Anglophone Literature and the Emergence of the Colonial Public Sphere in Asia, 1774-1819

<u>OVERVIEW</u>

By the 1790s, British India had developed a vibrant literary culture with newspapers, libraries, literary clubs, and amateur theaters that made the printer William Duane exclaim that Calcutta rivaled London with its own "Anglo-Asiatic taste." He argued that the "the civilized world affords no similar instance of the rise and culture of the arts" as that which produced late-eighteenth-century Anglophone India.[1] My book is the first account of the emergence of this literary culture. I concentrate on authors who wrote in India rather than on those more canonical orientalists based in Britain that most scholars of the global eighteenth-century know well. By recovering these less-known figures and the intricacies of the colonial public sphere they inhabited, I show how eighteenth-century Anglophone literature became a distinct entity detached from its British progenitors.

Anglophone Literature examines the geographical movement and intricate infrastructure of English-language writing in South Asia. I dislodge the current sense that this writing imitated British norms, showing instead that it was distinct, semi-autonomous, and often ambivalent towards its European influences. Anglophone literary culture, moreover, was not unique to Calcutta; Madras and Bombay borrowed from there and from each other, producing important interlinked audiences. Drawing on theories and methods from literary sociology, book history, and oceanic studies, I restore the contours of these publics as they developed in newspaper poetry columns, communally written manuscript miscellanies, dramatic societies, regulations

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[1] William Duane, *The World* (Calcutta: Oct. 15, 1791); qtd from Graham Shaw, *Printing in Calcutta to 1800*, 4. .

about print censorship, epistolary novels, and personal letters and diaries. I connect these publics with more distant outposts around the Bay of Bengal found in Sumatra, Java, and Singapore. My account of this interlaced infrastructure shifts scholars away from a fixation with transoceanic circulation between Britain and India, instead offering India as a space where texts and objects do not so much circulate as accumulate and coagulate in lopsided and unbalanced ways.

Working from my extensive archival research, I define otherwise abstract notions of cultural circulation, flow, and "exchange," offering a detailed account of the material realities and creative imaginations that propelled the consolidation of the Anglophone public sphere in Asia. My examination of the newspaper advertisements of 1790s Madras in Chapter 2, for example, reveals the economic substratum that facilitated Anglo-Indian literature's emergent aesthetic: the sale of paper, including blank books "fit for Journals."[2] This sale of paper demonstrates how changing commercial realities of oceanic trade enhanced the possibility for localized literary culture. These possibilities are exemplified by the exuberant proliferation of newspapers and journals in late-eighteenth-century India, often seen as an ornament to "congratulate the settlement," as the Madras-based *The Phoenix* boasted in its first print edition.[3] However, the East India Company often worried about such productions, engaging in a series of high profile conflicts with printers in Calcutta and Madras during the 1790s in anticipation of the robust censorship regime of post-1820s India. They demanded retractions, imprisoned printers, and deported undesirables, as I show in Chapter 1. Politics was persistently interwoven with the emergence of Anglo-Indian literature in the colonial public sphere. The martial verse that I examine in Chapter 4, much of it written by lower-class military men in response to the Anglo-

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[2] *The Hircarrah*, vol. 1 iss. 24, Feb. 18, 1795.
[3] *The Phoenix* (Madras: 1797), 1-2.

Mysore wars, indicates how warfare was a stimulus for (not just a subject of) the literary public sphere. But literature was often used to examine imperialism, as when the *Java Government Gazette* published poetry seeking affinities with Dutch-speaking native writers who remained in Java after the British captured it from the Dutch in 1812.

All of these examples indicate an interconnected colonial literary public that was responsive to locales dotted across India and around the Bay of Bengal. This intraregional literary culture has gone unnoticed because scholars have assumed, incorrectly, that because its writers, printers, booksellers, and readers were mostly white they were primarily affiliated with Europe. These authors are obstinately portrayed by scholars as conventional colonial administrators whose "bad" writing longed for a British "home" and advocated for colonialism with uncomplicated enthusiasm.

Recovering the complexity of these neglected artists and disregarded literary figures tells a different story, one that is crucial to understanding fully the historical emergence of English writing in Asia. More precise details about the infrastructure of this literature will force scholars to reconsider central conceptual dynamics of postcolonial studies and shift our emphasis away from explanations of colonial identity that depend on authentic and inauthentic agents, on absent nations, and on expatriate nostalgia. My book is an attempt to integrate European-descended authors into a history of Indian authorship, thereby redefining our notion of "British India" and overhauling our sense of what motivated colonial writing.

Johns Hopkins University Press, the publisher of my first book *Sounding Imperial: Poetic Voice and the Politics of Empire* (2013), has expressed interest in *Anglophone Literature*. The premise for this second book began while I was a fellow at Emory's Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry and since then I have drafted the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2. Portions

have been published in well-received edited collections and innovative journals, such as *The Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation*. Residence at the National Humanities Center will aid my yearlong faculty leave scheduled for 2016-17. In addition to contributing to the intellectual life of the other fellows—whose interests may coincide with my research on cultural politics, globalization, and its colonial antecedents—residence will allow me space and time to complete two central tasks. The first is to conclude my study of the James Romney papers that I have collected and digitized at the British Library. I estimate that this will require two months of intensive research (Sept. – Nov. 2016). With the remaining ten months I will compose my third chapter with this research, draft my fourth and fifth chapters, and my coda. My goal is to submit a proposal and the majority of my manuscript to my editor at Johns Hopkins University Press on December 1, 2017.

Power, Masculinity, and Sociality in a Vernacular Theatre

I am applying for an NHC Fellowship to make progress on my third book, *[TITLE REDACTED TO CONSERVE PRIVACY]* This book project asks two questions. Who has the power to tell the stories, and specifically, the story of the Hindu god Ram in the vernacular theatre of Ramlila? How do two literary versions of the story of Ram, separated by 400 years and used in this theatre, reflect very changed circumstances in Indian society?

Ramlila enacts the story of the Ramayana in an annual fall festival all over North India. The term "Ramlila" literally means "the play (*lila*) of Ram," and in the Hindu context, "*lila*" captures the sense of both the physical theatre or visual spectacle, and the eternal divine sporting of God. In my reading, it also refers to the sociality and sheer fun of acting that often obtains in amateur neighborhood Ramlilas. Yet, as I argue, even the power to play (as a performer or spectator) is circumscribed to varying degrees, based on one's gender and position in society.

[TITLE] will blend ethnographic interviews with Ramlila performers and close readings of two Ramayanas, one from the sixteenth century (*The Ramcharitmanas*), and one from the twentieth century (*The Radheshyam Ramayana*), which have served as scripts and songbooks in the theatre of Ramlila. This approach will allow me to make arguments about the ideological distance between these two Ramayanas, and at the same time, the profound social change that has occurred in India, with respect to caste, class, and gender. It will also allow me to expand knowledge about transgender women and other intersectionally marginalized performers and lives beyond those of the Global North. I want to show that although the modern Ramayana reflects attitudes of its day—'soft' Hindu nationalism, anticolonial sentiment, and an agenda of moderate social reform—it is still very much at odds with the lives of those Ramlila actors and dancers who live on the margins of 'respectable' society. In short, it doesn't tell their story.

As a medium, Ramlila mostly replicates the hierarchies and structures of gender and caste that obtain in the wider society. Formerly, it was common for all actors, organizers, and officiating priests to be male, and the *svarups* (divine embodiments), to be male and brahmin, despite the fact that the hero of the story (Ram) is a king, not a priest. This is still the case at some Ramlilas. However, nowadays there is much more diversity in Ramlila communities, from conservative, preservationist ones to progressive, modernized ones.

My book will add to the rather limited scholarship on Ramlila by demonstrating that social progress that has been made in neighborhood Ramlilas, to the extent that the medium has opened up to a wider community of organizers and performers. But it will also highlight the limits of that progress by examining who wields power in Ramlilas, who is given roles in Ramlila, and more generally, how Ramlila performances replicate and reinforce quotidian forms of social performance and social control in the local community.

The following is the table of contents: 1. Introduction; 2. When Kevat (a boatman) is Sikh; 3. When Shurpanakha (a demonness) is Muslim; 4. When Kaushalya (Ram's mother) is transgender and Dalit; 5. Conclusion. In the first chapter, I will present my main arguments, bringing in relevant theorizing on the performance of gender and social station. The next three chapters, the body of this book will each be organized around a particular Ramlila performer who in some way(s) defies expectations about who has the social capital to do the emotional and physical work of Ramlila: a Sikh man, a Muslim woman, and a Dalit transgender woman. (I use pseudonyms for the two latter performers). A brief reflective conclusion will synthesize my ideas and round out the book.

In chapter 2, I will use the example of a Sikh actor to show the social flexibility and inclusiveness that obtains in many Ramlila communities, which sometimes admit even non-Hindu performers into this form of Hindu ritual theatre. This actor initially had to fight certain

conservative members to gain entry, but once accepted, he became one of the most respected actors and directors in his Ramlila. He professes belief in Ram and sees no conflict between Ramlila and his Sikh faith. I will also include passages from the two Ramayanas about the low-born boatman Kevat, one of the Sikh actor's actual roles, to again suggest social progress.

The next two chapters will illuminate the limits of social inclusiveness in Ramlila communities and the wider society. In chapter 3, I will relay the story of a Muslim woman, Nargis, in her mid-fifties, who became a professional dancing girl at the age of eight, and a Ramlila performer around 20. She was selected by the chief priest at an especially conservative and famous Ramlila (in Ramnagar) to sing and dance for a few key scenes, and to play Shurpanakha, a demoness who is mutilated when she tries to seduce both the hero, Lord Ram, and his brother. I will complement Nargis's story with passages about Shurpanakha from the two Ramayanas, to show that her status as a poor and stigmatized Muslim woman who dances is not so unlike the character she plays. While the predominant brahmin men in this production have hereditary rights to certain roles—and land granted to their ancestors two centuries ago—Nargis lives in a shanty on the same field where the Shurpanakha scene plays out. Significantly, she had to take on a Hindu name, and erase her Muslim identity to be accepted in Ramlila.

In chapter 4, I will focus on a Dalit transgender performer, Chamcham, who started performing in Ramlila as a teenager in 2010, and excelled in a number of the major female roles, in a fairly typical neighborhood Ramlila. Although Chamcham found a place in Ramlila, the only way she could perform was to somatically present as a man, and use her given male name. Like Nargis, she too had too had to hide her own identity to perform in Ramlila. Once she started to transition in 2015, she quit acting in Ramlila and began to live with a community of *kinnars* (often translated as transgender women or *hijras*). In 2013, Chamcham had told me, "There's no stage for *hijras* in Ramlila. It's not okay in a play about God." She committed suicide on October

7, 2017, a week after Ramlila that year. I will contrast her story with that of the tribal woman Shabari in the two Ramayanas, to argue that the reality of gender non-conforming performers does not square with the many scenes of Ram's saving grace in Ramlila.

I am fluent in Hindi and have already conducted the archival and in-country work for this book, having made nine research trips to India and attended six Ramlila cycles between 2006 and 2018, with support from two external grants (Fulbright-Nehru and AIIS/NEH), and several internal grants. If awarded an NHC Fellowship, I anticipate that I could complete chapters 1-3 over the academic year, and chapters 4-5 over the summer of 2020.

I have built my research profile around modern literary and dramatic adaptations of the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. My current book project grew out of my second book, *[TITLE REDACTED FOR PRIVACY],* currently under review at SUNY Press. The latter is the first book in English to deal comprehensively with the history and aesthetics of Ramlila theatre. When I received an IAH Faculty Fellowship at UNC in 2012, I experienced the powerful effects of dialogue with faculty working in other disciplines. It was both fruitful and enjoyable to learn of other faculty's interesting work! In fact, it was our conversations about one faculty member's work that prompted me to add material about the effects of audio and print technologies on the shape of *The Radheshyam Ramayana*.

In my first book, *[TITLE REDACTED FOR PRIVACY]*, I show how modern Hindi writers retold the epic Mahabharata in ways that allegorically contested British imperialism.I have published a number of articles in edited volumes and journals such as *TDR, Modern Asian Studies, The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, Postcolonial Text,* and *Journal of Vaishnava Studies.* I am now working on a co-edited volume, *[TITLE REDACTED FOR PRIVACY].* I regularly teach two courses on the Hindu epics, have curated three Ramlila exhibits, and staged a student Ramlila.