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"Too Fatally Present:" The Crisis of Anglo-Indian Literature

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And yet, despite all the beauty, the mystery and tragedy of life in India, despite all the themes for song and speculation and all that is calculated to foster literary genius, none but the most biased critic could possibly grow enthusiastic with regard to the general mass of the imaginative writings of Anglo-Indians. Mediocrity has in general been too fatally present, the appeal to the universal too fatally absent.\(^1\)

Thus writes Edward Farley Oaten at the outset of his essay, *A Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature*, which went on to win Cambridge University’s prestigious Le Bas Essay Prize in 1907. What permeates the literature and makes it so consistently “mediocre” and unavailable to “universal appeal,” Oaten argues, is its omnipresent, nay, its “fatally present” provinciality. Anglo-Indian writers,\(^2\) we are told, are too enmeshed in their colonial locale, too preoccupied with subjects Indian, to appeal to English readers at home. “A concomitant cause of their ill-success in England,” writes Oaten, “was their disregard of the well-known, if lamentable, fact, that in things Indian *qua* Indian, English people are, or were profoundly uninterested” (143). Oaten attributes such a provincial preoccupation to a variant strand of nationalism present in the Anglo-Indian community: “Anglo-Indians have always felt themselves to be a distinct community, possessing something which in a nation is called a national spirit.” And the expression of this independent “national spirit” is “the predominant [and thus “fatal”] aim and chief *raison d’etre* of their literature”(5).

A liability of this communal attachment to the Indian milieu is that it acts as a stultifying force, sapping and straining the creativity of its Anglo-Indian writers. Instead of providing impetus for philosophical reflection and literary

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2. The term “Anglo-Indian” refers to English men and women living in India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Jenny Sharpe suggests that it is important to think of “Anglo-Indians” not so much as a white settler colony, but more as a community in exile (*Allegories of Empire* [Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993], 163). From the early 1900s onwards, the category “Anglo-Indian” was extended to include Eurasians, that is, people of mixed Indian and English parentage. Here, I am concerned only with the term’s nineteenth-century usage and the production of Anglo-Indian literature. This term is not to be confused with the term “Indo-English” or “Indo-Anglian,” which is used to refer to English-language literature produced by Indians during the same time.
genius, this "national spirit" creates a "permanent journalistic class in India" (12) who, unable to transcend their environs, unimaginatively churn out "hackeneyed 'Letters' or volumes of travel" (144). Either that, or the exigencies of mere survival are so pressing as to deny the Anglo-Indians the luxury of fully engaging in the writing process. As Oaten says, there is no escape from this imaginative paralysis in India: "A country so enervating and so productive of sloth ... can never be without its influence" (12). India is daunting, overpowering, and irrational, and "to save the delight of his eyes the Anglo-Indian must be willing to lose" (8), to sacrifice all that he has held dear to himself. Never is the literature completely free of "the exile's lament" (15), and a suffocating cast of melancholy suffuses the literature in a manner impenetrable to the outsider. Even Rudyard Kipling, one of the few Anglo-Indian writers to escape this fatally present mediocrity, achieves literary greatness only after he escapes the geographical clutches of the Indian colony. Oaten sternly reminds us that "we have to judge Rudyard Kipling's place among Anglo-Indian literary men as much, if not more, by the works he has done in England since leaving India as by his strictly Indian work" (174).

A further impediment to the flowering of literary genius in India is the disharmony between Eastern and Western aesthetic traditions. Oaten is not specific about what he thinks each of these elusive traditions represents and promotes, but he is clear that any contact between them can only be hazardous and produce a disastrously miscegenated body of literary texts. His observations on the subject are worth quoting at length because their language constructs a conventionally colonial order of gendered difference between the two traditions: the hard, disciplining form of Western literature encounters the pliant, chaotic mass of Eastern mythologies. And, Anglo-Indian literature, in all its incipient avatars, is birthed through the uneasy contact of these two cultures:

In India for the first time since the era of Asiatic Hellenism, the hard spirit of Western Literature came into vital contact with the imaginativeness, dreaminess and mysticism of the Oriental temperament. There was no real union between them; and yet it was impossible that each of them should remain unaffected by the other. Such a meeting, though it was long sterile of result, could not remain permanently so. New conditions produced new emotions, and new emotions always call for new literary interpretation. And so there grew up in British India a literature, English in form and language, which is unique among the literatures of the world. (my emphasis, 4)

Yet this "unique" literature, as we have seen, though preponderant in bulk, is barely noteworthy in its affect, or "universal appeal." It has viable English form and language, but its mangled hybridized content ("there was no real union between them") yields only mediocre literary success.

Despite such critical misgivings, empire remains, for Oaten, a "political phenomenon of paramount importance," that can only "body forth its imperial spirit in literary form" (1-2). Anglo-Indian literary strivings, despite their mediocrity, must thus be recuperated as one powerful voice of that phenomenon, of British identity overseas, of a community in exile, and most impor-
tantly of the travails of empire building. Viewed against such a grid, the body of Anglo-Indian literature then appears embroiled within a different set of analytical questions and subject to a different scale of scrutiny: literature becomes primarily ideological, engaged in a rescue mission for the falling edifice of empire. I outline the salient points of Oaten's essay, its jingoism notwithstanding, because its characterizations of Anglo-Indian literature overlap with current debates on minor literature. Oaten's recuperation of Anglo-Indian literature as historical and political documentation of empire, his dismissal of its literary value, his critique of its excessive provinciality, and his dis-ease at its hybridized form are all intellectual questions that continue to fuel the discussions around the inclusion/exclusion of minor literature in today's university curricula. Minor literature is simultaneously endorsed and undermined by the very analytical tools through which it is recuperated and disseminated. Also, increasingly, there appears to be a conflation between the category of “minor literature” and “minority literature.” Critics such as Rey Chow, David Palombo-Liu, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have traced this problematic conflation to the changing contours of the literary canon in an anxiety-ridden and multicultural context. “Minor literature” moves from being an aesthetically suspect, under-excavated body of work, to one whose features appear redeemed through its link with “minority literature,” the literature of communities traditionally underrepresented in the academy. Now the sole domain of minority populations, minor literature is transformed into the more benevolent and multicultural “ethnic canon,” estranged from discussions of aesthetic culture and reduced to mere narratives of identity and politics.

My purpose in this essay is not to evade or flatten the complex genealogies and geographies of the terms “minority” and “minor literature” in its many present avatars but to suggest more broadly that there are important gains to be made by using these discussions around minor literature to inform our readings of the corpus of Anglo-Indian literature. I want to argue that Oaten’s minoritizing of Anglo-Indian literature enables a crucial shift in focus, from a representation of the Anglo-Indian community as a community in power, to a community in a state of emergence and contestation. Worth noting is the fact that Oaten wrote at a point in history (the turn of the century) when the British empire was aggressively beginning to experience its failures in India, entering, what Francis Hutchins has called “The Era of

3. Interestingly, Oaten earned a position in the Indian Educational Service on the merits of this essay. He writes: “I was appointed by the Secretary of State for India in the summer of 1909, after he had taken the precaution of getting one of his officials to read the two books which I had written on Indian subjects, ‘Anglo-Indian Literature’ and ‘European Travellers in India’” (My Memories of India [Patna: Janaki Prakashan, 1984], 1).

Doubt,” marked by the emergence of strong Indian nationalist movements, and widespread strikes and demonstrations against British rule in India. Oaten’s rhetoric of minoritization thus emerges as an attempt to reconcile what he himself calls the “political solecism” that is India with the failures and strengths of Anglo-Indian literature. Anglo-Indian literature must be reconstituted, “assimilated” into the larger canon of English literature, lest its absence indicate a failure of government and an emergence of divisive “national spirits” among English subjects.

This project explores the tensions of such literary management vis-à-vis the specific content of the body of Anglo-Indian literature. The crisis of literary mediocrity unveils itself as a crisis of colonial civility. Oaten’s “too fatally present” literature contains no easy recuperation of empire; instead, we have a minor literature strewn with novels of a dysfunctional and slowly disintegrating Anglo-Indian civil life. In this essay, I read several such novels as narrative landscapes of a “national spirit” in distress. Within these textual spaces, anxieties around colonial civil life congeal around two clear foci: colonial domesticity and interracial unions. Colonial domesticity (in the guise of households and marriages), a major cornerstone of imperial self-production, appears damaged and exhausted, unable to sustain its losses. Interracial unions, the colonial taboo par excellence, seem equally pervasive, threatening colonial racial privilege and demographics. Read within such a framework, Anglo-Indian literature instantiates the conflicts and contradictions of a community whose internal coherence appears as tenuous as their comprehension of the country they govern. Aesthetic failure (lack of “universal appeal”), the literature’s stubbornly independent “national spirit,” its flawed narrative structures, and its fatal fecundity open up a critique of the rhetoric of empire that is as much aesthetic as it is political.

I: In the Wake of Jos Sedley

If, for instance, we are seeking for a typical Anglo-Indian official, our minds instinctively refer, not the hero of some Anglo-Indian fiction, but to Joseph Sedley.

Edward Farley Oaten, A Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature


6. David Lloyd’s influential work, Nationalism and Minor Literature, situates clearly the connections between Oaten’s discussion of Anglo-Indian literature and discussions of minor literature within the context of British imperialism. Using the example of Matthew Arnold’s On the Study of Celtic Literature, Lloyd contends that the conception of the canon, of aesthetic culture as a whole, is intimately linked to the legitimation of imperialism, especially in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. He argues further that the institution of criticism emerges out of a particular matrix of historical and political contingencies that is often left uninterrogated in discussions of pre-twentieth century minor literature. The second condition of a minor literature is that it sustain an oppositional and contestatory relationship to the canon and the state from which it has been excluded. Building from Deleuze and Guattari’s formulations of “minor literature” and their readings of Kafka, Lloyd argues that minor literature must perpetually frustrate the conventions of major novels, truncate the narrative of the bildungsroman, and refuses to constitute the narrative as productive, in any traditional way (1-22).
Let the company view it as a work of art—the attitude of the gallant animal quite according to nature: the gentleman in a nankeen jacket, his gun in his hand, is going to the chase; in the distance a banyan-tree and a pagoda, most likely resemblances of some interesting spot in our famous Eastern possessions.

William Thackeray, Vanity Fair

The above-mentioned “work of art” appears at an auction in the early sections of Vanity Fair. Ruined by his speculations on the stock exchange, Mr. John Sedley, Jos’s father, is forced to auction off all the items in his house. After the major items are speedily sold, we turn finally to “the purchase of minor objects,” in particular, to the “portrait of a gentleman on an elephant” (206). So unimpressive and absurd are the contents of the painting (the portly gentleman, the sad-looking elephant, and the haphazardly strewn Oriental props) that the buyers jeer at the painting, until it is finally sold for a mere five shillings. This is clearly no work of art, but a hotchpotch imitation of Eastern life, whose subject is none other than one of Thackeray’s most caricatured characters, Jos Sedley. The painting returns at the end of the book, tucked away in the shabby living quarters of its new owner, Becky Sharpe, and we are given more parodic details of its contents:

It was the portrait of a gentleman in pencil, his face having the advantage of being painted up in pink. He was riding on an elephant away from some cocoa-nut trees, and a pagoda: it was an Eastern scene. (784)

One simulacrum stands in for the other, as both painting and personage function as parodic representations of an uninspiring Anglo-India: The painting of the clichéd Eastern scene (pagodas, cocoa-nut trees, and elephants intact) finds few admirers, just as Jos’s repetitive and cumbersome narrations of his life in India enthrall few listeners.

It is to this incarnation of Anglo-Indian life that Oaten turns for a contemporary example of a successful literary narrative of Anglo-India. For Oaten, any excavation of the literary history of Anglo-India has to be rerouted through Thackeray’s creation of Jos Sedley because, as he says, in our search for an Anglo-Indian character “our minds instinctively refer, not to the hero of some Anglo-Indian work of fiction, but to Joseph Sedley” (139). And the challenge for critics and followers of Anglo-Indian literature is to persuade readers to substitute Jos Sedley with the more “real” and less frivolous body of Anglo-Indian fiction. Oaten reminds us that Thackeray, though an Anglo-Indian by birth, “never saw India as an adult,” and can thus hardly be a reliable narrator or satirist of Anglo-Indian life. Additionally, Jos Sedley is a “retired official,” and for “a portrait of the official in active work, recourse must be had to the Anglo-Indian novelists” (140-41).

7. William Makepeace Thackeray, Vanity Fair (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 207 (emphasis added). All quotations from the novel will be from this edition; page references will be included parenthetically in the text.

8. Oaten’s consecration of Jos Sedley is repeated, albeit critically, in a second early study of the novels of empire. Susanne Howe writes: “These [Anglo-Indian] novelists knew a great deal more about India than Thackeray did, but somehow it is only ... that unpleasant symptom of the decay of the old order, Jos Sedley, whom we have become familiar with.” Novels of Empire (New York: Columbia UP, 1949), 40.
Revealingly, Oaten’s own elaborations of Anglo-Indian literature mirror Thackeray’s characterization of Sedley. Jos’s corpulent, curry-ingesting, and pleasure-seeking body gives way to the “fatally present,” bulky and mediocre corpus of Anglo-Indian literature. Both Jos and Anglo-Indian literature are minor “works of art” whose failures are recuperated and redirected in the service of satire and politics respectively: Jos’s corpulence becomes a source of endless amusement, and Anglo-Indian literature’s bulky mediocrity is rewritten as an example of the tireless toilings of empire. Both Jos and Anglo-Indian literature recycle stories of India whose subject matter has lamentably little “universal appeal” for English audiences in England: Jos’s continuing saga of the tiger-hunt and Anglo-Indian literature’s insistent preoccupation with portraying Anglo-Indian private life. Yet hovering behind the figure of Jos Sedley are the same questions unanswered in Oaten’s survey of Anglo-Indian literature. We are told of the effects of Jos’s stories but not enough of their subject matter. Why does Miss Cutler choose another suitor, and what truths hover behind Jos’s “pompous braggadocio stories?”

Let us begin by tracing the contours of Jos Sedley’s character more carefully. In the early pages of *Vanity Fair*, he appears as a satirical example of the *qui hors* Englishmen who worked and settled in colonial India before 1857. Corpulent, faddish, and effeminate, he is an avatar of impotent masculinity, a larger-than-life parody of all that Englishmen allegedly accomplish in the wilds of Anglo-India. What happens to create such decay in Jos is not entirely known. We are simply told that when he left for India he was a mere boy, untutored in the ways of society and manhood. Somehow his growth becomes stunted in India. As his sister Amelia says in surprise when he returns from India: “I always had an idea that you were at least seven feet high, and was quite astonished at your return from India to find you no taller than myself.” (69). India is described in terms of wealth but not companionship, martial opportunities but not marital success. Even amidst the biting satire of Thackeray’s words, we find a certain pathetic “lonely” quality in Jos’s life in India. We are told he is the “collector of Boggley Wollah … an honourable and lucrative post,” where he “had lived for about eight years of his life, quite alone, at this charming place, scarcely seeing a Christian face except twice a year.” His loneliness appears to have translated itself into a lack of social graces that continues on his return to England, for we are told that “he was as lonely here as he was in his jungle at Boggley Wollah” (58-59).

9. Significantly, Jos’s repertoire of stories improves vastly after his experiences at Waterloo. In both India and Waterloo, he is portrayed as a bumbling and cowardly fool, yet Waterloo provides him with more interesting materials for his stories: “That period of Jos’s life which now ensued was so full of incident that it served him for conversation for many years after, and even the tiger-hunt story was put aside for more stirring narratives which he had to tell about the great campaign of Waterloo” (323).
But, alas, Jos is unheroic, even in his loneliness. Joseph Litvak, in his recent study of *Vanity Fair*, elaborates on the consistent failure of Jos to emerge as a character of substance and connects it to a second defining feature of Jos's characterization: his inability to enter into the normative script of heterosexuality:

Sedley bespeaks Thackeray's own anxious awareness of sophistication's homosexualizing potential.... Unlike such paragons of urbanity as the depressive Lord Steyne or the melancholic stage manager and ideal reader, moreover, the "lonely" Jos is merely pathetic, a sad case because he fails to be sad in the proper jaded way, to live his worldliness as world-weariness. On second thought, not "merely pathetic," but also pathogenic, sick-making, disgusting ... and "as vain as a girl," as grotesque as "an old beauty" .... wearing a heterosexual mask as transparent as the cosmetic stratagems he so desperately employs. 10

For Litvak, Sedley must thus necessarily be shown up as an "old beauty," produced as an undesirable misfit to foreclose any ultimate possibility of a functioning and likable homosexuality. I would add, however, that it is more than "sophistication" that produces Jos's panic in the company of women. At the center of it all are Jos's experiences in India: his bumbling and ever-present reference to his failed romance with the "devilish Miss Cutler" in India (64), and the ultimate failure—his inability to even come home with a "black Mrs. Sedley" (89), with tales of his exploits with native women, the easiest of all heterosexual seductions. His father is quick to remind the reader of this fatal failure with his constant talk of the threat of "mahogany grandchildren," a threat that in its incompleteness returns us to the lack of reliable information about Jos's experiences in India.

Also worth mentioning here is a lesser-known earlier Anglo-Indian creation by Thackeray: Major Goliah O'Grady Gahagan, a perfect example of flailing manhood that clearly leads to the more fully developed creation of Jos Sedley. Gahagan appears as the central protagonist of a fictitious autobiographical story, *The Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan* (1838), whose major accomplishments include the proverbial tiger-hunts in India, and more interestingly, his near-miss romantic encounters with members of the opposite sex. 11 Gahagan, too, is stationed for a time at Boggley Wollah, and his accounts of life in India are full of jumbled and mismatched historical narrations of events. Amidst these accounts which, at best, are rambling and lack Thackeray's later satiric acuity, there is one episode that stands out in its clarity and narrative difference: Gahagan's deferred nuptials with the highly popular Julia Jowler. A definite Becky Sharpe clone, Jowler is all "perfection and purity" and yet an "impudent flirt who played with [his] feelings and deserted others for him, and him for others." As Gahagan wanders through India, slaying endless rebellious natives and consuming tankards of pale ale,


he is sustained by his love for the fickle but “sweet presence of Julia” (5). On his return, he is surprised to find Julia Jowler still there and even more surprised to hear her accept his proposal of marriage. However, one “memorable night” before the nuptials, Gahagan walks over to his beloved’s room, only to find her holding a “very dark baby” in her arms, her half-caste mother in tow, and murmuring out aloud: “What would that fool Gahagan say, if he knew all!” The episode ends with Gahagan exclaiming “He does know all” and Julia fainting in fear (10-11). After that, we hear no more of Gahagan’s amatory escapades. At the heart of even this absurd little episode emerges the bugbear of failed masculinity, and the threat and consummation of interracial desire. Gahagan’s final declaration that he finally possesses “knowledge,” leaves him impotent and heartbroken. As he says desolately: “Why continue this tale?” (11)

And yet the tale continues, in many different avatars, in the hundreds of Anglo-Indian novels that follow the publication of The Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan and Vanity Fair, especially after the Indian Mutiny in 1857. And all of Oaten’s exaltations and repudiations of Anglo-Indian literature tell us little of these kinds of fictions and pseudo-memoirs. Oaten reiterates the provinciality, the entrenchment, in Anglo-Indian life but glosses over the often sordid and overtly sexualized nature of these texts. Of the almost five hundred novels written after 1857, over seventy-five percent of them deal with tales of failed marriages, adultery, and interracial romances. And yet they merit no mention in Oaten’s award-winning sketch. If Anglo-Indian literature is indeed to be held up as a celebration of the resilience of empire, then it is a resilience always on the verge of collapse. And if “it is to be trusted,” as Oaten claims, then it records less the upliftment of the “backward classes” in India, than the breakdown of the Anglo-Indian community, scrambling to comprehend and narrate the meaning of their “passages to India.”

II: Into Temptation, or the misery of Anglo-Indian married life

Coventry looked up involuntarily, and his attention was held, riveted, for, though not young, the woman was fair, most strangely fair, in her native dress and tinselled veil; and even the paint that was thick on her eyes and cheek could not conceal her unusual beauty. Coventry guessed with a sick conviction, that this was “the woman in the bazaar,” the woman of whom he had heard.

Alice Perrin, The Woman in the Bazaar

In this remarkable scene from the pages of Alice Perrin’s fifteenth novel of Anglo-India, the central male protagonist, Coventry, finds himself lost in the thick of an Indian bazaar. Far from his cantonment and quarters, he is sur-


13. Alice Perrin, The Woman in the Bazaar (London: Cassell and Co. Ltd., 1898), 194. All references hereafter in text referred to by page numbers only.
rounded by the smell and encroaching dangers of his environs. “The flare, the confusion and the clamour” (192) threaten to overwhelm him, and he makes his way desperately, “a white man in a rather undignified quandary” (194), until he is stopped by the spectacle of the “woman in the bazaar.” A “sick conviction” floods him, as he looks up at the tawdry figure with fascination and repulsion and realizes that the woman is no stranger but his estranged first wife, Rafaella: “The woman in the bazaar, who lived in the street of the dancers and suchlike, who now drove away in the rath of Babu Chandra Das, was Rafaella, his wife of the years that were over and dead” (196).

An extraordinary plot development and in fact the only one of its kind in the forty Anglo-Indian novels I read from this period: the mention and, more surprisingly, the detailed description of an English female prostitute in India, a white woman openly servicing the native babus and soldiers. Rafaella, the “woman in the bazaar,” is no casual character either; the entire cautionary moral fable of the novel hinges on Coventry’s memory of this vision and of Rafaella’s fall. After this encounter, Coventry returns home to his young second wife and vows to be more patient and flexible with her: “For even as he held her, sweet and silent to his breast, his conscience cried the bitter truth— that always must he owe the saving of her love, and of her trust, to the woman in the bazaar” (320).

But the novel contains a second Englishwoman in the bazaar who too walks around unescorted, exposed to the dangers and appetites of the dreaded natives. This woman is no prostitute but a crazed madwoman who has moved about in the same clothes for the past fifty years. We are told casually of her story: “An Englishwoman ... who had been found at the time of the Mutiny as a young girl of about fifteen, hiding in the jungle wearing native clothes.” Somehow the events that precede her discovery traumatize her, and she goes “out of her mind with terror,” only insisting that she be “dressed in grey and in the fashion of the Mutiny” (174). Yet, her story is easily dismissed as local myth and causes less disquiet than the sexual labor of the more spectacular woman in the bazaar, Rafaella. And this “sort of thing,” one of the local policemen in the bazaar tells us, “isn’t so uncommon as you’d think. Our service comes up against queer things in that direction” (176). What that ominous “direction” is, the readers are never fully told. Instead we are left with hints of the two women’s “hideous” stories and left to wonder, as does Coventry, “What was the real story of all those years?” (199).

The two narratives depicting one Englishwoman’s sexual fall and another’s suspicious disappearance during the Mutiny signal two crucial loci for debates around gender roles and sexuality in Anglo-Indian society, debates that are a direct result of historical events and political activity during the period. First, it is important to locate the scandal of Rafaella, the English prostitute, within the mid- to late-nineteenth century colonial debates around prostitution and venereal disease. Much scholarly work has gone into discussions of the more punitive Indian version of the British Contagious Disease
Acts. For example, Kenneth Ballhatchet has pointed out that The Cantonment Act of 1864 made a provision for the regulation of all regimental brothels (also known as Bazaars) and lock hospitals, all of which could extend beyond cantonment boundaries when required. Under the rules of the Cantonment Act, only women “frequented by Europeans” would have to register with local authorities and were subject to mandatory registration, medical examinations, and constant surveillance. Thus, it is hardly a coincidence that the narrator of The Woman in a Bazaar reminds us that only native babus and other rich nabobs were in the habit of patronizing Rafaella’s establishment. Ballhatchet adds that despite these cautionary measures, “there is no condemnation of [native] prostitutes on moral grounds, nor is there any attempt to persuade them to change their occupation.”14 In most of these studies, there is some mention of the desirability of Eurasian prostitutes, but no mention at all of English prostitutes. We know very little of them, and even less of how these Cantonment Acts affected their health and productivity.

Ann Stoler’s work on colonialism and sexuality hints at such a possibility, but even she admits that despite narrative accounts of colonial women employed in sexual labor, there is little governmental evidence supporting their presence. It is as if these women are physically erased from the landscape, appearing only on rare occasions, in the guise of figures such as Rafaella, acting primarily as cautionary textualized reminders of the horrors of such a possibility. Stoler calls such lapses in available official information, “blindspots in colonial studies,” and links them to constructions of the European bourgeois self in the nineteenth century. For Stoler, the cultivation of the “European bourgeois self in the colonies,” a self necessarily “gendered and a dependent” (a formulation she traces through Foucault’s exposition of the self) rested especially on the moral worth and security of European children’s and women’s bodies. One way of guaranteeing such an affirmation was through the sexual and menial labor of native servants, concubines, and nursemaids who serviced the bourgeois household, either peripherally or centrally. Stoler emphasizes that such affirmations were quick to turn into threats when lines of contact were crossed and native concubines became European wives. Taxonomies were overturned and the categories outlining native/colonial behavior more tentative.

There is, however, a second, more insidious threat to the consolidation of European self-fashionings in the colonies, a threat I would argue is perhaps more debilitating to the imaginings of a secure European self and community than simple sexual contact with the Other. Stoler speaks of the “pervasive anxiety about white degeneration in the colonies … and the insistent policing of those Europeans from middle-class grace, the vast compendium of health manuals and housekeeping guides that threatened ill-health, ruin and even

death, if certain moral prescriptions and modes of conduct were not met.”

While Stoler’s scholarly analysis relates more specifically to the Dutch and French colonies, her analysis could clearly extend to the Indian colonial context in which similar concerns around an internal dissonance emerge. Rafaela’s fall into prostitution and Miss Grey’s disappearance become dangerously gendered versions of that “white degeneration,” given that policing and controlling their downfall seems impossible. All that remains to be done is to relegate the two women to cautionary tales of the “woman in the bazaar.”

The second historical context for these Anglo-Indian representations of anomalous Englishwomen is the aftermath of the 1857 Indian Mutiny. Jenny Sharpe argues that the Mutiny is the defining site for shifting significations of Englishwomen in India, even though little had changed in the real living conditions of the women. The often-invoked rapes of Englishwomen during the Mutiny, for Sharpe, are not a “consistent and stable signifier but one that surfaces at strategic moments,” as the memory of the Mutiny is kept alive through its imbrication with the violation of English womanhood. In fact, Sharpe contends that there were no reports of native men raping white women prior to the events of 1857. Thus, for instance, when “Magistrates were commissioned to investigate the so-called eye-witness reports [they] could find no evidence to substantiate the rumors of rebels torturing, raping and mutilating English women.”

The appearance of Miss Grey, the mute victim of some unspeakable “terror” of the Mutiny, also appears at a strategically explosive moment in Perrin’s novel. Keeping the representation of Rafaela’s open sexual access in check is the abject body of Miss Grey. And as the policeman reminds us, this “sort of thing,” the violated Mutiny victim, is more heard of than the image of Rafaela. Yet Miss Grey’s silence hovers, despite the references to the Mutiny. We are never told what really happened, leaving the reader open to other possibilities of “white degeneration.”

And indeed one other possibility does emerge. In Bithia Mary Croker’s Mr. Jervis (1894), a variant of Miss Grey emerges. The novel centers around the marriage woes of young Lalla who arrives from England full of great expectations of making a grand match in the colony. Amid the domestic squabbles of Major Langrishe and his wife, amid the gossip and petty bickerings of endless social gatherings, we are told parenthetically of the story of a “pathetic figure,” an Englishwoman who survived the Mutiny by agreeing to marry a native. Lest we approach the subject with any sympathy, the woman appears briefly toward the end of the novel, recanting her decision of thirty years or so, and tells us how she now holds the backward status of a “native widow” and is spending her life healing lepers. She leaves the scene, exclaiming: “I ought to have died long ago, but it is those who are good and beloved who die.” No violations here, but the possibility of any shifting in


English morality and its connections to the Mutiny has to be rescripted as an enormous error in judgment. Yes, the woman lives, we are told, but as the narrator ominously tells us, “fiction has few more pathetic figures than this renegade Englishwoman.”

The stories of these women are part of a larger recurring theme in mid- to late-nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian fiction: vagrant, wayward, hysterical Englishwomen who threaten the narrative of English domesticity. Few of the novels, as I mentioned earlier, actually flesh out the fatal consequences of the women’s waywardness or of their straying from domesticity. The novels usually proffer the threat of a domestic breakdown, only to have it neatly resolved through the women’s recognition of their moral flaws. These novels highlight the near fall into domestic crisis with bold, sensational titles such as *The Wife’s Error* (1866), *The Moral Bigamist* (1888), *Into Temptation* (1894), *Interference* (1891), *Transgression* (1899), and *The Dishonour of Frank Scott* (1900). Bhupal Singh, in his 1934 study of Anglo-Indian literature, comments on this recurrent theme of domestic crisis with a sense of puzzlement:

Marriages go wrong all over the world. But taking into consideration the comparatively small number of the English in India, it is surprising that year after year novels should be written whose only interest lies in unhappy Anglo-Indian marriages. Love and marriage constitute the main staple of fiction. But the chief motif of Anglo-Indian fiction is not so much crossed love as the misery of married life.

And where else does one turn but to S. S. Thorburn’s *Transgression* (1899) for a perfect example of Singh’s pronouncement. *Transgression* is particularly compelling as an example of a novel about the “misery of married life” because the threat to English domesticity emerges not out of sexual excess or sexual violation, as we have seen so far but out of sexual abstinence. The central conflict in the novel revolves around the strained relationship between George Fitzhugh, known as Fitz to his friends, and “his lovely wife,” Mary. Working as a brave officer of the Queen’s army in the dangerous frontier district of Pechistan, Fitz is a wonderfully likable character. He is a “big handsome man,” well-respected and much admired by friends and foes alike. Yet as the narrator repeatedly and morosely tells us, Fitz does have one fatal flaw: “But alas! His soul was athirst, and cried out for more than wife and child gave him. In an earthly paradise it is frequently so.” Fitz is indeed unhappy and the yearnings of “his soul” do incessantly cry out, not, however, for spiritual upliftment, but for sexual pleasures.

And the cause of his frustrations is none other than his wife, Mary, “a born celibate,” caught in the clutches of his honest but “clumsy ardour” (9-10); a rare admission of explicit sexual incompatibility in a fictional genre.

that, even at its most lurid, barely hints at sexual relations between its white protagonists. This is no mere one-time admission, either. The novel painfully elaborates several scenes of sexual awkwardness between the married couple. We are told that Mary is pure, “better fitted for the cloister than the hearth”(9), and unresponsive “like the Snow-Queen in Anderson’s tale” (11). On the other hand, Fitz’s growing restlessness is betrayed in his “good natured smile [which] seemed ever contending for mastery with some sinister shadow” (7). In a fit of pique, and after yet another long and futile attempt to persuade his wife to resume her marital duties, Fitz cries out in anger: “Can you not be saint and woman both? (20). The narrative challenge of the novel rests on resolving this moral and emotional conundrum: is sexual desire Christian, outside of procreation, and if so, how can the Madonnesque Mary be brought around to understanding that?

Mary rehearses the contours of this conundrum aloud, after one drawn-out discussion with her husband on the subject:

Her cultivation of what she regarded as the higher life in herself, and as she believed, its successful inoculation into George’s less spiritual nature, had so to say, perverted some of her womanly spirits. What to do? (71)

The answer arrives in the form of Dorothea Carew, also known as Dolly, Mary’s cousin, who becomes the object of Fitz’s “transgression.” Dolly and Fritz begin a flirtation that culminates in a fatal kiss, a scene that is strategically observed by Mary. Instead of confronting Fitz and Dolly in anger, Mary responds with an admission of her own guilt: “I blame myself alone for having lost what you have given Dolly” (132). Dolly is equally unaffected by Mary’s presence as she turns to George, confirming Mary’s feelings of guilt: “George, dear, you shall kiss me if you like, and before Mary too; I am not ashamed of caring for you as Mary does not” (132). After this encounter, the two women leave to have a long conversation, the contents of which we are not told. The novel ends with Fitz and Mary, rejoined in marital bliss, and Dolly returning to England to marry her estranged lover.

In this novel, adultery and domestic breakdown are avoided fascinatingly through the staging of a “transgression.” The sexual problem is fixed, so to speak, through the invocation of the potential loss of Fitz. Anything goes, it appears, under the guise of maintaining domestic harmony. What is even more fascinating is the portrayal of Fitz up to the fatal moment of transgression. Each time Fitz touches or comes close to Dolly, his body pallor shifts and he comes more “brown” in color: “His big weathered hand, like a brown wrapper, over her small little one” (35). Each encounter between Dolly and Fitz, except for the moment of disclosure, significantly does not take place in the main house, but instead in a small building close to the house, where Fitz idles away his time cataloguing “some half-dozen camel-loads of Buddhist antiquities” (73). It is, here, within this milieu of “crawly Buddhas” that the first illicit meeting between Dolly and Fitz occurs, and Dolly exclaims: “You are too violent. I shall avoid this room in future” (76-77). It is only after they
stop meeting in this Buddha-infested place that Fitz becomes less “violent” and infinitely more desirable to Dolly—in fact, so desirable that she even permits him to visit her in her bedroom late at night, where they are finally interrupted by Mary. Transgression thus is whitewashed into a functioning part of English domesticity, only after it has changed locales and stimulants—from the native space of violence-inducing Buddhas, the space of a “fatally present” provinciality, to the more properly English household of supportive characters.

Even W.D. Arnold’s *Oakfield or Fellowship in the East* (1853), an unusually probing work that Oaten claims marks the “the transition from the conventional ‘letters’ to the novel of Anglo-Indian manners” (152), signals the breakdown of English society in India. A distinctive philosophical and moral purpose pervades the novel, whose protagonist, Oakfield, an Oxford man, goes to India on a voyage of self-discovery, only to be devastated by the widespread debauchery of the Anglo-Indian community. The novel’s themes of social and moral degeneration clearly reflect the influence of the famous Dr. Thomas Arnold, the author’s father. In a letter to his sister Margaret in England, Oakfield underlines his dismay at his surroundings and his disappointment at the failure of the English mission civilisatrice:

I came out here six months ago with a vague hope of finding some great work going on, to which all willing helpers would be welcome. The bathos from these notions to the intense insignificance of an unposted Ensign would have been wholly ludicrous, if not partly painful; but it was a painful thing to find one’s self suddenly in the midst of a society horrible, monstrous,—I fancy altogether unique.20

Oakfield reflects further on the pervasiveness of this “monstrous” society and questions whether such dissipation can indeed be written off merely as an effect of extended exposure to the colonies: “I sometimes fear that it is almost impossible that any peculiar local circumstances could produce, as an exception, such a state of things as is to be found here” (82). For Oakfield, the emergence of this “gross” society and its accompanying effects underscores a much more dangerous problem: the inherent and fatal “wickedness and stupidity” of European society. Such wickedness (we are never told precisely what behaviors are so wicked) hinders the functioning of the Indian empire and blocks the glorious path of social and moral reform (“the greatest object of a thinking man must always be social reform”) (83). The light of Christian enlightenment, thus, for Oakfield, must first extend to his fallen English brethren before it can even attempt to revive “the perfectly awful *vis inertiae* of Asiaticism”:

That is, in very general terms, my idea of a man’s duty in this country; to help in the work, or try to set it going, of raising the European society, the great influence of Asia, from the depths of immorality, gradually to a state of comparative Christian earnestness. (83)

20. W. D. Arnold, *Oakfield; or Fellowship in the East* (Ticknor and Fields: Boston, 1853), 82. All references hereafter in text referred to by page numbers only.
Yet, for all of Oakfield’s lofty Christian ambitions, and his earnestness, he is unable to intercede in the moral decay he sees around him. So profoundly traumatized is he by the excesses of Anglo-Indian life that he retreats into a space of silence and isolation, choosing to live a life of withdrawal and contemplation, rather than to expose himself to his society’s festering wickedness. While the bulk of the novel elaborates on the shifting contours of Oakfield’s personal agon, the European society within which he lives shows little evidence of any positive change. We encounter a few enlightened Englishmen whom Oakfield befriends, but overall the novel does little to offset its early depictions of white degeneration. Unlike the imaginative recuperations of English society and family found in the other texts I have thus far analyzed, Oakfield offers its readers no such fictional reprieve. Here there is no escape from the stain of English degradation, and the stranglehold of its fatal memory continues to suffocate Oakfield even after he returns to England. He summarizes his experiences in India to his sister with a deep sense of regret and despair: “It is a sad thing to have battled for six years, and seem at the end to be no nearer to a clear perception” (432).

III: Beyond Caste and Creed: Containing Interracial Romance

Percy tried to find the native mother in her face, but could not. He judged only by past experience. The East Indians whom he knew were generally the offspring of the lowest, blackest, Tamulian women, and of Englishmen of low tastes, if not of low birth ... Wherever he had seen dark blood it invariably came out in dusky skin, darky, heavy-lidded eys, thick black hair and full-lipped mouth. He had known East Indians who had a claim to Cleopatra-like beauty; but he had never come across a beauty like this, a refined tropical loveliness, that plainly bespoke a child of the South, as plainly reflected the intellect of the North.

Mrs. Frank Penny, Caste and Creed: A Novel 21

A second leitmotif in Anglo-Indian literary production is the constant evocation and production of narratives of interracial desire, largely between Englishmen and native women, and, very infrequently, between Englishwomen and native men. Oaten’s prognosis of the disastrous effects of a literary union between Eastern and Western intellectual traditions is metaphorized and realized repeatedly in the hundreds of mid- to late-nineteenth-century cautionary novels narrating the inevitable failure of interracial unions between the English colonizers and their Indian subjects. Rudyard Kipling’s injunction at the beginning of “Beyond the Pale,” his famous short story on the perils of interracial desire, seems very much in place, as these novels too reiterate the need for “a man ... to keep to his own caste, race and breed. Let the White go the the White and the Black to the Black. Then, whatever trouble fall is in the ordinary course of things—neither sudden, alien, or unexpected.” 22

There are, however, a few novels that do fall “beyond the pale,” into the realm of the “sudden, the alien, or unexpected,” with their mappings of successful interracial unions: an Englishman falls happily in love with a worthy native woman, as in Mrs. Frank Penny’s *Caste and Creed: A Novel*, or Meadows-Taylor’s *Seeta*, and we even have the rare example of a young Englishwoman consummating her love for an Eastern man in Marian Crawford’s *Mr. Isaacs: A Man of Modern India*. Yet all these novels, despite their transgressive fall into a different narrative order of things, struggle variously to contain and embed their stories within the larger context of English racial superiority and the legitimacy of the civilizing mission. The terms under which interracial unions are prohibited are the very terms that these novels invoke and reinforce to sanction the structure of interracial love. The native women and men who become the desired objects of Englishmen and women’s love are all cast within a carefully delineated visual field of whiteness and/or are claimed as “social projects” whose uplifting furthers the basic tenets of the English civilizing mission. They are either Eurasian, as in the case of Zelma, the heroine of *Caste and Creed*, containing that one strain of redeeming white blood, or suspiciously “white-skinned,” despite their native genealogies, as in the example of Seeta in Meadows Taylor’s novel of the same name. Or alternately, they are so completely Westernized, as with Mr. Isaacs in Marian Crawford’s novel on modern India, that their success with Englishwomen is read more as a victory for the civilizing mission, than as an incursion of English purity. In other words, the native characters who enter into relationships with English protagonists are somehow recuperated through their successful mimicry of whiteness, either chromatically or sociologically. Nonetheless, such recuperations and containments of interracial contact, I will demonstrate, bring with them simultaneous ruptures in the very fields of signification that they endorse. The lines of division between the races that are so rigidly maintained, especially at these moments of interracial contact, emerge as hesistant and imperfect constructions whose successful mimicry sharpens the oppositions between the races. 23

Let us examine one such imaginative recuperation of interracial contact by turning to the citation with which I began. In Mrs. Frank Penny’s *Caste and Creed*, Percy Bell, one of the novel’s central English protagonists, is faced with a crisis of representation as he encounters the perplexing beauty of Zelma, the novel’s Eurasian heroine. We are told that Percy Bell is a “magistrate who tries native cases,” whose particular forte is his ability to read and interpret the behavior and physical characteristics of the natives: “Our work in India is calculated to teach us to read human nature. The tongue of the native is the last thing about him that speaks the truth” (62). Consequently,

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23. My discussion of mimicry and mimetic production in the colonial era is clearly derivative of Homi Bhabha’s discussions of “colonial mimicry.” While Bhabha emphasizes the breakdown in colonial orders of representation through language, I am more interested in how structures of mimicry destabilize and point to the colonial dependence on a more visual order of meaning.
Bell regales us with examples of his interpretative acuity by underlining the particular “signs,” the physical minutiae, that decisively mark the native body. He points to the specific shape and state of the “hands,” “feet,” and “hygenic habits” of the natives around him and reiterates how his skills have not failed him in his entire time as a magistrate in India. Yet, somehow, all his skills fail him when he first sees Zelma: “Percy tried to find the native mother in her face, but could not. He judged only by past experience.”

It is this inability to locate the “native mother” in Zelma’s face that ultimately sanctions Percy Bell’s falling in love with Zelma. In a chapter appropriately called “Prejudices,” Bell declares: “I confess I feel an unconquerable repugnance towards the whole [Indian] race” (64). For Bell, the idea of marrying into such a race is untenable and counter to all the tenets of English morality, and it is precisely such a stubborn and biased belief that the narrative ostensibly seeks to expose and overcome. The entire courtship between Percy and Zelma takes place on a ship en route to India and entails long discussions of the differences between Eastern and Western literary traditions. Ironically, in each of these discussions, it is the Eurasian Zelma who emerges as more proficient and learned in European texts and culture, while it is Percy, who, as a budding Orientalist, seems more knowledgeable and aware of Eastern languages and traditions. Each of these encounters is also marked by Percy’s relentless cataloguing of Zelma’s physical person and behavior. We are told constantly of the beauty of “her white arms” and the smoothness of her visage, even as Percy continues to wonder if Zelma has a soul “that could rise unstained out of the mire of Oriental sloth and sensuousness” (104). Percy is satisfied only after he discovers Zelma’s predilection for bright “jewels,” a trait that he can finally attribute to her contaminated racial heritage.

Jacqueline Rose’s work on sexuality and the field of vision is useful here in understanding the interpretative dynamics at work in Percy’s visual dissections of Zelma. In her discussions of Freud’s writings on sexual difference, Rose argues that Freud focused on the primacy of visual representation in the development of a child’s sexuality:

Describing the child’s difficult journey into adult sexual life, Freud would take as his model little scenarios, or the staging of events, which demonstrated the complexity of an essentially visual space, moments in which perception founders (the boy child refuses to believe the anatomical difference that he sees) or in which pleasure in looking tips over into the register of excess (witness to a sexual act in which he reads his own destiny, the child tries to interrupt by calling attention to his presence). Each time the stress falls on a problem of seeing.

Such a “problem of seeing” is often foregrounded by a complicated structure of “repetition as insistence,” that is, as the constant pressure of something

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24. While Percy Bell’s delineation of physical characteristics may approach the systematic racial stereotyping of the phrenology debates of the nineteenth century, it is important to note his careful avoidance of any such mention. India, as Sander Gilman has pointed out, was carefully left out of the racial flattenings of the phrenology debates, because its racial connection to Aryan roots raised too many ambivalences. See Sander Gilman, Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), 30-32.

that can “only come into focus by blurring the field of representation where our normal forms of self-recognition takes place.” Rose goes on to add that the relationship between viewer and scene is thus less about the content of the scene than it is about the subjectivity of the viewer and the fragile and fractured structural dynamics between the two. For Rose, the fantasy of sexual difference can only be maintained if the imagined unity of the visual space is reified and not undone. In order to believe in sexual difference, one must first learn to forget what one has or is truly seeing. Any confusion at the level of sexuality brings with it “a disturbance of the visual field,” and a breakup or rupture in the fixed nature of sexual identity.

It is worth pausing over the implications of Rose’s formulations for a colonial field of vision that is increasingly being understood in terms of a problematic of reading. Except in colonial discourse analysis, structures of race and sexuality collide and collude in the most contradictory ways. Percy’s “foundering” racial vision (his inability to find the native mother in Zelma) recuperates its differenciating strength only after it has “tipped over” into the register of representational excess where any and all gestures of the seen body become symptoms of a tainted racial location. Yet in order for Percy to imagine Zelma as a sexual partner, he must return to his inability to fix her racially and focus instead on the beauty of her “white arms.” Any breakdown, rupture, or “blurring in the lines of representation” is quickly repaired through the insistent repetition of a characteristic that reinstates fixed racial identities. Hence, it is significant that at the moment of interracial contact, the viewer, the English subject, latches on to a physical characteristic that helps him to disavow the transgression he is about to commit, to not see the racialized body he covets. In most Anglo-Indian novels, the characteristic stabilizing such moments of blurred representation echoes Percy’s and is interestingly enough the evocation of a racial similarity, of a visual “whiteness” that punctures and repeats itself in the field of vision.

Donald Anderson, Zelma’s father, who marries a young native woman, also recuperates this very stabilizing structure in legitimating his courtship of the young woman. He first sees her as a girl of fourteen and is drawn to her, the narrator emphasizes, because she was “as fair as one of the daughters in Southern Europe: Her features were small and delicate, but as regular as those of a Grecian woman” (12-13). The very first encounter between the two is also carefully mediated not through structures of seduction or desire, but through structures of education. The young native girl wins Donald Anderson’s heart because she dismisses an old native concubine’s suggestion that she pledge herself to Anderson’s household. Anderson is equally disgusted with the old woman’s suggestion, and we are told that “from whatever cause she [the young girl] had uttered the words which dismissed the temptress, they formed the first link which was woven to bind the shrewd Anderson to this warm-hearted, passionate child of the tropics” (17).

It is at such junctures when the threat of interracial unions looms large that the sheer and frightening disproportionality of the English in relation to
the Indians becomes most obvious. That this was a very real feature of English life can be gauged by the large community of Eurasians that emerges toward the end of the century. Marion Crawford’s *Mr. Isaacs: A Man of Modern India* (1888) negotiates this fear of intermarriage/interracial unions by presenting us with an Oriental figure so anglicized that his Easternness seems incidental and thus perfectly erasable. Crawford, a popular English novelist of the period, is careful in the presentation of this topic: the narrator, and the main instigator of the union between the English girl and the native man, is an American whose national identity sanctions his speech in a way that an English identity would not. Mr. Isaacs, whose original Muslim name we are asked to forget, is an effeminate, simpering figure who is deliberately desexualized. Such erasures do not ultimately negate the fear of perversion posed by Indians. They instead compound the fear by invoking a perverse system of colonial mimicry that, in fact, reinstates the logic of the same that has to be constantly held at bay. In other words, if the Oriental can be anglicized enough to have his Easternness erased, so also can the Englishman be orientalized enough to have his Englishness erased.

Herein begins and ends the crisis of Anglo-Indian literature. Just as marriages fail, and races dangerously mingle, the literature of this community embodies in literary form its critical implausibility and impossibility. This literature’s failed, hybrid body (in form and content) becomes the insistent, the “too fatally present” referent for the colonial landscape, whose markings intercede and interrupt the workings and scripts of empire. We return once more to my opening invocation of Oaten’s pronouncements of mediocrity and fatal absences and presences. For surely and perversely, such a sketch of Anglo-Indian literature, “despite all the beauty, the mystery and tragedy of life in India,” would lead “but the most biased critic … [to] grow enthusiastic with regard to the general mass of the imaginative writings of Anglo-Indians.”