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National Narratives and the Politics of Miscegenation

BRITAIN AND INDIA

HISTORIANS LONG TO TELL their archive stories, but unlike anthropologists, sociologists, and even political scientists, our narratives of fieldwork have little purchase within the professional standards of our discipline, which demand a certain level of professional distance that makes history "objective," rendering the archive as a finite site of knowledge about the past.[1] And yet historians' archive stories often reflect the process by which historical knowledge is gathered, narrated, and represented. Archival research is an important credential in the career of a historian, often making or breaking our claims to "truth" and positivism. In processing the so-called primary sources of the archives into the secondary sources used by other scholars and students of history, it is a largely inadmissible secret that our work is often shaped by archival conditions beyond our control, conditions such as whether the archivist or librarian is sympathetic or drawn to the project, whether the proposed topic or research is congenial to particular types of national narratives, and whether the nation-state in which we do our research is invested in preserving and protecting the records we need.

My archive stories are drawn from the radically different responses in the two nations in which I did research, showing the ways in which what seemed like a great project in Britain was a terrible, even unspeakable one in India. If there is a lesson in these anecdotes, it is that national narratives and identities remain strong features in the production of histories, particularly in the ways that histories are fashioned from the spaces and conventions of national archives and libraries. In spite of recent efforts to downplay the importance of the nation and look at our historical projects transnationally, the ways in which archives are national institutions that regulate access by scholars, both formally and informally, often structure the information historians are able to retrieve. In presenting a personal "ethnography of the archive," this essay examines the stories and advice that were offered to me in encounters that I had with people who inhabit the archive—archivists, librarians, and other scholars—as a way of exploring the national and political investments that many archives and archive dwellers maintain in spite of a quickly globalizing and transnational world.[2]

This essay seeks to expand our definitions of the kinds of knowledges that archives produce by destabilizing the notion that archives are only places of impersonal encounters with printed documents. As Nicholas Dirks and Ann Stoler have argued, a complete ethnography of the archive examines the logic of the archive, its forms of classification, ordering, and exclusions.[3] As well, however, I would argue that an ethnography of the archive should include accounts of our exchanges with the people we meet and dialogue with in the process of our research. Doing research in archives in which we are "foreign" (in one way or another) is particularly fraught. As Jeff Sahadeo shows in his essay in this volume, the archive is an important "contact zone" that brings foreign scholars together with indigenous scholars and archivists, often producing a confrontation over what counts as history. When historians research colonial histories drawing largely from documents that are housed within the archives of colonizing and colonized nations, safeguarded by civil servants whose own relationship to the archive is a central part of the historian's archival encounter, the histories we write are inextricably bound up with archive stories. By telling these stories explicitly, we can remain mindful of the very powerful political and nationalist investments that continue to gird historical narratives, particularly when our projects challenge the history that those committed to maintaining the archive would like us to write and record.

My research topic was on local women who cohabited with or married European men in the long eighteenth century, circa 1760 to 1840, that coincided with roughly the first century of British rule in India. Represented in many historical accounts as a golden age in which racial hierarchies were nonexistent, the coupling of white men and brown women represented the tolerance observed between Britons and Indians in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth.[4] Sometimes partnered with a lowercase orientalism, in which East India Company men studied Asian languages and cultures for pleasure and curiosity, living conjugally

with a native woman was often read as a sign of living like a native, participating in local culture to its fullest, and reflecting the most productive (and reproductive) aspects of early Anglo-Indian "friendship."[5] For my own part, I have always been suspicious that these relationships were as carefree and consensual for the native women as they were for the men, so I started the project hoping to find out more about how women became involved in these relationships, what sorts of cultural and ethnic borders they crossed, and what kinds of racial, class, and gender dynamics structured their experiences.

Although my project was an investigation into the intimate domestic lives of British men living in India some two hundred years ago, it impinged greatly on the public perceptions that Indians and Britons today have of their past. My experience of doing research demonstrated that this shared history between Britain and India was hotly contested, given their respective nationalist narratives. In India, both in Calcutta and in New Delhi where I did my research, many archivists and librarians denied that native women became sexually involved with European men. In the process of delegitimizing the topic as an appropriate one for writing a dissertation, they marginalized the practice of interracial cohabitation as something that was "not respectable" or, alternately, "something Muslim women did." Distaste for the notion of interracial sex involving Indian (read: Hindu) women was expressed to me many times over by historians, archivists, librarians, and various library hangers-on, even security guards with time to waste, as they examined the contents of my purse. Much as in Craig Robertson's account of his encounter with the archives of the United States in this volume, these men and women acted as gatekeepers to the archive, controlling and mediating my entry into Indian archives by stressing what they thought was "important" to archive and catalogue. Their antipathy, by no means uncommon in my travels through the archives of northern India, reflects the ways in which contemporary anxieties about the sexual purity of Hindu Indian women are folded into a historical imagination in which "good" Indian women were necessarily Hindu and only ever slept with men of their own race, religion, and caste.

Perhaps because I am female, and was then young and unmarried, and so perceived as naïve about the workings of interracial sex, my presence invited advice of many sorts. My own status as a high-caste Hindu woman was often referred to; one gentleman in the Calcutta High Court library, upon noting that I seemed like a girl of a good family, asked if my parents knew what type of research I was doing. Another gentleman, while delivering my documents to me, noted that what I was working on was not particularly savory or respectable. The equivalent of "what is a nice girl like you doing working on something like this?," these questions highlight how closely our topics for study make us the objects of everyday surveillance within the archive. One archivist, upon hearing that my topic was on something that was, in his mind, mundane and everyday could not believe that I was doing a Ph.D. at Berkeley, an American institution that he held in high esteem; after some convincing that I was a "real" historian, he shook his head and concluded that Berkeley had once been a fine institution—implying that Berkeley's perceived downfall in academic circles was directly related to my outré topic. While I was busy reading the archives, I found the archives were reading me.

In London, on the other hand, from the white-haired old ladies doing genealogical research to the young Cambridge-educated journalists and the many librarians and archivists who staff the reference desk at the India Office Library, it seemed that everyone I talked to about my topic was keen to tell me about their familial connection to a native woman. Among those doing family history in the rooms of the old India Office Library on Blackfriars Road, I became a type of resident expert, helping them to decode the archival proof of native women, particularly since the colonial archives had been especially effective at restricting the ways in which the names of native women were registered in colonial records.[6] For some Britons, admitting that one is mixed-race, even a little, has recently become a sign of a cosmopolitan identity, making light brown into the new black in cool Britannia, at least in some circles. Despite the longstanding ambivalence Britain has had in its dealings with black Britons, library goers and archive hangers-on in Britain seemed especially drawn to accounts of cross-cultural sex.[7] Indeed, the recent bestseller by William Dalrymple, *White Mughals*, about a British political agent in the court at Hyderabad and his love affair with a young native noblewoman, has sold over sixty thousand copies in the British Isles, showing the extent of the mainstream appeal for colonial histories of interracial sex.[8] Dalrymple's book, a true story skillfully dramatized by his narrative style, has proved so enticing that it has been optioned for a Hollywood film treatment and a play at the National Theater.

These differing claims about the relative acceptability of histories of interracial conjugality suggest that miscegenation and racial hybridity have an appeal in Britain that they certainly do not in India. As noted, to be mostly white, with a tinge of brown, is to be cosmopolitan for some in an increasingly multicultural Britain. Having a native woman as ancestor perhaps gives people license to claim they are not racist or intolerant of racial and ethnic difference. While this is an admirable sign of cross-cultural and interracial appreciation, a celebration of miscegenation serves a particular type of postcolonial agenda in Britain: it diminishes the overall violence of colonial activity and promotes a vision (not always accurate) of a culturally and racially tolerant postimperial twenty-first-century Britain in which Indians are putatively claimed as biologically and culturally part of the colonial family. The problems of racial tension are overwritten by narratives of familial sentiment, conjugal and companionate love, and more important, by narratives of romantic intimacy that suggest that both sides were somehow uplifted by the multilayered experience of the colonial encounter.

For many Indians, to have the slightest tinge of white is to be racially contaminated, socially suspect, and more important, insufficiently Indian. To the many Indian archivists, librarians, and scholars that I spoke with, the idea that "Indian" women slept with Europeans was only acceptable if they were marked as Muslim—or Portuguese; this type of marking implicitly supported the common belief that only women of marginal groups were likely to be sexually promiscuous with foreigners and other outsiders. This sanitized history of interracial sex rewrites India's colonial centuries as ones in which Hindus remained racially pure by observing endogamy, Hindu women remained sexually faithful to their tribes and castes, and Europeans slept only with women who were marginal to Indian society. The impression many had that only non-Hindu women slept with foreigners and that this was not an appropriate history to write is consonant with a longstanding and enduring vision of history that dates to the colonial era in which non-Hindu, low-caste women are not seen as Indian or as rightful subjects of India's pasts and history.[9] Moreover, relying on what has become a hegemonic female ideal in Hindutva ideology, these often expressed views positing Hindu female virtue and purity versus Muslim promiscuity show the ways in which communal categories remain very prominent in mainstream and common cultural perceptions within India about what kinds of topics are worthy for history dissertations on colonial South Asia.

In both nations, these competing visions of history intersect with political and cultural agendas that reflect how contemporary Britons and Indians identify and affiliate with their respective postcolonial nations. As in Sahadeo's account of the Central State Archive in Uzbekistan below, there might as well have been a sign over the door of the archives I visited that read "Without the past there is no future." By consolidating and defending national identifications with particular pasts, the archive dwellers and hangers-on I encountered showed me that researching, sharing, and writing histories are necessarily shaped by highly politicized visions of India's and Britain's future. In India, colonialism, in spite of all its cataclysmic effects, becomes a historical development that left (and continues to leave) the contemporary middle-class Indian (again, read: Hindu) family untouched and "pure." Enacting a version of Partha Chatterjee's model middle-class Bengali household, narratives that deny the existence of interracial sex protect the putative Indian family's women from the "material" and penetrative forces of colonialism, particularly European men.[10] In Britain, common references to an Indian granny or half-sister or niece seemed to bring empire into biological if not psychological proximity at a time when the British empire itself is territorially small and ebbing away from mainstream awareness.

If the goal of transnational histories is to unsettle national narratives, what is clear is that people who identify as "British" or "Indian" are deeply invested in maintaining certain forms of national belonging, providing historians of empire with an important challenge to the project of breaking down the boundaries between metropole and colony, between colonizers and those who were formerly colonized.[11] While I am largely sympathetic with Tony Ballantyne's ground-breaking strategies for examining archives transnationally and undercutting national histories, we can make more of the confrontations between different national histories and the ways in which they produce competing fictions to which men and women become attached as a part of forming national affiliations.[12] My use of "fiction" here is not meant to pit literature against history but to examine the productive tensions between the two. Following Doris Sommer, who argues that national literatures act as allegories for the nation because they enable communities to imagine and discipline themselves as a collective,[13] my goal is to examine the ways in which the types of stories people told me in relation to my project indicated their investments in their respective nations and the ways in which they felt I should conduct my research. Many Indians were reluctant to admit that their history was shared in such an intimate way with Britons and discouraged such a topic, while some Britons were keen to acknowledge a certain level of familial and conjugal attachment and applauded my project. This disjuncture often affected the documents that became available to me in the archives in which I did research.

While I am describing archival encounters at a particular postcolonial moment, 1997, the year that India celebrated fifty years of independence from Britain, the moment is marked by the reestablishment of some recognizably colonial dynamics. The newfound British predilection for claiming native women as part of one's ancestry might be seen by some as an extension of an old role of colonizer, recolonizing the Indian family yet again and adopting native women to the British fold. Indian distaste for the notion of colonial concubinage might be seen as reinstating Indians into the role of the colonized, shoring up the borders and keeping those who are threatening to a putatively national culture outside the family and the nation. What these split histories do is to remind us that a shared colonial past continues to influence how Britons and Indians define themselves against each other, with Britons desiring histories that remind them of their ability to be intimate with members of other groups, be sympathetic and accepting of others, cosmopolitan and open-minded, and Indians wanting to forget that colonialism touched all members of Indian society, even the most marginal, outcast women who took up with European men. The futures that are being imagined by these nations require an acceptable past, one in which archival proof of interracial sex becomes a highly contested set of events.

Although this is a diagnosis of a particular moment in Britain's and India's postcolonial present, the relative acceptability of histories or accounts of interracial conjugality has had mixed fortunes in the course of colonial history on both sides of the colonial divide. Until recently, British documents represented a distinct reluctance to record the interracial dalliances of its officials. Elsewhere, I have discussed the obstacles of finding proof of native women in eighteenth-century British documents, which were strongly invested in registering subaltern female subjects in particular ways, often renaming women with nicknames or European names or leaving them unnamed in baptismal records. Reading "along the grain," I argued that early colonial archives erased or partially registered native women's names in order to suppress their existence in colonial households and families.[14] This process of erasure and selective recording continued well into the twentieth century, when *Bengal Past and Present*, the journal of the Calcutta Historical Society, published the baptism and marriage registers of St. John's Church in Calcutta, but did not print the names of "natural" or illegitimate and mixed-race children who were born to European men and native women. As the compiler, Walter K. Firminger, noted, "The names of natural children when that circumstance is stated have for obvious reasons been omitted."[15] While excluding the proper and complete personal names of native women in wills and church records was a way in which early colonial record keepers kept native women out of the historical records, excising mixed-race children in records reprinted in the early twentieth century was a continuation of strategies to mask the level of interracial sex that British men were engaged in during the eighteenth century. That such an "obvious" exclusion in printed records made sense to the imagined reader suggests the ways in which the imagined community of the English-reading audience of *Bengal Past and Present* constituted itself.

While English-language records kept by colonial officials were largely silent about the lives and experiences of native women, vernacular records from the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century are even less forthcoming of evidence on subaltern women. Persian-language histories, often the dominant local source until the 1830s, appear completely uninterested in recording the lives of poorer, lower-caste, and working women who indeed formed the bulk of the populations that became involved with European men.[16] When I raised the question of vernacular sources in informal discussions with archivists, academics, and family members, what came up repeatedly were novels written and published in Bengali in the early twentieth century. While I suspect that most of my informants suggested I read these as texts that represented history from a Bengali point of view, the novels—and their widespread popularity as part of the canon of Bengal literature—demonstrate the level of awareness that many Bengali readers have of interracial relationships in the colonial era, in spite of the constant disavowals that only marginal subjects, like Muslims and mixed-race Portuguese, engaged in sexual activities with Europeans. Nonetheless, these novels show how such sexual transgressions might be resolved or incorporated into a particular type of nationalist history. Paradoxically, much like British colonial records in which the names of native women were erased or carefully suppressed, in many Bengali novels, the figure of the native woman or mother remains on the margins, thereby containing

the figure of disrespectability so she does not contaminate the moral and social order of the larger body politic.

Two novels were most often mentioned to me when I did research in India. Written in Bengali, they are set in the shadow of interracial sexual contact that lurks throughout the narrative but is never explicitly addressed. *Gora*, by Rabindranath Tagore (1924), profiles the story of Gourmohun Mukherjee, a Brahmin living in Calcutta who becomes increasingly convinced that the way to reform Hindu society is to preserve orthodox caste-based practices. Nicknamed Gora, which colloquially means the equivalent of "Whitey," a surprise ending—albeit foreshadowed by the title of the book—revealed that Gourmohun was fathered by an Irishman. The explicitly ecumenical and nationalist tone of the book, marked by various references to religious and ethnic tolerance, disavowing caste prejudices, and securing a spiritual high ground, is balanced against Gora's simple-minded intolerance for lower-caste members of society, for the uneducated, the poor. When it is revealed that Gora had an Irish father (his mother is assumed to be a native, but she is never named), his worldview comes crashing down, and he realizes how the nationalist vision of tolerance and open-mindedness is better for India's identity than his own vision of orthodox Brahmin superiority. Tagore's fable played out through Gora suggests that European white racial prejudices fractured India by creating intolerance between whites and others, between high-castes and low-caste and between Hindu and Muslim. By bringing Gora into the Rabindrik nationalist vision, rather than excluding him because he was not completely Indian, tolerance becomes the hallmark of modern Indianness and serves as Gora's final redemption.[17]

Another novel, *Saptapadi* by Tarashankar Bandhopadhyay (1943), is the story of a local doctor, a converted Christian.[18] Through flashbacks, we find out that the doctor had a friendship in college with a young British girl named Rina Brown which turned romantic. They were prevented from marrying because she was British and he was Indian, yet he converted to Christianity to prove his devotion to her. She renounced him, noting that only a Hindu could change his religion at an instant, and he turned to helping the rural poor during World War II. As the story moves between the doctor's life as a general do-gooder, living among poor villagers, and his past living in the city, the juxtaposition between the insularity of village life and the cosmopolitanism of urban life is put into stark relief. This rural-urban split is breached one day when an American soldier appears in the village with a drunken woman, who is understood to be his sexual companion, and the doctor is asked to take care of her. In the process, the villagers observe the loud, uncouth behavior of the American, who verbally abuses the woman, calling her a bitch and a whore, and implying that her drunkenness is endemic to her character. The doctor rescues her from the abusive man and discovers that she is his old friend, Rina Brown. By reversing the British narrative of rescue, the Indian doctor becomes the savior of this young woman who is presumed British, an alleged prostitute, drunken and destitute.

In the final pages of the story, we find out that Rina Brown was the mixed-race daughter of her British father and her Indian ayah. The ayah, who remained in the background throughout the story, was deeply attached to Rina and was also the target of the Brown household's jokes. Mr. Brown and his new wife derided her for being slow; she was accused of being superstitious; worst of all, Rina treated her as an embarrassment to her British friends. After Rina discovered her ancestry, she became indelibly depressed and ended up as a camp follower to an American regiment. In the end, Rina marries Charles Clayton, the doctor's old school friend and the son of a British officer; by moving Rina into a more British social milieu, the narrative removes her from her Indian roots and suggests she will only gain respectability when she returns to England with her British husband. This book was made into a film that is periodically shown on Bengali Doordarshan (Indian state television).

As snapshots of society in Bengal, which was the capital of British operations on the subcontinent from the middle of the eighteenth century until 1911, these novels evoke the ways that Bengalis felt and feel about a history of having white colonizers in their midst. Reversing British stereotypes of Bengalis as effeminate and physically slight, Bengalis sketched Europeans as lumbering, clumsy, and not especially bright.[19] In *Gora*, the protagonist is described as "incredibly white, his complexion untouched by any pigment." He was tall, big-boned, "with fists like the paws of a tiger." Compared to his friend, Binoy-bhusan Chatterji, who is described as a well-educated refined Bengali gentleman, Gora was unable to keep up in school and relied on his friend to shepherd him through his exams.[20] More significant, these novels remain important parts of Bengal's postcolonial imaginary, frequently invoked in discussions about the practice of interracial conjugality and making sense of a past that few think of as respectable. If "making empire respectable" was a key concern of colonizers, these novels and the object lessons embedded within them suggest that respectability was a similarly central anxiety for those who were colonized.[21]

These literary accounts of colonial India remind us that India and Indian national identity were inextricably but uneasily linked with British colonialism. As the "intimate enemy" within the realm of nationalist consciousness,[22] Britain's metaphorical intimacy with India was replayed through literary subjects who were the biological products of British-Indian sexual intimacy; while some of these subjects, like Gora or Rina Brown, are undone by their parentage, others triumphed over this disability by adhering to the norms and behavior of the Bengali middle-classes.

Common to literary discourses in Bengali and to colonial archives of British rule in India is a shared understanding that native mothers of Anglo-Indian offspring remain on the margins of the story. British archives were especially effective at containing the effects of sex between colonizers and colonized by recording only the names of those who were legitimately considered parts of the European community. Similarly, Bengali literary archives selectively recorded characters with whom the reader could identify, which often did not include the figure of the native women who crossed racial, religious, and ethnic boundaries to form conjugal units with Europeans. Gora is found abandoned by his unnamed mother who states that his father was an Irishman; Rina is cared for by a woman who she never realizes is her mother. By removing the indigenous woman from direct involvement in the narrative and keeping her sexual transgressions out of the historical and literary record, the imagined domestic spaces of British India exist as pure, contained scenes in which British middle-class domesticity is staged as simultaneous to—but alternate from—Bengali middle-class domesticity.[23] In these parallel British and Bengali family imaginaries, the marginal body of the indigenous mother is made invisible in order to sustain British and Indian fictions that the national family remained unsullied under colonial contact. As Ann Stoler has noted, "If this [the family] was one of the principal discursive sites where bourgeois culture defined and defended its interests, in colonial perspective, it was also one of the key sites in which racial transgressions were evident and national identities formed."[24]

The divergent attitudes that archive dwellers in India and Britain expressed about my topic in 1997 are diagnostic, as I have noted, of the ways that histories serve particular political and national aims. More important, perhaps, were the ways in which these competing attitudes led me to very different types of sources. No one I met in Britain suggested I read vernacular historical novels of the early twentieth century, while few in India recommended that I spend months (as I ultimately did) reading East India Company proceedings volumes of wills, church records, and court cases and combing them for fragments of evidence about native women's lives. Without my archival informants, it is clear that my road to finding archival material for my project would have been very different. As Tony Ballantyne notes of his own work in his essay in this volume, the intellectual labor behind retrieving archival documents was just as crucial as the history I eventually wrote.

Although archivists at the India Office Library were unfailingly enthusiastic, documents that spoke directly to my topic were difficult to find, highlighting how marginal the question of native women, however beloved they might have been to their European masters, keepers, and descendants, were to the politics of colonial governance at the turn of the nineteenth century. In Britain, ways of cataloging and listing the archive's contents made it extremely unlikely that I would easily find proof of native women's lives since most of the documents are ordered by and collected under categories like revenue, judicial, foreign, political—all matters that likely barely touched these women's lives. Ironically, in addition to the novels, the most useful and productive colonial-era documents that I found in Calcutta were largely uncatalogued and out of chronological order, tied up in bundles with bits of twine, putting documents from 1765 with documents from 1896 next to each other, lumping civil suits with criminal cases, cases of petty theft, vagrancy, and domestic violence. Many of the materials I found there were about matters which were deemed unworthy of transport to London, perhaps because they were seen as inconsequential to the order and profitability of the colonial government, and so remained in the dusty rooms of the High Court, St. John's Church, and the national archives and library. While the haphazard nature of these piles of unkempt documents—unbound, wormy, dusty, dog-eared—indicated the lack of concern the present government of India has for colonial-era documents, the disorder contravened the aims and logics of colonial governance. The chaotic way in which these documents were kept forced me to look through all the documents and not just those in particular categories or bound volumes that I was directed to by archivists, librarians, and card catalogues.

Looking through unsorted and uncatalogued material is perhaps not the most efficient way to do historical research, nor does it guarantee a productive outcome. But the comparison between how colonial documents are stored in Britain and in India shows that the guardians of these respective national archives and libraries guard and protect the national past in different ways, yet to comparable ends. In Britain, where many were sure that I would find what I needed, archivists and librarians pointed me to various indexes and reference aids; what neither I nor they recognized was the degree to which colonial Britons were determined to keep evidence of sexual activity across racial lines from being recorded as a part of Britain's colonial legacy. In India, although the archive and records were rich and dense because they were disordered and comprised accounts and events that colonial officials felt were better left in India, archivists and other inhabitants of the archive warned me that my topic was unsavory and unsuitable as a subject of "proper" history, discouraging me from my pursuit of such a topic because this past has no value in the present. In Britain, then, recorders of the past—from the middle of the eighteenth century to Firminger in the early twentieth—have already sanitized Britain's colonial history of its sexual transgressions, while in India, modern-day gatekeepers keep histories of India clean of interracial conjugality in myriad ways. In their own ways, Britain's and India's archives produce silences that reinforce each other on a topic that is, if nothing else, a history of transgressive behavior that threatens the respectability and racial purity of the family and of the nation. The project I chose was a history of "private" behaviors in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth, yet its impact was central to how the "public" of both these nations have seen and continue to see themselves throughout the twentieth century.

History is a discipline with its own rules and standards. Historical research as it is commonly carried out in government archives disciplines historians toward particular national narratives that are appealing or acceptable to those who are the archive's gatekeepers. My archive stories were informative to the project because they demonstrated the ways in which the people I encountered attempted to discipline me into writing a history that resonated for them. Challenging my efforts to put Britain and India into a single frame by constructing such a topic, my archival encounters with Indian and British archivists, librarians, and other archive inhabitants showed that they had radically differing visions of this shared past and even diverged as to what might be suitable material for a historical research project. Nonetheless, it is crucial to put British and Indian national narratives and archival agendas into tension with one another, precisely because such a framing destabilizes the conceit that one's own national archive is the only site from which histories can be written. This kind of strategy undermines the archive's nationalist aims. By incorporating our archival confrontations and encounters in our writing and research practices, we continue to interrogate and unsettle the ways in which history writing remains an important component of forming national affiliations.

As Carolyn Steedman has suggested, inhaling dust is a critical part of doing historical work: the constant circulation of dust and historical narratives is why historians keep returning to the archives.[25]

In the summer of 2000, I returned to the Oriental and India Office Collections in London to do some more research on my project. Having filed the dissertation, I finally knew what I was looking for, and I continued my quest. I also found out at that time that I was newly pregnant, blessed with a very keen sense of smell that was meant to warn me away from smelly soft cheeses and other types of bacteria-laden goods. This new sense of smell also made me easily nauseated when I was in the proximity of the orange-red leather (and its fragments) of the East India Company's records.[26] In what was a case of real *mal d'archives*, I found myself rushing out to the bathroom upon receiving my documents for the day.

Thus I started on a new project: one that is based in the twentieth century (making it not quite so smelly or worm-ridden). My new project is about two terrorist parties that were founded by Hindu *bhadralok* (middle class) in Bengal in the early part of the twentieth century and were galvanized in resistance to the first partition of Bengal in 1905. Organized in cells by students, young professionals, and religious leaders, the movement had a strong ideological component that was expressed by acts of political violence, such as blowing up buildings, trains, and homes, assassinating colonial officials, and robbing banks and post offices. One of the most interesting elements of this movement was that it originated from the bhadralok classes, those who were most likely to have benefited from British education and paradoxically felt resentful of the limits imposed by the colonial state. Many of these men and women had traveled to Britain and had been radicalized upon their return. Stunned at the revolt of its most loyal cadres, British officials called these men "gentlemanly terrorists" and grappled for over a generation over how to deal with insurgents from the elite classes of Bengal who had previously been subservient.

When I returned to India in the winter of 2002–3, I found myself facing some of the same archivists, librarians, and scholars I had met on previous trips. Upon explaining what I was doing, they full-heartedly embraced this new project, telling me that the subject had long been ignored by "professional" historians and felt that a fresh look at a part of Bengal's tradition of political violence was one that was a much-needed corrective to the narrative of Gandhian nonviolent resistance. By "professional," many meant that the project needed to be taken up by a foreign historian who could bring international attention to the topic. For many, a history on Bengali terrorism would restore Bengal, which has long been marginalized in histories of the independence movement by Gandhi and the rise of the Congress party, to its rightful place in the struggle to rid India of British rule. Many admitted that their ancestors had been political militants who had spent time in jail for committing violence against the colonial state and hoped that my project would restore glory to a band of gentlemanly assassins, robbers, and bandits. My local beadle, the archivist who had initially been suspicious that I was at Berkeley, concluded knowingly that he knew I would never get a Ph.D. working on that other, less respectable project and that he felt sure that if I kept my nose to the grindstone in researching this worthy historical topic, I would eventually be granted a degree. Dependent on the beadle for access to the archives, I was too timid to say that I already had a Ph.D. and a tenure-track job.

While I suppose I should be grateful for the unmitigated support for my new project on revolutionary terrorists, I find the applause for this topic a telling sign of what kinds of historical research are considered legitimate or commendable because they conform to and consolidate nationalist agendas of the past and of the present. In addition to wondering whether we need another history of a privileged elite—Bengali bhadralok are noticeably overrepresented in South Asian histories—I wonder why a project involving political violence and terrorism seems more appropriate and respectable for a woman of a good family to do research on than one on interracial sex. As of yet, no one in India has asked what a nice girl like me is doing studying a group of men and women the British would call terrorists.

Notes

1 On scholars' accounts of research, see Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994). On objectivity and history, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

2 On the transnational perspective, see Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–4; Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 18; Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India* (New York: Routledge, 2003), xxiv–xxviii; and Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Empire: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 16–18. On the ethnology of archives, see Nicholas Dirks, "Annals of the Archive: Ethnographic Notes on the Sources of History," in Brian Axel, ed., *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form," in Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh, eds, *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002).

3 Dirks, "Annals of the Archive"; Stoler, "Colonial Archives"; see also Nicholas Dirks, "The Crimes of Colonialism: Anthropology and the Textualization of India," in Peter Pels and Oscar Salemink, eds., *Colonial Subjects: Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

4 The classic statement of this position is T. C. P. Spear, *The Nabobs: English Social Life in 18th-Century India* (New York: Penguin, 1963); see also Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).

5 The term friendship is taken from Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 15–16. See also Rosanne Rocher, "British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government," in Carol A. Breckinridge and Peter van der Veer, eds., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

6 For more on this, see Durba Ghosh, "Decoding the Nameless: Gender, Subjectivity, and Historical Methodologies in Reading the Archives of Colonial India," in Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, Modernity, 1660–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

7 For manifestations of anti-black prejudice in Britain, see, for instance, Paul Gilroy, *"There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": The Cultural Politics of Race and*

Nation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Bikhu Pareth et al., *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, commissioned by the Runnymede Commission (London: Profile Books, 2000); Paul Rich, *Race and Empire in British Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Laura Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

8 E-mail communication with William Dalrymple, August 11, 2003. And see Dalrymple, *The White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (London: HarperCollins, 2002).

9 Uma Chakravarti, "What Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past," in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

10 Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in Sangari and Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women*.

11 For Britain, current attachments to the nation as such have been well examined by Antoinette Burton, "Who Needs the Nation? Interrogating 'British History,'" *Journal of Historical Sociology* 10 (1997): 227–48; and "When Was Britain? Nostalgia for the Nation at the End of the 'American Century,'" *Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003): 359–74.

12 Tony Ballantyne, "Rereading the Archive and Opening Up the Nation-State: Colonial Knowledge in South Asia (and Beyond)," in Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

13 Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 30–51.

14 Ghosh, "Decoding the Nameless."

15 "Baptisms at Calcutta, 1759–1766," compiled and annotated by W. K. Firminger, *Bengal Past and Present* 5 (1910): 325–32.

16 Indrani Chatterjee, "Testing the Local against the Colonial Archive," *History Workshop Journal* 44 (1997): 215–24.

17 Notably, Gora is born of an Irish father, not a Scot or an Englishman; this detail brought the contemporary Irish struggle for independence into India's nationalist imaginary. Gora joining Rabindranath's nationalist community symbolically joined the two anticolonial resistance movements.

18 Tarashankar Bandhopadhyay, *Saptapadi*, in *Tin Kahini* (Calcutta: Bengal Publishing Ltd., 1994; original printing, 1943). Saptapadi, which translates to "seven steps," signifies the seven steps of the Hindu marriage ceremony; after seven steps together, a couple is said to be wedded through eternity.

19 See Indira Chowdhury, *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), especially chaps. 2 and 6. See also Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

20 Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora*, (Calcutta: Subarnalekha, 1978; 1st ed., 1924), 6–7.

21 Ann Laura Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures," *American Ethnologist* 16 (1989): 634–60.

22 See Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); see also Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

23 For more on the construction of an alternate modernity among Bengali bourgeois classes in the domestic arena, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), chaps. 5–6; and his "The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British India," *Subaltern Studies* VIII (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

24 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 137.

25 Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

26 This is apparently a common illness striking those who work with leather from East India. See Steedman, *Dust*, p. 26.

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