitation rather than neutered identification.

Given that “Hinduism” is itself a construction of outsiders who lumped together many different sects and doctrinal positions, Reed’s charge that a spurious Hinduism was being propagated in America upholds an empty notion of authenticity. The fact that Hindu doctrine and practice both acquired different meanings in their transplanted American setting, however, cannot be denied. In his 1930 overview of different Hindu gurus and their movements in America (provocatively entitled *Hinduism Invades America*), the philosopher Wendell Thomas argued that Hinduism is recreated in dialogue with American demands: an emphasis on renunciation is replaced by techniques to cope in the world; religion is overlaid with “scientific” trappings; monism is emphasized over polytheism and accompanied by the reassuring affirmation that the individual and God are one (Thomas 1930:246–255). More than four decades later, Harvey Cox of the Harvard Divinity School argued that “neo-Oriental” movements such as American Hinduism cannot be understood in terms of the mother tradition

from which they have sprung: laced with snippets of Western occult traditions, communicated through Christian images and vocabulary, filling psychological needs in consumer culture, and recast in Western organizational patterns, “most of them are Western movements,” he argues, “and are best understood as such” (Cox 1977:18).

Cox was writing from what he calls “Benares on the Charles” in the 1970s, toward the waning of the heyday of Westerners’ involvement with Hinduism. The 1965 amendment to the 1917 immigration act had lifted quotas blocking immigration from Asia, allowing Hindu gurus to come to the United States even as American youth were seeking out new forms of knowledge in the social and political turmoil of the times (Cox 1977; Ellwood 1987). While some of the newly arrived gurus did not significantly change in their new milieu, others—especially those who became media celebrities—followed the pattern of revamping Hinduism that Reed, Thomas, and Cox describe. First, the widespread desire for speedy gratification required gurus to tailor their teachings so that they could be easily communicated. The resulting arrangements were meant to allow for instant experiences, the kind of packaged spirituality that the journalist Gita Mehta (1979) has flippantly called “Karma Cola,” and whose forms include slick brochures, advertisements in New Age magazines, mantras for fees, video addresses, and weekend retreats. Second, because the gurus could no longer depend on voluntary donations, their teachings came to require fees. Cox has termed this phenomenon “Enlightenment by Ticketron,” observing that “consumer culture transforms whatever enters it into items for distribution and sale” (1977:130). Depending on the institution, several hundred dollars can buy the awakening of a dormant spiritual energy, the clearing of blockages in the chakras, or the know-how for levitation. Third, with these funds flowing in, āshrams began to take on the attributes of multinational businesses, with trustees, boards of directors, real estate, armed guards, and Swiss bank accounts.

While these trends hold true for many of the better-known gurus in contemporary America, having reached their most tragicomic height in the much publicized rise and fall of the self-styled Bhagwan (“God”) Rajneesh (Fitzgerald 1986), they are not unique to the Western hemisphere. What is often forgotten on the American side is that many of these gurus have āshrams in India, too. Practices forged in the West are often reimported to Indian settings. Returning home, gurus with foreign disciples may acquire greater prestige (Bharati 1970:274). Foreign-born initiates of a guru may even preach a particular sectarian form of Hinduism to lay Indians (Brooks 1989). Juhu Beach of Bombay, for example, where I grew up, houses an enormous headquarter complex and temple of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Through the years, I have heard the middle-class, English-speaking parents of friends make bemused mention of “those jumping sādhus” (bands of white Hare Krishnas dancing on the beach), commenting “how sweetly those people dress—it’s so traditional!” At another multinational āshram to which I was exposed through my family, the rise of American devotees resulted in Erhard Seminar Training (EST)–inspired nametags worn by visitors, fees for meals and lodging, video transmissions of

the guru's activities on tour, a codification of doctrine oriented toward disciples who were not raised Hindu, and the dispensing of positions of administrative authority to Westerners or English-speaking Indian devotees. As a result, the composition of āshram residents has shifted as access has become unaffordable to people of lower classes. Despite the growth of fundamentalist, nationalist-tinted reinterpretations of Hinduism associated with India as a bounded state, the Hinduism associated with traveling gurus has a hybrid character detached from "India" as a place, "Indians" as teachers or devotees, and "Indianness" as an essential (spiritual) quality.

Spuds Mackenzie and B.C. Cartoons: Gurus in Contemporary Popular Culture

November 1988. A student from one of my classes arrives, grinning and triumphant, during my office hours. He has heard of my research and bears an advertisement for Bud Light. Spuds Mackenzie, "the original party animal," amiably poses in a blue Bud Light sweatshirt, balloons festooned over his canine head, and a brimming goblet of beer before him. "He's the Guru of Good Times," the ad proclaims. A dog as guru? A guru preaching a party spirit? The category *guru* coopted by advertising copywriters to sell alcohol? What would Swamiji possibly have made of all this?

As the guru became a recognizable figure in American life, particularly in interaction with middle and upper classes recruited into alternative spiritual movements, both the term and the image were increasingly emptied of explicit Hindu content. The *New Dictionary of American Slang* (Chapman 1986) traces the entry of *guru* into American English to the 1960s, defining the term as "a leader, expert or authority in some field, especially a charismatic or spiritual figure who attracts a devoted following" (1986:186). Paul Goodman, Herbert Marcuse, and Barry Goldwater are cited among the examples given. The same usage surfaces in everyday speech, in newspapers, and in magazines. So in 1988 when I typed *guru* into a computer scan for keywords in the media, I found that Allan Bloom is "Chicago's grumpy guru," and Jack La Lanne is the exercise guru. There are tax-cut gurus, business gurus, management gurus, and sports gurus. While the word acknowledges a person's prestige and capacity to sway followers in the traditional sense of guru as "teacher," it also carries derogatory edge, evoking irrational and unquestioning "cultish" acceptance.

Representations of gurus also abound in cartoons, often cast in terms that echo the earlier images. Gurus are generally depicted practically naked (a lay-over from missionary imagery) and seated cross-legged on a mountain (perhaps a throwback to the theosophist masters in the Himalayas) or on a throne (the God-man turns materialist). Johnny Hart's syndicated "B.C." has a series in which a man looks up to a bearded guru on a mountaintop to ask profound questions, to which he receives answers that are clearly about American life as opposed to Hinduism. For example, to the question "Oh great and wise sage, what is insincerity?" the sage's reply is, "Insincerity is beating up your dog for biting

the guy from the IRS.” Similarly, a tax man opening his briefcase in a *New Yorker* cartoon inquires of the sage before him, “To begin with, do you have all your receipts?” While these are clearly spoofs of the materialism now associated with Hindu “God-men” in America, the cartoons have coopted gurus to become a mouthpiece not for Hinduism, but for American cultural concerns. As my students pointed out while viewing slides of these cartoons, the humor has as much to do with cultural anxiety about invasions by representatives of the Internal Revenue Service, as it does with the image of people who supposedly had renounced everything also having to pay taxes.

For the moment, beds of nails appear to have dropped out of American cartoons,⁶ but an Indian academic who emigrated in the 1960s vividly recalls a cartoon in which a holy man shows up in an American hardware store, bed under his arm, looking for replacement nails. That this image is well and alive, but in a more aggressively America-oriented form, is illustrated by a page from a catalog recently clipped by a colleague (without attribution). Here the durability of a Hyde Park oxford shirt is illustrated by a clean-cut, blond, bespectacled man smiling up from a bed of nails. He is identified as a physics professor whose “rigorous professional duties” at Henderson State University include demonstrating this contraption. The advertisement seems to indicate that academics may have replaced Hindu holy men as purveyors of quirky customs, that scientific inquiry has replaced religious practice. While the naked New Balance ascetic squatting on his bed of nails sells a product through distance and inversion, American viewers are more likely to identify with the well-dressed physics professor whose shirt is unaffected by the spikes he reclines on. In either case, the bed of nails now sells goods without overtly pointing to the alleged backwardness, cruelty, or spirituality of India.

Conclusion

In *The Study of Man* (1936), Ralph Linton invites the reader to contemplate the beginning of the “average man’s day”:⁷

Our solid American citizen awakens in a bed built on a pattern which originated in the Near East but which was modified in Northern Europe before it was transmitted to America. He throws back covers made from cotton, domesticated in India, or linen, domesticated in the Near East, or silk, the use of which was discovered in China. All of these materials have been spun and woven by processes invented in the Near East. He slips into his mocassins, invented by the Indians of the Eastern woodlands, and goes to the bathroom, whose fixtures are a mixture of European and American inventions, both of recent date. He takes off his pajamas, a garment invented in India, and washes with soap invented by the ancient Gauls. He then shaves, a masochistic rite which seems to have been derived from either Sumer or ancient Egypt. . . . [1936:326]

The description continues with actions culminating in the man smoking, “an American Indian habit,” as he reads the news, “imprinted in characters invented by the ancient Semites upon a material invented in China by a process in-

vented in Germany." As he reads, "he will, if he is a good conservative citizen, thank a Hebrew deity in an Indo-European language that he is 100 per cent American" (1936:327).

The bed and the morning newspaper bring us full circle to the New Balance holy man featured in the *New York Times* atop his bed of nails. While Linton is discussing the incorporation of exogenously based practices, as opposed to images, into American culture, his playful vignette dramatizes a central theme that guides this paper: that anthropologists' everyday life away from "the field" is also of potential theoretical consequence. It also reminds us that some of the contemporary insights about movements across cultures were foreshadowed in the Boasian school's interest in the diffusion of cultural traits and the acculturation of migrant peoples (Herskovits 1960:523–541). When we question the concept of culture as emphasizing boundedness and homogeneity, of setting apart the Other from the Self, we might also benefit from recalling these prior theories.⁸

What is to be learned from reflecting on traces of the Other in life around us? I conclude by expanding on the three theoretical vistas I discern as opening out from a study such as this: (1) that anthropological representation be located within a larger terrain of popular images deriving from historical encounters with particular Others; (2) that the encrusted formations standing out as referential landmarks in representations of an Other serve also as shelters for a variety of different positioned interests in a host culture; and (3) that the high wall segregating the Other as appropriate object of study from the Self as unproblematicized vantage point be dismantled in postcolonial anthropology.

The case of the Hindu holy man in America is a pointed reminder of the dense and deep history of the West's imaginative encounter with assorted Others, a history in which the 19th-century discourse of anthropology is a relative newcomer (see Trouillot 1991). Anthropological research about India, for example, was partially framed by preexisting Western assumptions about India in general, as well as by topics considered appropriate to research. Research within India's complex civilization first sought to isolate "savages" in the form of tribes set apart from Hindu society. However, shifting paradigms within the discipline—particularly the attention to peasantries advocated by Robert Redfield—stretched the purview of anthropology to village India by the 1950s. Nonetheless, in 1959, when the influential French anthropologist Louis Dumont isolated the "renouncer" as the only individual in the Hindu universe located outside the caste system, and thereby in the Archimedean position to effect change (Dumont 1970b:42–46), he was describing a figure familiar to Western thought for several centuries. Formulating this image of the holy man as renouncer, on the one hand, Dumont was echoing Brahmanical theorists like Manu even as he reproduced the entrenched Western view of caste, supported by Hinduism, as the defining feature of Indian society (Appadurai 1988; Inden 1986, 1990). On the other hand, in conceptualizing the renouncer as the only true *individual* in the Hindu world, existing in dialectical opposition to relational identities deriving from the hierarchical interdependence of caste society, Dumont

drew on the Western construction of the holy man as a lone, distinctive figure foregrounded in a social field by virtue of his peculiarities. Several years later, in *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970a), Dumont went on to make the remarkable statement that the world-renunciation practiced by holy persons paved the way for a colonization of the Indian mind, even as the colonizing Westerner appeared to Indians as a peculiar variety of holy man.

The presence of the individual-outside-the-world and his millenarian action was truly decisive for the permeability of Indian society to individualistic ways of thought. . . . The general mentality was thereby penetrated with elements contrary to those which result from hierarchy from long before the Western (or even Mughul) impact. The Westerner, in so far as he was concerned with quite other things than power in the most obvious sense of the word, appeared not only as a heathen prince, but also as a sort of sannyasi of an unusual type. . . . [Dumont 1970a:235–236]

Here, in arguably the most influential book on South Asia for anthropologists over the last 20 years, Dumont has enshrined a vision of the Hindu man that locates him as a potentially hybrid character mediating between the exotic world of caste and the familiar world of individuals!⁹ Might not this location of the holy man at the border of cultures be an outgrowth of his being not merely exotic, but already seeming familiar, a figure already at home in Euro-American discourse?

By way of contrast to Dumont's structuralist dichotomies, the Indian sociologist G.S. Ghurye had in his 1953 survey, *Indian Sadhus*, already sketched the complex empirical variety between and within sects that subsequent ethnographic research among Hindu holy people has confirmed (Babb 1986; Burghart 1983; Gross 1979; MacDaniel 1989; Miller and Wertz 1976; Narayan 1989; Parry 1985; Van der Veer 1988). Nonetheless, theory being more prestigious than ethnography, many scholars who have read Dumont's work do not know these other books. Moreover, the discourse of professional anthropologists itself has a limited audience, and most Americans will not have heard either of Dumont or of any other scholarly works in which Hindu holy people are featured. As we have seen, in the American popular imagination, the Hindu holy man appears to have retained an essentialized character based on images drawn from more accessible sources in the media. These images, I have argued, can be viewed as pastiches of different, historically traceable elements. I am certain that such composite images hover in the minds not only of "lay people" but also of professional anthropologists who work in other parts of the world and are unfamiliar with writings on South Asia. If the theoretical revisions stemming from intensive fieldwork are to seep out beyond areal specialization, it is vital that we do not peremptorily dismiss images purveyed by popular culture, but rather confront and address these images directly in our work.

An analysis of sightings of the holy man in America should also remind us that a bodily representation associated with a certain culture can be infused with a variety of meanings by different historically and socially positioned groups.¹⁰

As Sander Gilman has argued, the body of the Other is a site where anxieties about the normality, boundaries, and stability of identity of the Self crystallize (1985:23). The contorted, unproductive, “self-torturing” holy man, therefore, could be a metonym for the corruption of the Hindu social body to British colonial administrators, even as in America it represented the dire need to fund missionaries, an exotic spectacle worth paying to see, and an eye-catcher for selling altogether unrelated commodities. Indeed, the image could be stripped of its original cultural content. In 20th-century America’s culture of consumption, Hindu practices of *tapas*, originally designed to foster restraint and detachment, have instead been infused with messages emphasizing the need for goods and good times. Stripped of teachings that might critique taken-for-granted American concerns, the holy man has been coopted as a bodily shell in advertisements and cartoons to become a spokesman for concerns in the contemporary United States.

One aspect of this study that invites further reflection is why negative images were fixated on the holy man’s body, while positive, romantic representations bypassed corporeal issues and, instead, focused on the holy man as a disembodied locus of Hindu spirituality. This positive image of an essentialized “Hindu spirituality” implicitly defined through an opposition to “Western materialism” was in turn manipulated by Indian nationalists and actual gurus in their interaction with the Western world. The disembodied positive image also paved the way for flesh and blood gurus to attract audiences in America, even though, on arrival, the men regained bodies, as in the case of Vivekananda, whose corporeality had to be negotiated between negative and positive poles of imagery.

Finally, tracing the holy man in movements through time and across continents reminds us to move beyond binary segregations of Self and Other, between home and the field. While the postcolonial critique of anthropology has called hierarchical relations of the observing Self and observed Other into question, we largely continue to reproduce the assumption that the observer and the observed are two different categories. In one realm is academic discourse and theory, a “zone of cultural invisibility” (Rosaldo 1989:209), where lived experience has no analytic potential. The other realm is what we call the field: a place set apart by geography or cultural difference where natives are incarcerated (Appadurai 1986, 1988), with culture dictating their actions, and their experiences providing pure and unrefined nuggets of ethnographic data. Anthropologists come and go between these settings; yet in keeping with identities defined primarily by the first realm, standard academic production acknowledges the insights of lived experience *only in the field*. Being There is the experience channeled into writing Here (Geertz 1988). Being Here is important for professional location (what university, what theoretical movement, which conferences attended) and so feeds into written productions, but life at home is not usually consciously theorized.

What happens to anthropological knowledge if the boundary between “the field” and “home” is rendered porous? Tracing imprints of “home” into the

field, or acknowledging "the field" as it surfaces at home is to highlight that there is "... no vantage outside the actuality of relationships between cultures, between unequal imperial and nonimperial powers, between different Others. . . ." (Said 1989:216). It is now clear that, just as theorists and theories travel (Clifford and Dhareshwar 1989; Said 1983), so too images, concepts, and peoples cross boundaries to roost in imaginations far afield. Attention to traveling images, migrating peoples, and variegated discourses for even one limited example of a cultural Other problematizes the relationship between homogenous culture, bounded space, and the natives these sites produce (cf. Abu-Lughod 1991; Appadurai 1988). Are constructions of the Hindu holy man in America to be viewed as reflecting Indian culture, American culture, British and Indian influences on America, American influences on India, or all of the above, in varying combinations tied to various formations of socioeconomic and political power? Whether one focuses on an ethnography that involves "the impact of deterritorialization on the imaginative resources of lived, local experiences" (Appadurai 1991:196), or embarks on the task of "rethinking difference through connection" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:8), it is increasingly clear that the field can no longer be viewed as entirely distinct from the locale of the theorist.

In his discussion of cultural flows in the emerging "global ecumene," Ulf Hannerz lists Hindu swamis or holy men among phenomena that "exemplify . . . countercurrents . . . ; culture coming fully developed, as it were, from periphery to center, and at the same time culture that the periphery can give away, and keep at the same time" (1989:69). Yet, in this short and provocative piece, Hannerz does not sufficiently emphasize that in a case such as that exemplified by the swamis, contact with "the center" may change culture on "the periphery" along the lines that Aghananda Bharati (alluding to the reimportation of pizza as an American invention of essentialized Italian cuisine to Italy itself) has called "the pizza effect" (1970:273). While the scope of this paper has only allowed me to touch briefly upon the changes in the practices of Indian branches of multinational āshrams, the return of guru images to India and their subsequent appearance in Indian advertisements, cartoons, tourist brochures, and postcards is another intriguing area of study. My focus here has been on America, but it is important to remember that cultural flows bear impacts on *both* the disseminating and receiving ends.

In summary, while anthropologists may smile or sneer at popular images of alien cultures, examining these images more closely serves to illuminate the underlying assumptions and historical context of the anthropological enterprise. In particular, such images coax us to question an absolute distinction between knowledge gathered in the field and knowledge available at home as data for theorizing. While native anthropologists remind us that the field is not always geographically distant—it may, in fact, be home, as signified by the title of an influential edited volume, *Anthropologists at Home in North America* (Messerschmidt 1981)—to undertake anthropological research at home is nevertheless to transmute home (or at least part of it) into the field: an area bounded by analytic inquiry, combed through with research methodologies and meta-

morphosed into the terms of scholarly discourse. Home is the zone of everyday life: of visits to the grocery store, letters from family, driving along freeways, office hours, and jokes exchanged with colleagues in the hall. Home is also, as Linton reminds us, inexorably shaped by peoples who we usually think of as geographically or historically distant. To break down the distinction between home and the field as unequal sources of cultural data is to acknowledge the analytic potential of elements that sweep into everyday life and to be reminded that "knowledge belongs to the world of our social existence, not just to the world of academe" (Jackson 1989:9). To reflect on our own social existence in inclusive terms by fusing home and the field is to strengthen scholarly thinking as a political act in an irrevocably interconnected world.

That this world continues to carry sharp, spiked beds of cross-cultural irony is evidenced in my last vignette about images of Hindu holy men surfacing into my life in North America. This time, my data issues from a cosmopolitan Indian in the city of Bombay.

July 1989: I have written to my father about starting research on American images of holy men. Never having seen a bed of nails myself, I have asked if he has. Slitting open an Indian aerogramme of coarse blue recycled paper so different from the glossy American aerogrammes on which I write, I unfold it to find that my father has written back:

"I have not seen a bed of spikes ever since I was six years old, and that was at the Kumbha Mela [a massive gathering for ascetics] in Nasik. I think spike beds are out of fashion and air conditioned Mercedes and Lear jets are in vogue."

Notes

Acknowledgments. Earlier versions of this essay were delivered at the American Anthropological Association Meeting (1988), the Wisconsin South Asian Meetings (1989) Middlebury College, the Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Cornell University, and Ohio University. My thanks to Bernard Cohn for encouraging me to start this study at all. I am grateful for bibliographic leads and critical input from anonymous readers, Mekhala Abu-Lughod, Andrew Bock, Hank Bromley, Gaur Chiapetta, Narayan Contractor, Janet Davis, Robert Fryckenberg, Marian Goad, Ann Gold, Whitney Kelting, Smadar Lavie, Brendan LaRocque, Herbert Lewis, Owen Lynch, Lata Mani, Kathryn March, David Napier, Elizabeth Napier, Maya Narayan, Carla Petievich, A. K. Ramanujan, Andrew Rotter, Robert Schine, Marita Schine, Paul Stoller, Julia Thompson, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Gauri Viswanathan, and Lew Zippin. Special thanks to Eytan Bercovitch, Don Brenneis, Ed Bruner, Didi Contractor, Maria Lepowsky, and Renato Rosaldo for their support and careful readings when my confidence in this article sagged. The article has been in incubation for several years, and so if I have forgotten to thank someone, my apologies. As always, the final responsibility for this piece in its current incarnation is mine.

1. Though *culture* has recently come under attack for carrying implications of a bounded homogeneity, I use it here without brackets, with the understanding that culture is internally differentiated into multiple discourses and practices, is not tied to locale in a simple relation, and does not have clear-cut boundaries. For a trenchant critique of the culture concept, see Abu-Lughod 1991.

2. For these recent challenges, see Clifford 1988, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Dwyer 1987, Fabian 1983, Jackson 1989, and Rosaldo 1989.

3. I use *home* to imply a base from which one acts, a place which can be chosen, changed, or shared with others rather than following feminist critics such as Pratt (1984) or Mohanty and Biddy (1986) who see home as a bounded site of secure identity and privilege that serves to keep alien others outside.

4. For more on the sectarian variation among Hindu holy people, see Babb 1986, Brooks 1989, Burghart 1983, Gross 1979, MacDaniel 1989, Miller and Wertz 1976, Narayan 1989, Parry 1985, and Van der Veer 1988.

5. My thanks to Janet Davis, who is engaged in research on American circus history, for this information.

6. The bed of nails image is, however, currently popular in Japanese comics about a boy called Sugao which Youko Suzuki brought to my attention. The semiclad monk who becomes Sugao's tutor in Nepal drinks sake, sings Japanese songs when inebriated, and issues foul Japanese expletives when disturbed atop his bed of nails. Whether the Japanese have adopted this image via American popular culture or have developed it independently awaits future research by some other scholar.

7. I am grateful to Herbert Lewis for directing me to this passage.

8. The relation of diffusion and acculturation to Appadurai's "ethnoscapes" is a fascinating issue beyond the scope of this paper, and I bring this up here only to caution that novelty in anthropological theory may often be the result of selective disciplinary memory about its history. Prior theories about transmission across cultural units appear to have two key shortcomings: first, the assumption that while traits or people might travel, a culture itself remains largely tied to place, and second, an underplaying of the larger power inequalities that surround interaction, across cultural groups.

9. I find the assertion that Westerners were equated with sannyāsis to be extremely dubious. Rather, I would argue that Dumont perpetuates a Eurocentric fantasy about inspiring unquestioning devotion among the natives. This fantasy actually caused some missionaries to adopt the robes of a sannyāsi (cf. De Riencourt 1961:187–197; Pennell 1909).

10. For more on bodily images of Others from a Western perspective in diverse cultural contexts, see Alloula 1986, Honour 1975, Jordan 1968, Kabbani 1984, Miller 1985, Pagden 1983, Pearce 1988, Pieterse 1992, and Todorov 1984.

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