

“CON-FUSING” EXOTICA

Producing India in U.S. Advertising

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There is a long history in the United States of using race as a factor in establishing cultural, economic, and political membership in the country. Because mass media are a major arena where the struggle over national (racial) identity is played out, the lack of any or diverse images of minority groups in mainstream media is both significant and dangerous. Activist organizations such as the National Council of La Raz (NCLR), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), along with numerous scholars, have documented the paucity of representations of African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans in the media for decades. They have also complained that even when these groups are shown, their images remain narrow and clichéd. African Americans, for example, are shown as lazy and prone to criminal activity and violence (Dyson, 1996). Latinos are shown as cunning, ready to live by siphoning off of the system, and driven by primal urges. Native Americans, whose images are all too rare, are shown as primitive and simplistic (Kilpatrick, 1999), unaware of or unwilling to join “civilized” society. When confronted with these problems, media producers often point to the low ratio of these minority groups in the larger population and their lack of disposable income, which makes these groups irrelevant or marginally relevant

to advertisers. Although this could, to some extent, explain the absolute absence of complex and multivalenced images or any images at all of African Americans, Native Americans, or Latinos, it does not even begin to give us answers as to why communities such as Indian Americans, who indeed have the desired disposable income, are ignored by the media.

Indians have been part of the American social and cultural landscape for centuries (Leonard, 1997; Prashad, 2000; Takaki, 1989). Yet they have been systematically written out, erased, silenced, and marginalized in any mainstream picture of America. In fact, absence, invisibility, and silence are the main tropes by which India and Indians in America are "re-presented." This chapter examines how media, in general, and advertising, in particular, produce a commodified and an Orientalist vision of India that simultaneously erases indigenous peoples out of the landscape or puts them in the background. It traces this erasure to the racist immigration policies of this country, which have redrawn ethnic and race lines continually to maintain some kind of "purity" for the country. The chapter also connects this visual racial cleansing to the monetarist policies of U.S. capitalist economy, which has needed South Asian labor but has never been able to come to terms with the presence of this community in the U.S. landscape. This has led to a situation where Indians in America, even if they have been naturalized citizens for generations, are treated as sojourners rather than as immigrants, people needed, as Vijay Prashad (2000) has said, for their labor, not their lives.

In his pivotal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said examines how the West has constructed the Orient through scholarly works in disciplines such as history, archaeology, philology, and philosophy; through artistic representations; and through travel literature. This construction, he says, is neither apolitical nor happenstance. Using French philosopher Michel Foucault's notion of "discourse" to explain the

relationship between power and knowledge,¹ Said (1978) says the knowledge that was produced about the Orient was actually an ideological tool in the colonial ambitions and warfare of Europe. Because the chief function of Orientalism was "to control, manipulate, even incorporate what is manifestly a different world" (p. 12), he says Orientalist discourse about the East supported the enterprise of colonialism itself. Thus, analyzing the images produced by the Orientalist discourses is crucial to understanding how colonialism operates; it reveals more about the imperial ambitions of the West than any "essence" about the represented cultures.

In a variety of writings, Said and subsequent scholars investigating Orientalism have shown that Orientalist travel literature, scholarship, and art constructed non-Western cultures as unchanging and "historyless"; as mysterious, sexually decadent, and indolent; and steeped in traditions that kept them backward. This resulted in a dialectic between "self" and "other," between the familiar "us" and the peculiar "them." Because the study of the "orient" began with a fascination and desire for it in the first place, it gave rise to the exoticization of this "other." Representations about the Orient, in other words, worked to create clear and fixed demarcations between Europe and "others" and resulted in standards of inclusion and exclusion. They provided the foundational dichotomies of modern-premodern and primitive-civilized, which were crucial to Europe's own self-identity and the maintenance of its hegemony over the colonized.

Though Said's work examined the Orientalist literatures of the 19th century about the Middle East only,² the same regimes of representation continue to mark the images of other non-Western cultures being circulated even today. Scholars have found Orientalist imagery in contemporary Hollywood cinema (Shohat & Stam, 1994), in literature (Viswanathan, 1989), in fashion, and in news (Said, 1981). Though Orientalism in advertising has been common

in the United States since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, little work has been done on examining representations of Indians or India that evoke Orientalist discourse either explicitly or implicitly.

This chapter contends that the most frequent representation of Indians in contemporary advertising is through absence. Far from being a simple omission in the linguistic and visual iconography of advertising, this is a significant strategy changing the nature of the image we do see and the way we read them. India and Indians are at one and the same time wiped out as subjects but reinserted as objects of Orientalist gaze so that ultimately they are defined within the parameters of "exotica" and the "otherness" that so often demarcates Orientalist discourse. This simultaneous absence-presence allows the representational apparatus to achieve several things at once. First, absence helps reinforce a group's already-held location in the power structure. Thus, although whiteness asserts its position in the social structure by its ability to remain unnamed,³ the absence of South Asian Americans reinforces their absence in the power structure. In both cases, the group's image and identity relies on the already constructed regimes of powerful/powerless. Second, at a time when the processes of globalization have generated a sense of borderlessness and deterritorialization both economically and culturally, absence makes it possible for media empires to achieve a racially cleansed visual environment that reinforces the notion of who is "us" and who is "them," who is "in" and who is "out."⁴ Third, absence also allows those in power to recode the cultural identities of minority groups such as Indians in a way so that they can be used in a war against other minority groups. Thus, at times Indian Americans are constructed as the "usurping hordes" and at other times as a "model minority." Both images serve to fan incendiary interminority community hatred and are used to keep all minorities in check. This changing image of the Indian American is very much in the tradition of the fluctuating

popular iconography of the non-European immigrant, and as scholars such as Lisa Lowe (1996) have pointed out, it has always reflected national anxieties.

In recent years, India, along with other Third World countries such as Pakistan and Taiwan, has been an easy source of cheap labor for the United States. Increasingly, U.S. companies have turned to these populations to keep their competitive edge. This has resulted in huge increases in the number of Indians and Indian Americans in the United States. According to the 2000 U.S. census, the Asian Indian population doubled in the past 10 years to 1.7 million, making it the third largest Asian American ethnic group in the United States and the nation's fastest-growing major immigrant group. The educational and income levels of this population are higher than other Asian American groups, whites, Hispanics, or blacks (1990 U.S. census figures). This makes the Indian community the most well educated and prosperous of all ethnic groups in the country. Close to 89% of Indians in the United States have completed high school, 65% have completed college, and 40% have master's or doctorate degrees. In addition, their spending habits rival that of the most credit-happy teenager (Moen, Dempster-McClain, & Walker, 1999).

Social historian Prashad (2000) notes that India entered the popular imaginary in the United States through vaudeville acts and spectacles organized by P. T. Barnum. Both fetishized India as a domain of spirituality and its people as ghastly and mysterious. In fact, Barnum's 1874 Congress of Nations, the 1884 Ethnological Congress, and all the post-1880s circuses paraded midgets from India as savage specimens representing a strange land (Prashad, 2000, pp. 30, 27). At the same time, India was also constructed as the domain of the spiritual and the transcendental both in the works of well-regarded thinkers such as Emerson and Thoreau and by agencies such as Barnum's circuses. This kind of popular Orientalism that reduces the multiplicity and heterogeneity of India and Indian

Americans into either an exoticized and commodified spiritual realm or the well-spring of primitivism is well and alive even today in advertising.

An example of this is a 14-page fashion advertising spread in the March 1997 issue of *Vogue* magazine. It seems to be telling the story of two people traveling along the famous Route 66—they get lost in the desert, they run out of gas, they have problems with their vehicle, but along the way, they also form a sexual bond. The two people represented here are a leggy, blonde female model and a highly feminized Sikh taxi driver.⁵

The first two pages show the cabbie sitting in the "lotus position" on the roof of his cab. His eyes are closed and the tilt of his head indicates that he is praying. He is wearing gaudy orange-bronze pants, a richly patterned paisley shirt in brown and yellow, and a bright red turban. In contrast, the woman, dressed in virginal white, is standing in front of the vehicle with her back to the cab. She has a map in her hand and is pointing in a direction away from where they are. Clearly, they are lost. But whereas she is sophisticated enough to look on a map and set them in the right direction, he is the simple "Third World native" who would rather get his directions from divine inspiration! His very reliance on impotent "traditional" methods rather than modern cartographic instruments such as maps signify him as incompetent and irrational and perhaps serve as a reminder of India's backward status.

When they are not seen as backward and simplistic, Indians are coded as inscrutable, difficult to read. Two photographs of the spread show the woman unwrapping the Sikh's turban. Although this could explain her libidinal attraction toward him—he is a package that needs to be unraveled—it also pointedly reveals the nature of the encounter between the West and the East. As with all Orientalist representations, these photographs inscribe within them the West's post-Enlightenment certitude of its own ability to investigate and know all.

Sex between the two is suggested in a number of photographs. In one, the woman is sitting on the man's lap, happily looking into the camera; he, on the other hand, looks worried and anxious. The cheap curtains behind suggest that they are in a motel room. In another photograph, both are atop the taxicab—he is lying on his stomach and she is sitting facing the camera. Both are eating out of a bucket marked KFC. His very stance and his pleasure at licking a piece of chicken leg fixes him as a childlike person, enjoying the simple pleasures of fast food. The final two photographs show the pair at a diner on Route 66 and later at a gas station. The famed highway, with its association of freedom in the popular imagination, is cleverly inverted here. Route 66 is, perhaps, relevant for the woman. Her quick road affair with a clearly unsuitable man (from a different class, religion, and ethnicity) is tantamount to freedom—freedom from the taboos of miscegenation that continue to exist even today, freedom from a tamed sexuality to wild abandon, and freedom to delve in the unknown and the forbidden. For the Sikh man, however, the folkloric baggage of Route 66 is just a mockery. Throughout the narrative, the power rests with the woman. She is the one in charge and his very happiness—both economical and emotional—rests in her hands. Any question of freedom is absolutely crushed. The "Indian" man is feminized by his clothes and heavy eye makeup, both of which code him as inferior. The ubiquitous taxicab is a pointed signifier of the man's class identity—he is merely a taxi driver. The binaries used in the fashion spread posit the Sikh as backward, unenlightened, lustful, irrational, driven by primal urges, left behind, both untouched by modernity and comically ill-equipped to handle modernity. By and large, he is a bumbling fool. Thus, thwarting the dominant "freedom" iconography of the famed highway, this pictorial reveals a parody of a roadtrip, and a parody of a relationship. Because of the inequality between the partners the

spread is in no way a representation of a desert love story.

Although the *Vogue* pictorial is just one representation of an Indian man, it is still not merely a singular image. Because images gain meaning in relation to each other, this fashion spread becomes understandable only insofar as it invokes a whole host of similar images in history. Moreover, the paucity of any representations of Indians in the U.S. media multiplies the significance of this fashion spread. It reduces all Indian men to a homogeneous thing with neither complexity nor ability to change. It perpetuates the notion that Indian men are weak, primitive, and eager to please whites. It also manages to construct the "Third World native" as both desirable and forbidden, as both repugnant and appealing to some unconscious desires.

The more predominant trend of representing Indians in the United States is through their absence—as a spectral presence. In most cases, Indians are simply erased out of the picture, whereas their clothes, their homes, their cultural practices, and their artifacts are appropriated and used to sell a U.S.-identified product. This erasure conveniently creates the category of the "exotic" as an empty space that can be used to denote both the repulsive and the desired, the fearful and the fascinating, the fantastic and the phantasmatic. Thus, it inscribes within it both a fascination and desire for the exotic.

Ads in magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Esquire*, and *Vogue* show that couture designers often peddle as their own creations traditional products from certain regions of India. For example, an ad for Cole Haan footwear in *Bazaar* shows a pair of feet in leather slippers that bear intricate hand weaving. Clearly, the black-and-white photograph is meant to convey "exotica" as the woman is wearing a skirt with mirror embroidery and a toe ring. Yet there is no mention of the fact that these are the well-known *kohlapuri* slippers, indigenous to the Belgaum district of the southern India

state of Karnatak (SRUTI, 1995, p. 62). Though these slippers are trendy and used by urban Indians all over the country, largely they remain the stock footwear of rural folk because of their sturdy structure and flexibility. However, there is no acknowledgment of the footwear's history and regional origins.

Similarly, an ad for Tommy Hilfiger shows a Caucasian woman wearing a skirt in hues of deep red. Adorning the skirt is heavy embroidery work, and the small mirrors mark it as the famous mirrorwork embroidery of the Kutch region of Gujarat. In yet another ad, this time for Liz Claiborne, a Caucasian woman poses in a deep pink sarong made out of a silk sari. The gold border on the sari and the red *aalta* she wears on her feet all are indelible markers of Indian culture, yet any meaningful signification of India is absent. One final example is a storefront banner at the Body Shop, well-known as one of the biggest robbers of Third World peoples, announcing "Ayurveda: New Word in Healing." As Vaidyanathan (2000) points out, with remarkable gumption, the Body Shop wipes out centuries of history and tradition.

In ad after ad, Indian products are appropriated, even robbed, and then represented as works of haute couture designers whereas Indians are airbrushed or erased out of the picture. At the same time, their clothes (the *kohlapuri* slippers, the Kashmiri *pashmina* shawls, the Kutchi mirrorwork skirt, ritualistic adornments such as bindis and mehndi, touted as "henna tattoos") are appropriated and fetishized. It is a kind of an apolitical exoticism and uninformed ethnic chic that is both calculated and successful—after all, what better way of stripping people of their histories and their art of its oppositional or radical energy than co-opting them and transforming them into a First World consumer good. The couture designers draw their symbolic power and effectiveness precisely by masking and strategically revealing the origins of

their products. The objects are of value so long as they expressly and overtly signify *exotica*—by stressing the exclusive use of hand labor (as opposed to mechanized labor) and by reiterating its unavailability in the West (such as wool from the severely endangered Pashmina goats of the Himalayas, which has made much-desired Pashmina shawls a banned commodity). It is a marker of sophistication, of taste, and of racial awareness. Yet these same objects, when in the hands of native artisans, become a signifier of primitiveness and backwardness. In other words, Indians are symbolically useful to these designers, so long as they remain symbols. In an effective way, thus, capitalism allows this kind of exploitation and even violence to masquerade as racial sensitivity.

A plethora of ads appropriating products from India and other parts of the Third World shows that this robbing is both economical—it exploits artisans, who embroider, weave, and mold, and replaces them by replicating their art through machinery⁶—and cultural—it alienates artisans from their art, sundering the product from them, their histories, and their stories, which are woven into the very fabrics and the very clay of the artifacts. This dual act of reworking and rebranding of goods as “*exotic objects*” and conversely the erasure of cultural identities from other objects produces a generic commodified *exoticism* that knows no market boundaries; it is but one more tool aiding the globalization process.

Another representation frequently used in ads is the association of India, in specific, and the East, in general, with spirituality. The image of a saffron-robed, bearded guru can be seen in a variety of ads ranging from products such as Mementos candy to health insurance. The articulation of spirituality with women’s cosmetics is also very common. Magazine ads for Covergirl and Maybelline cosmetics from 1999 and 2000 looked and read almost identical. Unveiling a new line of orange, pink, and fuchsia lipsticks, both ads invoked the idea of a

transcendental spiritualism “from far and away.” This produces a cultural distancing as the East is seen as the epitome of calmness that serves as a counterpoint to the dynamism and flux of the West.

The essence of *exotic*, spiritual India is also inscribed by an imaginative landscape that includes dark forests and animals. A Sunday newspaper flyer for JC Penney from 1988 announces “Expedition India” urging Americans to “share the spirit of India” by buying consumer goods. The 32-page advertisement promises a brief introduction to that “truly *exotic land*” through a new collection of clothes and handicrafts acquired “from the colorful native bazaars of Delhi.” As usual, any “*native*” is written out or erased from the 8” × 11” photographs in the flyer. Foregrounded are white models in ethnic chic. Indians are usually shown in hordes and/or in ceremonial garb (a military parade, a classical dancer, polo players, a North Indian bride—misabeled) as insets 1/12th the size of the foregrounded photograph. The two unmistakable signifiers of “*exotica*” and “*primitivism*”—a tiger and the Taj Mahal—are prominently featured. The *exotic*, as a trans-Atlantic commodity, is now extended from art and artifacts steeped in antiquity and tradition, to location and animals.

In this Orientalist/popular culture conceptualization, India is spectacularized as a unitary and fixed space—jungle-like, barbarous, remote, and dark. It is a vision of India as static, frozen in space and time, primordial, without a history—as opposed to the West, which is dynamic and a repository of history and change. It is also a space that is simultaneously dangerous and yet holds forbidden promise. It is worth noting here that the essence of India is seen as residing in some religious truth. Again and again, the “*real*” India is seen as the spirit, and sometimes India serves as a metaphor for the soul itself. This notion of the East (and therefore “*India*”), with its qualities of mystery, mysticism, and antiquity, what Prashad (2000) calls “a metaphor of

spirituality in excelsis,” is reinscribed in different forms in popular culture—in editorial copy, in film, in news reports, and in music videos (such as for Madonna’s “Ray of Light” album). Interestingly, this selective appropriation of Indian culture constructs India solely as a mythologized, sanskritized Hindu India. The influence of Islam on India, home to the largest number of Muslims in the world, is completely ignored by the West. It is a representation of India that goes back to the Orientalist historiography of the colonial period. Ironically, absence/erasure of any Indians and their lived experiences allows the “real India” to be constructed as a cultural repository of religious values; after all, India is so well imbricated in popular imagination with the spiritual that it needs no overt mention.

These narrow constructions serve several purposes. First, they, of course, provide the token identity of Indianness. While it removes any sense of guilt about their absence in cultural representation, it also allows an atomized ethnic chic as I have discussed earlier. Second, it fuels white America’s resentment against this “Other.” Although most of the time this resentment remains in the realm of rhetoric, incidents of violence in cities such as New York in recent times and in New Jersey in the late 1980s are a constant reminder of how these fictive constructions play themselves out in the lived world. Finally, as Urmi Merchant (1998) has pointed out in her analysis of photographic art, these images also light up a curious desire for a return to their “homeland” by Indians who see themselves wiped out or reduced by America. Inadvertently, as Merchant says, such constructions reinforce nationalism within the South Asian diasporas because it strengthens a longing to be at “home.”

Media need to stress the heterogeneity of Indians in America—their differences based on class, gender, age, sexuality, and religion—and an identity that is continually in flux, changing as the political and economic climate changes. They need to move away from pictures of a Hindu India

to a more complex, complicated vision of what India truly is—a poly-religious, poly-glott amalgamation of principalities that only in recent years came to be known as a unified state. By politicizing issues of cultural representation through apparently benign practices such as advertising, one can challenge its appropriation and violent exploitation by the West in the name of universality.

Notes ♦

1. According to Foucault, knowledge is not neutral or innocent but implicated in the way power operates
2. The book never really makes it clear what Said means by the “Orient”; however, Malik (1996) suggests that Said seems to be referring mainly to the Middle East
3. Barthes (1979) uses the notion of “ex-nomination” to explain how the bourgeoisie maintains its power by remaining undefined itself and by defining others
4. Unfortunately, according to this analysis, the implication for social change seems limited to erasing absence—that is, increasing and expanding more consciously and critically the images and discourses in order to introduce more dynamism (and resistance) in the cultural construction of race and ethnicity.
5. Interestingly, a Sikh man wearing a turban has become the most used iconic representation of “the male Indian.” Examples can be seen in representations of Indians in Hollywood films, in television shows such as *Seinfeld*, and in numerous ads, like that for Zanadi jeans.
6. See Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

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