

2020

## “India Ink”: Interstices of Autobiography and Popular Images

Rane Arroyo  
*University of Toledo*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jx>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Arroyo, Rane (2020) "“India Ink”: Interstices of Autobiography and Popular Images," *Journal X*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jx/vol4/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal X* by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

## "India Ink": Interstices of Autobiography and Popular Images

Rane Arroyo

*Rane Arroyo is an Associate Professor in English and creative writing at the University of Toledo. His latest book of poems is Pale Ramón (Zoland Books, 1998). This essay is part of a project in process called "The Portable Famine: Autobiography and Popular Culture."*

1.

For a long time I've been intrigued by India and filled with a desire to visit it, a desire that I found strange due to the intensity of its nature. As a gay Puertorriqueño, I could never quite rationalize my longings for the Indian people and their culture. They weren't normally mine except as available through mainstream (and sometimes pleasant) capitalistic films such as *A Passage to India* or *Gandhi*. India, as an idea and/or a setting, became a text of the fantastic. Was I trying to avoid interrogating my own complex identity by transferring energy into a cultural community without personal risks to myself? I've witnessed the often disturbing cultural transvestism of other scholars who have called themselves anglophiles, etc., and yet I didn't feel so much as if I wanted to possess India; rather, I was like an exile anxious to return to his or her *home*, or at least to the idea of it.

Instead of turning away from this site of anxiety, I thought my interests in India might prove revelatory about my work as a scholar and writer, a means by which my own development as an intellectual might be made visible. I did not dismiss the possibility that perhaps I was remembering a past life spent praying on the banks of the ancient and still holy Ganges, although I know that the river is not merely mythic. My version of India was a puzzle with too many initial pieces. In this essay, I recreate the processes that led me toward a peculiar and particular insight into my own strategies as a mediator between facts and fictions, a mediator in words no less mysterious

because they stand revealed. Each section works within its own borders. As a totality, these narratives reclaim pieces of my past in which I struggled to survive. India was often a concept that gave me refuge.

## 2.

I grew up with images of India everywhere about me: the Beatles smuggled sitars into the rather provincial world of rock and roll music; writers such as Allen Ginsberg sought out gurus and lost their 1950s beat fashion sense; the Nehru jacket was popular among my uncles and neighborhood boys I thought as cool as James Dean or Sal Mineo — and much closer at hand; reincarnation was discussed in suburban living rooms as if it were a redecoration idea; *National Geographic* specials kept showing dead people floating down the Ganges while stressing that this was a different phenomenon than the bodies of American and Vietnamese soldiers floating down televised rivers; and Jonny Quest and his adopted brother, Hadji,<sup>1</sup> an Indian orphan who is at first mistaken for an assassin, continued to enjoy their homosocial relationship on the television airwaves riding the breath and width of this country. In the 1990s, however, India has become the proverbial invisible elephant.

I recently taught the *Bhavadgita* in a course called “Apocalypse: Myths and Possibilities.” I was struck by my students’ struggles to talk about this important book in intellectual terms, for to them there was nothing very real beyond the boundaries of Western Europe, the United States, or MTV. They refused to take seriously the existential dilemmas inherent in the *Gita*: which choice do I make in order to make meaning with cosmic ramifications? How is the self related to the greater whole? Is duty more important than one’s blood ties? One student said the book reminded her of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, only more boring, without a climax. Instead of dismissing her comments, I encouraged the student to map out her narrative expectations. This led to a class discussion about the Bible and its rather nervous multi-climactic stories. This student was shocked even to imagine the book of Revelation as anything but revelation. When another student said Revelation reminded her of *Platoon* and *Apocalypse Now*, the class went into an uproar. It is allowable to dismiss other people’s holy book as a film, but not the Judeo-Christian text of social norms as illustrated by parables that define and disarm social deviations. The more I tried to suggest that India might have been (and still is) a “real” place, the more my students referred to themselves as American readers.

The class made interesting claims that as students in the Midwest’s rust belt they had no incentive to consider the *Gita* as even marginal to their lives; at the same time they refused to consider the Bible as a text produced in a culture, or cultures, which might label them as intruders, appropriators, barbarians. If India was not in *our* image(s), it could — only as a text — provide an example of philosophy at odds with our own definitions of naturalized praxis. India was safely removed from our own apocalyptic expectations, and so its cosmic narratives of human destiny were “boring” because we had many more fears closer to home. One self-described “religious” student said that Jesus was more

"oriental" than he was European. The class didn't have the language at this point in the course to pursue this interesting argument further. A chasm opened before them in which their assumptions about "truth" were vulnerable to examination. People of Color often know about simultaneous or contradictory truths all too well in daily dealings with dominant culture.

We live, at the very least, in dual visions/versions of the world in which we spend our power. Centrality isn't a useful paradigm; homogeneity isn't the most friendly of concepts to the "other." There are real consequences in understanding that our ideas are just as constructed as those of people perceived to be different from us. Our discussion on the *Bhavadgata Gita* took by us a circuitous route back towards our own country. Étienne Balibar argues that "theoretical racism represents the ideal unity of transformation and fixity, or repetition and destiny" (291), a statement that suggests there is real power in questioning "naturalized" world views about oneself and others. Xenophobia depends on meta-narratives to veil the disorder at the heart of the true darkness of constructed lives.

## 3.

Kharman, my best friend in high school, had a variety of dramatic identity crises which led her into marriages, religions, lesbianism, secretarial work; she ended up living with my companion and me in Boston. At this time she was a punk, leather lesbian. Such a choice forced her to work usually for doughnut shops or as a "temporary" office worker. The United States is not interested in assisting anyone who chooses, out of free will, to become a permanent rebel, one no longer supported financially and/or emotionally by parents. As long as there are names to blame then homogeneity isn't very threatened.

One inspired day in Boston, Kharman wore a sari to work. She soon received a phone call from her temporary agency that her boss of that day had called to say she was very *uncomfortable* with Kharman's choice of office wear. Why was a white woman wearing this outfit? (Multiculturalism is often seen as a betrayal of the white race and culture.) Kharman was dismissed ("I was fucking fired"), and we took her out to lunch to celebrate the loveliness of this woman in her sari. Little did we know, sitting in that Boston restaurant, laughing at the corporate world, that we were witnessing the birth of the cruel Reagan era.

## 4.

In his essay, "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt," Homi Bhabha begins with an anecdote about Roland Barthes in a gay bar in Tangiers. This rhetorical strategy gives me permission, in my turn, to share a story about Bhabha himself. I was presenting a paper on the difficulties of creating a Hispanic narrator in some of my multigenre projects at the 1994 MLA conference in San Diego. My friends talked me into attending the Bhabha session despite

their disturbing energy, which seemed more appropriate for a rock concert than for a thoughtful commentary on issues of the contemporary text and the non-theoretical world. I often avoid readings and talks by all authors, always preferring the written word; I like the luxury of rereading, of thinking slowly through arguments, of private dialogue with an author. But there I was in a public space, flanked by hordes of mostly graduate students — I was one just a year earlier — who seemed especially electrified by the presence of Bhabha, the celebrity.

I know this sounds dramatic but I will not censor myself: I felt afraid for the intellectual work we need to do in the United States. Aren't we grappling with real issues that affect our daily lives? What is truly available to assist us with our own struggles in the intellectual spectacles I witnessed in conference after conference, spectacles in which scholars could claim a disturbingly specific genealogy simply by listening to a panel discussion ("I saw Bhabha and he said that . . ." and so on)? Of special interest to me was that the audience was a dazzling mix of People of Color and "whites," men and women, and other less physically distinct groups: gays, working-class scholars, writers, and the like. I hope I don't represent myself as some kind of puritan in saying there was a giddiness in the air, jokes about New Critics flying around. One friend said that Bhabha was "a stud." It was unusual to see dear colleagues suddenly enjoy life; it was a brief and limited joy, one without profound slipovers into their daily lives.

Earlier, in my own session, I heard an audience member dismiss a bright Indian scholar, who spoke before I did, with a terrible and terrifying comment: "He just wants to be the new Homi Bhabha." I looked at the brilliant and young scholar and wondered if he knew there was space for only one brilliant man from the East. Was it such a terrible thing to have elders you respect prepare the way for your own work, even if your ideologies aren't identical? It's as if the Scholar of Color is being forced into *one* acceptable Western mythic role: the Oedipus cycle. Much is gained by dominant discourse shapers if the rest of us are indeed ready to kill our elders for our own personal victorious positioning as the "new" minority major scholar, as if there can only be one or two voices from each convenient "other" group. This is ridiculous and actually quite evil. Many of us are not invested in destroying the work of the very people who have opened up theoretical possibilities for us, or whose work parallels, complicates, or rejects our own.

After Bhabha's talk, one of the first persons to ask a question was this very same young Indian scholar. I lost the thread of the question because I was shocked by what I was witnessing: many audience members' eyes burned with the fervent hope that blood would be spilled by either one of these brown men. I wanted to stand up and shout: *this is not a sport!* Of course I just sat there helplessly in my chair. The moment passed without incident and soon the session ended. Many people surged forward to thank Bhabha for his useful talk; I watched the young scholar being congratulated by his fellow (white) graduate students for daring to challenge Bhabha in public. It was not an intellectual challenge but one located in essentialism: will the new brown son kill the brown father?

I'm not restricting Bhabha to the role of either victim or naive sideshow freak; such a brilliant and original scholar must be very much aware of the business that surrounds being a public intellectual. This awareness of his audiences' multiple and contradictory expectations is evidenced in the question-and-answer session that follows the printed version of "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt." A man from the audience begins his "question" in this most disturbing manner: "I confess that I found your paper of forbidding difficulty, as I think many people did" (67). Bhabha politely listens to the long question and begins his own response with these words: "I can't apologize for the fact that you found my paper completely impenetrable. I did it consciously, I had a problem, I worked it out." This response, while firm, is actually polite, for Bhabha goes on to emphasize that his essay "is a work that is an aporetic, contingent position, in between a plurality of practices that are different and yet must occupy the same space of adjudication and application." This is a stinging claim that the intellectual, as either writer or reader, cannot (or indeed, must not) offer the process of thinking as a monolithic path. The Scholar of Color does not fit neatly into prescribed roles, even those offered by those within her or his particular field.

Bhabha's printed response is useful in questioning narrative as rationality, especially as deployed in historic Western European texts; they're not the only game in town. There also exist multiplicity, contradiction, rivalry, agreement, simultaneity. India is no longer over there and the United States is no longer here, although under certain circumstances each country can be geographically and culturally apart. Globalism means provocative intercourse between nations that are often genealogically linked to colonialism and imperialism.

James Baldwin often writes of the ideological displacements of the "white" man by Persons of Color(s) as the latter consciously reposition themselves; he works within the very American tradition of self-questioning and cultural unpacking, only he expects the word actually to affect daily life. David Leeming, the Baldwin biographer, offers the following example of this writer's talent at turning the specific into the cosmic:

[A teacher] asked Baldwin what he had intended in [*Another Country*]. . . . The very shapelessness of [the novel], he said, was a reflection of the "incoherence" of life in America. Its characters are on desperate searches for the self-knowledge and self-esteem — the identity — without which real love is impossible. (200)

These desperate searches threaten dominant structures of power because questioning, in itself, is an act that respects no agreed-upon or established realities. In Baldwin's stories, plays, and essays, movement in space or through society by any Person of Color means inevitable change for the (monolithically) white male.

I didn't encounter how naturalized the "white" viewpoint is in our educational system until I began to teach about white culture as if it weren't a homogenous phenomenon but rather a site of conflicting images, information, and agendas. Indeed, many colleagues commented that one of my graduate

course offerings, “Thoreau and Postcolonialism,” was too *exotic* for graduate students from a steel town. They justified their comments by saying our students hadn’t yet grasped even the concept of an American literature; these were protests by professors whose offices were lined with books by Bhabha, Spivak, and Said. Interestingly, graduate students thanked me for offering them a window instead of a mirror! Exhausted by being forced to examine their lives without the global contexts that inform life outside of the classroom, these working-class students found of great use Bhabha’s examination of “mimetic narratives and . . . monumental history” (66); they too, in different ways from me, had been excluded from reigning metahistories. The United States, as examined in the course, became less united. Xenophobia — traceable to the experiential, the “essential” self and to capitalism’s gobbling up of difference — returned us to an intellectual space in which to understand the dangers and opportunities in crossing borders of any kind. We had been taught to laugh at elders who once believed that they could fall off the planet itself. Now we are afraid we can’t, that we are each other’s ultimate reality, that we can’t plunge into eternity.

## 5.

I found the following poem<sup>2</sup> in one of my notebooks as I began editing this essay. I am reminded of how much of my work I keep at home far from a reader’s eyes. What catches my attention is my need to write about India, again. I find that the poems I don’t publish, those that I keep locked inside my handwriting, tend to be curious about the world around me. My poetry books seem to focus on “Latino” and “Gay” issues that, of course, are rooted in my identity struggles. In this poem, “The Station Master Speaks,” I write of observations culled from a PBS special on train rides throughout the world:

A filling moon in a full India, men jump  
 on the train engines, crowds late for funerals,  
 the whistle’s sound is a fingerprint,  
 the miles have been identified and named:  
 now, cars bear the burden of men’s breaths,  
 it is a portable scar, past Bombay with  
 its 13 million two-footed commuters,  
 privilege is having more than 30 seconds  
 to decide where to sit (if you can sit),  
 the noise of our arrivals and departures  
 through Milk Villages, past the largest slum  
 in Asia, movement makes us all rich[.]

Though I make no great claims for this poem, it does reveal a recognition that the world is larger than my viewpoint, that even this filmed India helps temper any narcissistic ideological impulses I may sometimes value as a poet.

## 6.

While my friend José was smashing plantains (*platanos*) in his Queens kitchen, the rest of us sat in the living room trying to pretend we couldn't hear the astonishingly violent noises coming from the kitchen. Was José really a Buddhist? Why? When? Why have so many Puertorriqueño friends with Ph.D.s converted to a religion and philosophy whose Indian roots are at such a distance from the Caribbean? Soon the meal was cooked and we all sat for the late supper, an enjoyable reunion. I have sat at so many other meals with Latinos, who almost always automatically cross themselves before eating — including many of the Buddhists. Jesus and Buddha are not rivals, or that is my hope. I smiled at my friends and ate the Spanish rice and beans, the pollo guisado and tostones; they tasted especially delicious as do most meals which fellow exiles share.

## 7.

My original dissertation topic focused on Henry David Thoreau's constant quoting of Hindi texts and culture in that most "American" of books, *Walden*. I remain curious about the notion of quotation, the human need behind introducing someone else's voice in scholarship that is usually nothing more than a monologue disguised as a dialogue; the English field, in general, seems to honor the skilled ventriloquists. I remember sitting in the office of a nationally famous professor, one of the few Americanists in my doctoral program, and feeling increasingly nervous at the man's obvious excitement about my proposal. Within a few moments, he elected himself my dissertation chair and wondered aloud who else would fit in this "most original" project. I quickly thanked him and as I backed out of the office he declared that I was "a young Sacvan Bercovitch." I wasn't even a good, middle-aged Rane Ramón Arroyo, clearly a priority. Later that week I changed dissertation topics without informing this professor (who has never talked to me since except for civil comments required in the day-to-day interactions in graduate school). Instead, I became a modernist focusing on the Chicago Renaissance, freed to pursue my own ideas with the assistance of the kindest committee.

I share this story because I do often regret I did not pursue the Thoreau book, for I am still fascinated by the necessity of inventing (an) India in order to justify or make the American Renaissance profound to America, to England, to Western Europe. I do not regret my narrow escape from the intellectual interference of a kind scholar whose enthusiasm frightened me; I also do not regret the loss of the potential national exposure through the complex networking available to the favored few mentored by the famous. What a curious business academia is, for while it rewards rereading of canonical texts, the "white" texts never are truly displaced or replaced. "Original" scholarship rarely "intrudes" with demands upon dominant texts.

India, for Thoreau, is a stream that feeds Walden Pond: "The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges" (322). In making India



only sacred, and restrictively so, the land and people become merely philosophical concepts divorced from the actuality of Indian lives, with their individual and collective passions. Thoreau proves to be as much an eloquent capitalist as those he denounces in his writing; the buying and selling of Hindi philosophy without worrying about contexts of cultural meaning and distribution is based on the model provided by spice and silk traders. Even when Thoreau seemingly calls for multiculturalism, or plurality at least, there is a profound catch: "That age will be rich indeed when . . . the Vatican shall be filled with Vedas and Zendavestas and Bibles, with Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares. . . . By such a pile [of texts] we may hope to scale heaven at last." Hindi writing is limited to the spiritual; Western culture's poets exist in the real world. India is effectively erased as a present and ongoing phenomenon, and it gets co-opted by the Vatican, which is once again the simple and "rightful" center of human consciousness. I cannot help but recall Gandhi's words, "Almost every page of the *Gita* advises us not to make a distinction between our own people and others. How is this to be done?" (70). He posits the struggle not in the writers but in the readers.

## 8.

Ben Kingsley as Gandhi? And he wins an Oscar? I'm not convinced that Western Europe and the United States are in the postcolonial world quite yet, or if they are, that Western culture has given up its concept of the master as a necessary role. I agree with Satya P. Mohanty that there are many risks that may indeed create mechanisms that will repeat "the colonizer's judgments" (111). Since the so-called First World and Third World are no longer easily kept apart, embracing through the magnetism of international business and media, there is a strange hybridity in process in a film such as *Wild West* (1992), which features Indian youths who puzzle their own community, already displaced within England, by forming a country and western band and mapping cultural spaces not even imagined by other Indians. Not surprisingly, the Indian "cowboys" (another example of multiplicity) end up in America seeking a record contract — Nashville as the Temple of the Golden Buddha with Steel Guitar. The American Dream has become an infectious dream, one that crosses borders with impunity. It is a series of imperialistic structures whose purpose is the maintenance of exploitation. *Wild West*, despite its gestures toward agency, ends up as yet another example of American co-optation. The exported country music returns to America with Indian youths in tow, youths desperate to speak popular culture as if it were their "mother" tongue.

American popular culture is not always attractive to People of Color. This obvious fact has to be stated outright. In order for me to make any claims on the series *Jonny Quest* or on *West Side Story*, I must perform a series of complex readings. In rejecting offered ideologies on race, class, and gender, I have learned to ignore or "detonate" troubling texts. I suspect it has been my hunger for an image somewhat like me that has led me to find whatever mirror is available. Increasingly I feel like an "historical" Puerto Rican as my students in

Ohio surf the net into cyberpueblos. They are creating new configurations I once thought to be science fiction. They have been empowered and are empowering themselves to create images and texts that speak to them and of them. By contrast, growing up poor in the 1960s and 1970s, I was forced to become an alchemist.

I especially question myself when as a poet and playwright I refer to India. In the very opening scene of my play, *Bed But No Breakfast*, Georgia — an African-American actress seeking refuge from her urban life at a country inn — is surprised to see that she is alone in the mansion. A note directs her to sleep but not to cook in the house for the fear of starting a fire that might burn the place down. She says:

There are only two things that you expect out of a bed and breakfast place in New England. A bed. A breakfast. The first night and every night. Simple, no? The second morning and every morning. Not too complex? Well, I got a bed. Bed, but no breakfast because the owner of this Colonial house has gone to India to search for British antiques from around the Revolutionary War. White tourist in a place belonging to brown people. But I'm black. Just like every other shadow in this bed but no breakfast place. Have you ever noticed how some white people live in such a nice and safe world, à la Disney World? I wish my world would revolve into one big evolution! One big turn of the wheel of fortune and BANG — no more revolution, ah, I mean, retribution, ah, I mean, revolution. Oh, I almost said revolver. The name of a Beatles album, and the lifestyle of many a brother.

India is used in this monologue as a repository for British culture that is ironically to be reified in New England (with the stress on *new*).

Yet I've also participated in romanticizing India for my own meditative purposes, not necessarily a pardonable theft. In the poem "Breathing Lessons," I look at the phenomenon of the Puerto Rican Buddhists I mentioned earlier. There is something unsettling for me about a philosophy based on the release of desire when most of us Latinos in the United States are already so poor, so empty-handed, except for our culture and our cultural productions. Desire proves to be an important epistemological system. I write:

Buddha teaches that most beaches  
in Puerto Rico are illusions,  
that the naked and the dead are

not obscene but opaque. He longs  
for *home*. Longing is thinking so  
he takes bigger breaths. In, in, in.

In simplifying Buddhism for my own rhetorical agenda I am opened to the charge of pilfering. I *intend* to open up dialogue and not close it the way *Gandhi* or the PBS series *Jewel in the Crown* transform "hindoos" into vehicles of

racism that maintain the status quo. Buddha, in this poem, and India, in my play, are offered as intentionally contested sites of ownership and ideology.

While preparing one of the “final” drafts of this essay, I have learned that “Breathing Lessons” has won a Pushcart Prize. There is reward indeed for pilfering other cultures — or perhaps hybridity is being recognized.

## 9.

There was the actor Sabu who in the film *The Jungle Book* was like Hadji of *Jonny Quest* fame, only he was nearly naked and less witty. Sabu was one of the rare exciting brown actors on the Hollywood screens of my youth. I did not want to imagine myself as someone’s gardener, maid, or chauffeur, or as the fat Mexican who was doomed to be killed by the white sheriff. Today I remember little about this film; interestingly my mother owns a copy and has lent it to me, but I have found innumerable excuses not to watch it again. What do I fear? I don’t expect the film to survive as some kind of masterpiece. The film contains ghosts that have little to do with the story.

No, it’s Sabu’s face and body that survive in my mind, even if disembodied within my scholarship and creative writing. He, in that film, possessed an innocence that actually required Sabu, as actor and character (another example of simultaneity), to investigate British colonization for the unnatural creature that it was. Sabu, living in the Indian jungle with *wild* animals, seemed so much more natural than when he was forced into proper Western clothing. Even as a young audience member, I knew that the West would win its ideological war. Hadn’t I seen the same phenomenon in my own neighborhood, even in my own family? Hadn’t we stopped speaking Spanish in order to “get ahead” in Chicago? Didn’t we learn to wince at the cousin who would inevitably show up at a family party in bright (garish?) clothes and in jewelry as big as a baby’s fist?

*The Jungle Book*’s India existed as a propagandistic backdrop to the dramatization of British cultural superiority, which of course engendered American cultural superiority; it was reduced to a cast of exotic savages, toothy animals, and ungrateful servants. There is nothing innocent about the valorization of whiteness in a story or film that is intended for “whites”; Audiences of Color have become master intercultural interpreters out of necessity. Sabu was handsome, in harmony with nature, and sensitive (so much so that he dies spiritually with his invaded India). These are of course insights that neither writer nor director *intended*, and they only exist because reading isn’t an easily controlled act. I make no claims of authenticity for Sabu’s represented otherness, for his body and mind are controlled by the business of representation. Hollywood assures the masses that racism and homophobia (etc.) are not specific individual trespasses unless the dire acts of a few extremists, that ideas mysteriously remain abstract and unsystematized by majority culture. Sabu’s presence allowed me, as a young viewer, to claim a space for myself. Some ideas allow potentiality to be more real than actuality. I remember going home, astonished that maybe most of the world wasn’t always white; despite Sabu’s ultimate bow-

ing to British culture, the actor and the role had freed me to imagine a different version of the film being presented to me as a completed text.

In re-viewing the *Jungle Book* film for this essay — again and at last — I'm struck by the fact that I only remember the beginning and the end of the film in great detail. Somehow the "savage" boy supersedes the tamed one, although his appearance is brief and melodramatic. The jungle of this movie isn't as dangerous as the village life. At film's end, a cobra guards the treasures hidden in a ruin, reassuring the viewer that greed is a terrible human sin. Yet isn't the Indian boy's soul stolen in this story? The lessons are explicit as the once wild child returns to the village, saves it through heroic action, and reestablishes the patriarchal structure through his heterosexual allegiance to Mother and to future wife — but not to the jungle.

## 10.

In "Passage to India," Walt Whitman has an ecstatic vision of "[t]he road between Europe and Asia" (344), which gives him an opportunity to address Columbus: "(Ah Genoese thy dream! Thy dream! / Centuries after thou art laid in thy grave, / The shore thou foundest verifies thy dream.)" (344). This passage reminds me of the childhood confusion I had in differentiating American Indians from Indians. I was raised to respect Columbus' obsessive dream of reaching the shores of India, China, and Japan; indeed his discovery of the Caribbean islands — including Puerto Rico — became a point of origin for me and my family. It has taken time for me to stop being protective about Columbus and those such as Whitman who declared their imperialistic desires for "more than India" (349). Will I ever wake up from living inside this Genoese's nightmare? Or have writers and other "historians" preempted my voice long before I was even born so that my protestations can be safely dismissed as political correctness? Can I be so easily dismissed, despite the years of pain and some secret joys?

## 11.

My mother adds a casual footnote to our conversation: "By the way, another of your friends, Samantha, has finally divorced that Indian man. She has stopped wearing saris and no longer cooks curried rice. I'm not sure if she is happy or not. She lives in Ohio, not too far away from you." I don't know how to react or what to say aloud. Is my own mother being racist? It's hard to imagine this because she has suffered so much through the Americanization of her family. Can a Puerto Rican feel superior to an Indian? If so, why? What is achieved? I felt an unexpected Foucauldian moment unfold before me: we, the People of Color, volunteering to ensure that racial divisions, as taught by dominant culture, remain intact through our willing surveillance of the "other." We are thereby denying that we ourselves are someone's "other."

My mother clarifies her words: "Samantha was too much like a tourist in that marriage." These words don't dismiss the entire conversation, but they do

dramatize that my mother, like many others, is attempting to understand how multiculturalism really works. Abandoned by my father, and now forced to face a post-Kennedy America on her own, my mother has returned to her culture. In her most recent visit, she was concerned if Youngstown, Ohio, was a place for Latinos (“Are there Spanish stores there?”), and if religious ceremonies there would take place only in English (“Where is the nearest Catholic church that has mass in Spanish?”).

The notion of “tourist” to her implies an unwillingness to commit, to live the commitment: our friend married her Indian neighbor as much out of curiosity as out of love. This rather cruel judgment on our part was in fact supported by the curiously racist comments that Samantha made now and then. She seemed liberated to say terrible things about “dark races” since she was married to “one of them” and so was suddenly an expert in intercultural exchanges. But she is also a woman capable of great love and affection, a talent not often praised. Mother changes the topic and tells me of her childhood in the Puerto Rico lost to her for years. I understand she is giving me information, but it is veiled because our entire conversation has been spoken in English. It keeps us at a safe distance from a homesickness that isn’t just emotional but also intellectual.

## 12.

The last of Gandhi’s ashes were quietly released into the Ganges in 1990. According to a National Public Radio report, the ceremony was not only intimate but practically ignored by the world. There were the faithful who were bathing at the banks of the holy river, but they were there for their own enlightenment. *How odd*, I thought, *pieces of Gandhi*: the last of his ashes culled from his shoulder bone, ribs, skull, or perhaps the left ankle. All gone, all returned to the nothingness that is at ground zero in each of our genealogies.

I sat on my windowseat and caught my breath. It was ridiculous to feel such sorrow overcome me. Gandhi had been dead for a long time. *The last of Gandhi*. All that remains now are his deeds and his advice in writing I had used in my own classrooms. His ashes had never been a particular concern. But they made Gandhi’s death final in Youngstown, Ohio, which of course was absurd, but absurd enough to bring tears to the eyes of a stranger without any legal right to mourn. The ashes became of the river, even as the river ignored such a profound contribution.

## 13.

*Jonny Quest* was one of the few spaces on the television of my youth that a brown face occupied as a major player, an equal partner (more or less), a secret role model for the minority viewer. Hadji was Jonny Quest’s pseudo-brother, personal magician, fellow conspirator, caretaker, rival, interpreter, and mystery. I was a young, imaginative, independent (I still continue to claim that my only

talent is that I'm stubborn), and lonely Puerto Rican boy who was naturally attracted to Hadji and his world: an artist among scientists. The cartoon youth, after all, traveled all over his world as an *adopted* member of the Quest household, holding higher ranking than the beloved family pet, Bandit. I was engaged in my own assimilation into American society, a project begun simply because my parents decided that I should be born in Chicago in order to be a *real* American instead of merely becoming one through assimilation. Even as a child, I sought the means to retain my own Puerto Rican identity at the same time as I felt the pressure to establish an intimate relationship with someone like the blonde future frat boy Jonny Quest, whose inevitable destiny was to be the center of the known and the unknown universe.

It was especially appealing to me that the Quest household was basically masculine, and I had always assumed (needed to assume?) that Hadji and Johnny were lovers, or would become lovers in the future.<sup>3</sup> I knew little about Buddhism then, but these young adventurers seemed like soulmates, bound to each other through many past and future lives. Certainly a nervous masculinity was a question central to the original series, for in the *Jonny Quest* movie I recently saw on television, and in the new cartoons based on the original, heterosexuality has been emphasized as female companions have come forward in the plot. A recent poll in which Race Banyon was voted best cartoon mother, however, still reveals a certain anxiety over gender roles. No wonder that I was so attracted to this series; it featured my own unarticulated issues about being a boy who preferred a male society.

I had no such models in my own immediate world. *Jonny Quest*, the cartoon, offered me that rare creature: a brown boy peering back from the television's mirror. I'm convinced that Freud got it wrong by referring to homosexuals, in the term of his day, as "inverts." I was actually looking out at the world for signs that I wasn't alone; my interior "self" seemed to be a fixed phenomenon while the outside world seemed fluid and ever in need of definition. Thus, Hadji encouraged me to go into a world never traveled by any adults in my life, or so I believed then. Scholar John Beverly writes, "El socialismo no he podido competir efectivamente con el capitalismo en la producción de una cultura de masas" [Socialism has not been able to compete effectively with capitalism in the production of mass culture] (59). Mass media has actually afforded me the space, quite unintentionally, to rewrite the world in my own image, at least some of the time and especially during the vital years of my adolescence.

Viewing *Jonny Quest* today I wince at the series' stereotypes of Hadji, which intentionally reify the Hindu as a mystic, Third World magician among scientists. Yet I cannot deny the pleasure I found those times when Hadji's turban would turn into a cobra while he played a flute! Somehow I dismissed all the stereotypes and was enraptured that a brown person had such power or powers. I was similarly attracted to the *Hardy Boys* (the book series), for example, but no character clearly marked as *other* was featured in any of the mysteries. No, it was Jonny Quest and Hadji who filled me with longing for a land of countless Hadjis. How often I've dreamt of walking down Calcutta streets, among the fabled crowds and dust, and exhaling at last: what it must feel like to be home.

In revisiting the cartoon series, I remember being interested in the episodes in which the two young men traveled, as if motion itself was of value. The internet guide to the adventures has an incredibly organized listing of places or sites that Jonny and Hadji visited: the Sargasso Sea, the Arctic Ocean, Egypt, Mexico, Thailand, the Amazon, Europe, Tibet, unnamed islands in the Pacific and the Atlantic. They were empowered to define these places by their own presence: the privilege of scientists and poets. This was a lesson not lost on me. Today, though, when I see an episode such as “Riddle of the Gold,” I am troubled by the absence of history and cultural materiality. Hadji returns to an India that has been reduced to an evil maharaja and a vengeful leopard. An ahistorical Hadji has succeeded in the Americanization of his soul. His India is no longer his home, only a site of adventure and nothing else.

## 14.

Hadji is a troubling figure for me. In some ways, I identified with him, and in other ways, he remained (and remains) uneroticized. I wasn't attracted to him precisely because he was too much of a mirror and it seemed that the world outside of me was the real mystery. I must ask myself in postcolonial fashion whether or not I have been taught not to see him as a sexual agent capable of independence from the discourses of whiteness by which he is defined as other.

David Bergman's wise study, *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature*, states that “[t]he vampire and the homosexual possess a narcissism without a reflection. They fall into the abyss, not to embrace themselves, but in a vain search to grab hold of any image” (45). This notion of “grabbing” hints at the hunger there is for identification, a visual (and cultural) confirmation of one's own aspects. Narcissism is a loaded word, one in which regulation is thinly disguised. Self-interest is too often seen as asocial and somehow disruptive. Transgression then can be located in images of versions of oneself that turn out to offer alternative or resistant reflections.

Research comes with its disturbing moments, as in this account of Hadji as a major figure in the *Jonny Quest* series:

Jonny's pal Hadji was created in response to Barbera's desire to add a dog to the show, which Wildley resisted. When Bandit was added, they realized that now they had a show where the hero would be basically talking to his dog. So they added Hadji, another character near to Jonny's age. Based on the Indian actor Sabu, Hadji's character was one of mystery and magic, a counterpoint to Jonny's more Western persona. (“Jonny Quest Origins”)

This is an astonishing revelation to me. First of all the Sabu I admired is here replicated. Jonny was clearly the intended center of focus, a naturalized one, even as Hadji and the dog Bandit were added to supplement Western civilization (as if the compass has neutrality). What is the opposite of mystery and magic? Scientific process and production? How did this dichotomy between left brain and right brain, science and poetry, east and west, become so codified?

It turns out that I was misreading my beloved cartoon series. Bergman makes the important observation that "no homosexual is raised as such; he finds no likeness in the family circle. . . . Indeed the family reminds the homosexual of his own 'unlikeness'" (30). I had projected an intramale relationship into a seemingly postcolonial pretend family of pretend figures. Hadji could not be my sexual hero or model because he was just as bewildered as I was about being a counterpoint to discourses not necessarily his own. Hadji and Jonny were boys, then, but I was investing in the future of their sexuality, even as I was beginning my own adventures in puberty.

In the past, I have gone home with Latino men because I didn't want to be accused (or to accuse myself) of rejecting my own brothers. That naive response, of seeing a lover in terms of political identity rather than multiple, simultaneous identities and investments, was an honest attempt to own something of my own past. Two brown bodies in one bed would surely become each other's embassies. I share this because anxieties over identity have larger repercussions than have often been voiced in many autobiographies. As Alberto Sandoval Sánchez writes, "Where / I expect a mirror / there is a hole" ("A Chorus Line" 46).

## 15.

Queer theorists have done much to look at the "naturalization" of sexual identity as a complicated and multi-headed monster. While this essay introduces same-sex desire as the logical end of my illogical fetishizing of the idea of India rather than India itself, it is equally true that I have mapped the poverty of images by which I've turned "straw into gold," as I write in the poem, "My Transvestite Uncle Is Missing." Higher culture is often better guarded and "air-brushed" in order to maintain its homogeneity, to keep out the materiality of difference. Popular culture is often where "leakage" can occur, where someone like me, a Person of Color who is also gay, can find an intentional or unintentional reflecting pool (Narcissus as role model) and experience the salutary shock of not being alone or a unique creature — much like Caliban's awakening to his entanglement with the others who turn him into an other.

But there are newer fictional and nonfictional texts now that have addressed the image of India as interconnected with Western Europe's great metanarrative of itself. I've included only those texts that have had a direct bearing on my own intellectual development, although I've since "discovered" texts such as J. R. Ackerley's *Hindoo Holiday*, along with travel diaries by many others. Screenwriter and prose writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala, for example, whose filmic England is nostalgic and fuzzy in interesting ways, offers a short story ironically called "Development and Progress," in which we can hear a certain psychic conquering of the conquerors as a British diplomat states:

I fell in love with the country. There is need for me to go into detail. Others have done so, describing the overwhelming sensual and emotional effect India has had on them; and in some cases, how this was enhanced by their feeling for a particular person, or persons. (69)



By keeping the body as an erotic subject that is “naturally” located far from genealogies of cause and effect, sensuality becomes one means by which not to diagnose the intrinsic links between the idea of India and the actual India that I have yet to experience. By intellectualizing my own visceral “attachments,” I have come to realize that, like many others before me, I was seeking a land in which I could participate with body *and* mind, that there was something in my own homeland that was preventing me from integrating my various identities. I just have to think of the rather tortured D. H. Lawrence exiled in New Mexico to understand that my own loneliness may perhaps be a systematic means by which the Other (a complex marginalized “creature”) is denied a healthy reflective image in what the poet Richard Katrovas calls “The Public Mirror.”<sup>4</sup>

I have since found other images closer to my own culture(s), from the CyberVato to the hermano in a James Dean costume. There are contradictions and points of anxiety even in these images, however. The macho Pachuco figure, for instance, has served as the occasion for a narration that “speaks its location as more than local yet makes no claim for universality for its viewpoint or language” (Sanchez-Tranquilino 564) — a statement I would complicate with Mikhail Bakhtin’s insight that “one’s own language is never a single language” (66). As I have moved through time and space on the internet, looked to my own past readings of novels and image-producers, and found links between my own personal sexual desire and the public mirrors that regulate my body and tongue, I have reread my experiences with Hadji and Jonny Quest as moments of personal freedom. I have rewritten the texts given me, an act of resistance that has allowed me to exist with body *and* mind. This has been done without permission, when no one was looking. I used to look at the maps at the local bookstores, maps that I couldn’t afford. Those maps promised me that the world was real and that I was real and that someday we would coincide.

## 16.

Something protective in me stirs when I read Italian poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini’s book about his travels to India. He observes, “You would need to have the repetitive power of a medieval psalmist in order to confront the terrible monotony of India in all of its representations” (90). Perhaps this is a fair comment made by a poetic mind about an actual India and not the virtual India I’ve created through media and chance experiences, but I find *The Scent of India* a disturbing book by a genius. Pasolini’s Marxist politics vanish in it, and India becomes something beyond “salvation.”

There is no doubt that postcolonial India is an amazing phenomenon, and I say this as a Westerner only now confronting his own misreadings of the stereotypes by which he was instructed to map the world. Allen Ginsberg writes in his *Indian Journals: March 1962-May 1963* of his own cognitive difficulties in a land overcrowded with stimuli. I quote at length from a single entry to demonstrate the almost feverish writing “required” by Ginsberg even at the end of his sojourn:

May 136 AM the yellow sun outside balcony thru<sup>5</sup> trees Dasaswamedh ghat waking up with Richshaw bells — I been in bed several days with kidney troubles — Hay Ram Ram Hay — sings the Motley-clad-in-yellow-and orange Medieval Clown-looking Bhakta. . . . That I've seen him often each day for months — once offered him some change, thinking him a beggar, which he refused. (206)

A wise man and a fool seem to wear identical looks for this poet and others. Ginsberg knows this and even asks himself in June 1962, "And when will I ever turn my attention (here) to the streets and figures of daily India?" (29). It proves a rhetorical question, of course, because Ginsberg does not seek the "daily" but the "universal" or the exceptional. One's habits of attention are profoundly defined by one's culture.

Neither Pasolini's nor Ginsberg's "daily" India is what I was seeking in my own longing for India. I had found great comfort and intellectual prompting in a cartoon figure: Hadji Quest (he was adopted, but he was called only by one name). Seeing a brown youth in exciting circumstances inspired me to look — or create — opportunities for myself. I longed for India because I hadn't known how to make all the pieces of my life fit together into a narrative. It is true that India isn't my home, that Puerto Rico isn't my home, that the United States is and isn't my home. I realize that figuring out the puzzle of India's centrality in my thoughts has confirmed how complex most things are, even concepts such as "essentialism" and "miseducation."

I no longer feel the imperative to visit India as I once did. Perhaps comprehending the sources of my mystification of this country and its people has freed me of that affective "baggage." I was surprised how colleagues nodded and understood the genealogy I've traced in this essay.<sup>6</sup> Many of them have also created their own parallel false places: New York City, Hollywood, France, London, Tokyo. The India of my childhood is put away as I look at the world as an adult man, although I still find great wonder in terms such as "India ink."

India, then, as a subcontinent outside and beyond my individual sorrows, made me take quite seriously the task of writing words. I knew from early childhood that I was going to be a writer, that the Hadji figure had challenged me to see the world. Words written in India ink had to be taken seriously, for they had arrived to my hand and eye from a great distance, one that challenged my imagination. It turns out that India isn't the mystery but that I am, even now.

## Notes

1. The story is examined later; "Calcutta Adventure" introduces the interstice of Hadji and Jonny. Hadji interests me in that he "learned English and judo from an American Marine, and wants to go to America" (*Jonny Quest Episodes Guide*). His India is traded for the new lamp of US culture and fraternity, an experience similar to my own.

2. I received the sensible advice to "gently" inform my readers that I quote my own work not as self-advertisement but rather as a deliberate strategy of

self-examination. The poets I admire have always been aware of the forces that have shaped their lives. Indeed, naming these forces is often what many of us consider our “real work.” This naming, then, requires us to examine our own texts as we do the writings and images of others.

3. Of course this is just one “reading.” Searching the internet on the subject of “Jonny Quest,” I was amused to discover that a porn star has taken up that name.

4. This is the name of one of his powerful books of poems but also a term I’ve found useful in thinking of public discourses and their regulatory natures.

5. The spelling throughout this quotation is Ginsberg’s own.

6. An internet search led to a brief biography of the Native American scientist, Wilfred Denetclaw. The overview states that, “[a]s a young boy, his favorite television show was a children’s science-fiction program called ‘Jonny Quest.’ . . . He says that he knows only about ten other people from Indian reservations who he knows have gone on to earn Ph.D.s in science” (“Wilfred Denetclaw”).

## Works Cited

- Arroyo, Rane. “Bed and No Breakfast.” *Evergreen Chronicles* 10.1 (Spring 1995): 76-88.
- . “Breathing Lessons.” *The Singing Shark*. Tempe: Bilingual P, 1996.
- Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.
- Balibar, Étienne. “Paradoxes of Universality.” *Anatomy of Racism*. Ed. David Theo Goldberg. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990. 283-94.
- Bergman, David. *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991.
- Beverly, John. “By Lacan’: Crisis del Marxismo y politica cultural en las Americas.” *Apuntes. Posmodernos* (Fall 1994): 58-60.
- Bhabha, Homi. “Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt.” *Cultural Studies*. Ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler. New York: Routledge, 1992. 56-68.
- “The Classic Jonny Quest Pages.” Internet. [http://web.raex.com/~lblosser/JonnyQuest/JQ\\_Ep\\_Guide\\_2.Html](http://web.raex.com/~lblosser/JonnyQuest/JQ_Ep_Guide_2.Html). 26 September 1998.
- Gandhi, Mahatma. *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*. Ed. Raghavan Iyer. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Indian Journals: March 1962–May 1963*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1970.
- Jhabvala, Ruth Praver. *East into Upper East*. Washington: Counterpoint, 1998.
- Johnson, Joel. “Pop Culture Diatribes.” Internet. <http://www.johnsonmusic.com/diatribes.htm>. 28 September 1998.
- “Jonny Quest Episodes Guide.” Internet. <http://www.illuminatus.com/fun/quest>. 26 September 1998.
- “Jonny Quest Origins.” Internet. <http://web.raex.com/~lblosser/JonnyQuest/JQOrigins.html>. 26 September 1998.

- Leeming, David. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. New York: Borzoi, 1994.
- Mohanty, Satya P. "Colonial Legacies, Multicultural Futures: Relativism, Objectivity, and the Challenge of Otherness." *PMLA* 110.1 (January 1995): 108-19.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *The Scent of India*. London: Olive P, 1984.
- Sanchez-Tranquilino, Marcos, and John Tagg. "The Pachuco's Flayed Hide: Mobility, Identity, and Buenas Garras." *Cultural Studies*. Ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler. New York: Routledge, 1992. 556-71.
- Sandoval Sánchez, Alberto. *New York Bakstage/Nueva Your Tras Bastidores*. Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1993.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. 1854. Roslyn, NY: Walter J. Black, 1942.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1992.
- "Wilfred Denetclaw." Internet. <http://breakthrough.blackside.com/bios/denetclaw.bio.htm>. 22 October 1997.