University of Alberta

'Live the Way the World Does', or, Reflections on Calcutta as an Allegorical City of Modernity

by

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O Almighty God, the Creator and Preserver of all things in heaven and earth, we the creatures of Thine hand desire to render in all humility the homage due to Thee.

Glory be to Thee in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men:

Glory be to Thee in Thine infinite perfections of Power, Wisdom, and Goodness:

Glory be to Thee for the revelation of these Thy perfections in all Thy gifts of nature and of grace:

Glory be to Thee for the gifts of understanding and knowledge by which Thou hast taught us to search out and apply the wondrous things of Thy Law.

Accept, we beseech Thee, this is our offering of praise and thanksgiving, especially now at this time, when we are about to display the fruits of our handiwork ere brought together. Subdue in us all unworthy pride and self-seeking, and teach us so to labour and use all that comes to our hand that we may ever be found working out the purposes of Thy Holy Will, to the fuller manifestation of Thy Glory and the greater happiness of mankind.

O Heavenly Father who hast knit together all Thy creation in a wonderful order, and hast made all mankind of one blood, to dwell together in unity, replenishing the earth and subduing it, pour down upon us of the abundance of Thy mercy such grace as may draw us to Thyself, and in Thee to each other, in the bonds of love and peace. Lighten our darkness that we and all mankind may know Thee and Thy will concerning us: kindle our affection, that loving Thee we may love the thing which Thou commandest and worthily fulfil the duties of our respective callings.

Bless we pray Thee, Thy servant Victoria, our most gracious Empress, and all the Imperial family: and especially at this time bless and protect thy servant Arthur Duke of Connaught, now called to serve Thee in this land, together with her whom Thou hast given to be the sharer in his life.

Give wisdom, faithfulness, patience to all who in authority, and in their several stations are endeavouring to promote the welfare of this land: and so overrule and order all things for good that peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and piety, may be established here and in the utmost parts of the earth.

Finally with these our praises and prayers, we offer and present unto Thee these fruits of our labours; beseeching Thee to accept them and bless them to our use, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with Thee and the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth, ever one God, world without end, Amen.

—Prayer offered by the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop
of Calcutta, attended by his Chaplain, on the opening of the
Calcutta International Exhibition, 4 December 1883.

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For Alice

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ABSTRACT

Following Walter Benjamin's key insights into modernity and history, this essay analyzes the social and built spaces of post-colonial Calcutta (Kolkata). Weaving personal narrative, ethnography, social theory, and visual analysis, I argue that Calcutta (Kolkata) is a paradigmatic space of modernity. The dissertation begins with a reflection, resolved through Henri Lefebvre's notion of "urban society", on the contemporary, global condition of totalizing urbanization. It narrows its focus through an examination of the tropes of commodity and allegory to read contemporary and historical spaces in Calcutta (Kolkata) as indicative of historical return and standstill. While Benjamin scrutinized multiple commodity forms in his *Arcades Project*, the following project focuses on the discursive transition of one particularly illuminating commodity form, Bengali *pata* painting. It contextualizes the transition of this significant folk art form from its traditional uses in cultural transmission, through its more recent articulation in commodification and exchange values, to its more contemporary reception as an artefact of nationalist identity formation. The role of the modern city space and its place in defining commodified forms of nationalist discourse contextualizes the discussion of the *pata* painting's transition to artefact. The essay concludes by investigating commodity phantasmagoria in both the Calcutta International Exhibition of 1883-4, and the now ruinous, but still surviving, remnants of a 19th century colonial arcade. Calcutta's (Kolkata's) emerging, contemporary consumptive spaces merely repeat previous commodity myths; and, as such, produces the image of Calcutta (Kolkata) as, quintessentially, an urban allegory of modernity, one that uniquely illuminates the multiple tensions and continuing catastrophes of the present.

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Plate 1: Unfinished Saraswati, Kolkata (photo by author, Feb. 2004)

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> Cities like people can be recognized by their walk. Opening his eyes, he would know the place by the rhythm of movement in the streets long before he caught any characteristic detail.
>
> Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities* p.1

Dashanath Saha wakes early. Fog cloaks the city. Its stillness envelopes him as he lies in silence, warm, adjusting to being awake. His eyes, yellowed, slightly bloodshot, alert behind his sleepy, heavy lids, cast about the cracked ceiling. They take in the dusty fan above his head, the green painted iron beams, the faint crack running the length of the wall, the high small windows, the blue curtained closet at the foot of the bed, the pile of clothes in the corner. He listens. His wife and son are breathing deeply. Outside it is vast, quiet, unrelenting. He cannot hear any movement. The city silently reverberates its stories. Stories he has heard of its past, stories told through the innumerable memories of the many he passes everyday, stories told by the few, the present, the intimate: his father, his mother, his wife, his son, his shopmen, himself. Now though, the city is guarded, silent, withholding until later. This later Dasha must now meet. He stirs.

Careful not to wake his wife and young son asleep next to him, he slowly lowers himself to the cold concrete floor. He shuffles out to the tap, past the carved wooden television cabinet where he pauses to scratch his taught belly before stepping over the worn jumble of shoes and sandals at the door. In the toilet, dark becoming greyish in the pre-dawn light, Dasha wets his face. The tap squeaks. Water splashes in heavy loose bunches around his feet. Wiping his hands on his *lungi*, his feet wet from the splash on the floor, he slips on a pair of plastic sandals. Another squeak. He ambles—squee-flip-slap, flip-slap-squee—across the small inner courtyard to the tall green door which opens onto the street.

Perched on an upper wall, a crow silently, eagerly, watches him cross the court yard. Always a crow. The soft greying light of the morning disappears for a moment as he enters the darkened entryway. Its arch, though crumbling, still bears the traces of its colonial makers. Stone curlicues emboss "1828" above the entrance. At one time someone else lived here, maybe a Britisher. The door handle, a twisted iron ring, creaks as it is turned. It is cold to his touch and scrapes against one of the rings on his hand.

Dasha steps over the tall threshold of the inset people-door and out into the street. A street dog, patchy white with black spots and pink sores, big boned but sickly thin with something sulks off, angry at being disturbed. Last night his wife told him it nearly bit one of Oscar's girls when she got too close chasing a ball. He might have to kill it, put it out of its misery. Pulling his lungi to his knees, he squats down facing a wall. Warm piss mixes with the white wet of the stone gutter. It trickles past a few fish bones and the odd pulpy grain of rice. He can smell last night's *dhal* and he shivers with pleasure at the gentle relief. The crow hops watchfully, expectant, on the wall above him. He stands and stiffens with a stretch. He listens again for a moment. The city around him is still and quiet. In the distance he can hear the faint rumble, roar and sing-song toot of a

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lorry. He imagines it big, orange, eyes painted on the front. A taxi answers back. Then quiet, grey fog, the standstill city.

When Dasha steps out onto the street again a few minutes later he is clad in a black Adidas knock-off track suit and some worn running shoes. The track suit he picked up at a stall in the market near Diamond Harbour which sells smuggled goods from Southeast Asia and China. Though it is barely four thirty, a few of his neighbours have also roused. Clad in a brown shawl and smoking, Khan, a policeman, huddles against the chill. Dasha and he nod to each other. It is too early for conversation. The intimacies of the inner space of home are still apparent in both men—sleepy, downcast eyes, shoulders hunched against the day, vague, unfocused thoughts still too personal for daylight. At the end of the narrow lane, a newspaper man on a bicycle rattles by, his papers draped over the handle bars. Collin Street is pale with a grey shroud of morning mist, and the bicycle clatters its stillness.

Though he can only hear him up ahead, Dasha follows the newspaper man out to the intersection. He stops briefly in front of the small street-side Shiva altar. Touching his forehead, he brings his hands together and mumbles a few words. Someone has already left a single incense stick; its smoke is the same texture as the morning mist; slowly, it curls up to mix with the city, melding the crumbling grey-brown walls with air and grime and history and the scent of something else.

Dasha continues on. With purpose now, his elbows up, arms deliberate beside his belly. His doctor has warned him about his heart. He must exercise. He doesn't want any more reminders than the tablet he takes each day after lunch. He walks past the steel shuttered shops—jewellery, electronic, Bata shoe, provisions, hardware, a Chinese beauty parlour—to the main road. It is too early even for the tea stall to be open, although its man is there, fumbling against the chill to prime his stove. Soon, once the fire is set and the water heating, the glass jars of biscuits will come out for display. Drawn by routine, a few other early risers are also making their way out to the Maidan.

He crosses to the back of New Market. Though it is crowded and crumbling, he is happy to live in the old, central neighbourhood of Taltala. The thick 19th century British built walls of his house are pleasantly cool against the raw heat of Kolkata's[1] summers. The iron beams above his bed signify permanence, solidity, participation in something larger. Compared to his parents' small brick country house, or to the very absence of one he experienced when he slept on the street as a child, his house in Taltala signals, in every way, having made something of himself. He feels lucky, now, proud of his hard work, proud despite some of the things he needed to do to survive. He feels he has succeeded despite all that he has had to endure: leaving the East, sleeping and washing on the street, the scrabble to sell vegetables, working as a shop boy, stale chapatis with sugar as his only meals, going to bed hungry and drinking water to ease the

[1] See Appendix I.

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pangs, involving himself in violent Naxa protests in order to earn a bit of money. Then, gradually, a steadier income conning foreigners, his marriage and his first son, his first wife's early death, more money, buying a share in a shop, then two shops, then his own shop, eating too much as life got easier, better, continuing to con foreigners, finally, getting bored of lies and tired of come-ons, reaching some sort of resigned peace with his new wife and the birth of his second son, Lokenath.

Someday, when "Popeye" is older, Dasha will tell him of the things he has done. Right now, though, now is not enough. The present never is. It could all come crashing down. He has to keep on. It's good that Popeye is attending St. Mary's, learning his English alphabet. But it is not enough. Besides, Dasha thinks, he needs to make it to an age when he can tell his son of his past; no good dying now of a heart attack. Where would Popeye be then? He has only just begun again.

Dasha picks up the pace as he passes the Chaplin Cinema. Two weeks ago it had been the scene of riots and demonstrations. A few bottles were thrown, a few police men pushed about, movie posters burned, Hindutva slogans shouted. A foreign made film had opened depicting women in love. He had heard of the protests from Pooria, his shop man, who read him the story as they sat about one morning waiting for customers. There was no sign of the scuffle now. He wishes he could read the signs as he passes by the posters. He wishes many things, but that only makes his heart worse. Best just to keep walking.

Chowringhee Road is empty but for the odd taxi slowly rumbling past. A few men, some wearing balaclavas, some with scarves wrapped vertically around their heads and tied under their chins trot across the road. They don't need to, the road is empty. But crossing roads quickly becomes instinct. In a couple of hours the busses will start running. Then one will need to dodge traffic. Now though, without the traffic, it is as though the city is for the few who remain. Soon one won't be able to stop mid crossing, to marvel at the metalled roads, to wonder at where the asphalt came from, or to wonder at what might be happening at the road's other ends.

One or two other men are out with their wives. Thickly sweatered over their sarees, the women waddle a few paces behind their men. They seem to teeter back and forth as much as they move forward. Being alone, with space to move, is difficult in this city. That's one reason Dasha likes to come walking in the Maidan every morning, before the park fills up with boys playing cricket, vendors, young couples, goats and donkeys, and more garbage, and more people, too many to, at least, pretend at anonymity. But in the Maidan and in the empty streets of the morning, the city feels big and quiet, intimate, as though it is resting, a crowd of villages in preparation, soon to pick up and jumble and rattle and flap about noisily for the day before settling down again for the night in the same place. Despite its history and its present crush of millions and the newly emergent trappings of other shiny worlds, Calcutta is still, in many ways, a very small place.

Dasha turns south at the corner next to the shuttered Nike shop and the UTI automated teller. A few people, asleep on worn cardboard, shroud themselves against the cold with thin blankets drawn completely around their

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heads, forgotten corpses not yet dead. He nods to the costumed, tired looking security guard outside the Oberoi Hotel. Dasha has been to the hotel a few times, not to eat, or to stay, but to do business with gullible, rich tourists, and, once, to make a delivery to a Tollywood movie star whose room was full of high-end prostitutes from the Nilkamal whorehouse. Those days are gone now. Everyone who stays there nowadays seems boring, as though the place anaesthetizes rather than energizes. Perhaps it never did though, maybe that is only nostalgia and the dreams of youth talking. Crossing the cobbled entrance of the hotel, he continues south, past the tourist ghetto, the white washed museum, the motorcycle shop, the entrance to the underground metro. Near the corner of Park Street, he turns to cross the main road. Empty. Dasha trots—he doesn't need to but instinct takes over—to the dewy brown mottled grass and litter strewn expanse on the other side.

The Maidan is huge, open, roomy. "The lungs of the city" some have called it. Although they are choked with litter and garbage which seems to pile up relentlessly. It has always been that way, as long as Dasha can remember it. Perhaps it is a bit worse these days; certainly there is more plastic. Above a broken statue of Kali a plastic bag is caught in the branches of a tree. It hangs there limp. A few people are rousing from sleep under the trees near the tank. A man emerges from behind a giant billboard smile, a convenient spot for ones morning toilet. Two donkeys and a few thin ponies graze in the grey distance. One pony, asleep, stands still, morose or just dead tired, its back leg crooked.

To the south, emerging from the mist, the Victoria Memorial stands strange and immobile, almost purple in the near distance. Dasha has heard it called a junkroom and a nightmare of stone, but he thinks, though he has never been inside, that it is nice, rather picture-like in the distance; he walks quickly towards it, warm now in his track suit. As he walks, he glances to his left to say a few words to the rising sun, still intermittently hidden by the towers lining the road.

More people are gathering to exercise on the memorial grounds amidst its ponds and tended greenery. Some are already waving their arms in the air. Others are stationary, meditating. Some are stretching, blowing, rubbing their faces, and breathing deeply in almost deliberately amusing ways. In the distance he can faintly hear one or two calls to prayer, and in the eastern corner, near the planetarium entrance, the laughing club is gathering under a tree. Soon they will start pretending to laugh—"a-ha-ha-ha". Dasha can't bring himself to join. Besides they wouldn't let him. The club is made up of retiree professionals and their wives: ex-engineers, ex-teachers, ex-government service men, ex-army men. One or two still carry their batons, ostensibly to beat off stray dogs, although every one knows this is not the real reason. The laughing club is not a place for an illiterate shop keeper, who, despite his relative success, never-the-less fulfills his caste name. Besides they sound ridiculous forcing themselves to laugh. Why not just laugh?

As the deep gravel crunches under his feet, he can hear a *chai* stall preparing the first of many cups of tea. Its intermittent roar faintly punctuates

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the painful first efforts of the laughing club. He sees regulars, smiles and nods to a few. Caught in the branches of a tree is a shiny, half inflated silver coloured balloon, obviously lost a couple of days before when families in the hundreds frolicked on the grounds during a warm, leisurely Sunday afternoon. It is just like the discarded plastic bag.

Despite the slight chill in the air, the sun is higher and the mist is slowly fading. Crows are becoming rambunctious in the trees. Their noise gathers with the occasional passing of a few buses and taxis, although the city's full throttle rattle will not commence for a while yet.

There was a time when Dasha could remember the city being more sedate, with fewer autos and buses, less polluted and dusty, although it always seemed old, as though it would crumble into the ground at any moment. His father told him of the days of the Britishers, of how the city was clean, orderly, not so crowded. He wonders if that too is a dream talking.

The sun, a still orange ball, is climbing the walls of the crumbling Tata Steel building. Someone once told him that the sun was orange because of all the dust and pollution in the air. They also told him that Calcutta had the highest amounts of dust and pollution in the air than any other city in the world. One day, Dasha thinks, when "Popeye" is older, married, maybe he'll move out to his parent's land where there are a few mango trees. That would be nice.

One day too, he thinks to himself, before he moves out to the relative peace of mango shade, relative because he's heard stories of the country too, of rapes and murders and political arm twisting, of people robed in tires and set alight because they didn't vote properly, he will see another city in another country— another city besides Kathmandu. Kathmandu was too much like home to count as another city.

Tokyo, now that's different. Lal, his friend and former business partner went to find work in Tokyo, met a woman, and eventually stayed. Lal phones every once in a while to catch up. When he does, Dasha can hear Tokyo in the background. He has seen a few pictures of it, postcards from Lal, although he knows how deceiving postcards can be. Even Calcutta looks better in postcards. Dasha has learned a little Japanese from the tourists who come into his shop now and then. Another city, in another country, a short visit with his son. He would like to do that before he dies.

Around the Victoria Memorial three times, then he heads home. He has worked up a bit of a sweat. The laughing club is still at it. Heading back, north now, he retraces the way he came. Reaching the main tank where a few people are bathing, he crosses over to Newmarket Street, down past the Empire Cinema, and round the back of New Market, past the opening meat and curd stalls, the still closed jewellery sellers. A few rickshaws are already pulling people to work and school, their bells jangling on the arms of the carriages. A litter of puppies is snuffling about in one of the nearby garbage piles and a cow is eating some cardboard and vegetable peelings next to some stalls. More traders are gathering for the morning's business, bringing vegetables down from their heads, arranging them nicely on blue tarpaulins.

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Dasha stops for tea at the intersection. The vendor is now doing a steady business. He is making an omelette with chillies and onions for a customer. Dasha nods for tea. His tea is poured into a short glass with a slight flourish and a small cloud of steam. As he sips loudly, Dasha feels anxious. He needs to get home to see 'Popeye' off to school, and business needs to be better today. Business always needs to be better.

When he gets home, Popeye is eating his breakfast of cold rice, half asleep and whining about having to go to school. He is in half of his uniform, grey shorts. His little vest is not doing much to keep him warm. Popeye's school bag is by the kitchen doorway. A school crest is sewn roughly onto the top flap. The bag looks heavy. Dasha thinks to himself that little Popeye is too young for school. But he needs to learn to read English if he is going to do anything with his life. Popeye is lucky to be going to St. Mary's. It's expensive. And, his Dad is illiterate.

Bina, Dasha's wife's grandmother, who lives with them, is shuffling about sleepily in the kitchen. Dasha can hear his wife in the toilet. Bina's grey hair hangs long and unkept about her shoulders. Her sari, now also grey, hangs loose about her large frame. Bina is a large woman. Skin hangs from her upper arms. When she bends over, her huge breasts swing from beneath her sari. She never wears a blouse at home. Too uncomfortable. Her hips are wide and high and she stiffly teeters about. She's lost most of her teeth and she looks tired. Dasha wonders if his wife will look like Bina one day. Bina's daughter, Madhu, lives with them as well. She must still be asleep.

Usha, Dasha's wife appears from the toilet, her hair wet and pulled back, her face damp. She is drying her hands on her sari. She chides Popeye for eating too slowly as she combs and oils his hair. He'll be late for school. The part in his hair is not quite right but it will have to do. Dasha helps Popeye into his shirt and tie. Tucking them both into his shorts, he pulls Popeye's belt high above his little waist and tightens.

Both looking rumpled, if at least smoothed over with a quick hand, they cross the courtyard, Dasha with Popeye's school bag in hand. They step out into the street. The day has begun in earnest. The street is now busier. People are washing, children are appearing for school, Khan is chatting to another neighbour, scooters weave by noisily.

Hand in hand Dasha and Popeye make the quick walk to school. Popeye is still tired and lost behind his eyes. They take a few shortcuts down old lanes, past smelly open air toilets, past a couple of the nicer houses, their thresholds being washed and their cage doors unlocked. As they step out onto the road in front of the school the air begins to feel warm again, and the sounds of children playing rings from behind the blue steel doors which bound the school yard from the street. Father Francis, the principal, is at the front entrance greeting children and their parents. He does this every morning. Dasha sometimes worries that Popeye is not properly turned out. Father Francis can be strict and has scolded Popeye in the past for a loose tie or an untucked shirt. Dasha thinks that he and Popeye

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have to be careful; Popeye is in Father Francis' bad books for fighting in the school yard last week. This morning, though, he greets them with a tight smile, and guides Popeye with a quiet hand through the gates. Dasha touches Popeye on the head as he goes and wishes him a good day, but Popeye, still tired, says nothing.

When Dasha returns home, a plate with his breakfast of cold rice, a boiled egg and some dhal is waiting on the bed in the kitchen. Bina is washing, and his wife is gathering clothes that need to be washed. Dasha eats quickly, licking his fingers noisily. When he is finished, he tilts his head back and pours water from a green plastic jug into his mouth. He swills it around, cheeks puffed, and swallows. Another gulp, the plastic jug back in the small red fridge, and on to get washed and dressed.

He turns the television on while waiting for Bina to finish. His wife comes and goes a couple of times, asking about Popeye, wondering if anything different will happen during Dasha's day. The television shows something of politicians in Delhi, but Dasha is not really paying attention. Nothing different today. Nothing planned anyway.

As he washes in the toilet, scrubbing, soaping, rinsing, he wishes that it might be different, that business might pick up, that it will go back to being how it used to be. He might have to try another sideline. The noodle factory is doing well. As is the sauce business. Orders for both are consistent. But fashions are changing. Saris and blouses and petticoats are not selling the way they used to. Sure, people come in for weddings, but every day street business is slipping away. It is the same for everyone. One can't live on blouses and petticoats alone. Twenty or thirty rupees here and there won't keep it afloat. As he empties the last of the bucket over his head he decides he should speak to someone about another sideline. Make some plans.

He dresses in his blue button down shirt and khaki coloured pants. The television flits fighting in a desert country. Tanks and dust and camouflaged soldiers with bulky clothes and helmets and sunglasses and a broken city in the background. Then a commercial for Amul milk that comes in a packet. Then another for Hero Honda motorcycles. Then one for Pepsi with the Indian cricket team and a lion.

Madhu will bring Dasha's lunch in tiffin tins this afternoon. He calls out a goodbye to his wife as he steps out onto the street and looks at his watch, a present from a Swiss tourist. He knows it's a knock-off, but it's from away. He is running behind schedule. Nanda will be there already, unlocking the shutters and pushing them up with a reassuring clatter, opening, sweeping, washing the entrance, lighting the incense, arranging clothes to hang above the doorway, wiping down the small glass display case. Pooria, the other shopman, might be late today and perhaps there will be some business. He decides to take a rickshaw.

Bablu is in his usual spot. He greets Dasha with a nod and rises from between the arms of his rickshaw. The bell on the left stanchion jingles. Dasha climbs into the red vinyl seat, and, as the rickshaw is lifted level, leans back. Bablu coughs a couple of times as they set out, but he and Dasha don't say

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anything to one another. Balblu's thin legs are strong and muscled. The soles of his feet are heavily callused, and he wears a thin, blue checked *gamcha* draped around his shoulders. His *lungi* is folded carefully above his knees, and his skin is dark, almost black, against his white vest. He is silent as he runs.

The rickshaw bumps along the same route that Dasha took this morning for his walk, but they turn north at New Market and head under the Municipal Corporation walkway, past the dilapidated hotel, and its restaurant. Instead of crossing the now frantic Banerjee Road, they stop in front of the big Bata shoe store, and Dasha gets down. Handing him a few rupees, Dasha tells Bablu that he might need him later to take Madhu home. Bablu nods but doesn't say anything.

Dasha dodges the onslaught of traffic as he crosses Banerjee Road. Buses screech their horns, and taxis honk, and auto-rickshaws squeal and zip amongst the trucks and cars before swooping right down Grant Street where they bottleneck at the end of their route. On the corner the trinket shop is busy hanging its bright plastic balls and toys and miscellany. On the other corner, behind the police station, men are busy washing at the public pump. Some covered in lather from head to toe squat before the plastic cups they use to rinse themselves. With arms across their chests they vigorously rouse dirt and sweat in soapy white foam. They shiver and tense with the chill, their skin bumpy. Rickshaws buzz by constantly. A water delivery man fills his large goat skin and heaves the heavy dripping bladder to his back. The first or second of the maybe one hundred trips he might make that day.

As Dasha passes his neighbours' shops he greets a few of the men. The new sweet shop is doing well. Maybe he should try sweets. Sweets never seem to go out of fashion; but then, what does he know about sweets. And there are enough sweet shops anyway. Grant Street doesn't need another.

When he gets to his own shop, Nanda is there, as always. Seated on the white cushioned floor, his legs crossed, Nanda is reading the paper. Nanda, square jawed and round faced, is sturdily built. Once handsome, his greying parted hair swoops from his forehead partially covering the white paste dot between his eyes which marks his morning prayers. His grey moustache is trim, though he hasn't had a shave in a few days. The ragged stubble on his chin lends him an unkept, slightly rough, appearance. His blue checked shirt is loose and the top two buttons are undone, exposing a few chest hairs. In his breast pocket he has a pen, a few folded invoices, scraps of paper with phone numbers and names jotted down in curving Bengali script on the backs of business cards.

Nanda is sitting by the red phone in his usual spot. He looks up and smiles briefly, says good morning, asks how Dasha is doing. Nanda has known Dasha since Dasha was a young man, a shop boy for his then boss. He taught Dasha the ropes of being a shopman. How to sell, how to anticipate a customer's wants, how to convince them to buy one more. Dasha, a keen deal maker, learned quickly. He was always was better at business and selling. Nanda is not upset that he now works for the young man he once trained; his children are grown and married, he and his wife have a small place, they eat, and occasionally can buy something nice.

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The step into the long narrow shop is still drying, and the last of the incense is still burning. Above, in the doorway, the same sarees hang, an orange one, a green one, a light blue embroidered one, a ruby one with gold trim. They are looking a little dusty and somewhat faded. Perhaps they should switch to newer ones. They make the shop seem worn and old.

Though he might come and go several times during the day, when he first arrives each morning, Dasha stands back on the edge of the sidewalk and looks up at the sign above his narrow shop. "Novelty Stores, Cloth Seller, 71 Grant Street, Calcutta – 16." The sign needs a bit of paint. The orange and blue of "Novelty" are fading, and the white background is cracking.

Dasha chose the name when he bought out the shop and made it his own. He thought it reminded him of exciting, new things, things you might not need, but things you nevertheless want, things that make you feel good, things that you hadn't seen in other places. "Novelty" felt young and alive and unknown.

It didn't feel that way anymore. That feeling of excitement and newness when he first opened years ago had changed. Things felt old and stale and passed over. People weren't coming. The saris and garment cloth he sold were either too cheap and unfashionable for those who seemed to be making more money, or they were too expensive for those who were having a hard time keeping up with the cost of living. He felt caught in the middle. And the young people these days didn't seem to want anything to do with his styles or clothes. They want jeans and kurta shirts, not blends of colourful saris. And they want to spend their time in shopping arcades and in fancy malls, places which were not for him. Going there would only make him realize how outmoded his own shop is. Besides, he couldn't afford anything. They are another world. He decided a while ago that he would concentrate on sarees and not bring in ready-made *salwaar* suits when they became the fashion. He didn't have fitting rooms, and he didn't have the space to hang clothes. The shelves he used to line his walls were made for stacks of folded cloth and boxes of sarees. He would need to spend thousands of rupees to change the store, and even then he wouldn't have had space. So, he stays with sarees and blouses and petticoats and the odd *dhoti*. His clientele are now older, many more from the country, and slowly, those he has counted on have drifted away. Regulars do come by, mostly for this or that wedding, but he can't even count on the puja holidays anymore. They too have become less dependable. People don't seem to want what he and thousands of others like him in the city have depended on for years.

Leaving his sandals at the doorway, Dasha steps inside the shop. Nanda, still reading, looks up from his paper, smiles again and chuckles in his deep way. Nanda always seems to find something to chuckle at. It's his form of acknowledgement. If it weren't for Nanda, where would he be, Dasha thinks. Nanda asks if he'd like some tea. Dasha nods thinking it has been a while. He rummages around under the mat by the phone for the tea chit, hands it to Nanda and settles himself by the door. Another day.

When Nanda returns with the tea he has two clay cups and an aluminium tumbler filled with enough for two generous servings. Nanda pours the tea, hands

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Dasha one and places the aluminium cup on the long bench that runs the length of one wall of the shop.

They sit together and sip their tea, passing idle chat about this and that. Nanda tells Dasha the headlines from the paper. So and so shopkeeper's daughter is getting married. Kundu-da might stop by for a visit today. The cloth shop across the street, "Messrs PannaLal and Co" is being re-painted next week. City taxes are due in a couple of weeks.

While they are having tea, Pooria phones to say that he won't be able to make it in to work because his daughter is ill and has just come home from the doctor. Dasha will have to stay late. Not that it matters really. He often stays till close.

People stream by the open door: women with their market bags and plastic shop bags; housemaids on errands, their keys tied to their *pallu* and draped around their necks; men on business, men carrying and delivering, men sauntering, their arms clasped behind their backs, men in lungis and men in pants; an Anglo or two who live nearby in the upper flats, one with her flower printed dress is an anachronism from the fifties; the Chinese man who works at the Central Hotel down the street. But mostly strangers, hundreds and hundreds of strangers. And on the street behind the sidewalk's strangers, endless auto and human rickshaws, taxis, scooters, bikes, blue three-wheeled delivery trucks, white Ambassadors, a constant cacophonous stream of colour, noise, fumes and more strangers moving off to parts of the city Dasha will never see.

When they finish their tea they wait for a lull in the passers-by to toss their clay cups out into the street. Dasha rolls up onto his knees, makes a quick peek left and right and deftly tosses the cups. They break satisfyingly with a soft crunch in the gutter. If it rains in the afternoon, they might soften enough to dissolve before they are swept up and tossed into a metal bin.

Throughout the morning a few people stop in. They leave their sandals by the door to sit on the narrow bench along the wall. With Nanda and Dasha at their feet displaying various styles and colours, prices and types of sarees—cotton, acrylic, polyester, mostly blends, rarely silk—customers either select one or two, or leave, unsatisfied with the choices on offer. Sometimes Nanda will pull out twenty or thirty sarees and sit amidst a pile of coloured cloth before the customer decides on one, or two, or none. Then, Dasha and Nanda will carefully fold up the cloth they unfurled, and stack them back on the shelves, only to repeat the process when the next customer arrives. This they have each done hundreds of thousands of times, so often that their selection, unfurling, display and refolding has become automatic, the movements of arms and hands and hips and fingers and eyes, glances to faces, as natural as breathing. People will usually buy one or two. Maybe a petticoat, and maybe a blouse in an appropriate colour; usually the blouse and petticoat, being more intimate, and decidedly cheaper, are left for the receiver of the saree to buy. On better quality sarees, a portion at the end of the length is left from which a blouse is cut and custom tailored. No need to buy cheap and ill fitting blouses.

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Novelty Stores caters to both Muslim and Hindu customers and tastes. Sometimes his friend Kamal will bring a customer from his New Market shop. Most days Kamal will come just to chat when business is slow. Dasha doesn't worry about who his customers are. Money is money. Besides, what's to fight about? Life is hard for everyone.

At around one in the afternoon, Madhu arrives with lunch for both Dasha and Pooria. She brings their lunches in a mesh market bag, and sits for a few minutes on the bench by the door, passing idle chat, before she smiles in her tired way, like her mother, and then rises to leave. Her hair is greying and there is no vermillion in the part in her hair. Dasha often wonders why it is that she never married. She is a nice woman, not unpretty, though older now, perhaps a bit slow, but kind, and with a mischievous smile. Why did no-one choose her? And now it is too late.

Dasha and Nanda each have their own four tiered tiffin tin. Nanda always has his lunch first while Dasha minds the front of the shop. Nanda washes his hands from his grubby water bottle at the edge of the street and returns to the back of the shop where he sits cross legged facing the wall to eat. Dasha, sitting at the front next to the entrance, can hear Nanda eating, slurping from his fingers, raising his head from the tins before him to take a breath before returning to his meal, shaking excess rice and wet from his fingers, or pouring water into his mouth. Nanda too eats quickly. Whole handfuls of rice and dhal, vegetables and fish. Dasha knows Nanda is done when he can be heard belching and the sounds of tiffin tins being reassembled into their tower and the closing of the hasp. When Nanda returns from washing his hands and rinsing his mouth, Dasha rises to repeat the performance.

After washing, Dasha sits too where Nanda ate. He spreads a new piece of newspaper on the floor and unpacks the tiffin tin. The bottom and largest tin is filled with rice. The other three have yellow dhal, mixed *sabji* (vegetables) with melon and "drumsticks", and the third, small spiced *bekti* fish. Dasha pours the dhal over the rice and mixes the two with his whole hand. As he eats, again quickly, handfuls of rice disappear between the crunch of the whole salty fish and the wet slurp of the bitter vegetables. He spits out the fibrous remains of the drumsticks onto the newspaper. When he is finished eating, he wraps up the paper, wipes his hands and deposits it in the gutter in front of the shop. There he kneels to wash his hands and rinse his mouth onto the street. It is warm in the sun and the street seems busier.

When he turns back to the shop, Nanda has turned on the ceiling fans. The moving air is gently flapping the Lakshmi calendar against the wall. As is his custom after every mid-day meal, Dasha retires to the back alcove to nap. Before his nap, though, he carefully unwraps his heart medication from a worn brown paper bag and pushes out one of the tiny white tablets from the back of its aluminium foil packaging. He downs the tablet with a pour from his wrinkled water container, an old, plastic Thumbs Up bottle. With the fan above lazily spinning, he spreads a thin blanket on the floor, removes his shirt and stretches out. His eyes closed, he can hear Nanda turning the pages of the newspaper, the

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auto-rickshaws buzzing, and the voices of people on the sidewalk swelling and muting as they pass by the open door. As he drifts off to sleep, he can hear that someone has come into the shop; Nanda is speaking softly and cloth is being gently unfurled.

When he wakes, the same sounds repeat themselves. Auto-rickshaws buzz and whine, people's chatter swells and fades, their sandals scuffing the pavement as they lazily drag their heels. Nanda though is on the phone. He is ordering more stock from a wholesaler in Burrabazaar.

The afternoon passes much as does the morning. When the sun gets too hot, Nanda hangs the blue cloth in the front to shade the clothes and the entrance. A delivery man arrives with a small bundle of sarees carefully wrapped in burlap on his head. He is wearing a checked lungi folded above his knees and a white vest. His plastic sandals are unevenly worn at the heels. After depositing and unwrapping the bundle, he sits for a minute to rest on the bench. Though they are strangers to one another, Dasha offers him a drink of water from his plastic bottle. They trade a few words quietly about business, the markets, the city, and then the man leaves.

Before the business of the evening, Nanda shuts off the overhead fans and sweeps the white floor mats. He tidies papers under the phone, and generally gives attention to the shop in preparation for potential customers who will come with the evening's market.

Business picks up in the evening, as it always does. Nothing too busy, but busy enough to give Dasha hope that this might be the sign of something. As daylight fades and the crows disappear, the lights inside the shops are turned on. This is Dasha's favourite time of the day. The heat of the day is fading slowly, and the warmth of the inner lights shines from the open shops. Streetlights, though dim, will soon strengthen. People come casually. Young women in groups, girls with their mothers, husbands with their wives and small children, lone men picking up a gift before boarding the bus or the commuter trains to the outskirts of the city where things are quiet and dark. The odd foreigner gawking about, looking a bit lost, but trying in vain to seem at home. Dasha calls out inviting them in. They are wealthy and easy to con, but he doesn't hound them the way he once did. Behind the moving sidewalk of strangers, acquaintances, the "once or twice mets" and the "sometimes recognizeds", always the incessant, relentless procession of cars and rickshaws.

Eventually, even they wane. The market traffic thins, and the sidewalk traffic becomes more intermittent until, when around 8:30 or 9:00, once the night has fully set in, the sounds of shop shutters being rolled down clashes up and down the street. Nanda needs to go home, and no-one more will come into the shop. They decide to close. Dasha tells Nanda that he will close up, and Nanda, without a bag or belongings simply stands, checks his hair and face in the mirror, and steps out to catch the bus, and then the train home. He pulls his sandals from under the bench, slips them on, bids farewell and walks into the night.

To close, Dasha repeats what Nanda did to open. He takes the sarees down from their decorative perch above the door with the hooked pole. He tidies the

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curtain which hides the shoes under the bench and retrieves the locks from one of the cabinets. The large black cast iron scissors he stows away safely. After drawing the roll blinds down almost till they close, he retrieves from the drawer above the telephone the day's earnings. This he sorts and counts. Rs. 1870. Not enough. He needs to clear 2000 a day to break even. He runs his eyes over the spot where he keeps the shop's papers, his own family papers, his birth certificate, his wife and his son's birth certificate, his passport, his mobile phone. They are safe. He shuts out the lights and backs out of the shop. Once the heavy cast roll shutters are lowered, Dasha locks it in place with two heavy key padlocks and pops the keys in his pocket. Most other shopkeepers have closed up for the evening. It is late, but they too wish for business to be better.

Before he goes home Dasha decides to check on the noodle factory. The noodle factory is something he started a few years ago. It is now supporting his shop. It is easy and seems to run itself. Actually, Manas runs it for Dasha. Manas takes care of the everyday ordering, selling, distributing. They only make one kind of noodles. Soft wheat flour noodles for the street side chow mien stalls. The factory is on the top floor of the building neighbouring Novelty Stores.

Dasha takes the narrow dark lane past the laneside urinal to the wooden stairs that wind up two levels to the floor above the street. From there a narrow, steep ladder leads to the roof. As he passes the second floor apartment, Mr. Tang and his wife are seated at the table eating supper: bowls of noodle soup with green vegetables. They are eating with chopsticks.

The steep steps up to the factory require that Dasha use his hands to steady himself. When he gets to the top he can see that the new Bihari boy working for Manas has finished his cleanup. The noodle machine with its large cast handle and dough bowl is looking freshly washed, and the flouring table behind swept and tidy. The boy is seated out near the building ledge eating his supper. Manas is in a back room counting the day's earnings. He has a small bottle of whiskey on the desk next to him. Dasha doesn't like that Manas is drinking before his work is done, but Manas does a good job for the most part, so he doesn't say anything. Dasha asks how business was that day. Manas replies that it was not bad, and gestures to the bottle for Dasha to help himself. Dasha knows too that his wife doesn't like it when he drinks, but a peg or two won't hurt. He pours himself a peg and fills the tall glass with water from a nearby jug. It tastes good as he draws a long drink, and he sighs deeply. He and Manas talk quietly as they drink.

Soon, a few of Manas' friends arrive to drink and they seat themselves in the room adjoining the noodle machine, the same room where the boy sleeps. They have brought country liquor in a plastic bottle. Not wanting to get drawn into something he will regret, Dasha bids them a good night and downs the last of his whiskey. He would like to see Popeye before he falls asleep.

Before he goes, he walks out into the dark to the edge of the building. The boy is still sitting there wrapped in a shawl and staring out over the street. He doesn't look up when Dasha approaches. The street below is drawing to a close. One or two auto-rickshaws buzz past and a shop front clatters shut. The orange

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glow of the street lamps gives everything a soft feel. In the faint light behind a burnt out streetlight two dogs are rummaging through a pile of garbage that has been swept up. Above them both, the moon is crisp and white and clear and round.

When he returns to street level and into the light of the streetlamps Dasha turns to look up to the roof where the boy is sitting. He is still there, motionless. The moon is motionless above him. Dasha can hear faint laughter from the room above. The men are just beginning; once he might have joined them. Bannerjee Road is quieter, and though for a few taxis will become quieter still. The hotel restaurant still has a few customers. The bill man is in his booth behind the glass counting the day's tally, but the shutters are pulled down a couple of feet to indicate its imminent close. The last of the street side stalls behind New Market are closing up, and as he turns east, Dasha covers for the fourth time that day, a street that though it is like home, changes every day. The chai seller on the corner has gone home. The rooms above the recycling shops glow warmly and he can smell meals being prepared. Three rickshaw pullers are seated together in between the arms of their circled vehicles. They are talking and smoking.

On Collin Street, as he nears home, a group of boys are playing cricket under a street light. They are using a thin piece of wood leaning in a old tin can as a wicket and an old tennis ball. The boys strain to see the ball in the dark. Soon they will be called in. The dog he awoke that morning is nowhere in sight. He opens the inset door and steps into the courtyard.

Popeye has had his supper by the time Dasha returns home. After he finishes washing his hands, and after changing into a lungi and out of his shirt, Dasha sits on the bed in the kitchen. His wife brings him a plate mounded high with rice. In separate dishes there are the vegetables and dhal he had at lunch, but on the plate next to the rice, a large piece of freshly fried *rui* fish signals supper. Lunch was cold, but he appreciates being home for a warm supper as he mixes the rice and dhal with his whole hand, and eats quickly. He and his wife, who sits beside him topping up the dhal and vegetable dishes, talk, between Dasha's mouthfuls, of the day. Popeye, excited that his father is home, runs to and fro, showing his parents his drawings, telling his father of his day. Bina and Madhu are in the courtyard washing the cooking pots.

When Dasha is finished, he and Popeye go to the bedroom together while the women eat. There he turns on the television and idly watches as he helps Popeye with one of his colouring books. He flips the channels from news to a talk show to a *Mahabharat* serial. He leaves the channel on the serial. Against a red stage-set men in theatrical make up and wearing plastic armour gesticulate to one another loudly, look overly shocked and exaggeratedly angry as some turn of natural or supernatural events.

Usha comes to the bedroom after eating and after helping her aunt and grandmother finish with the washing. She climbs onto the bed next to Popeye and the three watch the re-telling of the ancient story together. Soon, Bina and Madhu also come to sit on the edge of the bed to watch. By the time the television show has finished, Popeye is asleep. His mother scoops him up in her arms to get

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him ready for bed. Once Bina and Madhu leave to do the same, Dasha stretches out, head on a pillow and one arm behind his back. He sees on his belly that he has stained his vest with some dhal. He wonders if struggles have always been the same. Usha returns with Popeye, and as Popeye clambers into bed beside Dasha, his wife prepares to join them.

Soon, they are all lying together. Popeye is already asleep, his back turned to his mother. Usha and Dasha talk softly. She asks him about the shop, what he is going to do if things don't turn around, if the market doesn't get better. He replies that he'll think of something. He always has, perhaps something will come along to change the way things are. He doesn't know. They talk of this and other things. Soon, she too is asleep. Her head is on his chest, and his left arm is around her shoulders.

As he lies still so as not to wake them, Dasha's eyes slowly cast about the now dark room. The past and the present are all around him, the pile of clothes in the corner, the faint crack he knows is on the wall, the dark outline of the fan above his head, the iron beam in the darker still ceiling. He can hear Bina snoring in the next room. Popeye is breathing deeply, and he can smell the oil in his wife's hair. Outside, the future, the city, goes on. He listens. A horn in the distance. A dog barks. A television is playing in a room not far. It is quiet, asleep.

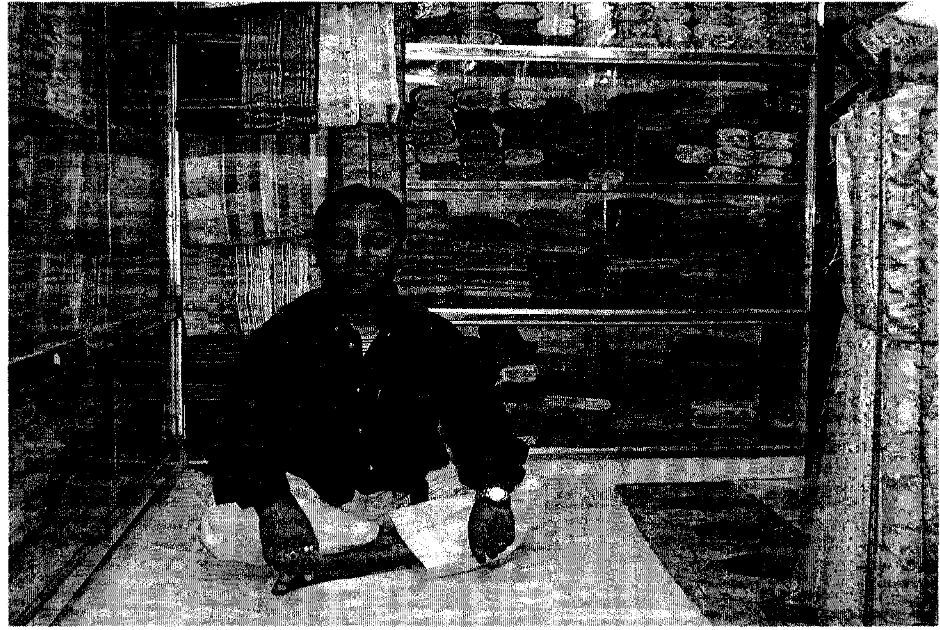

Figure 1.1: Dashanath Saha in Novelty Stores, February 9, 2003. Photo by author.

"My characters, those who figure in my social observation, are real... ."
Richard Cobb, "Endpaper" *The End of the Line: A Memoir* (John Murray: London,1997)p.220

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PART I: Introduction

The great art of making things seem closer together. In reality. Or from where we are standing; in memory....This is the mysterious power of memory—the power to generate nearness.

Walter Benjamin – "The Great Art of Making Things Seem Closer Together"

Figure 2.1: Shoes in Ruined Building, Joroshanko, North Calcutta. January 2004. Photo by Author.

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> The...traveler is the person who passes through cities and countries with anamnesis; and because everything seems closer to everything else, and hence to him, since he is in their midst, all his senses respond to every nuance as truth.
>
> Walter Benjamin – "The Great Art of Making Things Seem Closer Together"

Remember, this essay emerged out of a curious conceit.[1] I had the intuition that it was not only feasible, but apparent, and moreover, somewhat natural, to write an "Arcades Project" on Calcutta. "Conceit" because I still think my intuition correct; the project continues to be both self-evident and possible. "Curious" because, although even now the notion still excites presumptions of being the most ordinary of ideas, as natural as when it first flashed into my mind three years ago, the project remains elusive, tempting, an impossible to grasp "long rolling thunder"[2] which seems, always, like its model, to impend failure.[3]

But, the project began before excitement veiled my hubris, before satisfaction revealed itself as vanity in the everyday anxiety and intermittent thrill of writing, before even the idea that I could *actually* go to a far off, fascinating and difficult place became real with the encouragement and support of others. It began, as many interesting things do, with an improbable and unexpected request.

I was asked by a former philosophy professor to write a book review of the then recently published English translation of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project.*

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[1] Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory* (Granta: London, 1997) p.1. "Curious conceit" is Sinclair's alliteration.

[2] "...knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows." (N1,1). Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1999)p.456, hereafter, *AP*

[3] "The finished work is the death mask of its intuition." Walter Benjamin in a letter to Florens Christian Rang, January 10, 1924 as quoted in Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages* trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1995)p.219n.57

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The review was to be for a small publication called, at that time, *Philosophy in Review*. Surprised at being asked, as I was not in any way a Benjamin scholar, I protested, as I should have, and as, no doubt, was expected of me. "Surely there is someone more suitable!" I had just begun the first year of my PhD coursework and I could think of a few people off the top of my head (in the same building; down the hall, even!) eminently more qualified than I to write a review of one of the more weighty tomes of the twentieth century. Why he asked me I did not know.

I refused. He protested. I relented, and agreed to write the review, secretly thrilled at being asked. The English translation of *The Arcades Project* had been published a couple of years prior. It had been sitting on my professor's shelf for a while, and he wanted the review sooner than later. There and then he handed me the fat book, and I went away excited, yet somewhat nervous given its imposing mass. For the next number of weeks I read *The Arcades Project.* I cannot recall how many weeks exactly, but many.

I cannot claim to have read all of *The Arcades Project*'s over 900 pages, 1073 if you count the various accompanying exposés and essays in the English translation. Nor, I suspect, can most people who dip into or study its sprawling ruins. I don't even know that it is meant to be read in its entirety, let alone from beginning to end. Some, of course, argue that it is not a book at all but "a partially constructed dialectical image which refracts history into a fragmentary constellation of experiences."[4] This is a fancy way of saying that the *Arcades* is a collection of notes. It is. It doesn't really matter either way.

Indeed, the reader may approach the *Arcades Project* in as fragmentary a manner as it approaches the reader. I recall doing just that in trying to make heads and tails of it. I dipped in and out, letting its associations scatter my reading and reflection, letting my nose guide my curiosity rather than placating my confusion with the reliable bearings of a framework, a plan, or a discursive map to its theoretical and empirical convolutions.[5]

Benjamin's *Arcades*, it seems, is one gigantic "paratext"[6] to both a rather vague, intensely complex process, and, at bottom, perhaps rather basic set of ideas. Notes, titles, references, quotations, associations lead you in, frame and reframe and re-associate you to the question and act of textualizing, of saying something about the world. Part of the book's frustration lies in that it seems always to be on the way to becoming something else. It is an extended "threshold"[7] or, perhaps, a multitude of thresholds, a many sided vestibule in a hall of mirrors where inside and outside implode against one another. Instead of just coming out and telling you, it never reassures that there is indeed a definite line or *mot* that can be drawn against the world. The *Arcades*, it seems, makes one

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[4] See Rolf Tiedemann's "Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk*" in *AP* (1999) pp.929-45

[5] James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1999)p.ix

[6] Gerard Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext" trans. Marie Maclean, *New Literary History* Vol.22, No.2 (Spring 1991)p.261

[7] Ibid.

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honest to the practice of reading and of seeing (they are the same thing) the world and its histories.

Eventually, and, of course, a couple of weeks late, I struggled out a review[8] which was inevitably aided, as is much honest *Arcades* scholarship, by Susan Buck-Morss' famous, dense, and similarly cryptic exegesis, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, itself a sort of map or plan to Benjamin's labyrinthine intellectual landscape.

Since then, the *AP*, as I have come to refer to it in my own notes and mind, has stayed with me. It continues to startle, puzzle, befuddle, scatter and bore me. I am humbled before its scope. I have more than once been driven to tears both by Benjamin's enigmatic near Gongorism, and by the attempt to fathom the *Arcades* intricate and fragmented critique of modernity. I suspect I am not any closer now than when I started at understanding what it is all about. I worry too that in thinking there to be at bottom really a rather basic set of idea or premises, I have missed the point.

Yet, my experience is no doubt typical of most people's honest confrontations with the text. Benjamin once referred to the book's elusive "constructive moment" as comparable to that of the philosophers' stone eluding alchemy.[9] Perhaps I can take, therefore, some solace in the text's cryptic forever being on the way to becoming something impossible. The *AP's* lack of an essential moment or apodictic hermeneutic renders it doubly provocative.[10] In writing the review, and in reading amidst the texts' rambling, sometimes cacophony, I became intrigued by a notion which seemed at first to be familiar and yet a little far fetched, but which only sprung on me fully a year or so later.

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> ...for authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them.
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> Walter Benjamin —
> "Excavation and Memory"

It happened as I was crossing the Walterdale Bridge. Out walking one bright, crisp, afternoon, lost in thought, and casting about for something interesting to do—my first two SSHRC dissertation grant applications had been turned down—it dawned on me in one of those Benjaminian "lightning flashes."[11]

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[8] See *Philosophy in Review* Volume XXI, No. 2 April 2001, pp.79-81

[9] "This much is certain: the constructive moment means for this book what the philosophers' stone means for alchemy." Walter Benjamin in a letter to Gretel Adorno, 16 August, 1935, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, eds. G. Scholem and T.W. Adorno, trans. M.R. Jacobson and E.M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)p.507

[10] Provocative, to the extent, perhaps, that its mystique has been largely an auratic production by academics eager to exploit its form and style in subverting the linear, historicist hegemonies of historical meta-narrative. Although a fascinating and enormously intricate collection of thematically related notes, the *AP* is still a collection of notes on the way to becoming something else.

[11] Benjamin *AP* (1999) [N1,1]p.456; vide.ft.2

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Maybe I could approach a few of the vexing questions of contemporary urban modernity and history through the dialectical image of Calcutta. I could read Calcutta as a text and mobilise the city's possible dormant energies to make the city a sign for modernity's catastrophic present.[12] Maybe I could explore two seemingly distinct discursive worlds, and thus read the post/colonial city as a supplement to modernity, one whose spatiality reveals the disillusionment latent at the heart of a global modernity of which Calcutta has always already been inextricably a part. Maybe, I could assemble Benjamin's allegorical gaze within a modern colonial context, within a city stereotyped as the archetype of ruin, one whose popular image perpetuates the phantasmagoric, commodity fed myth of the modern as a social force building to fruition within a linear, progressive history. I could reflect upon Calcutta as both dream and ghost, as both phantasmagoria and forgotten haunt to the story of the urban modern, the lie that is the commodity, the lie which dreamt, built and flayed Calcutta, and which, as an abstract, global and totalizing myth, is now ruining us all.

Calcutta is, after all, one of the quintessential cities of modernity. It owes its existence to the "need of constantly expanding markets to nestle everywhere," even up the inhospitable backwaters of minor tributaries along whose banks barbarians were to be drawn in another image.[13] If modernity is capitalism and capitalism is modernity,[14] then Calcutta would be one of *the* archetypical urban spaces of modernity. Anthony King notes that "the colonial city was an instrument in the expansion of the capitalist world economy,"[15] and Calcutta was, at one time, "the second city of the British Empire" and arguably, for a time, the world's most powerful economic and administrative centre outside London. Its power was directly attributable to it being the site for the articulation of capital, and thus modernity, in South Asia.[16]

So, I thought, it would make sense to read modernity through a place like Calcutta, a place whose existence and history is directly contiguous with industrial technology and capitalist modernity's imperial history. Maybe more sense, I dare to venture, than a place like Paris whose history considerably predates the modern, yet which is almost always spoken about as the capital of modernity, the *ur*-space of modern consumption and culture, a civilized centre which embodies

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[12] Sinclair (1997) p.1

[13] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (International Publishers: New York, 1948) p.12-13

[14] Derek Sayer, *Capitalism and Modernity: An Excursus on Marx and Weber* (London: Routledge, 1991) p.12

[15] Anthony D. King, *Urbanism, Colonialism, and the World-Economy: Cultural and Spatial Foundations of the World Urban System* (Routledge: London, 1990)p.15. My thanks to Rob Shields for recommending me to Anthony King's work.

[16] "Calcutta [was] the pre-eminent focus of British commerce, shipping, finance, and investments in the East, and as the city where British capital was in command more overwhelmingly than anywhere else in India. ...Calcutta was the hub of the vital British dominated import-export trade, and...lay at the heart of [the Empire]...serving as an effective symbol of the proximity and interdependence of imperial grandeur, power and profit." Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998)p.164

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and mobilizes, in material particularity, the wishes and dreams projected from narratives of progress, order and "suprapersonal systems."[17]

Treatments of modernity through the lenses of Paris, Berlin, Vienna, London and New York are ubiquitous, so ubiquitous that speaking of modernity has become synonymous with speaking of these cities of modernism.[18] Calcutta and her ilk get conspicuously short shrift. Postcolonial cities and other similar modern spaces are often treated merely as problematic spaces left behind by the march of history, urban spaces whose only significance for history is that they are "constellations of problems requiring solutions."[19] Urban modernity, these treatments seem to suggest, is best approached through iconic, signature global cities, "cotter pins" which hold the capitalist world-economy and its expanding global commodity culture together.[20]

But, Calcutta had been, once, one of these "cotter pins." It was an outpost of a system intent on "worlding"[21] itself. It was a place where bourgeois civilization, as Marx wrote, "goes naked."[22] But, it had also become an infamous ruin, "a black hole", a "great slum", something many took to signify a distant "Third World" failure that might one day come to mimic the progressive modern models evidenced by more "First World" urban landscapes—New York, Paris, London, etc.

My suspicion, however, was that Calcutta's ruin signifies something much darker, something much more intimate to the global modern in general, something

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[17] Milan Kundera, *The Farewell Party* trans. Peter Kussi (Faber and Faber: London, 1993)p.85

[18] David Frisby intimates that urban modernity is an exclusively European phenomenon. His recent *Cityscapes of Modernity* (Polity: London, 2001) mentions Cairo only in passing and instead focuses on Berlin and Vienna; this despite claiming to speak of the modern metropolis as a crucial site for the exploration of global modernity.

[19] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" *Diacritics* 16 (1986) p.22

[20] J.R. Feagin, "The Global Context of Metropolitan Growth: Houston and the Oil Industry", *American Journal of Sociology* (90: 6) pp.1204-30, as quoted in King (1990)p.15

[21] My use of "worlding" is deliberate. Heidegger's use of the term "worlding" denotes a specificity peculiar to modernity. By "worlding" Heidegger meant that modern man conceives himself in relation to the world through picturing externality, or, in other words, that the word and world exists *for* him. The world is not the sum of extant things, but an ordered and meaningful structure of experience. The world *for* modern subjects is revealed through technology as both resource and thing. In Heidegger's view, the modern was a total relation bound by a unique but imaginary community of like thought and action, one whose social will and social body is defined through 'resource-ful' commoditization and productive instrumentality—a *Gesellschaft*. Understanding and reflection were the result, for the modern, of the world as site of production and consumption. See Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture" *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* trans., W. Levitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977). "Worlding" also captures nicely the way Benjamin thought of modernity as "the industrial transformation of society by technology, as part of the Enlightenment project of progress through the application of reason to nature and society." 'Worlding' frames the very "social imaginary" of modern subjects and thus the very horizons of our thinking. See Ryan Bishop, John Phillips and Wei-Wei Yeo, *Postcolonial Urbanism* (Routledge: London, 2003)p.285, and Charles Taylor, "Modern Social Imaginaries" *Public Culture* 14(1) 2002 pp.91-124.

[22] "[In India] the profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked." Karl Marx, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India" in *On Colonialism* (Foreign Language Publishing House: Moscow, date unknown)p.81

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closer to what Heidegger invoked, and something like what Benjamin was getting at in his allegories of Paris. *Qua* ruin, the modern cityscape of Calcutta signals an immanent failure within civilization, within the global, totalizing, commodity driven technological system—within a worlding. It is important to take up, again, the discourse of civilizational crisis, a discourse which so preoccupied the early 20th century European and Asian thinkers (Freud, Husserl, Heidegger, Marcuse, Benjamin, Adorno, Tagore), but which is today seemingly unfashionable.[23] The present world's myopic preoccupation with technological facility, comfortable urbanism, and free market capitalism masks the catastrophe that is the continuity of history. This preoccupation is not new. Today, the decayed vestige of Calcutta's "City of Palaces" fantasy-scape represents the immanent end to the image of the world as so much resource for middle class dreams of global order and comfort; a desire which is, in fact, "a virtuous pretext, an excuse for violent misanthropy."[24]

The imperial "naked" legacy on the sub-continent was written in blood and hunger. Calcutta was a planetary outpost for a process of technological and capitalistic totalization and urbanization, a process to which Benjamin poetically refers in the final lines of "One Way Street",

> Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth. This immense wooing of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale, that is the spirit of technology. But the lust for profit of the ruling class sought satisfaction through it, technology betrayed man and turned the bridal bed into a bloodbath. The mastery of nature, so the *imperialists* teach, is the purpose of all technology.[25]

Perhaps casting Calcutta through Benjamin's allegorical gaze might reveal something of how we conventionally conceive the contemporary urban modern.

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Paris, at the time—still today!—was going through a theoretical renaissance due to Benjamin's *AP* coming out in English translation. Totalizing

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[23] I am echoing here a similar call made in Andrew Feenberg's recent book, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (Routledge: New York and London, 2005)p.138
[24] Kundera (1993)p.85
[25] Walter Benjamin, "One Way Street" *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* trans. Edmund Jephcott (Schocken: New York, 1978)p.93, emphasis added.

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hyenas that we are, academics had swarmed around its renewed topicality.[26] Yet, little, it seemed, had been written on the spaces of urban modernity outside the West and the meanings these spatial texts generated for thinking about the contemporaneity and presentness of modern urban life.

Colonialism, however, was premised precisely on a global urbanized commodity expansion whose extractive wealth fueled the progressive cosmopolitanism of the more mythic centres of modernity: London, Paris, Vienna, etc. The modernity of London and Paris depended on the industrial urbanization and modernization of far away places like the Eastern Sub-Continent, of which Calcutta was an economic and cultural *point de caption*, an "undeniable signifier in human experience that marks a stage in history."[27] It located or pinned down the expansion of an urbanized commodity world picture. The city sutured the signifier (European colonial city space and building) and the signified (pre-colonial social and geographic landscapes) together in a movement of history as real as it was symbolic.

Calcutta, I thought (I'm still on the bridge remember), might just be a paradigmatic example of an urban modernity, a city whose very existence was solely attributable to global commodification and its instrumental, exploitative world picture. Calcutta is infamous for its image as a failed city, a city of despair, and an over-populated slum, yet also as a place which was, for some 150 years, commonly known as "the City of Palaces." Surely there was something about Calcutta's contemporary and historical antinomies which spoke not only to modern global urbanization, but also to the various multiplicities which shaped the modernity of the much talked about European metropoles.

Why didn't more modern social theorists talk about modernity through colonial cities like Calcutta, Saigon, Singapore, Shanghai, Manila, Jakarta, Mexico City, Guanajuato, Mérida, Antigua, Panama City, Buenos Aires, Johannesburg, Lagos, Harare,...the list goes on?[28] Why didn't they talk about how these such cities are paradigmatic spaces of urban modernity and urban culture? If anything, these cities, founded as they were on the relatively recent colonialist premise of capitalist commoditization, resource extraction, and modern imperial expansion articulate themselves as spatial exemplars of modernity, maybe even more so than, say, Paris, Vienna or London, cities whose millennial urban memories are almost as deep as backhoe shovels might care to go.

Colonial commodity capitals lack a memory or a tradition connecting them to their location, and hence, from the beginning, are places of ambivalence and

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[26] There is something deeply unethical in academic labour. We premise our work on the need to fill gaps in the literature, to address lacunae and aporias. It is supposed that by addressing stories not yet told with serious, detailed and informed treatment, we can open up new avenues for thinking. And while it is necessary to speak to the world in order to hold open the possibility of critique, and thus ethics, speaking also closes with certain frameworks of relation, and thus we are caught at once in the tragic impossibility of letting beings be, of speaking both whereof we should, and should not, be silent.
[27] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-56*. trans. R. Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (W.W. Norton: New York, 1993)pp. 291
[28] Perhaps New York is the notable and conspicuous exception which proves the rule.

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defiance.[29] Surely, it would be these implicit *para*-cities,[30] which today excite the futurists with their potential both for adaptation and for doom, which would embody Berman's oft quoted definition of the modern as that paradox which "...promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and at the same time threatens to destroy everything that we have, everything that we know, everything we are."[31] Surely these supplementary cities "pour us into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish."[32] Or, perhaps, if they do not *best* exemplify modern contradictions—for all cities exemplify contradiction and paradox—then, it would, at the very least, be interesting to approach the Euro-centrist and historicist registers of urban modernity through one of these marginalized and often forgotten outposts of global consumption and commodification. Furthermore, I thought, doing so from away might shed interesting light on home.[33]

Importantly, studying Calcutta would be a chance just to get away. For as long as I can remember I had imagined that my life would be solitary and "Chatwin-esque" (How quaint! How naïve.) spent wandering about fascinating, far away places, jotting in notebooks and taking pictures. On the bridge that afternoon I confirmed that it wasn't working out that way.

As a child I had seen the power station which stands behind the Walterdale Bridge. With an after-school, car pool regularity of five pre-teens, we had skittered over the woven steel surface of the bridge on late-winter afternoons after swimming lessons. I remembered those chilly, chlorine doused trips. Crammed in the back seat of a pig scented green claptrap Chevy Nova, Fergus—his father was a pig farmer—would pull out his squashed Wonderbread and peanut butter sandwiches. With partially frozen hair, peanut butter, chlorine and porcine fumes blending, backseat nausea welling, the long ride home began by crossing the bridge, behind which the power station poured forth electric steam.

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[29] Helen Thomas, "Stories of Plain Territory: The Maidan, Calcutta" *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space* eds. Iain Borden et al. (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2001) p.141. My thanks to Diane Chisholm for referring me to this interesting essay and book.

[30] By 'para-cities' I mean cities which exist alongside, or as necessary constituting supplements to, the metropole. Cf. ft.5 pg.2. Indeed, the centre is only so by virtue of its margins, and vice versa, and the European metropoles were only possible as centres of modernity given the existence of their far away supplements which framed and made them possible. "Europe was made by its imperial projects as much as colonial encounters were shaped by conflicts within Europe itself." See Laura Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper, "Between Metropole and Colony" in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* eds. L.A. Stoller and F. Cooper (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[31] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1988) p.15

[32] Ibid.

[33] "Ethnology is not a speciality defined by a particular object, 'primitive' societies; it is a way of thinking, one which imposes itself when the object is 'other,' and demands that we transform ourselves. Thus we become the ethnologists of our own society if we distance ourselves from it." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "De Mauss à Claude Lévi-Strauss." In *Signes* (Gallimard: Paris, 1960)p.150 as quoted in Fuyuki Kurasawa, *The Ethnological Imagination: A Cross-Cultural Critique of Modernity* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2004)p.12

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I desperately wanted to explore the possibility that my life could resemble, however briefly, a less probable reverie.[34] What a waste, I thought, to spend my research time and money sitting in a soul-sucking 15th floor room reading increasingly inane theory (or so it seemed at the time) only to graduate, supposedly educated, and, thereafter, arrogate to myself the mantle of teaching others about the world. Academic self-absorption and hubris staggers; I saw myself (still do) repeatedly falling into the narcissistic traps I decried in others.

Self-absorption and hubris explain something of the over-determination of European modernity by social theorists. There is something very basic in the academic reticence to seek urban modernity beyond the culture capitals, those playground citadels, of Paris, London and New York. As uncharitable as it seems, the comforts of home, and comfort in general, go a long way to explaining why cities like Paris, London, New York, Berlin, Vienna, Venice, Prague, etc., seem to win out over Calcutta, Lagos, Manila, Saigon, etc., as favoured spaces for modern academic theorizing. "Paris" (I use it as a locutionary metonym and a locationary symbol) is comfortable and self-satisfying, if not self-aggrandizing. Think of the caché and envy conjured up by the always strategic declaration: "I was in Paris this summer researching my new book." With romantic, self-congratulatory repose, participatory Parisians sup familiar flavors and practice civilized tongues. Relaxed, bourgeois cafes beckon after a day's genteel labor in, more often than not, accommodating archives and libraries. Paris and Vienna do not necessarily demand that drenched in sweat one cram oneself into an overcrowded bus in pre-monsoon tropical heat just to get to the library, or scratch ones head over alien and confusing alphabets just to get around, or spend the night on a toilet voiding unfamiliar poisons whose urban existence is predicated on the very inequities modern European colonialism exploited, or face ones own privilege. Rather, in Paris, the fact that luxury window shopping, museums and galleries offer

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[34] This admission locates, albeit weakly, my essay and reasons for going to Calcutta within a familiar topos of travel narrative: the discovery—or rescue—of oneself. It has been suggested that this reason for seeing the world and writing about it relies on instrumentalising the foreign culture as a platform for self-discovery. See, Daniel Reynolds, "Blinded by the Enlightenment: Günter Grass in Calcutta" *German Life and Letters* 56:3 July 2003, p.249.

While it is true that harm can come from an unreflexive appropriation, and so a violent Othering of the unfamiliar, one must question to what extent *any* writing or reflection is not always already an instrumentalising of the world as a platform for self-iteration. As the noted travel writer Colin Thubron has pointed out in resisting the often simplistic charges of Orientalist imbrication: "If even the attempt to understand is aggression or appropriation, then all human contact declines into paranoia." Iteration should be reflexive, and thus responsible. Done poorly, one can quite legitimately charge using the other as a means rather than an end. Were we to stick to familiar landscapes of reflection, as some postcolonial ideologues would seem to imply, myopia would come to characterize, as Thubron claims, an overly fearful scholarship. I am reminded of Bakhtin's reminder: "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. *To be* means *to communicate*...To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary: looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another...I cannot imagine without another, I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another within myself." Mikhail Bakhtin (1984)p.287

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themselves as necessary distractions after a day's hard research merely confirms that ones dreams are on the right track.

Or, if we do, if one does, say, wander into the fiery suburbs of Paris to interview, with good sociological intent, the new and repeatedly disenfranchised—usually brown—natives, and the 23 percent young and un-employed, then, when one leaves those disturbing margins, one can quickly return to the centre which offers, with greater ease and less hassle, an escape at the end of the day to the bourgeois confines of comfort. Escaping the turmoil of Lagos or Calcutta is much more guilt inducing, decidedly more difficult, and often, as expensive as the worn and bookish comforts of Bloomsbury, Tavistock, the *Quartier Latin*, Montparnasse and Washington Square.

My point is that theorists of urban modernity often neglect the extent to which they, as analysts, are just as bound up by the phantasmagoric and wish-image contexts of the modern, as are the modern objects of their enquiries. Indeed, often, social theory acts as a sort of wish image transference. We often hide behind the privileged cosmopolitan claptrap of emancipatory hybridity and the multiplicity of postmodern participatory identity to avoid looking in the faces of people who long for home. Don't talk about the joys of "chutnification" to the Palestinian refugee, or the French teenager who can't find a job because his parents are Algerian, or the taxi driver who can't be an accountant in his adopted homeland, but who wishes, one day, to return to a place that is not fractured by the very same rhetoric which asks him to celebrate his diversity. And don't talk to the refugee in Darfur. Just listen, and then hand her some bread, and then promise to rectify some of the wrongs of which we are each complicit.

What David Spurr argues for readers also holds for authors. "[W]e are constituted...by the very principles we would call into question, and we do not escape the West merely by constructing it as an object of critical interpretation."[35] The problem is not that authors are necessarily products of a particular cultural geography. From what other position can we write than from the place and time we find ourselves? The question is rather that ones position, and the constant reiteration of a particular position, needs to be reflexively thought and made explicit for the reader. We need to write in order to be aware of our biases, or more accurately, in order to reflect critically. Often, despite burnishing the patina of modernity in its particular and historical circumstances, the underlying appeal to a formalized notion of pure modernity is seldom critically excavated by authors and theorists of urban modernity.[36] And, most importantly, often the absences that result are more apparent in what these theorists don't *do*, than in what they do say.

Accusations of academic self-satisfaction, comfort and hypocrisy are perhaps unfair given the substantial, important and innovative work done in the

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[35] David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Duke University Press: Durham, 1993)p.185

[36] Ibid, and see also, Joel S. Kahn, *Modernity and Exclusion* (Sage: New Delhi, London and Thousand Oaks, 2001)p.15

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past fifty or sixty years on the representational and theoretical strategies adequate to the task of revealing the modern city in all its plurality, its transitory fluxes, its fragmentary juxtapositions and its sheer, yet tangible, opacity. But, the predominance of work on "the space of modernity" through iconic cities like London, Paris, Berlin and Vienna conceals a latent reticence to address, fully, honestly, the ways in which post-colonial urban spaces, and their present, unintended and chaotic conditions (endemic poverty, enormous inequalities, unimaginable population densities,[37] and dysfunctional infrastructures) bewilder a modernity whose progress is premised, as Foucault remarks, on "approaching urban space as a constellation of problems requiring solution."[38]

The failure of non-Western "developing" cities is too often seen as failure within an atavistic narrative of unfolding, linear history. An implicit historicist logic narrates that these cities have not yet developed. Hence, their difficult difference (i.e. backwardness) is couched in the auspices of a time spatialized in the historical wake of the progressive West. Writing about the spatial multiplicities of the modern in Paris might address representational conundrums. But, how does it address the more fundamental global modernities of difference whose spatial character questions western meta-narratives of the city as a symbol or metaphor of progress and modernization? Is the apparent obsolescence of a largely unintended city like Calcutta merely a camouflage that hides a crucial, repressed and disowned self of a modernizing society?[39] Maybe Calcutta is an implicit self-constituted other to modernity's official narrative of urbanity, a city which returns as an allegorical reminder of the repressed or disowned of contemporary modern society? As an implicit immanence within modernity, what is it about Calcutta that speaks to what is ignored by the contemporary myth-making of modernity?

Rem Koolhaas' recent reflections on the chaos and seeming anarchy of Lagos inverts our common sense assumptions of modern development, and plays on the immanence of the coming catastrophe: "Lagos is not catching up with us.

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[37] One recent report claims that the Dharavi slum in central Mumbai (Bombay), Asia's largest, has the densest human dwelling concentrations in the world. In Dharavi an estimated one million people live and work within an area of two square kilometres. What makes this statistic even more remarkable is the fact that none of the shanty buildings within this urban footprint are higher than two stories. *The Globe and Mail*, October 3, 2005, p.A10. The choking stench coming from the black river which exits this neighbourhood confirms that this report may not be an exaggeration.

[38] Foucault (1986) p.22

[39] Ashis Nandy, "Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye View of Politics" in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema* ed. Ashis Nandy (Oxford University Press: Delhi, 1998) p.3. Nandy speaks of the slum (with which Calcutta has become synonymous) as an "'unintended city' – the city that was never a part of the formal 'master plan' but was always implicit with it." Not only does the word "unintended" capture the unplanned aspects of contemporary urban slum growth, but, historically, Calcutta grew as a city largely around the sub-urban (ie. not quite urban) palaces erected by commodity traders. These 'unintended' dwellings were 'para-sites' (beside-sites) which were inhabited by those who provided largely domestic support to the palaces. The city thus grew supplementarily, and became, eventually, a supplement itself to a larger process.

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Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos."[40] Could the same be said of Calcutta? And, allegorically, of us?

Thinking about modernity and history through Calcutta might address these perceived academic shortcomings. Or, at least, it might provide an alternate way of gaining some insight on what the modern means in the present, in a world whose increased urbanization is almost solely concentrated in the south rather than in the more self-satisfied north. Furthermore, perhaps the allegorical gaze might refract on that coming catastrophe of coping in ways a repeatedly Eurocentric and historicist focus continually veils with its ongoing self-interested myths of commodity, planning and development. Maybe the city space of Calcutta would reveal itself as an unintended material text of modernity. The allegorical gaze might work to deconstruct the commodity bound meta-narratives of historical time which give birth to mythic space as the planned, intentional evidence of reason and progress.

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I excitedly ran the idea past a few people. Everyone responded with enthusiasm and encouragement.

I had been to India before—immediately after completing my master's degree in philosophy in 1998. In December of that year, I visited Calcutta for a week or so after coming down from trekking about the mountains of Sikkim and after enjoying the relative calm of Darjeeling's winter clear Himalayan vistas. The morning I broke the ice on the water basin in my room at the Ratna Restaurant, I decided it was time to head south to warmer climes. Calcutta seemed a suitably intriguing and fabled destination.

And indeed, Calcutta was a relatively warm, comfortably congested blur which impressed itself on my memory in images which recurred a few years later as I thought about, and read, *The Arcades Project.* (The *AP* is a book which seems to demand thinking about before even reading it.) In Calcutta I had seen Benjamin's dusty 19th century peering back at me from behind glass cases. I had seen the ruined still struggling remnants of the arcades, forgotten but somehow alive, amidst the garish signboards, noise, and fumes of the modern metropolis. I had seen the cracked curlicues of European classicism traced by the seemingly incongruous village exotic.

In the streets of Calcutta, the village plays more than hide-and-seek.[41] I remembered that it wandered in a herd past the fabled, and still extant, nineteenth century Great Eastern Hotel on its way to graze in the Maidan,[42] the city's central park which lies, according to the Enlightenment's rationalist dream principles, in the centre of the city, its spoke roads radiating civility straight into

[40] Rem Koolhaas from *Lagos/Koolhaas*, dir. Bregtje van der Haak, First Run Icarus. New York, 2003.
[41] Walter Benjamin, "Moscow" in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (Schocken: New York, 1978) p.124
[42] "Maidan" means "open land."

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the congestion of contemporaneity. There, watched over by little boys with sticks, the village grazed, mingling the meadow with the traffic island.[43] Across from the Maidan in the echoing Victorian halls of the Indian National Museum, which, wooden shuttered from the outside, rang with the blare of Chowringhee traffic and the calls of pavement vendors, images of a world historical picture were preserved in the taxidermy stares of the hairless Bengal tiger, in the anthropological *papier mache* dioramas of "primitive tribals," and in the endlessly specimened, labeled, and itemized geo-fauna entombed in dusty wooden and glass cases of nostalgic Victoriana.

I remembered images of magnificent decay, of the once regal Metropolitan Building, the home of "the most attractive and convenient showroom of the kind in the city." Formerly the four storied site of the 19th century Whiteaway Laidlaw Department store, its ruined sarcophagal grimace today heralds a bygone era of relaxed colonial emporia amidst the contemporary chaos of a struggling 14 modern million. While thinking about *The Arcades Project*, Calcutta's *mémoires involuntaire* spoke back to me.[44] I have never been to Paris, but its cultural memory seemed evident in the spatial language of this crumbling colonial dream space.

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> Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried [45]

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Italo Calvino remarks at the opening of his "memory exercises," *The Road to San Giovanni*: "A general explanation of the world and of history must first of all take into account the way our house was situated... ."[46] My own involuntary recollections have deep roots, for my exploration of Calcutta begins at home.

Curry nights and the kitchen table. Its small pots of sliced banana, raisins, coconut, mango chutney, homemade lemon pickle and poppadums, hybrid Raj vestiges of my father's war years in Burma and India. The idea of going to Calcutta arose in and of Dad. His stories of the war, of eating dhal and chapatis in the jungle for weeks on end, of building pontoon bridges, of recuperating from

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[43] "The places have mingled', the goatherd said. 'Cecelia is everywhere. Here, once upon a time, there must have been the Meadow of Low Sage. My goats recognize the grass on the traffic island."
Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* trans. W. Weaver (Vintage: London, 1997) p.153

[44] "Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involuntaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory?" Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken: New York, 1968)p.202

[45] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume II* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. 2002)p.576

[46] Italo Calvino, *The Road to San Giovanni* trans. Tim Parks (Vintage: Toronto, 1995)p.3

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typhus, diphtheria, and malaria, of being a junior staff member on Mountbatten's war council in Ceylon. My project began with dream images fabled and fostered by numerous books on Central and South Asian history and travel which lay around the house. Samarkand and the Hindu Kush, the Silk Road and the Great Game, books by Robert Byron, William Thesiger, Fitzroy Maclean, Dervla Murphy, Freya Starck, Jan Morris, Peter Hopkirk, Eric Newby, Peter Levi, Bruce Chatwin, Paul Theroux, and the many others we sought out each birthday and Christmas. (More recently, the infuriatingly competent William Dalrymple whose example I shall never live up to.) There was the dancing black steel Shiva on the bookcase, and the stained, flesh coloured silk scarf map of Burma which Dad wore in his boot in case of capture by the Japanese, and the leather sheathed kukri, and his uniforms, one blue and one khaki, which we dressed up in as children and wore out through our play. There was the look on his face the day he taught us to shoot when he mentioned, only once, "hunting men." Dad spoke of staying at Calcutta's Great Eastern Hotel when he first arrived in the theatre of war. He told of his recuperation from typhus a few years later, of being escorted, on his first day out of the hospital, limp and weak down Calcutta's Chowringhee Road by a beautiful blond (Australian?—all Australians are blond, aren't they?) nurse to have tea at the famous Firpo's, the legendary restaurant where the Viceroy of India had his Sunday lunch. Firpo's is now gone. Its dismal nostalgia was mercifully destroyed by fire in 1998.

Perhaps, my project began unconsciously with the questions I have never asked, yet have always wanted to ask, but somehow always seem to neglect to ask in the everyday familiarity of feeding cows, petting dogs, and in the gentle lull of unspoken understanding which is often less intimate, but more meaningful, yet always less productive, than an interview with a stranger.

The Calcutta project did begin much earlier, and it returned again on the buzzing Walterdale that afternoon as I cast about for more than an idea. Benjamin was writing and collecting about Calcutta, as much as he was amassing Paris. Calvino even said as much.

> *"There is still one of which you never speak."*
> *Marco bowed his head.*
> *"Venice," the Khan said.*
> *Marco smiled. "What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?"*
> *The emperor did not turn a hair. "And yet I have never heard you mention that name."*
> *And Polo said: "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice."*[47]

At least, that is what I thought that day on the bridge. I thought it as I wrote up my new grant application; and later, my candidacy proposal; it's what I thought as packed to leave; as I eagerly entered the British Library and the

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[47] Calvino (1997)p.86

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British Museum during a magic week of metropole discovery in January 2003 before I set off on a bargain basement flight to Delhi on Royal Brunei Airlines, changing through the exciting, aimless, super-conspicuity of the Dubai transit lounge, a paradigm non-place.[48] It's what I continued to think as I ethno-graphed in green pen on the noisy platform of the New Delhi train station waiting for the 2302 Rajdhani Express to take me to Howrah. It's what I thought as I disembarked amidst the comforting madness of Howrah, and as I unpacked for a few nights in the Great Eastern Hotel, the same hotel in which Dad had acclimatized some sixty odd years earlier when he arrived in Calcutta on far more serious matters.

It's what I think now while struggling to put into words something of Calcutta's enormous complexity. To speak and think about Calcutta is to think about a world picture, an "image of modernity." Benjamin considered the Parisian arcades to be the "moulds from which the image of the modern is cast." I am simply trying to say that thinking about Calcutta in a similar light might provide an interesting way in which to approach the modern. Calcutta's image asks us to think about totalization, a process of expansive settling and capitalist exploitation, of new wants, and the subjection of the countryside to the rule of an ever expanding urban society. It is about a world created in another's own image,[49] and hence about the transformation of regimes of experience.

At the heart of these images is an immanence which returns, something vehemently denied and fought against in the "sadistic craving for innovation"[50] that passes as the categorical imperative of the modern. Today's colonial ruin, dotted with shiny glass arcades, exposes the impermanence that is the lie to, not only colonialism's, but modernity's illusions of permanence. Calcutta embodies the mythic production of the city both as the emblematic archetype of reason in history, and as an anti-mythic collective dystopia repeating the ever-same physiognomies of commodification and nationalism, promissory phantasmagoria whose disenchantment and ruin is evident today in the continuing mythical delusions of new beginnings, successful living and modern progress.

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[48] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Super-modernity* trans. John Howe (Verso: London and New York, 1995)
[49] Marx and Engels (1948) p.13
[50] Benjamin, *AP* (1999) [S1,5]p. 544

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Figure 2.2: Metropolitan Building. March 2003. Photo by Author.

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Generously funded by a SSHRC doctoral grant, a Canada Research Chairs Studentship, and a doctoral dissertation grant from the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta, I spent approximately 18 months away on field research. Most of that time was spent in Calcutta. I made an extended trip to London in the summer of 2003 to present at a conference where I spoke on visualizing Calcutta's modernities. During that summer of 2003, I spent some comparatively genteel time working at the luxuriously accommodating British Library. Again, in April of 2004, on my way home from India, I spent a few weeks in Calcutta's metropole before returning home ahead of my research materials to begin teaching in the summer of 2004.

Of course, I made a few brief trips outside Calcutta during my stay in India. I visited Bangalore and Pondicherry during the Christmas and New Years period of 2003-04 to compare Bangalore's globalized IT urbanism and Pondicherry's French colonial charm with Calcutta's similar and emergent urban spaces. Importantly, too, I made several forays into the fabled Bengal country-side, the imaginary place of "*Sonar Bangla*" (Golden Bengal), where the green quiet saturates the eye and the mind, and where, in the kerosene lit night far from the electric hubbub of the city, the countryside truly does envelope with a golden embrace.

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My research materials, four trunks worth of books, newspapers, archival notes, photographs, posters, films, and scrolls, which I spent the better part of my time collecting while in Calcutta, arrived home some five maddening months after I did, after an unscheduled, but appropriately worldly detour through Busan, South Korea. In late 2004, I sat down to begin again, but in a different form, the hardest part of this whole exercise, writing the project.

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> Questions of literary form are moral problems; they are the shadow-play of social and political issues.[51]

I had conceived of the project taking a similar textual form to the *AP*. Fragmentary, aphoristic, quotational, thematically grouped, I wanted, as Benjamin threatened a few times, to have a project entirely made up of other people's words.[52] Such a citational style is immensely more difficult than I first thought; and moreover, something my structural limitations (academic, institutional, and personal) would, no doubt, not allow. But within the *AP*'s interest in quotational composition, lies Benjamin's concern with modernism, something famously expressed in his essay *One Way Street.* For Benjamin, the street and the city acted as structural metaphors whose formalized image captured the associative, transitory and fragmentary nature of modern experience, which, in Gertrude Stein's words, was the "only composition appropriate to the new composition in which we live, the new dispositions of space and time."[53] Benjamin's interest in capturing the modern experience of alienation, shock and freedom in the face of catastrophe was no different than that of the many literary and visual artists whose work makes up movement we now dub "Modernism." Benjamin's concern for the moral problem of literary form extended, as Russell Berman notes, to disrupting "the closed order of the organic work of art" in an effort to unsettle "a deception that imposes an enervated passivity on the bourgeois recipient."[54] Modernists embraced fragmentation and juxtaposition, and valorized the montage of formalist encounter in order to more honestly capture the modern subjective experience. It was a compositional technique which, for Benjamin, disturbed the "isolated and pacified recipient lost in contemplation" and proposed endowing the reader with an "active and critical

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[51] Peter Levi, *The Light Garden of the Angel King: Journeys in Afghanistan* (Collins: London, 1972)p.xvii

[52] "This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage." *AP* [N1,10] p.458.

[53] As quoted in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's, "The Name and Nature of Modernism" *Modernism: 1890-1930* eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Penguin: New York and London, 1991)p.23

[54] Russell A. Berman, "The Aestheticization of Politics: Walter Benjamin on Fascism and the Avant-garde." *Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) p.38

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character,"[55] one attuned to the phantasmagorical, deceptions of bourgeois, Whiggish history.

Benjamin's dictum of montage takes only a muted form in the present essay. Although, despite its more linear style and form, the present essay does convey a certain openness to the principle of the signifier always exceeding the signified, always opening, through the immanence of trace and association, elsewhere, pointing back to the past and beyond to a future, always revisable but yet not wholly free.[56] The present essay takes a more conventional, bourgeois form, one which returns, like its subject matter, to a few central themes: the inside/outside of city and country, bourgeois place and failed space, nationalist home and desired world, arcade and street, mansion as city and slum as anti-city, myth and anti-myth. Its repeated beginning-again returns to circle through the trope of inside and outside, through past and present.

My scattered reflections must be responsible to the texts of the city, its residents and its past. Pastness engrains Calcutta's present textures and futures in ways completely alien to contemporary palace spaces, places like Dubai or Abu Dhabi or Shanghai, more globally lauded current examples of modern spatial progress, places "where the present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of...challenging the future."[57] In a place like Dubai, the future erects itself with reckless plastic abandon from the desert. Quite literally, there is no past, only sand, Louis Vuitton and the global pastiche of un/retarded skyscraper hubris. Shanghai, on the other hand, is in the process of actively eradicating, Haussman-esque, its old city. Residents complain that the real Shanghai is disappearing everyday before the blades of the bulldozer.

In Calcutta, by contrast, everyday turns of Victorian phrase ("thrice") mingle across mobile phone conversations as the cobblestone clatter of barefoot rickshaws draw one past trans-national brothel line-ups to sacrificial temples above underground metros where pilgrimaging country folk nervously delight in their first escalator ride, at the banal summit of which they disgorge with commuters next to a lotto booth manned by bored teenagers—'Live the Life of a Raja!'—and betel-spit stained gutters. Past, present, future and timeless collide in a visceral juxtaposition of impressions. But, as I said earlier, there is a beginning to pastness in Calcutta. Calcutta's beginning was contiguous with what is often argued as the beginning of the modern, and as such, "Calcutta was a place of pure invention, a place home to no-one."[58] "Calcutta began as a city without a history."[59] It is the Dubai of yesterday. Yesterday's future and tomorrow's past, today.

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[55] Ibid., p.39

[56] These words are Derek Sayer's, from personal correspondence, February 2005.

[57] Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City" *The Practice of Everyday Life* trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) p.91

[58] Thomas (2001)p.144

[59] Sudipta Kaviraj, "Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta" *Public Culture* Vol. 10, Issue 1 (1997)p.86.

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As someone attempting to interpret the city, my presence in Calcutta was never going to be self-evident, nor is it uncontestable now. What follows is an interpretation of a few aspects of the city, not a final interpretation, not an essential interpretation, nor an exhaustive one, but merely scattering reflections on a fascinating, perplexing, and multiplicitous place, reflections which attempt to represent it through a semblance of "reflexive refraction" rather than "ostensibly objective mirroring."[60]

The structure of the present essay reflects a little of its subject. It is layered, at times juxtaposing and interrupting past and present. It is a little chaotic; but, why in trying to represent or speak about the chaotic, would we iron out and simplify that chaos? Is academic order another "virtuous pretext?" Of course. My city begins with a person. It also ends with one.[61] As do all cities. I try to reflect incidental moments in order to open up a space for the consideration of singularities within a larger context of historical, globalized urban experience.[62]

Part of Benjamin's motive in attempting as best he could to cite without quotation marks was his desire to, as he put it, "not *say* anything. Merely show."[63] With my brief ethnographic descriptions I aim provide some sense of Calcutta life through simple observation. The photographs which accompany and intersperse the text augment the descriptions, and hopefully prove illustrative for the reader, but they do not pretend to be products of a passive mode of seeing. Benjamin's friend and interlocutor, Theodor Adorno, once chastised him for his failure to emphasize the produced or constructed quality of the *AP's* dialectical images. Benjamin could not "merely show" for he had to be aware, Adorno argued, of the doubled movement of his critical constructions. Adorno insisted that Benjamin acknowledge how he conceptually selected phenomena from the materiality which impressed itself upon him. Adorno argued that Benjamin had to be attentive, once he had selected, and thus broken up the world, to how the brought together fragments of associative montage revealed or disclosed a particular social reality, interpretation and critique.[64] All selection and re-presentation is a productive choice made about the world. My own pictures and descriptions are interpretive constructions which break the world up in terms of particular phenomena I choose to represent so that they may disclose particular

[60] John Law and Kevin Hetherington, "Allegory and Interference: Representation in Sociology", published by the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YN, November 2003, at http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/Law-Hetherington-Allegory-Interference.pdf
[61] It has not ended by any means. I am every day haunted by its memory, and by my memories, amongst of course others, of the two men with whom I begin and end. I will return to the city, hopefully sooner than later, to see these two, and others again, and of course, to see the city. I would like one day to live there again. It is a magic, sad, infuriating, lovely place. Life is naked there, which goes to some extent, maybe, to explaining why it is, for so many people, impossible to shake.
[62] Mark Crinson, *Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City* (Routledge: London and New York, 2005) p.xxi
[63] Benjamin *AP*(1999) [N1a,8]p.460
[64] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School* (The Free Press: New York, 1977)p.76-77

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social realities. Of course, I cannot claim any authenticity thereby, nor do I think it possible to claim authenticity.[65]

Observations, pictures and theoretical reflections were gathered largely by exploring the city. I tried as best I could to allow myself to become aware, bodily, of the city, to let its materiality impress itself on me aesthetically and phenomenally. Of course, the primary means for this knowledge collection was sight and vision. I spent long hours, for weeks on end, wandering the streets, riding the buses, trams and metro, sitting at intersections, watching people and places, exploring alleys, buildings, bridges, ports, railway stations, markets, shops, temples, and parks—photographing the while—but also listening, as best I could, to its history.

While the present essay is not substantially an ethnographic account of the contemporary city, it attempts to develop ethnographic observation together with contemporary and historical social research and theoretical reflection. It was important, I thought, to the sociological challenge of representing the city that I be present in the city, that I immerse myself as much as possible into the everyday of the city's multiplicities and history. Reading and observing are as much matters of listening, smelling and touching as they are of seeing.

Attempting to grasp what is strange meant more than reading. It meant a corporeal immersion in the other, in this case, an other city, an other language, an other country, and in multiple other ways of knowing the world as mediated through the many I met and spoke with. It meant coming into contact with this other through seeing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and therein, attempting, to represent that other with at least a claim to the attempt of honest understanding.[66] Benjamin premised his methods and motives on the notion that knowledge is corporeal, that it involved "the embodied displacement of self."[67] My attempt to gain insight into the totalizing processes of urbanization and modernity, and the multiple, heterogeneous faces this takes, meant exploring the city I had chosen, allowing its fortuitous associations and accidents, its serendipities, to shape my coming to know the place and to know something more of modernity as well. I hope something of this corporeal or sensuous scholarship is intimated in the present essay.

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[65] My observations are impoverished compared to those of the long term inhabitant. There are many such writers who have long associations with Calcutta to whom I have turned to learn much about the place: Partha Chatterjee, Ashis Nandy, Gayatri Spivak, Tapan Raychaudhuri, Nirad Chaudhuri, Amit Chaudhuri, Pradip Sinha, P.T. Nair, Bharati Mukherjee, amongst many others. My refractions on the city cannot claim nearly the subtlety, nor the intimacy of a biography written by a "native" born and raised in its landscape. Two recent biographies of other cities suggest themselves as exemplars of this type, Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories of a City*, and Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*. It is not my place to write such an essay, and the present one does not pretend to be of such a type.

[66] See Michael Taussig on the "mimetic faculty" in *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (Routledge: New York, 1993)p.8. On "corporeal knowledge" and bodily comprehension, see Michael Jackson's *Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) and Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1997).

[67] Stoller (1997)p.66-7

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But, the success (or not) of my fieldwork and participant observation does not come from an attempt to establish an "active at-homeness in a common universe"[68] with my object of study. That was impossible given the relatively short time I lived in Calcutta. I came to think of my activity there very much as that of a "professional stranger."[69] More than once I had to explain myself to the puzzled looks of interested scholars from abroad who were there on very much more focused agendas. In some cases, particularly with a middle-aged, American endowed chair of sociology who prided herself on a certain familiarity or at-homeness with the city, my approach to an urban ethnography was methodologically "inaccurate" and she became openly hostile to my presence. I was, of course, treading on her territory. Colonialism takes many subtle forms.

No, I tried to let myself be drawn to the "attractions of the terrain" [70] and the encounters I found there. Loosely employing, or rather, *justifying* my approach through an appeal to Guy Debord's notion of the dérive or drifting, I tried to engage a "technique of transient passage through varied ambiances."[71] The city became a place of accident and happenstance, which produced not neutral descriptions, but ones which attempted to read the city as allegory, as a place which returns the desire of modernity (its surface appearance of things) to its latent or immanent contradictions (its ruin).

Debord's theory of the dérive, a theory of urban ethnography, developed Marx and Engel's notion that the modern bourgeoisie 'worlded', that is, "created a world after its own image," one defined by the space of the commodity. Debord suggested that through dérive the participant observer could interrupt the dream-wish of the commodity and so the homogenizing space of the modern city by intervening in the city in "dubious" ways.[72] These dubious techniques aimed to expose the city in ways for which it had not been designed. As Debord notes, "to dérive was to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which and environment was designed."[73]

But what became interesting for me was the way in which the city itself, much less my own participation, embodied adaptations distinct from that for which the city had been designed. The design of modernity in Calcutta, failed so to speak, and so is reworked or reshaped to embody in numerous oblique ways the heteroglossia that is the modern metropolis. This adaptive heterogeny thereby also exposes the many ways in which the promises and failures of the modern are

[68] James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority" *Representations* 1 no.2 (Spring 1983)pp.128-129
[69] See, M. Friedlich, ed., *Marginal Narratives at Work: Anthropologists in the Field* (Schenkman: New York, 1970), and Michael H. Agar, ed., *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography* (Academic Press: San Diego, 1996).
[70] Guy Debord, "Theory of the dérive" *Situationist International Anthology* ed. K. Knabb (University of California Press: Berekley, 1981)pp. 50-4
[71] Ibid.p.50
[72] Ibid., p.53
[73] Ibid.

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premised on particular exercises of power and exploitation. Such regimes are experienced at the most intimate and personal levels of everyday experience.

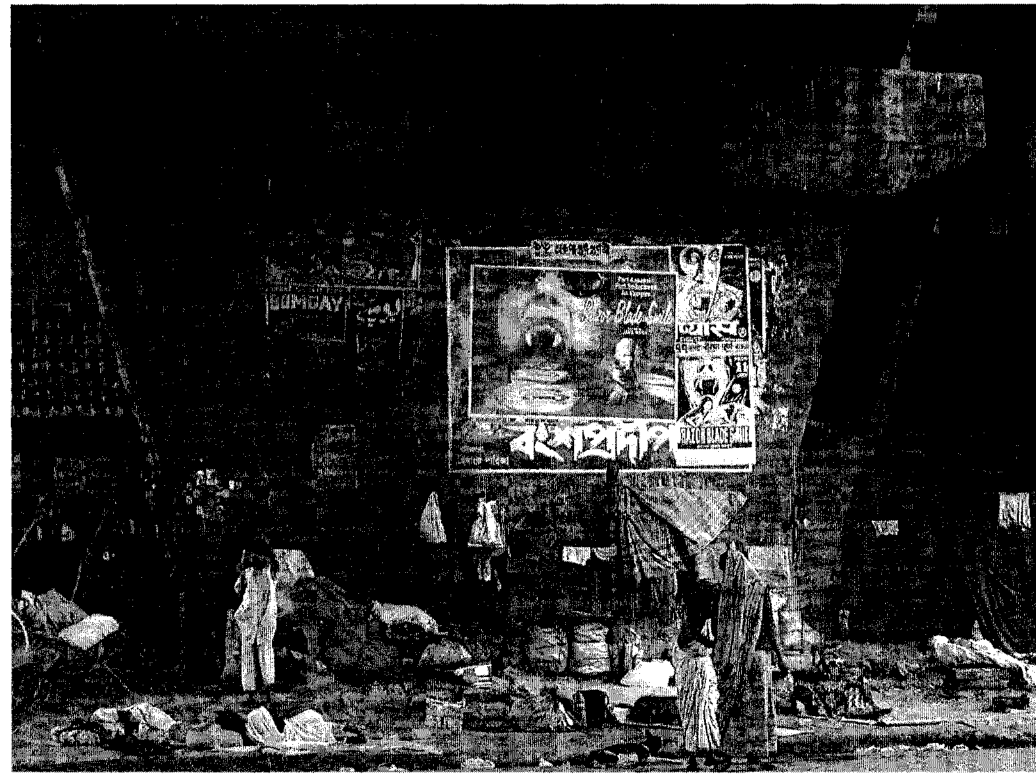

Figure 2.3: Home Under Overpass (Vidyasagar). January 2004. Photo by Author.

But just as a "neighbourhood is determined not only by geographical and economic factors, but also by the image that its inhabitants and those of other neighbourhoods have of it,"[74] so too is the city itself determined by its reflexive representational place in a circuit of significations. The city is thus, as Debord and the situationists emphasized, a place of "psychogeographical relief"[75] both with respect to its own internal topography, and as part of a wider, perhaps global, landscape of understanding. If, for the situationists, the practice of the dérive emphasized the emotional contours of the urban environment by unstructuring ones movement through the city, and so disrupting the reifying banality of one's everyday urban life, so, for me, Calcutta became, in the context of thinking about modernity, a site through which I could mobilize a certain theoretical reflection in order to disrupt the spectacle of the modern within a geography of plural intensities.[76]

Calcutta has always been a site of plural intensities manifest through the colonial exercises of the commodity spectacle. Today, the city is part of the sub-

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[74] Ibid.p.50
[75] Ibid.
[76] A. Bonnett, "Situationism, Geography, and Poststructuralism" *Environment and Planning D* Vol.7 No.2 (1989) pp.137

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continental "resurgence of modified forms of neo-colonialism, operating under the banners of 'globalization' and 'liberalization.'"[77] What is significant about this neo-colonialism and about Calcutta's place within it, is the fact that the historical spectacularization of the modern through the commodity fetish returns in the present to characterize the social horizon of futurity. These ostensibly "new" social imaginaries materialized in new sites of commodity and lifestyle consumption merely repeat the earlier colonial urbanization of landscape in terms of "alienation and the self-pacifying consumption of standardized images."[78] Situating Calcutta within the historical return of this devoutly modern process speaks to what goes unthought by social theory's ideological overrepresentation of modern Eurocentric cityscapes. Trying otherwise might uncover the certain limitations to cultural memory in the continued restraining of urban modernity through European cityscapes.

Amongst dérive's interventionist technique, Debord suggested "...slipping by night into houses undergoing demolition."[79] I did not slip into houses undergoing demolition, but I did repeatedly slip into a ruined building undergoing renovation. This essay is, after all, about the spatialisation of historical returns. The Metropolitan Building became for me a site where Calcutta materialized the ruin at the heart of the commodity. The Metropolitan Building is an old arcade of the sort that fascinated Benjamin. Its monumental edifice spoke, when it opened, of solidity, grandeur, imperial continuity and cosmopolitan participation and it attempted to monumentalize the myth of a 19th century imperial permanence. Today it stands facing West, at the heart of what was once one of the richest streets in the East. It became the premier shopping destination in Calcutta from 1885 till 1947 and sold everything: bicycles, underwear, servants aprons, kimonos, Christmas puddings, hammers, toys, chairs, food, rugby shirts, motoring hats, toothbrushes, tortoise-shell combs, tortoises. But, since its near abandonment in 1950, it has fallen into almost complete dereliction. The Metropolitan building came to symbolize so much, for me, of the multiplicity we call modernity. It is a space redolent of the multiplicity of historical and contemporary urban modernity in miniature.

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[77] Sumit Sarkar, "India in the Long Twentieth Century" in *The Great Divergence: Hegemony, Uneven Development and Gender Inequality* ed. Jomo K.S. (Oxford University Press: Delhi, 2006)p.195
[78] Bonnett (1989)p.138
[79] Debord. p.53

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Figure 2.4: Metropolitan Building. February 2004. Photo by Author.

But, of course, my serendipitous drifting was not limited to streets and old architectural spaces. Visual and corporeal drifting entails ambulating books as well as urban texts. Benjamin was an inveterate "scrivener" whose *Arcades Project* is more the product of endless hours copying at a desk with cue cards, than it was the product of *flanéurie*.[80] I too visited numerous archives and libraries, historical monuments, bookstores and cultural offices. I wanted, as best I could, to observe the city's various expressions of modernity. This entailed both observing the city through a physically immersive everyday experience and through more conventional textual and academic interfaces. Benjamin's desire to produce a largely quotational text reveals itself in the fact that his unfinished opus is comprised of roughly seventy-five percent direct transcription from archival sources.[81] My much more modest proposal relinquishes this degree of dependence on recitative fragmentation to the more conventional academic operation of the footnote.[82]

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[80] See Adam W. Chalmers, "The Aporias of Theory: Negotiating the Dialectical Image in Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project" *New Formations* 54 Winter 2004/5 pp.44-59.
[81] Ibid., p.44
[82] When well done, footnotes fill out the text and provide evidence of what the author is thinking, reading and referencing at the time of writing. In the present essay, argument sometimes takes place through the simple act of referencing, and at other times it takes place within the footnote itself. More often, I hope that the footnotes provide interesting asides and contexts.

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> Every image of the past that is
> not recognized by the present as
> one of its own concerns threatens
> to disappear irretrievably.[83]

The essay begins by taking the imperative of responding to the present seriously.

> Before you are through with any piece of work, no matter how indirectly on occasion, orient it to the central and continuing task of understanding the structure and the drift, the shaping and the meanings, of your own period, the terrible and magnificent world of human society in the second half of the twentieth century.[84]

C. Wright Mills' imperative to be responsive to the present was one which Foucault would come some years later to echo. Both were, of course, paraphrasing Kant's formulation of the ethos and responsibility of critique. To be modern was, for Kant, to ask the question of the present and to put the present at the forefront of ones critical concern. Foucault characterizes Kant's ethos thusly,

> "What is happening today? What is happening now? And what is this 'now' which we all inhabit, and which defines the moment in which I am writing?"[85]

This "now" is a spatial moment, a "social spatialisation"[86] which embodies a horizon of experience and a certain constitution of a social imaginary.

As such, the essay begins with a reflection on the global urban present, that moment of which we are, today, a part—namely the point in human history where more people live in "urban society" than in non-urban landscapes. Though no longer a part of the second half of the twentieth century, but perhaps its terrible and magnificent perpetuation, 2006 marks the first time that human civilization is more urban than rural.[87] We have reached that point in history when the distinction between what lies inside the city and what lies outside the city begins to break down and lose its significance. For the urban is not simply the spatial concentration of human dwelling and the consequent interdependence

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[83] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" *Illuminations* (1973)p. 112

[84] C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford University Press: London and New York, 1959)p.225

[85] Michel Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution" *Economy and Society* Vol. 15, No. 1, 1986, p.88

[86] See Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin* (Routledge: New York, 1991)

[87] *United Nations—Revised Urbanization Prospectus 2003* (New York: United Nations Economic and Population Division, 2004)p.4

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on specialized labour. The urban today is the parking metre in Inuvik, the fact that the Bengali farmer talks on his mobile phone while ploughing his rice fields with a bullock, the fact that the computer participates as much in milking cows as in the satellites which surveil the Earth's surface. Urbanization is a process of technological totalization, a commodification which subsumes the living other and its organic value in exchange for rendering it a function of the instrumental world picture, a consumable to be possessed through social relations fantastically imbued in the increasingly interdependent and concentrated relations of *things*. There is no place for the barbarian inside the city, and in a world where there is increasingly only city, there is no barbarian.

From the broad global present the essay narrows its focus. Colonial expansion was premised on commodification. The essay entertains the notion that spaces of modernity are not located in so many functions of the conventional cultural cotter pins (London, Paris, Vienna, Berlin etc.) as many commentators would have us believe. Rather, we should expand our understanding of urban modernity to include those urban spaces whose very existence is a dream function of the commodity imperative, spaces as signs of pure invention. These spaces, homes to no-one, arose in places where, from the start, their assumptions were contested both by the colonizers and by the colonized. As such, they were, as soon as they became locations in name, always already places of ambivalence, heterogeneity and defiance.[88]

Until recently, this heterogeneity and confrontational plurality was subsumed to a singular narrative of modernity which premised itself on the notion of linear development. European metropoles exist, so the argument goes, at the vanguard of modernity's historical development. Their various colonial outposts, despite being satellite signs in the civilizing service of their respective states,[89] were, and still are, nevertheless on the way to becoming fully modern. This notion of history as a chain of events, still very much taken for granted, is itself premised on the idea of consuming the commodity, a technical thing-ness extracted from a rationalized world inhering a manipulative capacity to solve the problems of life.[90] When these marginal places fail to live up to the dream image of their initial invention, they are deemed failed moderns and thus failures of rationalized planning. That is, their contested and plural status never really questions the underlying fundamental assumptions of modernity embodied in the fetish of the secularized commodity thing, namely, that rational or cumulative history, whose glorious sign the modern city radiates, can forestall death.

The essay narrows further to take up a specific contemporary site evidencing the continuation of this colonialist commodity phantasmagoria. It focuses on a new city, a city not yet finished, a city within the city of Calcutta. I attempt to illustrate a multi layered, contradictory place of difference within

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[88] Thomas (2001)p.141

[89] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* trans., Donald Nicholson-Smith (Blackwell: Oxford, 1991)p.21

[90] Zygmunt Bauman, "Liquid Sociality", *The Future of Social Theory* ed. N. Gane (Continuum: London, 2004)

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which a new development tries to erect itself as another beginning amidst a wider landscape of perceived failure. This new beginning is premised on the power of the commodity form "to batter down the Chinese walls"[91] and to capitulate, through mimicry, to 'living the way the world does.' But, I contend, *pace* Benjamin, these efforts merely repeat the earliest colonial phantasmagorical urbanizations spatialized in the trading tent and gated bourgeois palaces. Calcutta's new malls and condominium developments reproduce the idea of modern life as consumptive participation.

'Living the way the world does,' a normative participatory aspiration, means, for those who can afford it, living in a world made thing and thereafter image, and thus made abstract, a consumptive approximation to a reified participatory ideal. Such thinking is premised on the notion that if we render the world so many appropriable, manipulable things, then all the world, reified and manipulated equally, can live in a similarly developed, modern, utopian way. We would thereby extend the few privileged moments that the colonial presaged into the monumental longing of the present.

Benjamin characterizes this as a commodified rendering of the natural. He continues Marx's equation of the thing as exchange value and commodity when he writes,

> [The commodity] stands in opposition to the organic. It prostitutes the living body to the inorganic world. In relation to the living it represents the rights of the corpse. Fetishism, which succumbs to the sex-appeal of the inorganic, is its vital nerve; and the cult of the commodity recruits this to its service.[92]

Commodities and the commodity structure formed the central basis of Benjamin's critique of the delusional mythologies of modernity.[93] Following Marx, Benjamin saw, in the commodification of living, the making of the urban, the rendering abstract of labour-time and its purchase as so many things which stand as relations between people. In the commodity he saw the investiture of consciousness and social life. Its wishes, aspirations and longings were materialized in the artefacts and mechanical rhythms of industrial life. Yet, in the commodity he saw double. He saw the myth of modernity imbued in the thing and its promises of the new, but Benjamin also saw how the commodities in the arcades, and as embodied in the luxurious buildings which housed them, veiled behind their magical promises of liberation and freedom from problem and toil, a trap and burden of an interminable, empty present, a system of alienation, exploitation and dehumanization.[94] Commodities and their phantasmagoria rendered, for him, a

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[91] Marx and Engels (1948) p.13

[92] Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* trans. Harry Zohn (Verso: London, 1983)p.166

[93] Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Polity: Cambridge, 2002)p.125

[94] Ibid. p.126

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profoundly contradictory mystification or misrecognition. They embodied, and as desired and consumed things, thus represented, both dreamt wish images of futurity, and, at the same time, the imminent (and imm*a*nent) undoing of that indwelling mythic aspiration.

This seeing double is indicative of Benjamin allegorizing the commodity and its relation to history.[95] In it he sees promise and catastrophe, cultural wish image and mythic delusion, phantasmagoria and ruin. Benjamin's allegorical gaze sought to double the urban text of the commodity within its cityscape to reveal the evocative ruin that is the other to the history which hides behind the modern's veiling seductive and spectacularizing world of the commodity.[96] Just as the organic world (the non-commodified, the yet to be exploited, the traditional) is prostituted as commodity to the capitalist, industrial world of technological abstraction, so, for Benjamin, the prostitute became an allegory or embodiment of the commodity relation. As he writes in the *AP*, "the fetish character of the commodity [is] to be conveyed through the example of the prostitute."[97]

We might extend the allegory and metaphor of the prostitute to the process of colonialism and industrial urbanization in general. Indeed, this is the argument that Edward Said famously makes in *Orientalism* when he states that the patriarchal gaze objectified the Oriental woman and "fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled."[98] Modern European colonialism was premised on the capitalist market expanding in search of new commodities to feed the growing consumer desire and demand for such exotics as spices, gold, cloth, minerals, etc.[99] These it exploited from the colonized other, its landscape and geography, through systematic processes and rationalizations of commodification, instrumentality, objectification, and utility. These processes were often systematized and exercised via modes of patriarchal violence, theft, coercion, and submission. Where there was no systematic precedent (i.e. private property) colonialism impelled, sometimes under threat, the imposition of legalistic justification and rationalization (ex. the Permanent Settlement agreements of 1793[100]). Colonialism

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[95] "[A]llegory is an attitude as well as a technique, a perception as well as a procedure...allegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another..." (p.68). See, Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism" *October* 12 Vol.12 (Spring 1980) pp. 67-86.

[96] Cf. Ranjani Mazumdar, "Ruin and the Uncanny City: Memory, Despair and Death in *Parinda*" *Sarai Reader2002 The Cities of Everyday Life* (Sarai: The New Media Initiative, Delhi, 2002) p.69

[97] Benjamin (1999) *AP* [O°, 38]p.861 and [J65a,6]p.345, v. Gilloch, (2002) p. 127

[98] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage: New York, 1979)p.6. See also, Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (Routledge: London and New York, 1995)p.14.

[99] "The whiff of spice lured Britain to India. In 1599 a group of London merchants, flushed both by an emergent spirit of capitalism and by the English victory over the Spanish Armada eleven years earlier, formed the East India Company in the hope, among other things, of driving down the cost of pepper." David Burton, *The Raj at Table: A Culinary History of the British in India* (Faber and Faber: London and Boston, 1993) p.1.

[100] The Permanent Settlement Agreements were processes through which British common law came to be applied to the colony. Since private property did not exist in Bengal in the same constitutional way

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produced epistemic frameworks of obligation which demarcated social understanding and social relationships wherein power and knowledge became intertwined in productions of reason and intelligibility. Often the newly commodified landscapes of otherness became desired precisely because of their exoticism and difference. This desired difference and exoticism was consumed not through significant shifts in the colonial frameworks of understanding, but simply through the exploitative commodification of difference. The desired and fetishized exotic was bought, and participated in, through commodification, and mobilized through the sexualization of a feminized Orient for Western male power, possession and profit, or as Said notes, as a "male power fantasy."[101] Europe desired and consumed the other through the production and purchase of things, and once the (sexualized) fetish for the exotic became entrenched, and surplus value sufficiently motile that a middle class could afford luxuries, the exoticized other deliberately fashioned and sold itself through targeted commodity apparatuses. Chinaware, cloth, jewelry, metalwork, art, etc..., were all developed and produced for a modern urban *Lebenswelt* inscribed through frameworks of money economies, abstract and quantified participation, and objectified, inorganically rationalized socializations.

The exoticized other, rendered appropriable, its contexts, traditions and organicity understood and abstracted through the male structure and force of the commodity relation, transformed its own body (literal human body as well as landscape, cultural, religious and social bodies) into an item for sale.[102] Today that history culminates in the little boys who scampered around my legs during

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that it did in Britain, it was difficult both to hold people to account for crimes and misdemeanours, and, of course, to extract land tax.

[101] McClintock (1995)p. 14 and Said (1979)p.207

[102] This, of course, explains the long history of the Sub-Continent's attraction as a place of exotic consumable appropriation by adventurers, travelers, tourists, spiritual seekers and those others bored and alienated by the perceived material and spiritual deficits of an increasingly industrialized and fragmented Western social *Lebenswelt*. Siegfried Kracauer explains the desire by the modern for consuming the other, thusly: "[t]he goal of modern travel is not its destination but rather a new place as such; what people seek is less the particular being of a landscape than the foreignness of its face." See, "Travel and Dance" *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Harvard U.P.: Cambridge, Mass., 1995)p.65. If we can possess some artefactual semblance of the desired newness of the other through brief participatory immersion, however cursory or reified, if we can take home trinkets which signify both our attempts to transcend the strictures of our own subject production, and thereby gesture to the possibility of ways of life other than our own, then we can seduce our thinking into accepting the supposed innovations and justifications attendant upon such consumptive participation. Evidence the backpacker, the new age seeker, the tourist, the charity worker, the sex seeker, the academic. The irony, of course, is that the exotic becomes merely a function of commodified familiarity. As Kracauer continues, "The more the world shrinks thanks to automobiles, films and airplanes, the more the concept of the exotic in turn also becomes relativized. ... This relativizing of the exotic goes hand in hand with its banishment from reality—so that sooner or later the romantically inclined will have to agitate for the establishment of fenced-in nature preserves [i.e. commodified spaces], isolated fairy-tale realms in which people will still be able to hope for experiences that today even Calcutta is hardly able to provide. ... [A]s a result of the comforts of civilization, only a minute part of the globe's surface remains *terra incognita* today; people feel just as much at home in their homes as they do elsewhere—or they do not feel at home anywhere at all"(66).

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Christmas in Hampi—"Unk-el. Postcard Unk-el,...Unk-el?! Postcard. What is your name? What is your country? Unk-el! Only 50 rupees."

This process was, of course, subject, as all commodity fetishism is, to the vagaries of time, circumstance and taste. In other words, this complex relationship was subject to fashion. It was the waxing and waning of taste and fashion, the inevitable decay and disintegration of commodity appropriation and their attendant social identifications and productions that interested Benjamin, and excited in him the analogies to allegorical thinking. As he writes in the *AP*,

> The modes of meaning fluctuate almost as rapidly as the price of commodities. In fact, the meaning of the commodity *is* its price; it has, as a commodity, no other. Hence the allegorist is in its element with commercial wares. ... [H]e recognizes in the "price tag," with which the merchandise comes on the market, the object of his broodings—the meaning. [103]

The dream of modern actualization through commodities comes at a price. Just as the pre-modern allegory emphasizes the transience of life, the fleetingness and meaninglessness of human signification in its gestures to permanence with its dependence on the tropes of skull, corpse, skeleton and other catastrophic gesticulations to *vanitas*, so the modern allegorist finds in the fashionable transiences of the commodity fetish, similar warnings on the materially unredeemed life.

To highlight, allegorically, the seductive illusion of the phantasmagoric fetish for the new in its fashionable commodity form, Benjamin examined the plethora of the commodity landscapes fenced by the Parisian arcades. The arcades were, for him filled with the dusty relics of the forgotten wish image, detritus passed over in the seductive clamour for the new. He focused his attention on the multiplicity of these forms, on the overwhelming plurality and diversity of these materialities, within the commodity space of the arcade, that "ambiguity of space"[104] whose "abundance of mirrors...makes orientation difficult" amongst the commodity maze of promises and "double-edged dreams."[105]

The arcade acted as a spectacular landscape which opened up the city as an illusory, sleepy, standstill world of the phantasmagoria, whilst at the same time, in the form of the more intimate and decided ambiguous, street-but-not-street of the arcade, it closed around the modern subject as if a room, reassuring with "felt knowledge"[106] intuitive semblances of domestic wish fulfillment. The commodity and its spectacle spaces, in a sense, make the city a home. Commodities reassure

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[103] Benjamin (1999) *AP* [J80, 2] and [J 80a,1]p.369
[104] Ibid. [c°,3]p.877
[105] Ibid., p.878
[106] Ibid.[e°,1]p.880

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the city dweller that the fragmented mental life she experiences within the intensified, disorienting maze of increasingly alienating stimuli of the modern city are so many more opportunities to participate in the intimacies of the organic ideal. But, as Benjamin notes, these promises are empty. Ghosts and fetishes cannot redeem. The logic of the commodity and that of the modern city are closely intertwined.

While Benjamin analyzed the plethora of multiple commodity forms within the city, I focus on the discursive transition of one particularly illuminating commodity form. This form is especially interesting because its contemporary reception, and consumption, is a product of its interpretation within the framework of the modern city space. The contemporary commodity I will examine is the Bengali *pata* painting.

I contextualize the transition of the *pata* folk art form from its traditional uses in organic cultural transmission, through to its more recent articulation in commodification and exchange values, and to its contemporary production as a highly reified artefact of nationalist identity formation whose imageries are replicated and sold within the contexts of tourist theme parks and charity t-shirts. In analyzing this transition I emphasize how the understanding of modern city space defines and produces commodified forms of nationalist discourse and thus contextualizes the *pata* painting's transition from traditional "organic" (to use Benjamin's word) artefact to an almost strictly commodity apparatus of identity participation and consumption.

I end the analysis of the *pata* art form by locating its contemporary reception and consumption in two significant commodity spaces. The first is that of the book fair on the grounds of the Maidan, and the second is that of the tourist theme park and folk art mall called "Swabhumi" on the developing outskirts of Calcutta. The location of the sale of the paintings and their associated imagery at the book fair is significant because the paintings are today sold at an exhibition, and in literally on the same location as the famous, but little written about, Calcutta World Exhibition of 1884.

Exhibitions were important for Benjamin because they were exemplars of the spectacular power of the commodity fetish to instill in the modern subject the phantasmagoric wish-image of history fulfilling its social obligations in the material manifestation and the multiplicitous embodiments of progress and development. At these exhibitions "the progress narrative began to be consumed as a mass spectacle."[107]

On December 4th, 1883, the Calcutta International Exhibition, opened its doors, on a "wet and gloomy morning,"[108] to a three and a half month run of over one million ticketed visitors, over one hundred thousand exhibits, and 2,500 exhibitors from throughout the British Imperial world. The Calcutta Exhibition—museum, arcade, fair, bazaar, colonial theatre—"erected the universe

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[107] McClintock (1995)p.57
[108] *Official Report of the Calcutta International Exhibition, 1883-84* Vol.1 (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1885)p.16

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of commodities."[109] A temporary city in miniature, the exhibition celebrated the Imperial and technological masteries over nature and culture as it exhaustively catalogued the artefacts of modern Empire. The Exhibition produced in its various themed rooms, a history of the sub-continent by displaying the diverse wonders of a constructed "Indian" antiquity for those, Indian and English alike, who pilgrimaged to the manifest dream-world which encapsulated *only* the promise and not the manifold tragedy of modernity. In a calculated effort to produce commodity desire as a marker of belonging, the international exhibition was open to everyone who could afford the nominal ticket fee. One indicator of its importance as a public spectacle: train fares to the exhibition were lowered to entice non-urban and country folk. If only temporary, it was, nevertheless, "a place of pilgrimage to the fetish commodity."[110]

But if the temporary tents of the Exhibition framed the old and the new together in a historicist production premised on the aura of authenticity, the desire these fantastical rooms awoke needed an outlet in a more permanent form of purchase and possession. This collective desire to consume the extent and wonder of the mass-produced and ready-to-hand found its anodyne a stone's throw from where the exhibition closed its flaps in the "excessive heat"[111] of March 10th, 1884.

On the 5th of August 1885, the Whiteaway, Laidlaw Company, "the premier department store east of the Suez" moved from its location at 7 Esplanade East to its palatial site at 4, 5 and 6 Chowringhee Road and Corporation Street. The building was an example of a late arcade cum department store, and its monumental edifice spoke, when it opened, of solidity and grandeur, as well as of commemorative imperial continuity and cosmopolitan participation. It attempted to monumentalize the myth of a 19th century imperial permanence. It stood, facing West, at the heart of what was then one of the richest streets in the East, and was a premier shopping destination in Calcutta from 1885 till 1947, selling in its halls everything from bicycles, to men's and ladies' clothing, to house wares, shoes, toys and innumerable exotic and everyday commodities from throughout the colonial world.

Built and designed by Mackintosh Burn, a British architectural and engineering firm, its style reflected a classic, Victorian commercial aesthetic. The building is a froth of Baroque, Romantic, Palladian, and perhaps even Mannerist features. Inverting and inventing exterior space, it housed within the multilevel department store, a restaurant and café, as well as in its upper levels, flats, once called Victoria Chambers. Its form gestured to the classical arcade. Covered walkways and glass ceilings, the remnants of which are extant today, accessed the flats on the upper floors. It was as a department store, however, that it enchanted the dream of city as a world in miniature.[112] It interiorized the street, shutting out

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[109] Benjamin (1983)p.106
[110] Ibid.
[111] *Official Report of the Calcutta International Exhibition* (1885)p.16
[112] Benjamin (1999) *AP*[A1,1]p.31

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the unwanted – the natural elements and their social counterparts – by providing the cosmopolitan world in commodity form for the exclusive, through exclusion. It hid, as the new malls and condo cities within cities try to do today, from the uncontainable, and acted, as the Exhibition did before, as a globalized site for the domestication of desire. Today though, it is a ruin. Gutted, crumbling but still partially in use, holes gape between floors, rumble piles amidst cracked columns, and, though tenuous steps are under way to redeem its once celebrated glories, its broken stained glass and tree-rooted facades tell another story. The Metropolitan Building acts as an allegorical site, a corpse at the heart of the modern colonial—nay, the modern, for the two are inseparable—a materialized story of the ruin immanent within the promise of the modern.

Benjamin's aim in bringing together a constellation of notable sources was to awaken the reader, through juxtaposition and recognition, to the 'profane illumination' that the myth of modern progress is simply the "refinement of technical means for the ever more intensified exploitation and domination of nature and humankind."[113] The shock effect materialized in the text to mimetically reflect the experience of the modern—aesthetic modernism at its best—would act in the manner of a Proustian *mémoire involuntaire.* Such memories would illumine the intimate wish-images of the personal past within the context of humanity as a whole, and provoke a political actualization in the contemporary situation of the oppressed. As Benjamin writes in the *AP*,

> In what ways is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness to the realization of the Marxist method? The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event...To grasp the construction of history as such.[114]

Those provocative moments of alertness to the "catastrophe which has already occurred"[115] are, for Benjamin, moments of a fleeting redemption which disappears as fleetingly as it appears before one in the caress of a crack or fissure or ruin. They are thus memory traces, gone before they can be secured. Redemption itself becomes a wished for dream image, a messianic release from the inevitable tragedy of history. "[T]he future is not simply a human creation but a

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[113] Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Polity: Cambridge, 2002)p.226
[114] Benjamin (1999) *AP* [N2,6]p.461.
[115] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Vintage: London, 1993)p.96, as quoted in Gilloch (2002)p.230

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redemptive possibility interrupting the continuity of history."[116] But it remains only a possibility.

In the context of contemporary post-colonial, urban Bengal the wish-image of redemption takes the pervasive form of nostalgia, a nostalgia exercised through the perpetual cultural return to an imaginary past which attempts to interrupt the continuity and catastrophe of the present. This imaginary past is inscribed through the work of particularly, Rabindranath Tagore, sage, poet, painter, cultural avatar of a longed for return to some imaginary golden age, a *Sonar Bangla.*[117] But Tagore's work is not limited to the cultural memory of Bengalis alone. In 1913, W.B. Yeats, wrote of Tagore's poetry that "to read one line of Rabindranath's is to forget all the troubles of the world. ... [His] words display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long."[118] Yeats was speaking to a Europe he recognized as already broken by the metropolitan mind, and he saw in Rabindranath the capacity to speak to a possible future to come.

> If the civilization of Bengal remains unbroken, if that common mind which—as one divines—runs through all, is not, as with us, broken into a dozen minds that know nothing of each other, something even of what is most subtle in these verses will have come, in a few generations, to the beggar on the roads.[119]

For Rabindranath, however, pace Benjamin, the redemptive possibility of the non-historical, the outside of history, the messianic is always to come. As he writes in the poem "No. 45" in *Gitanjali,*

> Have you not heard his silent steps?
> He comes, comes, ever comes.
> Every moment and every age, every day and every night he
> Comes, comes, ever comes.
> Many a song have I sung in many a mood of mind, but all their
> notes have always proclaimed, "He comes, comes, ever comes."
> In the fragrant days of sunny April through the forest path he
> Comes, comes, ever comes.
> In the rainy gloom of July nights on the thundering chariot of
> Clouds he comes, comes, ever comes.
> In sorrow after sorrow it is his steps that press upon my heart,
> And it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joy to shine.[120]

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[116] Feenberg (2005)p.19

[117] *Sonar Bangla* translates as "Golden Bengal" and is commonly used to refers to a mythical past or present free from the disasters of modernity.

[118] William Butler Yeats, "Introduction" *Gitanjali* (Dover: London, 2000) p.ix

[119] Ibid.

[120] Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (MacMillan and Co.: London, 1962) p.36-7

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Beginning again, always beginning; repeating, but in a different form, this essay is about the spatialisation of historical returns. It is about history repeating itself in forms that echo the past's remembered dream future. It is about trying to read and visualize the city as an allegorical text. It is about tracing a commodity form, from its beginnings as a cultural practice of knowledge making and story telling, through its place in a discourse of city and village in the production of nationalism, to its eventual commodification as a consumer art object and its re-emergence as a consumer symbol of post-colonial national identity. It is about spaces of commodification and their multiple historical tracings from the city as trading post, to imperial exhibitions and displays, to contemporary, equally conspicuous palaces of globalized consumption which merely repeat the earlier historical events, only now in glass and plastic, and which, really, begin nothing new. It is about the contemporary and unplanned urban revealing, allegorically, an immanent catastrophe of modernity which challenges the historicist production of progress to be honest to its own myth making.

Figure 2.5: Detail of Metropolitan Building Exterior. February 2004. Photo by Author.

Postscript

Calcutta appears once in Benjamin's *Arcades Project.* In 'Convolute J: Baudelaire', Benjamin prefaces an excerpt from Jules Lemaître's *Les Contemporains* of 1895. The quotation describes Baudelaire's somewhat restrained spending between 1844 and 1864, conditions which precluded his ability to

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"indulge very often" in "Neronian orgies."[121] Benjamin prefaces the note: "After Calcutta."

Benjamin's note refers to a voyage Baudelaire was sent on, banished by his step-father, Jacques Aupick, after he amounted colossal debts following his expulsion from school. His destination was to be Calcutta. In June of 1841, Baudelaire left France for Mauritius, then to Île Bourbon (now Île de la Reunion) off the coast of Madagascar, and eventually, the plan was, to Calcutta. Baudelaire returned to France nine months after he left, on February 15th, 1842. He refused to go further than Île Bourbon.

One wonders how the history of Paris might have been different had Baudelaire actually made it to Calcutta, the other side of modernity.

[121] Benjamin (1999)*AP* [J15,2]p.254

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Part II: The Present

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Plate 2: Under Vidyasagar Bridge, December 2003. Photo by Author.

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"A Strange Dream"

One night I dreamt a strange dream:
Binu was calling to me, "Wake up and see what is happening."
I sat up and saw Calcutta shuffling along with uncertain steps
As thousands of beams and rafters knocked against each other.
The brick built houses marched ahead like rhinos
While doors and windows banged and clanged.
The streets moved like huge pythons
And on their backs clattered trams and carriages.
The shops and markets bobbed up and down
While roofs hit one another in a drunken orgy.
The Howrah Bridge crawled like a giant scorpion
And Harrison Road trailed behind: the monument reeled
As if a mad elephant was waving its trunk in the air.
Our school was rushing forward madly
With arithmetic and grammar books running fast.
The maps were fluttering on the wall like birds flapping their wings
The bells tolled ceaselessly and without break, with no heed of the hour.
Millions cried – "Stop this madness! Where is it you want to go and when?"
Drunken with movement, Calcutta paid no heed
For the lure of dance had made even pillars and walls restless!
I thought to myself –
"What does it matter if Calcutta goes straight to Bombay?
If she prefers Delhi, Lahore or Agra
All we need to do is to put a turban on her head
And horned shoes on her feet!
Or if she wants to rush off to England
All the people will become hatted, suited and booted Englishmen!"
Suddenly there was a bang and I awoke...and found
Calcutta was, as always, still in Calcutta.

Rabindranath Tagore
(trans. Humayun Kabir)

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Thinking the city moves towards thinking the world.

Henri Lefebvre
Qu'est-que penser? 1985

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The Present

From the end of Constantine Cavafy's poem, "Waiting for the Barbarians":

> *Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come*
> *And some have returned from the border*
> *and said that the barbarians no longer exist.*
>
> *And now what will become of us without barbarians?*
> *These people were some sort of solution.*[1]

One hundred years later, from a social philosopher:

> The planet is full.[2]

Both speak to the same thing.

Cavafy's poem is narrated from behind the walls of the City. An unidentified voice describes, through question and response, the preparations the City makes for the imminent arrival of a barbarian visitation from the outside: "What are we waiting for...?/ The barbarians are to arrive today."[3] It is as though the barbarian arrival, a form of conquest of sorts, is inevitable, as though the City, at the moment of realizing its failure, gives itself over to the immanent forces it has, till now, designed and ordered so hard against. Once producing the barbarians as Other, the intentional, social and material design of the City seems to have collapsed, rending open the totality of its conceptual and material *Lebensraum* to the supposed chaos of the outside.

Resignation cloaks anxiety. Gowns of honour are donned by the honourable, and titles are rehearsed. Speech makers and their speech making are abjured; more words aren't going to help now. Besides, those for whom words do not cast shadows, for whom action and idea are but one and the same, the instance of creation and conception,[4] "tire of eloquence and speeches."[5] In preparedness, ironic, for order is now gathering its hospitality, the city waits for the Beyond to

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[1] C.P. Cavafy, "Waiting for the Barbarians", *Open City - Alphabet City 6* (Anansi: Toronto, 1998) p.274

[2] Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Polity: Cambridge, 2004) p.5

[3] Cavafy (1998) p.273

[4] "...Between the idea/And the reality/Between the motion/And the act/Falls the Shadow/For Thine is the Kingdom/Between the conception/And the creation/Between the emotion/And the response/Falls the Shadow/Life is very long...." T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men" *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (Harcourt Brace: New York, 1971)pp.58-9

[5] Cavafy, (1998) p.274

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save it, to redeem it, to tell it what to do. "The barbarians—once they come—will do the legislating."[6]

But they don't come. Reports arrive back to the City that the border is no longer a border. It is now just an extension of the same, an extension of the city. There is no Outside anymore. The difference which the barbarian made, representing hope in reserve, an unthinkable difference which might have saved the city from its immanent undoing, "no longer exists."[7] Citizens of the city are sent home. Worried, perplexed, and uncertain anymore of what is to be done, they retreat behind their private thresholds to wait.

And, it is not as though the uncontained can somehow be found; that perhaps, if we mount a search party and wind our way up a river in some foreign land far from here, we might glimpse "It" peering out at us from the underbrush, as fearful of us, the Giant, as we, that Giant, are reassured in the illusion that there will always be something else no matter the extent of our reach.[8] Yesterday: the "New World." Tomorrow: Mars. The next day? Who knows, but, ostensibly, the "possibilities are endless." No. Whatever 'it' is—the excluded, the exception, the unknown, the thing, the excess—*it*, claims Bauman, "no longer exists." It is

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[6] Ibid.

[7] "[T]he state of nature is not a real epoch chronologically prior to the foundation of the City but a principle internal to the City, which appears at the moment the City is considered *tanquam dissolute*, 'as if it were dissolved'... Far from being a prejuridical condition that is indifferent to the law of the city, the Hobbesian state of nature is the exception and the threshold that constitutes and dwells within it." See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1998)p.105-6

[8] "Upon encountering others, a savage man will at first be afraid. His fright will make him see those men as taller and stronger than himself. He will give them the name *Giants*. After many experiences he will recognize that these supposed Giants are neither taller nor stronger than himself, their stature does not agree with the idea that he had first attached to the word Giant. He will therefore invent another name common to them and to him, such as the name *man* for example, and will leave that of Giant for the false object that had struck him during his illusion." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Essay on the Origin of Languages", *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* Vol. 7, trans. and ed. John T. Scott (University Press of New England: Hanover and London, 1998) pp. 294-5.

In a fascinating episode of the PBS series, *Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*, entitled "The Shock of the Other," Harvard anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis goes in search of a rumoured Other. As he tells the camera, he goes not to meet and colonize this other, but just to reassure himself that a remainder still does exist. He travels up a tributary of the Amazon in search of the mysterious Mascho-Piro people who have remained hidden from the modern, industrialized world. They find one another, stare across an expanse of river (he in a boat, she sheltering behind trees on the bank) and depart.

The reciprocal glimpse of the unknown no doubt reassured the suitably self-conscious Maybury-Lewis. Yet, it was just another step in a process which will subsume the Mascho-Piro to the totalizing, global commons of urbanized "man."

In a similar unutterable sadness, on February 8th, 2006, pictures of rarely seen, previously thought to be extinct, beings (birds and mammals and plants and flowers) were splashed across the front pages of the world's civilization barometers. The utopic names given to these lost and longed for creatures were telling: a honey eater, a bird of paradise, a golden fronted bowerbird. Scientists and conservationists trumpeted the need to intensify research so as to protect these docile and fearless beings, so unafraid that the humans could touch and gather them without chase. Yet, their naming, reaffirmed by their capture on photograph, is the first step to their now immanent and inevitable demise. In the supposed "protection of difference" the well intentioned modern cannot let beings be.

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gone. There is no earthly solution outside of us. And, at present, the earth is proving a recalcitrant host.

Cavafy's poem is an allegory on the end of modernity. This end is paradoxical because the end of modernity is a function of its complete totalization, its success. The City, thus, is responsible for extinguishing the possibility of its redemption.[9] Something immanent within the logic of the modern city, the ways and means of its inhabitants, its *Lebenswelt,* has eradicated the beyond upon which was predicated order-building, the design in whose terms that which inhabited the beyond of the border was defined as βάρβαροι, or 'not one of us.' "Deep in thought"[10] we shutter ourselves behind our ineluctable thresholds (linguistic, spatial, material, and conceptual) to wonder at what has come to pass. Despite historical continuity seeming to deliver on its technical promise to eventually appropriate all that was kept at a distance by difference,[11] we now, nevertheless, face the end of things, not with a bang of conscious absolution, the subject and object coming together, realizing themselves in an Adamic correspondence of word and world, but with a whimper amongst the ruins of our own making.[12]

Cavafy's insight is that the social efforts of modernity to change the world ever anew in the image or design of a human idea have foundered; and, despite modernity's imperative otherwise, there is now "no-one to give orders if all is not to be lost."[13] We have eradicated that against which design constructed itself as guarantee. At the same time, we have eradicated the figure whose futurity, reserved as otherness, promised the possibility of redemption in always being otherwise. Absolute difference is now subsumed in the process of being rendered everywhere the same, subject to the same, possible only as a condition of known frameworks. As Bauman chimes, "The planet is full."

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[9] My interpretation of Cavafy's poem is inextricably bound with reading J.M. Coetzee's allegorical novel, a masterpiece of the same name, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (Penguin: New York, 1982).

[10] Cavafy (1998)p. 274

[11] "...we were afraid to conceive of the *Other* in the time of our own thought. There is a reason for this. If the history of thought could remain the locus of uninterrupted continuities, if it could endlessly forge connexions that no analysis could undo without abstraction, if it could weave, around everything that men say and do, obscure synthesis that anticipate for him, prepare him, and lead him endlessly towards his future, it would provide a privileged shelter for the sovereignty of consciousness. Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity; the promise that one day the subject – in the form of historical consciousness – will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find in them what might be called his abode." See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (Pantheon: New York, 1972) p.12. Foucault is here critiquing Hegel's assertion that "the History of the World is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom." See G.W.F Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Dover: New York, 1956).

[12] "This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper." T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men" (1971) p.59

[13] Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (Routledge: London, 2000) p.125.

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Bauman's diagnosis of modernity's present predicament echoes Cavafy's of a hundred years before. 'The planet is full' is a sociological statement which, as Bauman notes,

> signals the disappearance of 'no man's lands,' territories fit to be defined and/or treated as void of human habitation as well as devoid of sovereign administration – and thus open for (clamouring for!) colonization and settlement. Such territories, now largely absent, for the greater part of human history played the crucial role of dumping grounds for the human waste turned out in ever rising volumes in the parts of the globe affected by the process of 'modernization.'[14]

Bauman links the disappearance of the barbarian landscape, that beyond-the-border place which, for Cavafy, similarly, no longer exists, to the inescapable effects of modernity, its order-building and its imperatives of economic progress. We are now faced, he claims, with the practical inevitability which modern historicism saw itself as consummating when it began its designs on universality, namely that "the totality of human production and consumption has...penetrated every nook and cranny of the globe."[15] Solutions for problems arising as a result of our (over)production and (over)consumption will not come anymore from outside, for "they are no longer available."[16]

Bauman places us at the point of having exhausted the reserve which makes possible the reach of our technical desire. We are faced with the relentless wreckage upon wreckage of progress irresistibly piling debris before us.[17] Where once we could perhaps shuffle off this waste to the nether corners of our borders, to the backward places where distance dulls responsibility, we can no longer. The waste of the city laps against the shores of our playgrounds, lingers in the air of our suffocating summers, and everywhere litters our open spaces. We cannot, those few for whom the privilege of modernity is waning, escape, as our forebears did, to some untouched, readily available outlet through which we may normatively extend, and thus seemingly absolve, our excesses. We cannot find relief in the exoticism of the other, for the other is both traced and made known by the frameworks of an 'urban society.' The city is a document of culture whose

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[14] Bauman (2004) p.5

[15] Ibid., p.6

[16] Ibid.

[17] See Walter Benjamin's famous IXth thesis: "Where we perceive a chain of events, [the Angel of History] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, waken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans., H. Zohn (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1968)pp. 257-58

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conditions contain its own dispersal.[18] Calvino characterizes the effect of this totalization as a new worry or anxiety for the modern sensibility: "[t]he question that now begins to gnaw at your mind is more anguished: outside Penthesilea does an outside exist? Or, no matter how far you go from the city, will you only pass from one limbo to another, never imagining to leave it?"[19] This is a kind of end, a completion of a process.

The history of modernity has been the history of technical design applied to the world in an effort to guarantee a privileged shelter for a sovereign consciousness. We may debate about the origins of this normative endeavour,[20] but modernity is premised on the enchantment that certain truths and methods will cast out falsehoods and superstitions, and in so doing generate a failsafe system for mediating the world to human control.

Those of us who became attached to this worldview, either by accident of birth, geographic luck, or design of education, privilege a pride of place whose imperative is categorically maintained by territorial ambition. This territory can either be delineated in terms of a *terra firma*, or it can be spatialized in the no less tangible work of reflection and assertion. It is, no doubt, a function of both.

What is becoming more and more apparent for our present global condition, however, is that modernity is, to a large degree, a process of totalization. Spaces, whether material or conceptual, are collapsing. The world, as a set of possibilities, is shrinking.[21] As Bauman, Cavafy, Calvino et al. remind us, one of the only things we can be certain of today is that the intensification of totality re-constitutes itself within the walls of our abode. It is as though the system has reached the outer limits of its appropriation, and is now turning back

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[18] "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, neither is the process of transmission whereby it is passed down from one to another." Ibid.p.260

[19] Calvino (1997)p.122

[20] The debates on the origins of 'modern', 'modernity', 'modernism', and 'modernization' are legion and innumerable. One might argue pace Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1948) that modernity has something to do with the rupture between *mythos* and *logos*, or one might be inclined to argue that the modern is something *avenir*, promissory, or on the way, a yet to come. See Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) or Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been* Modern (1993).

It is probably a little beside the point to argue about origins. I rather suspect that we have always already been modern in so far as we have been able to abstract about the world, and hence make representations about it in the form of tabulatory marks on clay or stone, paintings on cave walls, or boundaries drawn by landmark reference or pasture walls. The abstract representational medium of language ruptures the world in respect of its necessary signification, including this, and necessarily excluding that. Language, as a process of naming, is the fundamental violence or rupture by human beings on their environment. What redeems poetry, perhaps, is the fact that it is at least reflexive about its violence. Reflexion does not absolve it however. In this respect, modernity, as the reification made possible by language, is inextricably linked to the interdependent relationship between the first City formations and early agricultural beginnings. See Jane Jacobs, "Cities First – Rural Development Later" *The Economy of Cities* (Vintage: New York, 1969)p. 3-48.

[21] See amongst others, Paul Virilio's *Open Sky* (Verso: New York, 1997), and David Harvey on "space-time compression" in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Blackwell: Cambridge, MA, 1990).

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on itself. There are certain inescapable realities which now face an increasingly global culture, the most pressing of which are the problems surrounding the environmental sustainability of a modern way of life, a way of living dependent on technical design, rationalization, progress, growth, industrialization, and formal, functional, and social transparency. Amongst the most pressing ecological and social (they are the same thing) problems we face are: global climate change; the collapse of ecologies due to the loss of bio-diversities, pollution, and erosion, and overpopulation. Largely a result of over-consumption and the modern dependence on fossil fuels, such problems are functions of what I am calling here, urbanisation.[22]

On August 12th, 2005, 11 million cubic litres of manure cascaded down the appropriately named Black River in New York State killing hundreds of thousands of fish, endangering the fresh water supplies of numerous homes and towns, and threatening the water intakes of human population centres like Kingston, Ontario. This apocalyptic deluge came from a single milk farm. It is just one example among innumerable daily others from around the globe. Yet, it reminds us, as though we needed reminding, that our nostalgic notion of the city, which depends on a distinction between the inside and the outside, is inappropriate to our times. The city is no longer that which lies behind the walls of urban infrastructural connection.[23] Modern urbanization, as a technical way of living and doing has eroded the meaning of borders or walls, and has extended its modes of production and material concentration, gathering into its effect, and shrinking, the commons to a function of technical capacity whose conditions for the possibility of knowledge, dwelling and response are those of sameness. As Wirth and Simmel both reminded us, "the city has drawn the most remote communities of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and

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[22] My use of the term "urbanisation" is not unique in this regard. Raymond Williams argues in *The Country and the City* (Chatto and Windus: London, 1973) that the transformation of nature and related social processes is the work of urbanisation. Anthony Giddens, echoing Bill McKibben's famous phrase, argues that we have reached the "end of nature" because it is impossible now to support an ontological distinction between nature and culture. There is nothing out there anymore that has not been transformed or touched by the effects of human society/culture. See, Anthony Giddens, "Risk Society: The Context of British Politics," in *The Politics of Risk Society*, J. Franklin, ed. (Polity: Cambridge, Mass., 1997) pp.23-34. See also Maria Kaïka, *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature and the City* (Routledge: New York and London, 2005)pp.11-26.

[23] The Canadian architect Douglas Cardinal once perceptively noted that a modern city is a community of people connected by their assholes. Sewers and waste management are the only essential infrastructural common which connect fragmented and isolated individuals in a city. Those for whom a toilet is not a reality, they are not part of the city. They are "homeless," waste in need of management, in need of the ordering design of a toilet.

The perspicacity of Cardinal's insight manifests itself literally in contemporary Swedish apartment blocks. Housing elderly, or simply, alone individuals without family or communal bonds, the buildings are equipped with alarmed toilets so that, in the event of a toilet failing to flush within a 24 hour period, an alarm will alert the custodian to enter the private premises to check to see whether the occupant is still alive. Prior to this toilet alarm system, such were the isolationist extremes of the modern city, that the only indication a person had died was the smell of a body decomposing.

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activities into a cosmos"[24] such that "its inner life (*Gesellschaft*) overflows by waves"[25] into the hinterland.

Benjamin's conception of the urban and what urbanisation means is not very far from how Simmel, or Wirth, or Heidegger understand it. Evidence for this claim comes from a wonderful passage in his essay, "One Way Street." In this passage, Benjamin cleverly inverts the dynamism between the country and the city and so acutely presents the seriousness of technological urbanisation for human and non-human dwelling.

> XII. Just as all things, in an irreversible process of mingling and contamination, are losing their intrinsic character while ambiguity displaces authenticity, so is the city. Great cities—whose incomparably sustaining and reassuring power encloses those who work within them in an internal truce [*Burgfrieden*] and lifts from them, with the view of the horizon, awareness of the ever-vigilant elemental forces—are seen to be breached at all points by the invading countryside. Not by the landscape, but by what is bitterest in untrammelled nature: ploughed land, highways, night sky that the veil of vibrant redness no longer conceals. The insecurity of even the busy areas puts the city dweller in the opaque and truly dreadful situation in which he must assimilate, along with isolated monstrosities from the open country, the abortions of urban architectonics.[26]

Soon after the waves of manure killed everything in their path, in late August, and in an irony as enormous as the tragedy was overwhelming, the walls to a city failed and the outside came rushing in. Built to withstand only category 3 hurricanes and storm surges, the levees to the postcolonial city of New Orleans failed as Katrina, a category 5 hurricane, howled around cowering citizens too poor to heed a mandatory evacuation; this despite a decade long warning by urban planners, designers against the world's vagaries, that the city's levees were too weak to withstand the coming storm. In its aftermath, those who survived the wind, rain and flooding emerged to find their modern city submerged and ruined. As they stood homeless outside a sports stadium and a convention centre, cathedrals to consumption and phantasmagoric diversion which failed to house them from the progress of the modern world, they wondered aloud at how such a thing could happen to them, citizens of the most advanced and powerful nation on the planet. How, they wondered, could their man-made systems fail to protect

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[24] Wirth [1938](1964)p.60-1
[25] Simmel [1903](1950)p.419
[26] Walter Benjamin, "One Way Street" *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol.1, 1913-1926* eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Belknap Press: Cambridge, Mass and London, 1996)p.454

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them and placate their needs? The scene of citizens forced to hunt and gather amongst abandoned buildings, amidst a tele-digital infrastructure rendered useless, amongst floating, bloated bodies, and underneath legions of military helicopters, was likened by some to something "one would see in African cities"[27], as though Africa were somehow outside of modernity, and thus behind the forces of progress which attempt to render the world inert. Others located the irony in the fact that the walls of the city were breached by our own hubris, our own design, by our thinking that our ever increasing planetary urbanization could somehow not fail us.[28]

For many years prior to the ruination of New Orleans people warned of the effects that totalizing, modern, planetary urbanization would bring. Rampant human activity driven by global fossil-fuel consumption has been linked to the increased severity, fluctuation and intensity of weather phenomena.[29] For an already sinking city which lies beneath the levels of, on three sides, an ocean, a lake and a river, a city dedicated in recent years to eradicating non-urban barrier wetlands in the development of new, affluent homes, the threat was sure to become real. The walls gave way as much from within as from without. And they will continue to fail with greater regularity, as our urbanization reveals its immanence.

"Of these cities will remain what passed through them—the wind."[30]

Lefebvre and 'Urban Society'

Henri Lefebvre refers to the process of immanent modern totalization with the phrase "urban society." By 'urban society' he means "to refer to the society that results from industrialization, which is a process of domination that absorbs

[27] *Der Spiegel*, "The Downfall of New Orleans" 36, September 5, 2005, http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,373047,00.html

[28] Jeremy Rifkin, "Global Warming Hits New Orleans: The Controversy After the Storm" http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200509/200509060008.html

[29] There is a staggering amount of literature confirming this link. Ten years ago in 1996, a full 12 years after Bill McKibben's landmark publication of *The End of Nature* which proclaimed that we had already passed the point of no return, T.M.L. Wigley and R. Richels succinctly laid out the choice for modern civilization in an article published in *Nature*. They drew then on extensive literature linking the rise in atmospheric $C0_2$ concentrations due to fossil fuel burning and climate change, specifically global warming; see, "Economic and Environmental Choices in the Stabilization of Atmospheric $C0_2$ concentrations" in *Nature* Vol. 379, Issue 6562 1/8/96 pp.240-244. Recently two excellent synopses of the scientific literature and social consequences of these now inevitable environmental changes have been published. See, Elizabeth Kolbert's, *Fieldnotes to a Catastrophe* (Bloomsbury: London, 2006) and Tim Flannery's *The Weathermakers* (HarperCollins: Toronto, 2004).

[30] Bertolt Brecht, "Of Poor B.B." from *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Poems* trans. Michal Hamburger (Eyre Methuen: London, 1976)

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agricultural production."[31] Writing in 1970, Lefebvre posited "urban society" as "virtual" but something which "will become real in the future."[32]

His prediction seems today to have come to pass. The process of urbanization, a totalizing one, is something he argues that is a result of intensified modes of capitalist and instrumental (I.e. industrial) production, and as much a waste product as it is a positive materialization. Urbanization is, as Neil Smith notes, and in terms Bauman's analysis of waste would echo, an "excrescence of the circulation of capital."[33] Urban society and intensified instrumental exploitation in the service of commodity consumption (i.e. capitalism) are coterminous processes for Lefebvre.

> Economic growth and industrialization have become self-legitimating, extending their effects to entire territories, regions, nations and continents. As a result, the traditional unit typical of peasant life, namely the village, has been transformed. Absorbed or obliterated by larger units, it has become an integral part of industrial production and consumption. The concentration of the population goes hand in hand with that mode of production. The *urban fabric* grows, extends its borders, corrodes the residue of agrarian life. ... 'Urban fabric' does not narrowly define the built world of our cities but all manifestations of the city over the country.[34]

Urbanization is a form of totalization, an extension of a way of thought, often one un-reflexively realizing (I.e. self legitimating) and which "presents as a global (or even a *total*) reality involving the entire range of social practices." [35]

Totalization is the capacity and effect of a way of thinking, in modernity's case, of purposive, instrumental rationality, to encompass a *Lebensraum* to the degree that the fullness of the system allows of no outlet for either the waste which is produced as a necessary effect of the system's functional operation, or for that which is not appropriable within the system's ordered maintenance. The feedback loop thus becomes a negative one rather than counter-balancing. What is more, totalization admits of its nature, no openness to difference which might disrupt its encompassing. Its ethos is one of closure and refusal. Unicity negates or swallows diversity. Cavafy and Bauman speak to the human situation wherein totality realizes its finitude, and in doing so also realizes that it has extinguished the means by which it may re-think the conditions for its possibility, for the standards, options, possibilities and frameworks to otherwise have also been extinguished. Newness depends on difference and appropriable

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[31] Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (1970), trans. Robert Bononno (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2003)p.2.
[32] Ibid. p.1
[33] Neil Smith, "Foreword", *The Urban Revolution* (2003)p. xvii
[34] Lefebvre (2003) p.3-4
[35] Ibid., p. 48

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space. When that fills and newness cannot anymore be found, "the world lives from itself: its excrements are its nourishment."[36]

Technicity, the ever more efficient and refined operation of material interventions for producing an effect, is saturating the human *Lebensraum.* More technical interventions seem only to increase the effect of totalization, so that these effects spread to "every nook and cranny of the globe." To shrug off the impending concentration of effects as mere technical matters overcome with better management and ever more creative facility is to miss the point. As Bauman quotes Ivan Klima, "This isn't a mere technical problem. Because the spirit of dead things rises over the earth and over the waters, and its breath forebodes evil."[37]

Klima's use of "foreboding" resonates with Lefebvre's prediction, but his use of "evil" refers beyond simple ethical horror to the material fact that modern, global civilization is in the process of collapsing, and its effects are beginning to be palpable in the everyday of most peoples' lives. An intensity which warrants "evil" is sure to arrive in the form of suffering, misery, and death for billions in the years to come. But, this realization of an unknown future calamity befalling us is nothing new. We have for a long time now been grappling with the socially conflictual outcomes of localized modernism, modernity and modernization. The difference is that the totalization of modernity is now a planetary effect whose negative consequences "have come home to roost." "[A]ll localities (most notably the highly modernized ones) have to bear the consequences of modernity's global triumph. They are now faced with the need to seek (in vain, it seems) ... solutions to globally produced problems."[38]

As we have noted, despite writing in the 1970's of 'urban society' as a coming, and hence virtual, totality, Henri Lefebvre's presentiment for "complete urbanization" has proved prophetic. In 1970, 36 per cent of the world's population was estimated to live in urban agglomerations.[39] In 2007, it is projected to pass the 50 percent mark. The United Nation's Department of Economic and Social Affairs declares without equivocation that "the population of the world, which throughout human history has lived mainly in rural areas, is on the verge of becoming more urban than rural for the first time."[40] Indeed, given the notorious "imprecision of Third World censuses, this epochal transition may already have occurred."[41] The bulk of the growth in urbanization has not occurred in mega-cities, those agglomerations with over 10 million people. Such cities, although fetishized as sites of urbanization in the popular imagination,

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[36] Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen Werke* (*Gessamalte Schriften V*) as quoted in David Frisby's *The Fragments of Modernity* (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1986)p.36
[37] Ivan Klima, *Love and Garbage* (Random House: Toronto, 2002)p.13; see also Bauman (2004)p.4
[38] Bauman, (2004) p. 6
[39] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs' Population Division, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revision* (United Nations: New York, 2004)p.23
[40] Ibid., p.13
[41] Mike Davis, "Planet of Slums" *New Left Review* 26, March 2004, p.5

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account for less than 5 percent of the world's total urban population.[42] As evidence that urbanization is a form of totalization which is changing the very landscape and imaginative horizons of human dwelling, horizons which can no more depend on simple characterizations between city and country, the UN notes that "smaller urban settlements (with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants) of the less developed regions will be absorbing most of the growth."[43] That means that while undoubtedly the larger urban areas will continue to grow, with the mega-cities growing by an estimated 180,000 people per day, the forms of life characterized as urbanist (modernizations, industrialism, intensification, rationalization) are shaping the entirety of the global social *habitus* such that, as smaller urban nodes absorb the majority of growth, they are seen as sites for refuge and opportunity, not simply the mega or hyper cities. The growth in urbanized populations has, since 1970, been most marked in "less developed regions."[44] The growth in urbanization, or in Lefebvre's words of 'urban society', is a process of all landscapes becoming ameliorated into practices of industrialization, commodity

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[42] *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revisions* (2004) p.3

[43] Ibid., p.3

[44] Ibid., p.4. There is an urgency to the UN's *2003 Revision* which betrays a deep inequity and a troubling conceptual tautology. The UN Population division makes a distinction between "more developed regions" and "less developed regions." The former refers to the regions of Europe, North America and Japan, whilst the latter refers to Africa, Asia (not including Japan) and Latin America and the Carribean. In the context of rapid planetary urbanization, a process that Davis notes "is not in doubt", I find the use of "developed" and "urban" somewhat of a tautology in the context of a report detailing urgent changes to the nature of planetary hospitability. The UN, a supposedly world body of consensual nationalist imagination, premises its mandate on modernization. "Development", "modernization", "industrialization", however you want to characterize it, inherently entails urbanization. Urbanism is a function of the expanding influence of modernist social practices along with their contemporary accompaniments of commodification and capitalist demand. Rural livelihoods oriented to subsistence, sustainable localized production, and even state regulated localisms are forced, in commodity markets, to compete with large scale industrial practices. Such were the rationalizations of the Structural Adjustment Policies of the IMF and World Bank in the mid eighties. But the result of such forced changes and rationalizations is that more sustainable rural life ways are "torn apart at the seams." See Deborah Bryceson, "Disappearing Peasantries? Rural Labour Redundancy in the Neo-liberal Era and Beyond" in Bryceson, Christobal Key and Jos Mooij, eds. *Disappearing Peasantries? Rural Labour in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London: 2000) p.307-8. The distinction between 'less developed' and 'more developed' is thus one inflected by a functionalist, normative continuum. The worries over the speed and scale of urbanization posing "formidable challenges to the world community" (See *2003 Revision* p. 8) are ironic given the fact that the UN explicitly attempts to address global inequity and injustice through the very modalities which it worries against: development, modernization, rationalization and capitalist economic reform. If these latter are truly accepted as necessary, then urbanization and growth should be seen as laudatory evidence for the success of progress and development. But this same, supposedly laudatory evidence, is not a cause for celebration in the UN's report. Instead their worry is couched in a bureaucratic reserve: "[T]rends in the growth rates of the urban and rural populations and therefore in the resulting population distribution are certain to have important implications for the kind of life of the world's population and the quality of the natural environment of the world" (p13). One wonders whether North/South parity truly is an imperative, or whether current modernising trends by the less developed regions are cause for alarm by the privileged minority populating the "more developed regions." As environmental collapse will limit urbanization and cause "more developed regions" to alter their already gross excess as a "kind of life" the North will have to sacrifice much for the benefit of the many. Perhaps these impending sacrifices are the source of the UN report's barely disguised worry.

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extraction, and the concentration of rationalized modes of production. The rural, the all important median to the Beyond, the 'outside the city' but not quite wilderness, is fast disappearing. As the UN report notes,

> [t]he substantial growth expected in the urban population will be fuelled primarily by both rural-urban migration and the geographic expansion of urban settlements through annexations and the transformation of rural villages into urban towns.[45]

What was once not urban is becoming urban with greater speed, greater intensity, and on a greater scale than ever before. The Outside or Beyond-the-border has disappeared. The rural, a median space, an exergue, if you like, is now similarly on its way to being ameliorated by a horizon whose totality is defined by urban experience. "The expansion of urban localities through the transformation of rural settlements into urban ones" is resulting, consequently, in a "decline" of rural "kinds of life," such that by 2030, it is estimated that more than two-thirds of the world's population will live an urban existence.[46]

The UN report's prediction is a little short-sighted however. Given that we are now experiencing the effects, on a global scale, of urban society, and while in 2030 two thirds may be connected, or wanting infrastructural connection, 100 percent of the world's population is today living an urban existence as we attempt to deal with the inevitable excrescences of capital. Hence, again, Bauman's proclamation that the planet is full.

Fullness entails limitation. The ever greater amalgamation of human experience through urbanization necessarily entails the limiting of horizons of experience and possibility. While Lefebvre does acknowledge that "the urban can be defined as a place where differences know one another,"[47] he qualifies this statement as to cities' inherent heterogeny with the claim that "through their mutual recognition, [differences] test one another, and in this way are strengthened or weakened."[48]

It is not that increased global urbanization necessarily homogenizes all spaces and renders them indistinguishable. Naples in 2015 will be a very different place than Baghdad in 2015, which will be very different from Calcutta in 10 years, despite their joint accrual of the ubiquitous shopping malls, supermarkets, fast-food chains, luxury hotels, and global brand names, results of their shared participation in a global network of neo-liberal market demands. But the multiple horizons, which in the past delimited the conditions of their possibility, will have diminished or shrunk in effect as a result of becoming more closely intertwined and interdependent. The greater their respective urban characteristics in the

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[45] *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revision*, p.13
[46] Ibid. pp. 16, 13 and 14
[47] Lefebvre (2003) p.96
[48] Ibid.

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form, function and structure come to resemble one another, the greater the difference weakens.

As Lefebvre notes, the consequence is that "today we see a world wide tendency to uniformity."[49] As the world becomes city, a vast interdependency of communication, economic ties, commodity flows and market rationalizations, the entirety of the global commons is brought into contact with the metropolis and made to legitimize itself through the horizons of possibility instantiated by the metropole. Outlying areas, distant settlements and remote places are made to conform to the urban.[50] This persuasion is engaged through the complex web of industrial economics and modern imperatives of rationalized form, transparent functionality and universalizable structure.[51] Lefebvre cites the examples of "architectural urbanism," industrially produced food, and the automobile as three facets of a universalizing system of structures and functions which produce an everyday horizon of possibility limited by the productive functionalism of its material parts. The diversity of the modern, urban everyday, in so far as it distinguishes itself from prior horizons deemed parochial or narrow (I.e. traditional), is, claims Lefebvre, "only apparent," "fatuous" and "only arranged."[52] The limiting, everywhere, of horizons of possibility, phenomenally experienced as part of the everyday, conditions a society of controlled, rationalized consumption. The everyday thus becomes, under the conditions of modern capitalism, an alienated *quotidienne* existence of banality and the blasé.

This blasé attitude is a direct result of urban living, as Simmel famously remarked in his 1903 essay, "Metropolis and Mental Life". Fragmentation and contradiction necessitate the protectionism of apathy or indifference, and lead, as Lefebvre notes in his "Forward" to the Second edition of his *Critique of Everyday Life*, to "mediocrity."[53] Writing from a suburban periphery in Paris, Lefebvre laments the loss of difference, local eccentricity, and generosity of nature in a modern urbanism that has spread its faceless sameness and regularity across the globe. The differences that meet and 'test' in the spaces of the ever expanding modern urban "weaken" in the force of the functional benefits of technocratic consumption, and the world collapses its horizons.

> Naples, Baghdad, Calcutta: the same sun shines down on the same rags, the same running sores. The myths have disappeared, the rituals and magics have lost their glamour. All we can see now are the destitute masses, and the ignoble apparatus of domination which lies over them, the unlovely art of power. There is nothing left to seduce us. Everywhere the bare-faced display of force: rifles, armoured cars, policemen.

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[49] Henri Lefebvre, "The Everyday and Everydayness" *Yale French Studies* No. 73, 1987, p.7
[50] Jeremy Seabrook, "The End of the Provinces" *Granta* 90, Summer 2005, p. 227.
[51] Lefebvre (1987) p. 8
[52] Ibid., p.7
[53] Henri Lefebvre, "V: Some Overviews on the 'Modern World'" in "Forward," (1958) *Critique of Everyday Life* trans. John Moore (Verso: London, New York, 1992) p.43

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> Wherever people are in the throes of liberation from the old oppressions, they are also sacrificing – there is no way they can avoid it – certain ways of life which for many years were great and beautiful. The tractor and the mechanical seeder must replace the gestures of the ploughman. Thus when backward countries move forward they produce ugliness, platitude and mediocrity as though that meant progress. And the advanced countries which have known history in all its greatness produce platitude as though its proliferation were inevitable.[54]

For Lefebvre, the conditions he is describing are global ones: spaces of modernity in which people find themselves socially conditioned at a planetary scale by complex systems of production, nationalism, mystification and spectacle.[55] The mediocrity of the modern urban is a planetary effect of design. The modern necessarily enframes expectation and possibility through instrumental and purposive means such that the rational comes to totalize the experience of the everyday. Modernity, the effect of the modern, unresolved in its tendency to manifest itself as the experience of contradiction, tragically controls lives precisely through the perpetuation of irresolvable contradictions.[56]

'Modern,' 'Modernity,' and the City as Design of Desire

As we know, the totalization of technicity is, and is not, the end or goal of modern design. While the exercise of being modern does not intend to design itself into a corner such that it collapses under the weight of its own control, modern methods of technical appropriation are exercised under the guise of liberating human potential from the confines of that which resists – the world. Ever greater technical facility is encouraged in so far as it might allow human beings to conquer nature and alleviate natural discomforts (disease, aging, work, movement, cold, heat, etc...). Absolute facility produced through the rational, purposive control of natural and social environments would allow us to enjoy living with as few limitations as possible, and, as such, exercise and enjoy "truly human" capacities: aesthetic appreciation, moral probity, good humour, and reflexive leisure. The project of designing the world in light of human reason and desire characterizes the modern society as a 'project.'

But, projects are often deeply disruptive. So, while modern methods and techniques might result in numerous social goods (longer life spans, better health, greater mobilities, and greater control) they also produce numerous, as Klima might call them, "evils", or, as Lefebvre might characterize them, "sacrifices." Being modern entails experiencing the constant conjunction of paradox, because

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[54] Ibid., p. 44

[55] Rob Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics* (Routledge: London, 1999)p.94

[56] Henri Lefebvre, "What is Possible?" *Critique of Everyday Life* (1992) p.244

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"we do not experience the world *as* project, even though the world we experience is fundamentally marked *by* project."[57] The term "modernity" refers to the social experience of this constant conjunction of contrasts.

Indeed, the word "modernity" often denotes two things. First, it describes the paradoxical experience of being modern, those social and technical formations which together constitute both previously unimaginable freedoms and proficiencies, as at the same time, disintegrating the basic categories through which we interpret and experience the world (space, time, identity, etc...).[58] It denotes the flux and flexibility of living in a world governed by the imperative and project of perpetual newness. The manifest experience of being modern is the perpetual juxtaposition of competing tensions: totalization and fragmentation, old and new, tradition and progress, stasis and fluidity, sociality and individuality, disorder and regulation, efficiency and complexity, transparency and mystification.[59]

Second, in so far as 'modernity' describes the experience of a modern form of life or way of living, it is also used to describe periodicity. Thus, modernity entails history and the description of eras, in particular that era dominated by the modern 'project' of purposive, rational design. However, the experience of rupture and periodicity often go hand in hand, so that one necessarily invokes the other. It is in this sense that modernity, in so far as it refers to the experience of both continuity and change, describes the experience of break or rupture. As the modern is a process of critical self-consciousness, the modern experience of rupture is self-reflexive. We become socially aware of the break or rupture. Memory and expectation become the defining characteristics of modern being-in-the-world.

The modern *qua* break or rupture bifurcates, typically along temporal lines, the experience of being in the world. The resulting temporally constituted, conceptual poles (before/after; then/now; past/present; tradition/modern) compete against one another for material, political and normative precedence. The competition of constitutive claims made on both sides of this conceptual and temporal rupture produces a consequent experiential ambivalence or tension which characterizes modernism and modernity. This ambivalence is, as Jervis designates it, a "modern attitude."[60] The 'modern attitude' simultaneously looks forward and back, involving and distancing itself at being home in a world it finds continually dissatisfying, hence the nostalgic oscillation between memory and expectation.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "modern" as "of or relating to the present and recent times, as opposed to the remote past," and, "of, or relating to, or originating in the current age or period." This emphasis on the present or the up-to-date is most often delineated in terms of modes of rational, epistemic

[57] John Jervis, *Exploring the Modern* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1998)p.9
[58] David Frisby, *The Cityscapes of Modernity* (Polity: Cambridge, 2001)p.181
[59] Ibid.
[60] Jervis (1998) p.9

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determination, techniques for manipulating the world so as to render it malleable to human will and desire. A person who is modern is one who "lives in or belongs to the present time" and, as such, distinguishes his or her present situation or participation in distinct contrast with what preceded, and in aspirational terms which "think it possible to be happier, wiser and better."[61] Thus, how one comports oneself with respect to standards delimiting the before, as distinct from the present and the future, go a long way to defining one as a modern subject. The function of temporally distinguishing oneself in terms of a constitutive praxis or aspirational design renders difference appreciable. Distinctions of time and doing-things-differently become the identificatory features of being modern.

There is within modernism a paramount significance placed on the new as a criterion for demarcating the present as opposed to the past. It is in this sense that the conjunction of newness, and of doing things differently in the present as distinct from the past, allowed the term "*modernus*" to be used as early as 494-5 by a newly formed Vatican council to distinguish itself from the previous council it superseded.[62] The uniqueness or peculiarity by which one comes to identify ones own participation as modern entails advocating a practice or comportment which departs from the previous way of doing things in virtue of an imaginative design. The criteria or measure by which one makes that determination speaks to the degree to which the temporal or conceptual departure is considered a rupture. Indeed, "modern" is etymologically derived from the Latin word "*modus*" which means "measure." Measuring entails comparison and abstract justification; the act of measuring is itself a conceptual breaking up of the world into constitutive parts, things or components. Measure need not only be quantitative, but may refer to the means by which distinction is made, including the measure of inside and outside, here and there, now and then.

Since the modern has been largely a temporal concept, it is not surprising that the production and conceptualization of the new also produces a dyadic periodicity wherein the now is conceived as distinct and hence new, and the prior as "old" or more commonly, "traditional." It is important to note that modernity produces the notion of "tradition" in its attempt to distinguish itself as a paradigmatic conceptual and practical rupture. "Traditional" thus refers to ways of life, comportments or understandings which resist or thwart the movement or development of newness and distinction. 'Tradition' is a retrospective notion which itself implies both temporal change and a reflection on the measure or criteria by which that temporality is judged. Thus, "traditional" could denote either that in terms of which one positively secures constancy against change, or, it could denote, in a more negative vein, that which resists inevitability, but which, at the same time, is passed over or outmoded by inexorable continuity. In either case, "tradition" is produced by the invocation of "the modern."

[61] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Morality and Imagination: Paradoxes of Progress* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989)p.159
[62] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "A History of the Term 'Modern'", *Making Sense in Life and Literature*, trans. Glen Burns (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992)p.81-2

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> The concept of "tradition" emerged along with 'modernity'...specifically to denote objects, ideas and ways of life which were threatened by the change to modernity, and that were seen as dying. ... Tradition has come to mean anything that is threatened by change. Indeed, it is 'modernity' that invented 'tradition,' ...just as it continues to create traditions.[63]

An interesting feature of the modern is its identification both with the new as a temporal phase, and with that which the present has left, the before. The new identifies itself in terms of the old. Therefore, rupture is not complete or total. Conceptual, material and practical tendrils or connections are maintained with a past, now a history, in order both to signify a commonality, as at the same time, to progress beyond, or develop from. It might be argued that in a non-modern context of rupture, say in a religious community's break with a mythological story, that the separation might be complete, giving way eventually to complete linguistic and social independence. But the modern is different. The past becomes both the constitutive touchstone for identification and for distinction. While on the one hand, perhaps derided or castigated as outmoded, the past—that in terms of which the present characterizes itself as distinct—is at the same time also distinguished from the future. The modern is thus in a peculiar position of articulating between now and then, of oscillating along a continuum between both past and future upon both of which it depends for its conceptual distantiation. This peculiarity may account for modernity's obsession with the importance of history, despite its emphasis on imaginative design being always already oriented to futurity and the new. The past is written as a narrative (history) in terms of which the present legitimates and comes to understand itself.

Nicholas Dirks understands the writing, thinking and production of history in its multiple discursive genres to be a central constitutive feature upon which the articulation of the modern depends. He writes,

> History is surely one of the most important signs of the modern. We are modern not only because we have achieved this status historically, but because we have developed consciousness of our historical depths and trajectories, as also our historical transcendence of the traditional. ... The modern not only invented tradition, it depends on it. The modern has liberated us from

[63] Nelson H.H. Graburn, "IASTE: Retrospect and Prospect" *Traditional Dwelling and Settlements Review* Vol. 9, No.1 1997, p.61

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> tradition and constantly conceives itself in relation to it.[64]

While uses of 'modern' to designate a presentism may date from as early as the fifth century AD, the etymology of the modern in the Latin word for measurement, "modus", only reaches its manifold significance with the European Enlightenment's emphasis on scientific rationality, design, order, technical specificity and instrumental systematicity. It is with the Enlightenment, as Graburn and countless others have noted, that the modern comes into its full significance as a social and philosophical ordering of the world. With the Enlightenment, earlier temporal emphases on simple presentism become conjoined with the normative and epistemic imperatives of scientific rationality. The goal of these imperatives was to illuminate naturalized truths about the world through universalizable systems of repetitive, quantitative analysis, the end of which was, as Hegel noted, human freedom. These teleologically oriented rationalized rubrics were seen to illuminate fundamental structures and tenets of natural, and by extension, social life. In virtue of their practical effects, control and the logics of predictability came to usurp ways of living considered as false, irrational or superstitious, i.e. traditional.

Greater technical facility and control enabled the scope and purview of the modern to expand its influence beyond the borders of Europe. And, in order to facilitate this expansionism, at the same time as scientific instrumentalism set about appropriating the natural and social worlds, the quantitative and reductive facility consonant with this form of rationality became coupled with an economic system premised on commodification. Capitalism's dependence on the manipulable particularity of the commodity structure married well with an increasingly mechanistic world-view premised on the universalizability of measurement, quantity, identity, multiplicity, and territorial mastery.

Materialist manipulation and the control of a particularized, natural world available to human mastery, domination and economic exploitation integrated with Enlightenment modernity's increasingly industrialised production capacities and an economic system premised on efficiency, profitability and progressive growth. Stripped of its religious and superstitious resonances, rendered knowable, and seen as participating in a vast and seemingly infinitely malleable material complex, the natural and human worlds were subsumed to the manipulative capacities and interests of instrumental reason and capitalist expectation. Social action was mobilised and justified in the service not of religious ends, but of human ends whose limits were understood, mandated and legislated by the universalizable council of purposive rationality. Human beings thus could design the world to their own ends and interests, or so the thinking went. On the eve of the nineteenth century, Condorcet sums up this optimism in the power of the modern and the enlightenment.

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[64] Nicholas B. Dirks, "History as a Sign of the Modern" *Public Culture* Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring, 1990), pp. 25, 27-28.

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> The time will therefore come when the sun will shine only on free men who know no other master but their reason; when tyrants and slaves, priest and their stupid or hypocritical instruments will exist only in the works of history and on the stage; and then we shall think of them only to learn how to recognize and so to destroy, by force of reason, the first seeds of tyranny and superstition, should they ever dare to reappear amongst us...
>
> New instruments, machines and looms can add to man's strength and can improve at once the quality and accuracy of his productions, and can diminish the time and labour that has to be expended on them. The obstacles still in the way of this progress will disappear, accidents will be foreseen and prevented, the insanitary conditions will be eliminated... So not only will the same amount of ground support more people, but everyone will have less work to do, will produce more, and satisfy his wants more fully...[65]

Oriented to this world and its perfectibility, Condorcet's sketch promotes a secular faith in the inevitability of progress.

☙

Malleability and Commodities

Being modern refers to a complex matrix of effects and influences. It entails a rupture or break which constitutes itself through the imposition of a new mode for understanding what it means to facilitate a present as opposed to that which came before. Within the Enlightenment materialist emphasis on mechanism, manipulation and measurement, the modern subject, an individual replete with universal characteristics of reason, will and distinct interests, became inextricably a part of the natural order. The Judeo-Christian religious dualism between human and non-human was maintained, but legislative will was divested of religious authority. Individual human will and reason became the legislative arbiters for normative, as well as for scientific knowledge. Non-scientific or non-instrumental world views whose purposive nature contradicted the accumulative designs of the modern, which itself privileged the imperatives of newness and invention, were deemed regressive and condemned either to die, or were forgotten and simply excluded from the purview of the modern.

The epistemic promise of instrumentalism and materialist reductionism lent themselves uniquely to an economic system like capitalism which predicated

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[65] Antoine Nicholas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, *Sketch for the Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, trans. J. Barraclough (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1955)p.187-88

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itself on commodity transaction. Broken up into secularized and malleable pieces, the natural world was seen as a resource capable of furthering, through intentional design, both the private desires of those few positioned in places of privilege, as it was capable of furthering a public, human good. The modern emphasized the seemingly boundless innovative capacities of human reason as it, at the same time, emphasized the appropriation of the numerous conceptual, material and practical spaces opened up by purposive technicity and facility. Modernity thus coupled economic and epistemic imperatives which together materialized instrumental reason in an exploitation of the natural world, and in conjunction with a new emphasis on self-legislative, individual and rational will. Human striving was seen thus as free from the prisons of traditionally inscribed social roles. While the past represented closure and resistance, the future was represented as open and boundless. Private interest could, if it was able, fulfill itself in this infinitely malleable openness.

Crucial for Enlightenment modernity is the perceived malleability of social interest in the face of a seemingly limitless openness. The past is characterized as limiting and restricting, and the modern subject, freed of these limitations, biases and prejudices can make itself anew according to universal principles of normative and practical reason. Indeed, these interests are, on a hierarchy of value, considered more important than material manipulation, for it is the world that is put in the service of social desire and the public and private goods. If we can alleviate human suffering by changing the world, then so much the better. From Descartes to Marx, the imperative of changing the world to suit human need and desire dominated the history of modernity.

Of course, modern history is replete with models[66] of what constitutes good change to the world. These plans or designs for maximizing the human good, or potential for good, often contraposed one another. However, what defines these designs as modern is, first, their explicit attempt to render human will into action (rather than justify action as the will of God), and, second, the relentlessly critical self-analysis in judging whether the present as a new moment of human self-realization corresponds to a rational ideal or principle guiding the implementation of that design.

'Modern society' it was thought should be able to fulfill the imperatives of equality, justice, freedom and flourishing for all within its purview. When it fell short, as inevitably it did, the critical ethos of the present which sustained itself as a reflexive adjudicative relation between past and future, between is and ought impelled progress forward producing change ever anew. The enormous responsibility for moral action lay thus on the shoulders of human ideas and agency rather than being explained away by appeal to the will of God.

Siegfried Kracauer notes that what distinguishes modern history from what preceded it was the explicit attempt to materialize the human *Geistige*, the idea in the work of the present. Ideas, what he terms "*Sollen*" or "should-beings", or more colloquially, "shoulds," are imaginative and future oriented. They want,

[66] Like 'modern', the word "model" also has its etymological origins in the Latin *modus*, to measure.

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he writes, "to penetrate the extant world; they all want to become reality themselves."[67]

The desire to manifest the social "should" realizes itself between the past and the future. As Kracauer writes in another essay,

> Modern man is really a citizen of two worlds, or more correctly, he exists between the two worlds. Thrust into the spatio-temporal life to which he is not enslaved, he orients himself toward the Beyond in which everything in the Here would find its meaning and conclusion.[68]

The present is thus in a perpetual state of tragedy, anxiety, agitation and concern because it never adequately corresponds with the ideals of perfection seeking materialization; ideals or 'shoulds' which Kracauer characterizes as having "an inborn drive to realize themselves."[69]

Modernity, in so far as it is the experience of this paradox of unfulfilled promise, leads, for Kracauer to a double existence,

> Caught in the Here and in need of the Beyond, [modern man] leads a double existence. ... He suffers a tragedy because he strives to realize the absolute in the Here. He is always simultaneously within space and at the threshold of a supra-spatial endlessness, simultaneously within the flow of time and in the reflection of eternity; and this duality of his existence is simple, since his being is precisely the tension from out of the Here into the There.[70]

For modernity, the Beyond is the space of promise realizing itself through the material methods of applied reason. Modern desire is the "exaltation of the new"[71] often simply for the sake of newness and a desire that transposes without the necessary "perspicacity" which might temper totalizing tendencies. For Kracauer, this desire transfers itself through an over-emphasis on method, which, in the materio-mechanistic episteme of the Enlightenment modern exercises itself as mechanization. The desire for newness is founded in the "conviction that the world can be grasped on the basis of mechanistic pre-suppositions and aims at a rationalization of life that would accommodate it to technology."[72]

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[67] Siegfried Kracauer, "The Group as Bearer of Ideas" *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995) p.143
[68] Siegfried Kracauer, "Travel and Dance" (1995) p.68
[69] "The Group as Bearer of Ideas" p. 143
[70] Ibid., p.69
[71] Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, "Lost in Transposition" *Writings on Cities* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1996) p. 45
[72] Kracauer, "Travel and Dance" (1995) p.69

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While such an approach manifests many social boons (prediction, control, order, transparency, rationalization), Kracauer is quick to emphasize the totalizing consequences of such an episteme. "Real meaning," he argues, is not easily ascribed to the "radical flattening out of everything living. Technology becomes an end in itself, and a world arises that desires nothing other than the greatest possible technologizing of all activities."[73] And so we return to the experiential paradox of modernity with which we started, and which dominates our present global context.

Design comes to stand in for living. Ever attentive to the promise of being-otherwise, to the promise of the future, the modern is always already engaged in overcoming the present by attempting to reform the present in a new light. As Kant, Foucault and Lefebvre were at pains to emphasize, modernity, always already attenuating and oscillating between the Beyond and the incomplete Here, is fundamentally both a critical and an auto-critical, or reflexive enterprise. Embracing the agonal politics of the present as contradiction in an attempt to overcome it through constant questioning and reflection, the modern, for Kracauer, resides precisely in "tension from out of the Here into the There." An example of the critical tension in the context of technical totality and mechanistic insularity highlights the present's inertia towards itself in the face of collapse, and returns us to the totalizing themes with which we began.

> Today this unquestioned faith in the machine has been shaken...[for] a variety of reasons. One of them is the fact that the instruments of destruction ingeniously contrived in the machine shop and the chemist's laboratory, have become in the hands of raw and dehumanized personalities a standing threat to the existence of organized society itself...What is the use of conquering nature if we fall prey to nature in the form of unbridled men? What is the use of equipping mankind with mighty powers to move and build and communicate, if the final result of this secure food supply and this excellent organization is to enthrone the morbid impulses of thwarted humanity?[74]

This statement is by one of the past centuries foremost urban theorists and writers on organized society, and neatly encapsulates several themes to which we have so far attended. Mumford foregrounds the ethical and material importance of the question as at the same time he decries modernism's blind adherence to mechanism and technicity. The constitutive tension he describes between both power and here-to-fore unimagined facility, and their correlative universal dangers and threats describe the uniquely perilous condition Mumford interprets the present as facing.

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[73] Ibid.

[74] Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (Harcourt Brace: New York, 1963) p.365-66

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Mumford concludes his famous book, *The City in History* with the claim that, in large part, the world has become a city, the beyond to which is no longer graspable but in mechanistic and potentially catastrophic terms – "...the inertia of current civilization still moves towards world-wide catastrophe."[75] "Inertia", or in Kracauer's words, "flattening", impends for Mumford what he describes as a necropolis, or 'city of the dead.' Necropolis, he intones, is the inevitable state of society organized around the mechanistic and pecuniary principles which reify and exalt the desire of technicity for its own sake. In identifying such conditions of totality, Mumford echoes Cavafy, Lefebvre, and Bauman, and invokes the Greek poet's trope to describe what we, city bound and city defined moderns, are now facing: "Necropolis is near, though not a stone has yet crumbled. For the Barbarian has already captured the city, from within."[76]

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City as crucible for the Modern

We have thus far treated the notion of the city in both a metaphorical and allegorical fashion, as well as in the everyday, lived, phenomenal or real context of planetary urbanism. We began with Cavafy's allegorical description of the modern city as having eradicated difference. As a result, it finds itself poised on a catastrophic precipice. We followed by reading Bauman's diagnostics of planetary fullness as a reflection on the materiality and design of totality. And we came back to Cavafy after a quick meander through a very basic characterization of modernity with Mumford's pronouncement of our impending demise. Like Cavafy he recognized that the modern city has given itself over to the outside, to the very thing it has worked so hard to distinguish itself against.

Our emphasis has been thus far, 'worldly' or directed toward thinking about the globality of our current condition. We began with a poem set in an allegorical world as city, and we returned to a description of the world as very nearly a vast city of the dead, a necropolis. I would like now to turn to thinking about the city more particularly as a reflection of the modern and its consonant tensions. As Mumford writes,

> To think about the city is to hold and maintain its conflictual aspects: constraints and possibilities, peacefulness and violence, meetings and solitude, gatherings and separations, the trivial and poetic, brutal functionalism and surprising improvisation.[77]

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[75] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1961) p.653; see also p. ix, and pp. 47-656 passim
[76] Ibid., p.281
[77] Ibid.

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Such oppositions we saw as characteristic more broadly of the modern and the experience of the modern signified here by the term modernity. Indeed, thinking about the image, space, place and form of the city, with its always already everyday conflictual aspects mobilizes a means to examining the specificities of our present's global and worldly modernity. Henri Lefebvre, too, emphasized the interrelationship of world and city when he wrote, "thinking the city moves towards thinking the world (thought as a relationship to the world),...globality as totality."[78] The city is a crucible for representing and thinking about the modern. It challenges claims on modern beginnings as much as it celebrates the imperatives of mobility, newness and dynamism in its often fantastical dreams of futurity.

If the desire to design the world in such a way as to produce the human good is the paradigmatic imperative of the modern, then the city is the paradigmatic site for the instantiation of the modern in the world. The architectural critic and theorist, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, succinctly characterizes the city as the materialization of the *Sollen*, of the rendering of the idea as an earthly permanence flung at the future. She echoes Kracauer's claim of "spatial images [being] the dreams of society"[79] when she writes,

> Man has built and loved cities because in the urban form he constructs the superimage of his ideal self. The common denominator of cities, from Ninevah to New York is a collective idol worship, praying for power over nature, destiny, knowledge and wealth. The gods of cities are supermen, of whom Don Marquis wrote:
>
> And he clothes them of thunder and beauty.
> He clothes them with music and fire;
> Seeing not as he bows by their altars,
> That he worships his own desire.[80]

Desire, the design of desire oriented to control, and in the service of human perfectibility, characterizes the city. Desire is time unrealized. The city is desire spatialized. As Lefebvre notes,

> Space is nothing but the inscription of time in the world, spaces are the realizations, inscriptions in the simultaneity of the external world of a series of times, the rhythms or the city, the rhythms of the urban population...the city will only be rethought and reconstructed on its current ruins when we have properly

[78] Henri Lefebvre, *Qu'est que penser?* As quoted in Kofman and Lebas (1996) p. 53
[79] Siegfried Kracauer as quoted in David Frisby (1986) p. 109
[80] Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Matrix of Man* (Praeger: New York, 1968)p.41

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> understood that the city is the deployment of time...by those who are its inhabitants.[81]

While for Mumford the early city represented a mortal glorification of the immortal, Lefebvre and Moholy-Nagy identify the city with the investiture of place with the earthly desires of those who wrap themselves with its walls. They identify, within the inhabitants of the city, a hubris perhaps peculiar to that figure for whom the dreams of consciousness and reason have become the arbiters of action and value in the world. Don Marquis describes a deceit at the heart of the city, a lie told to the gods, and so a darkness hedging its bets between design and the Beyond.

Italo Calvino likewise characterizes the city as the quintessential doubled space of desire, dreams and deceit.

> With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful and everything conceals something else.[82]

Perhaps cities begin as desire, sometimes with good intention, sometimes of necessity and sometimes they reveal themselves only in retrospect as an agglomeration we can call urban society. If we can say the gathering of desirous intent materialized is a city, then we might be able to claim that they intend to bring out the best of human sociality. Lewis Mumford thought so. He wrote in *The City in History* that cities are special, liberating environments. More than being intentional aspects of desire, cities, crucially, also produce desire and people. They are, in the words of Simmel, "cause and effect."[83] They make people and communities. What is more, they produce according to their imagination and design. Cities are, Mumford writes,

> for making persons: beings who are more fully open to the realities of the cosmos, more read to transcend the claims of tribal society and custom, more capable of assimilating old values and creating new ones, of making decisions and taking new directions, than their fellows in more limited situations.[84]

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[81] Henri Lefebvre, "L'urbanisme aujourd'hui, mythes et réaitiés" as quoted in Shields (1999) pp.156-7
[82] Calvino (1997) p. 44
[83] Simmel (1971[1903])p.336
[84] Mumford (1961) p.31

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Cities, for Mumford, are, then, spaces which facilitate social development away from traditional stasis and limitation into the realms of the new and the progressive. They impel an immanent urge to modernity. They are, in their materializations of desire and collective power, "symbols of the possible" which produce conditions for the transformation of ideal projections (Kracauer's *Sollen*) into real, dynamic materializations of social processes.

More recently, another American urban theorist has extended his predecessor's modernist interpretation of the city's progressivist function.

> Humankind's greatest creation has always been its cities. They represent the ultimate handiwork of our imagination as a species, compressing and unleashing the creative urges of humanity. From the earliest beginnings...they have been the places that generated most of mankind's art, religion, culture, commerce, and technology... [T]he human attachment to cities has served as the primary forum for political and material progress. It is in the city, this ancient confluence of the sacred, safe, and busy, where humanity's future will be shaped for centuries to come. [85]

As crucibles of social intensity and human concentration, cities are, for Mumford and Kotkin, "complex receptacles for maximizing the possibilities for human interaction and passing on the contents of civilization."[86] Their modernist conception of history is decidedly linear and historicist. Cities accumulate social power and knowledge, transcend the prejudices of tradition, and propel human society, conceived as a civilizational constant and unity progressively into a future. Desire spatialized in a constant, linear time, cities act as crucibles and repositories for progressive human value to develop through successive, generational phases in an ever flowering genius of human possibility. The modern is, for these theorists, decidedly univocal and the city is the primary space for this accumulative action to take place.

But, as we have seen, in spatializing desire through time, cities also materialize fear, deceit, accident and destruction. Cities are, if anything, sites for the intensification of experience. At the same time that skyscrapers, audacious gestures to the Beyond, embolden a social desire for permanence and mastery, the gaps between these taunts to mortality, suggest an unfulfilled nostalgia for a future never to be.[87] Cities are places of exclusion as much as they are places of privilege.

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[85] Joel Kotkin, *The City: A Global History* (Modern Library: New York, 2005) p.3 and 7. Kotkin's image of the city is wrapped up in an uncritical, nonsense idealism.
[86] Mumford (1961) p.87
[87] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Raw and the Cooked* trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Harper and Row: New York, 1969)

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For the few thousand housed in the many storied cathedrals to commerce, millions more simply service the dreams and aspirations cities materialize most overtly in the skyscraper. Modern cities are both sites of the liberatory, creative genius of human societies, as they are at the same time sites expressive of the grossest inequities and barbarisms those same societies can muster. Cities contain the conditions for the possibility of modernity as at the same time expressing the effects of that modernity. Indeed, the city played a crucial role in the curtailing of the Enlightenment's modernist optimism in human rational design and control.

The nineteenth century cityscapes of slums, factories and industrial exploitation expressed an immanent failure at the heart of the modern project's dream of unlimited improvement in material and social perfectibility. The lot of urban, industrial workers in the applied service of science to technology and capitalist production evidenced a life far worse than their feudal forebears of unenlightened, traditional or non-urban times. The temporal ruptures which modernity expressed in terms of its technical applications of science and reason to production and profit, expressed themselves at the same time as everyday spatial ruptures of industrialization, urban concentration, fragmentation and alienation. The modern cityscape thus contained, produced, and expressed in its very form, fundamental social ambivalences: hope and despair, community and alienation, success and failure.

The city as space for the intensification of paradox and ambivalence renders the modern, constitutive tension between the Here and the There, between the "is" and the "ought" of the *Sollen* (should-being) more marked and insistent. Constantly re-creating themselves, re-designing, re-crafting and re-constructing themselves, modern cities reflect the impermanence of their attempts at permanence. Whether they are the new, semi-privatized cyber cities, multinational satellites of commercial flow appearing as though from no-place on the peripheries of Seoul, Dubai, Delhi, Mauritius and Kuala Lumpur, or whether they are sites as old as London, Paris, or Baghdad, cities are constantly engaged in the process of re-making themselves, and in the case of Baghdad today, being made from without.

Walk past a repair in central London, peer into the raw hole, past the futuristic orange barricades, and witness the hundreds of years of repair upon repair, plastic, cast, ceramic, stone. Or watch crews replacing cobblestones – those now seemingly quaint symbols of historical authenticity – in central Manchester, their oversized wooden mallets as cumbersome beside the computerized banking machine, as the stones are recalcitrant at being forced back into place, iconoclasts beneath the glass towers and advertisements, yet at the same time markers of the past, and the reasons for the new.

Contra Mumford and Kotkin, we might describe modern cities as always already heterogeneous spaces. While a city is undoubtedly a repository and crucible for invention and social imagination, it is important to recognize that modernity entails the coexistence of multiple spaces, times and contexts. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the modern city. As people flock in from the countryside they bring with them their everyday ways of living, their own life

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stories and the sets of associations which make meaning for them. Often these ways of living become co-joined with more rational, instrumental and technologically governed practices. Their co-existence and intermingling contributes to the urban experience of difference, multiplicity, paradox and contradiction. The urban modern, then, is not so much a function of progressive scales, as it is the intermingling of diversity and heterogeneity, with the consonant cultural tensions which arise as a result of this multiplicity.

Difference and totalization[88], those hallmarks of urban society for Lefebvre, intensify in the modern city. A result of modern production practices and industrialization, the intensification of contradiction and the experience of this tension as paradox, are the defining features of urban modernity. Totalization and fragmentation are integrally interrelated in the modern cityscape. In the modern city,

> ...the ordering of social formations is accompanied by processes of disintegration of human experience, creating fundamental discontinuities in the lifeworlds of modernity. In other words, the orders and structures of modernization and their putative totalizations simultaneously generate basic modes of fragmentation of everyday experience.[89]

Thinking about the city as a site for the intensifications of modern paradoxes and productions, is synonymous with thinking about modernity. This fact is reflected in the concentration of socio-theoretical focus the modern urban cityscape has engendered. Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Tönnies, Kracauer, Benjamin: all struggled with thinking about modernity through examining the various contexts of the modern cityscape of urban society.

Where else could one experience the vastly divergent pulls of monumental architecture and the sheer solidity of steel building techniques, while at the same time experience the interruption of such intimations on permanence as one stepped over a homeless woman, or as one avoided the slums whose residents were themselves a part of cosmopolitan crowds rushing to and fro, flowing in and out of centres, stations, and markets in an ever dynamic rush of production, growth and inequity. In the midst of such crowds one could experience, at one and the same time, both a greater unity and identification with the ever expanding interrelationships of human attachment and possibility; yet, in the faces of ones unknown neighbour, feel ever stranger, more alone and alienated. In the modern city one could experience with greater rapidity than ever before, and over time, and perhaps with greater frequency, the side by side production of better entitlements and greater disparities, whether they be the accessibilities of

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[88] It is important to distinguish totalization from homogenization.

[89] Frisby (2001) p.2

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democratic change and transparent, popular governance, or the ever increasing boundaries and divergences of class, wealth and opportunity.

The modern city reveals the beauty of imaginative "shoulds" in new material forms and dreams. They stand next to the ugliness of apathy, greed, and indifference, and to social designs failed, forgotten or passed over. Where else but in the modern city could one explore differentiation and contradiction, and at the same time uncover historical memories which speak to the multiple ways we continue to make the world our own?

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The Modern Metropolis

For early European writers and social theorists concerned with the meaning of the modern and modernity, the contemporary nineteenth century cityscape was a particularly conducive lens through which to address the perplexing social realities born out of conflict, imperialism, technological development and their consequent alienations and horrors.[90] Modernity, thus, became constellated in its early discursive treatments though particular European cityscapes: Paris, Berlin, Vienna and London. Due to the renewed academic interest in early critical theories of urban modernity and social space, largely in response to the popularity of Benjamin's approach to Parisian studies, the early socio-theoretical identification of predominantly European urban spaces as quintessentially modern has continued to characterize both popular and academic appreciations of what it means to be, and participate in, the modern. With the addition perhaps of Tokyo and New York, the discursive participation in theorising modernity continues to be capitalized by the cities of Paris, London, Berlin and Vienna.

The almost exclusive early socio-theoretical and socio-historical emphasis on the major metropolitan centres of London, Paris, Berlin and Vienna in the exploration and analysis of modernity reflects a fundamental conceptual orientation which privileges a Eurocentric reading of urban society and modern, global social development. The privileging of European metropoles manifests a particular diffusionist view of modernization. Diffusionism is the notion that social development is an imitative process which spreads from a central core outward to encompass other cultures and geographies. In terms of describing urban modernization, the original centre for diffusion is taken to be Europe. Diffusionism maps a temporal understanding of the modern onto an empty concept of social space, and refuses a reflexive admixture of already extant practice with the influx of the new or the modern into that space. As such, diffusionism upholds a specific Eurocentric vision of the modern by refusing the possibility of modern heterogeneities, and by reasserting the so-called centre as the standard by which modernity, progress and development must be measured. As

[90] See Shields (1999)p.94

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the embodiment of the new scope and vigour of the profound changes wrought by modern industrial, political and cultural activities, "[t]he Western city [was] the putative epitome of advanced technological civilization."[91]

The European cities, particularly, Paris, London and Berlin, were seen as centres for cultural freedom, aesthetic possibility, and technological and political innovation. Yet, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this triumvirate of urban modernity began to be rivalled by new centres of modernization —Moscow, Vienna, Madrid—as industry diffused itself to pervade and re-shape much of Europe. It is this process which Benjamin called the Age of Technological Reproducibility, an age which, through the spread of industrial production, also constituted diverse networks of informational dispersion and standardized representation and reproduction. New techniques of communication and representation which resulted from the ever more diffuse industrialization of everyday life were co-opted by artists and intellectuals eager to mobilise them for new possibilities at the vanguard of social and political action. Yet, at the same time that the Western city acted as a crucible for innovation and excitement, its extraordinary inequities and fragmentations also developed in many, reactions against the seemingly overwhelming onslaught of change. The figure of the Western city thus became an enormously ambiguous sign of both possibility and catastrophe. On an aesthetic level, where the Futurists (Marinetti, Boccioni, Carrà) celebrated the mechanical speed and dynamism of the city, marvelling at its technological potential for control and regularity, others resisted the celebratory violence signalled by the city. The modern western city for them was a symbol of violence, war, destruction, social fragmentation and cultural nihilism. As a cultural topography, the city was visualized as a wasteland.

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Let us examine this discursive history with an eye to asking why it is that there continues to be a significant Eurocentric reading of urban modernity.

Siegfried Kracauer wrote extensively about the social everyday of modernity in Berlin, Paris and New York. Georg Simmel, while famous for having written a general, theoretical statement of the psycho-social effect of modern cities, wrote specifically on Berlin and Vienna. Walter Benjamin, one of the most studied early social theorists of modernity, at least in the English speaking world, wrote on Naples, Berlin, Moscow and Paris. He is most known for his reflections on Paris as the archetypical space of modernity, even going as far as to describe Paris as the "capital" of the nineteenth century's modern social upheavals and promises.[92] The primary focus by these theorists on the

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[91] Andrew J. Webber, *The European Avant-Garde 1900-1940* (Polity: London, 2004)p.64

[92] Walter Benjamin, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century" *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. R Tiedemann (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1999)pp. 14-26

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continental cities of Paris, Berlin and Vienna is not surprising. These are the cities in which they lived, which they knew best, and which exerted a formidable cultural sway over the continent and its self-image as the modern centre to world civilization.

London, that other western metropole whose influence was perhaps greater, and probably more planetary in scope than Berlin, Paris or Vienna, was the subject, too, of intense intellectual and cultural scrutiny, much of which, it might be argued, acted as critical and conceptual precursors to the critiques mentioned above. I am referring here to the centrality of the cityscape of London and industrial England to the critical writing of Marx and Engels, and its socio-theoretic spatialisation. Although they (but Marx particularly) wrote critically of, and had the socio-political and economic contexts of Paris, Cologne, Brussels and New York within the scope of his revolutionary vision, London, and other heavily industrialized urban centres in England, like Manchester and Birmingham, were certainly at the forefront of their mature critical practice. The economic and social inequities which resulted from reason and science applied to technology and production (industrialization), and which were manifest in everyday living and working conditions of the urban industrial poor in London and greater industrialized England, were some of *the* material and spatial catalysts for Marx's revolutionary social critiques of capital and labour. As David McLellan notes, "it was in England that Marx found the bedrock of social and economic material on which to found his theories."[93] McLellan quotes one of Marx's early disciples, Wilhelm Liebknecht, who wrote that in London—Marx's residence in exile for some thirty four years—"Marx found what he was looking for, what he needed: the bricks and mortar for his work. *Capital* could only have been written in London. Marx could only become what he did become in England."[94]

Years before Marx arrived in London, Shelley had written,

> Hell is a city much like London—
> A populous and smoky city;
> There are all sorts of people undone,
> And there is little or no fun done;
> Small justice shown, and still less pity.[95]

Perhaps it was in response to experiencing Shelley's popular image of a smokey Hellish London that Marx wrote his social critiques in the revolutionary cause of global social justice, and in that, he was certainly, when he did arrive in London in 1849, amongst a long tradition of writers and thinkers who used the "marvels and monstrosities of Victorian London"[96] as catalysts for their social commentary.

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[93] David MacLellan, "Marx in England" *History Today* Vol. 33, No.3 (March, 1983), p.5
[94] Wilhelm Liebknecht, as quoted by MacLellan (Ibid.)
[95] P.B. Shelley, "Peter Bell the Third" *The Poems of Shelley* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1960)p.350
[96] Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx* (Fourth Estate: London, 1999)p.150. Of course, Marx, Morris, Dickens and Thornbury are but a tiny tip of an enormous iceberg of modernist literature in which London

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It is important to note, however, that industrialization and urban society in England—Marx's 'bricks and mortar'—were not simply limited to large, urban agglomerations. Due to intensive technological changes, the countryside of England became rapidly industrialized and urbanized such that by the time Marx wrote his critiques of capitalist social inequity, England had for at least some sixty years been publicly developing and promoting principles of scientific and industrialized agriculture.[97] Lefebvre's "urban society" of the present certainly has its precedent in the more localized history of a geographically insulated and industrializing England; London was the symbolic heart of this urbanization. Henry Mayhew, a journalist at the time, on seeing the city from the vista afforded by a hot air balloon ride, remarked that he could not tell "where the monster city began or ended, for the buildings stretched not only to the horizon on either side, but far away into the distance...where the town seemed to blend into the sky."[98]

Significantly influenced by Marx's social critiques of the capitalist effects of industrial urbanization, the agrarian socialist William Morris transforms the urban space of modern London into an imaginary landscape of pastoral equanimity in his futurist utopian vision, *News From Nowhere.* In it the dystopian modern past and present is replaced by a utopian vision for the world, but one which is written doubly through the cityscape-cum-landscape of London. Morris speckles his idealist and romanticized tract with dream images the protagonist has of the industrial Hell that was London, somehow removed in the narratives imaginary future of a pastoral post-urban idyll. Here, he "recalls" Trafalgar Square—

> A strange sensation came over me; I shut my eyes to keep out the sight of the sun glittering on this fair abode of gardens, and for a moment there passed before them a phantasmagoria of another day. A great space surrounded by tall ugly houses, with an ugly church at the corner and a nondescript ugly cupolaed building at my back; the roadway thronged with a sweltering and excited crowd, dominated by omnibuses crowded with spectators. In the midst a paved be-fountained square, populated only by a few men dressed in blue and a good many singularly ugly bronze images (one on top of a tall column). The said square guarded up to the edge of the roadway by a four-fold line of big men clad in blue, and across the southern roadway the helmets of a band of horse-soldiers, dead white in the

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figures as an ambiguous culture capital of threat and promise. Its image became synonymous with the modern itself, a place of fascination and repulsion, of vivid excitement and of dreadful night. James, Conrad, Pound, Wells, Eliot: all saw it as the city of modern cities; in Well's words, "*the* Imperial city—the centre of civilization, the heart of the world!" Malcolm Bradbury, "London 1890-1920" *Modernism* eds. M. Bradbury and J. McFarlane (Penguin: London, 1991)p.172

[97] Although technological changes had influenced cultivation practices in English agriculture since the early to the mid 18th century, a public Board of Agriculture was not set up till 1793.

[98] As quoted in Wheen, p.147

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> greyness of the chilly November afternoon - I opened my eyes to the sunlight again and looked round me, and cried out among the whispering trees and odorous blossoms, "Trafalgar Square!"[99]

For Morris, London's modern cityscape, complete with its horrors, its hell-like subways, smoke and fog laden streets and filthy neighbourhoods, becomes a fictive place against which he contrasts an equally imagined, rural—post-urban—yet rationalized, idyll. The present city of Morris' experience—"that vapour-bath of hurried and discontented humanity"..."which civilization has forced upon us like a habit"[100]—is, in the narrative, a dystopian counterpoint to an idealized, agrarian vision of a romantic non-urban and post-revolutionary future, one built over, literally, the very space of modern London with which he was familiar, and so becomes as the subtitle suggests, a spatial embodiment of an "Epoch of Rest", that very thing whose antipode is fleeting, rushing modernity.

Charles Dickens, a contemporary of Morris and Marx, is perhaps most recognized as *the* writer to incorporate London's modern cityscape, and its attendant social and spatial paradoxes, as an omnipresent character in his many novels and plays. The image of London as a dystopian and primordial horror was perhaps most famously allegorized in the opening passages of his 1853 novel, *Bleak House*,

> London. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn hall. Implacable winter weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth,...smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making soft black drizzle with flakes of soot....Dogs, indistinguishable in mire. Horses scarcely better....Foot passengers jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection....Fog everywhere....Fog down the river where it flows defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient...pensioners....Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog....Gas looming through the fog...as the sun may, from the spongey fields be seen to loom...[101]

For the mature Dickens of *Bleak House*, London is a filthy "void" for millions who live tied together by the invisible hand of modernity, yet who stumble about blinded by the city and its industrial fog to one another in a

[99] William Morris, *News from Nowhere, or an Epoch of Rest, being some chapters from a Utopian Romance* (Penguin: New York and London, 1993)p.77-78
[100] Ibid. p.21
[101] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (W.W. Norton: London and New York, 1977)p.5

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wasteland of poverty, alienation and isolation. The fog and the spectral city are allegorical figures which occlude for its citizens—citizens of a world city—the ways in which this modern place is a "shameful testimony to future ages" and an indication of "how civilisation and barbarism walk this boastful island together."[102]

A similar allegorical image of the city was later famously engaged by T.S. Eliot in his poem *The Waste Land* wherein the city, specifically also London, became a place of rejection, emptiness and decline, one saturated with the detritus of modernity and soiled by the very bodily abjection that a futurist vision of modernity, for instance, tried to absolve in the cleanliness of technological control and human self-assertion. Eliot, as we have seen briefly, drew from a long tradition in visualizing London as a cesspit of effluvial premonitions of death. He takes up Shelley, Dickens and Morris's allegorical images fog, mud, death and machines—

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> ...
>
> Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud nor long.
> But at my back in a cold blast I hear
> The rattle of bones, and chuckle spread from ear to
> ear.
> A rat crept softly through the vegetation
> Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
> While I was fishing in the dull canal
> On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
> Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
> And on the king my father's death before him.
> White bodies naked on the low damp ground
> And bones cast in a little low dry garret,
> Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year.
> But at my back from time to time I hear
> The sound of horns and motors...

[102] See *Bleak* House, Chapter 11. At the same time as Dickens' works were appearing, Walter Thornbury was writing, and walking, his six volume work called *Old and New London*. This somewhat lesser known work was published between 1872 and 1879, and indicates by its very title the attempt to capture the historical complexities of the modern London cityscape through the break or rupture which the transition between old and new constitutes. Thornbury's volumes, densely illustrated, presage Iain Sinclair's recent wanderings, and Benjamin's reflections on *flanéurie* revealing the city through walking the city and so walking history as space, by incorporating an ambulatory method of investigation from the very start.

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> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter noon...[103]

What is interesting, however, for our purposes, in a work like *The Waste Land* is the fact that Eliot used the Orient as an organic, redemptive counter-point to the spiritual wasteland of the urbanized Occident. Hindu mythological references (the fable of what the Thunder spoke from the *Upanishads*) and Sanskrit intonations ("Shantih shantih shantih") mark a distant and romanticized absence as London's antipodal presence of nostalgic longing for lost place in the centre of an estranged and corrupt modernity. Eliot's construction of the Orient as a romanticised other ambiguously presents London's own modernity, its wealth, power and technological capacity which he decries as so much debris and ruination, as a product of similar processes of exploitation in the distant and romanticised place of the Orient. It was a function of the modernization, the urbanization and exploitation of the distant in the service of the centre. The wasteland was as much present in Calcutta as it was in London.

Yet, long after Eliot, urban cultural modernity, critically analyzed as an ambiguous place of freedom and catastrophe, as a place of "irresolvable tension between abjection and redemptive order, waste and fertility"[104] is little recognized as existing outside the representational Occidental centres. Geographer Paul Wheatley comments to this effect in the opening to his inaugural 1967 lecture, *City as Symbol.* Despite the fact, as he notes, that "we are approaching the time when...all men will live in terms of the city,"[105] the investigation of "contemporary urbanism" he continues,

> ...focus[es] on its most impressive manifestations, namely the cities of Western Europe and North America....The result is that the study of urban phenomena has been confined very largely to these realms, with only the occasional tentative forays into peripheral territories—which more often than not have been regions of exported European culture. It follows that most of the formulations and hypotheses current in urban studies are based on the Euro-American experience, and have comparatively seldom been tested in the conditions of the traditional world. This lack of attention to cities outside the cultural sphere of the west becomes all the more important when we remember that two out of every three people in the world today are living in so called under-developed territories, territories

[103] T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land" *The Waste Land and other poems* (Faber and Faber: London, 1972)p.25, 30-31

[104] Ibid., p.66

[105] Paul Wheatley, *City as Symbol: An Inaugural Lecture, University College London, 20 November 1967* (H.K. Lewis: London, 1969)p.3

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> which have as many large cities and as many dwellers in large cities as do the industrialized nations. In other words, urbanism...is a significant phenomenon in the under-developed as in the industrialized sectors of the world.[106]

As our previous discussion and evidence presented about the state of urbanism in the world in 2006 shows, Wheatley's diagnosis has come to fruition. It is, indeed, even more relevant today than it was roughly forty years ago when Wheatley was speaking. Urbanisation and the spread of the urban as a way of life is more significant now, in non-Western regions, than it is in the West (or North, however you like to characterize it). It would seem, therefore, that academic and critical investigations into the socio-cultural effects of urban modernity *outside* Western citadels of power would be prevalent given their relevance to the present state of things.

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The Eurocentric Imagination of Contemporary Writing about Urban Modernity

Despite much writing about the post-colonial and the need to recognize that "modernization can proceed along a number of different roads,"[107] in contemporary theoretical and socio-historical analyses of urban modernity, the early trend to hegemonize urban modernity within the European dominated triumvirate of Paris, Berlin and London has hardly been usurped. Present-day, influential social theories of urban modernity have largely continued the earlier constellation around similar Eurocentric nodes, despite the fact that these same books often claim to speak about cultural modernity in general, and about the "areas outside the West, where, despite the pervasive pressures of the expanding world market,...the growth of a modern world culture...was unfolding along with it... ."[108] A few particularly representative examples of this continued academic theoretical bias come to mind.

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[106] Ibid.

[107] Berman (1982)p.124

[108] Ibid., p.174. There are, of course, a few notable exceptions. Anthony D. King has written about the theoretical and analytical lacunae of colonial urbanism in the academic literature on urbanism and cultural modernity. See, notably, his *Colonial Urban Development* (Routledge: London, 1976), *Urbanism, Colonialism, and the World Economy: Cultural and Spatial Foundations of the World Urban System* (Routledge: London and New York, 1990) and "The Times and Spaces of Modernity (or, who needs postmodernism?)" in *Global Modernities*, eds. M. Featherstone, et al. (Sage: London, 1995)pp.108-123. See also Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of Social Environment* (MIT Press: Boston, 1989), Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1991), James Holston, *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1989) and Ryan Bishop, et al. eds. *Postcolonial Urbanism* (Routledge: London and New York, 2003).

The only occasion I have come across wherein another author attempts explicitly to read an Asian city through the lenses of Benjamin, I discovered after my "legs had become entangled in the

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David Frisby's *Cityscapes of Modernity*[109] focuses exclusively and rather narrowly, on the diverse modernisms of Berlin, Vienna and Paris, despite the author's more generalized claims to "explore...the structuring, representations and modes of experiencing the modern metropolis."[110] There is nothing of modern life outside of the European cities examined in his book. It is almost as if, as Anthony King writes of Frisby's book, that the modern metropolis "is seen as an *exclusively* European phenomenon and one having no connection with the rest of the world, particularly, the world outside Europe."[111] There is brief mention made of Cairo, but only in the context of how the Orient is represented in the various 19th century international exhibitions held in Vienna and Berlin. Frisby's earlier, similarly influential book, *Fragments of Modernity*, although not dealing explicitly with cities, focused on the work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin as three central theoretical lenses through which to think critically about modernity. As such, in *Fragments of Modernity*, Frisby's writing on Berlin and Paris is central to his critical excursus of the three authors, and moreover, on his claims about modernity in general. But again, the world outside of Europe's metropoles figures not at all, despite, arguably, the largest fragments of modernity, and the greatest experiences of fragmentation and change being those which resulted from processes colonial urbanisation in spaces outside of Europe.

James Donald's otherwise interesting and revealing study of the modern urban imaginary promises much with its generous title, *Imaging the Modern City*.[112] The book jacket even proclaims that Donald's analysis will "take the reader on a psychic journey" through the "places...of civilized society's highest aspirations", and includes in the usual list of Paris et al, Singapore. However, Singapore merits only the briefest of mentions, a mere four pages. Indeed, in the "Preface" Donald admits in retrospect that his is a "European book" employing modernity as a "Eurocentric term" in an effort that "is not...the only way, or even the best way, to tell the story of the modern city."[113] He suggests that a better way to represent the modern city might be to "require a conversation between millions of citizens likewise enacting the limits of ... their modernity not only in Europe and North America, but perhaps especially in Hong Kong, Algiers, Buenos Aires, New Delhi, Cape Town and Perth."[114] But, despite his own recommendation, and claiming a more modest ambition, Donald proceeds to unfurl an excellent, though Eurocentric, study through the cultural and textual tropes of London, Paris, Manchester, Berlin, Vienna, and New York.

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ribbons of the streets" (Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. II* p.612) of Calcutta. This is the deeply imposing work of Rajeev S. Patke. See his excellent and formidably acute essays, "Benjamin in Bombay? An Extrapolation" (*Postmodern Culture: An Online Journal* Vol. 12, Issue 3, 2002), and "Benjamin's Arcades Project and the Postcolonial City" in Bishop et al. (2003).

[109] David Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity: Critical Explorations* (Polity: Cambridge, 2001)

[110] Frisby (2001)p.12

[111] Anthony D. King, "The Times and Spaces of Modernity" *Spaces of Global Cultures: Architecture, Urbanism, Identity* (Routledge: New York and London, 2005)p.69

[112] James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (Athalone Press: London, 1999).

[113] Ibid. p. xi

[114] Ibid.

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David Harvey's recent book, *Paris: Capital of Modernity*, identifies Paris as the quintessential historico-spatial expression of the modern and modernity.[115] In this, of course, he is not unique. His is but one in a now seemingly innumerable series[116], both old and new, which treats Paris as the *locus classicus*, the "home town"[117] of the modern. As Marx exclaimed to a friend before setting out to Paris in 1843, "And so – to Paris, to the old university of philosophy and the new capital of the new world!...the nerve centre of European history, sending out electric shocks at intervals which galvanised the whole world."[118] This reputation would only solidify as the century wore on and as the city became immortalised in the visual works of early modernism. "Paris [was] surely, for Modernism, the outright dominant centre, as the fount of bohemia, tolerance and the émigré life-style... ."[119]

The modern and modernity, Harvey likens to, if not a break or rupture, then certainly a moment of "creative destruction,"[120] and Paris has been, since the French Revolution, at the centre of the West's most significant modern social and cultural developments (most, of course, products of 'destruction', of crisis, tension, death and struggle), and, as such, "the central focus for the rise modern European

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[115] David Harvey, *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (Routledge: London and New York, 2003). Harvey's earlier work, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1985) also examined Paris as particularly conducive to mapping the urbanization of revolution.

[116] Patrice Higonnet puts the figure at close to 10,000 volumes which treat of Paris, its history and its centrality in world history. Of late, it is the done thing for academics and intellectuals to opine on Paris. The recent plethora of offerings, like all trends is capitalizing on the caché of a particular form of cultural capital. A recent search in my academic library returned over 166 volumes devoted to the social and cultural history of modern Paris published between the years 2000 and the end of 2005. This ad nauseam is motivated, significantly, by a modernist nostalgia for the future. In a time when the world seems to be coming apart at the seams, when the promise of modernity is now a warm wind across winter prairies, or rain in the Antarctic, or democratically elected terrorists, or murderous riots over cartoons—it was not meant to be this way!—it is no doubt reassuring to return to the paradigmatic space of modern promise to revel in its long past revolutions, its bourgeois comforts and its romantic "City of Light" dreams of *egalité* over *café au lait* and *brioche*. See, amongst so many others, Ross King, *The Judgment of Paris: The Revolutionary Decade that Gave the World Impressionism*(Bond Street Books: London, 2006); Colin Jones, *Paris: The Biography of a City* (Viking: New York, 2004); Patrice Higonnet, *Paris: Capital of the World* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., and London: 2002); Dudley Andrew, *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Mary Gluck, *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in 19th Century Paris* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2005); *Paris in Mind: Three Centuries of Americans Writing about Paris* (Vintage: New York, 2003); Nicholas Papayanis, *Planning Paris Before Haussmann* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2004); Michel Carmona, *Haussmann: His Life and Times and the Making of Modern Paris* (I.R.Dee: Chicago, 2002); Dan Frank, *Bohemian Paris: The Birth of Modern Art* (Grove Press: New York, 2001); Adam Gopnik, *Paris to the Moon* (Random House: New York, 2000); and, Edmund White, *The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris* (Bloomsbury: New York and London, 2001).

[117] Gertrude Stein, *Paris France* (Penguin: New York and London, 1940).

[118] Marx as quoted in Wheen, (1999)p.61

[119] Malcolm Bradbury, "The Cities of Modernism" *Modernism: 1890-1930* eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Penguin: New York and London, 1991)p. 102

[120] Harvey (2003) p.1

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culture."[121] Mid-nineteenth century Paris exemplified the modern as a quintessential moment of creative destruction for its was in the 1850s that the Prefect of Paris, Georges-Eugène Haussmann, masterminded the transformation of the city from largely a medieval provincial centre to a rationalized, grand spectacle of modernist rationalization. Before the 1850s, Paris was beset by the typically medieval problems of small dark streets, unsanitary conditions, artisanal production industries, and dense populations given to romanticism. It was seen, thusly, by Enlightenment predicates of rationalized emancipation which attempted to bring civilized light to landscapes where once there was darkness as a "sick city...wracked by decadence, corruption, crime and cholera."[122] Haussmann demolished whole neighbourhoods and rationalized their rebuilding along formalized, principles which prioritized mobility, speed, and structural planning. He brought sweeping changes to the city's infrastructure, the largesse and scale of which assured his place as a founding figure in modern urban planning.[123] Paris became a city seen to be premised on managerial, scientific socialism, a sprawling spectacle of affluence and consumption, and a centre for modern industry. Haussmann's modernist emphasis on linearity, symmetry, uniformity and totality realized itself in the rational evolution of spatial order and in the metropolitan region reaching out to the unruly and disorganised peripheries of the city suburbs. Haussmann's plans undertook the rational restructuring of roads, sewers, parks, monuments, schools, administrative buildings and commercial properties.[124] Detailed infrastructural changes were orchestrated through a rationally conceived, though de-centralized, plan which emphasized administrative legislation in the interest of public order and social evolution. Such progressive changes to the city wrought much in the way of wreckage to many at the time, and its was perhaps to this context that Baudelaire was able to write that the experience of the modern consisted in the transient, the fleeting and the contingent.

As crumbling streets were swept away, so too were the previous ways of living and making meaning, and the consequent sense of social security which anchored understanding. Drifting powerless, homeless, swept up by crowds clamouring for the next, the new, the future, Parisian life post-Haussmann starkly exemplified the tensions and contradictions of the modern. Given the magnitude and extent of the urban spatial changes which reflected the modern as a rational project in Paris, it is easy to see why Harvey, pace Marx, Benjamin, and so many others, sees Paris as the capital of modernity.

Not to be outdone in establishing a "hierarchical ordering" of modernity and the consonant capitalisation of power and cultural dominance that comes along with the normative ascription of the "more" and "less" modern, the historian Patrice Higgonnet goes further than Harvey. Paris is the "capital of the modern self", "the capital of world revolution", "the capital of science", "the

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[121] Eric Cahm, "Revolt, Conservatism and Reaction in Paris 1905-1925" *Modernism: 1890-1930* eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Penguin: New York and London, 1991)p.162

[122] Ibid., p.93

[123] Ibid., p.112

[124] Ibid., p.111

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capital of alienation", "the capital of pleasure, crime and sex" and "the capital of art and fashion", as Higgonnet argues in his happy, hagiographic history of the city.[125] For Higgonnet, Paris incorporates itself, in its imaginative entirety, as, following Goethe's description, a "universal city." Paris was, argues Higonnet, the "Capital of the World" from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, since its history "can be imagined as the universalizing and secularized sequel to collective religious myths that had begun to die" with the world-wide spread of urban modernity.[126] Notwithstanding losing its lustre in the past fifty or sixty years, and, thus, no longer being the modern world's capital due to the internationalisation and globalization of culture and economics (which, incidentally, have always been globalized and international), Paris will remain, for Higonnet, the "most universal and distinctive of all" cities; "*the* European city par excellence, a magical and once mythical place, the capital of a multinational memory" and the "focus of humankind's nostalgia for a golden past."[127] As we shall see later, the nostalgia which permeates much of the modern Bengali collective social imaginary has nothing to do with Paris, and indeed, in many instances stands as an active redemptive refusal to the continuity of history which Paris represents.

Although engagingly detailing the role of phantasmagoria in the consumptive myths of modern commodity culture, and noting that such "self-deceiving" and "self-indulgent" commodity notions denote the illusion of universalist relations of love and equality[128], Higonnet seems to be duped by his own sentimentalism about the city. He has hoodwinked himself into believing that that there was once a golden past governed by the radiant image of Paris wherein the hierarchical society upon which it depended for its spectacularity did not also depend upon a consonant brutality and abjection of both near and distant. Despite being the capital of the world, the world outside Paris hardly exists for Higonnet, except in so far as the city acts as a reified memory shelter for "African migrants and North African refugees" [129] or as a counterpoint to London, New York, Berlin and Vienna.[130]

The same constrained and totally Eurocentric vision of the world is operative within T.J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*.[131] Modern life and Paris are synonymous with one another for Clark. Despite a few passing references to the empire and the black subject, (the latter in particular within his extended treatment of Manet's *Olympia* and the painting's background figure of the "negress" offering flowers to the

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[125] Patrice Higonnet, *Paris: Capital of the World* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., and London: 2002)
[126] Ibid., p.3
[127] Ibid. p. 434-36.
[128] Ibid., p.6
[129] Ibid. 436
[130] See Chapter 10, "Paris in the World" pp.230-260. Higonnet's world does not extend beyond the Europe of these big cities and New York.
[131] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Knopf: New York, 1985).

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prone, fore-grounded prostitute, a figure whose naked class and exchange-value within a money economy, for Clark, defined her modernity) the "world" for Clark is limited to the countryside surrounding Paris where the bourgeois went to frolic on weekends, bored and overwhelmed by the intensity of big city life. The diversities of modern life that Frisby carefully delineates in Berlin, Vienna and Paris, but also limits therein, do not seem to be made apparent by Clark in settings other than Paris.

Miles Ogborn's interesting and thorough study, *Spaces of Modernity: London's Geographies, 1680-1780* nevertheless develops a similarly narrow conceptual focus on the spaces of modernity by exclusively centering attention on metropolitan London; this despite explicitly aiming to "splinter and fragment the notion of modernity by attending to the contextualised historical geographies of some of its disparate spaces" which "at times have seemed worlds apart."[132] The diverse spatial worlds of modernity for Ogborn—the prison cell, the paved street, the pleasure garden, the Magdalen Hospital, the excise and registrar's offices—notwithstanding being particularly detailed sites for the exercise of rational power and exclusion, hardly constitute "world's apart" spatiality.

It is especially important to think about the "rest of the world" in London between 1680 and 1780. During this one hundred years, the very spatial history examined by Ogborn, London was growing to the height of its colonial power by extracting mind-boggling sums from disparate newly commodified spaces, which were, literally, a world apart, but which in turn built the very physical spaces of the modern city of London the inequity of which Ogborn details. Modern urban colonial space secured London's place as a cultural and economic citadel, and predicated the spaces Ogborn interestingly examines. The cultural and economic spaces of London's modernity were very much more widespread than those Ogborn investigates.[133] Indeed, the map of modernity that emerges from Ogborn's investigation, while suitably traversing the spaces between totalization and difference *within* London, nevertheless perpetuates the glaring absence of the colony at the heart of much talk of urban modernity.

Just as Ogborn constrains the spaces of modernity to the geographically limited yet socially diverse landscapes of London, so *The Landscape of Modernity*[134] confines its broad analytical promise to the social geography of one city: New York. An edited collection of essays, the book does celebrate the multiplicities which characterize this most unique of world cities: its diverse boroughs, its enormous emigrant populations, its many social classes and industries, its magnificent vertical paeans to rationality and progress, its food and

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[132] Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity: London's Geographies, 1680-1780* (The Guilford Press: London, 1998)p.231

[133] Ogborn does give brief mention in passing to "problems in simply locating modernity in the big cities of the 'West,' in London, Paris and Berlin" because the "West's modernities are entangled with those of other places an other people through trade, imperialism and slavery" (Ibid., p.32). But the rest of his analysis is completely devoid of any attempt to theorise London within the ambiguities of this spatial entanglement.

[134] David Ward and Olivier Zunz eds., *The Landscape of Modernity* (Russell Sage: New York, 1992)

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street life, and its pleasure attractions. This energetic variety, the editors claim, poised between the limits of rationality and plurality, defines "global cities throughout the world" as though all others are modern only in so far as they mimic New York. Ward and Zunz's volume, as such, attempts to "retrace the creation of the modern landscape in its birthplace, New York City."[135] This is a bold—if erroneous—claim of cultural origins, but the world, they imply, is condensed in the "variegated territory" of New York, where the "imagery of the modern city...emerges from the competition among different kinds and visions of modernity."[136] Modernity, they argue, is best characterized by, and through, its birthplace: the real and imaginary landscape of New York.

In this opinion they are not alone. *Pace* Higgonnet's capitalization of Paris, modernity's world capital *is* New York, agrees Joseph Rykwert, the eminent architectural historian. "From wherever it is seen—Europe or Asia, Latin America or the Pacific Rim—New York now seems to be the capital (financial, administrative—even cultural) of all the world."[137] New York is a capital indifferent, from the beginning, Rem Koolhaas might say, to the variegated topography of the world. The grid of Manhattan, as a paragon of modernity *qua* project, signals "an intellectual program: in its indifference...to what exists, it claims the superiority of mental construction over reality."[138] This is a superiority, which, in the "plotting if its streets and blocks, announces the subjugation, if not obliteration, of nature as its true ambition."[139] Thus, the "Grid's two-dimensional discipline" which speaks to the modern virtues of "utility", "economy", "convenience and commerce"[140] "invalidates, at once, all the systems of articulation and differentiation that have guided the design of traditional cities."[141] In a "new space" in the New World, New York becomes, "a counter-Paris, and anti-London"[142], a representative to the newly globalising world of the 18th century. Here the truly modern originates in a calculated space of newness, and in a form superior to its progenitors. Thus, despite being "discovered" in 1609 on a stop during a search "for 'a new route to the Indies by way of the North' on behalf of the Dutch East India Company"[143], New York's founding 'European refinement' amidst a pre-existing 'North American barbarism' signals "a future that can be extrapolated forever"[144] in a cyclical movement of never ending progress. The world as a space of possibility thus finds

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[135] Ibid. p.3
[136] Ibid., p.12
[137] Joseph Rykwert, *The Seduction of Place: The City in the Twentieth Century* (Pantheon: New York, 2000)p.189
[138] Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1978)p.15
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid., p.14
[141] Ibid., p.15
[142] Ibid., p.14
[143] Ibid., p.12
[144] Ibid., p.10

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its originary moment in the inherent modernity of New York and which thereafter acts as a model for future significations of the modern.

Not much is different in William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock's much referenced collection which aims to detail numerous *Visions of the Modern City.*[145] Their vision, and those of their contributors, is again limited to the usual suspects of Paris, London, Berlin, New York, and, in a modest gesture to the "decentering" of contemporary metropolitan life which, they claim, marks our globally urban present, Tokyo. Their account seems to be "a largely undifferentiated, almost timeless representation of modernity" which spreads, one historical progression after another, across the empty "spatial palette" of the globe from European and North American centres of cultural capital. These words were issued against Marshall Berman's vision of the modern by Derek Gregory in his book *Geographical Imaginations*[146] but they might apply equally to Sharpe and Wallock's volume. The spatiotemporal contexts of the modern are modern only in so far as they resemble (mimetically visualize) the Eurocentric standards of urban modernity. They and their contributors identify three phases of modern city development, all of which they limit to the geographic regions of Europe and North America: population growth, neighbourhood segregation and now peripheral sprawl. That the modern urban centres of the colonial world, the world as colony space, was constituted through the peripheralizing of newly encompassed populations through social, economic and cultural segregation, does not seem to warrant the image or vision of the modern city.

Marshall Berman tries to open up the investigation of modernity and its spatial multiplicities beyond the centre of Europe and New York dominated North America, to the possibilities of places like Lagos, New Delhi and Mexico City. Despite being criticised by some for neglecting the gendered and sexual diversities of urban modernity[147], Marshall Berman's now classic study, ***All That is Solid Melts into Air***, does extend its critical reach to the peripheries of Europe, in an effort to investigate the diversities of modernities that arise when the modern

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[145] William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock eds., *Visions of the Modern City: Essays in History, Art and Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London, 1987)

[146] Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1994)p.293

[147] See Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity" in *Vision and Difference* (Routledge: London, 1988) pp.70-127; Janet Wolff, "The Invisible Flaneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity" *The Problems of Modernity* ed. A. Benjamin (Routledge: London, 1987); and Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, The Control of Disorder and Women* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1992).

Interestingly, despite criticising Clark, Berman, Simmel, Benjamin et al for defining modernity as a particularly male experience, these same authors replicate the Eurocentric bias for examining the spaces of modernity through key European and North American cities. For instance, Pollock's world is as limited as Clark's; she never leaves Paris, despite defining modernity as "a response...to the new complexities of a social existence passed amongst strangers in an atmosphere of intensified nervous and psychic stimulation, in a world ruled by money and commodity exchange, stressed by competition and formative of an intensified individuality..."(p.93). If any space of modernity was intensely characterized by these urban social forces, it was colonial space, yet colonial spaces far from the centres of bourgeois Paris and London are rarely, if ever, thought of as modern.

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European urban imaginary coincides with the multiplicities of social experience which can be said to pre-date this Enlightenment encounter.

On the periphery, but not an especially distant one, Berman finds the cityscape of St. Petersburg particularly conducive to theorising the spaces of modernity. In the history of Petersburg's "under-development" as he calls it, one is able to witness the juxtaposition of the "traditional" and the "modern", the old and the new, side by side, and so read the city's existence as a "symbol of modernity in the midst of a backward society."[148] He presents the city's emergence from the mud of the Neva River in 1703 under the direction of Peter I as a quintessential moment of modernization, and argues that the city is "the archetypal 'unreal city' of the modern world."[149] In its rationalized "geometric and rectilinear" planning, the city reflected the "symbolic language" of European modernity and made itself a "window to Europe."[150] But, Petersburg was largely a production reflecting the ideals of an already extant image of Enlightenment urban modernisation. Saint Petersburg was intended and built as an exemplary and didactic city, a new spatial centre for an expanding European periphery modeled after its spatiotemporal precursors which would transform the lives of its tradition bound and backward inhabitants.

Peter's new city was a pre-cursor, as James Scott argues, to the built high-modernist cities of Brasília and Chandigarh, and to the un-built dreams of the likes of Le Corbusier, Ludwig Hilberseimer, and Oscar Niemeyer.[151] St. Petersburg was built in the image of Venice and Amsterdam by designers and planners imported from England, France, Holland and Italy, and set about, under the explicit direction of Peter to become a European city on par with London, Paris, Berlin and Vienna. And, indeed, as Berman notes, the city did achieve the status of becoming "virtually overnight, one of the great metropolises of Europe."[152] Berman claims that the history of its imitation, and importantly, of its peculiar and specific interpretations of the modern, "its clash and interplay of experiments in modernization", make it especially conducive to interpreting "the mysteries and political life in the cities of the Third World."[153] It is precisely the juxtaposition of the planned, exemplary city in the traditional, spatiotemporal and socio-cultural landscape of the Russian peasantry and its 'un-modern' backwardness that intrigues Berman.

The juxtaposition of the modern and the pre-modern in the city space of St. Petersburg, was, like the city itself, exemplary. Furthermore, for Berman, reading the city as a text renders it exemplary of the wider more global social experience of modernity. Modernity in all its complex juxtapositions can best be witnessed in a city space wherein the early high modernism of the European

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[148] Berman (1982)p.285
[149] Ibid. p.176
[150] Ibid.,p.176-77
[151] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1998)p.119
[152] Ibid.,p.177
[153] Ibid.,p.286

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centres of rationalism and human self-assertion rubs up against the pre-modern traditional landscape of the dark, dangerous and disorderly. Berman, however, leaves off exploring what St. Petersburg "open[s] up in [the] modern life"[154] of the urban "Third World" and in their vastly more distant experiences of the imperial Occident. He goes on to conclude his book with an epilogue on New York. The modern thus gets constrained once again through a stereotypical representational space. More importantly, the experience of modernity becomes inscribed only in so far as it approximates paradigmatic and endogenous Eurocentric spatial rationalisms of planning contrasting with the pre-modern and backward entanglements they attempt to overcome. As Gregory notes, Berman's account is "a largely undifferentiated, almost timeless representation of modernity" when, indeed, most of the urban modern experiences in the colonial Third World were very different than the planned 'St. Petersburg-ian' "archetypal" model of urban modernity Berman suggests.

☙

Calcutta as Modern Metropolis

Calcutta, for instance, an equally modern European urban inception, predated St. Petersburg by 13 years. It quickly became the second city of one of the modern world's most significant global empires, and as such is, centrally important for a social history of modernity, urbanization and global socio-economic modernization. But, unlike New York or St. Petersburg, Calcutta is famous for not being built according to any formal urban plan at all.[155] As Kipling famously chimed, in his short, comparative poem of the city which eponymously echoes, Dickens' earlier work about revolutionary London and Paris, "A Tale of Two Cities", Calcutta was "chance erected, chance directed." It is not entirely true that Calcutta was completely accidental. According to Partha Chatterjee, Calcutta did evidence early administrative and scientific attention to its orderly growth.[156] However, it is important to note that the committees appointed to oversee improvements to the city in the 1820s were struck in response to the city's increasingly untenable living conditions. The city was not built according to some plan which symbolically reflected modern socially

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[154] Ibid.

[155] The city does have at its centre a planned park, the Maidan, in the centre of which lies Fort William, but the vast urban mass which makes up the built space of the city proper emerged without formal planning. The exclusive, colonial town buildings expressed the built spaces of wealthy European neighbourhoods (large private estates dominated by a mansion), and were surrounded by congested native hutments whose inhabitants worked as domestic servants for the mostly white-owned estates. As Pradip Sinha comments, "The European town, [part of] a highly capital-intensive and...vast global network or system,...at the level of physical planning could look to the baroque and early Victorian city of Europe as representing a life-style, oblivious of the congestion and decay behind the impressive façade." *Calcutta in Urban History* (Firma KLM: Calcutta, 1978)p.8

[156] Partha Chatterjee, "The Disciplines in Colonial Bengal" *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal* ed. P. Chaterjee (Samya: Calcutta, 1996)p.5

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redemptive values or a civilizing mission. Calcutta arose as a built space purely in response, and as an effect of, the economic imperatives of capital and commoditization. While the White Town polished a phantasmagoric veneer, which gave rise to the moniker of 'City of Palaces', behind that façade lay a "miasma" of barely tolerated congestion and slums which "were physically very close and would tend to encircle better class housing at many points."[157] It was only in response to population growth and the increasingly untenable living conditions that it was deemed necessary to provide "conservancy and improvement" in the form of limited public services. Calcutta's urban modernity thus reflects the spatial ambivalences of places like Victorian London or pre-Haussmann Paris.

Gail Ching-Liang Low argues that Kipling's other, more famous and longer treatise on Calcutta, *City of Dreadful Night*, which again eponymously echoes an earlier treatment of London, this time, John Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night*, is a deliberate "bastardised" "mimesis of the imperial city of London."[158] Although she asserts that Kipling portrays Calcutta "as a surreal and absurd imitation of London"[159], what is important for our purposes here is the recognition that the imitation Kipling ostensibly offers speaks as much to London's ambivalent modernity as it does to Calcutta's. The image Kipling presents is that of Calcutta—"a fearsome place" "damp drainage soaked soil...sick with the teeming life of a hundred years"—as the mirror to London as "megalosaurus"[160] as much as it is the literal and figurative antipode to the metropole's imperial civility. Calcutta is, Kipling writes, on the narrative's opening, as he crosses the pontoon Howrah Bridge from the railway station into the city proper, "not wholly foreign. Say rather too familiar."[161]

Although this might be apocryphal to postcolonial ears, Kipling's *City of Dreadful Night* is as much about London as about Calcutta. Kipling's account of the imperial frontier may be read as a spatialisation of return to the paradoxes and ambivalences of modernity he experienced all too often in London. We must not be too quick to castigate Kipling's reading simply in a light which holds London as the civilizational pole of the dreadful antipode. Despite his virulent paranoia, Kipling, it seems to me, had something of the wider scope of a sick, modern civilisation in his sights. Consider this lengthy passage in which the very real urban stench of Calcutta is likened to something very much closer.

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[157] Sinha (1978)p.11

[158] Gail Ching-Liang Low, *White Skins/Black Masks: Representation and Colonialism* (Routledge: London and New York, 1996)p.156

[159] Ibid.,p.157

[160] The image of London as primeval comes from Dickens' opening lines to *Bleak House*: "As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be so wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill."

[161] Rudyard Kipling, *City of Dreadful Night* [1888] in *Selected Prose and Poetry of Rudyard Kipling* ed. Rudyard Kipling (Doubleday Doran and Co.: New York, 1928)p.187.

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> [F]or diffused, soul-sickening expansiveness, the reek of Calcutta...is above pretence. There is no tracing back the Calcutta plague to any one source. It is faint, it is sickly, and it is indescribable;...*it is certainly not an Indian smell. It resembles the essence of corruption that has rotted for the second time*—the clammy odor of blue slime. And there is no escape from it. It blows across the *maidan*; it comes in gusts into the corridor of the Great Eastern Hotel; what they are pleased to call the 'Palaces of Chouringhi' carry it; it swirls around the Bengal Club;...It seems to be worst in the little lanes at the back of Lal Bazaar where the drinking shops are, but it is nearly as bad opposite Government House and in the Public Offices. The thing is intermittent. Six moderately pure mouthfuls of air may be drawn without offence. Then comes the seventh wave and the queasiness of an uncultured stomach. If you live long enough in Calcutta you grow used to it. The regular residents admit the disgrace, but their answer is: "Wait till the wind blows off the Salt Lakes where all the sewage goes, and then you'll smell something!"...Small wonder that they consider Calcutta is a fit place for a permanent Viceroy. Englishmen who can calmly extenuate one shame by another are capable of asking for anything—and expecting to get it.[162]

Fetid smell and the corruption of money and exploitation are made synonymous by Kipling in the urban space of the city. The places of European capital (mansions, hotels, clubs) are as rife with it as the real slums upon which such exploitation exercises its filthy grasp. "Why, this is London! This is the docks. This is Imperial. This is worth coming across India to see! Then a distinctly wicked idea takes possession of the mind: 'What a divine—what a heavenly place to *loot!*'"[163] Chiang-Liang Low is right to recognize that Kipling's is "a text of paranoiac misanthropy where all human subjects in Calcutta are in some way implicated in the process of misanthropy and contamination."[164] But I wonder whether Kipling's excoriating critique is one which aims to preserve a "geo-political colonial hierarchy"[165] threatened by a "stink" from which there "no escape,"[166] or, whether it is—without question xenophobic—also at the same time, deeply suspicious of any human construction? Kipling ends the first part of his modern urban ethnography amidst the derelict tombs of the infamous Park

[162] Ibid. p.188-89, emphasis added.
[163] Ibid.p.188
[164] Ching-Liang Low (1996)p.187
[165] Ibid., p.187
[166] Kipling (1888)p.188

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Street Cemetery at the centre of contemporary Calcutta. Amidst the "rotted", "blistered" and "stained" tombs, "small houses" in the "heart of utter desolation" we are left to "go about and moralize cheaply on the tombstones, trailing the robe of pious reflection up and down the pathways of the grave."[167]

A history of modernity is much more ideologically ambiguous, and allegorically resonant, when looking at Calcutta, than it is when looking at a determinately hygienic cityscape like St. Petersburg. The latter was built and directed to the social end of being a major European city, a goal it achieved in a relatively short period of time, according to Berman.

The image of history and modernity that emerges when looking at the history of Calcutta is very different, but, and this is the important part, equally modern. In analyzing a colonial cityscape as modern we are able to construct and reflect upon the ambivalences at the heart of modernity both in the colony and in the supposed centre, something, it strikes me, an over-resolute emphasis on a stereo-typed and reified image of the modern as Berman, et al. represents it is unable to do. But, we are, perhaps, getting a little ahead of ourselves.

Modernity Through Modernism

A particular image of the modern emerges when we look at the typical accounts of urban modernity. First, we note that the urban modern is, for many members of the European and American, pre-dominantly English speaking, academic community, something to be found in the stereotyped nineteenth century cities of Europe. This viewpoint is one which classifies the modern using a linear concept of undifferentiated time, and which spatializes global modernization according to a model of centrality and peripheries, with the centre being more modern than the periphery. As such, as King notes, it "assumes an industrializing context for the modern that takes no account of the colonial system of production and consumption, including the 'non-industrial' cities of Rio or Calcutta, without which the...'nineteenth century city' cannot be understood."[168] All of the above textual examples I proffer, but especially those by Frisby, Donald, Ogburn, Sharpe, Wallock, Higgonnet and Clark, evidence this temporal bias. Second, and especially with respect to Harvey and Berman, the paradigmatic experience that is urban modernity is read through a particular Eurocentric vision of city rendered outside the colonial. Moreover, and importantly, it is also one read through a high-modernist image of modernity. That is, modernity is read almost solely through the likes of Haussmann, Peter, and the ideology of the planned, rationalized environment of human control, efficiency, straight lines, clarity, transparency, light, starting anew from an empty *tabula rasa*, etc. While, of course, not incorrect, this approach evidences a

[167] Ibid. p.217-19.

[168] Anthony D. King, "Terminologies and Types: Making Sense of Some Types of Dwellings and Cities" *Ordering Space: Types in Architecture and Design* eds. Karen A. Franck and Lynda H. Schneekloth (Van Nostrand Reinhold: New York, 1994)p.141

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representational bias which inflects the imaginary notion of modernity in specific and limiting ways.

Shields warns against the extent to which representations of the city are always already internally unstable. This instability, I take it, is unavoidable. Any representation will be inherently unstable and subject to contestation. In mobilising certain social imaginaries, we need to be aware of the extent to which

> representations are souvenirs which serve to remind us of the city,...they replace or stand in for the city. Representations are treacherous metaphors, summarizing the complexity of the city in an elegant model....The city itself can be treated as a representation of the society which constructed it. For example, the spatial divisions of the city are often indicators of the fault-lines of social relations which are spatialized, extruded into the arrangements of everyday living. This 'social spatialisation' includes not only habitual practice and representations of environments, but also the spatial structuring of the social imaginary.[169]

Urban modernity, as the above discursive academic examples suggest, typically becomes theoretically demarcated, primarily, as a function of the social tensions which arise from the modernist attempt at spatial control, social and spatial ordering, mathematical rationalization, patriarchal authority, efficiency, calculated design, etc. These spatialisations attempted to embody in stone and in space what Carl Schorske terms, in his history of Viennese modernism, "a cluster of social values"[170], spaces from which the Rousseauian ideal of the modern emits. This social ideal Foucault described, echoing Bentham, as,

> ...a transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts, the dream of there no longer existing any zones of darkness, zones established by the privileges of royal power or the prerogative of some corporation, zones of disorder. It was the dream that each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society, that's men's hearts should communicate, their vision be unobstructed by obstacles, and that the opinion of all reign over each.[171]

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[169] Rob Shields, "A Guide to Urban Representation and What to Do About It: Alternative Traditions of Urban Theory" *Representing the City* ed. Anthony D. King (New York University Press: New York, 1992) pp.229-231. See also, Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin* (Routledge: London, 1991).
[170] See Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (Alfred Knopf: New York, 1980)pp.62.
[171] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Pantheon: New York, 1980)p.152

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As David Harvey[172] notes, various modern cities, urban projects and visions of planned futurity spatialize and become emblematic of these progressive Rousseauian ideals of modern community: Peter's neo-Renaissance St. Petersburg (1703), New York (post-1853), Haussmann's reshaping of Paris (1850 and 60s), Vienna's Ringstrasse (1860s), Burnham's 'White City'(1893), Ebenezer Howard's 'Garden City'(1898), Garnier's 'Linear Industrial City' (1903), Le Corbusier's 'City of Tomorrow' and 'Plan Voisin'(1924) and Frank Lloyd Wright's 'Broadacre Project'(1935). These urban visions, some built, some not, attempted to overcome the paradoxes of an unplanned modernity narrativized by the likes of Thomson, Dickens, Marx, Morris, Kipling, etc. And to a large extent they did. As Schorske says of the Viennese modernizations, some of the most successful work implemented by political liberals, was not so much the "projection of values into space and stone" but the "technical work" which made the city more accommodating to increasing populations: clean water, hospitals, public services, parks, etc.[173]

But in so doing, in becoming emblematic of the modern gesture, these and the other European cities to which they served as redemptive foils, have become closely allied with a particular representation of urban modernity in the theoretical literature, one that privileges the exercise of rationalized power and planning, and the idea of the modern as the formal response to physical inequity or chaos. This vision of the modern, and its singular, discursive emanation from selective European and North American urban spaces reifies a specific vision of human dwelling and ignores the extent to which the material exercise of modernity was also premised, as King and Shields note, solely on imperatives of consumption, exploitation, and commodification. These latter processes were materialized in supposedly "marginal", hybrid, and entirely unplanned colonial landscapes whose productive capacities were solely oriented to building the imperial metropoles of Europe but whose modernity inhered both in the production of inequity and in a selective response to it.

The overrepresentation of iconic, European urban cities, and on formal, planned spaces created as foils to the immanent antinomies of those iconic cities, characterizes the modern as a "known history, something which has *already happened elsewhere*, and which is to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise" in "a project of unoriginality."[174] This characterization of the modern is both spatial and temporal. The modern is constituted as something that happens chiefly in Europe and then which spreads geographically in an identifiable form, and in an historically, progressive, largely linear, way from the European centre to the rest of the world. It also perpetuates a monochromatic vision of the modern which neglects the extent to which the modern city is always already a hybrid production of the near and the far, predicated through a deliberate production of inequity.

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[172] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Blackwell: Oxford and New York, 1989)p.64
[173] Schorske (1980)p.25-6
[174] Meaghan Morris, "Metamorphoses at Sydney Tower" *New Formations* 11(Summer, 1990)p.10

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Fetishizing Europe's Urban Capitals of Modernity

In a sense, these over-determined sites have become "urban fetishes."[175] They are compulsively admired and held up as exemplars of modernity while occluding the material conditions of their own historical, often colonial, production. In fetishizing these supposedly iconic urban places, we often ideologically refuse the difficult modernities of the global urban present, difficulties which characterize the lives of the majority of the world's inhabitants. We need to ask ourselves why it is that we continue to find these iconic sites productive? Is it because we harbour nostalgias for the cultural modernity these cities now shelter, despite their many difficulties? Have these cities become "wish images", or commodified sites of dreamt modernity produced through an "estrangement"? Benjamin argued[176] that the more objects becomes distant, and the more they become difficult to acquire (as would seem to be the case with the cultural capitals, and hence their status as dream holiday and travel spots), the more they become wish images. He was speaking of commodities, but, of course, we can say the same of places, of cities, beaches, resorts, etc. Paris, London, Vienna, New York, Berlin, even Tokyo, are participatory commodities which embody the dream and promise of a better and happier life, even if only they are visited for short periods of edification. People are often considered 'better', 'more modern', 'sophisticated', 'cosmopolitan' or 'cultured' if they have visited such *ur*-spaces of modernity. The aura of these cities is constituted by their being distant and unattainable, and hence desirable. It is secured by their expense, their cosmopolitanism, the social prevalence of places of high culture, and, thus their inaccessibility by the vast majority of humanity. Furthermore, the centrality of these cities in the discourse of urban modernity acts to protect an ideological vision of the modern as a particular participatory or discursive purview. This fetishism, however, neglects the extent to which the urban present is, and perhaps always has been, a function of a continually reciprocating spatiotemporal flow and return of socio-spatial processes.

Cities are open sites of flux and flow.[177] They are dense networks of interwoven social and historical processes that are simultaneously human,

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[175] I borrow this term from Maria Kaïka *City of Flows* (2005)p.29, but re-contextualize its use.

[176] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass. 1995)p.181-2

[177] Deleuze and Guattari's image of the city might prove fruitful in this regard. They saw the city as a spatial network of flux, a conduit for the circulation of capital and processes of commodification. "The town exists only as a function of circulation and of circuits; it is a singular point on the circuits which create it, and which it creates. It is defined by entries and exits: something must enter and exit from it. ... It represents a threshold of deterritorialization because whatever material is involved, it must be deterritorialized enough to enter the network, to submit to polarization, to follow the circuit of urban and road recoding. The maximum deterritorialization appears in the tendency...to separate from the countryside." G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, "City-State" in *Rethinking Architecture* ed. Neil Leach (Routledge: London and New York, 1997).pp.315-16

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material, natural, economic, cultural, discursive and organic.[178] They shape the social and material conditions of those within as well as those without, near and far. Distant (from the metropoles) colonial nodes were products of a European 'urban society', as much as the metropole became a material hybrid shaped by the processes and results of commodification and exploitation at a distance. Just as looking at a single, more localised urban landscape (i.e. London) may reveal interesting insights into the flow or circulation of certain social, economic and cultural processes, so looking at modern cities as functions of a larger process of urbanisation or constellation of colonialism, reveals insights about the hybrid production of modern space as fundamentally a process of commodification, instrumentality, technology, capital investment and institutional changes. Indeed, in doing so, the limited dualism of 'centre' and 'periphery' appears to break down and give way, a la Deleuze and Guattari, to a nodal, rhizomatic image of consumptive totalization, one that represents global urbanisation less as a planned force and rather as a contingent, fitful process of exploitation and hybridization.

This process of totalization, which today is reaching its saturation as global urbanization, was often effected in highly haphazard ways with little thought to improving the human condition of the colonized through modern, rationalized means. European colonial endeavours were neither altruistic nor beneficent, and were oriented, at least in the beginning, not to improving the lot of all men through symbolic urban edifices erected as ideals of civilization, but simply to building material wealth back home in Europe. As Ross and Teljkamp write, "[C]ities were superfluous to the purposes of colonists. The Europeans who founded empires outside their continent were primarily concerned with extracting products which they could not acquire within Europe."[179] British imperial success (using wealth and subsequent power as indicators of success) on the South Asian sub-continent has been attributed precisely to its refusal to engage in improvement schemes[180], and by limiting its colonial purview to making money through the expansion of its commodity markets. And, as is well known, the colonized landscape and people were produced as Other, often thought of as less than human, and deliberately exoticized, social practices which went some way, at least in the beginning, to legitimating the single minded pursuit of private and state sanctioned wealth procurement in the form of exploitative surplus extraction.

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[178] Kaïka (2005)p.22

[179] Robert Ross and Gerhard J. Telkamp eds., "Introduction", *Colonial Cities: Essays on Urbanism in a Colonial Context* (Martinus Hijhoff: Dordrecht, 1985)p.1.

[180] See Metcalf and Metcalf (2000)p.46. These authors suggest that the colonial competitors to the British on the sub-continent—the French, Dutch and Portuguese—failed to secure hegemonic economic and social power because they arrogated to themselves the capacity to enlighten the "natives" with Christianity. It is important to note this improvement to the natives' well-being was premised under the guise of religion rather than that of social modernization. Prior to the 1820s and 30s the British made little attempt to convert the "heathens", and as William Dalrymple (2003) has shown, often celebrated their ability to curry favour—no pun intended—by hybridizing themselves.

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It is worth considering that colonial cities were often merely conduits for a larger, more significant, expropriation process. Economic wealth came from the countrysides of colonized landscapes, with cities acting as functional nodes—usually situated next to ports—for the efficient funnelling of newly commoditized wealth back to Europe. Colonial cities were thus singular facets of a larger instrumental process of commoditization and industry. "[C]ities were...necessary evils, as they were parasites on the rural producers, competing with the colonists in the process of surplus extraction."[181] Colonial cities were unequivocally important functional centres, but they were so only as parts of a larger, modern, socio-economic process of urbanization. They were, if you will, staging points for a larger metropolitan society—in Simmel's words, a 'money economy'—whose institutions, forms of government, science, language, etc., transformed 'traditional' landscapes into 'modern' ones.[182] Cities are but one part (perhaps the most important part, but still only a part) of a larger process of modernity: urbanization. And nowhere was this more evident than in the tripartite dynamic between colonial landscapes, colonial cities and imperial metropoles.

Limiting the representational and theoretical registers of urban modernity to both the symbolic tropes of high modernism or Haussmannization, and to the socio-cultural lexicons of select, prototyped European and American centres, constrains the extent to which the modern may be thought of as always already a multiplicitous production of spatial and cultural inflections marked thoroughly by the cultural spatialisations of consumption. It is too bad that few, including Berman or Harvey, have taken up the challenge of seeking out the multiplicities of urban modernity beyond the relatively safe, and admittedly often delightful, representational confines of the usual Eurocentric suspects (Paris, London, Berlin, New York), to investigate the rhetoric and global practices of contemporary and historical urban modernity.

Before I move into exploring Calcutta as a cityscape of urban modernity which might challenge the representational limitations of modernity as a largely European phenomenon, one of those places that Berman introduces through the possibilities set up in his examination of St. Petersburg—possibilities he himself ignores in favour of a New York epilogue—let us first turn our attention to the question of why it is that theoretical investigations of urban modernity largely refuse or ignore spaces outside streets more familiarly trodden.

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[181] Ross and Telkamp (1985)p.1
[182] Anthony D. King, "Colonial Cities: Global Pivots of Change" in Ross and Telkamp (1985) p.13.

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Seeking Shelter From Pandora

Ah! How big the world is by lamplight,
But how small in the eyes of memory.

—Charles Baudelaire, "Le Voyage", quoted by Benjamin in
"The Great Art of Making Things Seem Closer Together"

We have seen, briefly, that the history and experience of modernity has continued to be written through the cityscapes and social imaginaries of European capitals. The face of urban modernity as exemplified by Paris, Berlin, Vienna and London is augmented in the social theory of modernity by the inclusion of New York and Los Angeles, although the latter is often described as the quintessential "post-modern" cityscape.[183] As Anthony King writes, given modernity's invariable spatial identification with Europe and North America,

> [i]t follows, therefore, that postmodernity operates with the same geographical restrictions, whether in terms of the Eurocentric intellectual sources on which it draws, the phenomena it purports to explain, or the areas of the world to which it supposedly relates.[184]

Of the twenty cities identified by the United Nations in 2004 as dealing most intensely with the contemporary effects of global modernisation (urbanisation, population growth and metropolitan intensification, industrialisation, nationalisation, and economic and territorial imperialism) only two are cities commonly addressed in the socio-theoretical literature on urban modernity: New York and Los Angeles. Moscow is the only city in the top twenty which might qualify as European, and even then, peripherally so as Berman reminds us. Thirteen of the UN's twenty most populous and modernizing cities are located in countries now dealing with the aftermaths of modern imperial colonialism. The social and cultural effects of modernity, as Marx was keen to remind us, lest we perpetually seem to forget, were not isolated to the urban centres of Europe. Indeed, these European urban centres were dependent on the imperial and colonialist expansion of modernity and commoditization into all facets of the internal and external world.

Why then this apparent continual over-determination of modern European cities as paradigmatic sites of urban modernity, when this modernity is itself premised on a larger process of metropolitan society or urbanization? What might account for the under-representation by contemporary social theory of cities outside Europe and North America, places which are dealing, in intense and

[183] See Edward W. Soja's *Third Space* (1996) and Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* (1992).
[184] Anthony D. King, "The Times and Spaces of Modernity (or Who Needs Postmodernism?)" *Global Modernities* eds. M. Featherstone, S. Lash, and Roland Robertson (London: Sage, 1995)p.110

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disparate ways with the heterogenies, effects and legacies of colonial urban modernization? Why do we forget, at the light of a desk, how close far away places really are. Perhaps because we have never been; perhaps because they are not a part of our phenomenal past, our living, and thus felt, memories.

We have, previously, been somewhat glib in speculating that contemporary social theorists of modernity and urban history are inclined to comfort and therefore, less inclined to the discomforts of urban ethnography outside of Occidental metropoles. Paris, London, Vienna, Berlin and New York are, for middle-class intellectuals, for the most part, comfortable fetish places for academic work and research. These cities are suitably famous as cultural and socio-historical centres. Their modernity is as much a function of their industrial environs and the resultant comforts or improvements in everyday life, as it is (if not more so) in the number and prominence of their art galleries, museums, archives, universities, libraries, theatres, concert halls, fashion houses, publishing houses, notable buildings, fine restaurants, and internationalised diversities associated with these places – in short, places of modern cultural capital. Western educated people are inclined to travel to these urban centres of culture for research, pleasure and edification, and for the reassurance and honing of their identity as participants in dominant historical narratives of modernization and progress. We like to go there because we feel good about ourselves when we do.

Yet, there is something more to this incrimination than the glib—and easy—charge of comfort seeking. Representing the modern through the usual urban suspects assumes, and perpetuates, the idea that we build our modern social institutions, of which the great modern cities shelter the best examples—and hence attract our repeated attention—on dry land. It assumes that we can rely on the continuation of these centres for securing something permanent for the future of a social imaginary. The shipwreck[185] that is urban modernity in other parts of the globe (Calcutta, Lagos, Rio, São Paolo, Palestine, Haiti, Durban, Liberia, etc...) can be viewed from the relatively safe theoretical shores of those places (Paris, London, New York) which offer, in their social or cultural depths, reassurances and repose, the resources—the planks—from which we can best hope to resurrect the voyage—*qua* project of modernity—elsewhere.

Just as the question of literary form is also a moral question, so the question of spatial position is also a question of subject position; it raises the question of what a theoretical perspective on the world, spoken and spectated (the Greek word *theoría* derives from *theoros*, 'spectator') largely and repeatedly from the same urban spaces, entails. Hans Blumenberg, that forgotten moralist of modern history, uses the metaphor of the shipwreck in his small book[186] to raise some troubling questions of the work of a theoretical life.[187] He begins with an epigraph from Pascal, resurrected by Nietzsche, to remind us that *vous êtes embarqué*, we are already at sea. There is no shore. We are already awash on the

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[185] Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, trans. Steven Rendall (MIT Press: Boston, 1997)
[186] Ibid., p.2
[187] How is it that small books seem to raise the most troubling questions?

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seas of modernity, on the seas of being *human*, as Pascal cautions us. There is no dry land, no security, no 'unwreckable' ship. The modern characterizes Paris as much as it does Lagos or Calcutta, and vice versa. There is no safe shore, as perhaps we might have been safer in deluding ourselves in the 18th, but to a lesser extent, the 19th centuries.

Today, from horizon to horizon there is only debris. Clinging to the safety of the modern by representing its social spatialisation or social imaginary through a rather limited set of spatial paradigms dupes us into thinking that we can continue to speak from the theoretically unassailable security of some dry land. In a recent essay on the contemporary urban symptoms of modern fear in the face of what 'progress' has today engendered, "...the threat of a relentless and inescapable change that augers no peace and respite but continuous crisis and strain," Bauman argues that we need to speak from the "frontline of contemporary modernization battles."[188] These vanguard spaces are not, according to Bauman, cities like London and New York, but, he argues, places like Kinshasa, Abidjan, Chongling, Pune, Ahmadabad, places that in a few years will be home to two thirds of the human population.[189] Emphasizing cultural and social modernity from afar, from one of those urban disasters that is stereotyped as a shipwreck, problematizes a social urban environment which is lax in recognizing that the "Third World" is as at home in the contemporary urban landscape of Paris and London, as the "First World" is at home in the IT business parks and malls of Third World cityscapes. As Anthony King emphasizes, the contemporary social situations that "modern cities" face today demand that we reassess the "operational utility"[190] of the cities typically resurrected under the continual return to the representational models of the modern "nineteenth century city."

> The internationalization of major "western cities"(e.g. New York, London, Paris, Berlin) in the last two decades has seriously undermined earlier models of these cities. Similarly, in so-called "Third World"...cities, it is likely that there are as many "modern," "First World," "western," or "post-industrial" sectors as there are "traditional," "third world," "eastern," "pre-industrial,"...parts in contemporary "western" cities.[191]

I would go one step further than King and argue that this phenomenon of internationalization is not restricted to the events of the last, now, thirty years; although, it has, of course, as Edward Said notes, intensified. "Immigration and exile constitute one of the marks of our era. Never before have so many people

[188] Zygmunt Bauman, "Seeking Shelter in Pandora's Box, or: Fear, Security and the City" *City* Vol.9, No.2 (July) 2005 p.161
[189] Ibid. p.162
[190] King (1994)p.141
[191] Ibid.,p.141-42

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travelled across boundaries, never before have so many individuals on a mass scale immigrated, left their homes, found their place elsewhere, as in our era."[192] Major western cities closely attached to modern colonial apparatuses of power, as New York, Paris, London and Berlin all were, were always already internationalized by mobility in intricate and reciprocating ways. The dialogical poles of Occident and Orient are reified simplifications which the over-determination of spaces of modernity through the landscapes and cultural memory of European urban centrality perpetuates. The implication is that we need to reassess just what we, as so-called Westerners, take modernity to mean. As Pieterse explains,

> Western culture is neither what it seems nor what Westerners tend to think it is. What passes for Occidental culture is to a significant degree a collective human heritage: an Occidental synthesis of elements form other cultures. The fact that it is an Occidental synthesis means that it is a synthesis governed by the endogenous dynamics, interests, and perceptions of Western societies; the fact that it is heterogeneous means that there are multiple points of contact with other cultures. In the long stretch of history, this implies the irony that the West's 'civilizing mission' also consisted of reexporting cultural traits to the non-Western world which had been imported from them at an earlier stage.[193]

Thinking from the margins does not seek to bring the periphery into the centre, although often that is how it seems to be understood. Thinking from the margins attempts to ask questions of the processes which seek to resurrect, protect and shelter a centering. As Pascal reminds us through Neitzsche and Blumenberg and Derrida and Cavafy and Bauman and Benjamin and a host of others, there is no centre from which we can safely speculate.

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Modernism Constructs Modernity

But, there is more to explaining the critical omission of non-Western places of modernity. More needs to be said in accounting for this critical exclusion or absence of urban colonies as spaces of modernity. The question persists: why is urban modernity "...invariably defined only in relation to Europe and the USA, and not within the world system as a whole?"[194] Are the cityscapes of Lagos, Mombasa, Kolkata, Mexico City, Shanghai, Saigon, etc. less modern than those of Paris, Berlin and London? One further reason for the Eurocentric over-

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[192] As quoted in Pieterse (1989)p.373-4
[193] Ibid.
[194] King (1995)p.110

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determination by contemporary social theories of urban modernity might lie in the manner by which modern*ism* constructs modern*ity*.

The question of more or less modern arises from a relatively restrictive notion of what constitutes the modern, one that depends on a temporal definition of the term, and which binds it in a rather restrictive teleology to a less than malleable or shifting present, one that enfeebles the notion's critical force or usefulness. As King explains,

> ...because 'modern' and 'modernity,' understood to mean 'as of the present', are neither temporally nor geographically grounded, because they float in space, they are *empty of meaning* and hence *irrelevant* for either description or analysis...a phrase such as 'the modern city' applies equally to Kabul, New York or Varanasi.[195]

Yet, we mobilise the terms 'modern' and 'modernity' in prescriptive as well as in descriptive ways. Judgements are constantly made about whether one space is modern or not, and indeed, the label of 'modern city' is exercised in a normative manner to demarcate either legitimate participation in an ostensibly global project, or non-legitimate participation in a global project.

Critical theories of modernity have long held the fundamental assumption, at a general, abstract level, that modernity is characterized by an epochal attack on so-called "tradition" by individual, human subjects imbued with the justifications of universal, human reason.[196] It is thus an exercise of power. As Mark Elvin suggests, modernity is largely a complex realized with three central concerns or relations of power: a) power over other human beings; b) practical power over nature in terms of the capacity for economic production; and c) intellectual power over nature in the form of the capacity for prediction.[197] We might also add that modernity arrogates to itself the power, under the auspices of imperialism, to construct grids of intelligibility and understanding in terms of which knowledge is prescribed as legitimate; in other words, the power to name, classify and categorize.[198]

In his definition of modernity, Elvin echoes another useful characterization of this most vexing of concepts, which Kathleen Wilson takes up. Kathleen Wilson argues the need to theorise modernity in more effective ways by focusing on the relational quality of its ascription, something Elvin characterized as fundamental. She writes, like Elvin, that,

> [M]odernity need not be seen as *one* particular moment, whose 'origins' and characteristics can be identified with

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[195] Ibid., emphasis added.
[196] Joel S, Kahn, *Modernity and Exclusion* (Sage: London, 2001)p.8
[197] Mark Elvin, "A Working Definition of 'Modernity'?" *Past and Present*, No. 113, November (1986) p.210
[198] King (1994)

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> certainty and mapped onto a specific temporality.... Modernity in this sense is not one moment or age, but a set of relations that are constantly being made and remade, contested and reconfigured, that nonetheless produce among their contemporaneous witnesses the conviction of historical *difference.* Such conceptualisation opens up whole new grounds for theorising and understanding our histories without denying the specificity of a period's configurations...[199]

Perhaps from the time of Benjamin's reflexive theorizing and Nietzsche's perspectivism, the modern needed to be understood through its relational embeddedness in particular cultural and social circumstances. As such, what was important was not so much the characterization of the monolithic modernity, but the multiplicities of modernities and the multiplicity of approaches to the modern afforded within the landscape of the contemporary urban environment: Austrian modernity, Parisian modernity, New York modernity, Berliner modernity. And, within those, the kaleidoscope of modern experiences produced by particular national and urban environments exercised in consort with relational, social forces of rationalization, science, democratization, etc. So, not only were there identified particular national or urban subjects, but multiple subjects within these broader environments.

And furthermore, the environment and the perspective became matters as much of production by the viewer, as they were simply of supposedly passive observation. Modernism became as much about the process of looking as about the object being looked at. Situating the subject within the maelstrom of specific modern environments became a matter not only directed to that of the texts (literary, urban, artistic) under scrutiny, but also a matter of reflexive concern on the part of the analysts. Observers needed to recognize that they were just as bound up in contexts as were the modern objects of their enquiries.[200] As a result, analysts, critiques and social observers needed their writing and representation to reflect, in an intertextual and situational manner, the reflexive gaze doing the observing, and thus producing, the object.

The framework for this reflexive production and self-reflective representation had its origins in the artistic movements of Europe and North America during the period roughly between the early 1880s and the onset of the second world war. To this broad ranging cultural movement, what Robert Hughes describes as "one of the supreme cultural experiments in the history of the world,"[201] we ascribe, in the humanities and social sciences, the moniker "modernism."

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[199] Kathleen Wilson, "Citizenship, Empire and Modernity in the English Provinces, c.1720-1790" *Eighteenth Century Studies* Vol. 29, 1995 pp. 69-96

[200] Kahn (2001)p.8

[201] Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1991)p.9

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"Modernism" is typically used to refer to an aesthetic sensibility and movement within literature, the visual arts, music and architecture, which attempts to capture the experience and sensibility of living through the complex epochal social changes and novel environments produced by the exercise of ostensibly rationally legitimated power: power over others, power over nature, powers of prediction, and powers of epistemic legitimacy. Of course, within the modernity, these powers were characterized by such objective social processes as industrialization, urbanization, wage labour, mechanization, standardization, mass production, technologically advanced warfare, increased mobility, secularism, the dominance of the public sphere, etc.; in short, the constellation of social and cultural effects by which we understand the shift from the "traditional" to the "modern", that, as Charles Taylor says, "historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality), and new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution."[202]

Artistic modernism, whether literary or visual, had, at its core, the attempt to capture and represent the subjective experience of living under these rationally empowering and disempowering processes, within a modern environment complete with its intensities of cultural friction and the constant experience of the new, the contingent, the fleeting and the ephemeral. The iconic literary works of, amongst others, Joyce, Woolf, Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Stein, James, Barnes, Williams, Baudelaire, Aragon, Breton, Brecht, Beckett, Mann, Hofmannstahl, Musil, Nietzsche, Proust, Kafka, Breton attempted to capture something of the fragmentary, alienating, and liberatory, yet ultimately, agonal struggle of modern human beings within a world more than ever under human control, but far less secure than the grand narratives of the modern had promised. If the fragmentary, associative and juxtapositional character of modern literary representation attempted to characterize the subjective experience of modernity in letter, so the visual arts followed similar aesthetic suit in paint, colour and form. Hence, amongst countless others, he likes of Manet, Matisse, Braque, Duchamp, Ernst, Seurat, Klimt, Mondrian, Cezanne, Picasso, Legér, Vertov, Eisenstein, Lang, Ruttman and Epstein—all of whom attempted to portray the splendour and destruction of "the contemporary earth as no-one who has ever seen it."[203] In the aural realm, echoing at the time with the regularities of the machine, the clock, steam and the automobile, the works of such modernist composers as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Berg, Mahler, Berlioz, and Ravel suggested themselves as disjunctive soundtracks to the visual and literary experiments with experience. 'No-one had ever seen it' because Modernism attempted to represent subjective experience within a style which supposed "the shock, the violation of expected continuities,

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[202] Charles Taylor, "Modern Social Imaginaries," *Public Culture* No. 14 (2002)p.91
[203] Gertrude Stein as quoted in Hughes (1991)p.56

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the element of de-creation and crisis."[204] As an experimental style and form, modernism, as Gertrude Stein put it, was the only "composition appropriate to the new composition in which we live, the new dispositions of space and time."[205]

This representational strategy was not simply a mimetic one. Fundamental to much that became the aesthetic and rhetoric of modernism was a critique of "the modernity of our industrial society and its major ideologies."[206] Modernism was very much torn between those who, like the futurists, celebrated the coming of the machine and what it represented for humankind, and those who—quite frankly, the majority—like the Dadaists, the constructivists and the surrealists, questioned an uncritical positivist avowal of urbanisation, industrialisation and mechanisation. As J.G.A. Pocock remarks, "to be modern is to quarrel with modernity."[207] Which is precisely what Kant meant by his enlightenment proscription to submit everything to the reflexivity of critique.

But, at the same time that the literary, visual, and musical arts attempted to capture and resist the subjective experience of the modern, the self-referentiality and self-consciousness of those experimental and representational techniques also began to become a central focus of the creative and analytical process. Art turned in on itself by foregrounding formal and syntactic representational techniques and strategies. Reality, and more fundamentally, the experience of reality, was understood as an interactive or participatory relationship in which the viewer constructed, as much as was constructed by, the world. Modernist representations of the world tried to capture this process which was always already dynamic. "[R]eality includes the painter's efforts to perceive it. Both the viewer and the view are part of the same field. Reality, in short, is interaction."[208]

The location for this innovative representation of the interactive experience of the new world was specific. Modernism was above all an art and experience of cities. "The master-image of [the] modern...was no longer landscape but the metropolis."[209] And due to the rise and influence of the machine as an everyday part of experience, the industrial city was the place through which the conscious experience, now urban, of the modern manifested itself. Large European and North American cities became magnets which drew the still largely rural populous to the new experience of the machine age. They began to isolate

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[204] Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, "The Name and Nature of Modernism" *Modernism: 1890-1930* eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Penguin: New York and London, 1991)p.24

[205] Ibid., p.23

[206] Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977)p.263, as quoted in Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2005)p.123.

[207] J.G.A Pocock, "Modernity and Anti-modernity in the Anglophone Political Tradition" in S.N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Patterns of Modernity, Volume 1: The West I* (Frances Pinter: London, 1987)p.57. Scott Lash characterizes this agonism at the root of the modern attitude as the constitutive tension and uncertainty of a constant reflexivity. See his *Another Modernity, a Different Rationality* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1999).

[208] Hughes (1991)p.17

[209] Ibid.,p.12

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themselves as nodes or "cotter-pins" for isolating the experiences associated with the imaginaries of the new. "When we think of modernism we cannot avoid thinking of ... urban climates—Berlin, Vienna, Moscow, St. Petersburg, London, Zurich, Prague, New York, Chicago and Paris."[210] These cities were generative environments for the tensions, shocks and paradoxes of liberty and threat that characterized the compositional styles of modernism, and the wider socio-cultural experiences of industrialism, technology, speed, individualism and heterogeneity .

Indeed, the city became a metaphor, rather than a specific place (although it was always that too), for the experience of modernism. The city as idea, sign and referent found its way onto the compositional surface,[211] and so reflected an intermediated subjective experience—'the environment of personal consciousness and flickering impressions'—of an increasingly and overwhelmingly technological world,

> "[t]he cultural chaos bred by the populous, ever-growing city, a contingent and polyglot Tower of Babel, is enacted in similar chaos, contingency and plurality in the texts of modern writing, the design and form of Modernist painting"[212]

Modernism identified the environment of the technologically advanced industrial city and reflected the similarly juxtapositional character of its representational texts and experiences. It attempted to encapsulate the experience of modernity through both the objective immersion in a hostile and alienating environment, and through the recognition that the viewer and her reception was structured by that environment. Nevertheless, the environment was a fairly limited one, despite the fact that the machine-world of development dreamed to spread its influence to all corners of the globe.[213]

What we now classify as "modernism" was a social and cultural movement almost exclusively centred around a handful of European and American cities, as citied by Bradbury: Paris, London, Vienna, Berlin, New York. Modernism is not typically located in the far flung urban colonial reaches of Calcutta or Buenos

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[210] Malcolm Bradbury, "The Cities of Modernism" *Modernism: 1890-1930* eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Penguin: New York and London, 1991)p. 96.

[211] Think of Fernand Léger's rather pleasant 1919 painting, *The City*; Boccioni's ecstatic *The City Rises* from 1910; or, more mordantly, Georges Braque's frustrating *Soda* (1911), George Grosz's disenchanted, *The Big City* (1916) or his anomie soaked *Republican Automatons* (1920); and, Franz Marc's blood soaked, *The Fate of the Animals*, 1913. An anxious urban dream world was captured in Giorgio de Chirico's cityscapes, like that of *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914) or *Gare Montparnasse(The Melancholy of Departure)* (1914); and, Chagall's somewhat romantic visions are tempered with a worried cubism derived from his visits to Paris, as pictured in *I and the Village* (1911). Of course, books upon books upon museums can be filled with modernist works whose inflections are urban. So integral are the inter-relationships of modernism and the city that it is an almost always already redundant relation to re-iterate or belabour. It is now, as Hughes notes, "cliché"(1991:11).

[212] Ibid. p. 98-99

[213] Think of Vladimir Tatlin's, *Monument to the Third International* (1919).

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Aries; or, if it is, as is the case, perhaps, with the Mexican muralists Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, and the fantastical figurative work of Frida Khalo, it is certainly subordinated, to a large degree, to dominant "modernist traditions" centred around the European culture citadels, which, as in the case of Paris, acted as "cultural centres."[214] Indeed, when aesthetic and compositional strategies are recognized as products of colonial cultural infusion and admixture as in the well known "*l'art negre*" influences on such early modernists as Braque, Matisse and Picasso, these collaged vocabularies are rendered and interpreted as expressive of *metropolitan* admixture, power and novelty, rather than as symptomatic of modernity at a distance from the culture citadels. The subjectivity which it attempts to represent was typically that of the Parisian or the Londoner, not of the colonial subject at a remove in far away Calcutta or Saigon. In other words, the colonial subject is appropriated under, and for the temporal rubric and experiential vocabularies of, epochal, European urban modernism.

The words "modernism" and "modernist" are used to identify an artistic and literary compositional strategy which attempts to put modern subjectivity at the core of our understanding of what it means to live in the present. Those critical and analytical approaches which attempt to do the same thing, which attempt to foreground subjective experience in the reflexive strategy of representing a more honest and contextualized position of speaking about *modernity* naturally gravitate to the already extant vocabularies, syntax and imageries of subjective modernism. As a result, they are inevitably drawn to the iconic social spatialisations of modernism, I.e. European cities, which located themselves as the analogous spatial forms and places of temporal modernist experience.

These cities have become, in the academic literature, historically inseparable from the modern imaginaries by which we conceptualize historical modernism. They become the stereotypical spaces in terms of which theoretical reflection on the meaning and experience of urban modernity is engaged, and due to their historical richness and diversity, they are returned to over and over as places where the experience of being modern is most acutely felt. Modernity, "the experience of being modern"[215] is, thus, produced through the historical and representational frames of European modernism. As Kahn asserts,

> Modernity...cannot now in any simple sense be said to pre-exist modernism. Modernism constructs modernity as much as modernity provides the conditions for modernism's emergence. Modernity can never be unambiguously defined except in the context of how it is

[214] Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire and Emancipation* (Verso: London, 1992)p.371-3; and, Hughes (1991)pp.20-1
[215] John Jervis, *Exploring the Modern* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1998)p.7

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> constructed in an ambivalent or interrogating modernism.[216]

Reading modernity through the social spatialisations of representational modernism limits the collective social memory and cultural scope of accounting for the experience of global urban modernity. Two recent social theorists frame the need for an account which disrupts this typically "occidental prejudice."[217]

Fuyuki Kurasawa writes that,

> "Western social theory cannot afford to provincially close in on itself, either by exclusively focusing on what is nearby and commonplace, or by generating ahistorical and acultural models of social life based on what is observed from within its own socio-cultural horizons."[218]

Kurasawa employs the term "ethnological imagination" to investigate a diverse tradition of philosophical critique which has nourished, from Rousseau through Foucault, a critical hermeneutics of modernity. This imagination "insists on the importance of enlarging horizons in order to engage with, to be open to the provocation of, and to learn from other ways of being and thinking in the world."[219] Rather than exoticizing a periphery, and thereby difference, the 'ethnological imagination' seeks to foreground how analyses of the modern West have been made possible by way of non-Western realities.[220] It aims to produce what Louis Dumont calls an "anthropology of modernity" by critically examining its socio-historical formations from a comparative distance. [221] Despite arguing that a varied and incisive tradition of cross-cultural critique has been "always already present"[222] within the modern European discursive tradition, Kurasawa suggests that "Western social theorists have for the most part been blind to the spirit of radical interrogation engendered by cross-cultural encounter."[223] He argues that a "retreat of Euro-American social theorists *to their own settings* is taking place at the very moment when, in the shadows of globalization, cross-cultural reflection is most urgently needed."[224] What is needed, he asserts, is an enlargening of our imaginative and real horizons to counter the seeming uni-

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[216] Kahn (2001)p.11

[217] "Our valuation of the historical may only be an occidental prejudice." Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" *Untimely Meditations* trans. R. Hollingsdale (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1983)p.66

[218] Fuyuki Kurasawa, *The Ethnological Imagination: A Cross Cultural Critique of Modernity* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis and London, 2004)p.174

[219] Ibid., p.175

[220] Ibid., p.10

[221] Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1986)p.8; see Kurasawa, p.13

[222] Kurasawa (2004)p.13

[223] Ibid.,p.12

[224] Ibid.,p10; emphasis added.

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dimensional naturalness and universality of a history whose progress goes largely untroubled by a popular culture and social imaginary intent on perpetuating the myth of its success precisely by nostalgically returning over and over again to its own settings, or the belief in a dry land.

This process is not only about landscapes or settings but also about *who* does the speaking.[225] As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes in *Provincializing Europe* that "equating a certain version of Europe with 'modernity' is not the work of Europeans alone."[226] In order to disrupt the process which produces this "imaginary entity"[227] we need to recognize, for Chakrabarty, that "Europe's acquisition of the adjective 'modern' for itself is an integral part of the story of European imperialism within global history."[228]

I read what Kurasawa identifies as the geographic myopias of contemporary Western social theory as perpetuating this imperialist reading of history. The landscape of modernity is very much greater than Europe, as are the implications for a global process of totalization which is perhaps appropriately reaching its apocalyptic wish-fulfillment. As Chakrabarty notes, the spaces outside Europe are internal to a history of modernity: "third-world nationalisms, as modernizing ideologies par excellence, have been equal partners in the process."[229] The result is that we need to write from a distance the "ambivalences, contradictions,...tragedies and ironies that attend" the necessary entanglements that make up the history of modernity.[230] As Mary Louise Pratt argues, "[i]t is possible...to look out at Europe from the imperial frontier [where] genealogies for Enlightenment processes of standardization, bureaucracy, and normalization then come into view."[231] The repeated parochial Eurocentrisms of contemporary urban theory can only be addressed when we expand the horizon of modernity beyond the repeated Western appropriations of that safe conceit to itself.

Calcutta is one amongst many places along the Imperial frontier previously untheorized or under-represented in the reflexive story of modernity. It sits at a unique historical juncture of North and South, West and Non-West, past and future. It is an urban space which, from the beginning, evidences a complex, modern cultural plurality, a space whose heterogeneous and difficult responses within, and to, Europe troubles not only the place and experience of the modern, but reflexively the very notion of a global modernity and progress.

In a now infamous claim, Geoffrey Moorehouse wrote in his bestselling and still published account, *Calcutta: The City Revealed*, that no visitor from the West

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[225] Of course, I recognize the irony of this emphasis. This too is, again, a part of "European work."
[226] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2001)p.43
[227] Ibid.
[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Ibid.
[231] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge: London and New York, 1992)p.36

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could tolerate the city for more than two days.[232] Perhaps because staying longer than two days says more about where that Westerner comes from than about the space of Calcutta itself. If there is one thing that the long histories of globalisation, colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, development, nationalism, urbanisation, and the even longer histories of modernity reveal, it is that we, as western—and now western-izing—subjects, don't like to face our own personal complicities in the production of knowledge protocols which attempt to preserve the exclusivity and imperviousness of certain discursive and domestic terrains.

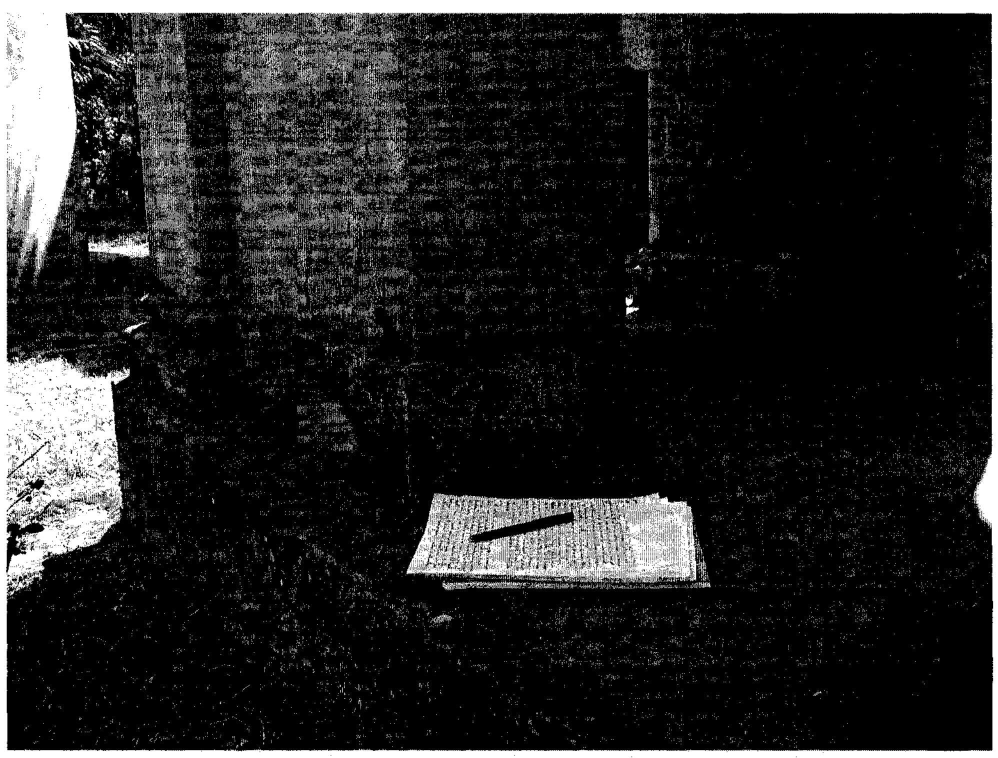

Figure 3.1: Field Notes on a Monument inside the Park Street Cemetery. March 2003. Photo by Author.

[232] Geoffrey Moorehouse, *Calcutta: The City Revealed* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1971)p.340

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Part III: Return to the New City

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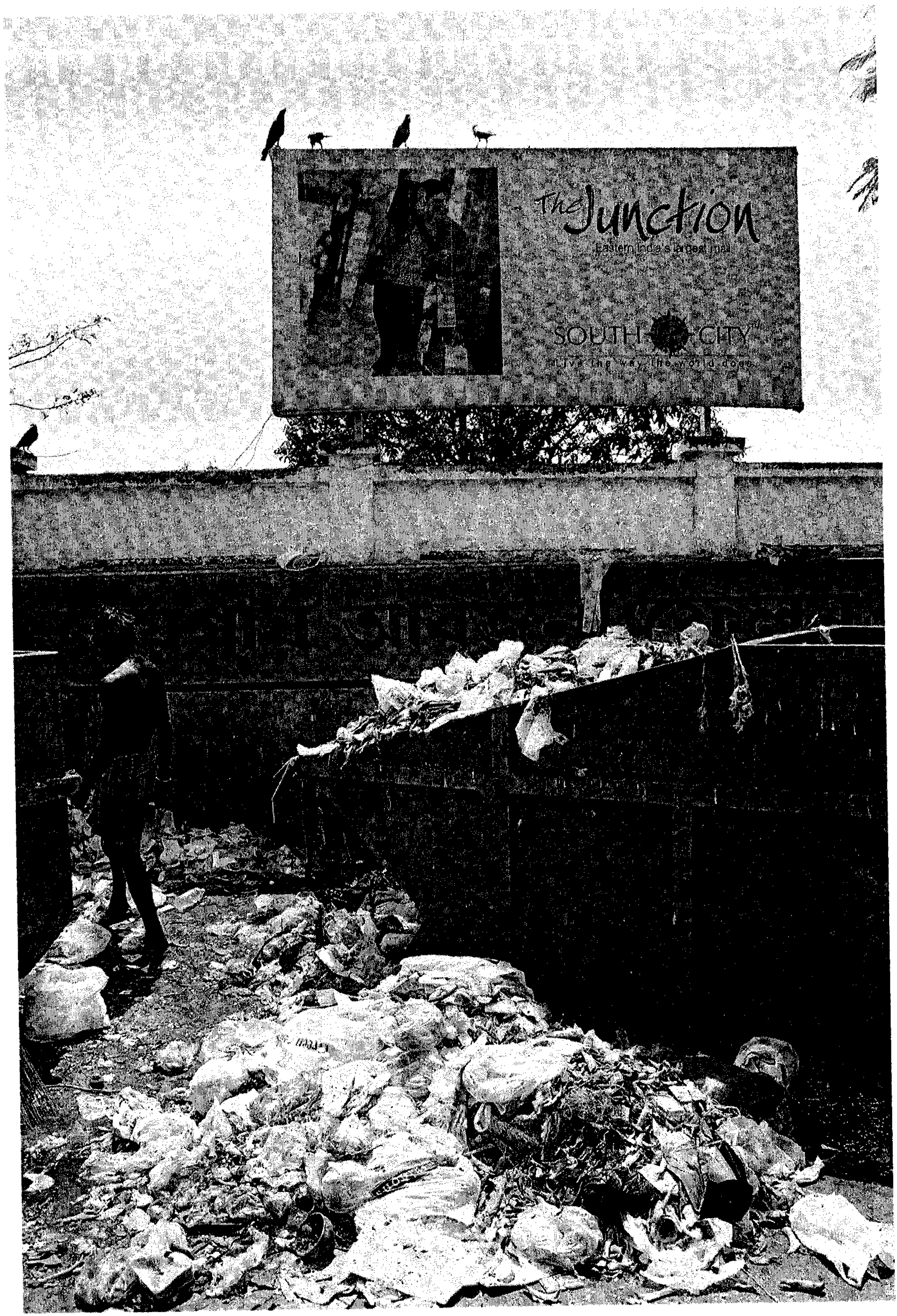

Plate 3: Outside the Gates to South City, January 2004. Photo by Author.

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Figure 4.1: Detail from Outside the Gates to South City, January 2004. Photo by Author.

"History is re-written" at 375 Prince Anwar Shah Road.[1] The location for a new city – a small city – but a "new city" none-the-less, 375 Prince Anwar Shah Road situates 31.14 acres (1,885 *kattahs*[2] as the advertisements proudly nationalize) behind walls. In the process of being built, South City promises "the world" to its future dwellers. "Live the Way the World Does" proclaim the oversized billboards. Living the way the world does means: four 35 story residential towers ("Eastern India has never seen buildings as high as these"), a supermarket, a "world-class" multi-facility club, "modern schools," an "international standard mall"("you could say it is Singapore"), a cinema multiplex, a food court, entertainment, India's "biggest urban swimming pool" and, that elusive necessity for city life, "serenity" in the form of "a natural wonderland spanning 24 acres of open area and greenery with a cascading waterfall, waterbodies and a hillock" ("you could feel that you're in Scotland").[3]

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[1] "Landmarks are made. History is re-written. South City Projects (Kolkata) Ltd. is one of its [sic] kind." These are the opening lines to the advertising, promotional and sales website for the South City Projects Ltd. new development, South City, in the south of Kolkata, West Bengal, India. See Home Page. 16 September 2005. 16 September 2005< http://www.southcityprojects.com/index.htm>.

[2] A *kattah* is a traditional, Bengali measurement of land equalling roughly 3600 square feet.

[3] The exclamatory "worlding" quotes are from advertising features for South City in *The Telegraph* Saturday 26 April 2003, and Sunday, 29 February 2004, Section A, p.16.

I employ "worlding" here following Heidegger's understanding of modern humans uniquely making or producing their own *Weltbild* or 'world-picture.' Heidegger argues that modern man conceives of him/herself in relation to the world (*Weltanschauung*) through picturing externality, and thus produces him/herself as a subject within an imaginary world community. "The world's becoming a picture is one and the same process as man's becoming a subjectum among beings." See Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture" in *The Question Concerning Technology and other essays* trans. W. Levitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) p.132. Modern man is unique, for Heidegger, because he/she positions him/herself with respect to the world in terms of an imaginative, 'resourceful'

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Everything the modern middle-class dream might wish for: technology, efficiency, cosmopolitanism, "revolution"[4], luxury, comfort, peace, nature, security – all amidst an exciting backdrop: the "hustle and bustle" of an already extant city, Calcutta.

More than simply a backdrop, Calcutta surrounds the new South City. In fact, South City is not a city at all. It is a glorified condominium development. But the development invokes a promissory imagery which reifies the idea of city (and country) in an idealized imaginary which speaks volumes about the perceived failures of past and present. Hence the professed necessity to rewrite history, anew, as though history is a linear project, and as though it is not always already in a process of re-writing itself.

Today, South City emerges as a bourgeois promise to futurity, to luxury and to enduring stability. But, the "new city" is, as yet, unfinished. Grey, concrete matrices, identical boxes, rise slowly above the wet earth, staring and empty. Thousands of bamboo poles hold up the still curing new stories. Mud is the landscape out of which it emerges. In the mud, amidst pilings and rebar, roil the struggles of hand excavation. Men in sandals carry earth from future private parking garages to shallow bedded lorries. Each lorry will carry the earth away to be, likewise, emptied by hand on the outskirts of the city somewhere. The workers carry the earth in shallow baskets on their heads. These baskets, filled by adze and heavily hoisted by boy helpers, are accommodated by the workers' flat topped yellow construction helmets. Those who are unable to afford the yellow helmets wrap *gamchas*[5] around their heads to protect themselves from the weight of the sodden clay. Other men, thin like yoked donkeys, their backs glistening with sweat, turn, by hand, huge bits suspended by tall tripods of rusty steel as they bore piles deep into the sodden earth. In a minute anachronism which reveals much about the greater contradictions and heterogenies of the city, the piling holes, once bored, will be filled by concrete pumped from futuristic, elaborately computerized trucks imported from Germany. The pilings made of woven wire and rebar cages inserted into the earth and encased in concrete will still be secured by hand though. And, what's more, they will support these middle class blasé

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picturing. "[T]o be new belongs to the world that has become a picture" (Ibid). Heidegger conceived modern 'picturing' to be primarily instrumental or scientific. The world becomes resource or commodity through picturing it as *for* humans. Modernity takes its resource-ful picture of the world as describing the world's entirety, its totality. While Heidegger does not speak about commodities explicitly, I would extend his analysis to include commodification and consumption as a fundamental modern means of picturing and exploiting modern quantitative control. The world becomes thing as commodity. Commodified picturing constitutes the direction, means and ends of control. The South City advertisements and photographs bring together beautifully the totalizing imperatives of world as commodity, and exemplify Walter Benjamin's insight that "ever more callously the object world of man assumes the expression of the commodity. At the same time advertising seeks to veil the commodity character of things." Walter Benjamin, "Central Park" trans. Lloyd Spencer and Mark Harrington, *New German Critique* 34 (Winter, 1985) p.42

[4] "Truly revolutionary" is how South City describes itself in several advertising features. See, for instance, *The Telegraph*, 26 April 2003, Sec. A, end page.

[5] A *gamcha* is a small, checked or patterned towel made of fast drying cotton. Its uses are many, but most often it is used to bathe, dry oneself, and to protect from the sun.

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monuments to success, comfort and cosmopolitan participation, until, in forty years, worn out and crumbling, they will be torn down; or until, the water supply to the city runs out and the residents forced to move – which ever comes first.[6]

In one corner of the massive work site, smoke seeps from low palm and plastic roofed huts. These are the temporary homes to the migrant labourers. Supper is cooking. The cook, on his haunches before a steaming pot, slices red onions on a piece of wood at his feet. White and green plastic bags with spices, lentils and rice are gathered carefully, lovingly, around his preparations. Not far from the huts a painted clay and straw figurine, a garishly garlanded god, protects the work site, and imparts blessings and stamina to the bachelors amongst the labourers.

Fat, mustachioed men in khakis and button down shirts appear every morning from chauffeured SUVs, mostly white Tata Sumos. Mobile phones appropriately attached to their ears, they bark orders to worried looking foremen. These compradors of neo-colonialist capital appeared again, only obsequiously, on the occasion of Independence Day celebrations, to flatter future tenants, and to grovel with politicians. On that day, the workers were ushered off the grounds of the new city. They silently gathered with other onlookers outside the barricades to the gaily erected tents to stare awkwardly, self-consciously, through temporary greenery as politicians, developers and the bourgeois "stakeholders in the future"[7] bounced their branded children on carnival amusements, lined up at buffet tables to feed, and listened to rosetted VIPS and reputed luminaries praise the unique partnerships of nation and commerce in bringing the new city to life.

The history supposedly in the process of being re-written is the history of that "hustle and bustle" which lies outside the walls of South City. Outside the development's new walls, away from the promissory rhetoric and sometimes spectacle of party tents and development brochures, the chaotic banal-ness of the modern everyday passes by on the busy thoroughfare that is Prince Anwar Shah Road, South Calcutta. This is the city as an adaptive, heterogeneous, experimental and accidental modern. It is an ambiguous, porous place of difference, of multiple confrontations and responses to earlier promises, of design, of the 'many-place' that emerges when design becomes lived in, or when it falls short, or when it succeeds, only to bring forth new forms of dwelling, sometimes anarchic, sometimes tragic, always intimate.

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[6] Private correspondence with a Dutch water and conservation engineer, who, as part of UNESCO, has been advising the city of Kolkata and the Governments of West Bengal and India on their water management, indicates that Kolkata has 10 to 15 years of potable water remaining. Increased consumption (Calcutta has the highest per capita consumption of water of any Indian city) and chronic infrastructural decay which has promoted wastage has lowered the ground water levels dramatically. Because parts of Calcutta are actually below sea level, brackish water has replaced the sweet aquifers. Coupled with the fact that naturally occurring arsenic levels in much of the Gangetic delta's fresh water supplies already endanger many people's health in parts of southern West Bengal, the Calcutta and Howrah Municipal Corporations, which together administrate to an estimated 14 million people, are headed for an overwhelming water crisis in the near future.

[7] As South City describes its future tenants in an advertising supplement in *The Telegraph* (Kolkata) Saturday 10 January 2004.

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Buses congregate at a makeshift terminal where weary drivers and conductors take tea, have a shave, count their change, nap, gossip, smoke and tend to their machines. Traffic, a daily constant in Calcutta, blares as it rushes by, or congeals in the afternoon heat: more buses, ever more private cars, lorries, motorcycles, cycle rickshaws, bicycles, hand pulled carts, peanut vendors, chamois and *paan* sellers, their red and beige towels and shiny packaged strips lazily offered to stalled drivers who honk their horns more out of habit than frustration. Garbage piles from nearby apartments. Uniformed children walk home from school. An antiquated hearse belonging to the Saha Nursing Centre, black crosses on its doors, rests under the shade of a tree, its glass enclosed stretcher empty on the rear flatbed. A woman with thick spectacles and wearing a red sari walks past the empty, waiting, hearse holding a black umbrella to shield herself from the sun. She is carrying an orange in a clear plastic bag held at her waist. A billboard above the woman and the hearse advertises "The Rendezvous – South City's resort-type club." The picture advertises the development's motto: 'Live the Way the World Does.' Illustrating the motto is a photo of a large, turquoise-clear swimming pool, deserted but for one swimmer, tall palms in the background, an empty, white sandy beach, and an empty chaise lounges in the foreground of a gleaming whitewashed pool house; imaginary dwelling in an imaginary world picture.

Across the busy street from the billboard an open pipe empties cloudy water intermittently. People wash: themselves, their children, their clothes, their pots and pans. Hundreds of thousands of people wash and drink at similar pipes, pumps and cracks in the water lines every day, all over this city of some 14 million. Wanting to fill his grubby plastic bottle, or to cool the back of his neck, and bored at sitting all day on his plastic chair, the *durwan*[8] who guards the rickety gate to the South City work-site ambles over to the gushing pipe now and then. He wears a baggy, khaki uniform awkwardly repaired at the shoulder with white stitches. His plastic slip-on shoes are falling apart. Once or twice in the day he might also saunter over to the nearby *paan* and cigarette seller to buy a few *bidis*, a glossy sachet of *paan masala*, or *gutka*; or, if he's feeling flush, a Gold Flake.[9]

The less fortunate, modernity's forgotten, pick through garbage surrounding the walls to South City as they salvage rags, cardboard and scraps of metal. Crows gather loudly above the large yellow refuse bins, nipping down to compete for the choicest leavings: day old rice, vegetable peelings, wilting

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[8] *Durwan* means gatekeeper, doorkeeper, or caretaker, and usually evokes the image of a pseudo-disciplinary figure whose moustache, stick and sometimes uniform, formalize his position. Jhumpa Lahiri has a beautiful story in her collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (Houghton Mifflin Co.: Boston and New York, 1999) entitled "A Real Durwan," which plays with the meaning and resonance of *durwan* in contemporary Kolkata.

[9] *Bidis* are small, inexpensive, hand rolled cigarettes, made entirely of tobacco leaves. Once wrapped, they are secured with tiny red strings. *Gutka* and *paan masala* are forms of chewing tobacco with betel nut and lime. Gold Flake is a popular conventional cigarette brand and can be commonly bought individually for one or two rupees.

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devotional flowers and other weary *prasad*: dried out sweets and discoloured fruit.[10] Blessed are the scavengers. The smell of urine and the sounds of knocking steel from a nearby workshop ornament the air amidst the pungent constancy of the overflowing rubbish. A street dog, never far, always thin and sore, pokes about, or sleeps fitfully in the shade.

Rain and damp have dulled the original luster of the billboards' facades. On one corner of the neo-city's walls, a lean-to of black plastic reveals a home, maybe belonging to the man with *gamcha* and *lungi*,[11] half naked, picking through what the world leaves behind. The Westernized, 'worldly' woman on the billboard above him gestures to an unknown, unseen, but implied delight. Her dress belies any geography but that 'non-place'[12] of money, success and cosmopolitanism. She and her friend could be anywhere, the shiny stretch blurring behind them an indefinite reference to an unparticular imaginary – the rest of the world.

To the man sorting garbage beneath her, she is, literally, from another world. This other "world", a space of modernity and promise, was the place to which Jawaharlal Nehru referred in his iconic speech on the eve of India's Independence,[13] a world which even now, some 58 years later, is still intoned as the beyond to which promise and destiny must catch up and aspire.

But Calcutta has always been, contrary to popular belief, very much a part of the world we and Nehru refer to as modern or new. Only, it is a city-space which encapsulates the forgotten continuance of the ever-same which a dominant narrative of progress denies in its efforts of mythical justification and legitimation. Walter Benjamin argued that the "belief in progress – in an infinite perfectibility understood as an infinite ethical task"[14] deliberately occludes recognizing the return of the ever-same and the repetition of the on-going present in its blind adherence to a doctrine of renewal. Progress and the city are linked in that the metropolis is the material manifestation of the highest ideals of the ethical work of progress and renewal: "Whether we are considering the mummified towns of the Old World or the foetal cities of the New, we are accustomed to associate our

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[10] *Prasad* refers both to a mental state of devotional generosity, and to the material offerings presented to deities in temples and home shrines. Food and flowers are presented to the gods, sampled by them, and, in turn, blessed. Their subsequent ingestion imbues the consumer with the divine blessings.

[11] A *lungi* is a traditional cotton garment worn by men around their waist and legs. Made of a single sheet, usually of checked or coloured cloth, it is wrapped and tied around the waist with a front pleat. Inexpensive and well suited to warm climates, it is typically worn by Bengal's labouring and peasant classes, although it is popular as domestic wear with most Bengali men.

[12] The picture of the woman in the mall worlds a picture or perspective which defines social relationships solely through the desire for contractual and functional consumption. See Augé, (1995)pp.100-107

[13] "Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance." As quoted in Shashi Tharoor, *Nehru: The Invention of India* (Penguin: New Delhi, 2003)p.156

[14] Walter Benjamin, *AP* [D10a,5]p.119

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highest values, both material and spiritual, with urban life."[15] Levi-Strauss went on to characterize Calcutta as representative of the Indian urban, and thus as everything the modern militates against.

> What we are ashamed of as if it were a disgrace and regard as a kind of leprosy, is, in India, the urban phenomenon, reduced to its ultimate expression: the herding together of individuals whose only reason for living is to herd together in millions, whatever the conditions of life may be. Filth, chaos, promiscuity, congestion; ruins, huts, mud, dirt; dung, urine, pus, humours, secretions and running sores: all the things against which we expect urban life to give us organized protection, all the things we hate and guard against at such great cost...[16]

But, if the modern metropolis is the pinnacle instantiation of the progressive ideal, then Calcutta's reified place as the modern spatial nadir protects the dominant phantasmagoric myth of rational, linear history, and its complementary metropoles as expressive places of human emancipation. Calcutta's multiplicity disrupts this reifying vision of the unitary modern and demands that we be honest to the ethical task of making and understanding modern places.

Beyond Prince Anwar Shah Road extends "the progress of the modern city."[17] To the south of South City, the television towers, newer suburbs, golf courses and sequestered clubs whose walls shelter shanties; and south still, for miles, more city, building, almost, to the ocean, where Diamond Harbour widens to the Bay of Bengal, where rice is milled and where refineries smoke, where ships wait to load these machined goods for transport to the rest of the world, where an old fort, once a stronghold for Portuguese pirates, crumbles next to the grey silence of the Ganga.

To the West: the metro, "better and more efficient than the London Underground," and near its entrance, the ramshackle magic of the Tollygunge movie studios, famous for the man who said these laudatory, but true, words of the metro, Satyajit Ray; also nearby, a new flyover which, in the words of West Bengal's current Chief Minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, "[I]nfuses more and more speed into the city's movement. We need more flyovers in the city and more speed...if we fail to increase the speed, then we cannot keep pace with the times"[18]; and west still, always West, to the decayed docks – Garden Reach, King George, Budge Budge, Konnagar, Kidderpore – which built Calcutta and the Empire as much on the edge of the Thames as it did on the edge of the Hooghly,

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[15] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Penguin: New York, 1973)p.134

[16] Ibid.

[17] Cuthbert Finch, "Vital Statistics of Calcutta" *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* Vol.13, No.2 (May, 1850) pp.168

[18] "High New Road Out of Misery" Front page of *The Telegraph*, Friday, December 03, 2004

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the river which predicates Calcutta; and onwards to the other side, to Howrah which is, and is not, Calcutta. There the railway station. "Howrah!–Howrah!–Howrah!" as it is exclaimed by bus conductors as they lean out, exhorting their infamous destination to the crowds around the city's innumerable makeshift bus-stops. Howrah, the rush and seeth "smothering with human forms...sitting and standing and wandering about, some eating, some cooking and some just sleeping."[19] And, just outside the station, crossing the river, the greater rush and clamor of the magnificent Howrah Bridge. Buses by the hundreds, taxis by the seeming thousands, hand pulled carts, and private cars, and, once in a while, a beast pulled cart, still. But, always, people; on either side, streaming to and fro. Coolies carry, with a graceful, necessary jog, heavy loads of devotional flowers on their heads. They jog from the trains to the *phulhat*[20] under the east side of the bridge. On depositing their loads, they turn around to do the trip again, and they will do so, remarkably, all day. Milk and *doi*[21] sellers, their produce suspended on poles slung across their shoulders, bob across the steel silver bridge, which, if you stand very still amidst the hubbub, bobs too; commuters, always, by the tens of thousands.

To the north of South City, the "hustle and bustle" of the city in its fullest, densest, most complicated and wondrous forms, "many sided, smoky and magnificent."[22] Past the Sarobar Lakes, up to Chowringhee and the Enlightenment Maidan, past "the white city" and into the heart of the "black town,"[23] the Bengali city, its crumbling neo-baroque mansions and old world lanes, its almost old world traffic, pulsing humanity, and north still, beyond the

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[19] From an anonymous reminiscence of the station's extremes from *Plain Tales from the Raj* ed. Charles Allen (Readers Union: Newton Abbot, 1976)p.55

[20] *Phulhat* means flower market.

[21] *Doi* is a fresh curd, similar to yogurt, sometimes sweetened, and a staple of most Bengali diets.

[22] Rudyard Kipling, *City of Dreadful Night* (A.H. Wheeler and Co.: London, 1891)p.1

[23] The "white city" was the sparsely populated expanse around the Maidan and largely a residential quarter for Europeans. The "black city" was the larger, denser area of the expanding city populated by non-Europeans. There were vast differences between the two towns. The European town was, as Sir William Jones noted, "large, airy and commodious" (as quoted in S.N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones: A Study in Eighteenth Century British Attitudes to India*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1968, p.77). In the 'White City', the houses of the Europeans, as William Hodges noted, had "the appearance of Grecian temples; and indeed every house may be considered as a temple dedicated to hospitality" (William Hodges, *Travels in India during the Years 1780-3*, London, Printed for the Author, and Sold by J. Edwards, Pall Mall, 1793, p.15). The 'Black Town', by contrast, was "dense," "interminable," and, in "appearance and structure...flimsy...indigent and...dangerous." See Finch (1850) p.168-9. Lord Valentia similarly contrasts the White City, which he describes as "the finest view I ever beheld in any city" to "the Black town" which is "as complete a contrast to this as can well be conceived." He continues by likening it to Britain's other back door: "Its streets are narrow and dirty: the houses, of two stories occasionally brick, but generally mud, and thatched, perfectly resembling the cabins of the poorest class in Ireland." George, Viscount Valentia, *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia and Egypt in the Years 1802, 1803, 1804, 1805, and 1806* (London, 1811), as quoted in P.T. Nair, ed. *Calcutta in the 19th Century (Company's Days)* (Firma KLM: Calcutta, 1989)p.12

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airport, to where names change, if not the city, along the river, Barrackpore, Serampore, Hooghly, old Satgaon, Kalyani, until Calcutta tapers into fields.

To the east of Prince Anwar Shah Road, but not too far east, a meridian, the E.M.Bypass and newer housing developments similar to those of South City, islands of wealth and escape from the surrounding older shanties and perplexities; older still fields now part urban which are still harvested and grazed; east still, less than one hundred kilometers, where, amidst the delta, another wall, only imaginary this time, the border of a recent nation, once family, now estranged.

A "south city," Calcutta was once an epitome of luxury and promise, the cosmopolitan, and later, the revolutionary. A colonial outpost to a world imagined total by the imperial metropole, it, and the colonial land to which it was capital, fueled much of the wealth of the British Empire, and subsequently built much of what we recognize today as London and the commonwealth.[24]

> —that first eager Calcutta, that landfall of modernity, which the British built long ago upon the banks of the Hooghly. There were the colonnades of Reason, there the elegant villas of Enlightened Profit, garden by garden along Chowringhi.[25]

The economic and political significance of the "modern capital of the East", as it was described by Thomas Twining in 1792[26], is reflected in the fact that, by the end of the nineteenth century, Calcutta was, after London, the second largest city in the entire British Empire.[27]

Calcutta's apogee as a great modern city was secured when its spatial promise was epitomized by the popular moniker, "City of Palaces." Although the term has its provenance as early as 1780, it was James Atkinson, who, in 1824, first popularized the phrase in his lengthy ode to Calcutta called "The City of Palaces." Atkinson describes Calcutta as a place of "dazzling splendors, towering peerlessly...like magic brought; all glittering in the sun beam...."[28] When Atkinson first visited the city in the early 1820s, Calcutta had experienced a period of some growth. He noted that it resembled "a little London in Bengal."[29] In the forty years between 1780 and 1820, Calcutta had grown from a "village of

[24] Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Belknap of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2006)
[25] James Morris, *Places* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1972) as quoted in *Simon Winchester's Calcutta* (Lonely Planet: Melbourne and London, 2004)p.227
[26] Thomas Twining, *Travels in India a Hundred Years Ago, with a visit to the States* (1893) as quoted in P.T. Nair (ed.), *Calcutta in the 18th Century: Impressions of Travellers* (Firma KLM: Calcutta, 1984) p.277.
[27] Jan Morris and Simon Winchester, *Stones of Empire: The Buildings of the Raj* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1983) p.206
[28] James Atkinson, *The City of Palaces; a fragment, and Other Poems* (Government Gazette Press: Calcutta, 1824) p.5-6
[29] Ibid.p.15

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palaces", to "a city of palaces." Thomas Twining's account of visiting the city on the 22nd August 1792 is headed, similarly, "City of Palaces."

> The situation of the elegant garden houses, as the villas on the left bank were called, surrounded by verdant grounds laid out in the English style, with the Ganges flowing before them, covered with boats and shipping, struck me, as it does everybody who sees it for the first time, as singularly delightful. These charming residences announced our approach to the modern capital of the East, and bespoke the wealth and luxury of its inhabitants. Turning suddenly to the north, at the end of this reach, the "City of Palaces," with its lofty detached flat roofed mansions and the masts of its innumerable shipping, appeared before us on the banks of the Ganges; and on the same side, in the foreground off this beautiful perspective, were the extensive ramparts of Fort William....A range of magnificent buildings...extended east ward from the river, and...formed the limit both of the city and the plain. Nearly all these buildings were occupied by the civil and military officers of Government, either as their public offices or private residences. They were all white, their roofs invariably flat, surrounded by light colonnades, and their fronts relieved by lofty columns supporting deep verandahs. They were all separated from each other, each having its own small enclosure, in which, at a little distance from the house, were the kitchen, cellars, store rooms, etc., and large folding gate and porter's lodge at the entrance.[30]

Private palaces ensconced behind walls, these small residential enclaves imitated the ideals of worldly (I.e., bourgeois European) living. Only, these ideals spatialized themselves in an autonomous inversion of European, urban participation. Gone were the old world linkages to public streets, squares, and plazas. In their place, the new world built blank walls with the homes turned inward to the interiors of their own compounds.[31] In the early colonial white city of Chowringhee, residents left their enclaves only to do business. Living was contained behind the privacy of walls with domestic servants providing the means to comfort. And the living, of course, was in a style of the world left behind. Interestingly, these suburban enclaves in Calcutta's "White City" or Chowringhee

[30] Twining, as quoted in P.T. Nair (1984) pp.276-77
[31] John Archer, "Colonial Suburbs in South Asia: 1700-1850" *Visions of Suburbia* ed. Roger Silverstone (Routledge: London, 1997)p.51

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area actually predated similar suburban settlements in the metropole.[32] Chowringhee became a model for suburban London. The colony was itself, after all, a global suburb of London. Today, this same neo-inversion continues in that the new world style of American suburban living is the model for the neo-bourgeois enclaves of South City and its scattered cousins.

It was the naked pursuit of wealth which propelled European Calcutta to its early bourgeois urban modernity. As Finch notes, "the European population of the Eastern capital regard their residence in Calcutta but as temporary, with their object being wealth: when that is attained, they return to Europe."[33] Indeed, sixty years before Finch's observations, the European 'nabobs' had returned home with vast fortunes which had been plundered and looted from the nascent colony.[34] Tales abound of the European city's opulence and ostentation: of "one hundred and ten servants to wait upon a family of four people,...Oh monstrous!"[35]; of ladies "spending 30 or 40,000 rupees in one morning, for the decoration of their persons"[36]; of precursors to, indeed, the early models for department stores in the more routinely regarded modern cities of New York and Paris, selling all manner of incongruous luxury. These emporia were known at the time as "Europe shops." One advertised itself in the *Calcutta Gazette* on Thursday, July 15, 1784.

> [G]oods for sale...the latest fashions, at the highest perfection. Pianofortes with organs underneath and flute stops, mahogany furniture, wines, ale, cheese, pickles, and herrings, ladies hats with feathers, gentleman's ditto, and children's ditto, boots and shoes, fancy cloths, doe breeches, and gloves, to vinegar, oil, and mustard, guns and telescopes, books and 'perambulators,' spectacles and speaking trumpets.[37]

Commodities and commerce were the sole reasons for British colonial presence, for the founding and existence of the colonial city, and for the subsequent exploitation of greater Bengal. Founded on New Year's Eve 1600, the East India Company was an incorporation of private interests, backed by a private army, and blessed by a sovereign, which traded up and down the banks of the Hooghly in search of capital. Microsoft with guns. What became the capital

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[32] Archer claims that the first suburban settlements in London were those of St. John's Wood in 1794 and antedated the suburban style living of early colonial Calcutta.
[33] Finch (1850)p.171
[34] For an account of these excesses see, Percival Spear, *The Nabobs* [1932] (Oxford University Press: Delhi, 1998).
[35] Francis Mackrabie as quoted in H.E. Busteed, *Echoes from Old Calcutta: Reminiscences of the Days of Warren Hastings, Francis and Impey* (London: W. Thaker, 1908) p.184
[36] Phoebe Gibbes, *Hartly House, Calcutta : a novel of the days of Warren Hastings* [1789] (London : Pluto Press, 1989 reprinted) p.87
[37] *Calcutta Gazette*, Thursday July 15, 1784, as quoted in Kathleen Blechynden, *Calcutta Past and Present* [1905] (Sundeep Prakashan: New Delhi, 2003 reprinted)p.124-5

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of the British Empire began as a trading tent in the mud. Even after the British House of Commons forbade, from the mid to late 18 century onwards, the private and often violent exploitation of Bengal by private East India Company officials[38] in an attempt to counter rampant usury which was embarrassing, even to the British crown, the colonial, imperial premise remained fundamentally that of commodification. Resource extraction through commercialization was the fundamental end facilitated by the British government's regulatory façade of sociality. Bengal and the greater sub-continent were regarded as a vast repository of extractable commodity wealth.[39] The landscape and its people were commoditized and exploited through an overwhelmingly commercial gaze that represented and objectified the colonized "other" as a pliant means to the end of imperial wealth. Colonialism meant commodification. As John and Jean Comaroff note,

> [T]he essence of colonization inheres less in political overrule than in seizing and transforming "others" by the very act of conceptualizing, inscribing and interacting with them on terms not of their choosing; in making them into pliant objects and silenced subjects of our scripts and scenarios; in assuming the capacity to "represent" them, the active verb itself conflating politics and poetics.[40]

The episteme in terms of which the sub-continental "other" was inscribed and conceptualized was one framed by the demands of commodity consumption.[41]

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[38] "The Company [was] a sort of Frankenstein's monster, out of control and capable of wreaking havoc both in India and in Britain. In the revealing words of one of its directors, it was an 'empire within an empire' possessing vast resources and answerable to no-one but its own share-holders." See Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (Abacus: London, 1998) p.49. James notes that the "sword intruded into everyday business life" and that the methods of the private traders were "brutal" (p.38). In 1773, Indians became British 'subjects' placed under the (relative) protection of the British constitution due to the fact that the servants of the East India Company were "widely regarded as a pack of brutal bloodsuckers, guilty of what the Whig leader, Lord Rockingham, called 'rapine and oppression' in Bengal"(p.51).

[39] "From the inception of direct trading relations between Great Britain and India in the early seventeenth century, India was looked upon as the source of commodities, the sale of which in Europe and Asia would produce profits for the owners and employees of the East India Company." Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British In India* (Oxford University Press: Delhi, 1997) p.77

[40] Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)p.132

[41] The demand for commodities from the colonies was fueled by the rise of a modern consumer economy in Britain after 1660. Indian luxuries like chintz, calico and muslin were all sought after. "As would be demonstrated time and again, the modern consumer possessed an almost insatiable desire for the luxury goods of the tropical, and subsequently, colonial world." (B.D. Metcalf and T.R. Metcalf , *A Concise History of India* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002) p.45. Metcalf and Metcalf go on to note that by 1740 Britain had secured 2 million pounds worth of imports from India alone. British colonial interests were, in the beginning, and perhaps until the late 1780s,

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The city of Calcutta was the epicentre of this process of commodification as it spatially articulated itself as both the product and instrument of this modern process.[42]

In order to facilitate commodity trade, and as an instance of commodification itself, land was privatized according to British dictates in the Permanent Settlement Agreements of 1793. Previous political and social structures were overthrown to make room for easier access to wealth accumulation. The idea of the land as a place of local provision and sustenance changed. Farmers were forced by unscrupulous Company officials and the demands of foreign markets into growing cash crops like indigo and cotton for foreign consumption. The growing of food crops like rice was discouraged, taxed or appropriated for the European market. Famines ensued, like that of the devastating Bihar-Bengal famine of 1770,[43] and led to the aforementioned regulation of private powers and abuses perpetrated officers of the East India Company. But, despite the facades of regulatory accountability and social conscience erected by the colonial governors and overseers in response to grievous corporate corruptions, the face of the emerging modern government both did and did not flaunt its rapaciousness. The modern does, after all, play in that ambiguous expanse between totality and hospitality.

Among the most infamous of Calcutta's early demonstrations of this fiscal and social ambivalence were both the social improvement schemes of Marquess Wellesley, and his extravagant building of the new governor's house at the north end of the city's central park, the Maidan. Emboldened by military and expansionist successes, Wellesley set about improving the city of Calcutta in 1798. In an effort to facilitate the ease and speed of movement, the governor built a wide, sweeping road around the outskirts of the city. The road, known as Lower Circular Road, and still extant today as A.J.C. Bose Road, swept away the dense and intricate inconveniences of earlier medieval spaces and opened the city up to new possibilities of movement. William Hickey remarks on the project, lending to it a decidedly modernist interpretation,

> One of the most marked and decided of these improvements was a new road sixty feet wide which was carried completely around the town of Calcutta...to an extent of eight miles. A prodigious improvement it

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concerned almost solely with money. This single minded pursuit, protected by private armies of mercenaries, distinguished them from their more proselytizing colonial cousins, the Dutch, Portuguese and French, and is attributed, by Metcalf and Metcalf, to be one of the reasons for their remarkable early colonial success on the subcontinent. Metcalf and Metcalf describe the East India Company's pursuit of wealth with the term "military fiscalism" (pp.53-4).

[42] Archer (1997)p.51

[43] The Bihar-Bengal Famine of 1770 is reputed to have been one of the worst in human history. Unimaginable estimates report of some 10 million peasant deaths in one year. The East India Company's complicity and indifference to the famine contributed to its devastating impact. See Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1982) pp.50-1 and pp. 267-8.

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> assuredly was...proving conducive to the health of the inhabitants in general.[44]

But if the Circular Road plans had social welfare and a modicum of urban planning in mind, it was Wellesley's designs on a new government house which illustrated the administrative elite's reticence to forgo commercial and imperial pride. The building of the classically styled new government house on the Esplanade between 1798 and 1803 was a gesture not only to Wellesley's own hubris, but to the hubris of the Company's commercial and administrative dominance in India. Despite being disapproved of by Company officials in Leadenhall due to its expense,[45] the "new government house" (today called the Raj Bhavan) was completed under Wellesley's instructions that "India be governed from a palace rather than a county house." If the Company was to administer, it had better cultivate the proper image.

But with its wealth and power, Calcutta was, like its mother metropole, always already a place of contradiction, a "nurse of opulence and vice."[46] Some years prior to Wellesley enshrining of the colonialist agenda in the affluence of a new and unprecedented palace, Robert Clive, the first British Governor of Bengal, referred to Calcutta as "one of the most wicked places in the Universe...Rapacious and Luxurious beyond concepcion[sic]."[47] Luxury and greed bred sin, or so the thinking went, and Calcutta became known for both its sin and its opportunity. Gambling, prostitution, duels, and opium fed the accelerated affluence of the European social climate and went some way to staving off, psychologically, the omnipresent threats of malaria, typhoid, cholera, syphilis, dengue, and numerous other unknown fevers. Although the popular proverb of a company man's days being numbered by two monsoons inculcated, with some degree of truth, the belief that the main causes of death were due to disease and pestilence, it was also noted at the time that "the irresponsible way of life of very many Europeans, particularly new arrivals, in the City of Palaces,...caused numerous deaths."[48] Howard Malcolm remarked in 1839 that "death owed more victims to high living, indolence, exposure at night, fatigue in shooting excursions, and c., than to the positive effects of climate."[49] At its height, the city has been likened to a cross between both the social openness of Paris in the naughty nineties and the roaring twenties, and the Klondike.[50] Only, it wasn't Degas' *chanteuse de caf' conc'* and

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[44] William Hickey, *Memoirs of William Hickey*, ed. Peter Quennell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975)p.124

[45] The building of the expansive new government house was reputed to have cost some 20 lakh rupees, an ungodly sum for a building in India at the time. Its unapproved building and ostentation, together with other excesses, notably warmongering, cost the Marquess his job as Governor. He was recalled by the Company in 1805 and publicly chastised in London for contributing to the Company's, by then, substantial debt.

[46] Hickey (1975)p.14

[47] Robert Clive as quoted in John Keay, *India Discovered* (HarperCollins: London, 2001) p.21.

[48] Abhijit Dutta, *European Social Life in 19th Century Calcutta* (Minerva: Calcutta, 1994)p.59

[49] As quoted in Dutta (1994) p.59

[50] Keay (2001), p.22

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Josephine Baker amidst a rush for a few bits of gold, but "sooty *bibis*" (prostitutes), "*nautch* girls" (dancers), and English girls in search of a rich widowhood, amidst tons upon tons of saltpeter, nutmeg, pepper, cardamom, betel-nut indigo, raw cotton, cotton goods, jute, raw silk, silk goods, rice, sugar, opium, tobacco and timber.

Calcutta's place at the centre of modern British colonial commodification and commerce was literally inscribed on the ceiling of the East India Company's headquarters in London. A portion of the ceiling of the East India House was covered by an arresting Spiridione Roma mural completed in 1778. The painting, entitled *The East Offering Its Riches to Britannia*, depicted[51] two central figures, Calcutta and Britannia. The central figure of Calcutta, a bare breasted black woman, is depicted as offering a dripping basket of jewels and other treasures to a similarly exposed, but, of course, white Britannia seated on a capitol rock. Roma's painting was described in *The Gentleman's Magazine* at the time.

> The principal refers to Britannia seated on a rock, to signify the firmness and stability of the empire; and as guardian and protectress of the Company, who are denoted by children behind Britannia, and overshadowed by her veil. The union of the old and new companies is expressed by two children embracing each other, and one of them placed sitting at the upper part of the rock, to show the firm basis on which the present Company stands; on the other part of the rock the child climbing upwards towards the summit is intended to express the prospect of the Company's continuance. Britannia is characterised by the usual emblems of the shield and the spear, and guarded by a lion, which lays tamely by her side, pleased with the offerings made her from the different East Indian provinces. At the foot of the rock lays the genius of the Ganges, in a majestic attitude, pouring out his whole stream on Britannia's footstool. The various provinces are represented under the conduct of Mercury, the god of merchandise, eagerly pressing to deposit their different produce before the throne of Britannia. *Calcutta (the capital settlement of the Company in Bengal) presents a basket with pearls and other rich jewels, which Britannia receives.* China is characterised by jars of porcelain and chests of tea; the produce of Madras and Bombay by a corded bale; Bengal is denoted by an Elephant, palm trees and a camel. Persia appears at a

[51] The East India House on Leadenhall Street was pulled down, curiously, in 1862 to make way for the Lloyds Bank building. Spiridione Roma's painting is located, today, and perhaps tellingly, in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, King Charles St., London.

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> distance, bringing silks, drugs and other effects, and with her are to be supposed all the rest of the provinces; which the artist could not describe without crowding or destroying the whole composition and harmony of the picture. At a distance is an Indiaman under sail, laden with the treasure of the East, an emblem of that commerce from which both Britain and the Company derive great and singular advantage.[52]

But the image of a lasciviously rich colony offering itself with almost abandon was not one which could be said to characterize the entire colonial city itself. If the metropole saw only riches, commodities, and palaces, the city itself was a much more complex, multi-faceted and heterogeneous place. In 1780, two years after Roma completed his painting in London, a Mr. Mackintosh, "world traveler", depicted Calcutta in a very different light than Roma's mural might suggest.

> It is a truth that, from the western extremity of California to the eastern coast of Japan, there is not a spot where judgment, taste, decency and convenience are so grossly insulted as in that scattered and confused chaos of houses, sheds, streets, lanes, alleys, windings, gulleys, sinks and tanks, which jumbled into an undistinguishable mass of filth and corruption, equally offensive to human sense and health, compose the capital of the English Company's Government in India. The very small portion of cleanliness which it enjoys is owing to the familiar intercourse of hungry jackals by night, and ravenous vultures, kites and crows by day. In like manner it is indebted to the smoke raised on public streets in temporary huts and sheds for any respite it enjoys from mosquitoes, the natural productions of stagnated and putrid waters.[53]

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[52] See, *The Gentleman's Magazine; and Historical Chronicle* Vol. 58, 1778, pp.73-4 (British Library, Call No. RAR052), emphasis added.

[53] A "Mr Mackintosh, world traveller" writing in 1780, as quoted in John Barry, *Calcutta 1940* (The Central Press: Calcutta, 1940) p.1. The decidedly elitist tone and racist tenor of Mr Mackintosh's proclamations on the city echo those of his compatriot Wellesley. Wellesley's tenure as Governor of Bengal, it has been argued, marked the beginning of a Euro-centrist, superior cast to the Company's administration in Bengal. Prior to Wellesley, the Company was fundamentally interested in making money, trading and exporting commodities for sale in Europe and South Asia. But, at the time, a significant number of people, to some extent at least, were interested in the history and civilisation of what has come to be called India. The pioneering historical, archaeological, philosophical and linguistic work of people like William Jones, Charles "Hindoo" Stuart, Charles Wilkins, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, and Jonathan Duncan, and the birth of Jones' famous Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta all attest to an intrinsic, somewhat open, cultural and social interest. Warren Hastings, the

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Perhaps it was in response to the city's admixture of chaos and extravagance that Wellesley attempted to bring some order to his urban charge by rationalizing a few of the major transport arteries, and by installing at its epicentre an icon of administrative power. In any case, the extremes, on the one hand, of wholesale appropriation to feed the desire of the modern metropole, and on the other hand, of the outright abjection it produced, characterized both the cultural and social aspects of the city, as well as it did its physical space. As we see from Valentia's, Twining's, Mackenzie's and Finch's accounts, Calcutta's reputation as a modern city of extremes had an early provenance.

Calcutta was founded and flayed, built and destroyed, by both the modern logics of mercantile and instrumental promise, and their inherent failures. Always already, the city of Calcutta has embodied the paradox that is modernity: from the early mobile capital of a private Company which engaged, from gun ships, in military skirmishes up and down the banks of a remote and foreign river years before any stable inception as a trading tent in the mud, to its gleaming white palaces, enclaves of the bourgeois dream which presaged similar middle class spaces in its mother city, to its imperial heights, rich with story and booty, to its subsequent, self-wrought demise as a colonial capital, and on to its mythic destitution. Always, and as is evidenced today, the city has invoked renewal, re-building, promises of the new and the future, whether in political revolution, or in middle class communities of walled affluence removed from the city's history of "hustle and bustle." The multiplicitous place that is denoted by intoning "Calcutta" spatializes itself, and may be read, as an allegory of the modern. Calcutta embodies the paradoxes of the modern.

> To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and at the same time threatens to destroy everything that we have, everything that we know, everything we are. ... Modernity...is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.[54]

Unfortunately, Calcutta has been represented almost singularly as a place of disintegration and anguish. It has been read primarily within a worldview which tends to interpret the modern as a synchronic, linear, unified and

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first Governor General of Bengal (then Fort William) even went so far as to say that "in truth, I love India a little more than my own country." Wellesley's administration largely shifted that hospitality by inaugurating an elitist discourse of racial and cultural supremacy which fundamentally changed the subsequent tenor of colonial rule. See William Dalrymple, *White Moghuls* (Viking: London, 2002) pp.41-54.

[54] Berman (1988) p.15

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accumulative movement of history which progresses towards some sort of immanently better end. This inevitable development is guided by the logic of originary spatial and urban dictates located in the West, conceptual frameworks which subsequently interpret the multiple confrontations and paradoxes which make up a city space like Calcutta as evidence of failure and aberration, hence the supposed legitimacy of describing the city as being "the definition of obscenity."[55]

These attitudes are today exemplified (ironically, perhaps, as we tend to think of such negative reactions and denials of complexity and paradox as Eurocentric) in the current Chief Minister of West Bengal's comments on needing to keep up with the age. They are also espoused by those many anonymous developers who premise their promises on the notion that 'West is best' and the monolith to which the future must aspire for release from the unpleasant present. Indeed, conceptual, monolithic generalizations continue to reify both the metropole and its distant offspring.

> Images of West, as a source of all hope, a place of luxury, affluence and ease, persist in the popular Indian imagination. On the other hand, most countries of the South principally appear in the [West] either as sites of violence or places of expanding markets. Similarly, within the South, there is hardly any exposure to issues, other than the political, prevalent in the southern world. Everyday issues of livelihood in developed, developing or our neighbouring countries are usually absent from our mental horizon. This one-dimensional exchange and orientation reinforces a simplistic and damaging falsification of the relationship between North and South and between South and South.[56]

Interpretations of Southern failure are certainly behind one of the more influential, if not infamous, contemporary descriptions of Calcutta. Günter Grass literalized Moorhouse's declarations of the city's definitional obscenity in his novel, *The Flounder*.

> Calcutta, this crumbling, scabby, swarming city, this city that eats its own excrement,...It wants its misery – and misery can be photographed wherever you go – to be terrifyingly beautiful: the decay plastered with advertising posters, the cracked pavement, the beads of sweat adding up to nine million souls. People pour out of

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[55] Geoffrey Moorhouse, *Calcutta: The City Revealed* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1971) p.132.

[56] Mukul Sharma, *No Borders: Journeys of an Indian Journalist* (Delhi: Demy Press, 2005) p.4.

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> railway stations which...have daily diarrhea: white-shirted maggots in a shit-pile with Victoria excrescences, a shit pile that dreams up curlicues every minute. And on top of everything betel-reddened spittle. ...The whole city is one *bustee*, or slum, and neither the middle nor the upper classes can segregate themselves from it....side by side with parks and run down mansions one sees village-like groups of cardboard and sheet metal shacks. ... People flushed into the city by the last famine...squat around fires outside the shacks and cook what they have been able to find in the garbage. Here the Stone Age is staging a comeback and has already made deep inroads. ...[57]

Advertising posters amidst the Stone Age; cardboard villages; garbage fires: "It is precisely the modern that conjures up prehistory."[58] History is not rewritten. History returns anew in Calcutta. South City is the newest face of what came before, as are all the other myriad new developments which are springing up around Kolkata. History returns with its new facades and curlicues "in the context of what has always already been there."[59] If anything, Calcutta spatially consummates modernity in the notion that "precisely in that which is newest the face of the world never alters, that this newest remains, in every respect, the same."[60] In order for South City to rewrite history, it would need to interrupt history, cease its return in the "catastrophe of the present." But instead of wresting something new from the past, it builds insular enclaves against the "hustle and bustle," and "attempts to master a new experience of the city within the framework of the old."[61]

The new developments which promise relief from a city modern history has wrought, repeat old patterns. They raise the question of whether anything new is really happening. Many of the new developments are appearing on the outskirts of the city where they are converting the rural landscape into an urban one.

"Udayan – The Condoville" encloses nearly 1600 homes in 25 acres on the southeast edge of the city. "Vedic Village," located "minutes from the city," is "sprawled over 100 acres of fertile organic farmlands, natural ponds, lakes and a wealth of flora," and incorporates inside its walls, "a world class...spa resort with spa facilities, swimming pool, restaurant and bar, conference facilities, together with Farm Bungalows, Orchard Homes, Eco Homes and Lake Front Homes...fashioned to offer all the modern comforts."[62] While the former are

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[57] Gunter Grass, *The Flounder* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1978) pp. 184-191.

[58] Walter Benjamin, "Paris – The Capital of the Nineteenth Century" *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* trans. Quintin Hoare (Verso: London, 1983)p.171

[59] Benjamin (1999)*AP* [S1,4] p.544

[60] Ibid. [S1a,5] p.544

[61] Ibid. [M16a,3] p.447

[62] From the "Vedic Village" promotional literature, see <http://www.thevedicvillage.com/>

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essentially private development projects for the affluent, another, larger project called "New Town" is a planned development administered by a government corporation. It describes itself as "a self-contained nodal growth centre" (Isn't this a roundabout way of saying suburb?) complete with,

> world class facilities, a technology park, a central recreational park around the new [commercial business district] located in the heart of the New Town, a permanent exhibition/trade fair ground, a large institutional complex including a civic centre, an environment-friendly industrial complex, super speciality[sic] hospitals, business schools, technical university and an entertainment centre.[63]

New towns with all the amenities of the old metropolis, but separate; new, but replicating the 300 year old same. In the same way that the Chowringhee of the 1790s "provided for those who lived there a spatial anchor for the construction of an identity...that differentiated itself from the larger political-economic nexus and instead celebrated the autonomy of the self,"[64] so these new, bourgeois settlements, largely private-public endeavors, offer their residents "homes built on strong foundations, to bring you closer to Nature, to happiness, and to yourself."[65]

Whether on the outskirts of the city, or like South City, embedded within it, these new developments, like their colonial precursors, spatially attempt to facilitate "a new positionality for bourgeois personnel."[66] Set beside and amidst the multiple coping mechanisms spatialized by the extant city of Calcutta (older apartments and private houses, low cost housing, slums, decaying mansions, squatter settlements, the cardboard homeless and the blanket homeless) these new spaces multiply an already heterogeneous vernacular landscape. They repeat what came before. "The sensation of the newest and most modern is, in fact...a dream formation of events...the 'eternal return of the same'."[67]

If Calcutta spatializes the return of the same in multiple layerings of city space, it also spatializes multiple time scapes. Modernity is plural, "a paradox of disunity," in Calcutta. In a more conciliatory characterization of the city than the one given in the early 1970s, Günter Grass remarked, in 1987, on Calcutta's unique chronic multiplicities.

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[63] From the West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation's website, http://www.westbengal.gov.in/hidco/introduction.htm, October 6, 2005

[64] Archer (1997)p.51

[65] From "Vision and Mission", a promotional statement by Bengal Ambuja, one of West Bengal's largest developers of semi-private, suburban settlements. See http://www.bengalambuja.com/about_02.shtm. 12 Otober 2005. Bengal Ambuja's parent company is Gujarat Ambuja, one of the largest cement companies in India, and the "lowest cost producer of cement in the world." http://www.gujaratambuja.com/comp_about_final.html 12 October 2005.

[66] Archer (1997)p.51

[67] Benjamin (1999)*AP* [M°, 14]pp.854-55

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> [Calcutta] is the only place in the world where all the centuries intersect at the same time; while walking in Calcutta I see the medieval feudal period, the European and the nineteenth century Bengali Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the electronic post-modern age all jostling with one another, and coalescing into one another. The grossest medieval superstitions and primitive ideologies coexist with the most modern views in the fascinating kaleidoscope called Calcutta. We have some very backward places in the world. And some other parts already live in the twenty-first century. Only in Calcutta do the past, the present and the future centuries collide.[68]

Advertising posters for South City employing mimetic, aspirant images of an always already impossible future are burned in the fires of the present Stone Age. Calcutta's multiple time-scapes spatialize contradictory meanings and images which co-exist without any resolution or synthesis. In this contemporary mosaic of spaces burgeon the many planes of modern existence.[69] Calcutta superimposes the past, present and future and fixes the modern in a spatial standstill of contradiction.

Yet, the restless present always attempts to dream a new future, and so it revises its past. Such a discourse sustains itself by blurring the fact that the present's future merely repeats the past. All that is new about contemporary Calcutta, from the emerging cities within cities, to the demolition of old markets to make way for new malls, is inflected with the hyperactive frenzy of commodity consumption: "mega-stores, super-stores, and hyper-marts"[70] (as though each was a distinct retail form). The former 'Europe shops' are now called 'world-marts.' "You could say it is Singapore."

Hysterical history-making forgets itself in its always restless work of renewal. The hyper-productive past repeats itself again in the hyperactive present. If the past, present and future collide, is there movement? Or is history at a standstill? Are our malls simply repeating an ongoing sameness inaugurated by John Company's trading tent in the mud? Is contemporary Calcutta not simply "the one and the same...crossed by countless intermittences"?[71], and now

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[68] From a 1987 interview with Günter Grass by Amitava Roy, "Leaves of Grass: Intercontinental Encounters and Conversations", *My Broken Love: Günter Grass in India and Bangladesh*, ed. Martin Kämpchen (Viking: New Delhi, 2001)p.244

[69] See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic: New York, 2001)p.29.

[70] These terms were used by Jiwan Das Mohta of the Venkatesh Foundation to describe the retail stores in his corporation's new six story mall, Lake Mall. Lake Mall is currently being erected on the spot of the recently bulldozed, old, one story Lake Market which had been a much loved neighbourhood market for the purchase of household and food items for generations of south Calcuttan's. As quoted in *The Telegraph*, Kolkata, Monday, March 28, 2005.

[71] "[W]hat is always again new is not something that remains, or something past that recurs, but one and the same crossed by countless intermittences." Benjamin, (1999)*AP* [G°, 19]p.843

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just another pile of modern debris, another forgotten sign of that immanence which progress ignores?

"Calcutta" qua debris. Intoned as a warning, "Calcutta" has come to stand for something else. As a proper name, it has represented and denoted something other than simply the geographic locale of the 'city of extremes.' Its invocation represents an attempt to set up a counterfoil to the modern everywhere else. It has been that representative southern 'other' which encapsulates the negation of progress, its reversal. Its emblematic use reifies the modern metropole (Paris, London, New York) as the be-all and end-all of modern historicism. "O Calcutta!" as an intonation of despair conceals the multiplicity that is modernity and repeats the utopian fantasy of bourgeois perfectibility. Read allegorically, the city space of Calcutta peels away the reifying veneer to reveal the modern in its multiplicities, to reveal the city as emblematic, yes, but emblematic of the rest of the world. Living the way the world does means living like the hustle and bustle of Calcutta, for Calcutta, outside the walls of South City, is as much the modern as South City's phantasmagoric picture of the shiny, worldly metropole of malls that it repeatedly attempts to renew through imitation. Calcutta articulates neither the end, nor the retrograde of the modern, but a standstill of things within a cultural logic premised "under a semblance of the production of the perpetually new."[72]

This cultural logic of idealized consumption was, for Benjamin, "the catastrophe." The colonial culture of commodity consumption and its bourgeois legacy does not hold the promise of redemption, nor of enlightenment, nor of emancipation. Rather it inheres in a catastrophic truth content whose veiled imagination returns in an ongoing continuum of sameness.

> The concept of progress is to be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things "just go on" *is* the catastrophe. It is not that which is approaching but that which is. ... Hell is not something which lies ahead of us, – but *this life here.*"[73]

Mrinal Sen, the great Calcutta film-maker, writer and intellectual, reflects at the end of his 1986 documentary, *Calcutta, My El Dorado*, on his home as a place of catastrophic return and repetition.

> Every time I return to Calcutta
> I feel it must be surely impossible
> That it can continue much longer than this.
> Yet it always does.

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[72] Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p.174

[73] Walter Benjamin, "Central Park" (1985) p.50

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An interval of a year

Makes the visual impact more painful
The squalor more squalid
The poverty more militant
The despair more desperate

Every time I return to Calcutta
I find it an intimidating and
Even infernal city
Unredeemed and probably doomed.[74]

The city's continuum of perpetual return preserves a glimmer of redemption for Sen; but, it is bound to its antinomy, tragedy. In the return is the promise of alleviation, but also a sadness that it will "probably" never come to pass. Benjamin, too, gestures to the irrevocable antinomies of promise and tragedy: "Redemption looks to the small fissure in the ongoing catastrophe."[75] It "*looks*" to the small fissure. Whether it lodges there is another matter.

Which is why Calcutta is still important. Calcutta is still important because looking through it we can address the reifying stories of the modern which more and more entrench our world in the unimaginative political and ethical orthodoxies of colonial consumption and the impossible promise of a better world. Only, once unmasked, we cannot make them right and whole again. That is not possible. We are "unredeemed and probably doomed." What we can perhaps do is be more honest to our own present catastrophes, and to our responsibility to live the way the world does, to face the always already brokenness of things, to try not to always re-write history, but to be attentive to how history gives.

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[74] Mrinal Sen ends his 1986 documentary film, *Calcutta, My El Dorado* with these words.
[75] Benjamin (1985)p.50

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Part IV: Commodities, Allegory and the Modern City

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Like all big cities it was made up of irregularity, change, forward spurts, failures to keep step, collisions of objects and interests, punctuated by unfathomable silences; made up of pathways and untrodden ways, of one great rhythmic beat as well as the chronic discord and mutual displacement of all its contending rhythms. All in all, it was like a boiling bubble inside a pot made of the durable stuff of buildings, laws, regulations, and historical traditions.

Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, 4

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Figure 5.1: Mansion in North Calcutta. January 2004. Photo by Author.

It was early evening as I left Popeye's birthday party and turned onto Collin Street. During the day, kneeling on white tarpaulins, thousands of devout Muslims had packed the same street for a special celebration of prayers and sermons. The mosque opposite the Shiva temple was too small to accommodate the many who gathered to listen to the visiting imam. I waited a while, watching as the last of the committed finished their devotions, mindful that the street was not simply a street. Dusk fell insistently, and I slowly picked my way through the stragglers as they quietly rolled up the last of their makeshift plastic prayer mats. Worn sandals were still strewn along the side of the road. I felt self-conscious of my own and wondered whether the small piles of shoes and sandals signified more than random association; whether strangers and friends had met, embraced, offered peace to one another, asked about wives and families, introduced growing sons, agreed to sit together and then shed themselves in intimate, and so perhaps more secure piles, before venturing out onto the sacred space. Perhaps these jumbled heaps were convergences like the city itself—worn, used, useful, seemingly random, but speaking always of something else.

It had been strange, yet somehow comfortable, to celebrate little Popeye's fourth birthday with Ganesha birthday balloons, Spiderman chocolate cake and a cauldron of Chinese style 'chilly chicken.' The sounds of Koranic prayers and sermons blared from loudspeakers outside, competing with the Bollywood film and North American pop music, and the sounds of children playing inside. Nobody seemed to think anything of it. Life in Taltala, the centre of Calcutta,

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was always complex, discordant and rich. It had been a fine Saturday in June of 2003.

I walked up the crumbling British built lane. Trees grew from cracks in the colonial porticos. The lane led past small street-side Krishna, Radha, Lakshmi, and Shiva shrines, jewelry and shoe shops, homes above refuse sorting and recycling shops, each with their old iron balance scales, to the back of New Market, named as such for at least half of its 300 year history, past crusty, hairless street dogs scratching, snuffling in garbage, the odd pup lunging happily at a dangling pink teat, oblivious to the world, the city, to why its mother, a *rasta kukur*, a street dog, was snuffling amongst a pile of debris. I walked past the Chaplin cinema showing *American Chai*, the latest *desi* film, through a throng of young things in tight jeans and short *kurtas*, lounging, mobile phones permanently attached to their ears. Perhaps after the film, they will wait again for the nightclubs to open in the zealously guarded hotels which charge more per night than what most Calcuttans make in months. I walked past the old Grand Hotel, through illegal, yet unionized, makeshift sidewalk stalls doing brisk Saturday night business in pirated CDs, knock-off ball caps, totebags and t-shirts, past rickshaw pullers squatting in circles between the handles of their carts smoking *bidis*, past the New Empire cinema showing, appropriately, and advertised with a hand painted sign, *Matrix Reloaded*. Drivers to the cinema's patrons lounged inside in their employers' cars, some with their eyes closed, feet poking out the side windows, listening to the latest hits on Radio Mirchi 98.3 "It's Hot!", waiting to take their newly prosperous, globally justified passengers home, many to new, North American style suburbs on the edges of the city. I crossed the old Chowringhee Road, now Jawaharlal Nehru Road and went down the steps of the Esplanade underground metro station. Chaplin returned. *Modern Times* was playing on the platform's overhead televisions. I coursed under the city.

Four stops later, I alighted onto the Kalighat station platform before an escalator. Re-runs of the 2002 World Cup of football were playing on the overhead televisions. A child was weighing himself on the scale that spits out horoscope tickets. On weekends at Kalighat metro, you can watch rural pilgrims nervously delight in their first escalator ride. Young women and girls giggle self-consciously, mindful that their saris might catch in the moving parts. Their men pretend to be stoic and knowing, instruct children to hold each others' hands and admonish that two trips on the moving staircase is enough fun: 'We are here to visit the temple.' Their second glances at the wonders of the modern conveniences suggest otherwise.

The escalator deposits commuters next to tunnels which lead up to the surface, not far from the Kali Temple, where morning sacrifices of black goats are made, where that very morning I had had my forehead smeared with orange paste as I waved a burning oil lamp in Kali's stone black face, and tossed red hibiscus at her feet as priests chanted Sanskrit mantras and informed me that with each eleven hundred rupees I donated so would double my family's happiness. A crush of worshippers pressed around me in the stainless steel control chutes eager to have access to Kali's wet, holy feet and to glimpse of her black, red tongued face.

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A police man in khaki struggled, pointlessly, to contain some semblance of order. Outside, others lay their necks in the stocks where goats were decapitated. Mimetic mock sacrifice of themselves to the powerful goddess.

Up through the metro's magnetic ticket gates, past the computerized lottery kiosk which promised winners the life of a *raja*, up curving stairs lined on either side by red betel stained gutters, past the "PHOTOGRAPHY IS PROHIBITED" and "TIME SPENDING IS PROHIBITED IN METRO PREMISES" signs, turning right at the billboard at the top of the stairs which advertises the Life Insurance Corporation of India (a relaxed, smiling—always smiling—young man in an unbuttoned tuxedo lounging in the front seat of a top down American convertible with the caption, "Know Yourself") and down onto the street past the same old woman I pass most days, in widow's white, except its grey with the grime of the city. She sits begging most days at the underground entrance: *Baba, paisa, baba.* "Maybe tomorrow" I say in Bengali as I pass. I said that yesterday.

It is night as I emerge onto the street. I am surprised.

> [I]s there anyone who has not once been stunned emerging from the *Métro* into the open air, to step into brilliant sunlight?...So quickly has he forgotten the weather of the upper world.[1]

It takes a few seconds to orient oneself through the noise of traffic and the rush of lights and the vendors selling green grapes, roasted peanuts, cigarettes, and *dosas*. I walk past the four husband-and-wife umbrella repair stalls spread on blankets on the sidewalk outside the metro. They face the street, their smoky orange lamps, single open flames, wave liquid soft light against the dark. Behind the umbrella repair stalls, in a small glass fronted shop, people peruse appliances (washers, fridges, televisions, air-conditioners). A security guard minds the line-up to the ATM next door. Others push through to line up at the Sify iWay, an 'internet café'—"No Food or Drink Allowed"—to surf, text message, and "chat." Many more jostle and crowd to catch cabs, rickshaws, the tram, or buses the next stage home. I climb into a rattling three wheeled auto-rickshaw. Kali images and a garland of red hibiscus, now wilted from a day's work, hang above the handlebars. In a cloud of exhaust, I am carried with four other passengers the length of Rash Behari Road through the harsh jostle of electric lights to the soaring concrete flyover at Gariahat Junction, under which hawkers are in full swing. In a few hours they will wearily re-pack their wares into large burlap and jute bags and dismantle their stalls after a long day of wheeling and dealing. They'll leave the street a street until the morning when they'll return and make it a market again. Nearby ancient tin-pan trams clatter across cobble stone roads under huge lit billboards advertising Ray Ban sunglasses, Bagpiper Whiskey,

[1] Walter Benjamin, "One Way Street" in *One Way Street and Other Writings* trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (Verso: London, 1985)p.100

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Prudential Life Insurance, Whirlpool fridges, and Nokia mobiles, hoardings which shine down onto men in lungis carrying loads of mangos on their heads, and street families settling down for the night in the shelter of the concrete arch, across from whom I would sometimes buy a mango "softee" ice cream for six rupees. I would eat it as I walked the last steps home to supper, past the used magazine book sellers who hide *Playboy* and *Juggs* under stacks of old dusty *Popular Mechanics* and *Desh*[2], and from whom I also bought, on separate occasions, a tattered copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, a *Learn Italian* phrase-book and, in an effort to improve my basic language skills a Bengali edition of the American children's comic, *The Phantom*.

Nearing home. The prostitutes will soon begin to appear around the traffic circle. The same long haired man is sipping tea at the same corner chai stall, a cigarette in one hand, his sandals, beard, untucked checked shirt, and cloth bag slung around his shoulders signify the uniform of conspicuous intellectualism. Across the road bare-chested sweet makers stir their boiling pots of sugar over roaring wood fires—ancient recipes—as the pneumatic bell at the neighboring petrol station rings in another customer. Jump To!

The burnt out wreckage of a private car, its recently crumpled front now dusty with the relentless street is still parked under the red billboard advertising Kotak's "Preferred Retirement Solutions'—"Prepare today for an independent tomorrow" reads the slogan. In the dust on the car's rear windshield someone has written, in Bengali, Ei Ma [Oh God!].[3]

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Vaishnava happy birthday balloons, confetti piñatas, Shania Twain, Bangla pop and Hindi film music, Kali images, Sanskrit priests and the *Matrix*, Spiderman chocolate cakes from "Kathleen's", the-last-of-the-Jewish owned pastry shop in New Market, *luchis*, *rui mach* and *rossugolla*[4], underground metros and barefoot pulled rickshaws; crumbling three hundred and thirty year old houses whose thick walls, exposed beams and tiny door ways intimate an age, within which hum frost free fridges and tinkle tiny Finnish mobiles, while open

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[2] *Desh* (meaning "country") is a popular Bengali language magazine.

[3] "Ma" is a reference to the mother goddess, Durga, who is revered in Bengal, and in particular in Calcutta. Kali-ma is a powerful and sometimes destructive form of Durga, also venerated in Calcutta, and specifically at the Kali Temple in the south of the city. There are two common exclamations in Bengali which invoke Durga and Kali, both of which can be translated in English as "Oh God." The first sounding like "Oh Ma", is a form of veneration in the greatness and benevolence of God, "O God." The second sounds like "Eh Ma" and is an invocation in a time of calamity or distress to the destructive or random violence of the world and God, represented by Kali, "Oh God!"

[4] *Luchis* are a popular deep fried bread often eaten on special occasions. *Rui Mach* is a species of large, fresh water carp which is cultivated in the innumerable tanks and ponds throughout Bengal. It is plentiful and cheap, and a staple of the Bengali diet. *Rossugolla*, perhaps the city's most popular sweet, are small balls of fresh, cottage-like cheese boiled in flavoured sugar syrup. Eaten fresh they are sublime. *Rossugolla* and *sandesh* define Calcutta's, and Bengal's, renown for unsurpassable sweets.

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sewers run past flower garlanded gods in neighborhood altars, mosques for poor rickshaw pullers, and jet set teens, fresh from London, New York and Mumbai flirting outside clubs with names like Tantra, while Tantric sadhus make headlines after they are thwarted in Khamakya for attempting to sacrifice a girl child on the altar of a Shiva temple; in a city which received 139 mm of rain in five hours on the 21st of June, 2003 and which lay under water for over a day as the 170 year old drainage system, built by a colonial imperial government only 56 years removed, copes as best it can with a capacity of 6 mm per hour...

> Send a postcard with regards from Calcutta. See Calcutta and go on living. Meet your Damascus in Calcutta. As alive as Calcutta. Chop off your cock in Calcutta (in the temple of Kali, where young goats are sacrificed and a tree is hung with wishing stones that cry out for children, more and more children). In Calcutta, encoffined in mosquito netting, dream of Calcutta. Get lost in Calcutta. On an uninhabited island write a book about Calcutta. At a party call Calcutta an example (of something). Rethink the Frankfurt/Mannheim area as Calcutta....Recommend Calcutta to a young couple as a good place to visit on their honeymoon. Write a poem called "Calcutta" and stop taking planes to far-off places. ...Develop a new dialectic from Calcutta's contradictions.
>
> Günter Grass, *The Flounder*, pp.190-91

Figure 5.2: Woman in Street with Posters. May 2003. Photo by Author.

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Describing contemporary India in terms of contradiction, paradox and anachronism has long been cliché. It is as though we seem always to arrive too late in describing it. The burden of the past is particularly heavy.[5] However, it is this overwhelming crush, this teeming, *seeming* paradox of traditions and modernities, of globalism, the urban and the village, of a secularized urbanism and a spiritual *Lebenswelt* that breathes through the pores of the everyday, which renders it so fascinating, yet, equally, so opaque. Indeed, it is *as* difficult to understand the contradictions, as it is easy to astonish at the heterogeneity and diversity they constitute.

The sheer overwhelming presence of contradiction, anachronism, and paradox is numbing, but these experiences of ambiguity and paradox are *the* defining characteristics of modernity and what attracted me to thinking that I could write about modernity through Calcutta.

What are the characteristics which impress the experience of contradiction so forcefully upon one in Calcutta? Why a city of extremes[6], or as Grass calls it, "the most the fascinating kaleidoscope"? Are contradictions what make it kaleidoscopic, juxtapositional, a collage of cultural influences, times, architectures, languages, incomes, smells, sounds, etc? What is it about the city which makes the experience of contradiction so immediate, intimate and puzzling? Is a genuine experience of the city not an immersion in the constant conjunction of these seemingly mutually competing juxtapositions? And why do we experience them as contradictory? But most importantly, why is *contradiction* and *paradox* overwhelmingly important and cliché to descriptions of the city's "secret insolence"[7], and indeed, to urbanity's constant threats of decay in general? What work are they doing? It is not enough to simply dismiss such clichés as clichés, and so as uncritical reflections. We must ask about why it is that the city continues to be the foil for thinking the virtues of modernity, and whether indeed, these virtues might in fact conceal rather tenuous conceits. Some answers might lie in looking at what commodities do.

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Modern Cities as Commodity Spaces

In 1925, one of the members of the now famous "Chicago School" of urban sociology wrote, echoing his colleague Louis Wirth (to whom we made reference

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[5] Kate Teltscher also tells us that by the 1830s, "the conventions for representing India [were] already fixed, the genres well-worn, and the land over-described." By then, "India had been subjected to the English gaze for well over two centuries." See, "India/Calcutta: city of palaces and dreadful night", *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, eds. Peter Hulme and Tim Younge (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002)p.191 and 194.

[6] James Cameron calls it the "worst, the most irredeemably horrible, vile, and despairing city in the world." *An Indian Summer* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1974)p.178

[7] Kipling (1888)p.42

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earlier) that the city, and more specifically, the urban, was more than the sum, or agglomeration, of its various material parts. The city, Robert Park wrote,

> is something more than a congeries of individual men and of social conveniences—streets, buildings, electric lights, tramways, and telephones, etc.; something more, also, than a mere constellation of institutions and administrative devices—courts, hospitals, schools, police, and civil functionaries of various sorts. The city is, rather, a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature.[8]

The city is also—for it *is* inescapably buildings, and the social institutions they house—a fermenting, effervescence of human energy and expectation, desire and failure, dreams and always unfulfilled wishes. In the words of Robert Musil, with whom we began this section, the city is "a boiling bubble inside a pot made of the durable stuff."[9] Constantly creating energies anew, it is always already returning, through the fragility of its materiality, to ruin. This metaphor of the boiling bubble, although agreeably vague, needs to be explicated further.

The urban geographer, Steve Pile, in his recent book, *Real Cities*, attempts to give a more sociologically palatable description of Park's "something more... state of mind", what I have identified here with Musil's "boiling bubble." For Pile, "what makes the city a city is not only the skyscrapers or the shops or the communication networks, but also that people in such places are forced to *behave* in *urban* ways."[10] The "vital processes" of the people who live in the city are specific to, and produced by, that environment. They are urban.

But what is "urban" about urbanity? And how is it that we are socially produced by the space of modern city-ness, so that we might recognize our socialization within it as akin to something like Pile's "forcing"? How do modern cities force us? Indeed, is it as strong as "forcing"? These are difficult and complex questions which have an equally long and complex discursive history. We cannot adequately address them all here, but I would like to look briefly at the question of what we mean by describing modern city folk as behaving in urban ways, and in so doing give flesh to something as fragile and fleeting as a bubble.

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[8] Robert Ezra Park, "The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behaviour in the Urban Environment", *The City* eds. Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie, with Louis Wirth (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1925)p.1

[9] Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities* trans. S. Wilkins and B. Pike (Picador: London, 1995)p.4

[10] Steve Pile, *Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagoria of City Life* (Sage: London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2005)p.1, emphasis in original.

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So, what is "urban" about urbanity? We might, like Park, suggest that the city, beyond being a geographic, social, ecological, and economic expression, is "the natural habitat of civilized man"[11]; in other words, that the bubble and its durable stuff is that against which the ***barbarian*** is compared, distinguished and excluded. Park, through an appeal to Oswald Spengler, makes the claim that the barbarian is not of a "civilized cultural type" and thus not in possession of "world-history" which is something specific only to "city men."[12] The barbarian is "the Other in terms of whose negativity [the city] is defined."[13] Despite such language seeming, today, decidedly anachronistic—we ***more*** moderns aim to undo and critique this gendered, un-reflexive prose—Park and Spengler associate the criteria and constitution of civilization and world-history with quite contemporary social forms, all of which still exist as markers of modern cultural participation and aspiration—maybe more so given today's internationalized hypocrisy's of freedom, democracy and good government. What is important is that all such markers of civility have their basis in urbanity. "Nations, governments, politics, and religions—all rest on the basic phenomenon of human existence, the city."[14] Park argues that the city offers itself as a unique and paradigmatic landscape through which to engage an anthropology of modernity. He suggests that while anthropology has been primarily concerned with the study of "primitive peoples", we can employ similar "patient methods" to "even more fruitful" ends in the investigation of "customs, beliefs, social practices, and general conceptions of life"[15] prevalent in modern cities.

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[11] Park (1925)p.2

[12] Ibid.p.2-3. Marx, too, is infamous for using the criterion of history as the demarcation for civility. For our purposes this is especially illustrative because he does so by referring to pre-colonial India and 'Asia' as ahistorical and barbaric. He writes, "Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is the but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society.' In Karl Marx, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India" [August 8, 1853 *New York Daily Tribune* No.3840] as quoted in *On Colonialism* (Foreign Languages Publishing House: Moscow, pub. date unknown)p.76. See also, Derek Sayer, *Capitalism and Modernity: An Excursus on Marx and Weber* (Routledge: London and New York, 1991)p.15. The barbarian way of life is, for Marx, one devoid of progress, resistance and change, all prerogatives of history. As he writes, of the Sub-continent prior to English arrival, "[w]e must not forget that these idyllic village communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism...we must not forget the barbarian egotism which, concentrating on some miserable patch of land, had quietly witnessed the ruin of empires, the perpetuation of unspeakable cruelties, the massacre of populations of large towns, with no other consideration bestowed upon them than on natural events, itself he prey of any aggressor who deigned to notice it at all. We must not forget that this undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life, that this passive sort of existence evoked on the other part, in contradistinction, wild, aimless, unbounded forces of destruction, and rendered murder itself a religious rite in Hindustan. ...[C]an mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia?...[W]hatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing out that revolution." (Karl Marx, "The British Rule In India" [June 25, 1853 *New York Daily Tribune* No. 3804] in *On Colonialism* (Foreign Languages Publishing House: Moscow, pub. date unknown)p.36-7.

[13] Sayer (1991)p.16

[14] Park (1925) p.3

[15] Ibid.

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But modern cities are "rooted in the habits and customs of the people who inhabit [them]. The consequence is that the city possesses a moral as well as a physical organization."[16] What makes a modern city *modern* is the urban behaviour of its people, a behaviour which is materialized in the durable stuff of buildings, and which is itself constitutive of, as Park denotes, a "state of mind." By analyzing the modern city we can learn something of the cultural and social organization which makes the modern, modern and the urban, urban.

In a pre-modern city, this moral or cultural organization might have been constituted by the presence of a religious building, or site, or hierarchical structure, which determined the behaviour of its citizens in specific ways. Think, for instance, of medieval Canterbury. The customs, habits, beliefs and practices of Canterbury were very much enchanted by, and predicated upon, the presence of the cathedral which drew people of like faith from all over the then known world. It thus produced them in specific ways and with respect to specific stories or myths. The myths and narratives which emanated from the cathedral explained the natural and social worlds and its occurrences, and placed or subjectified the buildings' and the city's associated citizens in ways consonant with those materialities, their justifications, and enchantments.

But with modernity and the rise of scientific rationality, materialism and the critique of religious myths, the stories and the urban sites through which those stories legitimized themselves, changed. The city and the culture of its citizens—civilization—came to be re-enchanted in different ways, ones tied as much to emergent economic ways of life, modes and materials of production, as much as to the explanatory and investigative methods and procedures which enabled their productive expression.[17] Instrumental technology, scientific rationality and their constitutive results manifested through industrial capitalism came to define the modern urban as, in Wirth's terms, a "way of life."

With those structural changes, the moral and behavioral character of people living in the modern landscapes changed to reflect the new defining stories and ways of knowing. In other words, new bubbles appeared which were fueled by a different, but no less intense, heat. Cities came to define themselves no longer simply as sites for the legitimation of certain explanatory stories, but as monuments, in and of themselves, to the triumph of *human* civilization and material culture over nature.

The modern metropolis became a monument to the "conquest and subjugation of nature by humankind, and constitute[d] the principle site of

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[16] Ibid.

[17] "The bourgeois period of history has to create the material basis of the new world—on the one hand the universal intercourse founded upon the mutual dependency of mankind, and the means of that intercourse; on the other hand the development of the productive powers of man and the transformation of material production into a scientific domination of natural agencies. Bourgeois industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth." Karl Marx, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India" [August 8, 1953, *New York Daily Tribune* No. 3840] as quoted in *On Colonialism* (Foreign Languages Publishing House: Moscow, date unknown)p.81-2

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human progress, of the wonders and marvels of technological innovation."[18] Human rationality and technical capacity came to the fore and became self-legitimating in so far as it was able to legitimize its ends through self-referential and self-constituting means. If an appeal to an external or supernatural legitimation (i.e. religion) disappeared with the rise of modern materialism and scientific rationality, the possibility of human action and social promise came to be located and embodied in the products of self-legitimated human action. The possession and value of these products came to define a participation in a certain history, one aimed at a collective redemption through control of nature and of destiny.

For Benjamin, as for Marx, the modern metropolis inaugurated a new form of mythical re-enchantment, one guided under the rubric of progressive nineteenth century urban industrial production and capitalism, and enervated by a vision of modernity as a "dream world"[19] or "phantasmagoria"[20] of commodities. "Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces."[21] The urban promise of modern technological control and natural domination came to be embodied, for Benjamin, following Marx, in the continually resurrecting life of commodities. Commodities embody and iterate the myths of the modern and, in their desirability and exchange value, promise the "overcoming of mythic compulsion and fate."[22] Commodities embody, for Benjamin, the modern wish to no longer be subject to a world which resists and stands over against human will.

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[18] Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Polity: Cambridge, 1996)p.11

[19] See "Convolute K" entitled, 'Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung', *AP*pp.388-404

[20] "Phantasmagoria" is Marx's term for the illusory state of mind produced by commodification. It is the state of mind within capitalism wherein moral value and desirability is ascribed only through a thing's exchangeability. We invest the thing and its possession with an abstract social power or value such that its original use becomes secondary or incidental. The social world, reified through abstraction, thus becomes governed by spectres, fetishes and ghosts. It is important to note that the phantasmagoric character of commodity mediated social relations and exchange values provokes a peculiarly modern divided consciousness, one dependent on the belief on the part of the participant in the exchange, that phantoms do not exist, that s/he is not being deceived or fed an illusion. The technical power and materiality of the commodity must produce its deceptive social value such that its circulation remains unchallenged if only until it is superseded by another and supposedly better materiality. This so-called progress of material mastery and technicity renders the illusory nature of the exchange value complete for the social value gets transferred through the appearance of the new.

[21] Benjamin (1999) [K1a,8] p.391. Of course, Europe was not the only landscape over which this dream sleep came. As Marx remarked, "[t]he profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilisation lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked." See, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India" [August 8, 1953, *New York Daily Tribune* No. 3840] as quoted in *On Colonialism* (Foreign Languages Publishing House: Moscow, date unknown)p.81.

[22] Gilloch (2002)p.127

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Commodity and Allegory

For Marx, the commodity and, more importantly, commodity production, was one of the key elements specific to the uniqueness of the emergence of modern social action.[23] While commodities, as products of human labour, have specific use values inherent to their particularity, and those use-values are compared and exchanged according to differing needs, how they are compared and assessed depends, for Marx, on the social property of their production: labour. "As values, all commodities are only definite masses of congealed labour-time."[24] Human labour is unique under the conditions of market capital. As he writes in *Capital*, "[o]bjects...become commodities only because they are the products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other."[25] Marx recognized that within modern capitalism, labour-time is essentially privately contracted, and the product of that labour (i.e. the commodity) thus only meaningful in so far as it is a product of exchange, but an exchange laden with social and cultural intent. He continues, "[s]ince the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only in this exchange."[26] Marx's "labour theory of value" connects the use-value of the commodity to its circulation in an economy of socially demarcated exchange values such that the thing itself becomes imbued with cultural and social content. Under modern capitalism, Marx argues, social value comes to be lodged, communicated and circulated through the materiality of the thing itself, through the commodity. The material thing comes to stand in for, and represent, the social value celebrated in the exchange. It becomes doubled and stands for something else.

> The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists...simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of labour themselves, as the socio-natural property of these things. Hence, it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things, which are at the same time suprasensible or social.[27]

But this, for Marx, is a chimera, a fetish, a phantasmagoria, which obscures and alienates the real human labour and its particular historical

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[23] Sayer (1991)p.24

[24] Karl Marx, *Capital Vol.1* (Lawrence and Wishart: London, 1967)p.40 as quoted in Sayer (1991)p.26.

[25] Karl Marx, *Capital Vol.1* trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin: London, 1990)p.165

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., p.164-5

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organization (i.e. class and oppression). As he famously asserts, commodity fetishism is a way of seeing and knowing whereby the social relations at the heart of capital production assume the fantastic form of the relation between things.[28] People come to identify themselves as subjects and actors within modern society, for Marx, through this process of commodity fetishization, such that, as he writes, "personal independence [is] based on a dependence mediated by things."[29] The dependence is not only mediated by things, but it produces the subject in ways intimately tied to the consumption of the thing itself. In *Grundrisse*, Marx makes this explicit.

> [T]he object is not an object in general, but a specific object which must be consumed in a specific manner...Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively, but also subjectively. Production thus creates the consumer.[30]

How the subject sees him/herself as a being independent, so to speak, from others, is in fact a determination set about by the material social conditions within which she finds herself. "[P]rivate interest is itself already a socially determined interest, which can be achieved only within the conditions laid down by society and with the means provided by society...its content, as well as the form and means of its realization, is given by social conditions independent of all."[31]

The perception of the commodity as constitutive of a certain social outcome through the process of exchange shapes both its production and its reception. "The need which consumption feels for the object is created by the perception of it."[32] This need, of course, may be a material or basic need such as food, shelter, clothing. But, more interestingly, as Marx recognizes, this need, produced by the sociality of exchange, is also specifically produced so as to constitute a particular social effect: desire. "[P]roduction produces consumption by creating the specific manner of consumption; and further, by creating the stimulus of consumption, the ability to consume, as a need."[33] The fetishism of

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[28] "It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things." (Ibid,p.165) As Tom Gunning notes in his essay "Illusions Past and Future: The Phantasmagoria and its Spectres", Marx uses the phrase "*dies phantasmagorische Form*", a subtlety that is lost in the English translation of "fantastic form". Gunning remarks that Marx deliberately referred to phantasmagoria so as to conjure the image in the reader of the mechanically inspired ghostly images popularly projected by lantern shows at the time. There is, thus, in Marx a very deliberate association between the mechanical or technical materiality of projection and the deliberate conjuring of non-existent stories or fantasies in the viewer or consumer of the spectacle.

[29] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1971)p.96, as quoted in Sayer (1991)p.62

[30] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Penguin: London, 1973)p.92

[31] Ibid.,p.156

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., p.93

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the object adheres to the thingness of the commodity to the extent that upon it are projected social and cultural longings or aspirations understood as needs. What we collectively wish for comes to inhere in the thingness of the commodity and its production as mythic need, mythic because the story of our future and our historical possibility is fantastically embodied in the thing itself.

For Benjamin, Marx famously revealed the intimate connections between economic production and the cultural expectations manifest through the materiality of commodity exchange. It was not only the materiality of things which interested him, but importantly the landscape in which this materiality came to inhere commodities with collective wishes and desires. Cities, complete with their durable stuff specifically built for the inculcation or enchantment of mythic desire and longing, were the productive sites of "phantasmagoric illusion." As Benjamin remarks on urbanism's durable stuff: "Architecture as the most important testimony to latent 'mythology.' And the most important architecture of the nineteenth century is the arcade."[34] Such urban sites and how they revealed a certain cultural and historical expression latent within the commodity form interested Benjamin. As he remarks further in the *Arcades*,

> Marx lay bare the causal connection between economy and culture. For us, what matters is the thread of expression. It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture. At issue, in other words, is the attempt to grasp an economic process as perceptible *Ur*-phenomenon, from out of which proceed all manifestations of life in the arcades (and, accordingly, in the nineteenth century).[35]

When Marx spoke of "private-labour" what he was referring to was the uniquely modern phenomenon of wage-labour within an urban industrial system which alienates and dehumanizes the producers, both in terms of its expropriated product (the thing), and in terms of its factory production processes (the way the thing was made). The products to which he referred, of course, were the mass produced industrial commodities which proliferated identical manifestations devoid of the mark of either work or their human labour time.

The absence of the trace of origin in mass produced commodities spoke, to Benjamin, of a mythic wish specific to the re-enchantment of modernity. The human ability made manifest through the very thingness of the industrially produced commodity itself represents the human capacity to transcend the resistance of the world which stands over and against, and thus demands, human labour. Commodities express a certain vital cultural or historical capacity for domination and control. They become repositories beyond simply the masking of

[34] Benjamin, *AP* [D°,7]p.834

[35] Benjamin (1999) [N1a,6] p.460

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labour-time and the suffering of exploitative and alienating production processes. Commodities, for Benjamin, are redolent as cultural wish-images with the "dream-consciousness of the collective."[36] Gilloch explains. For Benjamin,

> commodities [are] nothing more than wish-images, disguised representations of genuine wants and aspirations that remain thwarted under capitalism....As a wish image, the commodity points beyond the suffering of human labour in the production process to...[m]aterial abundance, freedom from want and necessity, liberation from the drudgery of labour, human progress and self-determination—these are not so much fetishistic illusions as unfulfilled utopian impulses and promises which lie embedded in the architecture, fashions and commodities of the recent past.[37]

The continual rebirth and resurrection of commodities in newer and better forms signifies the historical promise of the modern to progress, through the application of increased rationality to a realm, which promises at the same time, increased freedom.[38] Commodities' continual re-birth and improvement expresses a cultural way of being which is inexorably tied to an urban, industrial and capitalist way of life, one bent on perfecting control and domination, and so improving, through material progress, our social lot.

The city, hence, is the primary form or lens through which Benjamin sets out to explore the wish-images and dreams redolent within the supposedly durable stuff and materiality of the modern promise. Benjamin reflects on these efforts in his *Arcades*.

> This research...deals fundamentally with the expressive character of the earliest industrial products, the earliest industrial architecture, the earliest machines, but also the earliest department stores, advertisements, and so on....[I]t will demonstrate how the *milieu* in which Marx's doctrine arose affected that doctrine through its expressive character.[39]

Benjamin identifies the milieu or site of Marx's connection of the money economy with culture as fundamentally important because he sees Marx's historical materialism as complicit in a bourgeois historicist project of world

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[36] Ibid. [K2a,4] p.393
[37] Gilloch (2002)p.127
[38] C. Wright Mills (1959)p.166
[39] Benjamin (1999) [N1a,7]p.460—emphasis added.

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progress.[40] While Benjamin reinterprets Marx's theory of the commodity fetish through the lens of Freud to construct the thesis of the commodity as wish-image, he attempts at the same time to overcome Marx's perceived complicity in a world-historical picture by foregrounding the technical and urban material milieu, which, he argues, bedazzles Marx as much with the phantasmagoria of human progress as it evidences the rapacity of capitalism.

> It may be considered one of the methodological objectives of this work to demarcate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress. Just here, historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself sharply from bourgeois habits of thought. Its founding concept is not progress, but actualization.[41]

As we shall see, Benjamin uses Marx's commodity critique to deconstruct the rhetoric of modern progress and history which both capitalism and dialectical materialism shared. Benjamin's revolutionary critique sought to awaken people both politically to the economic and social exploitations of the urban capitalist market, and spiritually to the profound fragmentations and breakages inflicted upon the world by instrumental rationality and industrial technology.

There is in the *Arcades*, and, indeed, throughout Benjamin's work, a deeply felt and pervasive critique of technicity and its inherent catastrophe, for which the city stands as the consummate social landscape. His conception of modernity is fundamentally one oriented to the industrial transformation of society and individuals by instrumental technology, scientific rationality and industrial production. What he thought examining the city and its constitutive wish images could evoke is an "experiment in the technique of awakening."[42] This would be effected by formally "making use of literary montage"[43] and mobilizing the contradictions perpetuated by the juxtapositions of mythic commodity wish-images and their opposing pre-histories to actualize a re-membering of a redemptive spiritual-politics (he called it "Messianism") over the dream sleep of capitalist history. In essence, through exposing and contrasting the inherent contradictions of urban commodity production and their cultural repositories of value, need, desire and impossible wish-fulfillment, Benjamin's "dialectical images" sought to engage collective memories which lay bound up in the

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[40] Interestingly, C. Wright Mills makes this point too when he argues that, "Marxism and liberalism are no longer convincing because both take up the Enlightenment belief in the inner connection between reason and freedom, which holds that increased rationality would produce increased freedom. Not only that, but there is a certainty attached to the belief—such that, one should not believe otherwise; to do otherwise jeopardizes both rationality in irrational ways, and freedom in immoral ways." Mills (1959)p.165-66

[41] Benjamin (1999) [N2,2]p.460

[42] Ibid., [K1,1]p.388

[43] Ibid., [N1a,8]p.460

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experience of the built forms of the city. By recovering a lived past "buried" in the durable stuff of the city, and therein contrasting it with the present ("actual") conditions or ways of life, Benjamin hoped to expose the failures of the bourgeois modern promise of progress as the catastrophe of history. "The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are 'status quo' *is* the catastrophe....[H]ell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now."[44]

The "dialectical image" brings together, for Benjamin, contradictory or juxtapositional images or references so as to engage a creative political and redemptive outcome, an "awakening." In recognizing the dissonance or unsettling nature of something that we take to be familiar, we are forced to reflect again on its previously unthought or illusory presence. What was once familiar becomes strange. This experience he likened to shock. Only through the shock of recognition are we able to see the possibility of thinking otherwise than the present.

The commodity form and its doubled material nature is central to Benjamin's process of actualizing awakening. The commodity, under the conditions of capitalist enchantment, is necessarily a part of a process of continual fossilization.[45] The new becomes old, passed over, discarded and rejected as outmoded. "[I]t should be kept in mind that, in the nineteenth century, the number of 'hollowed out' things increases at a rate and on a scale that was previously unknown, for technical progress is continually withdrawing newly introduced objects from circulation."[46] New commodities eventually lose the patina of their promise to inhere quite the same means of materializing or actualizing the promissory myth of the modern. Commodities are subject to the transience or fleeting ephemeralities of fashion, and so become undesirable, not because their use-value has perhaps changed, but because newly enchanted exchange-values inhering in the next and better thing signify more socially acceptable participation. "Each generation experiences the fashions of the one immediately preceding it as the most radical antiaphrodisiac imaginable."[47] As the inundation of the ever new continues, so the process of urbanized subjectification becomes ever more reified.

Yet, the commodity and its fetishized corollary wish image are caught in the constant and contradictory process of being at the same time both an illusory promise and its death. Behind the alluring newness of the fashionable commodity is its always already decay.[48] In other words, time is built into commodities. Just

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[44] Ibid., [N9a,1]p.473.

[45] "As rocks of the Miocene or Eocene in places bear the imprint of monstrous creatures from those ages, so today arcades dot the metropolitan landscape like caves containing the fossil remains of a vanished monster: the consumer of the pre-imperial era of capitalism, the last dinosaur of Europe. On the walls of these caverns, their immemorial flora, the commodity, luxuriates and enters, like cancerous tissue, into the most irregular combinations." [R2,3]p.540

[46] Ibid. [N5,2]p.466

[47] Ibid., [B9,1]p.79

[48] "The other side of mass culture's hellish repetition of 'the new' is the mortification of matter which is fashionable no longer." Buck-Morss (1997)p.159.

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as fossils represent unfathomable passages of time, pre-histories to our own present, so commodities are discarded, their shelf lives eventually laid down first in the discount bins and pawn shops, then in the second hand and charity shops and eventually on the sea beds, the garbage heaps of cities. Hollowed out, their dreams passed over into another thing, they pile up. Industrial commodities, however, unlike natural fossils, speak both to the promise of a social future, and the technological capacity to overcome the present in the future, as at the same time they reveal, in their inherent material transience or fragility, the impossibility of that modern promise.

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For Benjamin, it was the inescapable materiality of the commodity which spoke to him of the need to gaze upon the city and its urban ways of life through the lens of allegory.[49] Indeed, the interrelationship of the commodity form and allegory was crucial for Benjamin, for within them "a world of secret affinities opens up."[50] "The figure of the 'modern' and that of 'allegory' must be brought into relation with each other."[51] The commodity form constitutes a doubled allegory. It stands in both instances for something else. On the one hand its manufactured and "untouched" veneer of newness, and thus its desirability as the latest and most up-to date, conceals the process by which it inculcates the re-generation of the myth of the modern. It communicates the illusion of progress. On the other hand, its entrance into a circulation of exchange is the first step to its becoming obsolete. The commodity is always already immanent with ruin. Either its materiality will give way and expose the lie of designed permanence upon which the modern depends, or, as an object in the circulation of exchange, it will begin to be subject to taste, to competing narratives which cohere around different commodities and different versions of the myth. Eventually, of course, it will begin to decay or be discarded.

Prior to the modern, the allegorical figure spoke as a reminder of the vanity of human hubris, a reminder perhaps that power lay beyond human understanding and with God. But with the modern attempt to transcend or usurp divine explanation with instrumental rationality and material scientific explanation, the commodity, for Benjamin, came to define the allegorical.[52] "Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside; Baudelaire [ie. modernity] evokes it from within."[53] The commodity's emphasis on exchange

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[49] "...only allegory, in that it makes substance totally significant, totally representative of ulterior meanings and, therefore, 'unreal' in itself, can render bearable an authentic perception of the infernal." George Steiner, "Introduction" to Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Verso: London and New York, 1998)p.20.

[50] Benjamin, *AP* [R2,3]p.540

[51] Ibid., [J6a,2]p.239.

[52] Gilloch (1996)p.136

[53] Benjamin (1999) *AP* [J56,2]p.329. Baudelaire was the poet for Benjamin who most closely reflected the allegorical face of modernity's contradictions in his lyrical reflections on the urbanity of modern

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value inaugurated a forgetting of the substantiality of the thing in favour of its phantasmagoric mythifications. For Benjamin, beneath the enticement of the commodity is the *facies hippocratica*[54], the countenance of death and decay. As he famously remarks in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*,

> [I]n allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head....This is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline.[55]

By reading the commodity form through the gaze of allegory, Benjamin attempted to expose both the tenuity of the transitory and fleeting nature of the modern commodity, together with its fantastic and illusory attempt to give an enduring form to these most ephemeral of phenomena.[56] The commodity, as it appears, repeatedly, in an unending hellishness is both a fleeting instance soon to be replaced, and thus is part of a historical production of the ever same.

> The dialectic of commodity production in advanced capitalism: the novelty of products—as stimulus to demand— is accorded an unprecedented importance. At the same time, 'the eternal return of the same' is manifest in mass production."[57]

The commodity, through the gaze of allegory, is the site and materialization of ruin and death. "That which the allegorical intention has fixed upon is sundered from the customary contexts of life: it is at once shattered and preserved. Allegory holds fast to the ruins."[58] Or again, "[a]llegory views existence...under the sign of fragmentation and ruin."[59] Nothing good can come of the status quo

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Paris. He was the modern poet *par excellence*. Baudelaire was, for Benjamin, an "incomparable brooder" and thus "at home among allegories." [J55a,1]p.328.

[54] "Hippocratic face": the face, supposedly identified first for medical literature by Hippocrates, which signals immanent death. It is characterized by emaciation, sunken eyes, pinched nose, drawn mouth and dull eyes.

[55] Benjamin (1998) p.166

[56] Gilloch (2002)p.34

[57] Benjamin (1999) [J56a,10]p.331.

[58] Ibid. [J56,1]p.329

[59] Ibid., [J56a,6]p.330

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which returns through its material phantasms to resurrect the same myths of progress and illusions of "harmonious totality."[60] Only ruin can come of this, and it is an "ongoing catastrophe"[61] that we tell ourselves otherwise. Would we awake, through the application of a dialectical technique, to this cycle of never-ending ruin, we might be able to gesture to the ability to set aright, with a radical break from what has been, and so redeem the possibility of what inheres in the intimations of the past.

Of course, the milieu for this dialectic, both of ruin and of redemption, is the city.[62] The modern city is the durable bastion which draws itself up—often to very great heights (think of the World Trade Centre)—against the natural world and proudly proclaims itself "the seat of progress."[63] But, of course, in doing so, it neglects the extent to which it is always already bound up in the production of ruin. Looked at from the point of view of allegory, the city, the urban, the urban way of life, is "from within"[64] a space of ruin.[65] Indeed, harkening back[66] to Benjamin's gnomic pronouncement in his "Theses" that there is "no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism", the modern city is both the document and, as Benjamin continues, the "process of transmission whereby [catastrophe] is passed down from one to another." It is the site, or the milieu, or the heat, in terms of which the conditions for the possibility of commodification give shape to the various bubbles or wish-images that boil inside the pot of material culture which is *not*, indeed, as durable as we would like to believe it to be.

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It is precisely around this fable of durability, and the promises that inhere therein, that reading the problem of contradiction, the colonial, and specifically the urban face of Calcutta, comes to the fore.

Walter Benjamin sought to read the landscape of urbanity, and Paris in particular, in order to expose the modern myth of progress as immanently one of ruination and catastrophe. In doing so, by shocking the reader through dialectical techniques which opened up what we take for granted to second scrutiny, he attempted to redeem the emancipatory promise of modernity from the instrumental rationalities and inanities of commodified consumption in which inhere the false wish-images and mythos of progress. But his critique, an attempt,

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Walter Benjamin, "Central Park" (1985)p.50
[62] "In stressing the centrality of the commodity, one must be careful that ones does not...lose sight of its location and setting: the city as the space of ruin." Gilloch (1996)p.138.
[63] Benjamin (1985)p.50
[64] *AP* [J56,2]
[65] Which is why our earlier invocation of Cavafy (and the other great allegorists: Eliot and Coetzee) rings so tellingly. The city collapses from within, not from the barbarian invasions from without.
[66] See footnote ft.19 in "Present".

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as he famously asserts, to "brush history against the grain"[67] was oriented to a world-historical picture. His project of modernity was one imagined through the image of "the world dominated by its phantasmagorias."[68] The urban face of modern history is not limited to the confines of Paris. Benjamin was concerned with a process that had totalizing effects and global implications.[69]

Colonial cities have a special place in the history, and pre-history, of modernity as told by Benjamin.[70] If Benjamin placed special emphasis on the links between commodities, allegory and the modern European metropolis, an emphasis which spoke to the ways in which modern dreams are done and undone, then the colonial city, as the archetypal site for natural and social exploitations in the name of profit and power, would be especially conducive to his critique. As Nicholas Dirks remarks in his recent book, "[e]mpire and capitalism were born hand in hand, and they both worked to spawn the modern British State."[71] In a way, a colonial city like Calcutta, built to feed the increasingly commodified culture of consumption within Europe,[72] and moreover, as an outpost in the schematics of imperialist domination, is itself a commodity face (a *facies hippocratica*) of modernity. Here, the doubled experience of the commodity was most keenly and exaggeratingly felt. On the one hand, colonization constituted itself through economic exploitation, and on the other, it portended the cultural catastrophes already well under way in the colonizing nations of Europe.[73] Colonization was itself enabled in the first place by the gap between Europe and the 'outside' in the application of instrumental reason to commercial, technological and administrative enterprise.[74]

But, of course, it is not as though Benjamin's critique is limited to the historical specificities of colonial urbanism, as though we could make such distinctions. Colonialism has become more complete today in ever more subtle and totalizing forms of commodification. Benjamin's critique, specifically that of the affinities between commodity and allegory, is as relevant today as in his own day. More so. The process of technological urbanisation and instrumental rationality continues unabated, and the accelerated inculcation of the urban way of life through the various phantasmagorias of commodification has reached levels of involution that no doubt would have impressed even Benjamin.

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[67] Benjamin (1968)p.256
[68] Benjamin (1999) *AP* p.26
[69] "Capitalism universalizes where there was once particularism and backwardness and it moves social life from the idiocy of rural life to the concentration of large capital located in the metropolis." Samuel Whimster, "Review of *Capitalism and Modernity: An Excursus on Marx and Weber*", *British Journal of Sociology* December 1993, Vol. 44 Issue 4, p.718
[70] "What is true of any modern city applies to the postcolonial city doubly." Patke (2003)p.296
[71] Nicholas B. Dirks (2006)p.8
[72] "In the last years of the seventeenth century and the first of the eighteenth, tea from China, laced with sugar from the West Indies, became the staple that it has remained in the English diet. Spices, silk, cotton, and an increasing array of other Asian commodities established Britain's dependence on the global economy… ." (Ibid.)p.9
[73] Patke (2003) p.293
[74] Ibid.

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> In the interminable dream that began in the nineteenth century, the dialectical tension between desire and its fulfillment continues to find resolution in the commodity. To the degree that the postindustrial West is the proof of progress, its modes of consumption and culture provide the model for the postcolonial city.[75]

Indeed, post-colonial cities are amongst the foremost examples of the type of commodified expansion and development, together with their hyper-realized reifications, that Benjamin submitted to his unique and transformative critical gaze. They are archetypical spaces for the illustration of "the split image of modernity, modernity's promises for social and individual emancipation, as well as modernity's failures."[76] As Rajeev Patke elaborates, the postcolonial urban experience "brings out the disillusionment latent in the myth of progress."[77]

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Contradiction as India

Disillusionment is the dominant experiential trope exercised in writing about contradiction in urban India, and more specifically, for our purposes, about Calcutta. Disillusionment finds its most concentrated exposition in the attention paid to dirt. India has been characterized, from the moment it came to be represented by the modern European gaze, "in the dominant grids of Western perceptions [as] a place of 'heat and dust'...crowds, dirt and disease."[78] Calcutta was one of the first sites of textual reportage due to its prominence for Europeans. Not only was it compared and contrasted to the modern metropoles in Europe, the experience of the city itself demarcated "the split image of modernity." This split image was articulated through the division between, as we have already seen, the White town and the Black town, and their conjunction whose constancy precipitated the first experiences of apparent aesthetic, and hence, ethical, contradiction. This was illustrated as early as 1803 with Lord Wellesley's social policy which made explicit the threat of social disorder and physical disease from disorderly and irrational streets. Wellesley wrote, demarcating the city between civilized modern and uncivilized, un-modern:

> In those quarters of the town occupied principally by the native inhabitants, the houses have been built without

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[75] Ibid., p. 296

[76] Heinz Paetzold, "The Philosophical Notion of the City" *The Cities Culture Reader* eds. Malcolm Miles, Tim Hall, and Iain Borden (Routledge: London and New York, 2000)p.216.

[77] Patke (2003)p.288

[78] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Of Garbage, Modernity, and the Citizen's Gaze" *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Permanent Black: Delhi, 2002)p.65

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> order or regularity, and the streets and lanes have been formed without attention to the health, convenience or safety of the inhabitants...The appearance and beauty of the town are inseparably connected with the health, safety and convenience of the inhabitants, and every improvement...will tend to ameliorate the climate and to promote and secure a just and salutary system of police.[79]

Wellesley's social policy resulted in a form of an early modernist rationalization—a "creative destruction"—and city planning in the form of the ring-road which both facilitated travel and sought to mitigate against mosquito contagion with the draining of swamp lands. Wellesley's proto-modern social policies were responding to a European perception at the time that the Black Town and its inhabitants, lacking in modern urban amenities, or any modern amenities for that matter, was a source of dirt and disease.

Illustrating the collective perception at the time is an excerpt from a travel narrative of 1835 by the poet and journalist Emma Roberts. She writes of the Black Town, but in a way that came to be characteristic of European perceptions of the greater city more generally: "a more wretched place can scarcely be imagined,...dirty, crowded, ill-built, and abounding with beggars and bad smells."[80] As Calcutta was her first port of call on the sub-continent, her initial impressions came to characterize her experience and perceptions of the country as a whole.

Perceptions of the Black Town as contiguous with dirt and disease sat counterposed with representative salutary claims made about the White Town, which was characterized as a vista of palaces, relative comfort and gracious living. Numerous accounts exist of the early impressions of the White Town amongst Europeans. In 1777, William Hickey recounts in his memoirs his first views and impressions of "the magnificent city of Calcutta."[81] "I was greatly pleased by a rich and magnificent view of a number of splendid houses...the beauty of which my powers of description are utterly inadequate to do justice to."[82] Three years latter, Mrs. Eliza Fay had similar impressions of the city when she first arrived. "The town of Calcutta reaches along the eastern bank of the Hooghly; as you come up past Fort William and the Esplanade it has a beautiful appearance [and] seems to be composed of palaces."[83] These palaces proved for Fay "very

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[79] Lord Wellesley as quoted in Chakrabarty (2002)p.66

[80] Emma Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society*, 3 Vols. (William H. Allen: London, 1835) Vol. 1.p.3, as quoted in Teltscher (2002)p.199

[81] William Hickey, *Memoirs of William Hickey* ed. Peter Quennell, (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London and Boston, 1960)p.225

[82] Ibid., p.224-25.

[83] Mrs. Eliza Fay, "Letter XV, Calcutta, 22nd May, 1780" as quoted in *Calcutta in the 18th Century: Impressions of Travellers* ed. P.T. Nair (Firma KLM: Calcutta, 1984)p.191-2.

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comfortable...but we are surrounded by a set of thieves."[84] The thieves to whom Fay refers, Bengalis in the employ of the Company's "gentlemen", occupied, as the French traveler, L. de Grandpre noted, a "disgustingly unclean" Black Town whose streets, "unappointed" with the accoutrements of "police" (sewers, drains, constabulary, garbage cleaners and sweepers) "are reservoirs of filth; that emit the most unwholesome exhalations."[85] These native conditions he noted differed greatly from the civility of "the capital of the East, the metropolis of the english [sic] empire in Asia, and the finest colony in the world." European houses "all denote the opulence and power of the conquerors of India and masters of the Ganges" and which "give to the town a most noble and majestic appearance."[86] Some thirty five years after de Grandpre, Fanny Parkes notes in 1822, how Calcutta "still deserves the name of the City of Palaces"[87] She is careful, however, to distance herself from "the vicinity to tanks and native huts"[88] preferring instead the civility of "the city proper" whose "advantages are these: you are under the eye of the Government, not likely to be overlooked,...are ready for any appointment falling vacant; you get the latest news from England, and have the best medical attendance."[89]

The identification of the native with pestilential decay and disease, and the European with suitably ordered civility and discipline or police, breaks down, of course. Beneath the dichotomies of civilizational, and fundamentally racial identification, the veneer of European urban order was itself very thin, literally. In a letter on sanitation to one Begum Johnson in the 1780's, a correspondent writes,

> Would you believe it, that in the very centre of the opulent city, and almost under our [English] noses, there is a spot of ground measuring not more than 600 square yards, used as a public burying ground by the Portuguese inhabitants, where there are annually interred upon a median not less than 400 dead bodies;

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[84] Mrs. Eliza Fay, "Letter XVI, Calcutta, 29th August 1780" as quoted in Nair (1984)p.193

[85] L de Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and To Bengal,* as quoted in Nair (1984)p.231 and 220-21.

[86] Ibid.p.220

[87] Fanny Parkes in *Begums, Thugs and Englishmen: The Journals of Fanny Parkes* ed. William Dalrymple (Penguin: New Delhi, 2002)p.14

[88] Ibid. p.33. "Tanks" are fresh water ponds (*pukur*) common throughout Bengal. The *pukur* is integral to traditional Bengali ways of life. Ponds provide for cooking as well as for washing people, clothes and animals. They provide water for domestic animals and are habitats for cultivating fresh water fish, one of the main sources of protein in the Bengali diet. Indeed, despite is proximity to the ocean, the vast majority of the fish consumed in Bengal is from fresh water ponds. Ponds also help to irrigate crops and they provide the micro-environments for coconut palms, also integral to everyday rural and urban life. Throughout the city and especially during the hot season, piles of green coconuts are sold for their rich water, which is useful in replacing electrolytes lost due to sweating in the intense heat. Around ponds, Bengali life can be said to revolve. As an indicator of its cultural importance, *pukur* was one of the first nouns I learned when studying Bengali.

[89] Ibid.,p.26

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> that these bodies are generally buried without coffins, and in graves dug so exceedingly shallow as not to admit of their being covered with much more than a foot and a half of earth, in so much that, after a heavy fall of rain, some parts of them have been known to appear above ground; that when the pressure of the atmosphere happens to be at any time diminished, and the effluvium arising from the accumulating mass of corruption has room to expand, the stench becomes intolerable and sufficient to give the air a pestilential taint! Moreover the quantity of matter necessarily flowing from it, assimilating with the springs of the earth, can scarcely fail to impart to the water in adjacent wells and tanks a morbid and noxious quality, laying by this means the foundation of various diseases among the poorer sort of people, who are obliged to drink from it; nor can those in more affluent circumstances, from natural indolence and deception of servants, promise themselves absolute exemption from it.[90]

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Contradiction as Calcutta

From the beginning, European representations of Calcutta have fundamentally characterized the place as caught in the dilemma of modernity. The first novel written about the city from first hand experience begins with the peculiarly modern allegorical paradox of the Imperial modern city caught between the dilemmas and promise of modern commodity wealth and death. *Hartly House, Calcutta*, anonymously published as an epistolary serial in London in 1789, begins,

> The grave of thousands!—Doubtless, my good girl, in the successive years of European visitation, the eastern world *is*, as you pronounce it, the grave of thousands; but is it not also a mine of exhaustless wealth! the centre of unimaginable magnificence! an ever-blooming, and ever-brilliant scene?[91]

The intensities of the experience of modern life are here juxtaposed between death and the promise of modern commodity extraction and urbanized

[90] Anonymous as quoted in Ivor Edwards-Stuart, *The Calcutta of Begum Johnson* as quoted in *Simon Winchester's Calcutta* eds. Simon and Rupert Winchester (Lonely Planet: Melbourne, London and Paris, 2004)p.156

[91] Anonymous, *Hartly House, Calcutta* [1789] (Pluto Press: London and Winchester, Mass., 1989)p.1

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wealth accumulation—"the eastern world is...a mine of exhaustless wealth." This economic possibility enabled and legitimated the present in which the novel was written by forestalling the ever-present threat of death with "the promise of a future as yet unenvisaged."[92] Indeed, as Harootunian argues, the performativity of the present as materialized in the commodification of everyday life is the informing principle of modern life.[93] More than simply the performance of a commodity driven escape from the past or tradition, the full promise of urban modern life, as instantiated through the everyday materiality of the city, is an attempt to forestall or deny death. As Ashis Nandy has suggested recently, "modern cities are systems of death denial."[94] Modern cities materially instantiate a way of thinking which identifies commodity ideals, promises and wish-images as prophylaxes against the threat of death. The modern city allows one to live through and deny death by clinging to the materiality of the everyday and the promise of futurity embedded in the culture of objects and their circulation.[95]

This proximity to civility, in the form of a European urbanity which shrinks geography and forestalls the ever present immanence of death by way of a materiality that constitutes, in Park's words, a "state of mind", continues to be reflected in contemporary accounts of the city. Calcutta has not escaped the ambiguities with which it first came to be characterised. Indeed, while early descriptions of the city concentrated a globalising geographic discourse between imperial civility and barbarism within the contrasts between the White and Black towns and their respective modern urban character and promise, the city itself has since become, precisely through such modern ways of looking, a (largely secret and unthought) foil against which are contrasted the virtues of European rationality, industrial capitalism, civic government, secularism, nationalism and individuality.[96] Calcutta, now entirely "Black Town" or slum, is contrasted with an imaginary promise of the "White Town" or palace (usually refracted through the cityscapes of London, Paris or New York). The latter represents, not just the dream of a better society and a happier life, but the actual progressivist 'wish-image' of this deeply modern conceit. The designation of Calcutta as a regressive cityscape depends on a historicist reading of history which continues to see progress as demarcated by the extent to which a city habituates bourgeois and instrumentally rationalized, and thus legitimated, ways of life.

The journalist James Cameron's epithets on the city as "the most irredeemably horrible, vile, and despairing city of the world" vehemently illustrate this prejudice. Cameron wrote at a time—1972—when Calcutta was suffering under the overwhelming strains of housing millions of refugees who came seeking solace from death and war. Nevertheless, so unflinching and

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[92] Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, N.J. and Oxford, 2000)p.95
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ashis Nandy, "The Darkness of the City" Conference Presentation at "City One, The First South Asian Conference on the Urban Experience" New Delhi, January 9th, 2003.
[95] Harootunian (2000)p.96
[96] Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (Penguin: London, 1997)p.111-112

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unembarassed is his characterization of the continuity of Calcutta's foil, that he is worth quoting at length.

> The inhuman cruelty of Calcutta defies the normal language of odium; its total wrongness has become base-measure of injustice, and its paradoxes are a platitude. It is immensely rich, and its poverty is of such an inescapable, all-pervadingly intrusive kind that generations of sociologists, reformers, planners, do-gooders and destroyers have, in the end, thrown up their hands and hopelessly retreated, loudly proclaiming that Calcutta's wretchedness has gone not only past redemption but beyond description....Everything in Calcutta transcends the ordinary extremes. Its excuse for existence is the greatest of negatives: that anyone who has lived in Calcutta can never again find serious fault with anywhere else. It is the nadir of all those values of British imperialism that were perpetuated by India herself: that is to say, the proclaimed indifference to human life. In Calcutta, most people are debris, and only too clearly know they will never be anything else.
>
> This place could have been designed as the demonstrable end-product of civic disorganization. I have often wondered how more explicitly the twentieth century could have produced its symbol of inequality.... To a European, and especially to a stranger exposed to it for the first time, this mass industry of organized misery must be a seriously disturbing experience, nothing in his ordinary Western responses equips him to come to terms with it...[97]

But, what indeed are these "ordinary Western responses" which equip us to come to terms with an ostensibly strange city? What are the expectations which are not met by the image of Calcutta? Since, perhaps, Max Weber, it has been customary to view modern life as disenchanted, freed of gods and myths. As Benjamin reminds us, the modern is very much enchanted anew. The modern city is a new mythic world, not enchanted by gods, but by the mythic possibilities and promises of capital and instrumental technology. What was colonial Calcutta if not the space of new gods and myths? These new enchantments, as Gyan Prakash notes, inhere in the 'durable stuff' of the place, in its material and social geography, which forms a natural landscape for a new mythic world.[98] The

[97] Cameron (1975)p.178-9

[98] Gyan Prakash, "The Modern City in Ruins" Conference Presentation at "City One, The First South Asian Conference on the Urban Experience" New Delhi, January 11th, 2003.

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modern city, for Prakash, through its material mythification, stands for an ethical aspiration for living together amidst difference; it aspires to a place where strangers live together. The commonality in terms of which these strangers could find some commensurability within modernity was capital. Just as capital and the commodity form produced a socio-economic middle ground in terms of which people could come together, following Benjamin's reading of the commodity, it was bound to evidence, always already, the decay and ruin that is at the same time an inextricable part of the commodified materiality.

In 1991, twenty years after Cameron visited the fateful city, ruin is again the form by which Nobel Laureate V.S. Naipaul characterizes Calcutta in his book, *India: A Million Mutinies Now.* Calcutta was a city Naipaul described in 1962, on his first visit to India as "a metropolis, with all the visual excitement of a metropolis, and all its suggestions of adventure and profit and heightened human experience"[99]; very much the positive image of the modern city exclaimed by writers on such places as New York or Paris, and, of course, early modern writers on European and Anglo-Bengali Calcutta's colonial promise. By 1991, Naipaul represents Calcutta as, "[d]ecay within, decay without."[100] It is a city of "restless vacuity and torment...broken...bypassed, living off its entrails, and giving an illusion of life."[101] It had "the feel of an abandoned Belgian settlement in central Africa in the 1960s, after Africans had moved in and camped....The British had built Calcutta and given it their mark. And...when the British ceased to rule, the city began to die."[102] As if it bubbles from within, slakes the crust of its decaying exterior, and returns in piles of regurgitated debris, worked over anew to some other state, but amidst isolated jewels or promises of something else that also fail to materialize. "Dug up roads." "Broken footpaths." "The day-long cicada shriek...of the horns of the world's shabbiest buses and motor cars."[103] The expectations of the modern that Naipaul brings to the city, "the visual excitement, the heightened sense of human possibility"[104] is met by their opposite—"public squalor", "ugliness and unsuitability", "smoking buses" "chemically tainted streets", "suffering."[105] These expectations speak of the paradox Benjamin read in cities, the tension between "the achievement of

[99] V.S. Naipaul, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (Minerva: London, 1991)p. 281. Naipaul is infamous for having written two former books about similar visits to India. The first, written in 1962, called *An Area of Darkness* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1965) characterized India, and not just Calcutta, in terms of filth. "Indians defecate everywhere" was one of the phrases which resounded out of that book. The second book he published in 1977 was called *India: A Wounded Civilization* (Penguin: New York, 1977).
[100] Ibid.p.282
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid. p.282-3
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid.p.347
[105] Ibid.

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civilization, concentrated in the great capitals" and its possibility being "overwhelmed by influences of contemporary mass society."[106]

Naipaul's Eurocentric historicism is tempered, however, by reflections which speak of an immanence within the modern, an immanence that harkens back to Sen's reflections on an urban civilization which copes, which just keeps on going through death because it has no other choice. The urban modern is read, thus, not as simply the landscape of success and failure, newness and its opposite, decay, but as one where the constancy of both coexist. The commodity, its wish-image and promise, and its *facies hippocratica* exist together. What is death or ruin anymore if it is immanent always already? Naipaul reflects on the meaning of cities' deaths:

> They didn't die with a bang...Perhaps they die like this: when everyone was suffering, when transport was so hard that working people gave up jobs they needed because they feared the suffering of travel; when no one had clean water or air; and no one could go walking. Perhaps cities died when they lost the amenities that cities provided, the visual excitement, the heightened sense of human possibility, and became simply places where there were too many people, and people suffered...Perhaps when a city dies the ghost of its old economic life lingers on. So, in Calcutta, old firms with famous names are taken over and their assets are broken up; and people invest in real estate, since people always have to live somewhere; and there is the illusion of an economic life.[107]

Only, Naipual doesn't go far enough. He still clings to the promise of Europe and of modernity, to the myths and ghosts of capital. Read allegorically, the economic is always already illusory. Naipaul is right in that the old is taken over by the coping of the new, but this overtaking constitutes a return, not a progressive dialectic of history into something else, utterly different and unseen before under the sun. The present's imaginary repeats the remembered imaginaire as its past.[108]

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[106] Louise Hoffman, "Walter Benjamin's Infernal City" *Research Studies: A Quarterly* Vol.52. Issue 3-4, 1983 p.146.

[107] Naipaul (1991)p.347-8

[108] "To understand the present imaginary, it is necessary to discover the shape of the imaginaire it now remembers as its past." Gyan Prakash, "The Modern City in Ruins" Conference Presentation at "City One, The First South Asian Conference on the Urban Experience" New Delhi, January 11th, 2003.

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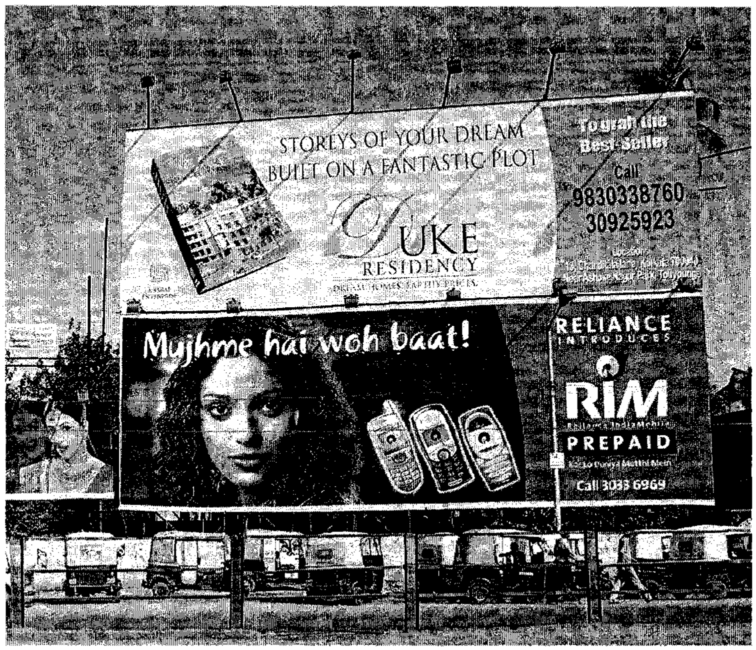

Figure 5.3: Billboard Advertising Housing Development, 2004. Photo by author

As we have seen, contemporary developments like "South City" evidence the continuing illusion of the economic life, its commodified promise, and a wish image of a future unstuck, somehow, from suffering. The City of Palaces returns and thus continues in Calcutta today. All over the city, "new palaces" resurrect themselves. Vedic Village, South City, Victoria Greens, Hiland Park, Greenwood Nook, Coral Isle. Duke Residency (see figure 1) promotes itself on an oversized billboard with the enticement "Storeys of your Dream Built on a Fantastic Plot. Dream Home, Earthy Prices." As with their colonial predecessors, these "opulent city" seclusions are surrounded by the *bustees* and huts of the many more who fall through the cracks and pile as debris on the streets. Accompanying the phantasmagoric commodifications of dwelling, similarly built accoutrements for collection materialize the habituating promise with the glitter of everyday things. The Forum on Elgin, the Metro Shopping Centre on Ho Chi Min Sarani—"Kolkata's Most Sophisticated Shopping Centre"—22 Camac Street, and Lake Mall. The latter, one of 30 such planned "opportunities" for consumption, is built on the newly razed site of the old Lake Market. It will soon be home ("projected opening date Puja 2006") to "mega stores, super-stores and hyper-marts...a food court, restaurants, cafeteria, pool tables, gyms and a play area for children...and...a four-screen multiplex."[109]

The intent behind these "re-developments", should they prove to be successful, will be, as Partha Chatterjee suggests, to integrate the metropolis "into the circuits of global capital, culturally dominated by the new managers,

[109] "Stone placed for market makeover" *The Telegraph*, Kolkata Monday, March 28, 2005

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technocrats, professionals, and middle-men belonging to, or at least aspiring to belong to, a globalized cosmopolitan subculture."[110] Was this not the aspirant image with which the city began? Is not the bubble which froths up from the same heat in the same cauldron not made of the same stuff?

If there is a difference between the colonial manifestations of material space and the current postcolonial materializations, it is that the former were concerned with producing narratives of Imperial mastery and public modernity. The latter, more contemporary forms are almost exclusively concerned with consumption.[111] Colonial urban materializations in the form of paved or metalled roads, gas lighting, electricity, parks, sewers, bridges and tramways aimed to produce or habituate the urban subject to narratives of technological mastery and modern possibility. Latterly, the more recent post-colonial urban materializations, interestingly, are more focused on purely consumptive appropriations of space. A larger public discourse of modernization is characterized almost solely through the register of consumption. Condominiums, malls, supermarts, convention centres, Maruti cars, Honda motorcycles, Zee television, Reebok, Nike and Titan watches, Nokia and mobile providers, fast food and LG appliances constitute the imaginative material horizon of Calcutta's postcolonial cityscape.

The globality of these spaces extends beyond the metropoles of Western Europe, specifically Britain, and conspicuously incorporates the syntax of Americana[112] in its consumption of the good life. As Partha Chatterjee notes, such self-conscious efforts at materializing the good life for those who can afford it, actively abandons the miasma of the decaying colonial city in which these neo-palaces situate themselves.[113] Nodes of exception constituted through participatory predicates of consumption—conspicuous consumption—these become the axes of social spatialisation and the corollary aspirant material wish-images of progress. Subjectively producing desire through their commodified landscapes, they conflate material comfort with the "infinite perfectibility of mankind"[114] and render themselves as "irresistible."[115] Naipaul was right. Space, and its specific articulations as place, have become the ultimate commodities. Outworn or outmoded earlier forms (including the people whose lives are constitutive of these spaces) are either bulldozed or discarded; or, more likely, they

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[110] Partha Chatterjee, "Are Indian Cities Becoming Bourgeois?" *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2004)p.146.
[111] Kilnani (1997)p.145
[112] Anthony D. King, "Trans-national Delhi Revisited: The Spatial Language of Three Modernities" *Spaces of Global Cultures: Architecture, Urbanism, Identities* (Routledge: London and New York, 2004)pp.141-160.
[113] Chatterjee (2004)p.146
[114] "Thesis XIII" Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* ed. H. Arendt (Schoken: New York, 1968)p.260.
[115] Ibid.

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are simply ignored, left to decay and cope as best they can. As Bauman argues, they become the "waste of modernity."[116]

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The contradictions we see and use to represent India and Indian cities are born in the projections of modern European expectation. They are born from "a homogenous, empty time"[117] and within a way of seeing which does not admit the contiguity of difference, heterogeny, nor the doubled immanence of history. These phantasmal expectations are tied to the ideologies produced and materialized through desire with respect to the social life of things.[118] Contradiction is precipitated by the wish-images of modernity, communicated through commodities and their milieux, and does not cohere with expected ideological landscapes which attempt to preclude ruin as not always already proximate to the materialities of human endeavour. The *experience* of contradiction and paradox comes out of seeing time and history as infinitely malleable to human desire and reason, of seeing the traditional and the modern, or the modern of the now and the modern of the remembered now, co-existing. It finds that co-existence anathema to the narratives of advancement with which we enchant ourselves. Contradiction is the experience of the peripheral contaminating what is expected to be central to an assumed teleology of international advancement.[119]

As in the cases of Naipaul and Cameron, the contradictory as ruin, decay and impossible heterogeny, speaks to the failure of a specific teleology. Calcutta, thus, is produced as a regrettable "residue of a dreamworld."[120] Looked at allegorically, however, contradiction, ruin and decay demand that we re-invoke the city under a materialized erasure in order to re-negotiate the teleological and progressivist assumptions of modernity that are inscribed through a materialized wish image of the hegemonic urban "state of mind." Following Benjamin, what I am suggesting here is that, allegorically mobilized,[121] the space, figure, image and discursive rhetoric of Calcutta interrogates registers of colonialism or imperialism or nationalism, discourses constitutive of global modernity and the urban, which frame how we think the present.

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[116] See Bauman (2004).
[117] "Thesis XIII", Benjamin (1968)p.261
[118] Arjun Appadurai "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value" *The Social Life of Things* ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1988)pp.3-63.
[119] Stephen Slemon, "Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History" *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* Vol. 23, No.1 (1988)p.158
[120] Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* trans. H. Zohn (NLB: London, 1973)p.176
[121] I recognize, of course, that this construction is limited to my own interpretation, just as Benjamin's allegorical reading was specific to his own gathering. "The allegorist pulls one element out of the totality of the life context, isolating it, depriving it of its function. Allegory is therefore essentially fragment[...]. The allegorist joins the isolated fragments of reality and thereby creates meaning. This is posited meaning[...]." Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, *Theory and History of Literature* vol.4, eds. Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1984)p.69, as quoted in Buck-Morss (1989)p.225

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The figure of the ruined modern city—an inevitable and immanent *facies hippocratica*—demands that we mount a form of social criticism which calls into question the assumptions which produce the contemporary apparatus of modern global civilisation.[122] Looked at allegorically, and against a picture of the city as part of a homogenous march of progress, Calcutta, as a ruined "arcade-ia", reveals itself as the very real immanence of the ensemble of urban promise within history. It too is the city of modernity. Contra Cameron's nostalgic imperialism, Calcutta does emphatically ask us to reflect on the very processes and history of the "somewhere else" by which it is that we find fault. Calcutta is about Paris and London as much as it is about India. Through the allegory of Calcutta we can "provincialize Europe."[123] It is a mirror we can hold up to ourselves, past and present; although the face staring back is stripped of the flesh of modern pretence.

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What would a "new dialectic" developed out of Calcutta's contradictions look like? The sense of the term "dialectic" used by Grass is not that of Benjamin's "dialectical image." Grass' enlightenment prejudice invokes a teleological notion of dialectic—Hegel's *Aufhebung*—which assumes a linear succession of continuous or homogeneous time, at the crest of which sits European metropolitanism. Grass' teleology attempts to re-iterate a purist modernist faith in the inevitable progress associated with the dialectical intimacies between rationality and freedom. Benjamin's dialectic, while not anathema to Hegel's *Aufhebung*[124], attempts to dissolve the naturalizing capitalist and technological enchantments of industrial modernity while preserving, in the space of history, the nascent promise of the modern.[125] Benjamin saw his dialectics as "a wholly unique experience of dialectic which refutes everything 'gradual' about becoming and shows all seeming 'development' to be dialectical reversal."[126] Contra Hegel, Benjamin's method attempts to rupture history at the very moment of discontinuity and contradiction wherein the linear flow of time established by prevailing ways of seeing history reveals itself as mythological and phantasmagoric.[127] It is as though his dialectic attempts to reveal a world

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[122] I am aware of the dangers of using this word "civilisation." I do not intend to invoke it as a means of identifying people with this or that civilisation. Such uses are dangerous forms of reductionism as Amartya Sen cautions in his recent book *Identity and Violence* (W.W. Norton: New York and London, 2006). By "civilisation" I mean the spread of instrumental rationality which exercises forms of modern material and technological urbanization and development and which touches, in one form or another, all living things.

[123] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Permanent Black: Delhi, 2002).

[124] Rolf Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill" in *AP* (1999)p.935

[125] Benjamin, *AP* (1999) [F°,6]p.838

[126] Ibid.

[127] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso: London, 1989)p.140 as quoted in Graeme Gilloch and Tim Dant, "From '*Passage*' to '*Parly 2*': Commodity Culture in Benjamin and Baudrillard" *New Formations* (2005)p.145

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stripped of pretence. "[T]he new, dialectical method of doing history...pass[es] through what has been, in order to experience the present as the waking world to which the dream refers."[128]

One wonders whether this dissolution of pretence extends to the material possibility of human resolution, or whether we are consigned to face up to the "unrealized potentials and tragic paradoxes"[129] of modernity. Benjamin's call for a reflexive awakening to the heterogeneous and hybrid co-existence of times and spaces is, in a way, a resignation to the inevitability of coping with the impossible vanity of man. Read through the lens of allegory, perhaps Calcutta can be understood as a special moment, a special space or set of spaces, which enables us to place the totality of modernity's signification into parentheses[130], to "fill time by the presence of the now."[131] Only then, by persistently facing that uncomfortable and provocative present, can we wake up to what we are doing. In this perhaps Grass, Naipaul and Benjamin might agree.

Grass' implicit invitation to re-invoke the sleep of history gestures to the inconsistencies or failures of the past in order to make the present aright. Indeed, we perpetually turn to the past for education in the present. Benjamin, too, of course, turned to the past in an effort to redeem the present. Only, he looked for the chinks in the carapace of the commodity driven mercantile myths of the urban in terms of which he attempted to "blast" the dreamworld of modernity from the illusory and homogenous course of history.[132] Benjamin's sabotage necessitates a way of seeing which is critical of a certain faith in instrumental promise. Allegory provided, for Benjamin, a way of seeing which gave license and work to that criticality.

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Commodities Visualizing Nostalgia and Reifying the Present

Uncritically turning to the past to escape, rather than suspend or bracket the conditions for the possibility of the present, produces nostalgia. Nostalgia recognizes in the present an unsuitability or dis-ease. But instead of critically interrogating the reasons for that unease, nostalgia sentimentally turns to the past to construct another wish-image, one which elides historical pluralities and contradictions and at the same time ignores pregnancies in the present. Nostalgia is a longing to go home to a future not yet arrived; it is a longing for an imagined past's promise to be fulfilled.[133] In a modern, capitalist life-world (the City) these wish-images are primarily constituted through the iterations and various grammars of material culture.

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[128] Benjamin, *AP* (1999) [F°,6]p.838
[129] Boym (2001)p.30
[130] Gilloch (2005)p.146. A form of phenomenological *epoche* or bracketing.
[131] "Thesis XIV", Benjamin (1968)p.261
[132] "Thesis XVII", Ibid.p.263
[133] Boym, (2001)p.xiii

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When materials, things, commodities decay, as they must, and do, one way of reinforcing the continuity of the wish-image, of willing the continuation of a certain sleep of the dreamworld, is to fetishize the origins of the object. A "nostalgia for origins"[134] works to deny what the inevitable passage of time intimates, and so reinforces the mythology and the enchantment of objects. With the nostalgia for origins, for an untroubled and universal place to fix social participation and identity, also comes, Baudrillard argues, a corollary "obsession with authenticity."[135]

Post-colonial India is obsessed with origins and authenticity. In post-colonial Calcutta, in particular, there is a deep and abiding public concern with the problem of origins and the protection of narratives of authenticity. The nostalgia for origins takes two seemingly contradictory forms. On the one hand, a nostalgia for an original and authentic Bengali-ness, one uncomplicated by a colonial past and socially spatialized outside the grammars of modern urbanism, saturates the society and culture of the contemporary city. From idealized, sentimental names on new housing estates, re-named streets—and, indeed, a renamed city—to popular images pedaled on streets and at fairs, to the middle class fixation with "Rabindra-sangeet"[136], contemporary Kolkata's nostalgic production of an idealized authenticity of identity is evident everywhere in the social everyday of the city. On the other hand, there is also a deep and abiding nostalgia for the wish-image and remembrance of the colonial city. Many more times than once, from more than one person, and from educated and un-educated alike, I heard the refrain and lament that life was better under "the Britishers." "The streets were cleaned everyday." "The Maidan didn't have so much litter." "Traffic was not as bad as today." "There was public order." "The Britishers left too soon."

In his recent history of the colonial city, Dhrubajyoti Banerjea, meticulously documents the colonial remnants of the "great metropolis" as "the only constant in an otherwise chaotic world."[137] Banerjea's history includes extensive archival photographs; but, his narrative, interspersed with textual excerpts from site specific historical documents traces a journey through the present day city. Yet, the book actively refuses the present "chaotic world." It does not contain, out of the eighty illustrated figures, one photograph of the present city. Instead, the present, when it is visually represented, is depicted in simplified line drawings. These line drawings circumscribe the complexities and chaos of the everyday post-colonial, and instead render the present through a

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[134] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (Verso: London, 1996)p.76 as quoted in Ibid.p.142.
[135] Ibid.p.143.
[136] "Rabindra-sangeet" refers to the some 2200 songs written and composed by Rabindranath Tagore, the legendary writer, poet and painter, and now avatar of Bengali cultural politics. His songs are learned and sung by school children all over Bengal. Every evening in Calcutta, they are sung and venerated in public and private performance. As Dhan Gopal Mukerji argues, Rabindranath's sangeet and their performance form a basis for a modern Bengali cultural ethos. See Dhan Gopal Mukerji, *Caste and Outcast* (E.P. Dutton: New York, 1923)p.24
[137] Dhrubajyoti Banerjea, *European Calcutta: Images and Recollections of a Bygone Era* (UBSPD: New Delhi, Kolkata and Bangalore, 2005)p.343 and p. vii.

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simplified, and sanitized, imaginary nostalgic lens. Banerjea's text is by no means the only one to sidestep the representational complexities and inconveniences of the present when it comes to visually depicting Calcutta.[138]

Another indicator of the city's disavowal of the present: photographic postcards of the contemporary cityscape are almost impossible to find. On the infrequent occasion when they can be found, they are invariably either re-touched and coloured images of the pre-independence city, or old, aerial photos taken at such a height that it is difficult to appreciate any specificities of the city other than major landmarks like the Howrah bridge, Victoria Memorial or the Ochterlony monument.

There is one (and by my searches the only one) extensive and popular series of postcards available of the city. These prove instructive for our present purposes. These postcards are reproductions of watercolours done by a local painter, Samir Biswas. As with most postcards, Biswas's images (see figure 3) are mostly of landmarks and sites of historic or nationalist importance, although some do attempt to depict everyday streetscapes.

Their style is such that the particularities and concentrations of photographic representation are elided in favour of conveying a feel of distanced nostalgia. Muted, washed colours, an indefinite economy of line and other formal exigencies of watercolour landscapes (indefinite frame, limited palette, colour transparency) contribute to the feel of the postcards' deliberate and constructed sentimentality. The postcards produce the city as a space of iconic remembrance. The titles of the cards also contribute to this feeling: "Nostalgia, Old Kolkata architecture at Gol Park", "Glorious Promenade", "Jewel in Kolkata's Crown", "The Old Gives Way to the New".

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[138] The few visual compendiums and celebrations of the city are almost exclusively limited to sketchbooks and watercolour treatments. See Desmond Doig's *Calcutta: An Artist's Impression* (The Statesman: Calcutta, 1989); Rathin Mitra, *Calcutta: Then and Now* (Ananda: Calcutta, 1991); and Raj Krishna ed., *From Thames to Hooghly: Calcutta, 1690-1990*, Special Issue of *Highlights: Notes, News and Views on Arts, History and Letters of India* Vol. V, No. 1 and 2 (1990).

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Figure 5.4: Jewel in Kolkata's crown: The Victoria Memorial hall awash with the fresh Monsoon glory, Watercolour painting by Samir Biswas, 1993 (source, author's collection)

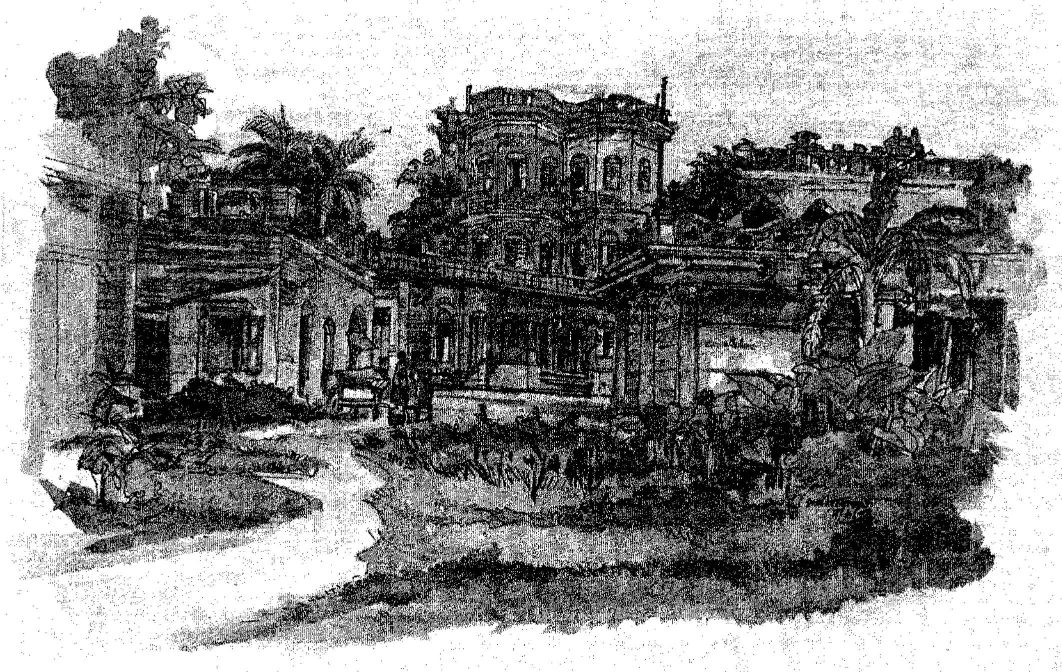

Figure 5.5: "Nostalgia: Old Kolkata architecture at Golpark, Watercolour painting by Samir Biswas, 1994" (source, author's collection)

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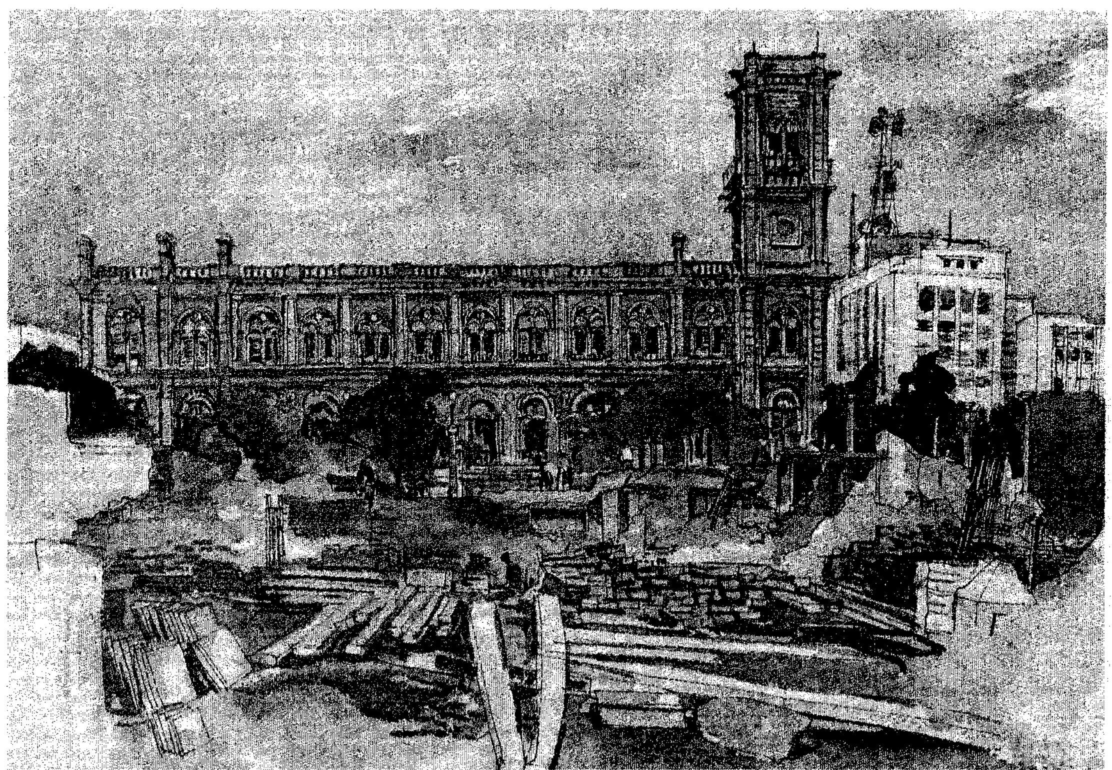

Figure 5.6: "The Old Gives Way to the New: Glorious British-period Buildings in Kolkata are being torn down (foreground) to make way for a modern multi-storeyed building. Watercolour painting by Samir Biswas, 1995" (source, author's collection)

With its obverse caption, the postcard entitled "The Old Gives way to the new" (Figure 5) makes explicit a nostalgic sense of loss of home and dislocation: "Glorious British-period buildings in Kolkata are being torn down (foreground) to make way for a modern multi-storeyed building." The colonial is described as "glorious", with, the card implies, the "new", "modern, multi-storeyed" being less than magnificent. That the card orients the reader's gaze to the representational veracity of the front side painting with the use of the qualifier, "foreground" speaks to the explicit intentions of the postcards' claims to represent something objective about the city. The postcards, some of the only such cards available in the city, I would argue, are not simply produced as explicitly interpretive vehicles for a nostalgic colonial remembrance. They are, as is Banerjea's visual history, produced with the intent of representing history with "fact and cold objectivity."[139]

Partha Chatterjee examines and critiques how similar non-photographic images are used in the didactic production of nationalist discourses. Specifically, he examines the use of non-photographic representational techniques in the

[139] The publisher's blurb on the cover flap of Banerjea's book describes its effort with the following. "History comes visually alive in this book which never compromises on fact and cold objectivity." Banerjea (2005), front cover flap.

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depiction of nationalist monuments in Indian educational and popular texts.[140] He argues that simplified line drawings and watercolours of present day nationalist spaces are preferred in educational and popular texts because they work to recover, and so produce, in the reader, (usually young and impressionable), the iconicity and sacred domain of an imaginary nationalist community. In other words, non-photographic images are more malleable than photographic images, and thus, arguably, easier to inculcate in the viewer an intended response. As he writes,

> photography itself is avoided, for its very life-like quality threatens to introduce into the image elements that suggest a specific time and context within which the monument actually exists. The iconic drawing allows for much greater control, so that all that is redundant to the sacred economy of the image can be carefully eliminated.[141]

Chatterjee's insights about the use of non-photographic images can be applied to the historical representation of cityscapes, and so can be extended beyond simply his own focus on the discourses of ideological nationalism. When faced with a cityscape whose discursive image is one that challenges the viewer through contradiction, paradox and the hegemonic rhetoric of failure, the use of non-photographic representation to circumvent that messiness in presenting, as postcards conspicuously do[142], an emblematic and highly symbolic picture of the place, is clear. Non-photographic images, mobilized in didactic ways, Chatterjee suggests, often produce,

> a visual anachronism in which the real object is taken out of its context in a specific place and time and located in an abstract and timeless space. The image now becomes the pure and sacred original, compared to which the real object can only be observed (by the tourist, for example) in its corrupt and utterly profane real-life context.[143]

In the case of Biswas' images and their near exclusivity as postcards of Calcutta, the history of the nostalgic visual reproduction of the city is placed in a deliberate, "homogenous and empty time." The city thus becomes, and is

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[140] Partha Chatterjee, "The Sacred Circulation of National Images" in *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2003)pp.278-291.

[141] Ibid.p.287

[142] Bjarne Rogan, "An Entangled Object: The Picture Postcard as Souvenir and Collectible, Exchange and Ritual Communication" *Cultural Analysis* (2005) Vol. 4, Issue 1, pp. 1-27

[143] Chatterjee (2003)p.288

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reiterated in its circulation around the globe, as a space that mourns the loss of a certain continuity in a deeply fragmented world.[144] Chatterjee's diagnostic becomes clear when we compare a "picture postcard" view with a non-postcard, photographic view of the city. The photographic present, when held against the watercolour will always appear more corrupt and irreverent than the watercolour depiction.

Consider the following two depictions of Chowringhee Road, now called Jawaharlal Nehru Road (see figures 5 and 6). The first is a postcard by Biswas. His use of the colonial name for the street, despite its name being officially changed prior to 1995 signifies a deliberate nostalgic re-iteration of the space with respect to a certain order of history. Biswas' use of Chowringhee is not exceptional or controversial. Most of the city's streets are referred to and known interchangeably, in everyday parlance, by their official Bengali names and by their colonial names. What is interesting, however, with Biswas' image, is the use of "Kolkata", a change of name made in 2001, six years after the painting was made. This simultaneous and seemingly untroubled use of colonial and the post-colonial names materializes an historical ambiguity at the heart of the city's perception of itself with respect to the history of modernity. It is an image which contextualizes, set against a photographic document taken from a similar location, the extent to which a representation can be deliberately fabricated. Biswas' image does represent actual buildings on Chowringhee Road, however, their sequence is fictitious. I tried to find a similar location from which to mimic Biswas' view, but discovered that the image Biswas presents is itself fabricated. It gives a sense of the location, but cannot claim to represent the actual road. The photograph cannot be said, in the same way, to choose its referent.

[144] Boym (2001)p.xiv

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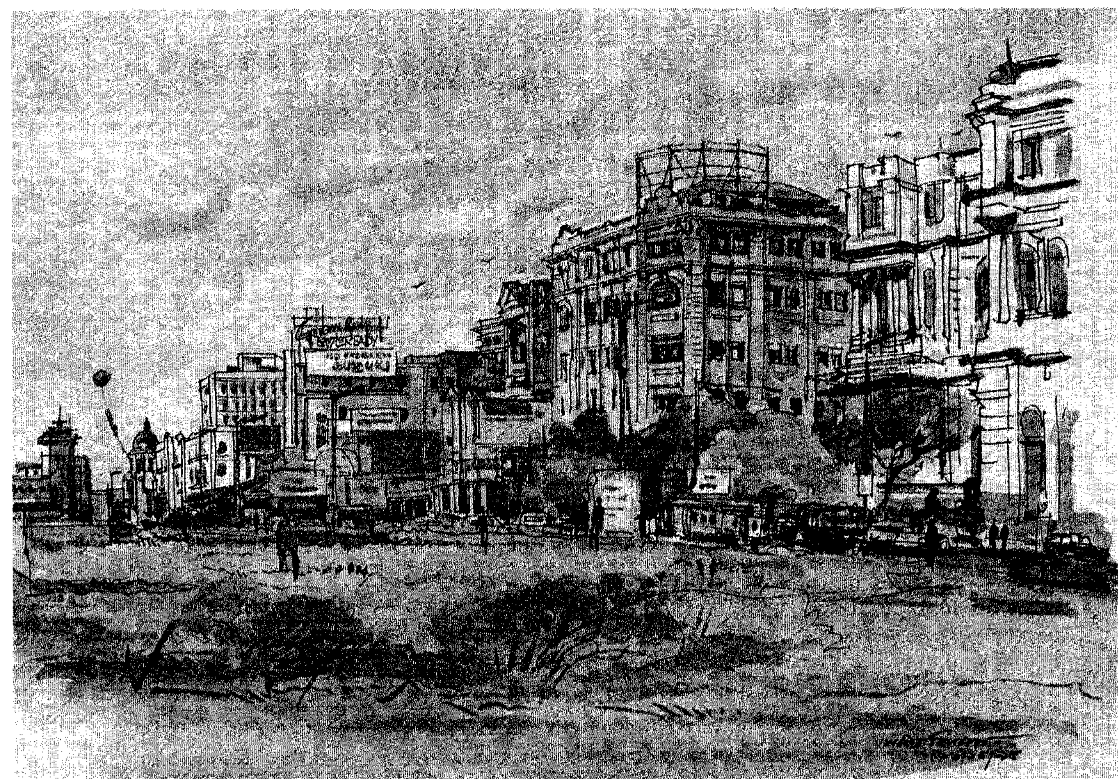

Figure 5.7: Glorious Promenade, Kolkata's Chowringhee Road with its magnificent array of buildings. Watercolour painting by Samir Biswas, 1995 (source, author's collection)

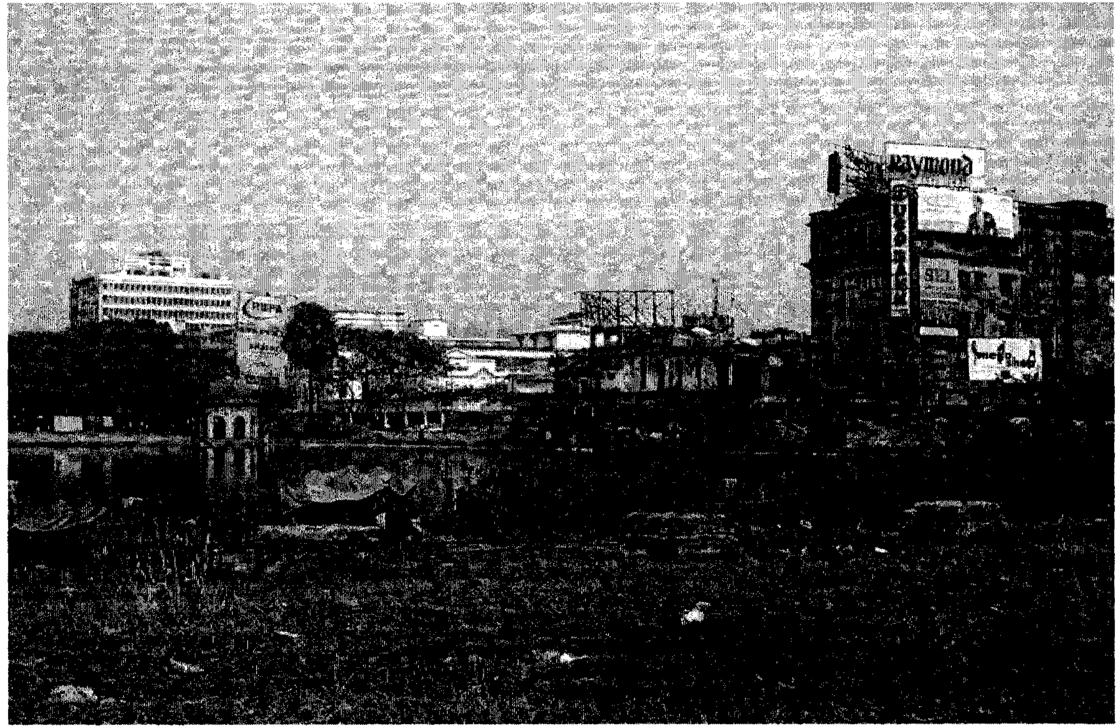

Figure 5.8: View of Chowringhee Road. 2003. Photo by author.

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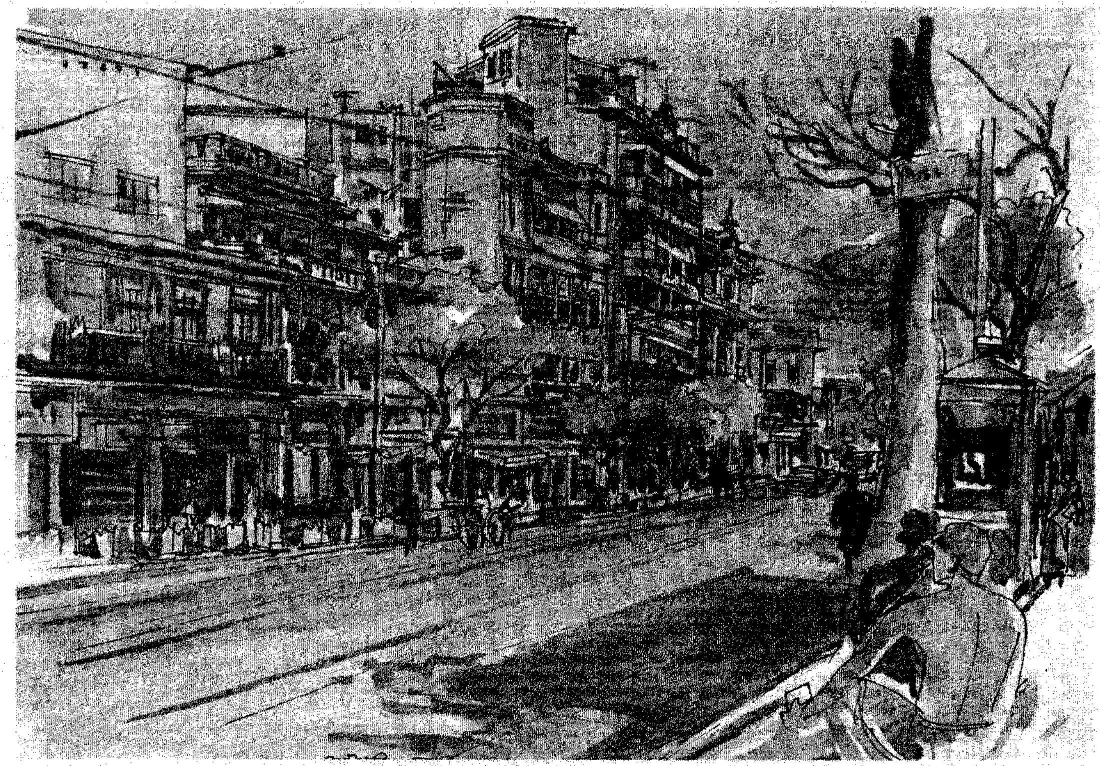

Figure 5.9: The busy Mahatma Gandhi Road, Central Kolkata. Watercolour painting by Samir Biswas, 1994 (source, author's collection)

Figure 5.10: View of Mahatma Gandhi Road. 2004. Photo by author.

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Or, again. Above are two depictions of Mahatma Gandhi Road in the centre of Calcutta (see figures 7 and 8). The postcard image is vague as to a precise location along this major street. My own photograph, taken on the same street, although undoubtedly from a different location, is here included as an attempt to illustrate the representational and ideological differences mobilized by the two distinct image forms. The former, as a postcard and a distinct commodity engaged in a discursive production within a particular semantic economy, evokes very different responses than the photograph. This is not, of course, to say that photographs are not constructed image artefacts. Photographs are malleable, and can deceive, and do produce responses in many of the same ways as do paintings. But photographs have a certain intimate dependency on light and the world that paintings do not. Biswas' postcards of Calcutta capitalize on that relationship of non-dependency and so produce a vision of the city that is decidedly more interpreted than what confronts immediate experience and its photographic document.

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The Present versus the Now

At play in my distinguishing between the two images is Benjamin's theoretical distinction between the present and the now of the lived moment. The present, for Benjamin, is inscribed and understood as an order of history. It is enframed through a particular understanding of how history constitutes the present. The present is always already historiographic; history is man-made.[145] The now, for Benjamin, is a phenomenological now, one whose experience is an effect of immediacy. Benjamin's dialectical critique invokes the heterogeneity and difficulty of the now of immediacy to interrupt the insertion of the present within an unreflexive or homogenous continuum of history. What Benjamin called the "now of recognizability"[146]—the immediate experience or the attempt to capture immediate experience in an effort to awaken urban capitalist consciousness—is not found in Biswas' postcards. Instead, the images in the postcards assert the present within an order of history, one which perpetuates the dream sleep of the collective. This order of history is, like the images, highly constructed, and arguably an historicist, homogenous one which empties time of difficulty, contradiction and ruin.

In contrast, photographs capture the now of the lived moment or immediate experience in a way that paintings do not. The photograph presents specificities that the watercolour chooses to ignore: the haphazard draping of

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[145] Tiedemann (1999)p.933

[146] "Can it be that awakening is the synthesis whose thesis is dream consciousness and whose anti-thesis is consciousness? Then the moment of awakening would be identical with the 'Now of recognizability' in which things put on their true—surrealistic—face." Walter Benjamin, "N", *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. G. Smith (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1983)p.52

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electrical and telephone cables along the outsides of the buildings; cars move partially into the frame[147]; people with definite faces—Biswas' postcards, no doubt due to the medium, erases the face—walk about their daily business. A man carries a heavy sack on his shoulders.[148] Trees grow from cracks in the colonial porticos.

In contrast to Biswas' image, the streets are barren of planned vegetation, and thus missing a certain bucolic grace fostered by the postcard with its foregrounded reclining figure and treed avenue.[149] Laundry hangs from what was once a *godown* (warehouse). More likely, modern order is disrupted in the photographed building being both dwelling and *godown*. Billboards and shop signs are visible. A temporary plastic awning has been erected to shield from the sun. Mobile phone signs and a jewellery advertisement on the electric light standard entice pedestrians with dreams of something else. In short, the photograph exposes multiplicities and heterogenies of the now that the deliberate commodity construction of the postcard elides and reifies.

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The difference between the picture postcard images and my own photographs, is, of course, that the postcards are commodities. I bought the Kolkata postcards. As commodities, postcards circulate both as material objects and as agents of action.[150] They are emissaries not only of the culture they depict, but perhaps more significantly, they circulate as transacted symbols of a consumptive form of life which is itself predicated on the capacity for, and leisured normalcy of, modern spatial transformation. Postcards are symptoms of modernity. As Siegfried Kracauer might declare, they signify "the comforts of civilization."[151]

Postcards are symbols of a modern, urban way of life which shrinks the world and makes of its participation a consumable thing. Mass products of nineteenth-century industrial technology, postcards communicate both the desire

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[147] It is difficult to take a photograph in Calcutta without a person or a car interrupting the frame, and trying to do so led me to question why it was that I didn't want interruption in the frame of my photographs. Benjamin is extending the same reflection to the frames of history.

[148] In central Calcutta where this photo was taken, and where much of the city's trade and commerce are centred, thousands of men are employed to carry goods on their heads and backs to and fro wholesalers and retailers. Indeed, entire trains are often unloaded and the goods ferried one man at a time from the Howrah station and across the Howrah bridge to the market district around Mahatma Gandhi Road. For their piecework labour, the men are paid a few rupees. In a city that needs to employ millions, these men fill an economic and social niche that in more modern cities might be considered inhuman or exploitative.

[149] In fact the Kolkata Municipal Corporation has faced significant criticism in recent years for its policy of cutting down trees lining streets to make room for more vehicular traffic.

[150] Rogan (2005)p.4. As commodities they are also part of a larger structure of social legitimation and sanction which gives assent and justification to their circulation rather than the circulation of other images. It was telling to me that Biswas' images were some of the only postcards of the city available.

[151] Siegfried Kracauer, "Travel and Dance" *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1995)p.66

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for new things and the successful, social consummation of the new. "I have arrived and here is the proof!" This desire for the new extends beyond the possession of a specific commodity out to a world which commodities make possible. Postcards signify a longing and participation in an exotic and imaginary world made accessible by modernity and leisured consumption. In signifying the dispersal of a new consumer culture, they re-produce the imagined world for the modern. They thus act as markers beyond simple and anecdotal communication between people. As symptoms, postcards produce the vicarious desire in the recipient to possess the world in the same or similar way as does the sender. For Benjamin they are narcotic agents in the global perpetuation of the dream sleep.

There is something bare or essential about the postcard as a commodity form. Its use value is its exchange value. Not only is its pictorial representation engaged in a cultural or political economy of signs, its movement and transaction represents something essential about the commodity driven mechanism of modern urban life, its social spatialisation, and the production of embodied material desire. Postcards signify and transact, at the same time, the very fetishization of space. For the sender they embody a certain illusory attempt to possess a place through transaction. And, as postcards are primarily bought and sent by tourists, by people who are merely temporary inhabitants of a space, they are time sensitive. The possession signified by the sending, or even just the retention of the card as memento or souvenir, is fleeting. And for the receiver of a postcard, the card signifies an embodied or unfilled wish which further alienates them from the profane present within which they find themselves. In essence, they goad the receiver into similar forms of participatory and social consumption of the world experienced by the sender.

Furthermore, this social alienation is doubled by the representational tactics of how postcards explicitly aim to produce, in the viewer, a wish image for a dream space which is itself alien to the complexities and contradictions of the present it depicts, a present against which the card invariably acts as a foil. For Benjamin, they might be read as signs of a global diffusion of the phantasmagoric dream sleep which besets the inhabitants of the modern.

> The nineteenth century a spacetime <*Zeitraum*> (a dreamtime <*Zeit-traum*>) in which the individual consciousness more and more secures itself in reflecting, while the collective consciousness sinks into ever deeper sleep. But just as the sleeper—in this respect like the madman—sets out on the macrocosmic journey through his own body, and the noises and feelings of his insides, such as blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, and muscle sensation (which for the waking and salubrious individual converge in a steady surge of health) generate, in the extravagantly heightened inner awareness of the sleeper, illusion or dream imagery which translates and accounts for them, so likewise for the dreaming

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> collective, which through the arcades, communes with its own insides. We must follow in its wake so as to expound the nineteenth century—in fashion and advertising, in buildings and politics—as the outcome of its dream visions.[152]

Celebrating a "macrocosmic journey"[153], postcards extend the dream-space of the commodity dream world out the body to encompass the globe as picture.[154] They make the globe "the insides" to the commodity milieux, which in the city is limited to the commodity spaces of the arcade and street. World as arcade, the globe itself becomes the commodified embodiment of the urban dream space for the self-conscious and imperially legitimated tourist, citizen of modernity.

What is interesting about Biswas' postcards of Calcutta is that they are products responding, within a commodity culture, to the demise of Calcutta as celebrated arcade. As representative commodities postcards are products of the image-making imagination of the individual transferred to the collective unconscious[155] in response to the ruin of the modern city. They are not revolutionary, post-allegorical reflexive products whose task it is to wake sleepers from their dream. Rather, through the tropes of nostalgia, they attempt to re-enchant or make sacred an iconic past against a fragmented and difficult present. As commodities they do not escape the standstill with which Benjamin diagnoses the narcolepsy of the modern city, but become read as a phenomenon of the naturalization of a modern capitalist mythology.

> The property appertaining to the commodity as its fetish character attaches as well to the commodity producing society—not as it is in itself...but more as it represents itself and thinks to understand itself whenever it abstracts from the fact that it produces precisely commodities. The image it produces of itself in this way, and that it customarily labels as its culture, corresponds to the concept of phantasmagoria.[156]

☙

While Benjamin analyzed multiple commodity forms in his *Arcades*, the next section of my essay will focus on the discursive transition of one particularly illuminating commodity form, Bengali *pata* painting. I would like to explore how a pre-modern art-practice becomes modern artefact and commodity within the discursive domain of modern urban nationalism. I will contextualize the transition

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[152] Benjamin (1999) *AP* [K1,4]p.389
[153] Ibid.
[154] See Heidegger (1977) and ft.3 in section called "Return to the New City."
[155] Benjamin (1999) *AP* [G°, 27]p.844
[156] Ibid., [X13a]p.669

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of this significant Bengali folk art form from its traditional uses in cultural transmission, through its more recent articulation in commodification and exchange values, to its contemporary reception as an artefact of nationalist identity formation.

The modern cityscape plays a significant role in how this cultural practice becomes commodified, and at the same time, nostalgically wrapped up in a pervasive longing for the imagined invisibility of the past.[157] I would like to draw out what Benjamin might call the "secret"[158] and "indefinite"[159] affinities between the city, the capitalist production of *pata* scrolls as commodities, and the discourse of nationalism, to show how "the commodity intermingles and interbreeds as promiscuously as images in the most tangled of dreams."[160] This process, exemplified by the commodification of *pata* painting, examines how Calcutta, as a commodity city par excellence, has been one of the central urban milieux on the sub-continent for the historical imagination of the post-colonial nation state. Indeed, the figurative city and the literal city assume a central role in how the imagination of a nationalist identity and character came to be constituted. The modern cityscape of Calcutta acted as a counterpoint to the re-imagination of a "natural" Indian-ness. By exploring the transition of a traditional art form to its place as a somewhat banal and inconsequential artefact and commodity within the landscape of modern urbanisation, we can then situate the city at the crossroads, past and present, between longing and estrangement, memory and freedom, nostalgia and modernity.[161]

[157] Boym (2001)p.75
[158] Benjamin (1999) *AP* [A°,4]p.827
[159] Ibid. [A°, 5]p.827
[160] Ibid.
[161] Boym (2001)p.76

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Part VI: Commoditization and the Role of Calcutta's Modern Cityscape in Naturalizing Indian Nationalism

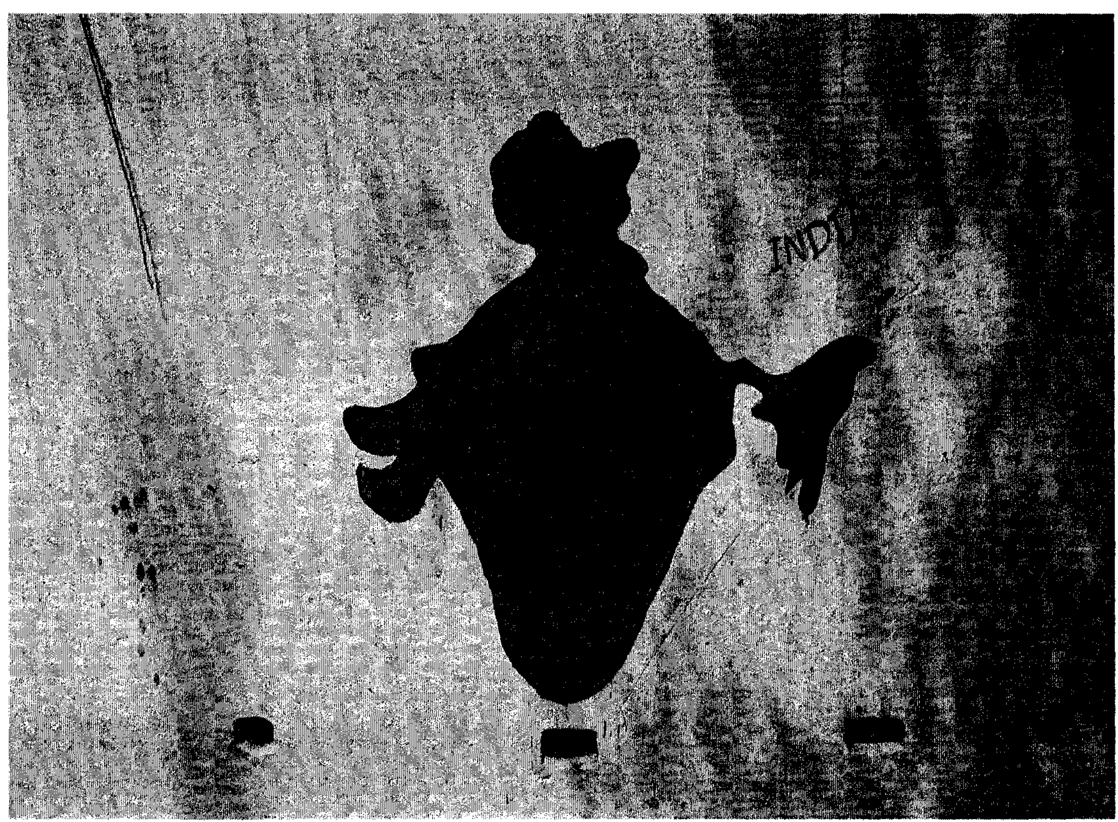

Figure 6.1: Wall Map of India, Diamond Harbour.

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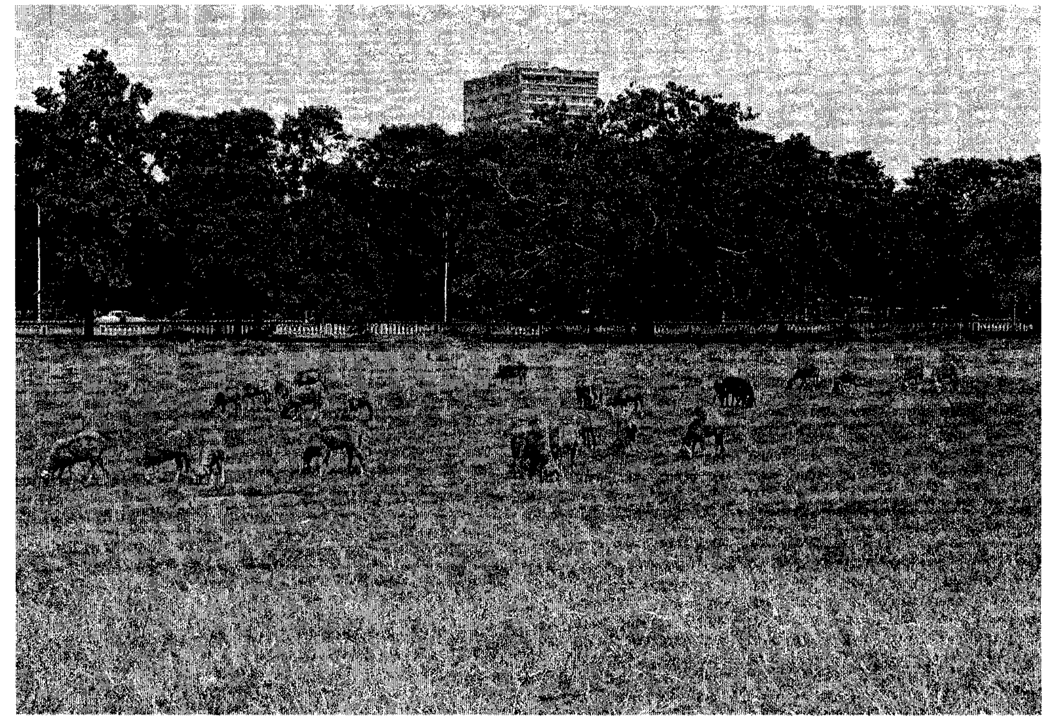

Figure 6.2: Sheep Grazing on the Maidan, Calcutta. June 2003. Photo by Author.

'The places have mingled', the goatherd said. 'Cecelia is everywhere. Here, once upon a time, there must have been the Meadow of Low Sage. My goats recognize the grass on the traffic island.'

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

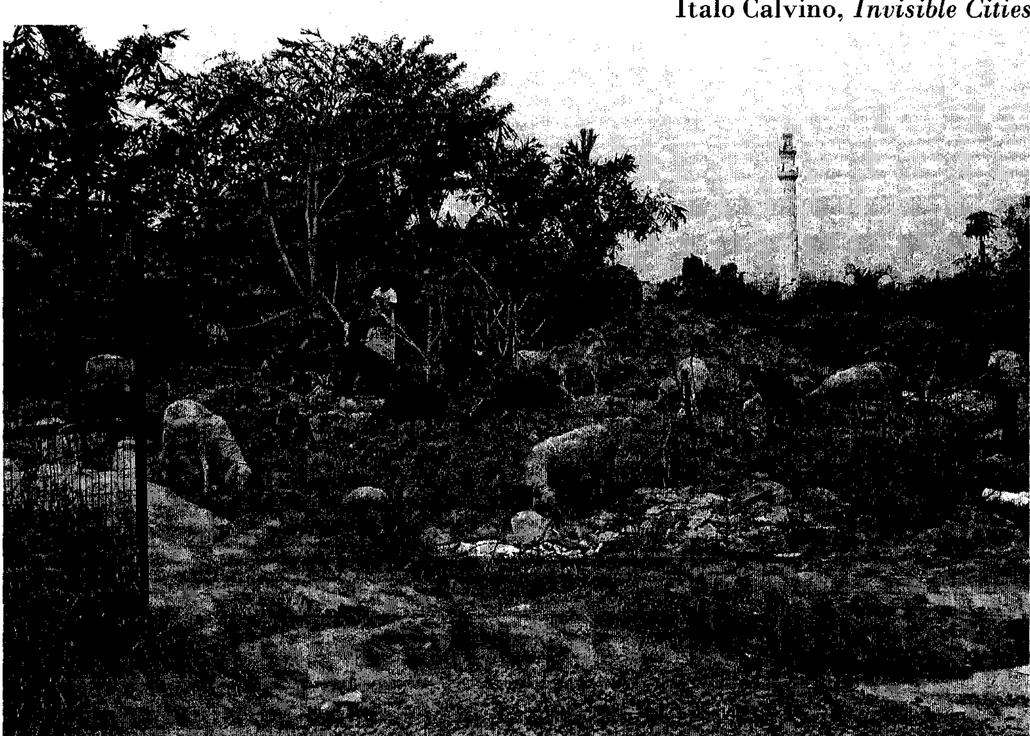

Figure 6.3: Sheep Grazing on the Maidan, near Chowringhee Road, Calcutta. April 2003. Photo by Author.

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> Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.
>
> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" [1936] 1968

> The image wields far greater power over our imaginations and passions than the real thing.
>
> Partha Chatterjee, "The Sacred Circulation of National Images" 2003

> The great art of making things seem closer together. In reality. Or, from where we are standing; in memory.
>
> Walter Benjamin, "The great art of making things seem closer together" [1929] 2003

In her recent study on the territorial production of nationalism in India, Manu Goswami opens with a simple observation. It is as resounding as it is direct: "[c]entral to the project of nationalism is making the nation appear natural."[1] 'Natural' means many things in the productive discourses of nationalism. Not least of which is its work in constructing narratives which presuppose a delimited, geographic space always already home to an imagined community,[2] culture, economy and history. The work of producing nation-hood is an imaginative, creative, and arguably, fictional one. There is nothing about the world that is objectively nationalistic.[3] Trees and rivers and beasts don't care whether they belong within this or that border. Borders, nations and communities are social products, imaginatively performed through the concert of geographic accident and human association, and discursively and textually legitimized through such creative productions as narrative, histories, myth, folk art, song, costume, etc. As lived and living stories, nations are constantly in the process of re-writing and re-imagining themselves. They are not completely free, of course, since they must meet collective human need and expectation. Producing the apparatus of a nation demands that the social construction of the mechanical and technical organization of the state be modelled so as to affect an outcome precipitated by a

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[1] Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2004)p.1

[2] Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and the Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991 rev.ed [1983]) is one of the most influential recent works on producing imaginative narratives of nationalism. Anderson's thesis is important in its subjectivist attempt to bridge disciplinary divides between structural and cultural accounts of nationalism. For an analysis of Anderson's thesis see Manu Goswami, "Re-thinking the Modular Nation Form: Toward a Socio-Historical Conception of Nationalism" *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 44, 4 (2002)pp.770-799

[3] Indeed, I hold to the assumption that we cannot, with any certainty, possess objective, sociological knowledge about the world at all. Objectivity is a chimera, a seductive one, but a chimera nonetheless—no less phantasmagoric than the wish-images of commodities. Indeed, much of the fetishistic force of the commodity is bound up with positivist and rationalist claims of objective appropriation.

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utilitarian objective. Under the secular, metropolitan rubric of modernity, nations exist so that they can do things for collectivities.

In the case of colonialism, the idea of the nation was mobilised by both the colonizer, and subsequently, the colonized, but each for very different ends. For both colonialism and its contiguous resistances, the objective of imagining a national community of association was either, on the one hand, to unify a previously disparate geography in order to better capitalize on its wealth, or, in the case of indigenous responses to colonialism, in order to unite previously disparate geographies and peoples in the effort of collective self-realization and self-government. For the colonizer, nationalism legitimized exploitation. For the indigenous colonized, nationalism was both a means to freedom from exploitative, colonial rule, as it was, at the same time, a ticket to membership and participation in a modern, cosmopolitan, global civilization. Self-determination and distinct but participatory membership are integral to the production of the idea of nationhood.

Thus, the discourse of nationhood participates simultaneously in a universally legitimate articulation of group identity and in a discourse of modern particularism.[4] Where a modern nation had not existed before, a narrative of collective determination depends on a representative, ideational apparatus, and the coherence of that apparatus depends on the production of various legitimate narratives of belonging, authenticity, authority and history. These various narratives need to be ideologically employed in order to legitimate a discourse of either oppression or resistance. In the case of Indian colonialism, the narratives of race and natural superiority became the dominant discourses of European legitimation for exploitation and subjectification. For counter-hegemonic collective practices, appeals to a particular, ancient history and a determinate and naturally constituted collective and essential character legitimated the right to self-determination and autonomy.

Resisting the colonial order demanded the ambivalent employment of seemingly incommensurable narratives. The rhetoric of a nascent nationalism needed to emphasize the modern, indigenous capacity to constitute a state apparatus commensurable with modern forms, in other words, extant European, modes of nation-ness. In order to be taken seriously, the new state had to take a form similar to the colonial model; it had to be of a form modulated to its patriarchal predecessor. For instance, the emergent state had to reflect values of secularism, common law, rationalism, capitalism, scientific representation, etc... . But, in order to distinguish itself as different, it had also to provide narratives, or histories, which proved its difference and distinction.

Self-government depends on defining a collective "self." In other words, one must delimit what it means to be "Canadian" or "Armenian" or "Indian." How we come to define ourselves as different and distinct is a matter of narratives, histories and discursive regimes which articulate that difference as a constituent of a naturalised order. Race, history, geography, language, aesthetics, religiosity,

[4] Goswami (2002)p.775

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economy are all examples of narratives mobilised in the nationalist constructions of difference and collective identity.

But to make a project appear "natural" is to naturalise it. That is, one must write the project through a language and representational semiotics of essentialism. We are different because it is in our "natures" to be so. The discourse of "nature" thus depends on a determinately geographic and territorial interpretation of being. Because we live in such and such a place; because we grow such and such food; because we cope with such and such environmental conditions (heat, rain, seasonal variations, etc..); because we are culturally situated in this specific landscape, and not otherwise; because we participate in a geographically bound linguistic community; etc., all determine difference and self-understanding, and thus constitute how social groups describe their being and becoming as naturally distinct.

In the case of Indian nationalism, the discursive production of natural, and national, difference depended on identity being defined through geographic location. To be more precise, the discourse of nationalism depended on narratives which negotiated mutually delimiting spatial topoi. Central to this delimitation within the discourse of modern nationalism, ambivalently balancing, as it does, the demands of universalism and particularism, were discursive representations of the city and the village. The modern discourse of Indian nationalism was written largely through the problematic of urban-rural differentiation. The space of the colonial city represented the ideational instantiation of the modern, rational nation. Yet, in so far as the colonial city was itself a place which demarcated social subjugation and hegemonic acculturation, it could not be relied on to produce a naturalized narrative of difference. It was, as a cosmopolitan space, always already an admixture of socio-historical and cultural influences. Something else had to legitimate, for the discursive production of modern nationalist narratives, the space of essential, natural, or grounded difference; that space, for India, was the rural village, ie. the country.

That which resided in the country was "natural" and thus Indian. That which resided in the city was not-natural. Important none-the-less for legitimate modern participation of the world stage, the modern city was always already an admixture of the colonial and the Indian. Producing the idea of the particular Indian nation depended on the discursive interplay between symbolic registers of the city and the village. Narratives of the village, the rural and the country were employed to define natural difference, and hence, made the project of the nation appear natural.

Within this differential interplay, competing notions attached themselves to the ideational, spatial landscapes of city and village. The modern, colonial city, while dynamic, liberating, fast paced, progressive, scientific, secular, technologically superior, wealth producing, ever changing and heterogeneous, was also seen as culturally destructive, materialistic, exploitative, indifferent, sinful, alienating and divisive. The village, while parochial, caste bound, impoverished, materially backward, locally bound, narrow minded and relatively unchanging, was also seen as the "natural" repository of cultural purity, continuity, essential

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identity, innocence, neighbourliness, peace, simplicity, sacred communion, sacrifice, and sustainability. It is important to note that the problematic of urban-rural differentiation mirrors the ambivalent nationalist imperative of universalism and particularism. Discourses of Indian nationalist modernity depended on the simultaneous participation in, and representation of, both city and village.

If the history of Indian nationalist discourse was significantly shaped through the discursive interplay of city and village, then Bengal was the locus, for several reasons, for much of this narrative production. It was in Bengal that the colonial encounter first permanently spatialized itself through the emergent metropole of Calcutta. While British colonial influence had been felt on the subcontinent in regions other than eastern India, notably in the factory of Seurat on the West Coast, since at least 1600, it was in what was to become Calcutta, that the colonial economy instantiated itself permanently. Calcutta became the central node for colonial governmental expansionism in the sub-continent. And, it was in this administrative centre that the idea of modernity first took hold on the subcontinent. Calcutta was at once the centre for colonial administration as it was at the same time the crucible for indigenous responses to modernity. These responses were from very early on, modern in character. That is, they attempted to address the question of self-determination in a way that synchronized European enlightenment rationalism with discourses of "natural" difference. As independent nationalism grew in response to colonial oppression, so the rhetorics of difference amplified and expanded. Where, in the early 19th century the indigenous discourses of participatory modernity depended on a certain colonial consensualism, by the early 20th century they had become almost exclusively discourses of outright refusal. For instance, the rhetorics and performances surrounding *swadeshi* (home industry) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were very different from earlier indigenous syncretic and Orientalist narratives of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Yet, despite becoming decidedly anti-colonial, the indigenous project of nationalism still depended on the modernist imperative of autonomy. The rationale for this determination lay in the naturalized, rational legitimation of identity.

The idea of "nature" came to play a much more prominent role in the critique of colonial modernity. And it was not just discussions of socio-cultural and linguistic identity which defined nationalist difference. Actual references to natural, non-human landscapes and the embeddedness of essential characteristics in village and rural settings came to define the collective understanding of difference and legitimate the critique of the modern for Bengalis, and subsequently, Indians. Notions of social identity, indigenous purity, cultural distinctness, local fecundity, self-reliance and redemptive spirituality were mobilised through natural rhetorics which emphasized landscape, rurality and village life. The forms these productive discourses took were varied. Folk art, folk songs, poems, essays, music, drama, dances, stories, novels, paintings, photographs and film, all contributed, in so far as they problematized the urban-rural differential, to the production of modern nation-hood in Indian. These

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varied discourses, enervated as they were through the symbolic registers of the natural, provided powerful, unifying ideologies which transcended simply political calls for representation. They defined the nature and identity of modern difference for political projects.

It is important to note, however, that the vast majority (I hesitate to say all) of the discourses involved in producing the modern national project originated in the space of the colonial city. Nationalism is an urban notion and an urbane production. The colonial city was perceived as a space productive of loss and acculturation, and consequently as a place of cultural and social alienation. Narrative appeals to the natural landscape and the rural village, as constitutive places of essential or natural difference from colonial, metropolitan modernity, were themselves removed, so to speak, from the sites of their representation. As a result, to speak of the places which delimited natural socio-cultural difference, the discourses employed reifying vocabularies. Rural spaces and natural landscapes were often idealized as pastoral idylls. They were romantically held up as the natural instantiations of the authentic normative grounds for a project of nationalism. Not only were the rural landscapes themselves imbued as the grounds for a normative critique of colonial modernity, but so too were the practices of those who lived in these landscapes, reified with the aura of authenticity. The villager and the "folk" were seen to embody the quintessential aspects of natural difference necessary for the modern project's implementation of a discursive particularity.

In the Indian case, not only was the village life and its natural surrounds amenable to the modern project of describing national difference, but it was also held to be a normative, social repository for values critical of modern civilization. This discursive production of difference thus doubled itself through the abstracted and reified, symbolic space of the village. The rural was both naturally distinct from the modern city and a wellspring for collective identification. But it was, at the same time, also the site for a redemptive ethics of modern refusal. Critiques of technological violence, environmental destruction, social alienation, economic exploitation and the capitalist commodification of culture located their normative grounds in the ideational, natural space of the rural and the village.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) were perhaps the most important, and famous, exponents of a universal humanism whose critique of modernity is grounded in the spaces of the rural village and natural landscapes of the sub-continent. Their work, particularly that of the former, Rabindranath, mobilised a critique of modern, technocratic civilization through a phenomenological ethics grounded in the lived experience of the natural landscape and the rural village. Yet, in so far as their critiques rationalized a critical humanism, they were at the same time intimately bound up with the modernist, national project of making the nation appear an autonomous expression of collective natural capacities. This discourse was never able disassociate itself from the problematic of urban and rural differentiation, and hence also from the problematic of nationalist modernity altogether.

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Since nationalist independence in 1947, the Indian rhetoric around the problematic of urban-rural differentiation and its appeal to a constitutive "natural" has only increased in intensity and importance. India has consistently sought to define itself on the world stage in respect of its particularity, as it must. The village and the rural life of the country are still appealed to as repositories of collective natural and normative difference, uniqueness and national particularity. Numerous and on-going border disputes, together with debates over national boundaries, have, since Partition in 1947, exacerbated the collective demand for self-definition, and foregrounded those discourses which legitimize and produce narratives of natural difference. Some of these political disputes, as we shall see, have resulted in enormous social traumas which are still very much alive in the imaginative national lives of millions today. For example, in Bengal, although it suffered two prior partitions in 1905 and 1947, the most traumatic territorial, cultural and psycho-social division, in living memory, is that of Bangladeshi Independence in 1971. Millions were displaced, forced to the city from their ancestral villages, many thousands killed, and their lived connections with home forcibly broken (*bhanga*). Many Bengalis look east from Calcutta to the new state of Bangladesh and mourn the loss of an identity, landscape, home, family and culture.

But, contemporary India is, as well, a very different place from the newly post-independence India of 1947, and indeed, from Bangladeshi independence in 1971. Neo-liberalist economic policies since the mid-1980s have opened the economy up to globalised forces of trade and cultural influence. Collective social traumas are no longer simply the purview of nationalist territorial disputes as they might have been thought and construed in the 1970s. The idea of an Indian "home" is contested and defined now, not simply by borders, but by lived commodity practices and mobilities. Such mobilities are characterized as much by spatial movement as they are by multi-class participations in commodity consumption and cultural heterogeneity. Cities, the dominant locales for class mobility are expanding at exponential rates as peasants flock to economic centres in search of work. At the same time, the capacity of the middle classes to comfortably afford travel and commodity luxuries is increasing at a rapid rate. Goods, products, services and images from all over the world are increasingly available, as is the capacity, and willingness, to participate in a modern, technologically progressive, materially determined and globally represented life-world beyond and at the same time within the borders of Bengal and India.

At the same time as a determinately modern, national collectivity participates in a more and more globalised lifeworld, saturated with its representative images and accesses to narratives and discourses not originating in the imaginative vocabularies of the territorially bound Indian nation state, the modern imperative of "same but different" continues to assert itself. The result is that the village and the rural are still held up as symbolic repositories for a naturalizing project of particularity, but in an increasingly reifying manner. The idea of the country is today consumed as a cultural commodity representationally transacted through spatial and discursive narratives of imaginary participation.

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Where once the swadeshi movement demanded the normative production of the nation through the consumption of local commodities, notably *khadi* (homespun cloth), in opposition to British machine-made imports, today, the idea of the country is re-produced and bought representationally. Within the space of the city, images of the ideational village, the imaginary rural landscape, folk art and idealized nature are bought as markers of cultural identity and heritage participation, despite an avowed contemporary urban emphasis on cosmopolitan globalism. Whereas in the early naturalisation of nationalism the discursive project entailed a certain participatory experience of the essential country, the same narratives which negotiated the descriptive differentiation between modern and traditional, urban and village, are today performed only as romantic or nostalgic reminders of cultural difference. The nationalist imperative to the natural is contained now in the image.

The following section is an exploration of nostalgic constructions of urban identity and imagined natural tradition as they are ambiguously represented in the imaginative interplay between Kolkata's ambivalent cultural and spatial boundaries of the rural and the city. I begin by ethnographically returning to a particular contemporary landscape of Kolkata. I aim to represent its imaginary dwelling space as a product of a particularly reified conception and commodified product of wished for and nostalgic place amidst the global flow of urbanism.

I situate the discussion between two material registers. One is the E.M. Bypass, a highway which forms the eastern boundary of the city. Along the Bypass contemporary spatial manifestations of the global flows of capital and desire manifest themselves as sites of exclusion. These spaces are situated in juxtaposition with older city spaces which were constituted, not simply in terms of exclusion, but in view of modernist progressive paradigms of attempted inclusion – nationalism, social welfare, authenticity. The second register through which these problematics are materialized and analyzed is that of Patua folk art. I read Patua scroll paintings both as repositories for imagined histories and identity, and as ambivalent sites which both exploit nostalgic constructions, and attempt, representationally, to render the present-day city in a reflexive globalism.

In reading the city between the poles of the bypass and folk painting, I suggest that contemporary Kolkata exhibits a specifically modern contradiction, one which oscillates between the traditional rooted, security of imagined folk and country, and the mobilities of necessarily modern, globalizing flows. This contradiction manifests itself in the city's always already heterotopic materiality "of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, the near and the far, the side by side and the scattered."[5]

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[5] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" *Re-thinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997)p.350

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I begin, in good Derridean fashion, on the Bypass. I then move to the centre of the city where a chance encounter provokes an introduction to a Bengali folk art made by a caste group called the Patua or *chitralekha*. I introduce the reader to the artistic and cultural characteristics of the Patua and their practices of painting narrative scrolls. In the 1970s, Patua scrolls saw a resurgence in their reception and appreciation. Previously, a considerable period of decline in the craft was attributable to colonial modernizations of the educated Bengali middle-classes. Why then this shift in appreciation? I contextualize the re-interest as due to, at the time, an overwhelming urban crisis and its concomitant literal, and figurative, homelessness or rootlessness. The turn to folk art representations signalled an attempt to assert an ideological master narrative in the pursuit of a nationalist identity and social stability in response to the massive social divisions and anxieties which defined Calcutta and Bengal in the 20th century. I broadly sketch some of the major historical events which produced these anxieties.

The attempt to imagine traditions in the work of re-defining social identity and stability necessarily entails exploring historical genealogies of rural-urban differentiation in the project of nationalism. I read the turn to folk arts within the context of these genealogies. I begin with the 1823 dialogue of Bhawanicharan Bandopadhyay, *Kalikata Kamalalaya*, which narrates a conversation between a "City-Dweller" and an "Outsider." Second, I present briefly how the Bengal Renaissance shaped a rational syncretism of European Enlightenment and indigenous practices in shaping a distinct sense of Indian modernity. I end with a brief on the novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. Third, I introduce the enormous cultural influence of Rabindranath Tagore for a nationalist project within his ambivalent discourses on the village and the city. Rabindranath's writing and socio-political work casts how Bengal, India and Bangladesh naturalise and define their respective national projects. It is no exaggeration to claim that Rabindranath has become an avatar for nostalgic productions of Bengali identity. Post-Rabindranath, the attempt to assert a sense of social identity in the face of the traumas of Calcutta's 20th century, resulted in a shift from a participatory performative reception of narrative art forms to their consumption as visual commodities. With reference to Partha Chatterjee's recent work on the simplified style of didactic, national images, I suggest that Patua scrolls work particularly well as devices for imagining iconicity, particularly romantic dichotomizing nostalgias of the rural village and alienating city. But, what of ambiguous, hybrid imaginaries? I analyze three contemporary scrolls. I read them both as imaginary nationalistic commodities and as ambivalent signs which literalize the social paradoxes between rural traditionalism and the perceived need to situate the city and community within a global modernity.

Lastly, I return to the Bypass. As commodities performing an imaginative redefinition of social identity, I compare the scrolls' ambiguous representations with a simulated and highly reified space called Swabhumi. Swabhumi is a commodity space on the E.M. Bypass which attempts to assert

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social identity through the simulacra of a "heritage" theme park. Working within a paradigm of privatized exclusion, citizenry is thus defined through those who can buy their way into participatory identity and heritage. Whereas once Calcutta's turbulent political history evidenced the agonies of inclusion, today, on the Bypass, inclusion is less a matter of territorial or communal belonging, something which necessitates a relationship with a landscape, than it is a non-territorial purchase related more to the global flows of nostalgic consumption than it is to countryside. I end by problematizing an "epiphanic politics of imagined modernity"[6] by situating this appeal against a necessary critique of nationalist institutions along the highly privatized and globally exclusive space of the bypass. The consumption spaces which celebrate an imaginary modernity are returns to the bourgeois palaces of the 18th century within an homogenous and empty history.

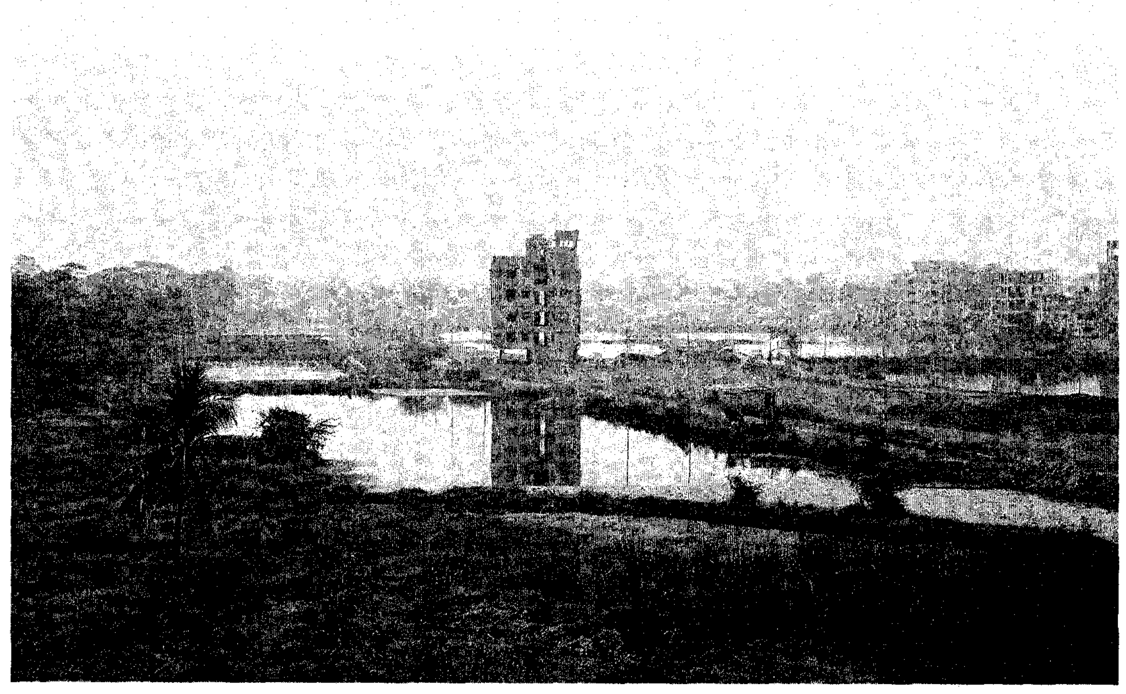

Figure 6.4: New Building, from the EM Bypass, Eastern Kolkata. October, 2003. Photo by Author.

[6] Chakrabarty (1998).

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> The force of the country road differs depending on whether you are doing it on foot or flying over it in a plane. Only when you are travelling along the road can you learn something of its force.
> Walter Benjamin, "Berlin Childhood" p.352

> Tourism is sin, and travel on foot virtue.
> Werner Herzog, "The Minnesota Declaration"

II. The Bypass

While walking on the edge of the Eastern Metropolitan (EM) Bypass, a road that runs north and south, and which transects the gradually condensing eastern edge of Kolkata, a boy passed me on a bicycle. He was riding an archetype of the Indian imaginary: the green, heavy bicycle, complete with rear, triangular kickstand, underhand brakes and omnipresent bell; one of those bicycles that, in order to make it move needs the considerable effort of slow laconic legs, and, in this boy's case, skewed feet splaying from the pedals. Maybe sixteen, his long, lanky legs accentuated an already awkward picture.

Seemingly the only type in India, one sees this bicycle in villages, on country roads and highways, and in cities all over the sub-continent. Distinctly Indian it speaks a particular modernity, though perhaps a nostalgic one now. It speaks to a place and time of unhurried emancipation, where the village and the world meet at a pace faster than walking, but slower than the engine, a manageable, reflexive pace. It signifies a reciprocal meeting where the village modernizes, and the city slows its frenzy, takes stock and reflects. It thus speaks to a more leisured mobility and measured haste, though this perception too has its limits. The bicycle's daily use in the delivery of milk, the mail, newspapers and countless other modern essentials, as with its use in collecting rags, in recycling cardboard and paper, and in ferrying everything from rebar to sweets, belies my romantic modern nostalgias; it still participates in exploiting the possible. The bicycle speaks too of economic and social mobility. As Sami-da remarked to me one morning after he walked to work, a walk of some 45 minutes he made twice a day, his work day beginning at 6:30 am and ending at 9:00pm: "If I can save enough for a bicycle, then life will be easier. Like Bannerjee [his boss], I will have time with my family." The bicycle condenses space as much as it does time. It signals the arrival of the outside (mail, news, stories, and friends) to the threshold, where leaning against thatch, mud, brick, or concrete, it rests only till business takes it off to the next village, to the neighbourhood across town, or to work. These bicycles were, for me, symbols of some sort of redemptive, modern charm still extant in the chaotic modern noise, dust, pollution and disarray of Calcutta's streets. But, so much a part of the everyday, they sink below notice, and are only recalled in the fondness of absence. Sadly, that bike, then, was nothing new.

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What stopped me was the boy's shirt.

I could tell he cherished it. It had been cleaned and pressed for the day, his day off; it was Sunday. Perhaps he was off to visit friends, maybe to play a bit of cricket. Around the shoulders and collar, his shirt was blue. A sky. The middle mushroomed violence in orange, black and red. An explosion. A blurred, black plane. Two narrow columns of grey fell down to the bottom of the shirt where chaotic patterns in squares of muted colours revealed a city. The boy was wearing a photograph, a montage of photographs woven as his shirt. The shirt *was* the photograph. Or, perhaps, it was the other way around. Immediately, I realized what he was wearing; but I hesitated.

Should I take it?

I have to take it.

Wrong lens.

He was disappearing up the bypass. My camera was around my neck, but he was moving faster than he looked, despite those awkward legs. A car sped past. I called out, but I was too late. He didn't hear me. I considered running after him. I could see myself, silly foreigner, camera bouncing, running down the edge of the road to hail a boy on a bicycle so that I could take a picture of him, his shirt, his photograph. Not that he would have cared. He, no doubt, would gladly have posed for a picture. I was constantly bothered to take peoples' photographs, often as much as I amused or angered onlookers at what I did photograph.

By then he was gone, past earshot. I kicked myself for being slow on the uptake, for being too self-conscious, for not getting the picture. I should have been quicker, more alert, more confident. That would have been a great photograph too. Who would wear a shirt like that? And why? I wanted to talk with him. I continued my walking, disappointed.

Figure 6.5: Detail from 9/11 Pata scroll. Original in author's collection.

Across the green and brown expanse of the neighbouring field, new houses were being built, their white concrete walls and flat roofs marking a horizon towards which, at regular intervals, electrical pylons marched, their humming wires swooping overhead. I remember looking at several women bent in a field under those wires, their saris bright against the grasses they were cutting for their animals. I took them instead. Juxtaposition, at a distance.

That morning I photographed a boxed Whirlpool fridge atop a pedal tricycle. The tricycle was stopped beside the road so that its delivery man could rest with a cup of tea. He smiled when he saw me take the photo of his tricycle and the fridge. Together, a

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diptych, they would have made a great pair of photos: Whirlpool fridges and exploding trade towers, with bicycles, those genius almost-machines, those almost benign symbols of modernity, tying them together.

I looked for similar shirts in and around New Market later that week. I didn't find any. I had heard that it was not uncommon for poorer families in Calcutta, those who sat for photos in the innumerable backstreet studios that dot the city, to have their portraits taken against a painted backdrop of the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York. I couldn't find such backdrops,[7] but I wanted to know why people sought out, bought and displayed themselves in the context of a catastrophe whose image has become iconic of its status as a global event. Iconic, but here, iconic of what?

Suggestions towards an answer were to come through the most unlikely of aesthetic practices. These practices, more importantly, helped me to think about the city and its present history. To get there though, we need to keep walking the bypass.

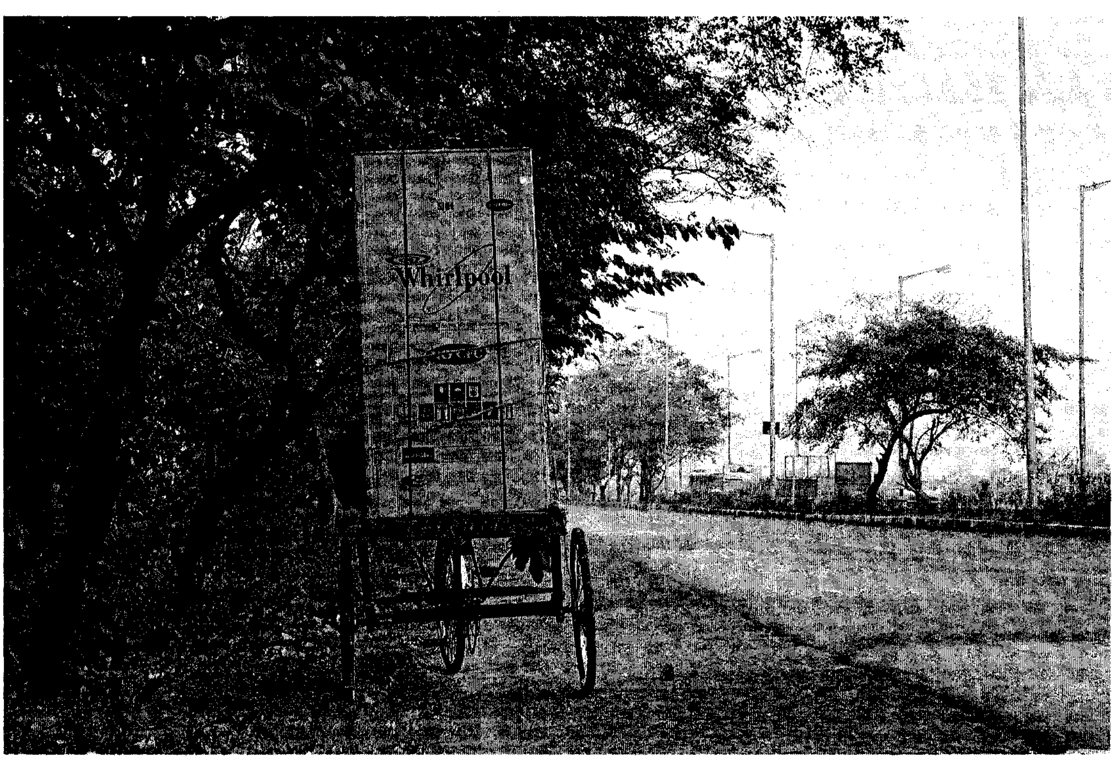

Figure 6.6: Delivery Cart, EM Bypass. December 2003. Photo by Author.

Das Passagen-Weke, or sometimes, *Das Passegenarbeit*, is the German title for Walter Benjamin's unfinished collection of notes dedicated to unearthing the

[7] Nistha Jain's recent documentary film has examples of such images. See *City of Photos* (2004) Kleur, video, 59 minutes, dir. Nistha Jain.

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contradictory historical faces of Parisian modernity.[8] It is a work of passage, of passing, of walking, on passing by, and reflecting, and as such, is about the work of exploring modern urban structures, how we think about, visualize, explore, wander through and by the modern city. As the English translation of the title, *The Arcades Project*, makes clear, but somehow at the same time loses a productive ambiguity, Benjamin's text is also a work on the physical structures of the arcades in turn of the century Paris. Thus, 'passage' unites the work of movement with the physical presence of the city.

How do we make passage or work through the city? As the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, a passage is that "by which a person or thing passes or may pass; a way, road, path, route, channel;...an entrance or exit." It is, "the action of passing; a going or moving onward, across, or past; movement from one place or point to another, or over or through a space or medium; transition, transit;...[i]n various *fig.* senses: transition from one state or condition to another;... *intr.* [t]o make a passage, as in a ship or boat; to move across, pass, cross." "By-pass" is closely related to "passage." It takes as its meaning "a circuit or element providing an alternative path for the flow of current; 3. a road diverging from and re-entering a main road, *esp.* one constructed as an alternative route to relieve congestion of traffic in a town; *verb*, 1b. to take an indirect route around, to avoid; related to *passage*."

The Parisian arcades, covered walkways devoted to the commodity, were, for Benjamin, symbols of a modern wish image, dream spaces of modern futurity, and "ur-phenomena" of modernity. Exploring their historical materiality he attempted to interpret "history's most recent configurations."[9] These arcades were located in the centres of Parisian life, and their examination would expose, for Benjamin, the mythic 'dream states' of capitalist modernity's un-thought political and historical continuum.

Today, the centre has found the edges of cities more conducive to the entrenchment of the un-thought continuum. In Calcutta, at least, the centre is in ruin, life difficult, and space at a premium. The edges of Kolkata now literally bypass a history which has proved itself unable to keep pace with the dream.

I had wanted to walk the length of the EM Bypass since I first arrived in Kolkata. Along this road, the urban face of the global present relieves itself: new billboards advertise gated middle class housing developments, developments which buttress thatch huts, goat herds and rice fields, fields where private hospitals owned by American based insurance companies and luxurious five star hotels hide behind concrete walls, buildings whose interiors, though they look out onto smoke filled *bastis* (slums), stinking tanneries, and littered fields, would not be out of place in downtown Toronto or Miami or Dubai, microcosms of non-place

[8] Translated as *The Arcades Project* by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
[9] Buck-Morss (1989)p.3

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for the city's twentieth century internal exiles of global flows.[10] Like Bombay, Calcutta has always been a city of internal exiles. Only now, instead of coming from Manchester, Bristol and London, they come from all over the globe: from New York, Los Angeles, Bombay, Bangalore, Dubai, Shanghai and Sydney, and Calcutta itself. Monied and mobile, they flit from luxury flat to suburban multinational workplace to air-con fitness centre to shopping plaza to hotel club to private hospital to air-con coffee hang out without ever leaving the first world. As Mehta notes, "the first world lives smack in the centre of the third."[11] Calcutta has always existed on this incongruous tension between the modern urban and the non, the so-called "third", that which cannot be re-couped, which stands beside in the dialogue of attraction and repulsion - the village.

The EM Bypass forms a boundary of sorts, a zone of differentiation and one of access. It marks a spatial transition between the built and the yet to be built.[12] One walks – if one walks – past fields and billboards and construction projects, along a reforming edge, where, as in all parts of the world, rural space becomes city, place commodified into subdivisions and mindless housing developments, industrialized farms and vacant lots newly fenced, with signs proclaiming "Development Opportunity" or "¾ Sold." And, around these developments in the in-between spaces, the *basti* villages of the migrant labourers crop up, filling the gaps with bamboo and plastic, replacing the refugee squatters

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[10] I borrow "internal exiles" from Suketu Mehta's sparkling portrait of contemporary Bombay, *Maximum City* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004) p.36.

[11] Ibid., p.35. This tension is constitutive of the immanent contradictions at the heart of the modern binary production of tradition and modernity. Although I have learned much from her work, I wonder about Ananya Roy's claim of "Calcutta...languishing at the margins of global change." See "Nostalgias of the Modern" in *The End of Tradition?* Nazer AlSayyad ed. (New York, London: Routledge, 2004)p.69. The constitutive contradictions which produce and propel the modern in its relentless attempts to recoup excess, surplus, the forgotten, or the supplementary, lie at the heart of every modern gesture, whether it be in London or Calcutta. Roy notes this later in her essay, and hence contradicts her own, perhaps offhand, claims about Calcutta's periphery status. She writes "difference lies at the very heart of modernity ... multiplicity is much more than simply the diverse localizations of the modern; rather it is the inherently paradoxical, even duplicitous nature of modernity"(p.81). From its very beginnings, Calcutta (ie. the periphery), like London (ie. the centre), has always been a multiplicity of modernities. The margin or periphery is always already, so to speak, a function of the centre. In Calcutta, as in London or Edmonton, the centre and the periphery exist side by side.

[12] I am dubious about the overly simple, and now idealized, binary opposition of country and city. In an era of genetically engineered crops, indigenous seed patenting, wireless digital communication, hydro-electric river system re-orientation, mega-dam construction, satellite land mapping, micro-loan strategies, negative production subsidies, chemical fertilizer dependencies, industrialized protein production, swamp and wetland drainage, foreign food market pricing schemes, the disappearance of food varietals, and the list goes on, all are significant issues as much in India as elsewhere. The rural is *the* site of intensified global change. The rural is no longer local. In Zygmunt Bauman's words, "The planet is full." The rural has become a database for finance capital, a circuit for instrumental technics, and a caloric resource for the bloat of modern expectation. As Spivak states, the rural has been transformed "into a meta-constitutive outside for the urban...the rural is not trees and fields any more. It is on the way to data." ("Megacity" *Grey Room 01*, Fall 2000, p.18 and 21). Elsewhere, she claims, "[the rural] is what we should be talking about", not cities ("A Conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Politics and the Imagination", Jenny Sharpe and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 2002,vol. 28, no. 2, p. 612).

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who were chased out when the land was bought from the municipal corporation, chased out to further edges, where, in a few years, the process will be repeated in relentless growth.

One walks under electrical pylons and humming wires, over stinking drainage channels and across litter strewn railroad tracks, past *durwans* guarding entrances to "Udayan"(meaning 'resurrection'),

> More than fine homes and lifestyle, Udayan promises you life. A life outside of your home – serene greenery, walkways and jogging tracks, parks for kids to play, a uniquely self-sufficient commercial centre, a club of your dreams.[13]

Past the erecting rebar bones of the mawkishly named "Hiland Park" and "Greenwood Nook" (what do they mean?), under gigantic billboard smiles hawking toothpaste, whisky, and life insurance, past roadside tea sellers under scavenged lean-tos, through a hospital's laundry drying in the sun after being washed by hand in a pond by men in *lungis* bashing away at flat stones, past marble slabs from Rajasthan waiting for luxury accommodation. Outside the walls of the five star garden pools to the newest ITC Sheraton and Hyatt Regency hotels, the under-classes and the not-quite middle classes wait for overcrowded buses; the 'redundant' trudge.[14] Streams of football fans riding small delivery lorries pass on their way to the overgrown Salt Lake Stadium, where, on big game days 120,000 segregated fans might cheer the Hindus (Mohun Bagan) against the Muslims (Mohammaden Sporting), the same cracked concrete stadium where, though presumably not segregated, a few nights earlier, a different 120,000 cheered the anonymous global sounds of Yanni in concert.

The walled compounds of the private Peerless Hospital and the new Hyatt hotel are bisected by the Bypass. On it time flows multiply: wooden buses spew exhaust, coal fires smoke in preparation for supper, women in saris walk home from fields with bundles of animal feed on their heads, bicycles and bullock carts, open sewers and teenagers in jeans with mobile phones head off to tuitions, or to jobs in the 'IT sector', glassy call centres beside shacks of bamboo and dried palm. Dirty toddlers clad only in holy cinctures squat shitting yellow into ditches. Unemployed men stare emptily as you pass - you are walking, remember - as little, privately owned Marutis pass you both, windows blacked out, occupants invisible, en route to the air conditioned Chinese restaurants in Tangra, upscale Park Street

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[13] Udayan newspaper advertisement in *Anandabazar Patrika*, March 12th, 1997. Costing Rs. 135 *crore* ($37.4 million Cdn.) the Udayan project was a collaborative public and private housing development between the West Bengal Housing Board and Gujarat Abuja Cements. Inaugurated in November 1997 by the Communist Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, it was hailed at the time as a venture in "mass-housing." Of course, it is nothing of the sort. 'Mass' here can only mean big. See, Ananya Roy, "The Gentleman's City: Urban Informality in the Calcutta of New Communism" *Urban Informality: Trans-national Perspectives from the Middle-East, Latin America, and South Asia* Ananya Roy and Nezar AlSayyad eds. (Lanham: Lexington, 2004)p.151

[14] See Bauman (2004).

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(Park Street is still Park Street) or the "world-scale"[15] new malls: the Forum and 22 Camac.

The bypass connects north and south along an eastern periphery. One of only two dual carriageways in the city, it begins in the south near the colonies of Garia and Baishnabghata. There it narrows through a few small villages to continue in another form, further south, to Diamond Harbour where the Hugli, a tributary of the Ganga and Calcutta's reason for being, widens to meet the Bay of Bengal. Too big to enter the now too shallow river, container ships gather under refinery exhaust to ferry goods elsewhere. At the north end of the Bypass lies Salt Lake and further, the international airport, formerly, Dum Dum Airport, then named after the fabled site of the invention and manufacture of the dum-dum bullet, a bullet invented for use in Afghanistan and the North West Frontier, and later outlawed by the Hague convention in 1899 for its "inhuman" effects on human bodies. Today, the airport is named after one of the more idiosyncratic figures of Indian independence, Bengali hero, nationalist, Japanese collaborator and leader of the Indian National Army against the British, 'Netaji' Subhas Chandra Bose.

Salt Lake City, one of the main destinations along the EM bypass, is a modern, planned neighbourhood, reputedly the only of its kind in Calcutta. Situated on the drained soil of an unnamed salt lake from which it gets its name, and though considered a prestigious middle class address for homes and outsourced global offices to pharmaceutical and IT companies, it is plagued with water woes, ill planning and ubiquitous mosquitoes.

The Bypass is a site of resistant "time-travel," to borrow from the inimitable Ashis Nandy.[16] Modernities rub against one another. Perceived contradictions press and flow, constrict and explode, shatter and stare back at you. It is a place, if you have the money, the right passport or skin colour, of accommodation and adaptation, fluidity and access, speed and contingency, escape and possibility. As a highway, it literally bypasses many of the infuriating failures endemic to a city under enormous stress. In doing so, however, it unwittingly unveils the lies of linearity, progress, development and history which are, so often, tied to the image of the modern we unthinkingly perpetuate. Here on the bypass, walking, past future and present co-mingle to break one another apart. Each starts to lose its meaning against the edifice of history and the story of progress we tell ourselves and judge Others by. Indeed, as a spatial boundary, the bypass mirrors back to us the interior boundaries we erect in our selves. If we are observant, it mimetically challenges us, and, if we are honest to what we see, it demands that we reshape them.[17]

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[15] Self-described in an advertisement supplement in *The Telegraph*, November 18, 2003

[16] Ashis Nandy, *Time Warps: The Insistent Politics of Silent and Evasive Pasts* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001)

[17] Ibid., p.10

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We are told that "...in this age of globalism, all cities are to some extent open to similar processes and conditions."[18] The bypass in Calcutta is evidence that what began in the mid-17th century continues, repeated in another form. Urban capital transforms the village, the palace rises next to hovel, and the metropolitan centre plays out a double-sided game of mimesis between itself and its imaginary fruition, its always future-to-come. Calcutta, thus, can still be a home to no-one, a fantasy, a pure invention.[19] But, the fantasy need not be utopian. It can, in the case of Calcutta's "dreadful" mythos, also be the dream of catastrophe, the "haunt to the European imagination"[20], precisely because it manifests the plurality of modernity in its face[21], a face which fractures the modern ideal, but in doing so propels it ever outward.

On the bypass we find ourselves at home in the aleatory, the peripatetic flux of the modern, the now cliché *'le transitoire, le fugitive, le contingent'*; "we find ourselves in a moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion."[22] For a city whose inception and history speaks at every turn of the rack of modernity, the bypass is indicative of only the latest envelopments, ruptures and ambiguities which began some three hundred and fifteen years earlier when a private corporation amalgamated three separate villages on the banks of the Hugli River and called them Calcutta.

But, if the bypass is an open ended, multiplying place where the desire for modern utopia and progress justifies itself next to the ambiguities literalized by that same determined impulse, it is, then, a place that repeats something begun in the centre, and indeed, is a product of the nostalgias of the core.[23] Let's go to the core, to the Maidan. "Every rupture is also a repetition."[24]

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[18] Iain Borden, Joe Kerr, Jane Rendell and Alicia Pivaro *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001)p.21

[19] Thomas (2001)p. 144

[20] "Calcutta continues to haunt the European imagination. It is the perennial Other that captivates and repels. It has been the chosen site for intense East-West encounters down the centuries. It is the city where the most magnificent and repellent scenarios of commerce and culture are enacted." *Playwright and the City: Calcutta's Tribute to Brecht in his Centenary Year* Amitava Roy and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, eds. (Calcutta: Dasgupta and Co. 1999) p.xiii

[21] At the wind up to the final session of the 1971 seminar 'The Cultural Profile of Calcutta', Radharaman Mitra remarked, "[w]hy do you use the term 'profile' instead of a more familiar term 'face'? If you had made an effort to look at the full face of Calcutta, you would have found not only diversity but varieties of contradictions in the city. Only one of her eyes smiles, the other is full of tears. It appears to me that tears dominate her look with rare breaks in flashes of smile...". See *The Urban Experience: Calcutta, Essays in Honour of Professor Nisith R. Ray*, ed. Pradip Sinha, (Calcutta: Riddhi 1986)p.9

[22] Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994)p. 2

[23] John Hutnyk's book *The Rumour of Calcutta* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996) critiques the typical representation of Calcutta as a "site amenable to charitable expenditure, as a site to be worked upon, to be developed, helped" p.219. As Ananya Roy writes, Hutnyk situates the city "in a dualistic mapping of the world system, where the periphery is produced in and through the discourse of the core" see *City Requiem: Calcutta* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) p.7.

[24] Spivak, (2000) p.21

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A few days after the boy with the 9/11 photograph-cum-shirt passed me I was to be startled once more by the image of 9/11. My surprise was evoked not in the context of highways, bicycles, and industry, all rather tropic spaces for 9/11 sightings. Rather it was propitiated by folk art.

I was in the centre of the city, "Monmartre" to be exact, an imitation place which symbolically tries to wrest the iconic mantles of modernity from Paris to the Gangetic delta. 'Monmartre' is temporarily rebuilt every year within the larger Kolkata Book Fair which resurrects itself annually as a returning cosmopolitan dream.[25] The book fair is held on the Maidan, a huge, open expanse which lies at the centre of Calcutta and which acts, much as central Park and Hyde Park do for Paris and London, as a centralizing space for public expression and relaxation. Often referred to by both the popular press and residents as the "lungs of the city", the Maidan's mottled, green space supposedly cleanses the city's enormously polluted air. Patently the Maidan does nothing of the sort. Such pretence is pure figurative wish fulfillment. But, what it does provide is welcome social and political breathing space to a congested city. An un-named character in Raj Kamal Jha's enigmatic novel, *If You Are Afraid of Heights*, captures the open embrace of the Maidan when she reminisces:

> I have been there a few times on Sundays when the Maidan is crowded but so big is the Maidan that it never seems crowded, you always get a place to run around without bumping into anybody.[26]

The book fair, crowded, dusty, uncomfortable, repeats the city within is temporary walls. It is an annual event in Calcutta and one of the highlights of the urban cultural calendar. It is held on the same site every year a few meters to the south of where, from December 4th, 1883 till the 10th of March 1884, the Calcutta

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[25] Everywhere you turn, Calcutta is gripped by a deep seated sense of inadequacy which reveals itself in its insistence on asserting the city's place on the international stage. Some rather chauvinistically say that this sense of inadequacy might been traced back to the announcement of the shift of the British Empire's capital from Calcutta to the as yet un-built New Delhi in 1911; since, from that moment on, Calcutta lost its pride of place as the second city of Empire. I am less sure. The city has for so long been stretched between the global cosmopolis and the lamp-lit village, been subjugated and battered under the heel of nationalisms, communalism, war and exploitation, that genealogies of difference rather than origins are important; and these genealogies of anxious modernity stretch back, perhaps, to colonial contact. The book fair is one contemporary manifestation of inadequacy's insistence, with its stylized pavilions and temporary mimetic monuments (Eiffel Towers, Montmartres, Arc de Triomphes, etc..). To illustrate the internationalist imperative thrust upon the book fair, I quote an official to the Publishers and Booksellers' Guild. The organizer of the event, is quoted as saying that the "Kolkata Book Fair…is of special significance as it is technically updated and is remodeled to keep pace with international standards. … [t]he Kolkata Book Fair is ranked at par with its foreign counterpart – World Book Fair, Frankfurt on the world calendar." Sabitendranath Roy, former president of the guild, goes further, "[i]n certain respect[sic], the fair is superior to its Frankfurt cousin. Each year, it hosts a number of intellectual and cultural events at Monmarte, an open forum for performing artists. Nowhere else will you get such an enriched milieu of creative hearts."
(http://in.rediff.com/news/2005/jan/27book.htm)
[26] Raj Kamal Jha, *If You Are Afraid of Heights* (London: Picador, 2003)p.277

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International Exhibition opened its "jewelled arms" in "...the first attempt made in India to hold an exhibition of an international character."[27] The year of my visit, 2004, was the occasion of the 29th annual book fair. The theme, every year a nationalist one, was Chile.[28] A 'Casa de Pablo Neruda' faced the main square as the only ostensible nod to the theme.

There were a few clearings amongst the several hundred book pavilions, and, though the main "square" within the fair compound was dedicated to the likes of Pablo Neruda, as with the 18th Parisian arrondissement, this eponymous Monmartre stood off to one side. Squatted around the base of a large stage, where throughout the day writers, novelists and poets read works in Bengali and English, visual artists gathered to draw, paint, and sculpt, and to show their works with the hope of selling a few pieces. Most were students, some recent graduates of the nearby Academy of Fine Arts.

On first glance, nothing of interest particularly stood out. It was the usual kitsch I had seen, and admittedly, long been bored by, in Calcutta: idyllic vistas of rivers and fishermen, ponds and thatched huts, sunsets on golden rice fields, nubile women bathing in ponds, Rabindranath and his godly beard, Radha, Krishna, etc. But, as we rounded one of the corners of the stage, under a lonely tree something different was being shown. Spread out on the ground were long scrolls of bright, stylized, almost naïve images. Amongst the scrolls, most depicting religious, mythological and folk stories, two particular ones caught my eye.

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[27] *Official Report of the Calcutta International Exhibition, 1883-84* Vol. 1 (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1885)p.7,1

[28] The theme of the 2005 Kolkata Book Fair was France, complete with a clumsily imitated Eiffel Tower. 2005's theme was a repeat of 1997, the infamous year of Jacques Derrida's visit, a smaller Eiffel Tower, and a fire that destroyed one life and a few pavilions.

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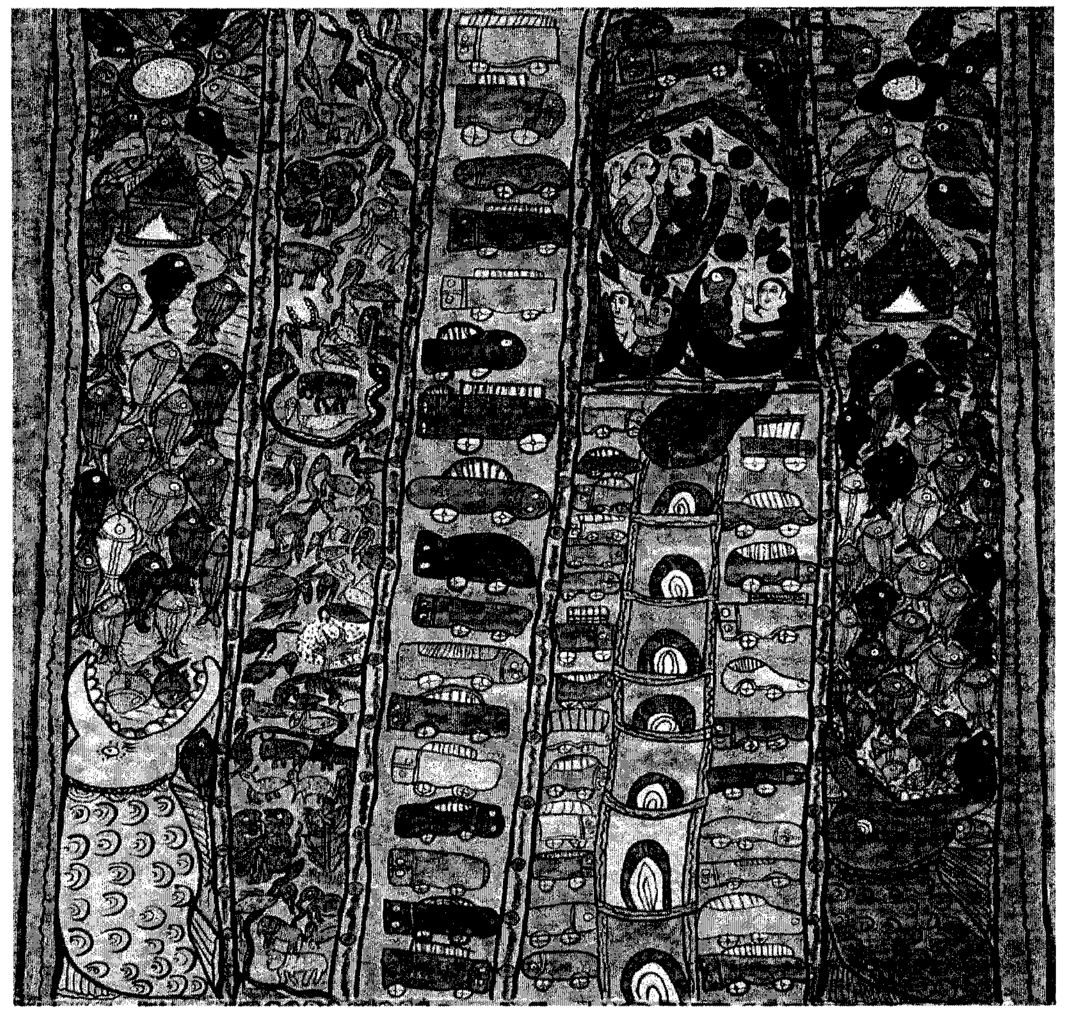

Figure 6.7: Depiction of Calcutta from Pata Imaginary Map Scroll. Swarna Chitrakar (artist). Author's collection. (Detail)

Calcutta's Amazing Astonishing Titillating Games[29]

Strange things happen in Calcutta,
Oh brother, I saw the Howrah Bridge,
It left me half dead,
Calcutta is an unbelievable place.

I went along the underground
I saw cars driving over houses.
People from the village say in wonder,
"Why the houses don't fall over!

[29] Translation of "*Ajab Shahar Kolkata*", a song by Dukhushyam Chitrakar, Patua scroll artist; see, *Calcutta Conversations*, ed. Lina Fruzzetti and Ákos Östör (New Delhi: Chronicle, 2003) p.v-vi

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What a place Calcutta is!"

When I went to Calcutta,
I saw the underground railway,
I, Dukhushyam, was thunderstruck,
I have such a hard time imagining,
Oh, Calcutta is such a strange city

I went to the "babus,"
They called me over
and bought my "pats" cheap to sell abroad.
I ask you, does that make my sorrow any less.
We have no rice to put in our stomachs
Calcutta is an unbelievable place.

Went to a cinema hall
Saw so many men and women
Well, if I was to tell the truth
No one will speak well of me.
Calcutta is a strange place.

I see men with hair like women
and women wearing men's clothes.
Oh babu, this isn't a foreign land after all
so why do they wear such clothes.
Calcutta is a strange place.

I saw on the bus from Moyna
women sitting on top of the roof
what is left then (to do)?
Now the only thing left
is for the women to take up the plough
Calcutta is a peculiar place.

I haven't said anything of importance
I have only studied till the first grade
All of you here are educated people
Please forgive me
Calcutta is a strange place.

Well, Dukhushyam Chitrakar is my name
I come from Naya in Pingla Thana.

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III. Patua and Pata

Paintings on scrolls of paper and cloth are not uncommon to the entire sub-continent. Scrolls are found, for instance, in Gujarat where they are produced by Garoda picture showmen, in Rajasthan where they are made for *bhopas* or priests-cum-singer/musicians, and in Andhra Pradesh, in the south eastern sub-continent, where they are known as *Telangana*. As Binoy Bhattacharjee writes in his survey of a caste of Bengali scroll painters, "it can be presumed that [scroll painters] ... are distributed almost all over India."[30] In Bengal, the most famous of the picture showmen are the Patua. *Pata* (literally, cloth, silk or a piece of fabric) scroll paintings made by the Patua are a distinct form of rural based folk art which have been produced throughout Bengal for hundreds of years. Historically, the Patua were indigenous to regions throughout the north eastern sub-continent in what are now the Indian states of West Bengal, Orissa, parts of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and parts of Assam. They were also, of course, found numerously in what is now Bangladesh. Contemporary Patua, or scroll painters, are today extant in fewer numbers, and almost exclusively in the West Bengal provinces of Birbhum and Medinipur.

Most Bengal *pats* (scrolls) contain a single story narrated in a linear fashion in concordance with the vertical unfurling of sequentially linked panels of stylized and brightly coloured representational images painted on paper and cloth. The depicted story, usually a re-telling of a mythic folktale popular amongst rural communities, frequently builds to a climactic scene and resolution. Since the stories are both educational and entertaining, often, a didactic element is written into their display. Some scrolls (*Yamapatas*) will end with imaginary scenes from hell where offenders, usually women, are depicted as suffering elaborate and painful tortures at the hands of remonstrative *rakshas* (demons). Other scrolls, those detailing valorous deeds, will often end in the representational deification of a main character or caste hero. Songs accompany the scrolls and narrate the stories depicted. In Bengal, the songs typically are quite short, lasting at the most ten minutes, and are of a simple "he-went-he-said-she-saw-she-said" style and sung in a monotonous, repetitive metre.[31]

The scrolls themselves come in various sizes. As a general class of paintings defined by the medium on which they are produced, the pats are referred to generally as *patachitra*. *Pata*, as we have seen, refers to a piece of cloth or a piece of fabric; and, *chitra* refers to paint and the act of painting. Literally, then, *patachitra* is painting on a piece of cloth. Cloth lends durability to the scrolls as paintings must be able to withstand the rigours of travel as well as repeated viewings which entail the repeated rolling and unrolling of scrolls.

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[30] Binoy Bhattacharjee, *Cultural Oscillation: A Study on Patua Culture* (Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1980)p. 11

[31] Kavita Singh, "To Show, To See, To Tell, To Know: Patuas, Bhopas, and their Audiences" *Picture Showmen: Insights into the Narrative Tradition in Indian Art*. Ed. Jyotindra Jain (Mumbai:Marg, 1998)p. 110

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The most common form of scroll painting, or *patachitra*, is the *jadan-pat* which comprises a long, rectangular scroll of fabric and paper glued together. The *jadan* (or *jarano*) is made of paper glued to cloth, usually old saris or the like. Each panel or frame of paper is pasted to the cloth, and, if pasted to separate smaller pieces of cloth, the pieces are sewn together to form, when unrolled, a scroll of between 10 and 40 feet. Each rectangle of paper is called a *choukosh*. *Choukosh* alone can comprise individually painted scenes which are not accompanied by songs and which might, as non-narrative pieces, represent a beloved image, for instance, the *macher-biye*(wedding of the fishes) or dancing villagers.

A derivative form of *choukoshpat*, which came to be known as the Kalighat pat, popular from the late 19th century till the 1920s, grew out of the migration of a number of Patua artists to the area surrounding the Kalighat temple in south Calcutta. Sensing economic opportunity from the increasing numbers of pilgrims flocking to Calcutta, and taking advantage of cheaply produced industrial papers made by Danish and French missionaries in Serampore since 1800, the Patua art form changed due to the modernizing urban landscape of Calcutta. The Patua began to produce thousands of cheap *pats* of varying qualities and themes for pilgrims, for whom custom decreed they return from their pilgrimage with a memento of their journey.[32]

Until 1905, the province of Bengal variously spread over a large geographical region of north eastern India. What are now the provinces of Orissa and Bihar were once a part of Bengal. Contemporary *patachitra* exist in Orissa and Southern Bihar, are of a similar form to the *jarano-pat* in Bengal and are called, *Jaggannathpata*. The largest group of tribal peoples in West Bengal and North eastern India, the Santhals, also have a form of *pat*. Though smaller, more portable, sometimes made only of paper, and lacking the bright colour forms of the Patua scrolls, the Santhali *jadupata*, as they are known, are believed to mediate magic powers between the scroll, the viewer and deceased ancestors. The most common feature of the invocation of magical powers within a *jadupata* and its recitation is evidenced by incompletely painted eyes of deceased ancestors. The painter omits the irises in the belief that eyesight can be restored to the sightless wandering ghosts if alms are given to the painter of the *jadupata*.[33] Given the mobility of Patuas across Bengal, it is not uncommon to see figures whose eyes and, in some cases, faces, have been incompletely rendered by the Patua, as well as the Santhali, painter. These latter *pata*, are not, however, similarly thought to magically mediate between the living and the dead. Instead, omitting the irises has become a convention amongst some painters who depict dead characters within their stories.

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[32] Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in 19th Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1998)p. 130-37. See also, Bolnath Bhattacharya, "The Evolution of Kalighat Style and the Occupational Mobility of the Patuas" *The Patas and Patuas of Bengal*, Sankar Sen Gupta, ed., (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1973)pp. 77-84

[33] Dutt (1990)p.80

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In contemporary West Bengal, the term "Patua" has three distinct meanings. The first and primary meaning refers to the caste and community of scroll (*pat*) painters who continue their ancestral work of painting scrolls to educate and to entertain. The Patua are considered wandering teachers-cum-picture storytellers whose folkloric, moral tales are drawn and sung with the intention of being exhibited and narrated for food and/or money. Increasingly today, the paintings are sold as visual artefacts to be displayed rather than to be performed. Second, as artisans and pupillary craftsmen and women who belong to a sub-caste of one of the nine artisan classes, or the *Nabashaka*, 'Patua' also refers to the caste name and surname taken by the practitioners of their hereditary art. Third, 'Patua' can also refer to practising picture showmen, who, though they might not have painted the scrolls themselves, never-the-less originate from the Patua community and caste group, and nomadically travel the countryside and cities singing the stories and tales represented on the paintings. Today, however, due to diminishing numbers of Patua who continue their ancestral practices, the Patua is usually the author of the images he or she displays.[34]

Historically, Patua painters and singers were exclusively men. This has changed in the past forty years, such that some of the more well known and respected Patua are women. Consequently, the songs and stories have shifted focus from explicitly patriarchal, and in some cases, deeply misogynist themes, to include tales and social issues pertinent to contemporary women's roles in India. For instance, I have seen and heard a tale relating the injustices of dowry, sung and painted by Swarna Chitrakar of Naya Thana in Pingla, Medinipur. It is noted, however, by a number of authors that stories abound which are critical of women's emancipation, gender equity and similar social modernizations.[35]

H.H.Risley, colonial administrator, and one of the first systematic ethnographers of Bengal, author of the extensive two volume work, *The Castes and Tribes of Bengal*, first published in 1891, writes that the Patua are an "endogamous class of low Mahomedans, who paint pictures illustrating Hindu mythology and hawk them from door to door with songs."[36] The Patua have a long and storied place in the cultural landscape of Bengal. Known to have existed in the 2nd century BC, that their work today exists in reputedly much the same form[37], is evidence of an extraordinary continuity of an ancient "Indian" cultural practice.[38] Sankar Sen Gupta writes that the Patua were thought to have been a

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[34] Ibid., p.108

[35] See Kavita Singh (1998) and David McCutchion and Suhrid Bhowmik's, *Patuas and Pata Art in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1999)pp. 93-97

[36] H.H. Risley, *The Castes and Tribes of Bengal* Vol.II (Calcutta: FirmaKLM, 1981, reprint of 1891)pp. 169-70

[37] Jyotindra Jain, "Introduction" *Picture Showmen: Insights into the Narrative Tradition in Indian Art.* Ed. Jyotindra Jain (Mumbai:Marg, 1998) p. 8.

[38] I worry about using "India" to describe the location of ancient, sub-continental, cultural practices, hence the scare-quotes around Indian. "India", from the sixteenth century Spanish or Portuguese, which itself is from the Greek, Latin and Persian roots which refer to the Indus River and the lands east of it, is a decidedly European appellation which unifies, in a determinately Orientalist Othering, a vast geographic and social polysemy. Prior to colonial arrival in the 16th century, the word "India" would

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nomadic group of storytellers and farmers who practised an animistic religion.[39] Their work is mentioned often in the ancient Sanskrit literature of India wherein they were referred to as *chitralekhas* (*chitra* meaning 'paint'; *lekha* meaning 'write', so literally "paint-writers"). Gurusuday Dutt (1882-1941) corroborates the claim. He writes,

> [the] tradition represented by these scroll paintings is not only the art vernacular of Bengal, but it is the direct descendent of the pictorial art of continental India of the pre-Buddhistic and pre-Ajanta epoch, which have given birth to other provincial and classical schools of pictorial art in India.[40]

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have meant nothing to those living under Mughal rule in Bengal. Today, "India" refers to a very recent nationalist edifice which unifies a vast array of languages, traditions, locales, customs, religions etc... under a modernist state apparatus which can be very tenuous, contested and provisional indeed. As a Keralian academic and political theorist mentioned to me in conversation, the Indian state is as artificial and bewildering a unity to the subcontinent as would a similar unification of Europe be to those living east of the Caucus Mountains and between the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas. Socio-culturally, he claimed, the visitor from Kerala has little to nothing in common with the Bengali. "We both eat rice," he said, "but that's about it."

Partha Chatterjee, Gyan Prakash, Gyanendra Pandey, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ashish Nandy, Ranajit Guha, Sumit Sarkar, David Arnold, C.A. Bayly, Sudipta Kaviraj, Aijaz Ahmad and others, many from the Subaltern Studies group are some of the most recognized authors on the subject of Indian political and social nationalism working in India and abroad today. It is inadequate to situate these hesitant comments within their subtle yet monumental works. I want simply to recognize that the use of "India" as a reference to pre-Euro-colonial (ie.pre-1500 AD) occupation is problematic. Referring to a tradition in the 2nd century BC as Indian only seems to me to work as an imprecise and inadequate geographical marker, and nothing more. Moreover, it is a decidedly colonial apparatus of naming read through the European imperative of modern nationalist identity formation. As Kaviraj writes, "[India] is an historical object, and it is essential to speak about the contingency of its origins against the enormous and weighty mythology that has accumulated on its name." See Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India" *Subaltern Studies VII* eds. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992) p.1. For a similar recent arguments see Manu Goswami (2004) and in the context of a contemporary nationalized Hinduism, see Gauri Viswanathan, "Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism" *Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming). There is nothing inherent or essentially "Indian", in a nationalist sense, about socio-cultural activities dating back over 2,000 years. Indeed, the Patua, as we shall see, are exemplars of the malleability and polysemy of social groups, rather than a collective repository of any natural or essential Indian-ness or Bengali-ness. Their practices and life-worlds have been shaped by tribal, animist, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jaina, and European influences which incurred themselves repeatedly over the centuries in Eastern South Asia.

[39] Sankar Sen Gupta, *The Patas and Patua of Bengal* (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1973)p.39

[40] Gurusuday Dutt, *Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers* (Calcutta: Seagull 1990) p.68-9. Dutt was one of the most influential and prominent scholars, collectors and protectors of Bengali folk art and traditions, including Patua scrolls, in Bengal. His collection can be seen at the Gurusuday Dutt Museum, University of Calcutta. I will refer later to his important essay, "Folk Art and Its Relation to National Culture" (1932) in building my argument for the imagined naturalized traditions of Bengali nationalist identity and their ambivalent relationship to the modern city in the social imaginary of Calcutta.

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Due to their reputed aboriginal origins, Dutt notes that the *chitralekhas* were of "low caste" and thus were "cruelly ostracised by Hindu society."[41]

Their ostracism from Hindu society accounts for a fascinating feature of Patua social identity. After the Buddhist incursions into Bengal, notably those of Ashoka's Maurya Empire in the second and third centuries BC, the Patua were thought to have adopted Buddhist practices as a means of escape from caste discriminations. With the subsequent waxing and waning of various empires (Maurya, Gupta, Pala, Pathan, Maratha, Mughal, Portuguese, Dutch, French and British) the Patua situated themselves within the flow of cultural transitions and adapted accordingly in an effort to mitigate caste persecution and social marginalisation. They have, as a result, been influenced significantly by the Islamic traditions of the Mughal Empire, as well as by aboriginal, Hindu and Buddhist histories. Today they are, as Sen Gupta writes, "something of everything: Buddhist, Hindu, Tribal and Muslim."[42] Beatrix Hauser, a contemporary German ethnographer and musicologist who has recently lived and worked with the Patua in Medinipur, notes that, today, the relatively few remaining Patua are generally considered to be somewhere between the two dominant religions of Hinduism and Islam. She writes,

> They depict Hindu gods on their scrolls, sing about Hindu myths, and their patrons are exclusively Hindus. One the other hand, they practice their rites of passage according to the Islamic rules, albeit in an unorthodox manner.[43]

Let me briefly append Hauser's claims. Patua scrolls depict Hindu themes, predominantly, but not exclusively. The British Museum has in its collection a Bengal *pat* of atypical length and complexity. The "Gazi *pat*" (British Museum Catalogue No. 1955.10-8 095), as it is known, measuring over 13metres and made up of 57 different registers, depicts the story of the Muslim saint or *pir*, Gazi.[44] David McCutchion and Shurid Bhomick transcribe another popular Muslim *pat* and song which tells the story of the famous Mughal ruler, Masaul I Allah's marriage to a beautiful Hindu woman. The authors note that Patuas composed songs depicting figures popular to Hindus and Muslims so as to establish a relationship between the faiths. Sen Gupta and Maity claim that *patas* exist which represent stories congruent, as one might expect, with each of the cultural groups which have shaped the Patua over time. Thus, they distinguish between patas of religious and secular themes, and identify Tribal, Christian, Hindu, Jaina,

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Sen Gupta, (1973)p.39

[43] Beatrix Hauser, "From Oral Tradition to 'Folk Art': Re-Evaluating Bengali Scroll Paintings" *Asian Folklore Studies* Vol. 61, 2002, p.110

[44] For a translation of the song accompanying a version of a similar Gazi *pat* see McCutchion and Bhomick (1999)pp. 97-100. T. Richard Blurton analyzes the *Gazi pat* in the British Museum in his article, "Continuity and Change in the Tradition of Bengali Pata-Painting" *Shastric Traditions in Indian Arts, Vol.1* A.L. Dallapiccola, et al. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1989)pp.425-51

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Buddhist, 'Musalmani' and Laukik as amongst the major religiously themed scrolls.[45] Inhabiting as they do porous communal and identity positions, Patuas self-identify as both Hindu and Muslim. Those who observe predominantly Hindu social and religious practices take as their surname the appellation Pal or Chitrakar. Those who identify as Muslim typically use the surname Patua.

As a rural folk art, pata scrolls are typically displayed throughout villages in Bengal by peripatetic Patua. The Chitrakar or Patua artist travels to small villages with numerous scrolls where at each stop three or four scrolls will be displayed and their stories sung. The display and singing of the scrolls is usually quite short with a story lasting only between five and ten minutes at the most. After a few stories are sung the Patua ritually asks for payment for his performance. He will often receive rice, a few rupees, or some personal effects (clothes, etc...). Given that Patua arrive uninvited and are considered of a low caste, they often have to cajole payment for their entertainment.[46]

Patua artists are widely considered today to engage in a form of begging (*bhiksha kara*). Begging is a punishable offence under the various Public Nuisance Acts, of which the first to be enacted was the Howrah Nuisance Act of 1866.[47] Although begging has an ambivalent place within Hindu society, and asking for alms is a legitimate means of making a living, giving therein indicative of a gain in religious merit, the Muslim, marginal, and at best, hybrid status of the Chitrakar hardly confers Hindu mendicancy. The result is that the Patua artist is often seen as participating in a degrading practice and is increasingly ignored by upper caste

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[45] Sankar Sen Gupta and P.K. Maity, "The *Patas* of Bengal in General and Secular-*Patas* in Particular: A Study of Classification and Dating" *The Patas and Patuas of Bengal*, Sankar Sen Gupta, ed., (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1973)p. 56

[46] Singh (1998) notes, p.114, that the Patua often append or preface their tales with a few verses requesting or imprecating payment. She transcribes one verse as follows:

> Shuno shuno ogo babu bolije tomare/Kapod ekta dite hobe aponader ghare/Paisa chal dite babu na hobe kater/Apanader nam ge jayer sansare bhitar/Jadi na dao babu olije tomare/Hadi khau kir jhhi bole jabo grameri bhitare.
>
> *Hear me, kind sirs, hear what I say/Get me a piece of cloth from your home./If you give me money or rice, babu, you will never suffer,/your fame will spread throughout the whole world./If you don't give me anything, babu, let me tell you now/The women will eat up all your food and send you out to fend for yourself.*

[47] Ibid. It would be interesting to research the history of this first act, and to situate that history with respect to a rapidly modernizing city. What were the socio-historical conditions which precipitated the perceived need for an act criminalizing begging? How was begging perceived and dealt with prior to 1866? Who was it intended to control? It is interesting to note that the Act of 1866 came into effect 9 years after the 1857 Rebellion, an event which became a turning point in institutionalized European-Indian race relations. Race-relations had been deteriorating since at least the Macaulyism of the 1830s and the Anti-Idolatry Connexion League protests which opposed government funding for Hindu and Muslim schools. But, after the so-called 'Sepoy Mutiny', (or as Indian nationalists call it, the First War of Independence) English attitudes and social policy towards Indians changed more radically. Less trusting, overtly dismissive of cultural difference, and increasingly repressive, social control measures were implemented by the British after 1857 in an effort to secure, by force, a threatened order. Of course, such efforts only had the opposite effect. Less than twenty years later Surendranath Banerjea founded the Indian Association and held the first nationalist conference in Calcutta.

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and middle class Hindus who have been educated in the modernist, urban paradigms of citizenship and capitalist social mobility.[48]

Patuas have, until the 1970's, typically plied their craft in smaller villages where poorer and lower caste farmers and their families make their livings.[49] Their wandering display also shapes the stories they learn and tell. It is important to note that Patua and Chitrakar painters and "picture –showmen", while primarily catering to Hindu audiences with Hindu myths and legends, also make a point of painting and narrating stories their audiences may wish to hear. Hence, although the stories and representations are passed down from generation to generation, there is no religious or spiritual necessity in their stories' performances and representations. The Patua are not priests. Patua scrolls are forms of folk art, and, just as all folk arts are open to, and reflect changes in, popular beliefs, practices and cultural expectations, so do the scrolls reflect such changes in their content and depictions.

That said, the narratives painted and sung by the Patua reflect the most loved myths and legends of predominantly, Bengali Hindus: stories of Behula, Manasa (a non- Sanskritic tale of a snake goddess), Lakhinder, the visions of Kamale Kamini, the life, renunciations and visions of the 15th century Bengali saint, Chaitanya, the adventures of Krishna, stories surrounding Durga, Kali and Saraswati, and, as mentioned above, the odd story of a Muslim saint or popular Mughal ruler.[50] In their folkloric forms, the tales come from the Bengali tellings of the Puranas, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata, amongst other iconic narrative cycles. As I noted previously, however, the *pata* exist at the performative interstices of numerous linguistic, religious, racial and cultural lifeworlds. Although the scrolls have historically focused on popular religious and regional folkloric themes, scrolls have, since the mid-nineteenth century, also depicted more secular themes. Scrolls in the possession of the Gurusuay Museum, University of Calcutta, the Asutosh Museum, Calcutta, the Indian Museum, Kolkata, and, in the private collection of the late David McCutchion, depict stories of dacoitry[51] and of the political and social oppression by the colonial European incursion into Bengal. These latter patas were known as *sahib* pats.[52]

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[48] Ibid., see also Beatrix Hauser, "Scroll Painters (*Patuya*) and Storytelling in Bengal: Patterns of Payment and Performance" *Jahrbuch für musikalische Volks-und Völkerkunde* Josef Kuckertz, ed. (Eisenach: Wagner 1994)p.140

[49] Sabita Ranjan Sarkar, "Socio-Economic Background of Patua Painting in Traditional Cultural Environment[sic]" *Indian Museum Bulletin* (Calcutta: Indian Museum, 1988/89)p.132

[50] See Hauser (1994); McCutchion and Bhomik (1999); Pika Ghosh, "Story of a Storytellers Scroll" *RES: Anthropological Index* Vol. 37, 2000 pp.166-85; and, Pika Ghosh "Unrolling a Narrative Scroll: Artistic Practice and Identity in Late-Nineteenth Century Bengal" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.62, No 3 (August 2003)pp. 835-871 for specific details on narratives common to Patua scrolls.

[51] Dacoit, an Anglo-Indian word very common in contemporary Indian parlance means thief, gang-robber or highwayman.

[52] Sahib was a term used to refer to a white foreigner or an Englishman. It is still used today, though less commonly.

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Figure 6.8: Detail from traditional pata scroll depicting tale of Goddess Manasa. Artist: Subha Chitrakar. Author Collection.

With technological modernization, the consolidation of English imperial power in the mid nineteenth century, increased urbanization, the rise of Indian and Bengali nationalism, and the centralisation of Bengali life prior to partition through the socio-political nexus of the city, particularly Calcutta, patas began to address their pluralizing environments. Hauser notes that since 1970, this trend to representing secular, social stories and themes (*samajik*) has become more pronounced.[53] Anything is open to depiction and interpretation: bus accidents, natural catastrophes, the subjugation of women, the permissiveness granted women within social modernization, the popularity of the cinema, the importance of wearing eyeglasses, the injustices of stepmothers and mothers-in-law, the evils of dowry, even re-depictions of popular Bollywood and Hollywood stories and world events are subject to the Patua brush and lyric.

Aesthetically, (see Figure 7) Patua scrolls are strikingly coloured with intense solid opaques of red, yellow, black, green, blue and brown. Figures are dramatically outlined in black, and though figurative, the elements within the frames, people, animals, buildings, carts, trees, etc..., are highly stylised. Decorative design is given primacy over realism.[54] Perspective is absent from the paintings so that the action and representation takes place on the stylised surface of the cloth and paper canvas. The unvariegated plane of representation is itself played upon a single, undifferentiated, and vivid background colour, often scarlet or blue. The dimensionality of time is sometimes collapsed within the frame, so that, occasionally the central character or characters may appear at numerous instances within a single frame. In complex tales like the Pabuji and Dev Narayan legends, many temporalities and spatialities converge and diverge repeatedly throughout the one scroll and sometimes within a single frame. More often, however, time is narrated in a linear, sequential fashion as the scroll is unfurled vertically. The separations between the registers, and around the border of the entire scroll, are always decorated with repeating flower or plant motifs. The effect, for a Western viewer,

[53] Hauser, (1994)p. 136, 146

[54] T. Richard Blurton, "The 'Murshidabad' Pats of Bengal" *Picture Showmen: Insights into the Narrative Tradition in Indian Art* ed. J. Jain (Mumbai: Marg,1998) p.51

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is not unlike that of viewing medieval European panel paintings which narratively depict battles, myths, religious texts and imaginary social worlds, dystopias and utopias. Nor is it so different from some modern European work. Krisna Dutta notes that, "[t]his striking genre of Bengali folk art...is intriguingly modern, and has noted similarities of form and content with the works of 20th century painters such as Léger, Matisse and Modigliani."[55] Given early modern art's fascination with non-European, "exotic" folk art forms, it is not surprising that Dutta would make such connections. Sovon Som goes further and notes that Fernand Léger's 1924 painting, *Le Siphon* mimics a Patua painting, but for a soda bottle in the extended arm in the place of prawns in the Patua piece, a likeness he claims is "neither accidental nor coincidental" and attributable both to a tour of Paris by Calcutta artworks, and the penchant Parisian moderns had for vying with one another in raiding shops for their 'exotic art.'[56] But, whereas modern European art progressed in terms of its constant imperative of the new and individualist expression, Patua folk art forms are decidedly un-modern in this respect. Aesthetic representational invention and formal innovation are not criteria for acceptability. Indeed, one might say that innovation and individualist expression are actively discouraged.

The stylized elements of the scrolls' *mise-en-scene*, so to speak, conform to representational standards solidified across generations of artists, between geographic locales and amongst shared narrative heritages. Gurusuday Dutt remarks that the apparent, but deceptive, simplicity of the styles of figurative depiction is indicative of what he calls "true art." He writes,

> [t]he rural and indigenous art of Bengal...is distinguished by the fundamental characteristic of true art through reliance on the basic art alphabet of pure and robust line and colour form – particularly the latter; an innate insistence on design, an avoidance of inessential embellishments and spontaneous harmonizing of abstract and naturalistic idioms of expression.[57]

It is important to note that this continuity of artistic expression by Patuas is not simply a function of caste belonging. Though highly stylized, vivid and expressionistic, the depictions themselves, like the songs, vary little from artist to artist. How an artist depicts a figure, a tree, a god or goddess, an animal or a devil is a function of convention and unquestioned tutelage by a more experienced painter, a master or teacher. Thus the depiction of form varies little within regional styles and over decades. Individual artists do not take it upon themselves to innovate with forms of visual expression. Of course, new stories need to be told

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[55] Krishna Dutta, "Talking Patua in Calcutta" *The Times Higher Education* Supplement, August 27, 1999, p.20
[56] Sovon Som, "The Nineteenth Century Art of Bengal – A Reappraisal" *Art of Bengal: Past and Present 1850-2000* (Calcutta: CIMA, 2001)p.55
[57] Dutt as quoted by Samik Bandyopadhyay, "Introduction" *Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1990) p. xiv

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as the demands of the audiences change, and within these demands, older, more familiar stories need to be told anew. Narrative variations occur between paintings and different tellings, but the figures and their styles stay relatively unchanged over time and from artist to artist.

I want to draw the readers' attention to a few significant points in considering the Patua and their scrolls for our current discussion. The first is that of the Patua's socio-religious hybridity. Although identified by nationalist writers like Gurusuday Dutt as exemplifying in their "true art" an essential Bengali, and by extension, Indian character, they do not submit as easily to such reductive devices. Indeed, their history suggests a decidedly polysemic character, one attentive to and adaptive within multiply competing influences like language, myth, religion, etc. That they have maintained a marginal status, and exercise seemingly contradictory everyday practices is evidence that they have integrated influences in their own life-world rather than assimilated with more powerful ones. They have integrated seemingly incommensurable terms and irreconcilable realities in the production of art and in their own identities, and moreover, have done so for hundreds of years. They are a wonderfully specific example of how "cultures have been hybrid all along," of how, "...hybridization is in effect a tautology."[58]

Secondly, Patua are story-tellers and artists whose life-work and social definition it is to entertain and educate a social majority, but from a marginal and outsider status. They tell stories integral to the construction of the social identities definitive of those to whom they themselves do not resolutely belong. Many are Muslims who tell Hindu's about their own myths and traditions.[59] Thus they are in the distinct position of mediating culture, tradition and myth to an admittedly diverse majority. Their perceived difference, what I am calling their hybridity, offers them the opportunity to challenge, as well as entrench, the hegemonies of the norm and the power of the dominant majority.[60]

Thirdly, the Patua engage their practices within an endogamous, caste prescribed culture of folk-art production which deliberately draws on traditional stories and defined stylistic and aesthetic parameters both in terms of form and

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[58] J.N. Pieterse., "Globalization as Hyridization" *Global Modernities*, M. Featherstone et al., eds. (London, Thousand Oaks, CA, and New Delhi: Sage, 1995)p.51

[59] To our nationalized eyes, this seems remarkable. However, as is always the case, the particularity of the everyday is far more complex than our abstractions allow. Hinduism, as it is practiced in its seemingly infinite multiplicities, admits of far more malleability, contamination and particularity than the nationalized Brahmin image portrayed by Indian nationalists and the increasingly dominant far right Hindutva movements. Some scholars even dismiss the notion that Hinduism is a unified religion at all. Viswanathan (forthcoming) writes that modern Hinduism is a product of a "socio-historical process distinct from the evolution of a doctrinal system based on successive accretions of philosophical thought." She quotes Heinrich von Stietencron who writes, "Hinduism...does not meet the fundamental requirements of a historical religion of being a coherent system; but its distinct religious entities do. They are indeed religious, while Hinduism is not." The implication is that Hinduism is constructed through the unifying colonial ordering of Orientalism, nationalism and modernity.

[60] Nezar AlSayyad., "Hybrid Culture/Hybrid Urbanism: Pandora's Box of the Third Place" *Hybrid Urbanism* ed. Nezar AlSayyad (London, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001)p.4

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content. The authority of their practice derives from just this continuity; and hence, secures both moral validation and cultural transmission from the repetition and continuity of its aesthetic character, and from the repetition of the form and narrative. Patua scrolls thus are not modern artefacts which prize innovative expression; they should be read as contiguous within a lineage of folk and religious arts whose authority and value derives from the repetition of known images.

I placed special emphasis earlier on the capacity for Patua and Chitrakar artists to represent secular tales. While such secular tales (*samajik*), popularized through the Kalighat pat form, and as Hauser notes, in the scroll form in the 1970s, represent, from a position of marginality, modern social and cultural lifeworlds, I think it is important to recognize that these modern, secular tellings also re-inscribe outsider stories through the traditional visual vernaculars of the paintings. The effect, of course, is to re-interpret change and difference through known frames of reference, and in culturally definitive ways. Doing so maintains social cohesion through formalized structures of narrativity and performance. There is a doubled movement at work. On the one hand, new stories illustrating new social forces are introduced, interpreted, re-inscribed and transmitted. On the other hand, they are narrated and represented in known and culturally identifiable ways which reinforce community bonds of shared under-standing, inter-subjective recognition, and territorialization. The modern, then, is inscribed through constantly re-imagined but consistent representational and aural registers. Such inscriptions are indicative of a search for new meaning in old symbols, and old meanings in new symbols.[61] In summary, then, Patua artists inhabit marginalized, socially hybrid, rural spaces through which they communicate and inscribe imagined registers of communal identification in the repetition of recognizable forms, stories, narrative devices and representational techniques.

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[61] Frank Korom., "Inventing Tradition: Folklore and Nationalism as Historical Process in Bengal" *Folklore and Historical Process* (Zagreb: Institute for Folklore Research, 1989) p.70. An example might illustrate this dynamic. Amongst the small pile of scrolls displayed on the ground at the book fair, one, by Swarna Chitrakar depicted the story of the Titanic. Depicted was not the story of the ill fated ship 'Titanic' but of the 1997 film, *Titanic* directed by James Cameron, starring Leonardo Dicaprio and Kate Winslet. The scroll was of conventional length and style, and in every way typical of a secular pata. Swarna Chitrakar did not see the film, but her friend did, and it was her friend who told her the story of the ship, the film's dramatisation of the sinking and the fictional portrayal of the doomed love affair between a rich girl and a poor boy. Because Ms. Chitrakar had never seen the ocean, living as she did in a village in the Pingla Thana, she imagined the boat on a great river, river's being central to the Bengali topographic imaginary. Not having seen an iceberg, she represented the block of ice instead as a shoal or sand bar in the middle of the river. Smaller panels within the registers portrayed the story as Ms. Chitrakar imagined it, removed as she was from seeing the film. The character of Rose Bukater was depicted as a Bengali woman in a sari, her head covered, except for the retelling of the penultimate scene as she is symbolically liberated at the prow of the ship by her lover from her socially prescribed role as a soon to be married woman. The character of Jack Dawson was depicted as a typical Bengali man, moustachioed in a dhoti and Bangla shirt. Representationally, the figures were two-dimensional, depicted but for a large steel ship on a stylized river, against a background symbolically resonant of rural Bengal. Chitrakar had imagined the story of the film as it was told to her, and reinscribed it through the symbolic vernacular of Patua scroll paintings.

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Hauser (2002) notes that, in the 1970's, the demand for Patua scrolls increased. This demand came not from rural villages, to which the Patua had wedded their trade for hundreds of years. Rather, the demand came from urban, educated, middle-class Calcuttans. These were not the traditional audiences for the scrolls. "The Patua were entertainers and educators for simple people; sophisticated city-dwellers shunned their rustic antics."[62] Why, then, this renewed interest by urban sophisticates in folk arts, and why in the 1970s? Hauser does not speculate on the reasons for this reversal in the reception of Patua scrolls, a trend which modified the long decline of an ancient practice towards obscurity. Nor does she speculate as to why it happened when it did.

I suggest that the city space of Calcutta, though it had long been the epicentre of intellectual Bengali culture, played a crucial role in the resurgence of interest in Bengali folk-art, particularly in scrolls. The rise in interest amongst urban Bengalis for "traditional" art reflecting values reiterative of religious and social identity, identities which were tied to the depiction of popular, collective stories and self-definitions which played on notions of authenticity and essentialism, was due to the profound upheavals and divisions which tore the city apart in the decades prior to the 1970s. The political and social turmoil engulfing the city of Calcutta until the early to mid-seventies played a central role in driving the resurgence of interest in defining Bengali identity through a supposedly stable set of definitive traditions.

Let me very briefly describe a few of the more significant historical upheavals which led to Calcuttans' perceived need to produce ideological master-narratives by way of reclaiming, and hence inventing, a heritage. Doing so will contextualize, for the reader unfamiliar with Calcutta's recent history, an appreciation for the city's beleaguered psycho-social state in the 1970's. It will constitute another detour, a bypass if you will, but one it is important to provide, if only in the roughest of sketches, some character of the enormity of the unrelenting social divisions and collective traumas which afflicted Calcutta from approximately 1905 till 1971.

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IV. A Few Words on a City's Experience: Calcutta, late 1880's to the early 197os

For almost one hundred and thirty years prior to 1970, Calcutta had been buffeted by enormous social and political upheavals, events whose effects are still visceral in the city today. Indeed, by the late nineteenth century, Calcutta had already been, for some fifty years, in a process of dynamic change and modernization. This dynamic period came to be known as the Bengal Renaissance. Central figures of early modern Bengali cultural life like linguist William Carey, social reformer Rammohun Roy, poet Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, writer and thinker Michael Madhusudan Datta, and scholar and activist Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, amongst a great many others, confronted the promise

[62] Dutta, (1997)p.20

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of the Enlightenment and interpreted the rationalist sciences of European modernity within the social contexts of Calcutta and Bengal. In doing so they shaped the tenor of how Bengali's came to think of themselves and their place in the modern world. As the historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar noted, rather outrageously, of the Renaissance in 1928,

> The greatest gift of the English, after universal peace and the modernization of society, and indeed the direct result of these two forces – is the Renaissance which marked our 19th century. Modern India owes everything to it.[63]

Of course, the reception of colonial modernity at the time was more varied and complex than Sarkar's effusion might suggest. In the early phases of the renaissance, it was more laudatory than in the later phases, when, after the official Orientalist policies were revoked, the interpretive mood of modernity shifted to political independence and the struggle for autonomy. The composite legacy of the renaissance was one of historical discovery (or invention), linguistic and literary modernization, and socio-religious reformation.[64] It was from the metropolitan centre that Bengali became standardized, in speech and in writing, for West Bengal and for what was to become Bangladesh, and in a form that continues for both regions today. Thus, it is from this modernization that the first modern vernacular novels, poems and stories were written, as well as newspapers and journals. It was also through the renaissance that modern science was introduced to Bengal; that legal reforms were introduced which resisted the injustices of the caste system, and which outlawed *sati* and child marriage; that historiography was systematized in a European fashion; and, that technological modernizations were integrated into Indian life. Perhaps the most significant of these latter technological demands on Bengali interpretive adaptation was the arrival of rail travel to Bengal. On June 28th, 1854 the first train steamed out of Howrah Station. From that point on, the idea of the village, and the city's place within an easily accessible, larger peninsular 'nation' were to be inextricably problematized. The germs of the Indian nationalist movement grew within the Bengal renaissance and its interpretive struggles with social and technological modernizations. By the 1870s the political and social mobilizations for national independence from the British Empire were in full swing.

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[63] As quoted in Kopf (1968)p.1

[64] The literature on the Bengali Renaissance is vast, and as complex as its subject. I have consulted the following sources: David Kopf., *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969); Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal*,2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002); Sumit Sarkar, "Calcutta and the 'Bengal Renaissance'" *Calcutta the Living City, The Past, Vol.1* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990)pp.95-105; and Sibnarayan Ray, *Bengal Renaissance: The First Phase* (Calcutta: Minerva, 2000).

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As the locus of these socio-political and cultural movements, Calcutta became an originating site for the emotional *Swadeshi* (literally, 'of one's own land') movement which fuelled nationalist fervour in the resistance to exploitative British practices of importing cheap cloth and foreign made products. *Swadeshi* emphasized an Indian nationalism rooted in a Hindu civilizational past, and celebrated and promoted indigenous products which exemplified this imagined communal identity. At the turn of the century, India was the chief export market for British made goods (textiles, machine parts, steel, etc..), a movement of capital which reflected the industrial dominance of Britain, but which depended on India for critical raw materials like jute, indigo, rice, cotton and tea. Calcutta was one of the main ports which shipped raw materials to Britain, but it also was one of the major ports receiving the imports which undercut domestic Indian manufacturers.

The Swadeshi Movement lasted from roughly 1903 till 1908. Through this movement Indian Nationalism came of age. Rabindranath Tagore, one of the early proponents of Swadeshi led a protest march through the streets of Calcutta in 1906 to celebrate the solidarity of its members against a by then partitioned Bengal. The movement took as its goal the union of India against the Raj which had become synonymous as a wicked instrument of division and subjection, anathema to the goals of Indian self-governance and self-reliance.[65]

But as much as Rabindranth promoted a peaceful, if non-co-operative, vision of political emancipation, at the same time, in Calcutta, there emerged within that same movement a politics of revolutionary terrorism. Although confined like Swadeshi to the upper-caste, educated Hindu's of Calcutta, those sceptical of the political efficacy of mass mobilization entrusted the "noble task of freeing the country from the grip of foreign invaders...with the enlightened few, organized into secret groups of selfless patriots fully trained in the complex skills of prolonged under-ground activity and planned violence."[66] Violence thus became, very early on in the concerted struggle for Independence, a central facet of Calcutta's political and moral topography.

In 1905, Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal. The partition was a deliberate attempt to divide and conquer. If the growing opposition to colonialism by the educated Hindu middle-classes could be disrupted by allotting power to Muslim interests in the East, it was thought that partition might mitigate opposition in Calcutta to colonial rule. H.H. Risley, that same ethnographer who, some fifteen years earlier, had surveyed the Patua and numerous other tribal, caste and ethnic groups in nineteenth century Bengal, was candid in his administrative cunning,

[65] Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1997)p.108

[66] Partha Chatterjee, "Caste and Politics in West Bengal" *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997)p.71

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> "Bengal united is a power; Bengal divided will pull in different ways ... [O]ur main object is to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule."[67]

Lord Curzon was equally as direct,

> The Bengalis, who like to think of themselves as a nation, and who dream of a future when the English will have been turned out, and a Bengali Babu will be installed in Government House, Calcutta, of course bitterly resent any disruption that will likely interfere with the realization of this dream. If we are weak enough to yield to their clamour now, we shall not be able to dismember or reduce Bengal again; and you will be cementing and solidifying, on the Eastern flank of India, a force already formidable, and certain to be a source of increasing trouble in the future.[68]

The partition, which lasted six years, saw mass protests, of which Rabindranth's was but one, by outraged English-educated middle class Bengalis for whom the partition was tantamount to the vivisection of their beloved homeland.[69] These mass protests, and accompanying terrorist skirmishes, resulted in the colonial government eventually rescinding the decision at the 1911 Delhi Durbar. But the success of this modern collective politicization galvanized the city's citizenry to new techniques of mobilisation, techniques which would be repeated countless times in the future, so much so that Calcutta became known the city of protest.[70] Agitation in the form of protest, and in terrorist-style violence, was seen to work. In response, the successor to Lord Curzon, Lord Minto implemented aggressive reforms. Calcutta saw press censorship, sedition arrests, emergency measures limiting public gathering and police attacking protesters. Minto, at the same time, also began to exploit communal divisions between Muslims and Hindus which the partition of Bengal and the Swadeshi movement had exacerbated.[71]

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[67] As quoted in Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908* (New Delhi: People's Publishing, 1973) pp. 17-18

[68] Ibid., pp.19-20

[69] See Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

[70] Sarkar (1973)p.81

[71] One of the rallying cries for independence in Bengal came from an overtly Hindu song, written by Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and later set to music by Rabindranath Tagore, 'Bande Mataram' (Hail to the Motherland). 'Bande Mataram' represented India as a "Divine Mother" and incarnated the Hindu goddesses Durga and Lakshmi within the very soil of Bengal. The implication was, of course, that Bengal, and Calcutta, which was the location of the most significant temple to a form of Durga in India, was primarily Hindu. The song quickly became the unofficial anthem to the nationalist movement. Subsequently it also became a rallying cry for the violences of communal division. It translates as follows:

Mother, I bow to thee!

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An important year for Calcutta, 1911 saw far reaching delimitations and further divisions to Bengal and Calcutta. At the spectacular durbar held in Delhi where the King and Queen presented themselves for the first and only time to their Indian subjects, three "boons" were announced. The first of the "boons" announced by the King-Emperor George V was that the imperial capital of the British Indian Empire was to move to the yet to be built, modernist, *beaux-arts* and British planned, New Delhi. Delhi, it was thought, was a more central location from which to govern India and more in keeping with a past Mughal majesty. But the move also recognized, and sought to undercut, the increasing political activism which characterized Calcutta at that time.[72] Although the effective date of complete bureaucratic movement to the new capital did not take place until 1924, the news of the move further rent the pride of place urban, middle-class Bengalis held for themselves and their Eastern capital as a city of hybrid civility, troubled though it was.

The move both recognized Calcutta's centrality in the crisis of the colonial order, and actively attempted to undercut that significance, a significance which, at the same time, was buoyed by the second boon announced at the durbar; the partition of Bengal was to be rescinded. Despite the two halves of the once separate Bengal now being rejoined, the reunion came with conditions. New provinces of Assam, Orissa and Bihar were formed out of the old Bengal. The province was again fragmented and the influence of Calcutta further reduced. The third "boon", almost akin to throwing a bone to Bengal, was the decision to raise it to the level of Madras and Bombay by making it a governor's province. While the rejoining of Bengal placated the Indian Congress, by then one of the most significant voices for *swaraj* (self-rule), it also angered Muslim leaders and thrust more forcefully onto the liberation stage, the spectre of communal politics. These

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Rich with thy hurrying streams,
Bright with thy orchard gleams,
Cool with thy winds of delight,
Dark fields waving, Mother of might,
Mother free...
Who hath said thou art weak in thy lands,
When swords flash out in twice seventy million hands...
To thee I call, Mother and Lord!
Thou art wisdom, thou art law,
Thou our heart, our soul, our breath, thou the love divine, the awe
In our hearts that conquers death
Every image made divine
In our temples is but thine.
Thou are Durga, Lady and Queen,
With her hands that strike and her swords of sheen,
Thou are Lakshi lotus-throned
Mother sweet, I bow to the
Mother great and free!

As quoted in Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)p.155

[72] Suranjan Das, "The Politics of Agitation: Calcutta 1912-1947" *Calcutta: The Living City, Vol. II* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990)pp.15-26

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divisions, channelled as they already were through nationalist struggle and identity formation, came to characterize Calcutta as a central flashpoint for communal tensions between Hindus and the minority Muslims who saw their autonomy revoked in the loss of East Bengal.

Between 1911 and 1924, the resistance to the British occupation on the sub-continent intensified with the rise in influence of Mohandas K. Ghandi and the Indian National Congress. On 13 April 1919, the catastrophe of the Amritsar massacre galvanized nationalist resolve against a government Ghandi described as "so evilly manned as it is nowadays."[73] In Calcutta, Rabindranath Tagore, who by then had become the pre-eminent Bengali cultural figure around the world, winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize for literature, and almost avatar of the Bengali collective imagination, responded to the massacre by attempting to return the knighthood conferred on him four years prior by Lord Hardinage, then Viceroy of India. To add insult to subjection, Rabindranath's attempt to return the bestowal of knighthood was refused.

During the 1920s and 1930s, political opposition to the British came from another native son of Bengal, Subhas Chandra Bose. A radical revolutionary, Subhas Chandra resisted the grounding of self-rule in Mohandas Ghandi's philosophy of passive non-violence. He saw the Congress party's concomitant political policies of compromise and constitutionalism as "weakening rather than strengthening the civil-disobedience movement."[74] Instead, he struggled to endorse a militant patriotism which would wrest freedom rather than submit to the patronising affect of freedom being granted. In September of 1930, while in jail in Mandalay under charges of sedition and revolutionary activity, Subhas Chandra became the Mayor of Calcutta. As Mayor he built his popular support amongst students, women and industrial workers, and became the pre-eminent youth leader in Bengal.[75] He continued his active resistance, but in response to Congress leaders' refusal to back his election as leader in 1939, which was due to fears over his increasing militarism and interest in European fascism, Subhas Chandra fractured the Congress by forming the Forward Bloc. Bose considered the Bloc to be a political "necessity" which had as its aim the rallying of "all radical and anti-imperialist progressive elements."[76] These elements would resort to armed revolution or revolutionary war in the effort of ridding India of British colonial imperialism. Politically thwarted, he fled Calcutta to Austria where he became tentatively involved with Fascist Europe, meeting Mussolini and Hitler, and propagandizing from Nazi Germany with the journal, *Azad Hind* (Free India). He subsequently found his way to Japan and the south Pacific, where in Singapore in 1943, Bose took command of the 50,000 strong, Indian National

[73] See Metcalf and Metcalf, (2002)p.167

[74] Jasobanta Kar, *The New Horizon: Nataji's Concept of Leftism* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Co., 1977) p.12

[75] David Arnold, *Ghandi* (London: Longman, 2001)p.198

[76] Ibid.

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Army whose aim was, with Japan's help, to "Free India."[77] His military and political ambitions largely unrealized, Subhas Chandra died in a plane crash in Taiwan in 1945; his martyrdom was secured. Subhas Chandra's legacy stands as evidence that the passive non-violence of the Congress did not have a monopoly, especially in Bengal and Calcutta, and that populist agitational resistance held more sway than constitutional negotiation.[78]

During the Second World War, Calcutta was one of the main staging grounds for the British war against the Japanese in Burma. As such, it suffered from aerial bombing skirmishes by the Japanese in December of 1942 and early 1943. The bombing targeted the port areas of Garden Reach and Taltala, along the Hooghly River, and while militarily ineffectual, the psychological damage of the skirmishes on the population was great.[79] Calcutta was perceived to be under threat of collapse. As many as 300,000 people fled the city, shops closed, and in a panic, the government seized private stores of rice.

Far more significant for the city during the war than a few lacklustre bombing raids by the Japanese was the Great Bengal Famine. Estimates place the loss of lives during the year 1943-44 at close to two million people. The famine, which affected the whole of Bengal, particularly the east, was, as is generally regarded, "man made."[80] The famine was the result of both the British and Bengal governments' administrative failures which were precipitated by the stoppage of rice imports due to war in Japanese occupied Burma, poorly administered rationing schemes, market protectionism by neighbouring provinces, hoarding on the part of Bengali wholesalers, high prices, and crop failures.[81] As a result of the famine in the rural areas, tens of thousands of people flocked to

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[77] While in Singapore, Subhas Chandra Bose actually became the Japanese recognized President of Free India, or Azad Hind, on October 21st, 1943. The Indian Independence League, of which Bose was the leader, was recognized by Tokyo as the provisional Government of Free India. See Marshall J. Getz, *Subhas Chandra Bose: A Biography* (London: MacFarland, 2002).

[78] Arnold, p.201. All over India, but in Calcutta and West Bengal especially, Subhas Chandra Bose is widely regarded as a nationalist hero and matyred saint of Bengal and the Indian cause. He is referred to simply as "Netaji" or "Great Leader." His name and likeness are everywhere: on shop signs, street names, parks, buildings, calendars, etc. January 23rd, the date of his birth, is a holiday. On that day the streets are festooned with red flags bearing his image, or that of his symbol, a tiger, and parades, prayer services, rallies and festivities honour his militant legacy.

[79] Paul R. Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982)p.109

[80] The 1943-44 famine was not the first "man-made" food disaster in Bengal. The British servants of the East India Company were blamed for exacerbating the famine of 1769-70 by speculating on rice and profit mongering on the misery of millions. At the time, Horace Walpole, in London, remonstrated with his countrymen abroad: "[w]e have murdered, deposed, plundered, usurped – nay, what think you of the famine in Bengal in which three millions perished being caused by a monopoly of the servants of the East India Company." Quoted in Kopf (1969) p.14. As Kopf argues, it was largely in response to the imperialist swashbuckling and large scale extortion by the East India Company and its private armies after the battle of Plassey 1757 that Warren Hastings, in 1772, implemented more culturally sensitive policies of rudimentary governance and civil service, one of which included making Calcutta the capital of the British India (p.16-17).

[81] See Greenough (1982) and Tarakchandra Das, *Bengal Famine (1943)* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1949)

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Calcutta, particularly to the south of the city. With nowhere to house the refugees, the city on a war footing and inadequate already in addressing its own basic needs, the starving were left homeless. They filled the streets totally dependent on free relief. Not only were disease and starvation the first phenomena of the famine, but they were accompanied by "the devastating breakdown of essential social and moral arrangements."[82] As Das (1990) writes, "the humanizing impact of the famine led to a brutalization of the human consciousness that perhaps prepared Calcutta for ... 1946."[83]

In 1946, soon after reeling to its feet from one of the worst man made disasters in history, the city plunged into the darkest of communal violences. In August of 1946 riots devastated parts of the city as fighting between Hindus and Muslims, mostly focused on "revenge and humiliation", killed thousands.[84] The events of August 16th to the 20th, 1946 have been dubbed the Great Calcutta Killing. The killing subsequently spread west to Bihar where 7,000 Muslims died, and east to Noakhali, where Hindu's died in retributive violence which was only abated when Gandhi himself physically intervened. Das argues that the communal violence in 1946 precipitated the Partition violence of 1947.[85] Only a few months after the Great Calcutta Killing, India won independence from Britain in August of 1947. The Muslim states of East and West Pakistan were formed sparking off the communal partition violence that has come to define the political and psycho-social maps of the subcontinent since.

Calcutta was awarded to India by the Boundary Commission, thus depriving the east of an established port necessary for shipment of goods. But, as East Bengal became East Pakistan, a subordinate to far away West Pakistan and a deliberate province of Muslims, so an enormous exodus of Hindu refugees left their homeland to converge on Calcutta The city was once again deluged by destitute refugees fleeing violence from the 'truncated settlement' of 1947. Barely 100 km from the border of East Pakistan, Calcutta had become home to thousands seeking the relative freedom and safety of a largely Hindu metropolis.

In the post-partition period of the Calcutta Metropolitan District the territorial space of the city and its surrounding communities expanded. Refugees from the eastern parts of Bengal did not come to Calcutta in one large wave. Partition inaugurated a series of incursions from 1947 till 1971, although the late 1940s and early 1950s saw Calcutta attempting to deal with the largest migrations. Small numbers from the initial influx were housed in government transit camps, but the vast majority housed themselves in squatters' settlements on the entire breadth of the eastern edges of Calcutta, from Barrackpur in the north, to Behala and Sonarpur in the south. In the 1960's refugees continued to settle in the city. Instead of only settling on the eastern side of the Hugli and on the fringes of the city, they migrated to the western banks of the river thus

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[82] Greenough, p.147

[83] Das (1990), p.17

[84] Das (1990), p. 26 See also Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991)

[85] Das (1990), p.28

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swelling into the rural vicinities around the whole of the metropolitan region creating an urban sprawl. This sprawl was constituted by displaced people who shared much in common with those who over the previous incursions populated the pavements throughout the city, thus integrally linking the edges of the city with its core.[86]

Due to the vast numbers of displaced homeless who sought refuge, straining the infrastructure, demanding relief, and crowding the space of a city which had already been riven by communal factionalism and violence, considerable social turmoil ensued in the 1960s. Nilanjana Chatterjee writes that "[t]he unresolved problems of the East Bengal refugees were seen as a fundamental cause of socio-economic decline and political unrest."[87] This turmoil, bred in the deprivation of refugee camps and squats, expressed itself in disorganized reactionism and increasingly violent agitational mobilizations.[88] Economic crisis, food shortages, rising prices and increasing social inequities tied to nationalist divisions instigated student and peasant protests. These protests drew their inspiration from global Marxist politicizations in places like Western Europe, Vietnam, China and Latin America.

The idealist dream of the solidarity of revolutionary class-struggle mobilized around agrarian reform. The so-called 'Naxalite' movement focused this revolutionary resolve in northern West Bengal and in Calcutta. The movement took its name from the area in North East Bengal called Naxalbari where an uprising amongst landless sharecroppers in 1967 loosely coalesced into a broader revolutionary peasant movement for land reform and food equity. The movement found an organized expression in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the secessionist Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), the latter to which is attributed an excessive reliance on spontaneous militancy rather than organized resistance.

Partha Chatterjee notes that the Calcutta leadership of the CPI(M-L) came to glorify violence and the armed struggle through the un-critical objectification of oppressed masses and the "mystification" of figures endowed with the aura of 'violent resistance.'[89] This endowment of noble purpose had its precedents in the violent secessionist politics associated with the earlier Swadeshi movement. And, as with its earlier incarnations, the urban educated elite took on the enlightened mantles. In Calcutta, these sympathetic expressions to the rural Naxalite struggle attempted to waylay the attention of the state from a highly politicized countryside. Bombings, street violence, police crackdowns, jail torture and death became the legacy of the city in the late 1960's. Relatively unorganized and reactionary, the movement was quickly repressed by the police and the army. The

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[86] Partha Chatterjee, "The Political Culture of Calcutta" *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997)p.186-7

[87] Nilanjana Chatterjee, "The East Bengal Refugees: A Lesson in Survival" *Calcutta: The Living City Vol. II* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990)p.76

[88] Ibid., p.27

[89] Partha Chatterjee, "The Naxalbari Legacy" *The Present History of West Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997)p.91 and passim

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legacy of Naxalite violence, however, is very real today. The movement has not entirely died out, and although its actions are more common in south central India, graffiti and slogans still appear with regularity in Calcutta, as do commensurate political tensions. Indeed, the ruling party of the state today had its roots in the Naxalite's Marxist politics and actions.

The CPI(M) eventually formed with factions of the CPI(M-L) to become the Left Front, and were subsequently voted into office in 1977. They continue today, in an uninterrupted line of successively elected governments, as the ruling party in West Bengal, and unparalleled as one of the longest serving communist governments ever to take office. The legacy of their violent birth and solidification of popular support is still very much evident in today's political landscape.[90]

In December of 1971, India went to war with Pakistan. Bengal was angered by West Pakistan's domination of the eastern state and declared independence after the majority election of the Awami League was refused the right to convene. Pakistan countered by killing thousands, mostly intellectuals, in Dhaka. India decided to back the Bengalis in their efforts for independence, and, after being attacked by Pakistan, invaded East Bengal. Once again, so close to the East Bengal border, Calcutta was deluged by refugees. It is estimated that some 8 million refugees came to West Bengal during the Bangladesh War, of whom some 2 million stayed after Bangladesh won its independence.[91] Bengal was two, fragmented again, but this time it had been divided from itself. The explicit "natural history" of a Bengali unity which had been promised, regardless of religious plurality, within a diverse and larger unity of India was impossible to recover. The promisory future of a united Bengal whose capital, Calcutta, would lie at the political, cultural and spiritual centre of the unified Bengal would now never arrive. Curzon's strategy of divide and rule had succeeded. The new nation of Bangladesh could now, in the words Curzon used in 1905 to explain the first partition strategy, "invest the Muhammadans in Eastern Bengal with a unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Mussalman viceroys and kings."[92]

Calcutta and its surrounds bore the brunt of the second partition. The middle-class educated Bengali identity which based its self image in an imaginary, semi-mystical union of its beloved language and the landscape of its immense rivers and pastoral idylls of country side and village was irrecoverable. That

[90] The violence which characterized much of the political turmoil in Calcutta in the 1960's shows its face regularly in the contemporary political landscape. For instance, during the state wide *panchayat* (elected village, caste or group councils which arbitrate and represent to higher regional bodies) elections of April and May 2003, hundreds of people were intimidated, driven from their villages, tortured, raped, horribly mutilated or murdered by violent factions of the five main competing parties: the governing CPI(M), the Trinamul Congress, the BJP, the Congress party, and the RSP. The CPI(M) was blamed for much of the violence. Such violence, reputedly the worst in West Bengal since the mid-seventies, made little appearance in the city and state-wide newspapers, less in the nationals, and was totally ignored outside India.

[91] Nilanjana Chatterjee,(1990)p. 71

[92] As quoted in Sarkar (1973) p.18

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nostalgic imaginary in which was placed so much productive energy had been stolen, starved, divided against itself, bombed, suffocated by despair and homelessness, and manipulated by the powerful and the weak. Millions died, millions more were torn from their homes and forced to re-build their lives either in the urban environment of an incapable and infrastructurally strained city, or in the border regions to the east of the city. The result, of course, was a deep sense of loss, a loss of 'home' felt by millions in the city. Today this loss is the source of much sadness, anxiety and division.

Due to this unrelenting modern history, Calcutta came to be known in the West as a place of misery and failure. Infamously regarded as a 'homeless home' to the starving, the refugee, the diseased and the forgotten, the city's inability to cope with these enormous upheavals secured for it the infamous imaginative aura as a city of charity.[93] Within India, Calcutta became synonymous with the discourse of decline. Since the 1970s, while other large centres like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Chennai were expanding, liberalizing and becoming relatively wealthy, Calcutta was relegated as a back water of stagnating provincialism, failed industrialism, sterile despair and collapsing, corrupt public institutions mired in bureaucracy and petty labour politics.[94]

While the above is a broad and too brief synopsis of the city's tumultuous history from the beginning of the 20th century till the mid 1970s, I include the historical brief to provide a sense, both of the overwhelmingly divisive history of Bengal and Calcutta, but also to contextualize, in what I felt to be the most pertinent examples, a sense of the culture of politicized violence, protest and division that accompanied these massive upheavals in the everyday lives of millions of Bengalis. It is to the heart of division and to the ineluctable experience of difference, rupture and fragmentation that we now turn, in another bypass, as we explore the many imaginative and ambiguous faces of modernity in Calcutta.

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[93] Dominique LaPierre's book *City of Joy*, despite its theatrical mischaracterizations, is the most famous example of a slew of books that characterize the city as a 'black hole of misery.' Geoffrey Moorhouse's *Calcutta*, too remains a popular English history of the city. Gunter Grass is perhaps the most famous literary figure who has contributed to Calcutta's pitiful characterization. As we have seen, his books *Show Your Tongue* and *The Flounder* both describe the city as a 'shit-hole' and locus of deprivation and failure. Claude Levi-Strauss too has little good to say about the city in his *Tristes Tropiques*. Of course, no one has done more in the twentieth century to cement its place as a city of despair than Mother Theresa, although, it has been argued that she exploited the city in her own unique way to feed a certain narrow interpretation of pious Christian service, one that refused to question the larger social structures which perpetuated injustice. See Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Theresa in Theory and Practice* (Verso: London and New York, 1995).
[94] Chatterjee (1997)p.viii

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V. Imaginary Nationalism and the Problematic of Urban-Rural Differentiation

Stephen Vlastos notes that a tendency to invent tradition is due in large part to pervasive feelings of "anxiety over new, more sharply delineated and disturbing social divisions."[95] That Calcutta and Bengal had been subject to enormously divisive forces – cultural, political, geographical, religious, economic, environmental and ethnic – is beyond question. In the first periods of relative political and social stability post 1971[96] Calcuttans sought ways to reassert and re-imagine a collective identity in the recovery of memorialized "traditional" narratives and local stories. These efforts attempted to recuperate a sense of wholeness through an appeal to an imaginary past which constructed a remembered discourse of social wholeness by appealing to prescriptive representations of socially desirable institutions and ideas thought to have inhered in a natural landscape.[97] Some of these representational appeals were to artefacts produced by craftsmen indigenous to an imagined lost idyll. Patua traditions were a part of, if not central to, these folk appeals.

I would like to explore now how anxieties over social loss and prescriptive recuperation, arising as they did in the city space, became triggers for a representational, mimetic resurgence which strived to relocate and retrieve a semblance of the lost wish image. With respect to this mimetic resurgence, how may we read the renewed interest in folk art in general and Patua scrolls in particular as part of this recuperative and productive process?

The need to tell old stories anew, and in the re-telling, to re-invent a collective redemptive or prescriptive image is age old, and subject to constant repetition and rewriting. It is not as though this resurgence comes out of nowhere. As Miriam Silverberg notes, "Traditions do not spring up ex-nihilo; genealogies, if not origins, can be found."[98] Indeed, as I have noted already, the process of re-imagining a history has been a feature of Bengali cultural life since the Bengal renaissance's attempts to synthesize the West and the East through the invented territorial community of India and its equally imaginary glorious past. For

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[95] Stephen Vlastos, "Tradition: Past/Present Culture and Modern Japanese History" *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions in Modern Japan*, Stephen Vlastos, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) p. 9. Vlastos' essay and edited volume critically analyse E. Hobsbawm and T.O. Ranger's influential text, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), which presented the thesis that tradition is an invented modern trope, which, in response to modernity's inherent tendency to fragment social life, attempts to prescriptively recoup a sense of social wholeness by rewriting and re-performing historical idea and practices as though they were latent within, and essential to cultural identity.

[96] Anjali Ghosh, *Peaceful Transition to Power: A Study of Marxist Political Strategies in West Bengal 1967-1977* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1981)

[97] Vlastos (1998) p.3

[98] Miriam Silverberg, "The Café Waitress Serving Modern Japan" in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions in Modern Japan*, Stephen Vlastos, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) p.211. One of the central criticisms of the "invention of tradition" thesis is the idea that, despite all tradition being, always already, invented, the appeal to the "inventedness" of an imaginary narrative production implicitly supposes an appeal, if not access, to a counter-balancing "real" or "authentic" history.

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example, it was the Swadeshi movement which took up a modernist, collective ethic of indigeneity and politicized it on the stage of the independence struggle. These constructed traditions both in the mid-nineteenth century and in the 1970s, and continuing today, express themselves, in the face of civic collapse and anxious urban disillusionment, as a desire for stability, continuity and timeless socio-religious security. As Ashis Nandy notes, "[t]he search for reconciliation has always been there – as an epic search for another vision of a desirable society and another vision of a future that would not be entirely disjunctive with the past."[99]

The interest in the Patua scrolls and like cultural productions may be understood, in Calcutta, within a broader attempt to re-produce an ideological master-narrative located in the identity and linguistic unity of a largely Hindu populace united under the protection of a larger spiritually connected nation, itself wielding a re-inscribed image of cohesive identity, one that balanced the spiritual sustenance of the rural with the global modernity and cosmopolitanism of an invented nation. This recuperative ethic emerges from a specific history of repeated urban immiserizeration. In so far as the immerizeration is a function of living in the city, a resulting ambivalent relationship to modernity locates itself in the constitutive tension between the imagined country and the imagined city. It oscillates between linking nationalism with the intellectualist rationalism of the metropole, but differentiates this identity in the idealisation of the rural. Thus, a contradictory process describes its movement between the structural role relationships of 'traditional' society and the 'culture' of modern, industrial nationalism. Manu Goswami characterizes this as the protean character of nationalism: that is the "at once irredeemably particular and solidly universal." [100]

We have seen that the tumult which characterized Calcutta in the 20th century almost exclusively centred on the struggle to assert Bengali and Indian national independence. Nationalism was seen as the lens through which modernity might assert a distinctly Indian legitimacy. But the experience and struggle for the modern was exercised through an ambivalent and, at times, contradictory process. This experience was haunted by the fear of looking unoriginal.[101]

The nationalist struggle for modern independence arose within the context of an already imposed colonialism. Not only was European modernity imposed through the matrices of a colonial political economy (capitalism, industrialism, and territorial exploitation) but, culturally, it was actively, if critically, taken up by the Bengali urban educated elite, and celebrated, in some cases unreservedly (for example by Vidyasagar); towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, it was considered more selectively and with an eye to legitimizing independence.

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[99] Ashis Nandy, "The Decline in the Imagination of the Village" *Dissenting Knowledges, Open Futures: The Multiple Selves and Strange Destinations of Ashis Nandy* ed. Vinay Lal (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000)p.185

[100] See Manu Goswami, (2004)p.15

[101] Dipesh Chakrabarty., "The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal" *Subaltern Studies VIII* David Arnold and David Hardiman, eds. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994)p.50

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The haunt of originality, then, is woven through a doubled reception. Not only was the modern nationalist project, in the words of John Plamenatz, "drawn from a civilisation hitherto alien," whose standards for success were foreign to the ancestral cultures of pre-colonial Calcutta, but the very notion of an Indian cultural past and cohesion was itself shaped by colonial grids of intelligibility. The struggle within India thus became one of regenerating an imagined national culture, adapted to the requirements of progress, but retaining at the same time its own sense of distinctiveness. [102] How that distinctiveness manifested itself became a matter of myth making.

Chakrabarty argues that the colonial experience of modernity was thus one of attempting to legitimate itself with respect to the question of difference. Modernity is portrayed as something that happens elsewhere, as something which needs to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise, but with a local content.[103] Within a nationalist context, the question of difference, Chakrabarty argues, gets subsumed as a search for essences, origins and authenticities. In its attempt to validate the modern nationalist imperative of 'different but modern', the deferral of the question of difference renders the reductive re-description of origins amenable to European understandings of what it means to be modern.[104]

One way these re-descriptions most often typify the attempt at self-definition through the turn to origins and essences is in distinguishing a historical trajectory from a 'before' to an 'after.' Modernity is thus mythically characterized as constitutive of a break or a rupture.[105] This myth suggests that the new is inscribed as if on a tabula rasa without reference to the past, or if in reference to the past, then only through its obliteration. As Harvey writes, the mythic modern is, then, a "creative destruction."[106] Concomitant with the definition of the modern as rupture is the notion that it is generated within a specific place and time, and diffuses outward to encompass the rest of the world; hence Morris's worries about it being too often characterized as something from elsewhere. In the Indian context, the need to individuate the forces of the elsewhere in order to make it both contiguous with a globalized trajectory, but still locally distinct, necessitates a turn to the past.

In a wonderful memorial lecture entitled "Our Modernity" given, in Bengali, in 1994, Partha Chatterjee addresses the need to assert the Indian modern through the logic of difference and within a consideration of the past. He notes that the driving force of "our" modernity, and by 'our' he means a modernity that is unique to, and produced within India and by Indians, is the sense of attachment transposed onto a past which is constructed as a place of prosperity, beauty and healthy sociability, but which above all is a place of "our

[102] See Partha Chatterjee., *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* in *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) p.2-12.
[103] Meaghan Morris., "Metamorphoses at Sydney Tower" *New Formations* (11) Summer 1990 p. 10
[104] Chakrabarty (1994)p.51
[105] David Harvey., *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003)p.1
[106] Ibid.

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own creation."[107] This attachment, he writes, is not backward-looking and thus resistant to change. It is in terms of the attachment to the past that a current dissatisfaction with the present may critically engage in a resistance to the legacies of colonially institutionalized modernities. He writes,

> [I]t is our attachment to the past which gives birth to the feeling that the present needs to be changed, that it is our task to change it. We must remember that in the world arena of modernity, we are outcastes, untouchables. Modernity for us is like a supermarket of foreign goods, displayed on the shelves: pay up and take away what you like. No-one here believes that we could be producers of modernity. The bitter truth about our present is our subjection, our inability to be subjects in our own right. And yet, it is because we want to be modern that our desire to be independent and creative is transposed on to our past. It is superfluous to call this an imagined past because pasts are always imagined. At the opposite end from 'these days' marked by incompleteness and lack of fulfillment, we construct a picture of 'those days' when there was beauty, prosperity and a healthy sociability, and which was, above all, our own creation. 'Those days' for us is not a historical past; we construct it only to mark the difference posed by the present. All that needs to be noticed is that whereas Kant, speaking at the founding moment of Western modernity, looks at the present as the site of one's escape from the past, for us it is precisely the present from which we feel we must escape. This makes the very modality of our coping with modernity radically different from the historically evolved modes of Western modernity.[108]

In a remarkable, counter-intuitive move, Chatterjee crystallizes the problematic of modernity for the Bengali modern in the post-colonial present. It is the present whose contradictory face disturbs and liberates, disenfranchises and opens to possibility. On the one hand, precisely because of the progressive possibilities a modern rupture entails, the mantle of nationalist self-definition and self-government are thrust upon the Bengali modern. But, the epistemic imperative also compels that within the colonial categories of self-definition and institutional practice, difference operates as a constitutive de-limitation to the European Imperial modern. The demand is to be different and the same.

The violent irony, however, is that the narratives of difference are themselves predicated on colonial categories. Chatterjee's call to enlightenment is

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[107] Partha Chatterjee, "Our Modernity" *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997)p.209-10

[108] Ibid., p.210

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a call to the "attempt to write difference into the history of 'our' modernity in a mode that resists the assimilation of this history to the ... imaginary of the European derived institutions."[109] This was exceedingly difficult in a city whose very provenance was, since its colonialist inception, and still today, is the constitutive site of the intrusion and the European modern into the Bengali imaginary. It is through the city space of Calcutta, as a place invested with an ethos of identity, history and becoming, that the ambivalent history of modernity is articulated. This articulation oscillates between two discursive devices of time and space. The first is between a discourse of the before and the after. The second locates the before and the after in the imaginative and productive representational tropes of village and the city, and importantly, in the mutually dependent movements between the two. "Movement" here must be thought of in two ways. First it must be thought as the actual movement of people, through space, from one location to another. Movement must also be thought as the figurative deployment of psychological, sociological and political discourses employed in the effort of constructing nationalism through the invention of a collective past, a shared epic history, and an essential identity.

The 'these days' and the 'those days' to which Chatterjee refers are discursive tropes used by a writer during the Bengali Renaissance, Rajarayan Basu, who applied them as rhetorical devices to his 1873 tract *Se Kāl ar ē Kāl* (*Those Days and These Days*) to distinguish between the periods before and after mandated English educational reforms in India. Basu's discussion plays on a familiar dichotomy: in the imaginary days prior to the '*nabya*' (new), modern notions and ways of living, people were "simple, caring, compassionate and genuinely religious." After the *nabya* they were "cunning, devious, selfish and ungrateful."[110]

Basu's employment of the 'before and after' literary device is perhaps more symptomatic of modernity than it is critical or reflexive. It responds to the way modernity defines itself against enchantment by producing a new re-enchantment of an imagined past. The new re-enchantment thus becomes a means of securing difference within a wider discursive framework which both demands difference and sameness, ie. the nation and the community must be both a nation in the European sense, but it must be distinct, for the geography of borders is predicated on preserving the play of difference. What is interesting in the context of Bengal, however, is that this movement of disenchantment and re-enchantment played itself out through the dialectic between modern city and country since at least the early 19th century.

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VI. Bhawanicharan's *Kalikata Kamalalaya*

[109] Chakrabarty (1994)p.88
[110] Chatterjee (1997)p. 194

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In the 1820s, the Bengali writer Bhawanicharan Bandopadhyay explicitly locates the doubling dichotomy of enchantment and re-enchantment in the space of the city and in its difference with the pre-modern space of the village. Instead of locating it simply through a 'before and after' as did Basu, he concretized the locus of the dialectic in the physical and normative city-space of Calcutta. Published in 1823, Bhawanicharan's *Kalikata Kamalalaya* (Calcutta, Abode of Kamala) was written as a cautionary guide to the modern in the guise of a travel book for people who come to the city from villages and cultural locales "unaware of the customs, behaviour and the art of speaking of the people of Calcutta."[111] The narrative employs the literary device of a satiric dialogue, and situates the discussion between an educated upper-caste 'City Dweller' and an 'Outsider' who, newly arrived from the country, enquires as to the social customs of the city and those who live there. Bhawanicharan's use of descriptors is significant. *Nagarbasi* (literally, 'town-man') refers to the 'City Dweller.' *Palligramanibasi* (literally, 'small-village man') refers to the 'Outsider.' However, to denote the qualitative difference between village, town, and the new phenomenon of the metropole, which Calcutta had become by the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, he uses the term *mahanagar*, literally, great city.

In the dialogue the Outsider questions the City Dweller on changes to Bengali social and religious customs, and demands that the City Dweller justify the cultural and social modernizations of the city. The city then is asked to justify the perceived loss of traditional, and hence rurally located and identified ways of life. For example, in one instance the Outsider questions the City Dweller about shifting uses of language. '"I have heard," he remarks, "that the gentlemen in their conversation mix other languages with our own national language."[112] The Outsider proceeds to list an extensive array of words from non-Hindu and non-Sub Continental languages (*yavanik*) together with their Bengali and Sanskrit equivalents. Why, he asks, are such incursions tolerated? The City-Dweller, defensively responds with his own list of words. These, however, are not words which have Bengali or Sanskritic equivalents. Rather the words cited by the City-Dweller are Persian, English, Portugese, French and entirely non-Sanskritic in origin. Interestingly, the City-Dweller argues, the untranslatable words do not dilute a supposedly inviolable and pure Sanskritic essence which needs preservation against colonialist incursion. Rather such words are indicative of the value attributable to "the course of worldly affairs." [113] The modern inflection is thus seen as a movement to a wider cosmopolitan worldliness.

The tone of the exchanges between the village dweller and the city dweller is one of a rather didactic enlightenment bestowed from the latter to the former. Repeatedly, the Outsider is portrayed as subservient. He refers to himself as a

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[111] Bhawanicharan Bandopadhyay, *Kalikata Kamalalaya*, trans. Satyabrata Dutta (Firma KLM: Calcutta, 1990)p.xi. *Kalikata Kamalalaya* translates as 'Calcutta, abode of the Goddess of Wealth, Kamala.' Kamala is another name for Lakshmi. In the opening lines of the narrative, Calcutta is characterized as a "bottomless ocean of wealth."

[112] Ibid., p.10

[113] Ibid., p.18

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"villager" and hence as a "rural rustic" as an "ignorant person in the ways of the city." The City Dweller, impatient with his "simple" interlocutor, often exclaims with annoyance: "Well, man, you are so stupid" or "I am so annoyed with your simpleness" or "You put such ordinary questions which could be solved by normal intelligence." At one point the Outsider is berated, as is his kith, for his decidedly unenlightened lack of education and his decidedly un-modern capacity.

> Oh, my gentleman from the village! It seems you never go places where the intelligent people reside. Because, you are unable to understand where the books produced by so many printing presses now existing in Calcutta go. It is very clear that mostly the people residing in this city purchase these books. How many books the villages purchase [sic]? I think that people in many places do not even know what sort of thing a printing press is. ... You are a rural rustic! You don't even know what a watch is! Even if somebody offers you a watch worth hundred rupees for only five rupees, will you take it? I shall continue to make you understand all these. I shall continue to make you understand![114]

Their discussion characterizes the city as a place of education, money and mobility. It describes various socio-economic classes of Bengalis who work in the service of business as agents, clerks, officers, etc. The Outsider's questions revolve around how the political economy of the city changes more traditional socio-religious caste relations.

That the city is characterized as the figurative locus for these enlightenment effects is nothing new. But *Kalikata Kamalalaya* is not an example of an unreserved celebration of westernization and modernity. The dialogue as a whole displays an ambivalence over the phenomenon of social mobilities in the city, and seeks to contextualize these changes from a previous 'proper order' within a hybridizing and modernizing cityscape. Bhawanicharan's dialogue can be read as attempting to mediate the social conservatism of the village based cultural concern over changes to a traditional role based order, with the benefits and boons capitalist modernizations bring: social mobility, capital wealth, education, common law, property relations, commodity resource exploitation, etc... . An anxiety exposes itself in the dialogue's attempt to separate the worldly concerns of commerce and government from more traditional socio-religious pursuits. For instance, the City Dweller, in recognizing the opportunity Calcutta and European modernity presented for a capacity to shape one's own social position in light of monied mobility and class distinction based on wealth, argues that languages of commerce should be kept separate from the languages of Bengali and Sanskrit which were the domain of religiosity. Amongst the untranslatable words the City Dweller lists are: Common Law, Warrant, Decree, treasury,

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[114] Ibid., p.35

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collector, bill, premium, due, etc.[115] These words, and the City Dweller's insistence that they remain as hybrid instances of necessary assimilation, if you will, are indicative of the enormous socio-cultural and spatial changes that took place in Calcutta and Bengal in the 18th and early nineteenth century. Bengali society had transformed from a "status and relatively closed society where social and political relationships were determined by caste and customs, to a relatively open and competitive society where social relationships were largely shaped by class."[116]

One of the most important precipitants of this change from a largely caste and tradition bound socio-political environment to one dominated by class and capital relations was the colonial implementation, only a generation prior to *Kalikata Kamalalaya's* publication, of the 'Permanent Settlement' of 1793. 'Permanent Settlement' inaugurated in Bengal the colonial "rule of property." It introduced the notion of the private property of land, and transformed previous systems of land ownership. People whose prior socially defined roles as revenue collectors were turned into land owners.[117] Ownership, and the previously more feudal tax relationships, were disenfranchised from group and community claims, and placed in the hands of single owners, called zamindars. These owners were often high caste Brahmins who, due to their privileged positions as members of the priestly castes, and as therefore more educated, had already close ties with colonial business and administrative interests. These ties were secured to wealth through new ownerships guidelines and resulted in class status articulating itself through caste status. Due to their wealth and social positioning as intermediaries between the wider Bengali communities and colonial business interests, these zamindaris often developed very close ties with the city of Calcutta. The city became for Bengalis a site of concentrated wealth generation and consumption, an administrative centre and a space of considerable cultural hybridization.

One of the most famous examples, although of course there were many, of the new zamindari class was that of 'Prince' Dwarkanath Tagore, the grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore. Dwarkanath embodied the new consumptive ethic materialized in the Company's imperial arrival in Bengal. He made his fortune as a middleman for Company, and exploited Calcutta's mercantile centrality, second only to London, to become India's first industrial entrepreneur.[118] He was feted by Queen Victoria and King Louis-Philippe, hosted by Charles Dickens, and granted the key to the city of Edinburgh. Despite his enormous commercial success, built in part as an opium trader with China and as an imperial apologist and lackey, and because of it, Dwarkanath came to be held up as an example of European exploitative commercialism, and a model against which the Bengali middle-class—somewhat hypocritically—distinguished itself.

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[115] Ibid., p.18

[116] S.N. Mukherjee, "Class, Caste and Politics in Calcutta, 1815-1838" *Elites in South Asia* eds. Edmund Leach and S.N. Mukherjee (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970)p.35

[117] Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, reprint of 1963)

[118] Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad Minded Man* (Bloomsbury: London, 1997)p.8

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Bhawanicharan describes those most successful in capitalizing on modern opportunity as "purse-proud."[119] As a result, he claims, such figures, and Dwarkanath might have been one, began to follow a new mode of life that seemed alien to their village cousins. But these modes were not simply appropriative ones which cast aside previous identities and social relationships. They were anxious ones that attempted to traverse and maintain the social spaces of both the rural and the city, as well as the colonial and the indigenous, with the oscillation between the former figuratively acting as a symbolic discursive nexus for the latter. This anxiety is revealed in the discussion on words intimated earlier.

If the process of modernization had extended to the degree that modern English words were incorporated into the daily lives of elite Bengalis, and further, defended as necessary to the continued capacity for progressive commerce and civil society, Bhawanicharan's anxiety over changes to 'traditional' caste and custom social arrangements figuratively located in the village, also reveals the perceived need on the part of Bengalis to preserve an area of collective activity to which British colonial power would have little access. Caste rules, particularly those concerning marriage, inheritance, and bodily pollution were "hidden" from British control.[120]

What is significant about *Kalikata Kamalalaya* is that it foregrounds the anxious ambiguities of Bengali social modernization through the figurative device of the city. The social politics and the life of Calcutta were at the time hybridizing forms being shaped by both economic and educational class and 'para-colonial'

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[119] The word Bhawanicharan uses for 'purse-proud' is *dhanamattatadi* which denotes the new feeling of status based on wealth. See Kopf (1970) p.212, Fn. 160.

[120] Mukherjee (1970) p.34. Indeed, almost two hundred years later, modern India is still struggling mightily with caste rules concerning marriage and pollution, rules which remain largely incomprehensible to, and variously hidden from, casual western observation. Caste continues to play an enormous role in the logics of everyday praxis, and is actively concealed by the post-colonial Indian state and mainstream media which together fervently strive for globalised cultural and economic parity with the west. Caste-ism is concealed from foreign curiosity, as well, by many middle class Indians most of whom have trans-nationally defined lives, and who do not wish to appear any less modern or backward. In contemporary Indian politics, caste plays a definitive role. *Dalit* (untouchable) emancipation from caste persecution is central to socio-political debates on national, regional and local levels. Unfortunately, caste rules over *dalit* pollution are exploited both by the state apparatus and by private arrangement. Divisions of labour are still largely determined by caste, with upper-caste Brahmins working as priests, intellectuals, educators, lawyers, etc... and the professions declining themselves in accordance, largely, with a consonant caste hierarchy. *Dalits* are relegated to the lowest strata and therefore to the most menial and taxing of labours despite capacity or inclination. Their jobs are often confined to waste removal, street and sewer cleaning and recycling or rag-picking. In the context of caste rules governing marriage an illustration might help to contextualize their prominence despite state and governmental protests to the contrary. Every Sunday the papers print their 'Matrimonial' sections. Usually printed on glossy pull-outs listings are broken down by gender and caste, and organized hierarchically according to the caste group of the seeker beginning at the top of the front page with Brahmin. The classified advertisements typically extol the academic and professional accomplishments of the advertised subjects and their families. Often the ads would specify that 'caste is no object or barrier.' That they are nevertheless classified according to caste exposes a certain hypocrisy, one that is commonly acknowledged, quickly dismissed and sometimes condemned, but seemingly often condoned.

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caste based traditions.[121] But these class and caste hybridities, new as they were within Calcutta, were demarcated in terms of urban space. Caste was figuratively, and practically, aligned with the rural and the village. Educational and economic mobilities of class were aligned with the modern city. As Mukherjee writes, "rural Bengal left its mark on Calcutta despite rapid urbanization, the 'traditional' language...was as important as the 'modern' language."[122] The hybrid mixing of class and caste produced a "new social grouping in India."[123]

> It was composed of an elite and an intelligentsia. The class was urban, not rural; it was literate and sophisticated; its status was founded more on wealth than on caste; it was a professional, not a literati, group; it was receptive to new knowledge, ideas and values; it absorbed new attitudes and its intellectuals created a syncretic cultural tradition; and perhaps, most important, it mentally transcended kin and caste and thought in broader terms.[124]

These broad terms were cosmopolitan by definition for they were concerned mostly with the procurement of wealth, of which the British colonial order, itself solely concerned with wealth making, was the key tool. Arabinda Poddar, in his study of the Bengal Renaissance, writes that

> "this obsessive pursuit of wealth could succeed only because the congenial atmosphere was created by imperialism and an acquisitive psychology was most cunningly engineered by it. Without the British conquest of India this...community could never have come into existence and amassed so much wealth at the cost of the poor in India. So, whoever was engaged in trade or commerce in whatever proportion or of whatever status was not only subservient to British rule, but prayed for its perpetuation.[125]

Subservient maybe, but perhaps only to the point of expedience. As the text by Bhawanicharan reveals, the city demanded a certain syncretism and/or hybridity of its cultural and business elite, one that gradually developed into a thoroughly modern anxiety of self-definition and ambivalent construction.

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[121] I use "para-" rather than "pre-" because it denotes a beside-ness or parallel, contiguous supplementarity to the caste relationship to colonial modernity. Caste did not disappear, nor did it become "creatively destroyed" by modernity's incursion into Bengal. It continued, as Mukherjee (1970, p.35) notes, "hidden and still attached."

[122] Ibid.

[123] Kopf (1969)p.213

[124] Ibid.

[125] Arabinda Poddar, *Renaissance in Bengal: Quests and Confrontations 1880-1860* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1970)p.236

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VII. Syncretism and the Bengal Renaissance

In 1828, Rammohun Roy, a leading intellectual in Calcutta at the time, founded the Brahmo Sabha (Assembly of God). He formed the assembly in order to legitimize the historiographic production, from ancient Vedic texts, of what he considered to be the pure and 'traditional' core of Hindu belief. In his conviction that Vedic knowledge, with its rationalist and monotheistic interpretation of the scriptures, would provide foundation for modern social and religious reform to a culture he considered had become decadent, idolatrous and infected with "puerilities" which needed to be excised, Rammohun strove to implement a vision of a modern, democratically inclusive, and civically oriented India.[126] The Sabha movement was implemented by urban intellectuals who, dissatisfied with their culture and its perceived inadequacies in the face of the ideas and activities of a Western-educated elite, and in the synchretic voice of Bhawanicharan's "City-Dweller" attempted to re-interpret the past within the unique urban context of Calcutta. The intellectual movement which gave birth to nationalist debates and modernizations, and which we have noted is now known as the Bengal Renaissance, cannot be extricated from the idea of the city. The beliefs of the movement and its context at the time were intimately wrought within both the context of the rapid urban transformation of Calcutta and with the concomitant "urban psychology" which was "the effect of a fundamental change in the world view of the people residing there. The progress of the intellectual movement synchronised with the urban transformation of Calcutta which became its nursery."[127]

In an effort to unite a diversity of traditions and practices with a universalist credo of a selectively purified and united Hinduism, Rammohun popularized key texts by publishing them in Bengali. Rammohun attempted to wed the rationalist and cosmopolitan values of European modernity or enlightenment as they were personified through the city, its ideals and the built spaces which reflected the tenor of its vision (colleges, businesses, civic governments, law courts) with the more narrowly defined scope of Bengali cultural interests centered around the spatial edifices of traditional caste bound social arrangements (temples, family homes, landholdings, villages). He sought a middle path between complete renunciation of the past and a regressive romanticism. David Kopf terms Rammohun's efforts a "dynamic classicism." He defines the dynamic classicist as follows: "[t]he dynamic classicist argues that the golden age models are to be used not to shape the present in the image of the past but to rediscover guidelines in one's classical heritage appropriate to a society in

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[126] Rammohun Roy, "Original Hinduism" *The Hindu Tradition* ed., Ainslee T. Embree (New York: Vintage 1972)p.282.
[127] Poddar (1970) p. 229

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transition. Unlike a static classicist, [Rammohun] uses history to justify accepting modern values from the West. But he makes a sharp distinction between adopting modern values from the West and Westernization."[128] Moving beyond the narrowly pecuniary interests of his syncretic forebearers, of which Bhawanicharan's "City Dweller" might have been an example, Rammohun attempted to take the monotheistic vision of European rationalism and read Hindu texts through this recuperative, unifying vision in an effort to resist the inequities of a Brahmin dominated scriptural interpretation.

As a result, the *Sabha*, and its later incarnation which was called the *Brahmo Samaj* (Society for the Worship of One True God) alienated the growing upper-caste urban educated elite[129] by exposing, in his re-interpretations, their elitist hypocrisies and perpetuations of "error." In light of the Orientalist rationalizations begun some years earlier by European scholars and linguists whose task it was to historicise a body of literature in the effort of colonial exploitation and domination, Indian history with Rammohun came to be recuperated under the nascent umbrella of nationalism and emboldened with the task of self-definition and rationalization. It was the almost exclusively urban class of the *bhadralok* and their gradual remove and separation from the normatively imagined rural traditionalisms which precipitated Rammohun's criticism and the subsequent reaction against his judgement. The *nabya-bhadralok*,[130] as Bhawanicharan called them, had become comfortable profiteering from an uncritical syncretism of colonial idolatry and colonialist capital mediation. Rammohun's attempts at modernist reform thus exacerbated a deepening social- psychological conflict in the search for describing a new identity, one manifest between the modern vision of a objective, universalist participatory mankind on the one hand, and the contiguous need, and desire, on the other hand, to maintain a sense of difference through a local and particularized discursive history tied to geography. This geography was not that primarily of the city, but

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[128] David Kopf., "The Universal Man and the Yellow Dog: The Orientalist Legacy and the Problem of Brahmo Identity in the Bengal Renaissance" *Aspects of Bengali History and Society: Asian Studies at Hawaii No. 12*, ed., Rachel Van M. Baumer (Hawaii: U of Hawaii Press, 1975)p. 45

[129] By the time Rammohun had instituted his critiques, the urban elite who had benefited from colonial structural and economic implementations came to define themselves as a separate class. This class came to be known as the *bhadralok. Bhadralok* literally means "gentle or refined man", and is used today in this sense. *Bhadra* is a Sanskrit term which also connoted a social value surrounding homestead property. As a class designation it connotes a social definition far more complex than simply "gentleman." J.H. Broomfield defines the *bhadralok* as, "A socially privileged and self-consciously superior group, economically dependent on land rents and professional and clerical employment; keeping its distance from the masses by its acceptance of high-caste proscriptions and its command of education; sharing a pride in its language, its literate culture, and its history; and maintaining its communal integration through a fairly complex institutional structure that it had proved remarkably ready to adapt and augment to extend its social power and political opportunities." See J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968)p.12-13. It was the *bhadralok* who were the object of Bhawanicharan's scrutiny in *Kalikata Kamalalaya*. As a new social class who amassed considerable wealth with their colonial contacts, he accused them of being indifferent to traditional ways and religiously defined social prescriptions. They were thus the object of the "Outsider's" rather pointed questions.

[130] In contemporary parlance we might use the term 'newly rich' to denote much the same thing.

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of the country, for it was increasingly the country which came to stand for the imaginary production of nationalist and cultural difference. What Bhawanicharan's "City Dweller" had tried to hybridize reflexively by maintaining the social division between caste and commerce, between the secular social or public, and the religious and private, began with Rammohun's modern interpretations, to be pulled apart in multiply competing dichotomies: tradition versus modernity; conservatism versus liberalism; East versus West; reform versus progressivism, city versus country. The melee these competing debates threw up in the form of organized social groups, assemblies, societies, newspapers, journals, and pamphlets inculcated ever more strongly the desire and concern for the awakening of Bengal. Nationalism and self-definition came to take centre stage.

Two subsequent events, each in a way, responding to the growing tide of Bengali modernization, self-definition and nationalism changed the fractious socio-political landscape and unified a resolve against colonial power. The first was the reaction against Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous Education Minute of 1835, and the second was the Sepoy rebellion of 1857-8. Let us begin with the Macaulay minute and the reaction to it.

Macaulay, a staunch liberal optimist in the British capacity to erode, universally, the barriers of tradition and custom, was champion of imperial modernization in India. But his modernity was decidedly British and championed its form universally. "The English...have spread their dominion over every quarter of the globe and have created a maritime power...to a perfection which our ancestors would have thought magical.... The English have become the greatest and most highly civilized people the world ever saw."[131] In his 'Minute on Education', Macaulay insisted that the previous efforts at Orientalist syncretism were misplaced, and that education should instead focus on the propagation of English and Englishness. The British mission was to create an India "English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."[132] He swept aside years of work on South Asian language and culture, and as President of the General Committee of Public Instruction, implemented the "opinion that the great object of the British government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science amongst the natives of India and that all funds appropriated for the purposes of education would be best employed on English education alone."[133]

The vast majority of the urban elite reacted vehemently against the proposed changes to education. Organized protests and petitions were amongst the first instances of a collective political action against the colonial administration, protests driven by the attempt to preserve access to the capacity to produce, discursively, a narrative of difference and particularity. With their protests they continued to endorse the need to reinterpret the past and history as guides to an uncertain future.[134] However, a small but vocal minority welcomed

[131] T.B. Macaulay, "Sir James Mackintosh" (1835) as quoted in W.E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957) p.39.
[132] Ibid., p. 40
[133] Macaulay, "Resolution on Education" (1835) as quoted in Kopf (1970)p.248
[134] Kopf (1970) p.253

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the changes implemented by Macaulay, and led by the poet Henry Derozio, espoused a secular vision for their modern future, one which promoted a vigorous and progressive Westernization. These modernizers were known as 'Young Bengal Movement.' Thus, ironically, amongst Bengalis, Macaulayism had the effect of widening divisions between the urban intelligentsia. Those who were divided by Rammohun's rationalized Vedantism between liberal and conservative wings of social reform became further estranged in their response to Macaulayism.

The second, and perhaps more influential event in terms of unifying resistance to colonial power, was the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857. It was argued at the time by an Indian official serving the British administration, a Sayyid Ahmad Khan, that insolence and contempt for Indians evinced by the British precipitated the revolt.[135] Race had become one of the key divisive factors in the continued estrangement in relations between the British and the Indians. Coupled with the gradual erosion of princely landed power, severe tax and revenue assessments, and increasingly restrictive cultural policies, the feelings of oppression amongst Muslims and Hindus grew. A series of protests, strikes and agitations boiled over in May of 1857. A year of skirmishes, open insurrection and battles deeply fractured the British administration. The British government's response to the insurrection in the form of stiffer cultural policies, greater policing of the population, and overt political control from Whitehall – on 2 August 1858, the British Parliament passed the Government of India Act and transferred all authority from the East India Company to the British Crown – magnified racial and communal divisions in India, including those between urban and rural populations.

One consequence of the British response to the uprising was that it radically re-oriented itself and its cultural focus. The city of Calcutta was no longer the sole site for academic endeavour, hegemonic cultural interpretation and administrative scrutiny.[136] Now the overtly Imperial Raj aimed to contain and describe the rural landscape and its people within its increasingly disciplinary and governmental gaze.

The site, therefore, to which the Bengali attention had shifted in its internal debates on self-definition, the site which constituted the most particularistic and explicit representational discourse of difference, the village and the rural, a site which had not been overlooked, but regarded, culturally, somewhat indifferently as simply a resource or hinterland by the British, suddenly became after 1858, a contested zone and necessary cultural touchstone for nationalist self-definition and containment. It and the peasants who populated it were seen by the British after the so-called "mutiny" as fractious and dangerous. For the Bengalis, who themselves were struggling with modernity's imperative of self-definition the idea of the country became more and more a repository for narratives of difference and identity.

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[135] Metcalf and Metcalf (2001)p.99
[136] Korom (1989)p.65

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Recall the debate and central problematic for Indian nationalism and modernity was (and still is) that of the different and the same. "Nationalist discourses, across regional and cultural contexts, worked in and through the simultaneous assertion of their similarity with and difference from other nation states and nations."[137] As Partha Chatterjee writes,

> In order to qualify ourselves for progress and liberty...it was necessary to transform our culture, to bring into being a new national religion suited to the modern world. And to achieve this transformation, we have to learn from the West, indeed to a large extent, to imitate the West.
>
> But how, then, would we retain our cultural identity, those distinctive cultural traits which made us different from all other nations in the world? How could we prevent ourselves from being submerged completely by the dominant culture of the West? By imitating the West, we might become modern, but what about our national character? How were we to preserve the latter?[138]

It seems, today, almost a truism of nationalism and modernity. Oppression breeds resistance and its own downfall. The intensification of British imperialism as a deliberately oppressive regime in response to perceived threats evidenced in the rise of the intellectual and populist debates on self-definition and, of course, in armed insurrection, had the effect of fuelling resistance and the demands for self-definition and self-government. "With the escalation of British Imperialism and the subsequent rise of militant nationalism, the problem of modernity became even more acute."[139]

Answers to the acute problem of modernity were to come, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the form of an explicitly revivalist and religiously nationalist political project. The earlier renaissance had attempted a hybrid modernism without overtly contesting the power of political oppression. For example, we saw that the 'City Dweller' in Bhawanicharan's dialogue extolled the virtues of hybrid languages in an effort to render separate the social worlds of class and caste. The hybrid use of English words and terms (Persian had lost, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, almost total sway to English) for matters of business and government effectively worked to separate the domains of material wealth production dependent on colonial economic structures, from the spiritual and familial spaces of cultural discourse. The material domain, culturally negotiated through hybridized forms of language, dress, education, mediation and wealth production became the gesture to the "outside" (ie. the West) that its

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[137] Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004)p.15

[138] Partha Chatterjee, "The Fruits of Macaulay's Poison Tree?" *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (Delhi: Oxford university Press, 1997)p.16

[139] Kopf (1975)p.67

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economy, statecraft, science, commerce and technology were superior. The constitutive markers of difference upon which, later, nationalism would build its challenge to power, politically, were those of the inner and spiritual domain which bear the supposedly 'essential' marks of cultural identity. Partha Chatterjee notes that this separation between the material and the spiritual is the fundamental feature of anti-colonial modernity,

> The greater ones success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture....The colonial state...is kept out of the 'inner' domain of national culture; but it is not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged....[H]ere nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not Western. If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being.[140]

The spiritual or inner 'core' through whose difference from the West the problem of identity and self-definition manifested itself in the early and mid 19th century remained separate from and unbreachable by the purview of the administrative state apparatus. *Kalikata Kamalalaya* "marginalizes the state by separating it from the purer aspects of personhood, by looking on it as a contingency and an external constraint, one of the many one has to negotiate in the [material] domain [ie. action to do with the realm of worldly interests like the pursuit of wealth, power, fame, livelihood].[141] Once, however, the state apparatus extended its gaze beyond simply the making of wealth, and took as its obligation the governance of the inner socio-religious and cultural lives of its, by now, proper subjects, the neat and expedient divide between the inner and the outer became inextricably bound up with the problem of power. After the "Mutiny" of 1857, the parliamentary government of the British Empire divested control from the East India Company and instituted as its responsibility the discipline of its subjects. Prior to 1857, the East India Company ruled Bengal and the rest of the sub-continent as a pecuniary arena ripe for resource exploitation and profit. After 1857, the problem of difference, something instituted by administrative design, and as a result, foregrounded as the categorical imperative of Bengali nationalism, became the crucial fulcrum around which the problem of modernity revolved.

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[140] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 1999) p.6
[141] Chakrabarty (1994)p.74

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VII. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Reification of a proto-nationalist past

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, who, by the late nineteenth century was Calcutta's pre-eminent man of letters, sought to use the discourse of a constitutive civilizational difference, which had been, over the course of the previous one hundred years involved in a process of becoming essentialized, historicised and reified, in the interests of nationalist solidarity. He saw political, rather than simply pecuniary, possibility in the essentialized historical difference between East and West. The importance of the narrative of history for modernity was becoming more marked for both the Bengali and the colonial interests in so far as it had for both sides been protected, disputed and mobilised through the events of 1835 and 1857. Since then, this notion of historical difference had been exploited by colonialism in the interests of both imperial hegemony and oppression. History came to be regarded as the "great symbol of the new age."[142] For Bengali's, modernity's necessary invocation of history had a two pronged or paradoxical effect; it was a doubled symbol. On the one hand, it referred to the course of happenings in time and to the seamless web of experiences of a people. But, on the other hand, with Bankimchandra and the educated Bengali cultural context of the later half of nineteenth century Calcutta, its great promise lay in how the stories about what had happened were recovered, explained and importantly mobilised. Bengalis awoke to the fact that history was a "...pragmatic science; its task was not to leave the world as it found it. The past was an image created in the interest of the present."[143] Where colonialist historians had mobilised a linear historical narrative which constructed an image of a subject people destined for colonisation, Bengalis, for Bankimchandra, had, by the same logic, the responsibility to similarly motivate their own narratives of history in the interests of self-definition.

Bankimchandra began with the premise that the East and West were fundamentally different. The modern West, he thought, was superior in terms of its material and technological capacities. The ground for its natural superiority evidenced by technological and material progress, Bankimchandra thought, was attributable to it placing the work of reason at the centre of its culture. But the East, he thought, was superior in spiritual terms. The Hindu *shastras* contained the greatest human achievements in the celebration of God and in the spiritual aspects of human experience. He made it his object to unite the best of the West with the best of the East. "The day the European industries and sciences are united with Indian dharma [conduct for right living], man will be god...Soon you will see that with the spread of doctrines of pure *bhakti*, the Hindus will gain new life and become powerful like the English."[144] In his attempt at a modernist,

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[142] Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995)p.107

[143] Ibid. p.108

[144] Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, "Dharmatattva" *Bankim Racanabali* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1955)p.630, as quoted in Chatterjee (1997)p.16-7. *Bhakti* is an approach to spiritual practice

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regenerative synthesis of East and West, however, Bankimchandra's proposal depends upon an explicit dichotomy between material and spiritual culture. Chatterjee paraphrases Bankim's 'new conservative' voice. He writes, "by learning from the West we did not necessarily risk losing our national cultural identity as long as we were careful to distinguish between the two aspects of culture. We would learn our science and technology from the West, for there the West was superior. But we must at the same time revive, retain and strengthen our own spiritual heritage, for there we were second to none. That would preserve our national identity vis-à-vis the West."[145] The task of differentiating, both between East and West, and between the material and the spiritual, became, with Bankimchandra, a political one descriptive of a nationalist identity. Bankimchandra's break with the earlier orientalist syncretism of Bhawanicharan's narrativized bhadralok "City-dweller" came in his attempt to wed the imaginary histories of two competing civilization constructs, the materialist, technologically superior West, and the internalist, spiritually superior East, but with the explicit goal of politically constructing a world power in a 'revival' of the Indian nation. He differs from Rammohun, quite markedly, in so far as while both he and his forbearer attempted to construct a distinct narrative history of Hinduism, Bankimchandra did not accept that this revival could be read through the rationalist lens of the Christian West. Rammohun tried to rationalize Hinduism and reform Brahminically doctrinal injustices through his reading of the politics of the Enlightenment. Bankimchandra considered this, and the Brahmo movements' pretensions of reform, ridiculous. The Brahmo babus were, he thought, mere "heteronomous agents of others' ideas and others' acts."[146] What they lacked was the authenticity history makes. This authenticity would be found and enervated through the courage of a responsibility to an indigenous society's historical sufferings. The Bhrahmo's, neither culturally a part of the colonial apparatus, nor in their rejection of its traditionalist forms, a part of the indigenous community, they represented a pure heteronomy for Bankimchandra, one constitutively unable to take responsibility for their own history.[147] Aimed at the emergence of a middle-class, the discourse of an arising identity responsible to its own making was written through the figure of the nation. Bankimchandra iconicized the idea of the Hindu nation as feminine, maternal, territorial and natural. As an anthropomorphised form it became the enervating force of action as well as an object of reverence. Bankimchandra's song, *Bande Mataram* (Hail to the Motherland) became the rallying cry for the nationalist cause in so far as it acted as a symbolic locus for political and communal identification.

Bande Mataram was first written in 1875 and subsequently contextualized in *Anandamath* in 1882. The novel came out at around the time of the Ilbert Bill which sought to place Indian judges on par with their English colleagues in the

characterized by personal devotion to a divinity, sometimes, but not necessarily, mediated by a holy person or teacher.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Kaviraj(1995)p.46

[147] Ibid., p.47

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courts of the colonial empire. Previously it was written into the law that whites on trial could not be judged by Indians. The Ilbert Bill sought to redress that. The white community, faced with the prospect of being tried, convicted and sentenced by Indians, protested the bill by arguing the moral inferiority of Indians and by desecrating Hindu places of worship. *Anandamath* argues for the acceptance of British rule, as a preferred alternative to Mughal rule, but balances this acquiescence to British modernity with the revivalist attempt to restore idealized past glories of Hindu civilizational and communal identity. *Bande Mataram* repeatedly symbolizes this belief in an inherent, territorial and essentially Hindu civilization.[148] The nation was symbolically represented through the figure of the Mother, an idealized place with a "utopian meaning, dreamlike, yet passionately real, charged with a deeply religious semiotic."[149] In Calcutta, the figural representation of the territorial nation with the mother, had special, deliberate significance. Bengal, and especially, the Kali temple in the south of the Calcutta, are the spiritual loci for the worship of Durga and Kali, mother figures and facets of Shiva's creative and destructive aspects. Durga and Kali, aspects of one another, symbolically manifest themselves as slayers of demons The mother figure emanated, for Hindu Bengalis, a symbolic commitment, as well as an agony invested in the nationalist struggle to "re-unite" what was supposedly intimately and unmistakeably one's own. It also explicitly Hinduized the nationalist struggle for self-definition.[150]

The keys to the nation's liberation were placed in the hands of the urban intelligentsia, who wrote the symbolic struggle through their fictional and non-fictional narratives, but who enervated this struggle through an appealing to a territorial register. New meaning was invested in the land, its collective people's who would unite under her provision, and who would resist her exploitation. Christopher Bayly quotes a song popular at the time of Bankimchandra's writing which reveals this process of the land becoming a symbolic register for communal identification.

> We may be poor, we may be small,
> But we are a nation of seven crores
> ...
> Defend your homes, protect your shops,
> Don't let the grain from our barns be looted abroad.
> We will eat our own coarse grain and wear the rough, home-spun cloth,
> What do we care for lavender and imported trinkets?

[148] Romesh Chunder Dutt, "Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay" Encyclopedia Brittanica 11th ed. 1911, Vol. VI, p.910. Romesh Chunder Dutt was a novelist and historian, and near contemporary of Bankimchandra's. Dutt wrote one of the first generative texts of anti-colonial political economy, the *Economic History of India*, and extended Bankim's call to define a collective Bengali self with respect to the idea of India as a whole.

[149] Chatterjee (1997)p.18

[150] see Jasodhara Bagchi, "Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal" *Economic and Political Weekly* October 20-27, 1990

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> Foreigners drain away our mother's milk,
> Will we simply stand and watch?[151]

But the symbolic process of liberatory, political enfranchisement was something driven by the urban elite. Bankimchandra and his elite ilk took upon themselves the subtle and demanding synthesis of two seemingly incommensurable and civilizational lifeworlds. Calcutta was placed at the centre of the cultural crossroads between the east and the West, and took pride of place, as it was the singular cultural home to the unique conditions for the training of the urban elite in their nationalist imperative. Only those who had training and an education in both worldviews could lead this re-birth of a uniquely, materially and spiritually, progressive nation. Despite Bankimchandra's symbolically territorial populism, his reification of an idealized and ancient Hindu past explicitly privileged a caste bound didactic politics and the place of the educated Brahmin. In "Dharmatattva" he emboldens the figure of the "Guru" with an appeal to Brahmins to live up to their ancient glory.

> There has been no such mentally cultivated, yet destitute, class of people anywhere on earth....They understood that if the mind is on wealth, the acquisition of knowledge is hindered, and society's education is hindered. It was because they were to single-mindedly and with concentration educate the people that they renounced everything. It is those into whose bones the *dharma* of dispassionate action has entered. ... They understood that without devotion to the educators of society there is no progress, and for this reason they promulgated devotion to the Brahmins. The society and civilization which they created is...even today unequalled in the world: even today Europe can accept it as an ideal. ... Their praise is eternal. There are no other people of all those on earth with as much genius, ability, wisdom and religion as the Brahmins of India.[152]

By the late 19th century, the colonial metropolis became the pivotal fantasy space and counter-point to the village.[153] At the same time it was also in the process of becoming the locus for the reaction against the Western materialist order which threatened a renewed nationalist resurgence, one explicitly tied through the increasingly romantic imagery of the village and territorial identity to a political cause. Rabindranath Tagore would soon use such imagery to warn, within the context of *swadeshi*, that just as the "European mills are killing our handicrafts, so

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[151] Christopher Bayly, "The Origins of Swadeshi: Cloth and Indian Society." *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p.183

[152] Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, "Dharmatattva" *Sociological Essays: Utilitarianism and Positivism in India* translated and edited by S.N. Mukherjee (Riddhi: Calcutta, 1986)p.179

[153] Ashis Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001)p.12

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is the all pervading machinery of an alien government destroying our simple old village organization. ... The village community, the mother of nations" threatens with its extinction because its life-giving institutions are uprooted and ... floating like dead wood logs down the stream of time."[154] In this new politics of signification, as in any system of signification, the city as signifier is likely to represent many often contradictory discourses at once. As a site from which the material force of the West emanated, the colonial city-space of Calcutta made a place for itself in the modernizing, nationalist fantasy life by promising freedom from caste limitations, ascribed status and cultural obligation.[155] It was a place wherein one could lose oneself, and in the new spirit of alienation and individuation make oneself free from village determination.

In so far as the political task of inventing a modern nationalist self entailed the construction of a syncretic globalised individual within a specific and unique historical narrative, the colonial city came to define a modern nationalist sense of self. The village, or the pre-self, which, outlived its normative utility, represented now the intimate ruin at the heart of the symbolic maternal future, and, as an earlier incarnation, the counter-point other. Its less materially sophisticated landscape, its caste-bound social hierarchies, and its incivility by virtue of being closer to nature, all contributed to its distancing from modernity's historicist narratives of development and progress.

But, the village was also something which, as a distanced form of the pre-self of modernity, became reconceptualized from within the originating force of the city. It was through the unique combination of symbolic registers of rational material modernity, and spiritual revivalism embodied through the spaces of the city and the village, that the project of self-determination found its practical force. The village came to be re-imagined and re-cast, but from the vantage point of the city and its abstractionist narratives of ideal typification. If the colonial city is symbolic of the site for the construction of the new self, one identified with history, progress and becoming,[156] the village of the imagination came to be re-cast as a redemptive place or reservoir for nationalist value and normative legitimacy. As such it became typified as a place of serenity, a pastoral idyll, and repository for spiritual and "soil' based values which in their very materiality demarcated both spatial and normative differences which the city could not alone propitiate. Traditional wisdom, value and simplicity comprised "no longer a village in itself;...[but] a counterpoint for the city." While on the one hand a site for libratory self-making and progressive materiality, the city was also a place of alienation from self and community, a site of fragmentation and instability and "a symbol of impersonal, institutionalised exploitation and immorality."[157]

A dyadic and conflictual interdependency between two mythic and imaginative constructions of place came to take centre stage in the discursive

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[154] Rabindranath Tagore, *Greater India* (Madras: S. Ganesan, 1921)p.70. See also Manu Goswami (2004)p. 259.
[155] Nandy (2001)p.12
[156] Ibid., p.13
[157] Ibid., p.14

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struggle for Indian modern self-definition. The city was both symbol of freedom and possibility, alienation and homelessness. The village was both regenerative source for spiritual uniqueness and difference, but also site of tradition bound hierarchies and limitations to geographic and social mobilities. Both became idealized narrative symbols. "If the journey to the city was once an escape from oppressive sectarian and community ties, the demands of ascribed status, and the denial of individuality, the attempts to escape from the city are also powered by dreams of an idyllic community and escape from hyper-competitive, atomized individualism."[158]

The dialectic between the city and the village, at once contradictory and self-supporting, contextualized at the time, the significance of Bengal's colonial modernity. It produced,

> ...at one and the same time, an urge to find a distinct and authentic cultural identity for the nationality, as well as an urge for cosmopolitanism. It was the two together...that provided this culture of the middle class with the standard of legitimacy which made it the accepted cultural norm for the entire nationality – the dominant, the 'standard' form of its culture. ... [The] intellectual and creative tension between the two demands, for indigenous authenticity on the one hand, and cosmopolitanism on the other, was born out of the more fundamental contradiction encountered by the new middle class in its entire colonial experience – the contradiction between the national and the modern.[159]

☙

VIII. Rabindranath's Ambivalent, Critical Poetics of Urban Nationalism

Tagore has sung Bengal into a nation.

Ezra Pound

Perhaps the most significant figure in Bengal to trouble, critique, examine, and capitalize on the creative contradictions between modernity's conceptual problematic of authenticity and cosmopolitanism was Rabindranath Tagore. Over and over again he mobilised the polarities of the problematic in his poems, novels, plays, essays and paintings. Central to his conceptual framing of the form were the symbolic and imaginary figures of the city and the village. They became for him, archetypical spaces and tropic, discursive places. Rabindranath struggled

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[158] Ibid., p.25

[159] Partha Chatterjee, "The Fruits of Macaulay's Poison Tree" (1997)p.21-22.

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with the basic oppositions of modernity – East and West, tradition and modernity, past and present – as they shaped his Bengali context in the nationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Rabindranath was a product of the tensions these oppositions manifest. Brought up in the privileged context of a spiritual, if iconoclastic, Pirali Brahmin household,[160] an elite one wealthy in rich landholdings and extensive colonial business relationships, Rabindranath was educated in both a classical Sanskritic high culture, and in the diverse, low culture traditions common to the countryside of Bengal. A product of a heteronomous or hybrid urban privileged elite, he was also educated in English and in European Enlightenment thought. He described himself and his family as a "confluence of three cultures: Hindu, Mohammedan and British."[161] As a young man of 17, he was sent to England, by his father, to study. From 1878 till 1880 he lived in England, and there began to write seriously. Growing to maturity during the Hindu revivalist era of Bankimchandra's nationalism, it is not surprising to see the latter's call for civilisational union reflected in his earliest writing. In 1878, he wrote and published, though anonymously, an essay in his sister's literary journal, *Bharati*, entitled "Bangalir asa o nairasya" (The Hope and Despair of Bengalis). In it he writes,

> If the remnants of Bengali civilisation were to become the foundation upon which European civilisation is to be built, what a most beautiful sight in the world that would be! The European idea in which freedom predominates, and the Indian idea in which welfare predominates, the profound thought of the Eastern countries and the active thought of the Western countries; European acquisitiveness and Indian conservatism; the imagination of the Eastern countries, and the practical intelligence of the West – what a fullness will emerge from the synthesis of the two.[162]

We might forgive him a certain enthusiastic naïveté, but his words do mimic the prevailing intellectual efforts of the time. Bankimchandra's *Anandmath* would be published only four years later, but the political tenor of the late 1870s and early 1880s was one, as Chatterjee notes, of building a nationalist ideology through linguistic and cultural difference but complemented within a colonialist

[160] 'Pirali' refers to a Brahmin caste which has 'fallen' so to speak from the prescribed orthodoxies of the *shatras*. As a family, the Tagores (originally Thakur, meaning 'godly', but anglicized as Tagore) broke from Brahminical tradition by engaging in non-brahminical or priestly activities like business, landownership, associating and eating with foreigners. They are still respected as Brahmin's but with the understanding that they had renounced some of the more orthodox practices and thus were no longer considered entirely 'pure.'

[161] Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* (London: Unwin, 1961)p.105

[162] Rabindranath Tagore, "Bangalir asa o nairasya" (1878) as quoted in Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China and India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).p.21

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framework of modern state building. Thus the discourse at the time was one of breaking with a European Enlightenment nationalist mould, but at the same time one of attempting to open the concept to new possibilities and content.[163] For Rabindranath, it became clear that the possibility of any new nationalist scheme could only be grounded in the traditions, languages, and diverse cultures of Bengal. By the 1890s, on a second trip to Europe, and in a more critical mood towards colonial rule, it became the paradigm for his ideational notion of the "country."[164] Bankimchandra's marriage of a re-vitalized and re-imagined past through the modernist achievements of the colonial material present in Calcutta came to be read as uncritically narrow by Rabindranath. The neo-Hinduism which Bankimchandra's syncretism espoused was limited to a sacred revenance as nationalist protectionism. In his "Twenty-fourth Adyaha – Love of Country," a chapter in his dialogue "Dharmatattva," Bankimchandra writes,

> ...the protection of the country is a higher dharma than even self-protection. And it is for this reason that thousands of people sacrifice their lives in an effort to protect their country.
> For the same reason for which the protection of the country is a higher duty than self-protection, it is also a higher duty than the protection of kindred. For your family is only a small part of society, and it is right that a part should be sacrificed for the sake of the whole. Like self-protection and protection of kindred, protection of the country is an action directed toward God; for it is a means to the welfare of the whole world. If everything should be destroyed and overcome by mutual attack, and should fall under the control of some greedy, sinful race of people, then religion and progress would vanish from the earth. Therefore it is right that everybody should protect their own country, for the sake of the welfare of all things.[165]

For Rabindranath, who by 1890, had returned to England, and there awakened to the international injustices of colonialism not only in India, but in China, South Africa and the Americas, the idea that nationalism would speak for universal human interests was abhorrent. He called this form of nationalism "the idolatry of geography."[166] By this time he had come to the conclusion that a critique of modernity must be enervated through a universalism rather than through a more

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[163] Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) is an examination of the ideological content of Indian nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century in India. It examines the roles of Bankimchandra and Ghandi in the production of Indian nationalism.

[164] "A country is not territorial (*mrinmaya*); it is ideational (*chinmaya*)." Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Ranchanabali*, Vol. 1, p.1 as quoted in Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994)p.1.

[165] Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, "Dharmatattva" (reprint 1986) ed. S.N. Mukherjee, p. 196-7.

[166] Rabindranath Tagore, "A Vision of Indian History" as quoted in Goswami (2004) p.265.

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parochial nationalism. In an 1886 essay, he wrote that, "if one wished to love even a tiny stretch of earth anywhere, one had to be imbued with universalism, since that piece of earth was only a part of the universe."[167]

Indeed, in perhaps his most well known novel *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World), published in 1915-16, Rabindranath critiques the legacy of Bankimchandra's political sociology which had produced, in his eyes, a highly divisive, communalist nationalism prone to violence and instrumental patriotism. In the character of Sandip,[168] a fiery, rhetorical agitator, whose powerful presence seduces Bimala,[169] the wife of Nikhil[170] into joining his aggressive, nationalist cause, Rabindranath symbolizes the forces of a flambouyant, patriotic nationalism. The character of Nikhil is written as the counter-point to Sandip's volatile patriotism. Although equally wedded to overcoming colonialism and to the virtue of self-rule, Nikhil is a consensualist and liberal humanist who strives to enter the modern world through education, political deliberation and cosmopolitan liberation. He sees virtue as extending the critique of modernity beyond the confines of the state. Bimala, symbolic of the pure motherland of Bengal, is torn between the two visions of nationalism. She sides with Sandip. But in a communal riot fired by Sandip's divisive politics whose violence fatally wounds Nikhil, and which precipitates the fleeing of the now exposed as morally shallow Sandip, Bimala loses both home and the world. Rabindranath's narrative warns of the dangers of placing too much emphasis in the divine power of the motherland. With Nikhil's words he opens his critique of a narrow nationalist modernity which sanctifies the state to a universal critique of modern civilisation. He thus widens the scope of the anti-colonial critique beyond the territorial confines of earlier discourses. "I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it."[171]

It was to universalism, and to a broad critique of modernity's ambiguous effects both in India and around the world that Rabindranath turned his attention. Rabindranath celebrated cultural diversity and encouraged an open dialogue between elsewheres, be they European, Japanese or North American modernities, while at the same time emphasizing the need to ground a critical perspective on modernity in ones own culture and heritage.[172] Rebuking the neo-Hinduist privileging of spiritual superiority as a racist discourse, Rabindranath opened his critique of modern civilisation's normative bankruptcy to, what he considered to be, the inherent value of distinct folkways and rural life.

To the grounding, vitalist values of the village he contrasted the abstract and intellectualist character of the urbanite, the latter, seduced by, what Simmel

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[167] Rabindranath Tagore, Rabindra Ranchanabali, Vol. 11, p.12 as quoted in Poddar (1977) p.170.
[168] "Sandip" means 'lighted lamp.'
[169] "Bimala" means 'pure.'
[170] "Nikhil" means 'whole,' 'entire' or 'complete.'
[171] Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World* trans. Surendranath Tagore (London: Penguin, 1985)p.29
[172] Amartya Sen, "Tagore and His India" *The New York Review of Books* 44 (June 26, 1997)

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might term, an objective valuelessness which regresses the delicate, spiritual and idealist culture of the individual.[173] It was in the rural lifeways of Indian society and economy, and in the peasants relationship to the land and earth where Rabindranath located a critical resistance to abstract urbanism.

> The soil in which we are born is the soil of our village, the mother earth in whose lap we receive our nourishment from day to day. Our educated elite, abstracted from this primal basis, wander about in the high heaven of ideas like aimless clouds far removed from this our home. If this cloud does not dissolve into a shower of a loving service, man's relation with mother earth will never become truly meaningful. If all our ethereal ideas float about in vaporous inanity, the said time of the new age will have come in vain. It is not as if there is no rain but the land remains untilled. It is as if from our vast country, stretched out like an arid waste, a thirsty cry goes forth heavenward: All your accumulated ideas, your wealth of knowledge arrayed in fine splendour – all this should be mine. Give me all that is mine. Prepare me so that I may receive it all. Whatever you give will be restored a thousand fold.[174]

The intellectual spirit of Rabindranath's understanding of "*swadeshi samaj*" (society of our land) was fuelled during a period of some ten years when, at the end of the nineteenth century, young and entrusted with the care of family landholdings, Rabindranath travelled throughout much of Bengal by river and by road.

Letters from his journeys "describing village scenes in Bengal," collected and published by Rabindranath as *Chhinnapatrabali*, and, subsequently published by the author in English as *Glimpses of Bengal*[175] idealize a romantic conception of the village as the true heart of Bengal. Poetic reflections on human beings' place in a cosmic order, the letters are not without political and social critique. Often the city life of Calcutta is contrasted with the simple, unadorned pleasures of the riverine landscape and its open spaces, the city only iterative of civilization's artificialities and "empty mirages."[176] The city, symbolic of materiality and utility, its technologies stultifying a genuine poetry of natural landscape and the human experience of nature is aligned as a site not only of colonial oppression but also of modern civilisation's spiritual vacuity and ceaseless freneticism. In a letter of the 16th of Jaistha (May) 1892, from Bolpur, he writes,

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[173] Georg Simmel, "Metropolis and Mental Life." *Individuality and Social Forms* ed. D. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971)p.337

[174] Rabindranath Tagore as quoted in Krishna Kripalini, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962)p.150.

[175] Rabindranath Tagore, *Glimpses of Bengal 1885-1895* (MacMillan and Co.: London, 1921)

[176] Ibid. p.165

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> No church tower chimes here, and there being no other human habitation near by, complete silence falls with the evening, as soon as the birds have ceased their song. There is not much difference between early night and midnight. A sleepless night n Calcutta flows like a huge, slow river of darkness; one can count the varied sounds of its passing, lying on one's back in bed. But here, the night is like a vast, still lake, placidly reposing, with no sign of movement.[177]

The colonial context of the city and its commensurate technological and political oppression are castigated as impoverishing a now naturalized Bengali character. His letter from Cuttack of March, 1893 reads,

> If we begin to attach too much importance to the applause of Englishmen, we shall have to be rid of much that in us is good, and to accept much in them that is bad.
>
> We shall grow ashamed of going about without socks, and cease to feel shame at the sight of their ball dresses. We shall have no compunction in throwing overboard our ancient manners, nor any in emulating their lack of courtesy.
>
> We shall leave off wearing our *achgans* because they are susceptible of improvement, but think nothing of surrendering our heads to their hats, though no headgear could well be uglier.
>
> In short, consciously or unconsciously, we shall have to cut our lives down according as they clap their hats or not.
>
> Wherefore I apostrophise myself and say: 'O Earthen Pot! For goodness sake keep away from that Metal Pot! Whether he comes to you in anger or merely to give you a patronising pat on the back, you are done for, cracked in either case. So pay heed to Æsop's sage counsel, I pray – and keep your distance.'
>
> Let the metal pot ornament wealthy homes; you have work to do in those of the poor. If you let yourself be broken, you will have no place in either, but merely return to the dust; or, at best, you may secure a corner in a bric-a-brac cabinet – as a curiosity, and it is more glorious far to be used for fetching water by the meanest of village women.[178]

The Bengali countryside takes on, in Rabindranath's letters, a timelessness evocative of a space outside of history and relieved of the vagaries of human concern. In a letter from Shelidah, dated 24 June 1894, he writes,

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[177] Ibid. p.66
[178] Ibid. p.98-100

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> I have been only four days here, but, having lost count of the hours, it seems such a long while, I feel that if I were to return to Calcutta today I should find much of it changed – as if I alone had been standing outside the current of time, unconscious of the gradually changing position of the rest of the world.
>
> The fact is that here, away from Calcutta, I live in my own inner world, where the clocks do not keep ordinary time; where duration is measured only by the intensity of the feelings; where, as the outside world does not count the minutes, moments change into hours and hours into moments. So it seems to me that the subdivisions of time and space are only mental illusions. Every atom is immeasurable and every moment infinite.[179]

But, Tagore is not writing, in these formative years, of a landscape unpopulated, a wilderness devoid of any human interference. The village, fields and folk he characterizes through the language of the idyll and of a bounty such that the Bengali folk evinces "against the artificiality of the city of Calcutta, the qualities of the Bengali heart."[180] His idealizations of the Bengal heart expands the scope of colonial critique to the wider universalizable phenomenon of technological modernization and, for Rabindranath, its commensurate moral decay. The colonial city and the town he equates with modern technocratic society, the Indian country with universal and infinite communion and value, something he extends to non-human sentience and a particularly "Indian" appreciation. Nationalist territorial identity here at least takes on a transcendentalist character. Again from Shelidah, 9 August 1894, and upon passing a drowned bird in the river, he writes,

> When I am in the presence of the awful mystery of...Nature, the difference between myself and the other living things seems trivial. In town, human society is to the fore and looms large; it is cruelly callous to the happiness and misery of other creatures as compared to its own.
>
> In Europe,...man is so complex and so dominant, that the animal is too merely an animal to him. To Indians the idea of the transmigration of the soul from animals to man, and man to animal, does seem strange, and so from our scriptures pity for all sentient creatures has not been banished as sentimental exaggeration.

[179] Ibid. p.130

[180] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of Partition" *Economic and Political Weekly* August 10, 1996 p.2148

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> When I am in close touch with Nature in the country, the Indian in me asserts itself and I cannot remain coldly indifferent to the abounding joy of life throbbing within the soft down-covered breast of a single tiny bird.[181]

Rabindranath's belief in the normative superiority of the rural life compared to modern urban society and culture was shaped by his travels throughout Bengal in the 1880s and 1890s.[182] But, as the last letter quoted above makes clear, Rabindranath's universalism is grounded in an identity politics of difference. He contrasts a natural, *Indian* affinity and capacity or closeness to nature – "when I am in close touch with Nature in the country, the *Indian* in me asserts itself" (emphasis added). The idealized foundation for a critique of the modern is found in the Indian cultural identification with the beauty, simplicity and harmony of rural life in the country.[183] Against its redemptive capacity, Rabindranath counterpoised the ugliness, over-activity and organized selfishness he saw in city-life, particularly in the cityscape of Calcutta. City life, for him, actively exploited the capacity of the countryside to respond to and create alternatives with what the modern-as-city represented. In an essay called "City and Village" he wrote, "...unlike a living heart [ie. the countryside of Bengal]...cities imprison and kill the blood and create poison centres filled with the accumulation of death. ... The reckless waste of humanity which ambition produces, is best seen in the cities, where the light of life is being dimmed, the joy of existence dulled, the natural threads of social communion snapped everyday."[184] Thus Rabindranath's ideational country, a nation read through a somewhat nostalgic and romantically ideated landscape became exemplified and experienced as a place of loss. The city, and what it manifests socially, was the constitutive source of the country's destruction. It is important here to note the doubled meaning of country. "Country" refers both to the national apparatus with its territorial and identificatory boundedness, but it quite self-consciously manifests, as such, through the conceptualization of the nation as a non-urban space or country-side.

While an essay like "City and Village" might evidence a forceful and perhaps one-sided critique of the city as a place of destruction, it is a mistake to argue that Rabindranath generalized this condemnation. His writing about the landscapes of the village and the city were far more ambiguous and ambivalent than his sometimes strident critiques evidence. Perhaps the most singular, literary example of this conceptual ambivalence comes with his long, anguished poem, "Nagar Sangit" (Song of the City).

'Nagar Sangit' opens with a lament,

> *Kotha gela sei mahan sauta nava*

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[181] Rabindranath Tagore (1921)p.133-34
[182] Hay (1970) p.61
[183] Ibid. p.32
[184] Rabindranath Tagore, "City and Village" *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* Vol. 2 No.3 (October) 1924 p.221

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Nirmal symalkanta
Ujjavalanil vasanapranta sundar
Subha dharana?[185]

Where has it gone, that noble calmness,
Fresh and pure and graceful greenness,
Edged with a hem of shining blueness,
Beautiful, kindly world?[186]

Sundar and *subha* are conflated by Rabindranath. *Sundar* means beautiful, and *subha* means good, kind, dignified, auspicious. The green and blue, noble in their calm are beautiful and good. The poem continues,

Sky's delight by light excited,
Secretive gardens, coolly shaded,
Where have the buzzing bees retreated –
What brings us to this pass?

Rabindranath answers in the next stanza.

O city, city, jungle of people,
Road after road, buildings innumerable,
Everything buyable, everything saleable,
    Uproar, hubbub, noise.

Enormous profits, thumping crashes,
Sky-polluting foul dust flurries,
Whipped by the sun into swirling eddies
    Soiling heaven and earth.

Everything fitful, broken, fleeting,
No lasting sign behind remaining,
A quick combining, fast dividing
    Dash to the sea of death.

Pathetic weeping, raucous revelry,
Tyrranous arrogance, abject slavery,
Futile striving, malicious raillery,
    Hurtling forward en masse.

Nothing fixed for a single moment,

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[185] Rabindranath Tagore, "Nagar Sangit" *Sanchayita* (Calcutta: Visvabharti, 1972)p.241
[186] Rabindranath Tagore, "Song of the City" trans. William Radice, *Tagore: Verse and Versatility*, eds. Udayan Bhattacharya and Pathikrit Bandopadhyay (Mumbai: Shahana, 2001)p.1

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No desire for anything permanent,
Constant activity, ceaseless movement
By day and by dark of night.

Each in pursuit of a gleaming fantasy,
Desperate to hunt and catch an illusory
Golden deer that dances endlessly –
Old and young rush on.

It's like a ritual bonfire leaping,
Snouts and trunks of fire flailing,
Scrabbling and scratching the night with raging
Hunger for more and more. ...[187]

The city, the site of modernity's ceaseless movement and fleeting pause, fragmented, destroying, pursuing ephemera and the illusory reprieve of wealth, gathers all, no matter their age or caste, and consumes hem in a "massive, fiery spectacle."[188] But, Rabindranath does not claim in the poem that the city consumes innocents. Rather people give themselves. They "offer their souls as fuel"[189] like insects drawn to a light.

...

Heart, like a fly, is drawn to the dazzle,
Longs to add to the wild hubble-bubble
Blood of self-slashed veins.

City, o city, rushing and pouring
Constantly forth like foaming and bubbling,
Wine – let me lose myself by drinking
Deep your essence today.[190]

Rabindranath implicates himself in the seduction of the city. It is the heart that is drawn, noble, beautiful and good, to the fire. The poem continues, and gives way to the poets own seductions to the orgy's excesses, "I shall become your fellow-traveller,...joining the great unfettered orgy,...let me be a part of you."[191] What began as a lament moves with heady violence to seduction. The poem shifts to the first person and, overcome by the delirium and promise of modernity and the city, the narrative voice celebrates the cityspace as a powerful tool of self-realization surrendered to the ambiguous energy of conquest.

Whatever the games that fate has planned for me

[187] Ibid., p.2
[188] Ibid., p.3
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid., p.3-4
[191] Ibid., p.4

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Some of them right and some of them wrong for me
Some of them sweet and some of them bitter agony –
I'll take them as they come. ...

... Seizing the city's trumpet of conquest,
Grabbing all that is furthest and hardest,
I the unstoppably wildest and strongest
Will take what I want by force.[192]

If the country was symbolic of the space of tradition and communal action, the city is decidedly individualistic, and seductively so, for the modern city, as Rabindranath characterizes it, is a place for the new and the unknowable process of self-making and futurity.

Crooked and tortuous paths ahead of me,
Start unknown and end not clear to me,
Forward I'll rush and cross unstoppably
Rivers, mountains and seas.
Looking ahead and never behind me,
A nestles, restless bird-of-the-night I'll be,...[193]

The city is portrayed as profoundly attractive, by Rabindranath, and describes his own ambivalence with respect to Calcutta. Rabindranath agonized over his own inability to let go of the city and his ties to Calcutta. Athough his aversion to the city grew all his life, he kept returning, attracted like a unrequited heart, a fly to the immense and seductive light despite knowing that as a form of life, it was ultimately unfulfilling and itself contingent.[194] 'Nagar Sangit' ends,

Fame and wealth and status and power
Are not the slaves of any owner –
The river of time takes all.
So for a few days, a few nights only,
Let the clashing and crowded city
Fill the glass of my life completely
With churning, heady wine.

Rabindranath gives himself over to the inevitability of the city and modernity. It does not end by returning to the present absence of the lament, as it began, and as one might expect it might end. Far more complex and perhaps pessimistic is Rabindranath's vision.

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[192] Ibid., p.5
[193] Ibid.
[194] Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Myriad Minded Man* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995)p.335

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'Nagar Sangit' presents an enormously ambiguous portrait of the emotional life of the city, a place of violence, division, filth, rush and noise. But it is also a place of freedom, self-making, liberation from tradition, and a space of invention, material growth, desire and pleasured fulfillment. Not unlike the work of Baudelaire, that other, but European, poet of modernity, Rabindranath's poem expresses the ambiguous contradiction at the heart of a modern life, one "based on the pitiless search for what we desire, with all the means within our grasp, but it is also a life that is transformed by the enchantment of the new – it forces human beings not merely to satisfy their desires, but to invent new hunger, new thirst."[195]

The relentlessly industrial Calcutta of the late 19th and early 20th centuries thus invented, along with the material freedom and possibility of a "sky clouded with smoke from a furnace,"[196] an ideational social levelling of a highly stratified traditional ordering, one that destroyed a dichotomy productive of the possibility of a non-Euro-modernist difference. The results were at the same time seductive and fearsomely destructive.

Some years prior to Rabindranath writing 'Nagar Sangit', the Calcutta poet Rupchand Pakshi (1814?-1891), nearing the end of his life, presaged the Rabindranath's ambivalence in his poem "Kolkata Barnan,"

> Clean-streets, garbageless, lit by rows of gaslight,
> The full moon has come out, it is no longer night.
>
> Flour mills, jute mills, cloth and brick mills,
> Machines that dig out water and make landfills,
> Elephantine machines make a road a day,
> *Pranam* at the feet of machines,
> Town and country – have become twins.[197]

The attraction to a modern life, one which materially degenerates and levels the worlds of the city and country is, thus, for Rabindranath, a deeply ambivalent one. A space of freedom, anonymity, invention, wealth, democracy, liberation, and possibility, it is also a site of disenchantment, ambivalence, loneliness, inflexible servitude, corruption, inequality, disorientation, exploitation and degeneracy. This complex set of mutually constituting contradictions as they are experienced in the modern city were not, as we have noted, foreign to Rabindranath himself.

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[195] Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Art of Despair: The Sense of the City in Modern Bengali Poetry" *Evam: Forum on Indian Representations* Vol.2, No.1and 2 (2003) p.239

[196] Rabindranath Tagore, "Nagar Sangit" p.3

[197] Rupchand Pakshi, "Kolkata Barnan" as quoted in Debjani Sengupta, "Mechanicalcutta: Industrialisation, New Media in the 19th Century" *Sarai Reader2: The Cities of Everyday Life* (Delhi: Sarai, 2002)p.149. *Pranam*, literally, "we pay obeisance to your soul" is, not unlike "nomoshkar" and "namaste," with hands pressed together, a customary sign of respectful greeting between two Hindus. However, to pranam is to show obeisance and is performed by bowing to "take the dust from the feet" of a respected other.

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In his efforts to ground a critique of modernity, and in so doing, foster a legitimate basis for Bengali liberation and nationalist formation, Rabindranath couldn't help but to attempt to exploit the complex inter-relationships between city and rural life. He was, after all, a product of the city and compelled to it as much as it loathed him. It was from the city that he wrote many of his political essays and his best known novels, which themselves were set in the city, and which explored modern ambivalences. *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World), *Gora*, *Char Adyay* (Four Chapters), *Choker Bali* (Eyesore), and *Nashta Nir* (Broken Nest) are each intimately wound up with the question of the city, technicity, and instrumental modernity.

The city acts as a promissory space, for Rabindranath, as it does for the modern in general. Ideally it is a place of liberation, possibility invention and mobility. If the nation was an ideational imaginary, the ideal city, too, acted, for Rabindranath, as an ideal locus from which a syncretic, modern, rationalism of humanist education and spiritual possibility must emanate. When asked by a Chinese philosopher, while on tour in Beijing in May of 1924, whether a 'return to nature' was really a legitimate foundation for a critique of modern civilization, Rabindranath interestingly replied that "the ideal city should act as a centre of culture, radiating its influence out into the countryside."[198]

He went on to illustrate his suggestion, however, by drawing on a counterintuitive example. The example he used to illustrate the centrality of the city's ideal situation in communicating a normative, socio-cultural ethos of authenticity was that of the Baul's of his native Bengal. Baul's are nomadic minstrels and practitioners of an ecstatic form of folk transcendentalism who, very much like the Patua scroll painters, travelled from village to village reciting poetry, stories and songs. Their recitations, more spiritual than secular, Rabindranath claimed to his Chinese interlocutor, kept "a culture of the past alive in the hearts and minds of the people of Bengal."[199] Why would he illustrate the normative centrality of an urban culture and its didactic responsibility through the illustration of a rural, nomadic social group whose very identity was defined by its refusal of indigenous social structures, let alone the modernised, urban syncretism of a highly European and industrial Calcutta? One answer to the question reveals the importance of folk culture in the attempts, at the time, to wed an inescapably modern political economy to a redemptive, nationalist conception of a collective past in imaginary accord with the "regulative social and ethical ideas of India."[200]

The spatial locus for the production, at the time, of a nationalist conception of modern, Indian political economy, a discourse essential to the

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[198] Rabindanath Tagore, as quoted in Hay (1970)p.165

[199] Ibid.

[200] Radhakamal Mukerjee, *The Foundations of Indian Economics* with an introduction by Patrick Geddes (London: Longmans, Green, 1916) p.xix. For an interesting discussion of Mukerjee's attempts to build a nationalist political economy by envisioning the village as "the normative exemplar of a national economic space" see Manu Goswami (2004) pp. 237-241. It was through reading Goswami's text that I was introduced to Mukerjee's extensive work.

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constitution of an ethics of difference and a narrative of authenticity, was the rural and the village. Indeed, the problematic of urban-rural differentiation, and the anxiety by many at the disappearance of the village, subsumed, as it was characterized at the time, as a "slave of the city,"[201] constituted much of the discourse of nationalist difference. Radhakamal Mukerjee, a contemporary of Rabindranath's, and political economist, wrote in 1916 that the rural village was merely a "field of exploitation without a separate existence of its own"[202] so dominant was the presence of the urban social and world market forces. "Villages that for centuries followed customary practices are brought into contact with the world market all of a sudden. For steamship and railways, which have established the connection, have been built in so short an interval as hardly to allow for breathing time to the village."[203] Radhakamal's economics sought to ground a critique of industrial colonial modernity in a conception of the rural village as both a sustainable economic unit which preserved indigenous character and difference, and as an imaginary and promissory space for a future, universal humanity. Radhakamal's work attempts to unite Rabindranath's universalist critique with a practical village based, *swadeshi*, economics which resisted the linear historicism of colonial modernity. He writes, "Universal humanity is not to be figured as the crest of an advancing wave, occupying but one place at any moment and leaving all behind at a dead level. For universal humanity is immanent everywhere and at every moment."[204] It is this immanence of universal humanity that Rabindranath sought to illustrate as rooted in the particularity of indigenous practices, practices whose universality, he thought, could be translated through their aesthetic appreciation, and which could also serve as legitimate instances of normative, nationalist difference. Folk traditions were the most obvious examples of such indigenous practices, and Baul's were close to Rabindranath's heart.

Rabindranath was one of the first collectors of baul songs and stories. Baul singers, unique on the Sub-continent to Bengal, are travelling minstrels whose songs and performances are devotional abeyances. Baul is a Bengali derivation of the Sanskrit *vatul* which means mad, or affected by the wind.[205] Indeed, mad is how Baul's are generally thought, even today, by Bengali's. The Baul is wholly dedicated to his own nature and place in the world. Characterizing, not unlike the Patua, a social hybridity, they combine elements of Sahajya Buddhism, Sufic Islam and Vaishnava Hinduism in the worship of a universal spirit which is said to dwell in all people. This spirit is individually manifest in each singer and worshiped through practices of singing, meditation, trances, dancing and drug taking. The object for each Baul singer is to individually re-connect with this universal spirit, called *Maner Manush* (The Man of the Heart). "He laughs or

[201] Mukerjee (1916) p.402, see also Goswami (2004) p.238.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Ibid., p.5, see also Goswami (2004) p.239
[204] Ibid., p.329
[205] Deben Bhattacharya, *The Mirror of the Sky: Songs of the Bauls from Bengal* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1969)p.23

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cries, dances or begs as he wishes. ... He lives a strange life, almost insane, with values of his own but contrary to others. His home being under the tree, he moves from district to district, all the year round, as a dancing beggar who owns nothing in the world but a ragged patchwork quilt."[206] The Baul is a nomad amongst the peasant bourgeoisie of Bengal. Though not attached to the land in a property relationship, the language and the imaginary he uses in his songs, appealing as it does to the landscape and physical world of Bengal, speaks to a collective social imaginary. In the context of an industrial evisceration of village based lifeworld and communities, themselves seen as recuperative repositories for imagined and constitutive difference, the Baul's language and songs are nostalgically read as narratives of loss.

Though seemingly a strange illustrative example, by Rabindranath, especially given its use as a defence of an ideal modern city, the figure of the Baul folk artist highlights a transcendent, universalist didacticism inherent to all of Rabindranath's work. It is a didacticism whose appeal to the natural world and in a rooted conscious experience constitutes a liberatory, human fulfillment not bounded by nationalism or official systems legitimated by scientific facility and modernist governmentality.

Ideally, then, a reciprocal symbiosis between country and city, past and present, tradition and modernity would balance one another in "an atmosphere of culture in which freedom of thought and individuality are nurtured."[207] The modern city represented the possibility of an ideal, though one tempered by the "calmness" of the rural idyll, reachable through a modern imperative, education. "Everyone must reach through education some great ideal – the ideal of the age."[208] A quintessential modernist, the present was an imperative, and of paramount importance for Rabindranath. Through the present's ideal synergy of tradition and the spirit of the new, as spatialized by the modern city of Calcutta, embodied in its, and its people's possibilities, the present age could create a "bond of relationships among men of all nations. Our education must aim to make every child a fulfillment of the spiritual ideal of the present age – which is sympathy, understanding and love between people."[209]

In India, this love between people was a problem of race. In an address given in America, Rabindranath notes, "Our real problem in India is not political. It is social....From the earliest beginnings of history, India has had her own problem constantly before her – it is the race problem."[210] Where India's strength lay, for Rabindranath, and where it could present itself as a possible example for the world is in its "adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them where they exist, and yet seek some basis of unity."[211] The solution

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[206] Ibid.
[207] Rabindranath Tagore, as quoted in Hay (1970) p.165
[208] Ibid.
[209] Rabindranath Tagore, as quoted in P.C. Mahalanobis, *Rabindranath Tagore's Visit to China, Part 2* (Calcutta:Visva Bharati, 1925)pp.33-4.
[210] Rabindranath Tagore, "Nationalism in India" *Nationalism* (Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd.,1995)p.59
[211] Ibid.

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was not one limited to the fragmenting discourse of pluralizing world borders, what he called a *bhougalik apedavata*, a geographical demon,[212] but is found in an "intense internationalism" of the Ghandian kind. It would be one grounded through the freedom of the individual subject, of whom the Baul typified the most ideal expression in Bengal. In an oft cited poem from his collection, *Gitanjali*, the collection which secured him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, and which Ezra Pound noted, when he heard it read to him by Rabindranath in W.B. Yeats' drawing room, made him seem "exactly as if I were a barbarian clothed in skins, and carrying a stone war-club, the kind, that is where the stone is bound into a crotched stick with thongs"[213], Rabindranath writes of his vision for the Indian nation,

> Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
> Where knowledge is free;
> Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow
> Domestic walls;
> Where words come out from the depth of truth;
> Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
> Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary
> Desert sand of dead habit;
> Where the mind is led forward by these into ever widening thought and action–
> Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.[214]

Indian nationalism was, for him, a passage to a modern universalism. In his essay "Nationalism" he notes,

> In finding the solution of our problem we shall have helped to solve the world problem as well. What India has been, the whole world is now. The whole world is becoming one country through scientific facility. And the moment is arriving when you must also find a basis for unity which is not political. If India can offer to the world her solution, it will be a contribution to humanity. There is only one history – the history of man.[215]

Despite Rabindranath's perhaps laudatory universalism and cosmopolitan humanism, notice in the above quotation, that in the identification of India's

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[212] As quoted in Nandy (1994)p.7

[213] Ezra Pound, "Rabindranath Tagore" *The Fortnightly Review* ed. W.L. Courtney, Vol. XCIII, January to June 1913 (Chapman and Hall: London, 1913)p.575. In the same article, one which influenced the Nobel committee to take seriously Rabindranath, Pound compares the Bengali poet's "flawless" work to the "poetic piety of Dante."

[214] Rabindranath Tagore, "Poem 35" *Gitanjali* (London: MacMillan, 1962)pp.67-8

[215] Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (reprint 1995) p.59

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problem as social, there is also an appeal by Rabindranath to the "earliest beginnings" of Indian history. Rabindranath is one amongst a myriad of instances in the din of Indian nationalist discourse, in which a collective memory is constructed through the institutional structures of a modernist, educated elite, radiating from the city to the country an imagined identity legitimated by an appeal to a shared past, a community of difference, tradition and geographical particularity. In a way, he blends, as Spivak writes, "the feeling of community that belongs to national links and political organisations" with "that other feeling of community whose structural model is the family."[216]

There is an irony in this perhaps impossible balance between an emotive national community and a familial identification whose aim is to unify a collective redemptive response to the furtive, fragmenting "demon" of modern world civilization. Because it was located in a modernist epistemic ideal of individual freedom and rational knowledge, the attempt on Rabindranath's part to re-write and re-imagine a history located through an authentic discourse of folk tradition, place and practice, and so unite a diverse family of man was a profoundly modernist, colonially inflected work. Nevertheless, it is to an epiphanic poetics that Rabindranath staked his last claims on human liberation and possibility. In the context of a recent debate in the academic literature on the interpretation of Rabindranath and his uses for historiography, Rosinka Chaudhuri emphasizes Rabindranath's epiphanic and transcendental poetics of the self in distinction from a hard interpretation of his writing for political history.

In the epilogue to his book *History at the Limits of World History*, Ranajit Guha appeals to Rabindranath's essay "Sahitye Aitihasikata" (Historicality in Literature) in an effort to awaken historians and historiography to a "creative engagement with the past as a story of man's being in the everyday world."[217] Guha's plea is "to recover the living history of the quotidian" by "recuperating the historicality of what is humble and habitual."[218] Guha locates a similar appeal in the essay by Rabindranath and thus he appeals to the poet's critique of historians in arguing that history should "emulate literature."[219] However, Rosinka Chaudhuri argues, in a recent essay entitled "The Flute, Gerontin, and Subalternist Misreadings of Tagore" that Guha has misread Rabindranath's critique. Guha, she claims, has misread Rabindranath because, a) he has underappreciated the complicated history of Rabindranath's writing of the essay, and subsequent attempted retraction of its content; and b) he has misinterpreted the entire essay as not simply a riposte "to the historian, but to the literary critic."[220] What was more important to Rabindranath, Chaudhuri argues, was

[216] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cathy Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds.(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988)p.277. See also Chakrabarty (2000)p.40
[217] Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002)p.6
[218] Ibid., p.94
[219] Ibid.
[220] Rosinka Chaudhuri, "The Flute, Gerontin, and the Subalternist Misreadings of Tagore" *Social Text* 78, Vol.22, No.1 Spring 2004 p.105

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"the extraordinary character of certain ordinary moments"[221] and the "poetics...constructed around a moment of epiphany and transcendence that lifts him out of his everyday existence."[222] Art and love, not history, were where human redemption lay for Tagore.[223]

The ambiguity between his work as poetic and apolitical, and historigraphic and located in the political histories of the present was not at all foreign to Rabindranath. Just as his work oscillated between the modernist tensions of the city and the country, so it also oscillated between the poetic and the modernist political. As Amit Chadhuri, the noted contemporary novelist, and resident of Kolkata, writes, expanding on Rabindranath's characteristic ambivalence as a feature of Indian personality, "Tagore is ambivalent and full of doubt: like the subconscious, history, for the Indian, is both one's own and the Other. The awareness of it is accompanied not only by a sense of modernity and identity, but also by a sense of loss and imprisonment."[224] Thus, the ambiguity of the Indian modern between identity and loss, freedom and imprisonment, allegorizes itself, in Rabindranath's work, through the complex relationship between the urban modern and the rural natural. This ambiguity is forcefully evidenced in the disputed essay Guha uses to advance a literary history. Written in May of 1941, a few months before his death, Rabindranath explicitly contrasts the work of history and the work of poetry through the metaphors of urban public and rural private intimacy. He was responding, in the essay, to his critics of the day, young Calcutta poets, who accused his poetry of lacking a sense of social realism, and further the poet himself for being disengaged from contemporary events. Rabindranath responds to the charge by suggesting that the creative impulse is unique and inviolable to him as a monadic subject. The phenomenological experience through which the work of creation is manifest is one outside of history. "In his own field of creativity Rabindranath [he refers to himself in the third person] has been entirely alone and tied to no public by history. Where history was public, he was thus merely as a British subject, but not as Rabindranath himself."[225] Refusing to be censored by political imperative and expediency, Rabindranath characterizes his work as fundamentally concerned with the intimacy of collective human, phenomenal, experience, a phenomenal understanding capable of universalizable application, and which he found instantiated in his own geographic locale, both in his own experience, but also in that of his communal brethren.

> Thanks to his [again he refers to himself in the third person] creativity, what came to be reflected...was not the image of a feudal order, nor indeed any political order at all, but that

[221] Ibid., p.111
[222] Ibid., p.105
[223] Ibid., p.118
[224] Amit Chaudhuri, "The Flute of Modernity" *New Republic* Vol. 219, Issue 16, 1998, p.39
[225] Rabindranath Tagore, "Sahitye Aitihasikata" (Historicality in Literature) trans. Ranajit Guha, in Rananjit Guha (2002)p.97

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> history of the weal and woe of human life which, with its everyday human contentment and misery, has always been there in the peasant's field and village festivals, manifesting their simple and abiding humanity across all of history.[226]

The experiences which defined the creative moment for the poet were phenomenal encounters with the natural world he had had as a child: seeing "trembling coconut fronds and the dewdrops burst into glitter; ...light vibrating on shrubs and trees."[227] "[A] dark blue cumulus suspended high above the third storey of our house."[228] But these reminiscences are not without a political tenor, and so reveal how the intimate and ahistorical is always able to be inserted into a political discourse of difference, and mobilised in the nationalist description of territorial space and culture. He writes, in the same breath as that of glittering light and dew, clouds and the sublime, the following reminiscent image,

> A donkey – not one of those donkeys manufactured by British Imperial Policy, but the animal that had always belonged to our own society and has not changed since the beginning of time – one such donkey had come up from the washermens' quarters and was grazing on the grass while a cow fondly licked its body. The attraction of one living being for another that then caught my eye has remained unforgettable for me today. In the entire history of that day it was Rabindranath alone who witnessed the scene with enchanted eyes.[229]

The natural is written here through a number of registers. First, it is a source of subjective, creative enchantment, and thus works against, or outside of, history and the fragmentary modern politics of nationalism. Second, in so far as it is a subjective experience it is, as a source for redemptive grounding resistant to loss, a source for an imaginative, familial identification. The donkey was one of "our own," not a colonial import, and from a mythical time immemorial. Thirdly, though, the natural can be read, in this passage, metaphorically. This passage was being written at a time of deep communal division throughout India, and in the context of a wider world war, which, remember, was being fought in the form of the Burma Campaign, from the front door of Calcutta. The small, intimate reminiscence is also a plea for tolerance and understanding between diverse communal groups, most specifically, Muslims and Hindus.

Over and over again in Rabindranath's poetry and prose there is an explicit movement through the language of the individual as it, an idealized subject, confronts the phenomenal world, but which at the same time encodes the

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[226] Ibid., p.99
[227] Ibid., p.96
[228] Ibid., p.97
[229] Ibid.

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natural and the rural as explicit touchstones of imaginary, national identification. There is a constant oscillation between the national and the universal. The language of nature, intimate, supposedly, 'non-social' experience, and the represented life-worlds of the rural are mobilised for both ends. Despite the ultimate end, for Rabindranath, being a "cosmic" human unity balanced between reason and natural freedom, the linking of these aspects, tied as they are to a landscape and cultural topos marked by colonialism, an inevitable, divisive Othering asserts itself politically.

At its ground is the individual in creative enchantment with the non-social, the natural, dewdrops, light across leaves, clouds as sublime reminders, animal intimacies, fields and rivers. The city, destructive of these aspects, is the ambiguous topological antithesis to individual, redemptive enchantment. The metaphor of spatial openness signifies a certain refusal of modern definition and enclosure, but again returns to the discourse of nation making through universal imagery.

> How I cherish light and space! Goethe on his deathbed wanted 'more light!' If I am capable of expressing my desire then, it will be for 'more space.' Many people dismiss Bengal for being so flat, but for me the fields and rivers are sights that I love. With the falling of evening the deep vault of the sky brims with tranquility like a goblet of lapis lazuli; while the immobility of afternoon reminds me of the border of a golden sari wrapped around the entire world. Where is there another land to fill the mind so?[230]

Or again, natural metaphors are evident in the following, and expressive of an individual's grounded openness to an imagined family or community.

> On the one hand, I represent in me an endless current of generations; with my life I add to its flow, I contribute as much as I can to its store of ever increasing experience of knowledge and possibilities of power. On the other hand, I represent the individual whose life has a beginning and an end in itself, and who must reach some ideal of perfection in that limited space of time. The unending can have no idea of completeness, its nature is movement. To be its part for a moment and then to vanish, means struggle and no realisation ...As in the heart of all things there is the impulse of unending progress, so there must also be the ideal of fulfillment which alone gives meaning to all movement. Who is to realize it if not the individual?
>
> And how shall they realize it? The answer to this question was given by the sages of ancient India when they said

[230] Rabindranath Tagore, *Glimpses of Bengal*, p.112

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> that fulfillment was to be found in unity: He who sees all beings in his own self and his own self in all beings, he does not remain unrevealed.' To remain confined within oneself is to extinguish oneself, but to realize oneself in others is t reveal oneself.[231]

Ever political and practical, however ambivalent about it, Rabindranath sought to establish an institutional forum or context for individual fulfillment with the founding of his school, 'Shantiniketan' (Abode of Peace), in 1901, on the outskirts of Bolpur, an impoverished rural district north-west of Calcutta. The school was founded[232] with the explicit intention that children receive their education through the harmonious development of all of their faculties, and further, in surroundings of natural beauty and spiritual resonance. Classes were held under trees. Music, dance and other cultural arts, specific to Bengal, were given pride of place in the curriculum. Shantiniketan was founded and developed so as to engage the effort of infusing new life into the cultural heritage of an emergent nation, while at the same time resisting the formalized "scientific facility" which dominated education in the colonial city, and which Rabindranath hated. Later, as an adjunct to, and adjacent with, Shantiniketan, Rabindranath founded Visva-Bharati University with the intention that it "offer to others the hospitality of her best culture and India's right to accept from others their best."[233] The imagery of the natural reveals itself again in Rabindranath's choice of the university motto, the Sanskrit phrase: *Yatra viswan bhavaty ekanidam* – "where the world makes its home in a single nest."[234]

What Rabindranath was doing was engaging a doubled lyrical movement around the problem of authenticity. On the one hand, foregrounding the imagery of the natural landscape of Bengal marked off a non-political and discursive participatory regime of identification through which people could engage an experiential logic of difference, and so politically and socially unite against colonial oppression. It didn't matter that the literary forms (novel, short story, lyric metre, etc...) were colonial artifices or traces, for the political process of nation building and the collective demarcation were themselves modernist

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[231] Rabindranath Tagore, "The Idea of Fulfillment" reprinted in *Tagore Centenary, May 1961* (London: Macmillan, 1961) p.35

[232] The school is still very much extant. When I visited Shanitiketan in the spring of 2004, classes were still being held under trees, and traditional arts were readily visible throughout the town and the school. The school, town and university (Visva Bharati) which make up Shantiniketan are regarded throughout Bengal, and even across India, as a spiritual centre for Bengal, and even for nationalist identification. It is a place of tremendous pride for Bengalis and Indians. An enormously sentimental energy and work are invested in Shantiniketan to maintain it as a spiritual and didactic model for Bengalis, despite the fact that only a very tiny number of students, out of the millions who go to school throughout Bengal, actually attend the school. In March of 2004, days after my visit, Rabindranath's Nobel medals and several precious items associated with his life were stolen from the museum on the grounds of the school. This unfortunate incident was taken by Bengalis and the nation as a slight against the nationalist character and identity of all Bengalis and Indians.

[233] Rabindranath Tagore, from his speech at the opening ceremony to the university, excerpted in *Tagore Centenary, May 1961*, p.17

[234] Ibid.

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activities. The imagistic content was distinct to, and unique from, an instrumental apparatus as it existed in the modern city. But, on the other hand, this same imaginary appeal to a landscape outside of, so to speak, the colonial trace – ie. both the unhistorical trace and those images wrapped up in the vernacular and mythic – grounded the awareness and logic of difference in a participatory register outside of the colonial reach. Rabindranath's literary and linguistic register confers on itself a sense of authority as it demarcates an imagined authenticity and shared past in the efforts of nationalist inscription. The figures of the village, the rural and the natural, all those images separate from the city, are used to ideologically locate an authenticity in a history of difference. As Jacob Golomb writes,

> One is historically authentic when one creates ones own history by utilizing and recreating one's past and the past of one's people, projecting them with anticipatory resoluteness towards one's future. ... Authenticity is the loyalty of one's own self to its own past, heritage and ethos.[235]

The sum of the many individual workings of resolute creativity in their individual and intimate lives, "...collectively exercised through a network of shared imaginary registers constitutes the authentic historicality of one's self and one's society, folk or people: in short one's authentic ethos."[236]

As we have seen, the ethos of authenticity and historicality is created and projected in Rabindranath's poetry and prose through a naturalized imagery of the Bengali landscape. Nowhere is this appeal to a naturalized imagery, as a projection of socio-historical communality, more apparent than in his songs and poems written during the tumultuous and divisive episodes surrounding Bengal's first partition in 1905. There the collective emotional experience of loss became most palpable for Bengali's who after a period of some eighty to one hundred years began to think of themselves as united in the effort of independence and freedom from colonial rule. The riverine landscape of Bengal, which had been enervated politically and socially by culture makers, and which had become the touchstone and repository for nationalist difference asserting itself through an authentic discourse of identity making, was in the process of being fragmented and divided from itself. This sense of cultural trauma is embodied in the language used to speak about Curzon's partition. In Bengali, the partition is known as "*banga bhanga*" or as "Bengal broken." Perhaps in response to this sense of enormous and divisive loss, Rabindranath wrote a song which was later, ironically, to become the national anthem of independent, Muslim Bangladesh, the only anthem for a world Muslim nation written by a non-Muslim. The song was called, "Amar Sonar Bangla" or "My Golden Bengal." The song, as Chakrabarty notes, employs images of the Bengali village and rural landscape as a

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[235] Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity*(London: Routledge, 1995) p.117
[236] Ibid.

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land of arcadian and pastoral beauty overflowing with the sentiments that defined what Rabindranath called "the Bengali heart."[237]

> My Bengal of gold, I love you
> Forever your skies, your air sets my heart in tune
> As if it were a flute,
> In spring, o' mother of mine, the fragrance from
> Your mango-groves drives me wild with joy –
> Ah me, what a thrill! In autumn, o' mother of mine,
> In the full blossomed paddy fields,
> I have seen spread all over – sweet smiles!
> Ah, what a beauty, what shades, what an affection
> And what tenderness!
> What a quilt you have spread at the feet of
> Banyan tress and along the banks of rivers!
> O' mother of mine; words from your lips are like
> Nectar to my ears!
> Ah me, what a thrill!
> If sadness, o' mother of mine, castes a gloom on
> Your face,
> My eyes are filled with tears.[238]

The nation and the imaginary community is defined through landscape and the resonance the human has with the natural world—the sky, breezes, mango groves, fields. Importantly, they are also personified through the image central to Bengali Hindu culture, the Mother. What is interesting too, despite the obvious and perhaps over-wrought, verdant lyricism, is the use of the first person. Individual identification with the imaginary landscape in the song takes place through the use of the first person. The poem begins, "*my* Bengal" and "*I* love you." The breezes play through an individual heart, and the scent of the mangos drives the narrative subject, "wild." There is an ecstatic communion between the landscape and its imagery, and the singer or reciter of the poem. The fact that it has become one of the most famous songs in West Bengal and Calcutta, and the national anthem to the neighbouring independent nation of Bangladesh, despite it also being an intimate song of creative, ecstatic and individual communion on the part of a solitary, subjective experience, manifests the capacity for forging an authentic ethos of anticipatory historicality and topographical identification in each person who recites the lyrics. In so far as any national anthem is a performative utterance, this one, too, actively produces the nation in its singing. The song goes further in that its repeated exclamation, "Ah, me..." identifies the landscape as a part of the creative "I" that is singing or reading. Bengal is the singer.

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[237] Chakrabarty, (2000) p.153
[238] Tagore (1921)

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This individualized resonance and naturalized intimacy repeats itself in another of Rabindranath's more famous poems, *Dui bigha jami* (Two Bighas[239] of Land). Published in 1896, soon after, and no doubt written while Rabindranath travelled East Bengal on his duties as a landlord, and whence he wrote the letters collected, in English, as *Glimpses of Bengal*, the poem tells the story of Upen, an impoverished landholder who is relieved of his "seven-generations" old tiny plot by a "fraudulent deed" and an unscrupulous *zamindar*. He leaves his beloved plot, despondent, and roams the world with a *sadhu*, until his "homesickness grew too great to resist."

> I bow, I bow to my beautiful motherland Bengal!
> To your river-banks, to your winds that cool and console;
> Your plains, whose dust the sky bends down to kiss;
> Your shrouded villages, that are nests of shade and peace;
> Your leafy mango-woods, where the herd-boys play;
> Your deep ponds, loving and cool as the midnight sky;
> Your sweet-hearted women returning home with water;
> I tremble in my soul and weep when I call you Mother.
> Two days later at noon I entered my native village:
> The pottery to the right, to the left the festival carriage;
> Past temple, market place, granary, on I came
> Till thirsty and tired, at last I arrived home.[240]

Again, the natural imagery and its phenomenological force constitute the intimacy of the nation for the imaginary and universalized narrator, as well as for the reader. As William Radice notes[241], this stanza from the poem is often quoted for its patriotic feeling, and should be read as a meditation as its begins with an expression of obeisance often used both to begin prayers to God, *namonamo nama*. Interestingly, Rabindranath taught his students at Shantiniketan to begin their meditations on nature with this sacred recitation.

The meditation on Bengal occurs in the middle of the poem, '*Dui Bigha Jami*', but the poem continues, once Upen returns home to Bengal, by describing how Bengal has fundamentally changed. The land as "mother" is chastised for being a "witch" and for being seduced by "a wealthy man's love" where "all signs of the past have gone completely." "Shame on you, shame on you, shameless, fallen [land]! What mother gives herself freely to a chance seducer?/ You have changed...you cared for me before, you fed me, your bounty was abundant, you were a goddess; now, for all your wiles, you are a servant."[242] Despondent at the loss of a previous wholeness, Upen sits beneath a mango tree, his "heart in two" and through tears, remembers his childhood days as a "sweet, still noon." With

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[239] A "*bigha*" is a Bengali measurement of land, roughly a quarter of an acre in size.
[240] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Dui Bigha Jami*" (Two Bighas of Land) in *Selected Poems* ed. and trans. by William Radice (London: Penguin, 1994) p. 56
[241] William Radice, "Notes" in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1994) p.134
[242] Rabindranath Tagore, "Dui Bigha Jami" (1994) p. 56

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that wholeness, now sundered, he laments, "Alas, those days will never return."[243] When caught by a gardener – "a messenger of death" – with illicit mangos, he is threatened with death, and the poem ends with an ambiguous fulfillment of that threat. Upen's alienation from his land describes a wider cultural desolation and subsequent loss of self-identity.[244]

Written at a time when *zamindari* abolition was beginning to be considered an economic and political necessity, the poem is a thinly veiled castigation of the British colonial policy of Permanent Settlement (1793), and the consequent Bengali, urban, elite's profiteering through collusion with the British land allotment scheme which resulted in the exploitative *zamindari* system of land management.[245] In the second stanza of the poem, Upen reflects that, "For those want most, alas, who already have plenty:/ The rich *zamindar* steals the beggar-man's property."[246] *Zamindars*, at the time, were considered guilty of greed, indifference, and economic parasitism[247] and, as signalled by Rabindranath at the poem's end, represented the sacralization of property and money as inaugurated through economic dependencies on a colonial administration and its indigenous complicity. Rabindranath considered the commodification of the motherland anathema to a universal and redemptive self-consciousness which, through an attention to individual phenomenal and naturalized enchantment, would stand as a valid alternative to the economic modernism which informed colonial ideology.

The solitary figure set against the sublime landscape appears again in one of Rabindranath's more enigmatic poems, and although subtly intimated, a colonial presence may again be read in the ambiguous figure of the golden boat. "*Sonar Tari*" (The Golden Boat) begins with the narrator, alone on a stormy landscape and in the rain. A boat, unnamed and un-described arrives to take away the rice crop just cut. At the end of the poem, the boat disappears and leaves the narrator as he began, sad and alone, without his crop, and in all encompassing landscape, wild, swollen and hostile.

> Clouds rumbling in the sky; teeming rain.
> I sit on the river bank, sad and alone.
> The sheaves lie gathered,   harvest has ended
> The river is swollen and fierce in its flow.

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[243] Ibid., p.57

[244] Amartya Sen, "Culture, Identity and Human Development" (September 11, 2003) p.14 http://www.undp.org/hdr/docs/Sen_FirstDraft_11Sept.pdf

[245] Engineered by the Cornwallis administration in 1793, the Permanent Settlement agreement implemented a contract between the indigenous rent collectors (*zamindars*) in Bengal and the East India Company. The agreement created private property in a land in which it had never existed before, and invested that newly created landed property in the indigenous elite. Implemented with the aim of improving "this country to a state of prosperity... to enable it to continue to be a solid support to the British interests and power in part of the world " (Cornwallis as quoted in Guha (1997, p.32), the program was "a political strategy to persuade the indigenous elite to 'attach' themselves to the colonial regime" Guha (1997) p.33.

[246] Rabindranath Tagore (1994)p.56

[247] Greenough (1982) p. 63

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As we cut the paddy, it started to rain.

One small paddy-field, no one but me –
Flood waters twisting and swirling everywhere...

Trees on the far banksmear shadows like ink
On a village painted on deep morning grey.
On this side, a paddy field, no-one but me.

[The golden boat arrives, loads and leaves with the rice crop. The poem ends...]

No room, no room, the boat is too small.
Loaded with my gold paddy, the boat is full.
Across the rain-sky clouds heave to and fro,
On the bare river bank, I remain alone –
What I had has gone: the golden boat took all.[248]

'*Sonar Tari*' may be read as engaging a similar critique to that of '*Dui Bigha Jami.*' The universal, solitary narrator is set, in the first person, against a sublime or transcendent landscape scarred by a human political economy which destroys a natural simplicity and relation of lived abundance possible in a non-modernist comportment of being-in-the-world. The poems are not simple castigations of a reified, monolithic colonial presence. They represent complex portrayals of social interactions between the colonial influence and indigenous responses to the colonial political and moral economies. The "golden boat" is an ambiguous image in "*Sonar Tari*". It signifies the wealth and promise of the colonial arrival, but in its leaving – "Oh, to what foreign land do you sail?" – at the end loaded with a "golden" rice crop, it also speaks to an economic and cultural appropriation of natural wealth and abundance, and a perceived abstract logic of capitalism. The symbol of the 'golden boat', intimating the golden rice fields and golden Bengal which were repeated images throughout Rabindranath's work, might also speak of an indigenous dependence on a colonial economy, as it is not clear what sort of boat it is that arrives, but simply one "whose sails are filled wide."

Rabindranath was infamous during his life for his strident denouncing of Bengali complicity and small-mindedness in the face of colonial modernity. Some of that may be seen in his portrayal of the *zamindar* in '*Dui Bigha Jami.*' What is important, however, is the way the poems' narrative, first person voice is set against and torn between both redemptive natural forces, and the human, political or social forces.[249] This lone figure concretizes Rabindranath's liberal,

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[248] Rabindranath Tagore, "The Golden Boat" trans. William Radice, in Tagore (1994)p.53

[249] The individualized tone of the poems, and the song 'Sonar Bangla,' all of which isolate a solitary figure faced with a sublime landscape both endearing and alienating, is very different from the overtly political, nationalist song "*Janaganamana*" (Heart of the People), which unites disparate peoples within a diverse, territorial space. The narrative voice is that of the united "we": "Glory to thee, ruler

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humanist internationalism and reveals it as grounded in an individualist and individualizing ethos. The naturalized subject is located against a geographic, organically constituted, and ideational country which acts as both a site of refuge and as a site of resistance to colonialism, but also a land irredeemably marked by loss, fracture, division and exploitation. Indeed, in as much as the country existed as a site of refuge and a universalisable example in which lay "the capacity to see all as part of ourselves"[250], so the emerging country also reflected the world-wide, character of fragmentation and loss attributable to modern civilization.

In the same year that Rabindranath wrote his ode, "*Sonar Bangla*" to Bengal, 1905, he addressed a gathering of students in Calcutta. His topic was the *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad*, the Literary Society of Bengal, which he founded in 1893. The society published a quarterly, the *Sahitya-Parishat Patrika* (Literary Society Journal). The journal featured folklore from various districts in Bengal. He explained to the students the goals of the *Parishad* and the *'Patrika'*,

> In the Sahitya-Parishad, we are trying to know our country. The parishad is searching for the spirit of the country in the epics, songs, rhymes, doggerel, legends, ritual tales, manuscripts, in the village festivals, in the ruins of the ancient temples and in the huts of the hamlets. ... You don't have any temptations [ie. urban, foreign desires] here. But if you prefer the silent blessings of your [motherland] to the leftovers from the dinner of a queen, then please stand beside these volunteers [members of the *Parishad*] and fulfill your patriotism by working day after day for this cause...[251]

We have noted that Rabindranath was one of the first collectors of *Baul* songs and verse, but it is widely recognised that, beyond simply *Baul* folk artefacts, Rabindranath was one of the first and foremost collectors of Bengali folk songs and art in general.[252] Rabindranath collected folk ballads (*palligiti*) in the form of *kirtans* (*Vaishnava* devotional songs), *Bhatiali* (East Pakistani songs of nature) and saris (boatman's songs) as well as folk dramas (*jatras*) and legends (*upakatha*).[253] In an essay called "*Gramma Sahitya*" (Village Literature) Rabindranath explained his interest in preserving folk literary forms. He wrote that a national literature must first come to terms with the country's folk

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of our hearts and of India's destiny,/ Punjab, Sind, Gujrat, Maharashtra,/ The land of the Dravids, Orissa, Bengal,..." *Janaganamana* became the national anthem of India after independence in 1947.

[250] Rabindranath Tagore, *Greater India* p. 198, as quoted in Goswami (2004)p.277

[251] Rabindranath Tagore, as quoted in A.S.M. Zahurul Haque, *Folklore in the Nationalist Thought and Literary Expression of Rabindranath Tagore* unpublished PhD Dissertation, Indiana University 1968, p.115

[252] Ibid., p.119

[253] Ibid., pp. 105-186 passim.

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literature since most written literature was the product of material which had its succession though stages of folk and oral traditions.

> As the roots of a tree are firmly bound together with the soil and its upper part is spread towards the sky, in the same way the lower part of literature is always hidden, being to a large extent imprisoned in the soil of its mother country. There is a ceaseless inner connection between the lower literature and the higher one. The blossoms, fruits, twigs, and sprouts of that part which point to the sky cannot be compared with the lower roots in the soil; and yet those who know do not in the least fail to see their similarity and affinity.[254]

Of course the project of a *lok sahitya*, or people's literature, was a project directed towards an explicitly nationalist literature, since the history of a nation could not be fully (re)constructed without taking what were considered its 'traditional' materials into consideration. "History is scattered in the forms of folklore. When the genius of a historian bound them together, the long unspoken history is revealed to us."[255]

The necessity for a recuperative, ostensibly authentic revival of a common, cultural ethos, and so, in that, one constructive of a nationalist, anti-colonial identity legitimated in a universalist, redemptive critique of modern, technocratic civilization, but itself reflexive to the enlightenment, rationalist imperatives of individualism, freedom and rationality, was, in Bengal, a direct function of the rural-urban dialectic. Calcutta embodied the reciprocal antinomies of this differential inter-relationship. A site of cosmopolitan liberation and freedom from tradition, it was also a psycho-social space constitutive of loss. Rabindranath's poetry, prose, and socio-political essays constantly iterated the ambivalence and ambiguity at play in this geographic differentiation. But his work was not simply romaniticist or idealistic. He did not as we have seen, advocate an uncritical return to the village. The village was a place, he noted, of narrowness, inequity and deprivation. It was as a zamindar that he first embarked on his travels around Bengal and in that role developed his literary and philosophical intimacies with rural Bengal. These travels occasioned the reflection years later.

> I had the opportunity...to get to know close up the villages of Bengal. I have seen...the scarcity of drinking water in the houses of the villagers, and noticed the manifestations in their bodies of the influence of diseases and the want of appropriate food. Many a time I received proof of how they remain

[254] Rabindranath Tagore, "Gramma Sahitya" as quoted in Haque (1968)p.125.

[255] Rabindranath Tagore, "Sahitya Sristi" (Literature Creation) as quoted in Haque (1968)p.142 'Sristi' is Sanskrit for "creation" or "to let loose" and can also be used in the context of parenting or husbanding.

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> oppressed and cheated at every step, their minds afflicted by ignorance and inertia.[256]

A paternalism is reveal led in Rabindranath's language: villagers were "afflicted by ignorance" and stupefied by "inertia." They lacked the fundamentally, modern traits of knowledge and movement, of improvement through application of knowledge and thus progress from backwardness to modernity and freedom from "want." Although itself replete with its own pitfalls and traps, the modern city, its spaces for ambivalent social freedoms institutionalized through centres of education and enlightenment, was the site for the emancipation from village narrowness. The city too is a space of refuge and resistance. As Ashis Nandy notes,

> A Dalit, landless, agricultural worker or rural artisan seeking escape from the daily grind and violence of a caste society has reasons to value the impersonal melting pot of a metropolitan city. He is ever willing to defy the pastoralists or the environmentalist's negative vision of the city. ... The colonial city made a place for itself in the Indian's fantasy life by promising that freedom in place of caste specific vocations, and ascribed status...[257]

But it is in precisely this ready dualism of village as backward, and city as progressive, that the nationalist, modernizing rhetoric of revivalist identity building, or re-discovery, asserts its patronizing historicism of progress. It was from the city that Rabindranath spoke. Even when he spoke (ie. wrote) from Shantiniketan, "that rural idyll which seemed in the popular imagination utopian, unreal and enervated"[258] Rabindranath was writing within the modern presumption informed by "the revolutionary rhetoric concocted for the sake of the oppressed – by superbly well read, well motivated, urbane radicals, selflessly trying to occupy the moral high-ground on behalf of the larger forces of history."[259] The colonial city was the site of nationalist production. But, it was instantiated through a narrative of difference, and that logic was defined and produced through the geographic discourse of the village and the rural. The new collective, nationalist, self was a product of both the city and the village. It was a progressively oriented, modern, and cosmopolitanly located, city-self imbued by the difference authenticity makes, the village self.

The didactic moves necessary to produce the collective identity are easily appropriable. From the perspective of the city as a degenerative space, the village becomes an imaginary well-spring, an intimate, repository locus for narratives of

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[256] Rabindranath Tagore, "Abhibhasan" as quoted in Chakrabarty (2000)p.152
[257] Ashis Nandy (2001)p.12
[258] Anita Desai, "Preface" *Noon in Calcutta: Short Stories from Bengal* eds. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (London: Bloomsbury, 1992)p.ix
[259] Nandy (2001)p.13

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tradition, spirituality and unifying repose in the face of historical events and spaces which fragment and disarticulate. The space of the rural and the village itself becomes ideologically idealized and reified, as, at the same time, do the narratives surrounding the city space, so that the selves located in the former, unconsumed and uncommodified, compose their fragmented lives in imagined utopias and idylls.

Rabindranath's poetry and songs were, as indeed were the literatures of many of his contemporaries (Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Bibhutibhushan Bandhopadhyay, Tarashankar Banerji, Prabhalkumar Mukherji) taken up, often uncritically, by readers at the time – and especially so today – and mobilised in the production of discourses of difference and anti-colonial critique. Divorced from the phenomenal source in terms of which a cosmopolitan nexus demands difference and distinction, the idealized images and rhetoric took the place of the determinately authentic *experience* Rabindranath so valued. Through the imaginary city, and the imaginary country of the poems and songs, nearness and farness reciprocate as psychological and ideational poles for identity construction. The poles became reified and idealized, and though pretending to realism, instead fomented an ideological illusion of natural production. As Manu Goswami opens her study on the territorial space of nationalism in India, "[c]entral to the project of nationalism is making the nation appear natural."[260] In the case of Rabindranth, as indeed in most of the discursive nationalist productions in Bengal in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the "natural" was indeed as much about trees and rivers and leaves and beasts, as it was about the psychological and social origins of people. These ideational tropes, wrought as they were within the nationalist fervour, became ripe for the historian's picking.

☙

Gurusaday's Reified Folk

Rabindranath's place was among many intellectual and social historians engaged, in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries, in 'revealing' an ostensibly authentic history constructed through the doubled lenses of urbane nationalism and revivalist, folk imagination. Gurusaday Dutt, like Rabindranath, wrote from the vantage of the city, and like Rabindranath, Gurusaday's nationalism was fostered in the notion that "urban people could be brought closer to their rural roots through a common cultural revival."[261] Gurusaday argued that "...the mission was to bring into clear perspective the robust and genial manners of the elements of folk culture and to make them known and popular amongst the urban people who have deviated from the main stream of the country masses."[262] Within this tutelary or didactic paternalism, we can see very much the urbane

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[260] Goswami (2004)p.1
[261] Korom, (1989) p.75
[262] Gurusaday Dutt, *Folklore* (Calcutta) Vol. 3, 1962, p.424, as quoted in Korom (1989) p.75

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intellectualist arrogation which follows in the tradition of Bhawanicharan, Rammohun, Bankimchandra and Rabindranath. Namely, remedies for the experience of social loss, cultural fragmentation and institutionalized disenchantment must originate in the intellectually advanced or progressive city, be read through the retrograde, but redemptive, village, nature and the rural, and then be re-appropriated, unified and revitalized in a political stand against imperialism.

In the case of Rabindranath, this critique extended beyond the boundaries of the Indian nation state to include the global instruments of modern tyranny. Rabindranath deliberately and repeatedly eschewed the idea of nationalism as a panacea, instead preferring to produce work critical of global modernization and productive of, as he saw it, a universal humanism. However, he was never able to separate himself fully from an intellectual and political climate which was defined by the imperatives of political autonomy. His work, despite his repeated avowals, openly reflected this fundamental, critical ambivalence.[263] In the case of Gurusaday, a contemporary highly influenced by Rabindranath's inescapable presence, his critique extended, similarly, to include a disavowal of the organizational imperatives of an institutionalized, technocratic modernity. Yet, his studies and collections of Bengali folk art and dance, and his contextualizations and writing of the same, were never as reflexive, complex, internally ambivalent or as self-critical as those of Rabindranath. His justifications were solely rationalised with respect to the project and frames of nationalism. This is most evident in his notable lecture and subsequent essay "Folk Art and Its Relation to National Culture."

The influential essay was published in October 1932, in the sociological journal *Prabuddha Bharata*. First delivered as a lecture at the University of Calcutta on 7 April, 1932, in it Gurusaday brings together his extensive work in the collection and dissemination of folk songs, art forms, and stories throughout Bengal in the service of nationalism. The dialectical problems of difference and authenticity are the central theoretical constructs through which the turn to the folk legitimates itself. The city, its machine like character, instrumental

[263] Gandhi's philosophical position, unlike Rabindranath's attempted refusal of nationalism, was also one that modulated between a strident nationalism and a critical, universal humanism grounded in the sustainable, practical ethics of the Indian village. One may contrast Gandhi's position with that of his Congress Party colleague, and first Prime Minister of an independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi ruralized his cosmopolitanism by developing an anti-industrial economics based on self-sufficient, low-technology production. The village was the symbolic and normative locus for this critique as he considered the Indian cities of the time to be colonial constructs. Gandhi's critique had a Hinduized religious frame to it which revealed itself in his prescripts of ascetic puritanism, vegetarianism, celibacy, prayer and absolute adherence to non-violence. By contrast, Nehru opposed imperialism, but through an urbanized nationalism which explicitly embraced a secular, scientific and industrialized modernity. He recognized the demographic centrality of the village in Indian national life, but opposed its parochial traditionalisms. As a way out of village narrow-mindedness, an unapologetic westernized Indian, Nehru industrialized the country by building dams, factories, roads and mills. He also commissioned Le Corbusier to plan and build Chandigarh, that most modern of all constructs, a planned city. See Vinay Dharwadker, "Introduction" in *Cosmopolitan Geographies: New Locations in Literature and Culture* ed. Vinay Dharwadker (New York and London: Routledge, 2001) pp.8-9.

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technology, the lures of commodity fetishism and materialism are seen as the "causes" by which the "soul characteristics" of the "Bengali heart" are drawn into inevitable degeneracy.[264] Like Rabindranath, however, and perhaps owing to both men's journeys' to Europe, and their respective considerable contacts with peoples and nations around the world, a cosmopolitan or universalist modern humanism enervates Gurusaday's work. He saw nations as responsible for acting, in terms of the identity characteristics of their people, to make, in consort with other nations, a distinct contribution to a universal human culture. He writes in the lecture, "in order to be able to make its maximum contribution to human culture and civilization, it is the duty of each nation to cultivate and develop, to the full, its characteristic philosophy of life and its characteristic forms of artistic self expression... ."[265] Gurusaday quotes Herbert Spencer in suggesting that the only way to realize this contribution to "human civilization" is in terms of "developing ... 'the greatest separateness and the highest individuation' ...along distinctively national and racial lines."[266]

For Gurusaday, this development takes the form of discovery. Bengal and India had succumbed "to the impact of an extraneous culture" which "wiped out its own distinctive race-personality," resulting in the "loss of identity."[267] Gurusaday reads expressive identity as primarily a function of the affective faculties of the emotional life and imagination: "...the distinctive soul-quality of each nation finds its most characteristic expression in the emotional field and in that of the decorative imagination."[268] In a culture which experienced a sense of loss and change, reading, preserving and renewing folk practices "...more than anything else helps it to discover...essential national characteristics."[269] The essential national characteristics Gurusaday posits are themselves participants in a "universal life"[270] at whose roots lay a "spirit of pure and simple joy of life."[271] This supposedly pure root has, he claims, been repressed by modernity,

> ...owing to the invasion of artificiality, the growth of self-consciousness, the cramping effects of the development of rigidity, and sometimes even of corruption, in social life under the influence of perverted religious and social forces, or through the influence of a misguided educational system.

Reification, reflexivity and doubt, bureaucracy, politics and corruption, colonialism, and institutionalism are seen, by Gurusaday, as the deleterious

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[264] Gurusaday Dutt, "Folk Art and Its Relation to National Culture" (1932) reprinted in *Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1992)p.3
[265] Ibid., p.4
[266] Ibid.
[267] Ibid.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Ibid., p.5
[270] Ibid., p.6
[271] Ibid.

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modern effects on a pre-modern, authentic national character. "The growth of the hyper-material, hyper-industrial, and hyper-commercial outlook and the increasing sophistication of life, which are the results of modern civilization, are accompanied by a loss of the simplicity and freshness of outlook, aims, ideals and aspirations, and of the directness, vigour, sincerity and spontaneity of life which marked the pre-industrial age."[272] Folk art, for Gurusaday, is the "fountain for the renewal of national inspiration and for the resuscitation of national culture." Folk art, in the context of the modern, addresses emotional and imaginative loss with a return to the re-discovered values of simplicity and directness, something yearned for in the modern age.

> In the history of each nation there comes a stage in the process of its progress in stereotyped artificiality and sophistication when it yearns to return to the simplicity and directness, the vigour and freshness, the sincerity and spontaneity which marked the earlier stages of its life, and to regain touch with the distinctive soul characteristics of its own race as acquire through countless ages of its evolution.[273]

Urban Bengal, he saw, as particularly isolated from an essential sense of simple joy and sincerity. The arts produced in the city he saw as reflecting that alienating environment, and so as unconducive to resuscitative, creative activity. "The cultivated arts of the sophisticated stages of society...are often marred by a complicated formality and artificiality, an excessive elegance and an over-refinement of mannerism."[274] The experiential spaces and consonant, conceptual tropic ideations of the rural and the village, exemplified for Gurusaday by the unlettered and uneducated, serves as a counterpoint to the city's urbane abstraction and alienation. "Among the simple unlettered folk of every nation, artificial conditions do not operate, and thus they retain to a marked degree the spirit of this simple, pure, child-like joy, even in the face of poverty, privation and want, and express it spontaneously in their life and art. Folk art furnishes a nation with the means of recovering its spirit of spontaneous joy in life."[275] Gurusaday understood this to be the case because folk art is an expression, he thought, of the purest roots of creative, instinctual emotivism and phenomenal awareness. "Folk art being completely unadulterated by extraneous influences, supplies the purest rhythmic mould, or inspirational channel worked out by the race-soul for its creative activity."[276]

Interestingly, if only for its extraordinary irony, Gurusaday appealed to contemporary, European examples of modernism to legitimate his claims.

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[272] Ibid., p.5
[273] Ibid.
[274] Ibid., p.6
[275] Ibid.
[276] Ibid.

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> This fact has been realized by the nations of Europe during the last two or three decades...where there is a movement on the part of all the nations of Europe and America to ransack the primeval woods and forests of Africa and America, to search out the primitive arts of the Negroes and other primitive races...to gather inspiration and ideals for the re-production of simplicity, naturalness and vigour in their life and art. The same forces which are at present fast killing the invaluable folk arts of India have been at work in Europe for more than a century; ...in their eagerness to introduce freshness and vitality into the soulless artificiality...the European races are now busy studying the sculptural creations of the Negroes and the rock paintings of the cavemen.[277]

The irony of Gurusaday's appeal to European aesthetic modernism as legitimating his claims on the national character and necessity to preserve folk art does not lie in the fact that he was wrong about the appeals of primitivism by artists like Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, etc. Rather, the irony lies in the fact that Gurusaday would find it necessary to legitimate his claims by appealing to the very civilization whose modern character he found responsible for the "loss of sincerity and ...spontaneity which characterized pre-industrial life." Furthermore, the appeal to the forces responsible for the disinvestment of nationalism, in an argument which explicitly locates its normative authority in the cause of nationalism is very strange indeed. But it goes to show, I think, the degree to which urban Bengali intellectuals living in Calcutta during the turmoil of the independence movement were constituted by an enormously syncretic and, perhaps even hegemonic, paternalism which explicitly wedded modernist imperatives of rationality, civil society, education, and nationalism with nostalgias of an idealized past and the normative superiority of a non-modern folk culture. Indeed, the strange inter-dependence, on the part of urban Bengali intellectualism, between the dominant culture and its counter-point, is illustrated in the revealing biographical ironies of Gurusaday himself.

Gurusaday resolved to dedicate himself to the preservation of indigenous, folk aesthetic forms while he sat in the Royal Alberta Hall in London. It was 1929, and he was watching a performance of English folk dances and songs. There and then he "decided to devote [himself] to the conservation of the village dances of my province on my return to India."[278] On his return to India, he founded the widely lauded "Bratachari Society" (Vow-Taking Society) whose mandate it was to educate young people (ie. boys) in performing good deeds for "Indian society" through the study and practice of folk traditions and arts. The movement was modelled explicitly after Lord Baden-Powell's scouting movement in England.

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[277] Ibid., p.7

[278] Gurusaday Dutt, "The Living Traditions of Folk Arts in Bengal" *Indian Arts and Letters* Vol.10, 1936 p.24

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The *bratachari's* (a young person, usually a male, living to a sworn vow) in the Society were to develop their practices and roles under a rubric that held, "life is based on joy and should be pursued as a rhythmical ritual." Undertaking to perform good deeds and strengthen fellowship by developing the mind and body through folkdance, each *bratachari* had to take the following oath:

> *brata laye sadhaba mora bangladesher kaj*
> *tarunatar sajib dhara anbo jiban-majh*
> *chai amader shakta deha, mukta udar man,*
> *ritimato palbo mora moder pratipan.*
>
> We vow to serve the cause of the land of Bengal;
> We'll bring the vivacity of youth back to life;
> We'll build our bodies, open our minds;
> We'll stick to our pledges till we die. [279]

Members of the society also had to take three vows:

> *ami banglake bhalobasi;*
> *ami banglar seba karbo;*
> *ami banglar bratachari habo.*
>
> I will love Bengal;
> I will serve Bengal;
> I will be a bratachari of Bengal.[280]

The movement spread throughout India to become a pan-Indian phenomenon lauded by politicians, indigenists and revolutionaries. In modelling the movement after Baden Powell's scouts, Gurusaday wedded indigenous practices to highly European and modernist practices. For instance, the uniform of the boys in the society was made of *khadi dhoti*, a hand spun, loose fitting cotton garment worn around the legs, traditionally worn by Hindu Bengali males as both a practical garment for a sub-tropical climate, but also importantly as a marker of indigenous pride and independence.

The institutional structure and mandate of Gurusaday's movement was oriented toward the education and revivification of an indigenously conceived, modern social unity, manifest in the ideal of nation state, be it Bengali or Indian. Despite its success depending largely on the charisma of its inspired leader, and the movement dieing out soon after the death of Gurusaday on 25 May 1941,[281] it exemplified a highly modern syncretism. It brought together assumptions about nationalist, social cohesion and unity, and implemented these suppositions

[279] Sankar Sengupta, *Folklorists of Bengal* (Indian Publications: Calcutta, 1965)p.136
[280] Ibid.
[281] Korom (1989)p.75

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through the production of an identity premised on the indigenous practice of folk aesthetic and expression. The movement was largely an articulation of "romantic-nationalist" fervour; but, in being so, it exemplified a fundamental, ambivalent dialectic within modernity. This ambivalence is most forcefully cast in the competing imaginary collective representations between the image of the village and the image of the city.

☙

Reification and Cultural Fetishism

For some time now we have been tracing the relationship of the stories of nationalism and autonomy through the productive, narrative interaction between the imaginary and lived sites of the city and the village. An internal ambivalence has been noted within a trajectory which moves from a guarded, isolationist interactionism, to negotiated resistance, to colonial rule through modes of European modernization, to the active refusal of colonial modernity, yet one articulated through the rational apparatus of the modern nation state.

In the late 18th century, and until the 1820s, colonial modernity and the new, modern city space of Calcutta were practically engaged by the indigenous, Bengali elite as everyday spheres conducive for business and wealth production. The life world of the burgeoning colonial city had little to contribute to an indigenous life world which was still, despite a colonial presence, almost solely defined by caste-relations, kinship bonds and pre-European, local mythic narratives. If you will, the urban elite tried to balance and keep separate a *Gemeinshaft* and a *Gesellshaft* while participating in both. And for some time this appeared to work. Indeed, it was through the ability of the Bengali, urban elite to operate in separate public spheres that colonial negotiation developed into active resistance "outside the purview of the colonial state and the European missionaries."[282]

However, due to the constellation of a various social factors, a *Gesellshaft* came to structure more and more of urban, social life. Notably, the institutional factors which came to structure social obligation and subject formation were: the remarkable late 18th and early nineteenth centuries' rapid urbanization of Calcutta; consequent intensifications of space, population density, cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism; increases in industrialisation and technological influence; the hybridization and change in commercial, linguistic registers and market relations (ex. Persian to English); the proliferation of a public sphere through printing presses, newspapers, societies and journals; and the increasing economic and social dependence on an urban, colonial apparatus whose bureaucratic and capitalist forms came to structure the everyday lives of both the indigenous elite and the masses.

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[282] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993)p.7

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By the 1820s and 1830s Enlightenment rationalism heavily influenced indigenous thinking, and not only about colonial social relations. The Enlightenment was also invoked in the attempt to better understand and even change indigenous socio-religious practices. The religious and social reforms of Rammohun and Vidyasagar (proscribing *sati*, changing laws regarding widow remarriage, unifying Hindu practices, etc...) are examples of such indigenous modernizations which appealed to Enlightenment principles. But with the colonial imposition of practices which deliberately targeted an indigenous social order, and indeed, explicitly attempted to destroy a non-European life world governed by religious, caste and kinship relations, resistances grew. Due to the fact that these colonial practices legitimized themselves explicitly in terms of racist rationalizations (Macaulayism in 1835), and within the context of a diverse and syncretic urban culture which had already employed enlightenment principles in the structuring of a public sphere defended by the rule of common law, the resistances to colonial oppression and injustice took the form of a modern freedom struggle for autonomy and rational self-government. The problem then became, once resistance constituted itself as a viable alternative, how to demarcate difference and autonomy, while at the same time negotiating technological and social modernizations which were already integral to the social and cultural landscapes of Bengal. Nationalism and independence became the apparatuses through which this problematic was negotiated. The practical and moral imperatives thus became those of producing the nation through self-descriptive narratives of history, territoriality, community, social unity, and rational legitimacy. In terms of these arguments, the inter-dependent nation could participate on an equal footing on the world stage.[283]

What this entire process plays out, though, is an inescapable tension between the rhetorics and practices of internationalization and those of "home-making", between the desire and need to be at once participating in, and defining oneself through, the practices of the global *and* the local. This constitutes, as we have seen, one of the key tensions of emergent Indian modernity. The consonant tension between the global and the local is one between centrifugal and centripetal forces.[284] The centrifugal forces of modernity propel outwards in cultural openings of border, mindedness, and market. The centripetal forces attempt to localize through parochial and protectionist, cultural definitions of history, landscape, language and practice.

It is important to recognize, however, that this relationship between internationalization and home is interdependent and correlative. They are not

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[283] Homi Bhabha characterizes this as an ambivalent movement from the "problematic unity of the nation to the articulation of cultural difference in the constitution of an *inter*national perspective." See his "Introduction: Narrating the Nation" in *Nation and Narration* ed. Homi Bhaba (London: Routledge, 1990)p.5

[284] I borrow this metaphor for the tension from Jennifer Robertson's "It Takes a Village: Internationalization and Nostalgia in Postwar Japan," in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan* ed. Stephen Vlastos (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998)p.110

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opposite trajectories, but mutually constituting. Each depends on the other in a uniquely modern relationship or dialectic. "[B]oth exist together as refractive processes and products."[285] Indeed, the dependent dichotomy of the two is a product of modernity's dichotomizing character itself, hence the ambivalence that we have seen in the narratives from Bhawanicharan to Gurusaday. The self-constituting dialectic evidences itself through a fundamental ambivalence because it wants to be two things at the same time: international and local; cosmopolitan yet unique. As such, the constitutive tension between these opposing but productive forces characterizes a fundamental experience of ambivalence at the heart of modernity, and "indexes the ambiguity of national identity and its tense relationship with cultural identity."[286]

The ambivalence of internationalization and 'home-making' mirrors itself, and indeed, as I have shown, is fundamentally produced through, the equally correlative, ambiguous spatialization of city and village. The productive spatial narratives discursively map onto one another. Each symbolically comes to stand in for the constitutive poles of this tension. The city symbolically manifests the centrifugal forces of internationalization, whilst the village symbolically represents the centripetal forces of localization. Two coordinate, relational axes of transformation thus reveal themselves as mutually interdependent. The first is a temporal dynamic which oscillates along a continuum between poles of imperial subjectification and political autonomy. The second is a spatial axis characterized by the ambivalent pulls of, on the one hand, city modernization and cosmopolitanism, and on the other, of rural traditionalism and identificatory distantiation in the space of the village.

While the ambivalence or ambiguous tensions between the forces of European modernity and indigenous, syncretic responses have always already been in a process of perplexing the life of the everyday,[287] Gurusaday's discourse seems to inaugurate a distinct reification of imagined historical and cultural processes. Folk art explicitly comes to stand in for cultural identity and practice in a way that elides the inherent syncretism of situated aesthetic production. Gurusaday invokes a reading of folk art and practices through the idealized and imaginary, spatial semiotic of the village, but one which attempts to locate a essentialized national identity through the re-discovery and consumption of an ostensibly lost cultural practice. What distinguishes Gurusaday's romantic narrative framework as reifying from Rabindranath's is the level to which nostalgia comes to play a role in articulating a sense of modern present and future.

Nostalgia is, for the most part, deliberately uncritical. Nostalgia and romanticism played a large part in the poetry and prose of Rabindranath, perhaps more so in its reception by the urban middle classes than in its production. But

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[285] Ibid., p.112

[286] Ibid.

[287] I take use the verb "perplexing" after Homi K. Bhabha's description of hybridity as being more than simply an admixture of essences, but as interrupting or deconstructing the representation of fullness or authenticity. See his "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Nation" in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhaba (London: Routledge, 1990) pp. 291-322.

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what characterized Rabindranath's literary voice was his reflexive, and therefore anxiously self-critical, ambivalence. This critical ambivalence is self-consciously fore-grounded, for example, in the poem 'Nagar Sangit' (Song of the City) which we examined earlier. In it Rabindranath moves from opening with a lament on the loss of a natural landscape and its lived, ethical possibilities to being swept deliriously into the city, its energy and freedoms. The city remains a space of fear and of exhilaration, of freedom and of destruction, but the latter's effects do not cause the poem's narrative voice to discount the city space of modernity altogether. Quite the contrary. The constitutive experience of modernity as ambivalent, contingent, contradictory and paradoxical, and celebrated precisely for its dis-locating movement and energy is fundamental to Rabindranath's "Song of the City."

While Rabindranath's idealised village space of Shantiniketan, constructed in opposition to the city, celebrated the rural and its practical, didactic potential of traditional arts and their contexts, Rabindranath was, as we have also seen, critical of the parochialisms, impoverishments and narrow-mindedness of much of village life. In his writing, lectures and extensive travels, he sought a pragmatic, universalizable modernism outside the blinders of nationalism, money, and the machine, one grounded in truth, equality, justice, creativity and unity through diversity. The Indian village, as a space for possible redemption, could offer an ethical perspective on being in the modern world, but it was not simply an anodyne or panacea for the anxieties of modernity. Perhaps towards the end of his life, weary in old age of world wars, colonial violence, industrial destruction, nationalist violence and repeated personal tragedy, Rabindranath's retreat into the mindset of the village could be evidence an uncritical, romantic nostalgia. Yet as illustrated in his short essay on historiography and the three examples therein, a naturalised, phenomenological ethics of the rural acts *both* as a metonym of redemptive desire and as a lived, experiential ground for a universal humanism whose modern tenets of justice and creative unity are unmistakeably fraught with semantic ambiguity, something he worried over and debated both within the context of the essay and in its public reception.[288]

From Bhawanicharan to Rabindranath we have traced a process of social modernization in terms of which the critical, discursive nexus of city and village articulates a politics of national identity and difference. As we have also seen, it is a discourse which plays out through the social landscape of increasing colonialism, bureaucratization, urbanisation, industrialisation, nationalism, war, capitalist exploitation, and the segregation of community and personal spheres. Responses to these modern processes became increasingly constituted by the social dynamics in which they arose. The more the social landscape became totalized by the centrifugal processes of modernity, the more the responses to those internationalizing pulls reified the redemptive spaces of the village. Gurusaday's work on folk art and culture marks a distinct shift in the centripetal reception and

[288] For a detailed account of the essays ambiguity and reflexivity, both textual and historical, see Chaudhuri (2003).

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production of discourses of "home-making." It is a shift for whom the conditions had been building for some time, as perhaps evidenced in some of Rabindranath's work, but certainly in its reception and mobilization; for, while Rabindranath was consumed with the definition of the new and its implication in, and constitution by, the social and historical totality of modernity, Gurusaday seems to begin with the premise that the society in which he lives is "wiped out"[289] and already in a state of degeneration. Gurusaday begins with the notion that his work is premised on both the practice of redemption, a work of revealing to city dwellers their essence, and so bringing back to their lifeworld and national character that which has vanished: joy, immediacy, beauty, and pathos; bringing back, in other words, authenticity. But unlike his Calcutta contemporary, Rabindranath, who engaged a structural, political, philosophical and socio-economic critique of colonial modernity, Gurusaday located redemptive practice in nostalgic consumption.

Gurusaday lacks that crucial critical reflexivity which characterizes so much the modern in Rabindranath's work. In effect he generalizes participation in an idealized social process and removes the heterogeneity of the social world by locating a mythical representational origin for social identification. For Gurusaday, the folk, its arts, landscape and aesthetic are metonymic, sentimental anodynes for the anxieties of modernity and its productive problematics of identity. The very fact of his locating the authenticity of a nation's soul in its folk arts, and therein using the revival or preservation of the arts as a means of bringing 'fullness' back into the fragmented lives of modern urban dwellers speaks to the way in which he attempted to render the distant intimate and interiorized. He begins from a sentimental position of estrangement and alienation, removed from home, distant from the familiar and the fullness of social meaning and value. His nostalgia for "the meaning of the world made visible"[290] through folk art and practice is a barometer for the mood of his historical situation. The social turmoil and trauma which had inflicted Calcutta, Bengal and India, were nostalgically juxtaposed, by Gurusaday, with presumed verities and comforts of the past.[291] For him the nostalgically imagined landscape of the folk was both a "represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package."[292] What is important about the discursive shift in Gurusaday is his location of an essential social nature in the representational and performative products of folk art. A semantic fullness indicative of nationalist difference and essence is reclaimed through the representational mnemonic of folk art rendering the experience and redress of fragmentation, alienation, loss and "un-homed-ness" an intimate interiority.[293]

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[289] Dutt (1992[1932])p.4

[290] Georg Lukács., *The Theory of the Novel.* Trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971) p.34

[291] Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979)pp.6-10

[292] W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape" *Landscape and Power* ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994) p.5

[293] See Robertson (1998)p.117

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There is thus a distinct process of reification at work in Gurusaday's discourse. Folk art comes to stand in for ambivalent cultural practice and identification. By 'reification' I mean that process which turns the relation of the modern subject to him or herself, situated in the context of emergent nationalism and urbanisation, and experientially located in a fragmented domain of urbanisation, into the consumption of a thing.[294] Folk arts and their recuperative potentials, consumed, performed, and exercised by adherents to the Bratachari Society became ways of securing stable referents, original and authentic in their production, around which was negotiated the ever more unstable present. The instability of the present was juxtaposed to the authentic, ontologically secure past which was supposedly evidenced, for Gurusaday, by folk art. This "recuperative project"[295] is a singularly "paternalistic" one which attempts to impute a narrative of original purity untouched by commodification in which the pre-modern or pre-European societies evidence a quality of existence destroyed by colonial encounter. What this effect does however is to further foreground the tensions between the forces of internationalizing forces of modernity and the forces of home-making. Locating a socio-cultural essence in the reified landscape of a pre-modern past and its supposedly pure 'folk' practices is possible only in a present of malaise and alienation. Nostalgia amplifies this tension and exacerbates the process. The more modernity entrenches itself with the expansion of capitalism, urbanisation, industrial growth, and growing social inequity, the more a response of historical mythification and reification responds in an attempt to configure textual strategies of resistance.

Gurusaday's ethnographic work and practice received as they were in the 1930's as integral to the nationalist cause and the preservation of identity, and today, lauded in Calcutta with a museum dedicated to his "definitive" collections, reveal themselves as processes employing this strategic cultural fetishism. The reification at work in Gurusaday's nostalgic revival of folk art in the project of national differentiation lies in both its elision and displacement of modern plurality, and in its location of a figurative, univocal "primeval present of the folk"[296] in the commodity or consumed thing-ness of folk art. The Bratachari Society spread across India in an attempt to unify a political resolve of nationalist identity, but in doing so abstracted from an increasingly modern hybrid social space in order to produce a territorial and historical narrative of legitimacy. Bhabha characterizes this process as follows:

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[294] The concept of 'reification' is a much debated concept originating for social theory in Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971)pp. 83-223. It is beyond the scope of this essay to address the complex and perplexing debates surrounding the problematic of reification. I simply want to use it loosely here to denote how the relation of subjective meaning formation for society embedded in an experiential landscape of competing modernities and their consequent traumas becomes transposed onto the products of folk art practices, with distinctive identity located in their consumption and practice. For a recent, complex analysis of the concept of reification see Timothy Bewes, *Reification, or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002).

[295] Robertson (1998)p.125

[296] Bhaba (1990)p.1

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> [T]he political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of its irredeemably plural modern space...into a signifying space that is archaic and mythical, paradoxically representing the nation's modern territoriality, in the patriotic, atavistic temporality of Traditionalism. Quite simply, the difference of space returns as the Sameness of time, turning Territory into Tradition, turning the People into One. The liminal point of this ideological displacement is the turning of the differentiated spatial boundary, the 'outside', into a unified temporal territory of tradition.[297]

For our purposes not only is this discursive displacement or elision performed in the narration of a nation set against a universal imperative of modern cosmopolitan participation, but it is also doubled through the difference of city and village space. The 'outside' is identified, from Bhawanicharan's "Outsider" to Gurusaday's idealised folk space of Bratachari identity as the village. Only, by the time we get to Gurusaday in the 1930's, some one hundred and ten years after Bhawanicharan, the ambivalence evidenced in the latter is reified by the former in his explicit attempt to redeem the modern through the pre-modern root "the urban people who have deviated from the main stream."[298] The now artefacts of cultural life become touchstones for identification, and embody, as signifying practices of difference, a modern national legitimacy, as much as a pre-modern traditional essence.

I do not want to argue that Gurusaday was responsible for a reification of tradition singularly in the context of discursive productions of nationalism. I want simply to locate in his work a shift in the rhetorical nature of narrating nationalism through cultural productions which was indicative of a certain cultural way of dealing with the modern experience of fragmentation both within the space of the city and without. The rhetoric of cultural difference reaches a certain level of abstract articulation when "the 'loss' of meaning enters, as a cutting edge, into the representation of the fullness of demands of culture."[299]

Gurusaday begins from a position of authentic culture as already lost, a process which he attributes to the space and practice of the modern city of Calcutta. But he was, of course, not alone in his attempt to articulate a certain fullness or authenticity to cultural difference. An interesting case proposes itself as illustrating both the narrative search for territorial authenticity within a landscape of fullness outside the city, and its reception and promotion through the reified construct of a national univocal identity.

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[297] Homi Bhaba, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation" in *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990) p.300
[298] Gurusaday (1962) as quoted in Korom (1989)p.75
[299] Bhabha, "DissemmiNation" (1990)p.313

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Rabindranath, Jibanananda Das and Naturalizing Allegories of the Village and the City as Critiques of Modernity

The Bengali poet widely considered to be Rabindranath's literary heir, Jibanananda Das, wrote intensely inflected odes and eulogies to Bengal during the years 1934 to 1936. Written in Bengali in a set of notebooks called the 'Grey Manuscripts'[300], but published posthumously by his brother, Asokananda Das, as *Rupasi Bangla* (Bengal the Beautiful) in 1957, his some sixty sonnets invoke a lyrical, rural landscape of Bengal almost devoid of human or social reference. The Bengal Jibanananda invokes is "animal-vegetable-mineral."[301] Jibanananda's poems became very popular after the last partition of Bengal (1971). One reason perhaps is that they spoke of an intimate plenitude within the Bengal countryside, something that, in the war torn, famished and refugee stricken land was certainly somewhat of an imaginative, if chimerical solace. Intended or not, within the continuation of Rabindranath's legacy, Jibanananda's poem's reconstituted an imaginative nationalist production using already familiar tropes.

Jibanananda's early poems engage similar literary devices as those often employed by Rabindranath: the solitary figure, speaking in the first person, in direct, if ecstatic, but reflective communion with the natural world traced by modernist sociality. From the perceived authenticity of this experiential communion a nationalist, but deeply critical, anti-urban ethos is fostered. From Jibanananda's poem "*Tomra jekhane sadhchale jao*" ("You can all go where you wish"),

> You can all go where you wish; I by Bengal's expanse
> Will stay – to see jackfruit leaves fall in the dawn breeze,
> Or the myrna's brown wings in the dusk turn cold as ice,
> Her yellow legs under white down in darkness dance
> Once – twice – upon the grass, then all at once
> The hijal tree from the forest summon it close to its breast.
> [...]
> She washes her feet once, silently; and then is lost
> In the distant mist – and yet I know, in the world's throng
> I cannot lose her: she is here on the banks of my Bengal.[302]

Jibanananda's individual is located in the larger space of a history already happened, but one without the overtly political rhetoric of patriotism to which

[300] Seely (1990)p.91
[301] Ibid.
[302] Jibanananda Das, "*Tomra jekhane sadhchale jao*" ("You can all go where you wish") trans.and ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri, in *A Certain Sense: Poems by Jibanananda Das* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1998)p.1

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Rabindranath's poems sometimes slid. Sisi Kumar Das describes Jibanananda's *Rupasi* series of poems as follows:

> "[H]is Bengal was not apostrophized as a mother, nor was it identified with any mother goddess. His Bengal in harmony with the entire geography of his poetic world, is earthy, concrete, pulsating and sensuous, redolent with myths, history and poetry, and lively and vivid with its trees and plants and birds and beasts. Deeply rooted in the regional ethos, these poems, [are] all intensely Bengali in temper and tone... . Regional yet sophisticated, sentimental but not lacking in depth, flowing with passionate love for his native soil yet free from the arrogance of patriotism, ..."[303]

Two of Jibananda's poems suggest themselves as particularly striking examples of this intense naturalism. The two poems, "*Banglar much ami dekhiyachhi*" ("I have seen the face of Bengal") and "*Abar asiba phire*" ("I shall return to this Bengal") self-consciously produce a naturalized, geographically determined identity.

"I Have Seen the Face of Bengal"

I have seen the face of Bengal; so the beauty of the earth
I seek no more; waking in the dark, I see
Under the great umbrella leaf of the fig tree
The daybreak's magpie-robin: all round, silent massed leaves
Of jam and banyan, hijal, peepul and jackfruit:
Their shadows fall on the thorn-bush, the clump of arrowroot.
So Chand the merchant long ago, from his honey-bee boat,
Sailing past Champa, saw the same blue shadows float

Of hijal, tamal, banyan—Bengal's beauty beyond form.
So Behula saw from her raft on the Gangura, when the light
Of the moon's twelfth dark phase died on the southbank,
countless peepuls
And banyans, golden paddy; heard the shama's soft song.
When she danced like reft wagtail in Indra's heavenly halls,
Bengal's fields, streams, flowers wept at her feet like
ankle-bells.[304]

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[303] Sisir Kumar Das, "Introduction" *A Certain Sense: Poems by Jibanananda Das* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1998)p.xvi
[304] Ibid., p.2

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"I Shall Return to this Bengal"

I shall return to this Bengal, to the Dhansiri's bank:
Perhaps not as a man, but myna or fishing-kite;
Or dawn crow, floating on the mist's bosom to alight
In the shade of this jack-fruit tree, in this autumn harvest land.
Or maybe a duck – a young girl's – bells on my red feet,
Drifting on kalmi-scented waters all day:
For love of Bengal's rivers, field's crops, I'll come this way
To this sad green shore of Bengal, drenched by
the Jalangi's waves.

Perhaps you'll see a glass-fly ride the evening breeze,
Or hear a barn owl call from the silk-cotton tree;
Or a little child toss rice grains on the courtyard grass,
Or a boy on the Rupsa's turgid stream steer a dinghy
With torn white sail – white egrets swimming through red clouds
To their home in the dark. You'll find me among their crowd. [305]

The crowd of the city is replaced by the crowd of birds: egrets, myna and fish-kites, or dawn crows, or maybe even a duck, an owl. The poem's narrative voice locates itself decidedly outside the fragmenting realm of the modern city, and with a chaos of a different, and ultimately redemptive sort, one with which, if in an oblique way, a land, a people, a language and a possible collective representation of life are identified.

This almost eulogistic identification was a pessimistic one, and it derived explicitly from Jibanananda's vision of the city. Indeed, the city of Calcutta became, for Jibanananda, a foil for describing Bengal, a land which was often rendered through the device of memory. It is this memorializing in his poetry which lends his work, as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, a sentimentalist imaginary and nationalist idealization not unlike Rabindranath's *Sonar Bangla*.[306] The evocation of a landscape destroyed by the city of Calcutta, and only remembered is evident in a poem called "On the Pavement."

It is late at night—very late at night.
I am walking on and on
From pavement to pavement, pavement to pavement,
through Calcutta—
Feeling through all my blood the bitter poisonous touch
Of the tram-tracks stretching underfoot, like so many
primordial serpent sisters.

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[305] Ibid., p.3
[306] Chakrabarty (2000).

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It's drizzling now—the wind seems rather cold.
I recall a faraway land of green grass, a river, fireflies—
Where are they?
Are they lost?
The thin gangling tram-track under my feet
And the intricate network of wires above my head
Chastise me.
It's drizzling now—the wind seems rather cold.
In the face of the chilly wind, in the dead of night
In this city of Calcutta
You will never see a blue-veined nest shiver:
No dove, waking from sleep among the olive leaves,
Will ever come to tell you of the soft blue savour
Of its broken sleep.
You will not suddenly mistake the yellow papaya leaf
for a bird,

Your eyes will not grow intense when you come to understand
The creation to be a deep fog. ... [307]

Fog returns interestingly for us here. Jibanananda writes of the city as a place of illusion, of a place obscuring its real and durable stuff—intricate wires, gangling tram tracks, and the social and cultural bubbles which effervesce from such material mediations with the world—with something almost intangible within which we lose our way, and by which we fail to see the vanity of human technological striving against an unfathomable natural universe. The city, if you will, acts as a phantasmagoric milieu for this forgetting, and indeed destruction, of the natural, and with it, implicitly Bengal. Jibanananda is always looking beyond the city and the milieu which generates in the mind a fog or illusory chimera of "deeper communion"[308] with the world. The poem "Cities" exemplifies Jibanananda's characteristic incommensurability of the country and the city.[309]

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[307] Jibanananda Das (1998) Trans by Ujjal Kumar Majumdar. p.51

[308] See the poem "Sailor" by Jibanananda Das, first published the journal *Poetry* in 1959 and translated by the poet for its inaugural publication:

As long as the honeybees with wings sparkling like spray in the sun
And the heron with a surer touch than the jet plane
Brings home the virgin vastness of the blue
Man will not rest content;
Purged of follies, sin and tragic mistakes
His sailor-soul fare forward
To move into a better discovery of life on this planet,
A greater joy—a deeper communion.

As quoted in Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Art of Despair: The Sense of the City in Modern Bengali Poetry" *evam: forum on Indian representations* 2:1&2 (2003)p.244

[309] Ibid.

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It becomes apparent in cities, that "the heart" identifies not with gaslights, trams, jet planes, streets and the anxiety of the urban, but with the perhaps ungraspable beyond signified by the natural world which stands, always, over and against the "fog" of men, but which, as such, also beckons to the possibility that things be otherwise.

> My heart, you have seen many big cities;
> Cities whose bricks and stones,
> Accents, affairs, hopes, frustrations, and terrifying deprivations
> Have turned into ashes in the cauldron of my mind.
> Nevertheless, I have seen the sun arise amidst thick clouds in a corner
> of the city;
> I have seen the sun on the other side of the river of a port city,
> Like a love-struck farmer he bears his burden in the tangerine-cloud coloured
> fields of the sky;
> Over a city's gaslights and tall minarets I have seen—stars—
> Like flocks of wild geese heading towards some southern sea.[310]

The real of the city and the modern becomes apparent, ironically, at night when the business of the day subsides and the stars become visible. What is important is what stands over and against the city, and which is always supplement to, and thus uncontainable, and also, as such, unknowable. We moderns are not content with the hummingbird's wing against the sky, but must appropriate, and approximate, it for ourselves with the jet plane.

In Jibanananda's most famous indictment of modernity, "*Ratri*" ("Night" 1940), the poet links utter abjection with the materiality of the city.[311] It is as though the city and its *facie hippocratica*, in the iconic form of the leper, its allegorical other—an urban life form familiar both at the time of the poet's writing and during the 1970's when his poems became indicative of an imaginary nationalist production—coexist side by side. The poem begins,

> Unscrewing the hydrant the leper licks up water;
> Or perhaps the hydrant itself had burst.
>
> Now the thick of night descends on the city en masse.
> A car goes past, coughing like a lout.[312]

The abject human and its impoverishment, both spiritual and physical is contrasted with the technological materiality of the modern city: the hydrant and the motor car. Like a dog, the leper drags himself to lick from the broken

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[310] Jibanananda Das, "Cities" trans. Fakrul Alam, as published in *The Daily Star* (Dacca, Bangladesh) December 13, 1997. The "other side of the river of a port city" is undoubtedly a reference to Calcutta.
[311] Kaviraj (2003)p.245
[312] Jibanananda Das (1998) "Night" trans. Bhaswati Chakravorty, p.61

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hydrant, as a car, the occupants obviously of a different class, obliviously passes. Night descends figuratively in the poem with this social passing. It is an existential night constitutively produced by the act of living en masse. The poem continues, one stanza on,

> And I, having left Phears Lane—defiantly
> Walking mile on mile—stopped by
> A wall in Bentinck Street at Tiretta Bazar
> In a wind peanut-dry.
>
> Cheeks kissed by the warmth of an intoxicating glow:
> The aroma of kerosene, lumber, shellac, gunny and leather
> Blending with the hum of dynamos
> Draws taut the bowstring.
>
> Draws taut the world dead and awake,
> Draws taut the string on the bow of life. ...[313]

The illuminating light through the crack in the wall is not that of something that might herald redemption, but is the stuff of industry. This stuff is, Jibanananda recognizes, alluring and "intoxicating." It does not bring release or liberation or hope, but is itself inescapable. In the city, we are both dead and awake; Benjamin might write "asleep." We are dead to how we are inextricably a part of the fog. We are all beggars who ignore our urban present. From the conclusion of Jibanananda's poem "*Bhikhiri*" ("Beggar"): "But in the crowd—on Harrison Road—was a deeper sadness./A world's mistake: a beggar ignored. The world's failing."[314]

It is not simply that there are beggars. There have probably always been beggars, and there probably will always be beggars. What renders the modern peculiar, and which signified its ethical paucity and failure for Jibanananda, is that we now ignore the beggar. As Simmel famously remarks,

> the essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinctions between things. ... [T]he meaning and the value of the things, and therewith of the things themselves, are experienced as meaningless. They appear to the blasé person in a homogenous, flat and grey colour. ... Money takes the place of all the manifoldness of things and expresses all qualitative distinctions between them in the distinction of 'how much'?[315]

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[313] Ibid.
[314] Jibanananda Das, "Bhikhiri" translated by Clinton B. Seely, *A Poet Apart: The Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das (1899-1954)* (Delaware University Press: Delaware, 1990)p.157
[315] Georg Simmel, [1903] "The Metropolis and Mental Life" in *Social Sciences III: Selections and Selected Readings*, Vol.2, 14th ed. , ed and trans. Edward Shils (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) p.329

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The beggar is the legitimated modern cost of doing business. This attitude is, for Simmel, and Jibanananda and Rabindranath would concur, the product of living in an urban milieu. "[T]he metropolis is...the peculiar seat of the blasé attitude."[316] The hurried business and fragmented rush of the city, what Jibanananda phrases as the "accents, affairs, hopes, frustrations, and terrifying deprivations" of metropolitan life impoverish the human spirit, such that our only response is "turned to ash in the cauldron of [the] mind." We become blasé to the face of the other, no matter how disfigured and near death. Due to the individualist pursuit of money and the reduction of social value to economic relationships, the modern city "hollows out the core of things, their peculiarities, their specific values and their uniqueness and incomparability in a way which is beyond repair."[317] The city is what allows us, and produces in us the attitude that it is necessary to step over the beggar. Indeed, the city demands that we do. We have no choice. Had we not, as Simmel suggests, we would be "completely atomised internally and would fall into an unthinkable mental condition."[318] This is not the response predicated by a less urban environment. Would we step over the beggar on a country road? Or, on a lane, when, unmediated by the machinery of convenience, we come upon the leper, would we step over or pass by the one who drags herself to lick at water?

It is this terrible realization about the attitude of the modern fostered by the city that Jibanananda speaks to with his incommensurabilities of city and country. The attitude constituted by the urban, material phenomenality of which the modern finds itself, for him, cannot, as he says in an address, speak to "a decadent age" with "the salvation...or crystallization of experienced screened vision."[319]

He turns instead to Eliot's "The Hollow Men."

> In this last of meeting places
> We grope together
> And avoid speech
> Gathered on this beach of the tumid river
>
> Sightless, unless
> The eyes reappear
> As the perpetual star
> Multifoliate rose
> Of death's twilight kingdom
> The hope only

[316] Ibid.p.330
[317] Ibid.
[318] Ibid.p.331
[319] Jibanananda Das, [1940] "Rabindranath and Modern Bengali Poetry" *Mahfil* Vol.III, No.4 (1967)p.8

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Of empty men.[320]

The infernal city is the site for recognizing the modern as a place of despair for Jibanananda. For Jibanananda,

> [t]he world of modernity contains, ineradicably, too much evil, of degradation and an unspectacular desolation of uncomplaining everyday lives filled with meaninglessness, to be captured by the earlier aesthetic of beauty.[321]

Jibanananda is not far from a voice Rabindranath bequeathed—Rabindranath bequeathed many voices, some contradictory—although perhaps, the former was more pessimistic than his cultural and literary master.

Jibanananda's poems quoted above were written in the final year of Rabindranath's life, not long before Rabindranath's "melancholy farewell to the world"[322] in his essay "Crisis in Civilization." Rabindranath did not live to see what calamities were to come to Calcutta and Bengal. Jibanananda did, and these events inflected his poetry tremdously.[323] Rabindranath died in 1941, two years before the terrible famine which came to define the still living collective memory of Calcutta, and five years before the gruesome riots which were precipitated by the traumas of scarcity in years prior, and whose grotesquery continued with the convulsions of partition.

Rabindranath's work sought to universalize a world struggle, rather than simply a national struggle, against those modern forces which have brought us to "the brink of so disturbed an age, and such a grim collusion [which] confronts"[324] the present. Jibanananda's focus is also global but despairs of the existential vacuity of the modern. For both writer's the city and the urban way of life was the lens through which this anxiety gets articulated. An interplay of two poems, by the two writers respectively illustrates this dynamic.

Both poems have as their central characters, a *karani*, or office clerk. The clerk operates in both poems as a figure of lower middle class urban hopelessness. In the first poem, "Flute-Music" by Rabindranath, published in 1932, the clerk, telling his own story, opens with a description of his impoverished urban surrounds.

Kinu the milkman's alley

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320 Ibid.
321 Kaviraj (2003)p.246
322 Naipaul (1990)p.271
323 In an interview, the noted post-Tagore, Bengali poet, critic and contemporary of Jibanananda, Buddhadeva Bose (1908-74) remarks that Jibanananda's "later poems, written in Calcutta during the famine and war, show the influence of world events and a haunting sense of pain and anguish." See, "Perspectives on Bengali poetry: An Interview with Buddhadeva Bose" *Mahfil* Vol. III, No. 4 (1967) p.43.
324 Jibanananda Das, [1940] (1967)p.6

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A ground-floor room in a two storey house,
Slap on the road, windows barred.
Decaying walls, crumbling to dust in places
Or stained with damp.
Stuck on the door,
A picture of Ganesha, Bringer of Success,
From the end of a bale of cloth.
Another creature apart from me lives in my room
For the same rent:
A lizard.
There's one difference between him and me:
He doesn't go hungry.

I get twenty-five rupees a month
As junior clerk in a trading office.
I am fed at the Datta's house
For coaching their boy.
At dusk I go to Sealdah Station,
Spend the evening there
To save the cost of light.
Engines chuffing,
Whistles shrieking,
Passengers scurrying,
Coolies shouting.
I stay till half past ten,
Then back to my dark, silent, lonely room.

The poem then shifts registers, and through the device of the clerk's memory recalls a village near the Dhalesvari river where he was once betrothed to a woman. He ran away from the wedding to "save" the girl from his "unfortunate self" and situation in the city. She and the life of the village haunts him: "she's in and out of my mind all the time: Dacca sari, vermillion on her forehead."[325] The narrative voice returns to the present from which the girl was saved and the clerk condemned.

Pouring rain.
My tram costs go up.
But often as not my pay gets cut for lateness.
Along the alley,
Mango skins and stones, jack-fruit pulp
Fish gills and dead kittens
And God knows what other rubbish

[325] Rabindranath Tagore, "Flute Music" trans. William Radice, in *Selected Poems* (Penguin: London, 1994)p.96-98.

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Pile up and rot.
My umbrella is like my depleted pay—
Full of holes.
My sopping office clothes ooze
Like a pious Vaisnava
Monsoon darkness
Sticks in my damp room
Like an animal caught in a trap,
Lifeless and numb.
Day and night I feel strapped bodily
On to a half dead world.

What exacerbates Haripada the clerk's misery are the faint and intermittent sounds coming from a nearby flat whose occupant "fancies himself on the cornet", a type of country flute. These sounds suggest of something possible other than the destitution and squalor of the city, but this is a promissory transcendence, attainable only in the memorial landscape of the imaginary country where the girl impossibly waits.

The music is true
Where, the everlasting twilight hour of my wedding,
The Dhalesvari river flows,
Its banks deeply shaded by *tamal*-trees,
And she who waits in the courtyard
Is dressed in a Dacca sari, vermillion on her forehead.[326]

Unlike Rabindranath, Jibanananda does not gesture to the transcendent in his poetic evocation of the urban life of a middle class *karani*. For Rabindranath, even in the urban decay and hopelessness of the modern, the transcendent could shine through and be seen, if only in the pain of memory and through the ethereal immateriality of the flute's "Sindhu-Baroya rag." For Jibanananda, the *karani* finds relief from the catastrophe of his urban predicament only through death. The poem variously titled, "*Lashkata Ghare*", literally, "corpse cutting room", but published also as "*At bachhar ager ekdin*" ("One Day Eight Years Ago") in 1938, undoubtedly responds to Rabindranath's earlier piece. It wonders as to why a man—a supposedly happily married and, at least, fed man—kills himself. The reason, the poem seems to suggest, is due to the self-awareness and experience of the overwhelming ambiguity, existential anxiety and psychological despair stemming from the profound darkness of the modern metropolitan's laborious and monotonous existence.

[326]Ibid. In Bengal, a vermillion line on the forehead between the central part in a woman's hair is a sign of being married. Almost universally practiced except by those women who self-consciously eschew such traditionalisms, it is a sign aspired to and celebrated. Made today of a synthetic paste, it is applied every morning, sometimes by the husband, in the way that one might don a wedding ring. Many complex cultural references play on this deeply personal, yet publicly symbolic, ritual.

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> ...Last night
> In the dark of a spring night
> When the quarter's fifth moon had sunk,
> He felt the desire to die.
>
> His wife lay by his side, his child as well.
> There was love, and hope—yet, in the moonlight
> What ghost did he see? Why was his sleep broken?
> Or perhaps he had not slept for many nights:
> He sleeps now in the morgue.
>
> This perhaps was the sleep he sought:
> Hunched like a plagued rat, lips flecked with blood and foam,
> In some dark cranny he sleeps now.
> Never to wake again.
>
> 'You will never wake again
> Never endure again
> The unremitting—unremitting burden
> Of the deep pain of knowing.'...[327]

"Knowing", that imperative burden of the modern—"Sapere Aude!" resounds Kant—which both tantalizes and forever fails the subject, and for which the city stands as both symbol and material embodiment, is the cause of the man's despair. It is the modern (in Bengali, *adhunik*) which as "another terrified awe/plays in our blood"[328] causes the man to take his own life. Neither "Money and fame/nor comfort"[329] can bring relief; and so,

> ...in the main darkness, you went to the *peepul* tree
> with a coil of rope in your hand, alone;
> knowing that the life of the grasshopper, the magpie-robin
> is never met by man.[330]

While both poets saw in the natural world some place and hope for redemption from what modernity has wrought, Jibanananda goes further than Rabindranath by legitimating death as an adequate response and relief from modernity. Rabindranath's dream of a social harmony of the human and nature is realized by

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[327] Jibanananda (1998)p.47
[328] Ibid.
[329] Ibid.
[330] Ibid.p.48 Significantly, Jibanananda has the man hang himself from a *peepul* tree. The *peepul* (classified in Western scientific parlance as *ficus religiosa*), symbol of self-awareness and enlightenment, is the most sacred tree to Hindus and Buddhists. It was under a *peepul*, it is believed, that Prince Gautama meditated, attained enlightenment, and became Buddha.

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Jibanananda only in death. For the latter, the modern present is forever separated from the natural world, and stands almost as an ecstatic other or truth forever beyond, but in an intimate proximity to, the present.

By the end of his life, Rabindranath had given up on the promise of the modern as it was exercised through the material promise of Europe: "I had at one time believed that the springs of civilization would issue out of the heart of Europe. But today, when I am about to quit the world, that faith has deserted me."[331] Rabindranath died in the midst of the crowded city he hated. When he heard of the great poet's death, Jawaharlal Nehru, then in prison, wrote presciently in his diary, "[p]erhaps it is as well that he died now and did not see the many horrors that are likely to descend in increasing measure on the world and on India. He had seen enough and he was infinitely sad and unhappy."[332] Jibanananda too died in the city which made for him his uncomfortable bed. He was struck by a tram as he was trying to cross the "gangling" tracks of Rash Behari Road on October 14th, 1954.

In a posthumously published poem written during the war years, Jibanananda seemed to have given up all hope in modernity's unreflexive present.

> Is the sky's pale colour that of dawn or dark of evening?
> Is this vast sea to be crossed?
> And though we're many, we're now alone;
> As we bring extinction to the species, those last remaining
> dodo birds,
> As we set out we hear the sound of pigeon wings,
> Or is it the abysmal shrieks of dodoism?[333]

☙

It is important to emphasize the contiguous contradiction of the many, and at the same time, the psychological aloneness of that same many, for Jibanananda. As such, this dissonance again conjures forth the characteristic social forms of urban modernity identified by the likes of Benjamin, and, in particular, Simmel. Despite the present being defined overwhelmingly as one of material proximity (I.e. urbanism), the character and material condition of our proximity is not one which fosters "mechanical association" (Durkheim) or "organic community" (Tönnies). Rather, the economic character and structure of the modern urban milieu fragments and individualizes, pits one against the other, and, despite the crowd, renders ever more alone and confused those who do seek, as Jibanananda says, "deeper communion."

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[331] Rabindranath Tagore, "Crisis in Civilisation" as quoted in Dutta and Robinson (1997)p.364.
[332] Jawaharlal Nehru as quoted in Ibid., p.368.
[333] Jibanananda Das, "*Mahaprithibi*" as quoted in Clinton Seely, "On the Poetry of Jibanananda Das" *Literary Review* 23 (3) Spring, 1980 p.365.

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As for Benjamin, the city was also, for Rabindranath and Jibanananda, the site for the enthronement of modernity. Twenty eight years prior to Rabindranath's death, when Rabindranath was first becoming known to Europe as a poet, as Yeats remarked, "greater than any of us,"[334] Ezra Pound identified in the Bengali's poems, reminders of things obscured in the fog of the modern metropolitan and urbanized ways of life. Pound remarked,

> I find in these poems a sort of ultimate common sense, a reminder of the one thing and of forty things of which we are over likely to lose sight in the confusion of our Western life, in the racket of our cities, in the jabber of manufactured literature, in the vortex of advertisement.[335]

Pound contrasted, on the one hand, the attitude and sentiment of the European metropolitan mental life, one of characteristic impoverishment and "confusion", with the "common sense" and "stillness"[336] of a voice untouched by the machinations of "ignition"[337], something very much "at one with nature"[338], on the other. Pound's remarks smack immediately of the most explicit and classic prejudices we now might classify as Orientalism. Pound identifies the exotic, visiting, Oriental "native" as somehow closer to nature, purer, devoid of the trappings and busied encumbrances of modern civilization. "He is at one with nature, and finds no contradictions. And this is in sharp contrast with the Western mode, where man must be shown attempting to master nature... ."[339] There is no doubt that a certain Orientalist racial archetyping and essentialist stereotyping was at work in Pound's and Yeats', at the time, unqualified heralding of the new and mystical voice from the East.[340] Rabindranath's character and poetic voice were celebrated as exemplifying a simple, yet elusive, connectedness with natural being that somehow seemed beyond the capacity of the European voice. For Yeats, as for Pound, they spoke to a certain wish-image and intense desire.

> These lyrics...display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long. The work of a supreme culture, they yet

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[334] Pound (1913)p.571
[335] Ibid. p.575
[336] Ibid. p.574
[337] Ibid.
[338] Ibid.
[339] Ibid.
[340] Their lauding of Rabindranath would soon wane. In 1935, some years after the 1913 Nobel which Yeats and Pound were instrumental in having him awarded, Rabindranath was castigated as "Damn Tagore" and charged with writing overly sentimentalist, didactic religious poems. See, Nabaneeta Sen, "The Foreign Reincarnation of Rabindranath Tagore" *Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 26, February, 1966.

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> appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes.[341]

As such, Rabindranath is represented through an Orientalist frame which serves both the external individual and collective desire to possess a similar naturalness (associated with the Orient), and as the internal desire to appropriate that naturalness (again identified with the Orient).[342]

What's interesting about this Orientalism, though, is when it was spoken. Yeats and Pound lauded the naturalist voice of Rabindranath at a particular time in European history: on the eve of the first world war. Mere months after Rabindranath became the first Asian writer to win the Nobel Prize, and precisely for his capacity to render deeply felt and perhaps ineffable wish images in disarmingly simple and direct ways, Europe exploded in the technical monstrosities of war. Rabindranath's poetic intimacies were mobilised and celebrated by the likes of Yeats, Pound, the painter Sir William Rothenstein, G.B. Shaw, T.S. Eliot, and the sculptor Jacob Epstein and others as a way of making sense of their own anxious present. André Gide remarked in the Preface to his French translation of *Gitanjali* that,

> [w]hat I admire in *Gitanjali* is that it is not encumbered with mythology...it is not at all necessary to make preparations for reading it. No doubt it can be interesting to discover in what respects this book belongs to the traditions of ancient India; but it is much more interesting to consider in what respects it appeals to us.[343]

What, no doubt, appealed most to these European writers was Rabindranath's invocation of the phenomenological register of the natural world and its use as an experiential foil and foundation for a critique of modernity. In a 1932 essay, Rabindranath asks,

> ...for who can determine the limits of the modern by the calendar? It's a matter not so much of time as of feeling....In Bengali this word is *adhunik*. This modernity is not dictated by time, but by temperament.[344]

This temperament or attitude is fundamentally, of course, an urban one. It is produced in, and as a result of, a modern, urban environment. How we approach the world was, for Rabindranath, simply a function of our phenomenological experience and immersion in a particular material *Lebenswelt*. Our environment

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[341] W. B. Yeats [1913] "Introduction" *Gitanjali* (Dover: London, 1998)p.4
[342] Ziauddin Sardar, *Orientalism* (Viva: New Delhi and Kolkata, 2002)p.2
[343] André Gide as quoted in Dutta and Robinson (1997)p.5.
[344] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Ādhunik kābya*" ["Modern Poetry"] [1932] *Particles, Jottings, Sparks: The Collected Brief Poems* trans. William Radice (Angel Books: London, 2001)p.174

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conditions our response to the world; "common sense" says Pound. As Rabindranath reflects in an earlier English lecture presented in Vienna in 1922,

> We stand before this great world. The truth of our life depends on our attitude of our mind towards it—an attitude which is formed by our habit of dealing with it according to the special circumstance of our surroundings and our temperaments.[345]

In the modern age, or, perhaps, more correctly, "attitude", our urban surroundings produce a temperament or emotional life Simmel identified with some restraint as "intensified."[346] Rabindranath was less prone to restraint.

> [I]n the mind of the modern age there is impatience, hurry, a lack of time. Livelihood has become more important than Life. Swept along by the plethora of speed-inducing machines, we hurry both our work and our pleasures. The man who previously created his own world to suit himself, now sets it up in a purely utilitarian way, ordering whatever needs from the factory as quickly as possible, to a uniform pattern. Pleasurable eating has gone; eating is all that remains. No thought is given to whether Life is in harmony with Mind, because mind is set on pulling the rope of Livelihood's juggernaut, along with the crowd. Songs have been replaced by the perpetual 'Heave-Ho, Heave-ho'. ... Mental activity has become perpetually rushed. In the general hurly-burly, no one is concerned to avoid the crude and ugly.[347]

Calcutta was for him the epitome of the "crude and ugly." In an essay called "The Modern Age" written at the same time as "The Religion of the Forest", Rabindranath makes clear his equation of the catastrophic modern with the city, and in particular, the cityscape of Calcutta.

> Calcutta is an upstart town with no depth of sentiment in her face and in her manners. It may be truly said about her genesis:—In the beginning there was the spirit of the Shop, which uttered through its megaphone, "Let there be the Office!" and there was Calcutta. She brought with her no dower distinction, no majesty of noble or romantic origin; she never gathered around her any great historical associations, any annals of brave sufferings, or memory of mighty deeds. The

[345] Rabindranath Tagore, "The Religion of the Forest", *Creative Unity* (MacMillan and Co.: London, 1922)p.45.
[346] Simmel (1948)p.325
[347] Rabindranath [1932](2001)p.178

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> only thing which gave her the sacred baptism of beauty was the river. I was fortunate enough to be born before the smoke-belching iron dragon had devoured the greater part of the life of its banks; when the landing-stairs descending into its waters, caressed by its tides, appeared to me like the loving arms of the villages clinging to it; when Calcutta, with her up-tilted nose and stony stare, had not completely disowned her foster-mother, rural Bengal, and had not surrendered body and soul to her wealthy paramour, the spirit of the ledger, bound in dead leather.[348]

Calcutta, as symbol of the modern attitude or temperament against which the poet rails, is characterized through the logic of the commodity. It is the city of the "Shop" whose only defining form is that of the "ledger", of the "dead", empty, accountancy of "wealth", commodities "devoured" from the "banks" and "soul" of "mother...Bengal."

Against the city and its characteristically modern attitudes and destructive temperaments, Rabindranath posits the "rural" life of the "forest" as somehow communicative of the possibility of experiencing the "expansion of sympathy" with others rather than "alienation and domination."[349] Utilizing a similar dichotomy between the country and the city as does Simmel, Rabindranath argues that the Natural world imparts a "peace" to the "human emotions"[350] that the modern city undoes with its phenomena of restless kinetic distraction. The nervous disposition and decadence of modern cities produces the "hungry fire of concentrated wealth" which "reduces the forest to ashes" and which becomes the "presiding deity of our modern cities."[351]

It is clear in the essay "City and Village" that Rabindranath had some acquaintance with the basic tenets of Marxism. At the beginning of his essay, he distinguishes his own position on the necessity of private property—"it is the only medium through which men can communicate with one another"[352]—from "some who believe that in the eradication of the idea of property the solution is to be found, for then, and then only, will the communal spirit find its full freedom."[353]

His position on private property, however, was one attuned to Marx's insights on the phantasmagoric seductions of the commodity form. This phantasmagoric excess he located in the landscape of the modern city, which, beyond the proximity of Calcutta, he saw as extending across the globe.

> Modern cities are continually growing bigger only because no central spirit of Unity exercises vital control over their growth

[348] Rabindranath Tagore, "The Modern Age" *Creative Unity* (MacMillan and Co.: London, 1922)p.116
[349] Rabindranath Tagore, "The Religion of the Forest" (1922)p.49
[350] Ibid. p.51
[351] Rabindranath Tagore, "City and Village", *The Visva Bharati Quarterly*, October 1924, p.220-21.
[352] Ibid.,p.216
[353] Ibid.,p.215

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> of dimension. There can be no end to their addition of hugeness, because their object is not to modulate human relationships into some beauty of truth, but to gain convenience.[354]

"Unity" came from the sympathetic attitude or temperament fostered in a rural or natural Lifeworld unencumbered by the economic relationships of utility and commodification. "Convenience" was the decadent and commodified relationship of people to one another through the fetishized exchange value of things. When people come to value the thing in itself, rather than the social form for which the thing has value, Rabindranath argues, we come to compete against one another in a decadence of "surplus value", and, as such, "property comes to change its aspect."

> It shuts the gate of hospitality...and displays its wealth in an extravagance which is self-centred. It begets envy and irreconcilable class division. In short, property becomes anti-social. Because, with what is called material progress, property has become intensely individualistic...It breaks social bonds...Its unscrupulousness plays havoc all over the world, generating forces that can coax or coerce peoples to deeds of injustice and wholesale horror.[355]

Rabindranath is here invoking an argument similar to a Marxist critique of capitalist forms of social and material exploitation of the natural world, as well as of their resultant capitalist forms of association.

> Man has been digging holes into the very foundations, not only of his livelihood, but also of his life; he is feeding upon his own body. The reckless wastage of humanity which ambition produces, is best seen in the villages, where the light of life is being dimmed, the joy of existence dulled, the natural threads of social communion snapped everyday.[356]

Modern cities were important indicators or symptoms for Rabindranath, for they were the primary sites, not only of a concentrated intensity or proximity of an economic form of association and sociality, but also of a physical, and thus experientially urbanised, form of life—"a way of life" as Wirth said around the same time—that extended its temperament or attitude throughout the globe.

> The consequence of such material and moral drain is more evident when one studies the conditions manifested in the

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[354] Ibid.,p.221
[355] Ibid.p.217
[356] Ibid.,p.225

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> fatness of the cities and the physical and mental anaemia of the villages almost everywhere in the world. For cities have become inevitably important. They represent energy and materials concentrated for the satisfaction of that exaggerated appetite, which is the characteristic symptom of modern civilisation.[357]

Rabindranath turned his back on, not only the aesthetic, but also the ethical possibilities of Calcutta, and the modern, urban forms of life the city embodied. The village and the countryside were for him repositories of "civilized" association which were not premised solely on economic forms of social value. Rabindranath uses the English word "civilization", specifically the term "my civilization"[358], to distinguish his vision of a collective, human social practice distinct from the forms of "urban civilization" he saw as embodied by the modern metropolis, forms which he claimed had "turned into a vast catering establishment...whereby the future hope and happiness of entire peoples are sold for the sake of providing fastidious fashion with an endless train of respectable rubbish."[359] The possibility of European "civilisation" was for him compromised by its compulsion to dominate and colonize nature.[360]

Clearly, Rabindranath is here arguing against a capitalist vision of society whose supposed progress is premised on commodification, and what he terms, "the illusion of wealth."[361] In this, his argument is very similar to that of Benjamin, precisely in so far as he recognizes, perhaps through Marx's critique of exchange value, the phantasmagoric effects of the commodity fetish, the chronotopic affinity of the commodity with decay, and the dream like illusions of material, urban progress.

We must be careful, however, not to label Rabindranath's criticism of the modern city as of a naïve romantic or nostalgically simplistic sort. Rabindranath was not a romantic of the sort who celebrated unreflexive traditionalisms. He did recognize that the city could be a complex arena of multiplicitous and competing experiences. The modern city brought freedoms as much as it brought despair. As he writes in "*Nagar Sangit*" and "*Banshi*" the city can be both a place of ugliness and pain, as it can also be a place of free from the restrictions and violence of village and of custom.[362]

Rabindranath's critical stance towards modernity is not an indication of his romantic refusal of the modern. Indeed, he is, in virtue of his anti-modernism, thoroughly modern in his call for a global, collectivised movement towards a unity of people attentive to the sympathies fostered by an intimate association with the

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[357] Ibid.,p.218
[358] Ibid.,p.222
[359] Ibid.,p.218
[360] See the novelist Amit Chaudhuri's recent essay, "Of Nature and Poetry" Part 5 of 6, in *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, Monday, May 1st, 2006.
[361] Ibid.,p.219
[362] Sudipta Kaviraj also makes this point in his essay, "Reading a Song of the City—Images of the City in Literature and Films" in *City Flicks* ed. Preben Kaarsholm (Seagull: Kolkata, 2004)p.80

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natural world and organic intimacies. His theoretical and practical focus is always oriented to the collective global progress of civilization to a higher and more advanced state of material and spiritual enlightenment. Only, the concept of progress he championed was not one harnessed to the dictates of capitalist wealth accumulation and exploitative development.

> I am never against progress, but when, for its sake, civilization is ready to sell its soul, then I choose to remain primitive in my material possessions, hoping to achieve my civilization in the realm of the spirit.[363]

His work is caught in the constant tension and ambiguity of struggle with the modern, and this is what makes him a committed modern thinker. As Marshall Berman notes, pace Kant and later Foucault, it is the agonal, critical struggle with modernity which characterizes the very possibility of the modern.

> [T]o be fully modern is to be anti-modern: from Marx's and Dostoevsky's time to our own, it has been impossible to grasp and embrace the modern world's potentialities without loathing and fighting against some of its most palpable realities.[364]

Reflexive nostalgia, dream and memory are the primary forms by which the natural world, as redemptive other to the city, is produced as spiritual touchstone for the present. But, for Rabindranath, these are all things—the past, the unspoilt countryside, nature—which are transient, tenuous, threatened and ultimately brought to submission by the everyday technicity of the city.[365] By the end of his life, Rabindranath's weltschmerz had succumbed to the vast darkness that the city historically realized.

In Jibanananda's poetry, Rabindranath's legacy of sentimental pessimism became allegorically explicit. The commodity form of the city of Calcutta expressed its decayed heart in his gloomy despair. As Kaviraj writes of Jibanananda's poetic vision, "[t]he present is entirely enclosed in the claustrophobic space of Calcutta with its subtle and ineradicable curse, where everything beautiful is transient, awaiting decomposition and death."[366] The natural world no longer simply stood at a distance to the city, it became wholly incommensurable with it. The sentimentality and nostalgia of Rabindranath were still there, but the natural came to take on an almost reified form. The human was tied to the inescapable catastrophe and limitation of the modern predicament, whilst the natural world embodied an ecstatic truth beyond the contradictions, ambiguities and frustrations of the modern lifeworld.

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[363] Ibid.,p.222
[364] Berman (1983)p.13
[365] Kaviraj (2004)p.79
[366] Ibid.,p.78

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Critique of the City and Nationalism

What is interesting about how this transcendent arcadian lifeworld came to be sentimentally, or nostalgically, characterized, first by Rabindranath and then by Jibanananda, was that it identified with "the Bengali heart."[367] Rabindranath's critique of urban modernity became inextricably welded with a political movement of nationalist differentiation grounded in *swadeshi*, something he lamented as the "idolatry of geography." A rhetorical discourse of authenticity and collective social representation came, through a reception seeking to differentiate itself from European colonialism, to be inextricably tied to the framework of nationalism. Rabindranath's internationalist humanism, which distinguished itself as a critique precisely through disavowing the urban topoi of modernity exemplified by the cityscape of Calcutta, got caught up in the fervent need to distinguish an Indian-ness that was separate from a colonialist representation predicated on a paternalist encroachment and imperialist exploitation. Part of this nationalising discourse was fuelled by Rabindranath's own rhetoric. In a lecture published in 1921 as *Greater India*, he espoused using India's past and religious traditions to build a humanist, world consciousness built on an "ethic of sacrifice" rather than on the "infliction of suffering", an ethic which would enable "us to feel those who are distant and different to be near and meaningful to us."[368] This ethic, though, was not something that would come out of modern urban living. The modern city, for Rabindranath, exacerbated distance, and actively fragmented social life. Indeed, Rabindranath's vision and "identification of [India's] own personality"[369] grounded in an organically constituted space of refuge from, and site of resistance to, colonialism, came out of his active refusal of modernity as it was crystallized by the experience of the modern cityscape of Calcutta.

For Rabindranath, an international civilization of proximity could only come about through the active and self-reflexive, indeed critical (and that is what makes him modern) engagement with the arcadian rural values of natural connectedness and organic village community. But, caught as Indian nationalism was—and as we are today—"in the dust storm of modern history"[370] (the coincidence of this phrase with Benjamin's famous Angelus Novus "storm we call progress" image in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* is wonderful!), Rabindranath argued that global modernity, and specifically an urban modernity,

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[367] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Swadeshi Samaj*" in *Greater India*, trans. Surendranath Tagore (S.Ganesan: Madras, 1921).
[368] Rabindranath Tagore, "Greater India" *A Tagore Reader* ed. Amiya Chakravarty (Beacon: Boston, 1966)p.198.
[369] Ibid.; see also Goswami (2004)p.277.
[370] Ibid.

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was caught up in a seductive imaginary, a dream-world, whose "inner truth"[371] would remain unattainable as long as the dream logic of nationalism, authenticity and the chimeras of capitalist, commodity wealth prescribed the parameters of historical progress. Rabindranath linked the modern logic of the state and the modern logic of the city in a globalizing phantasmagoric dream-sleep of catastrophic proportions. In *Greater India* he writes,

> Today, the hunger for political self-assertion is for many reasons the most powerful, and our dreams likewise have taken the form of political feast. Thus, the voices of higher realities are rejected as irrelevant.
>
> If we follow the course of our modern political self-assertion we touch foreign history at its starting point. In a feverish political urge we had to imagine ourselves to be dream made Mazzinis, Garibaldis, and Washingtons; in our economic life we were caught in the labyrinth of imaginary Bolshevism, Syndicalism or Socialism. These mirage-like manifestations are not the natural outgrowths of Indian history, but are fantasies born of our recent misfortune and hunger. As the film of this dream-cinema is being unrolled before our eyes, we see the trademark "Made in Europe" flashed in the corners, betraying the address of the factory where the film originated.[372]

Just as Benjamin sought to awaken the conscious work of European history to its own inner truth, so Rabindranath sought to awaken the nationalist forces of colonial resistance to their own chimerical dream images and its uncritical statist sleep, something he too located in the European economic imperatives of capitalist and urbanised exploitation (*Gesellschaft*) and which he terms "our recent misfortune and hunger." Replicating the European logic of the state, which was integrally tied to a modern urban way of life, in the Indian context, would cause South Asians to become "passive spectators and consumers of histories and products 'Made In Europe'"[373] The implications of this, Rabindranath, like Benjamin, saw as having global consequences; in their universalist perspective they can both be seen as anti-modern moderns.

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How does Jibanananda fit into this critical affinity I have constructed? I include Jibanananda's poetic critique of modernity through the similar tropes of urban disavowal as a way of transitioning between the colonial and the post-colonial, and by way of arguing that the popular reception of his naturalist

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[371] Ibid.
[372] Ibid.,p.197-98
[373] Goswami (2004)p.278

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imagery, nationalistically interpreted, perpetuates the historical dream sleep Rabindranath so feared. Jibanananda's resurgent popularity in Bengal after his death in the mid-fifties and during the early 1970s was in large part due to the publication of his song cycle *Rupasi Bangla* (*Bengal the Beautiful*). Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that the book marks a critical nodal point in the cultural transmission of an imaginary romantic sentimentality of nationalist tenor.[374]

Bengal at the time was experiencing another violent upheaval and partition. Again, a poetic critique of the global forces of modernity refracted through the device and image of the city, though this time more despairingly so than perhaps those mobilized by Rabindranath, were interpreted through the logic of a nationalist discursive frame. The need, as Rabindranath put it, to "identify our own personality" became interpreted by a collective conscience through the rhetoric of geographic idolatry and spatial authenticity. The intensity of the personal, phenomenal identification with a landscape was reiterated by Rabindranath in his use of the personal voice. Rabindranath grounded his poetic aesthetic of communal sentiment and familial recognition through the direct phenomenal experience of, and unmediated interaction with, the natural world. In *Sonar Bangla*, he writes: *my* golden Bengal, *I* love *you/your* sky drives *me* wild./Ah *me/I* have seen, etc., etc. The use of the first person inculcates the phenomenal experience as a nationalist one. This device is taken up by Jibanananda as well, with a similar nationalized tone: " and yet *I* know, in the world's throng/*I* cannot lose her: she is here on the banks of *my* Bengal." Who is this she? She is the imaginary, innocent "story-land" Bengal lost in the throng or crowd that the world has become, but still redolent in its soil and landscape.

> ...she waits by the pond at evening,
> To bear the parched-rice-coloured duck to some story-land—
> As though her soft body still bore the scent of ancient tales,
> As though she was born in the pond's nest, from kalmi tendrils.
> She washes her feet once, silently; and then is lost
> In the distant mist—and yet I know, in the world's throng
> I cannot lose her: she is here on the banks of my Bengal.[375]

Jibanananda's poetic saturation of natural imageries and his explicit linkage of these images to specific personal locales, and anthropomorphized experiences in the form of women, rivers, trees, ponds, etc, and through the rhetorical device of memory and the trauma of the earlier nationalist partition, only exaggerated their nationalised (and naturalised) reception. In 1971, with the final partition of Bengal complete, and the new Muslim nation-state of Bangladesh effectively closed to the return of Bengalis to their places of birth, the painful language of loss and remembered and imaginary beauty asserts a different,

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[374] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Romantic Archives: Literature and the Politics of Identity in Bengal", *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 30, No.3 (2004)p. 678

[375] Jibanananda, [1957] "*Tomra jekhane sadh chale jao*" ("You can all go where you wish") (1998)p.1

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if re-inflected, meaning than that perhaps Jibanananda intended. As Clinton Seely writes in his biography of Jibanananda,

> In 1971, during the Bangladesh liberation war, poems from this collection became viewed as expressions of the quintessential Bangladesh for which the *Mukti Bahini* ('freedom army') fought. Twice during the war's nine months, new editions of *Rupasi Bangla* were published.[376]

In the same years too, but in West Bengal, and in Calcutta in particular, the influential Naxalbari movement was petering out, but its ruralist ideology was still very much in political vogue. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of how poems like "*Banglar mukh ami dekhiyachhi*" ("I have seen the face of Bengal", 1934) and "*Abar asibo phire*" ("I shall return") could *not* be read as eulogies for a lost nation. It is for this reason that Dipesh Chakrabarty locates the reception of Jibanananda's poetry within the long lineage of Bengali "romantic-nationalist construction[s] of the past"[377] which began in the early 1890s and which reached their anti-colonialist apogee with the nationalist Swadeshi movement by 1910. The intensely personal response to the crisis of modernity that Jibanananda wrote about effecting Bengalis, his communities and his intimate, rural landscape became refracted through its collective reception and within a cultural and political legacy that Rabindranath and others (not only Bankimchandra, Sharatchandra, Bibhutibhushan, and Gurusaday, but also, as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, "a host of poets who rose to prominence between 100 and 1920—among them Kalidas Ray, [et al]..."[378]) bequeathed to the Bengali language, and so to the social imaginary of both Bengal and the greater Indian and Bengali projects of independence.

In other words, that poetic language was one which "found in the countryside an eternal Bengal" whose abiding ethic was contained a nostalgic desire to return to the future in an imaginary land.[379] What rendered this desire radical in the work of Rabindranath, and, in a more oblique sense, Jibanananda, was that this imaginary topos also served as a ground for the critique of a global modernity of which they saw themselves inextricably a part and on the global stage as a nascent, agitating nation desperate to assert its uniqueness, difference, particularity and authenticity. The catalyst for this critique and re-imagination of the grammars and rhetoric of reflexive, if sentimental, modern participation was the experience of the modern city, specifically Calcutta. The image and experience of the modern city, together with its myriad modern histories, narratives, ambiguities, technicities and contradictions, was the constitutive back

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[376] Seely (1990)p.97
[377] Ibid.,p.661
[378] Ibid.,p.678
[379] Ibid.

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drop against which these powerful narratives of collective representation were woven.

As the swadeshi and nationalist movements gained an irreversible strength in the late 19th century, Rabindranath wrote that Bengali literature[380] should act as "...'the live umbilical cord' helping to bind together the past, present and future of the Bengali people in all their 'intensity and greatness.'"[381] Nearer his death some 45 years later, Rabindranath had come to renounce those forms of myopic nationalism which he sadly saw as triumphant, forms which stemmed from an abstract and violent logic of urbanized capitalism and which participated in colonialist geographies of domination and exploitation.[382] His internationalist humanism sought to reject the day-light illusions of urban modernity, and instead sought an ethic and aesthetic of indigeneity grounded in the self-conscious practice and phenomenally rich pursuit of a sociality little mediated by the destructive intensities of a commodified, urban habit. Jibanananda existentially rendered these social longings. In his poem "*Andhakar*" ("Darkness") he reflects on the peace of death by moonlight instead of the harried enterprise of daylight.

> ...O moon, dimmed to a faint blue disk,
> Day's light you are not, you are not enterprise,
> ambition, or dream;
> The quiet and peace of death,
> Its sleep – so dear to our heart –
> Is like a holy tryst
> Which you, Moon, have no means to spoil. ...
>
> Never more shall I waken
> By the river's ruthless gurgling.
> I shall not see how the dim, assorted moon
> Divides her flickering between the River of Death
> And the River of Mutability.
> By the waters of the Dhanshiri
> I shall go to bed with Darkness that never ends,
> The sleep that never abates. [383]

Jibanananda knows that the imaginary landscape of the past's future *qua* hope will never arrive, and so gives himself over to death.

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Pata and the Urban Commodification of Nationalist Discourse

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[380] Our earlier discussion of Gurusaday aimed to show that it was not only literature which sought to express an essential Bengali-ness, but all cultural productions including folk art, dance, painting, etc.

[381] Rabindranath Tagore, "*Jatiya shaitya*"[1895-6] as quoted in Chakrabarty (2004)p.661.

[382] Goswami (2004)p.278

[383] Jibanananda Das, "*Andhakar*" ("Darkness") trans. by author *Mahfil* Vol. 3, No.4 (1967)p.11.

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Partition in 1947 and the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971 were social exercises of a modern, industrial and capitalist materialization of place, and, as such, were, as Rabindranath might have argued had he lived to witness them, part of a global urban "devouring process"[384] premised upon the imperative of the commodity fetish and its "lurid counterfeit of prosperity."[385] It is no surprise then, that the discursive production of a social imaginary, and its collective praxis as embodied in the exercise of nationalist space, should be written through the logic of commodity participation, one whose social value is premised upon exchange. If, as Wirth, Simmel, Benjamin and Rabindranath had argued, the urban is a form of life which spreads unfettered as technology, city and nationalist struggle, then, the resultant grammars and practices of collective representation and social participation would also be bound up in these multiplicitous and contradictory materialities. The nation and its legitimating naturalist narratives and imaginary landscapes of authenticity thus came to be expressed through commodity participation.

Nationalist belonging and cosmopolitan difference, two constitutive markers of modernity, came to be defined, with the growth and interconnected saturation of urban life ways, through participation in a repertoire of consumption practices.[386] With the intensification of intellectualist individuation, competition, and commercialized relationships premised on quantitative socialisation, all predicated by the experience of the urban milieu, consumption of particular commodities comes to signify "qualitative uniqueness."[387]

It is interesting to note that with both the increasing urbanisation of Bengal, and South Asia in general, and the consequent materialization of nation-states through discursive productions of natural belonging and imaginary community, there occurred, at the same time, the need to individuate social subjects as market participants. This process most famously occurred in the early 20th century with the *swadeshi* drive to counter British market hegemony by advocating strategies of consumptive regulation through appeals to the self-sufficient, autonomous and self-reliant character of Indian identity.[388]

Khadi hand-loom textiles and goods are, to this day, marketed as products of authentic India and as markers of responsible, reflexive social development and village enrichment. But, the social lives and circulation of these and other commodities also changed due to the increasingly urbanised environments in which these products circulated as both commodities and material practices. Hand-loom khadi today, although popular and often legislated as mandatory

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[384] Rabindranath, "City and Village" (1924)p.219
[385] Ibid.,p.221.
[386] See Robert J. Foster, *Materializing the Nation: Commodities, Consumption and Media in Papua New Guinea* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2002)p.109
[387] See Simmel [1903] (1948)p.339
[388] Goswami (2004)p.272

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dress for some government sectors,[389] makes up a relatively small proportion of India's overall textile commodity market. Mechanisation, urban factories and globalised market liberalisation, rather than the small village based production practices, has changed the way khadi is both made and how it circulates as a symbolic social practice. It has become somewhat quaint, and its wearing once again politicized although perhaps in a less nationalistic fashion.

Practices of cultural representation have also changed to reflect the increased influence of modern city life on the social imaginary of modern India. And it is here that we return to *pata* scrolls. The changing parameters of the social life of *pata* scrolls in the 20th century reflects the increased influence cities have had on everyday cultural practices. Where once the scrolls were used to tell socially significant stories, whether myths or local happenings, with the increased use of electricity and the proliferation of radio and television, their use value as modes of everyday communication has waned. People in cities have no need, any more, for wandering minstrels and story tellers; they are either merely considered as historical and cultural oddities, or they are treated as an unwanted indigent nuisance—beggars, hawkers or outcastes.

At the same time as cities and the urban logic of modern nationalism have exercised their interconnected and contiguous influence on Indian societies, so too has the need to individuate social and cosmopolitan participation also increased. People's self-expression, and the collective expression of difference, participation and authenticity, has been integrated into the flux of market forces. Membership in a nationalized and globalized polity is increasingly marked by consumption rather than by some set of civic political practices. *Pata* scrolls, thus, have entered into the symbolic circulation of cultural capital as commodities.

Interestingly, Beatrix Hauser has noted[390], the scrolls became sought after as commodities in the 1970s, around the same time that India was asserting itself as a modern nation-state, and, strategically, helping others to do so as well.[391] The Green Revolution brought significant changes to the rural landscape and relative wealth and self-sufficiency of India, and the socio-cultural character of the nation was changing to reflect that industrialization and urbanisation. Televisions, radio, cinema halls, and travelling video parlours all attracted more attention than did the *Patua* picture showmen.

By the early 1980s, the scrolls were sought after by the educated and upper-middle class city dwellers of West Bengal. The scrolls truly had become commodities as their ownership and possession signified a fashionableness or social identity. The scrolls too were affordable. They were produced by relatively impoverished rural artisans who saw the demands for their practices disappearing.

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[389] In 2004, *khadi* handloom was made mandatory dress for employees of some sectors of the East Indian Railway.

[390] Hauser (2002)p.114

[391] On March 26th 1971, Bangladesh declared its independence from Pakistan. Pakistani forces responded with a brutal repression precipitating in response a guerrilla war. India intervened in the fighting. By backing the secessionist uprising against Pakistan, India aided the formation of a new nation-sate in south Asia, further exacerbating already poisonous relations with its enemy, Pakistan.

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The scrolls themselves are produced on paper pasted to discarded saris, and the dyes and paints are largely water and vegetable based. As they became pieces of folk-artefact rather than folk practice[392], so too changed the mode and method of their display. The reciting of songs, once integral to the scrolls, became tangential as the scrolls were made and purchased to hang on the walls of upper middle-class homes. In many cases, as Hauser notes, the songs, orally passed down for generations, were forgotten and lost.[393]

As a result of their increasing cultural marginalization, the *patua* artists had to adapt their aesthetic practices to reflect new market demands. The scrolls thus depicted amongst other things: the effects of movies and cinema halls on local cultures and traditions; the arrival of automobiles and buses in the country-side; girls attending schools; the distribution of eye glasses to the poor and barely literate; the use of helicopters in disaster relief; and the integration of media and news reports into the everyday lives of rural inhabitants. But, while the content of the *pata* scrolls changed to reflect their new social and material realities, the style of the visual depiction was still very much in line with traditional representations. The colour palate, always bright and appealing, nevertheless continued to be rendered in two dimensional image-scapes unchanged from traditional forms and patterns of representation. This representation too, when contrasted with Western modern representations, is almost child-like, deeply imaginative, and disarmingly simple. But, the content of the images themselves contextualized the new and modern changes to the everyday, yet within formalized and narrative contexts of indigenous and religious myths and stories. The paintings thus became symbolic hybrids of the old and new, as at the same time commodities circulating and symbolizing a certain social participation. The scrolls shifted their collective representational form from traditional yet heterogeneous practices of mythical storytelling and organic communication, to contemporary nostalgic, child-like or innocent re-enchantments as commodities. Their private ownership thus became a sign of post-colonial nationalist participation and negotiated identity formation.

People sought them out because they archived a certain idiomatic expression of imaginary collective identity representation. The scrolls communicated a certain imaginary, simplified and innocent authenticity at precisely the time when the boundaries of that supposed authenticity and innocence were challenged, seen to be traumatically lost, and only exercisable through the rhetorical substrates of memory. Boundaries of the new nation were becoming settled after tumultuous periods of assertion and intense flux. The notion that Hindu refugees from east Bengal could return to the new Bangladesh was increasingly realized as unfeasible. The city slowly had to come to terms with

[392] In 1957, Biswanath Bandyopadhyaya wrote that *Patua* scrolls were never intended for sale because they were part of a material practice that constituted the livelihoods of the artists, their families and communities.
[393] Hauser (2002)p.119

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its new inhabitants and its new, if diminished, role as a relatively minor metropolis on the national and global stage.

Still, Calcutta and its urban effects were central to how Bengali cultural cosmopolitanism shaped itself. As early as 1957, in a study on urbanization and its effects on the traditional arts and literary practices of West Bengal, Nirmal Kumar Bose notes that,

> ...with an increasing urbanization of rural India, we are perhaps on the threshold of an age in which we are seeking to strike new roots into the culture of ancient times so that we shall be furnished with strength to face the problems and responsibilities of the present.[394]

In periods of relative stability (late 1950s and late 1970s and early 80s) but ones pregnant with global and national re-definition, people with the means and need to express a modern participation in the imperatives of cultural capital, turned to consuming representational practices which fostered imaginary lineages and communal identities, while at the same time addressing the newness of the present. As purchasable commodities which both anchored and mediated the past for the present, *pata* scrolls filled the need nicely. They gathered in vague visual form, for a beleaguered and restructuring present, an unconscious mine of literary, natural, social and political associations to buttress experience with the justification of tradition. As Walter Benjamin writes,

> Experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data.[395]

Contemporary Pata Commodification

Today, although *pata* scrolls continue to be bought and displayed as commodities, their fashion has waned somewhat with the rhythms of decay and desire that all commodities experience. They can still be found, with some regularity, once a year in the centre of the annual Calcutta Book Fair. In an area designated, with a white painted sign, and in transliterated Bengali script, as well as the English, "Montmartre", rural *patua* artists gather, in twos and threes, to display their scrolls and smaller pieces to interested Calcuttans and foreigners. That an area called Montmartre has been set aside for the display and selling of local Bengali art is not insignificant. This mimicry is deliberate. Montmartre in

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[394] Nirmal Kumar Bose, "The Effect of Urbanization on Work and Leisure" *Man In India* Vol.37, No.1 January-March 1957, p.3

[395] Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken: New York, 1968)p.157

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Paris is considered one of the last vestiges of the village in the heart of a metropolis. It is also a place where artists have traditionally gathered to live, paint, and show their work. For two weeks in Calcutta, its namesake, surrounded by the throng of the book fair, its hundreds of stalls and pavilions, its dust, and the smell of fried chop and cutlets, gestures, temporarily, fleetingly, to as much of European modernity as it can muster.

And it was in the "Montmartre" of the Calcutta International "*Boi Mela*" (book fair) where one evening in February of 2004, I bought the "story map" of Bengal pictured, in detail, below (see figure 6.9).

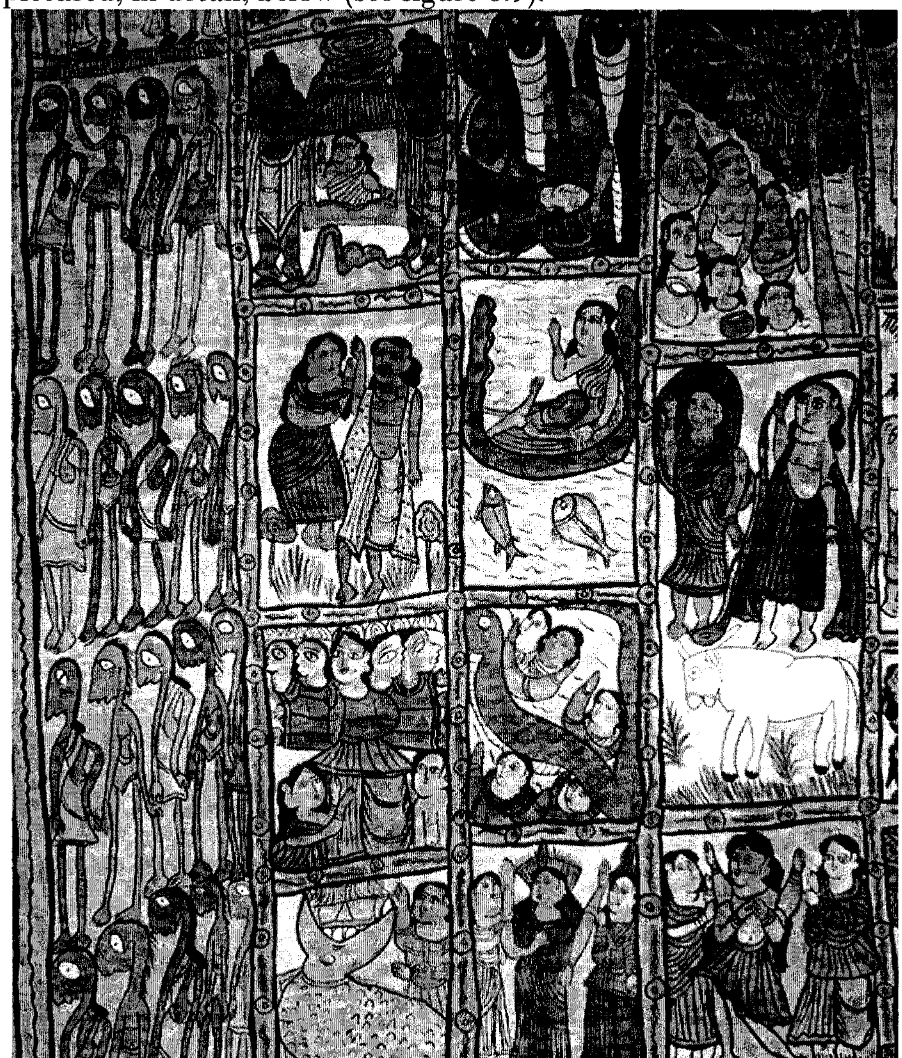

Figure 6.9: Detail of Map Scroll, artist Swarna Chitrakar. Author's collection.

I bought the scroll from Ram Chitrakar of Pingla Thana. Pingla is a small village, accessible from Calcutta by bus, then car or truck, then on foot, in the south central Midnapur district of West Bengal. Located in a politically volatile and sometimes violent area controlled by the Communist Party-Marxist, Pingla is in the interior of West Bengal's southern rural heartland. It has long been one of the central villages for *patua* production, and today is known for its scrolls. Ram's

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sister, Shwarna Chitrakar painted the scroll. Ram told me that Shwarna painted it as an imaginary map of Bengal. Since she did not come to Calcutta for the *Boi Mela*, I wasn't able to hear the song that accompanied the scroll, but true to the new commodity status of the scrolls, Ram assured me that it did not matter.

Some seventy-two inches long and twenty inches wide, the rectangular scroll is comprised of fifty-one painted scenes, each bounded by an identical border which separates the distinct images from one-another. The entire scroll is itself framed by a painted border which ties the disparate parts together as one unique whole. The painted scenes have been applied to three equally sized pieces of thin paper measuring twenty-four by twenty inches, and the sheets have been glued to a thin, faded green and white piece of hand embroidered cloth, most likely an old sari .

As a "story map" of Bengal, the scroll bears little resemblance to a cartographic or topographic map. Instead, each distinct panel, or set of panels, tells a mythical or religious story associated with a correlate region of Bengal. Hence, in the upper left hand side of the scroll, a series of twenty-two human forms, profiled in the distinctive character of Santhal figures, ostensibly represent the western districts of Bengal which border the impoverished state of Bihar. The Santhal figures are distinct from the other figures in the scroll for the reason that the Santhals are amongst the few remaining indigenous peoples of South Asia, and, as such, are considered distinct from, or other to, the majority of Hindu West Bengal. Santhal people are often Christian or animist believers who speak Santali, a pre-Sanskritic, autochthonous language entirely distinct from Bengali or Hindi. Many Santhals live in the western regions of Bengal bordering eastern Bihar. Ram also told me that Swarna painted the Santhal figures in an emaciated fashion to represent the fact that Bihari, and most of its people, Santhals included, are poor and live in a dry and hot environment quite different from the verdant, green lushness she imagines as characterizing Bengal.

I will not describe each panel on the scroll, but will instead identify those that are interesting for our purposes. Suffice it to say that there are many stories represented in the numerous panels of the scroll. There is a panel depicting the stories of Manasa and Chandi, and poems to the snake goddess, a popular image, commonly depicted in *pata* scrolls. Another tells, a tale in which the god Shiva plays a role. In another, from the Bhagavata tells of the exploits of Krishna, in blue, who is attended by two women. Others seem to tell stories of human sacrifice from the Mahabharata, and from the Ramayana, stories of the abduction of Sita. And in a few others, the goddess Durga, aspect of Shiva and of whom Kali is herself a manifestation, is depicted.

But it is the centre of the scroll, made of six long thin image panels, which is of particular interest, because it is here, in the centre of the imaginary map of Bengal, that the artist has chosen to depict the city of Calcutta.

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Figure 6.10: Detail of Imaginary Map showing image of Calcutta bounded by mythic tales. Artist Swarna Chitrakar. Author's collection.

On the extreme left and extreme right sides of the scroll the central aspects depicting Calcutta are bordered by two images, both similarly themed. These, I was told by Ram, tell an origin story, common in *pata* scrolls, of the Baul fish, and the subsequent marriage of the fishes. Smaller fishes are seen emanating from the gaping mouth of the Baul fish, where they congregate up one of the many iconic and mythical rivers of Bengal to celebrate marriage and to partake of feasts of rice pudding. These tales also represent, simply the rivers, fish and water around and through which almost the entirety of the Bengali cultural imagination circulates. Besides one of the matrimonial and river scenes, a thin panel depicts another of Bengal's iconic, imaginary repositories, that of the forest and its many terrestrial creatures. Birds, snakes, elephants, turtles, monkeys, sheep, cows, deer and tigers

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are all depicted against a fertile, green background with trees, plants and flowers suggesting an arcadian abundance, which, as Rabindranath remarks in his essay, "The Religion of the Forest" recognizes "the kinship of man with conscious and unconscious creation alike."[396] It was perhaps a similar, imaginary cultural repository which Rabindranath drew upon in identifying a particular civilizational or national character in supposed union with nature. In the same essay, comparing the Indian character to a Western, modern and urban character, the latter of which he characterizes as one of conquest, he characterizes an imaginary Indian, natural and nationalistic attitude.

> India holds sacred, and counts as places of pilgrimage, all spots which display a special beauty or splendour of nature. These had no original attraction on account of any special fitness for cultivation or settlement. Here, man is free, not to look upon Nature as a source of supply of his necessities, but to realise his soul beyond himself. The Himalayas of India are sacred and the Vindhya Hills. Her majestic rivers are sacred. India has saturated her love and worship with great Nature with which her children are surrounded, whose light fills their eyes with gladness, and whose water cleanses them, whose food gives them life, and from whose majestic mystery comes forth the constant revelation of the infinite in music, scent, and colour, which brings its awakening to the soul of man. India gains the world through worship, through spiritual communion; and the idea of freedom to which she aspired was based upon the realisation of her spiritual unity.[397]

Juxtaposed, on the scroll, to the images of the natural and spiritual which Rabindranath characterized as an inextricable part of the nationalist, imaginary community of Indian-ness, is Calcutta. Recall that the modern city is the landscape through which that other to India's natural spirituality and ancient civilization, is distinguished. Calcutta is represented by the automobile, an unmistakable signifier of the modern. There are no buildings in this scroll's depiction of Calcutta, although in other scrolls I have seen, buildings, particularly tall buildings are depicted as emblematic of the city. Each of the automobiles is different. Some are identifiable as cars, others trucks, and still others buses.

It is no surprise that the artist chose to represent the city with the automobile.

[396] Rabindranath, "The Religion of the Forest" (1922)p.50
[397] Ibid.,p.62-63

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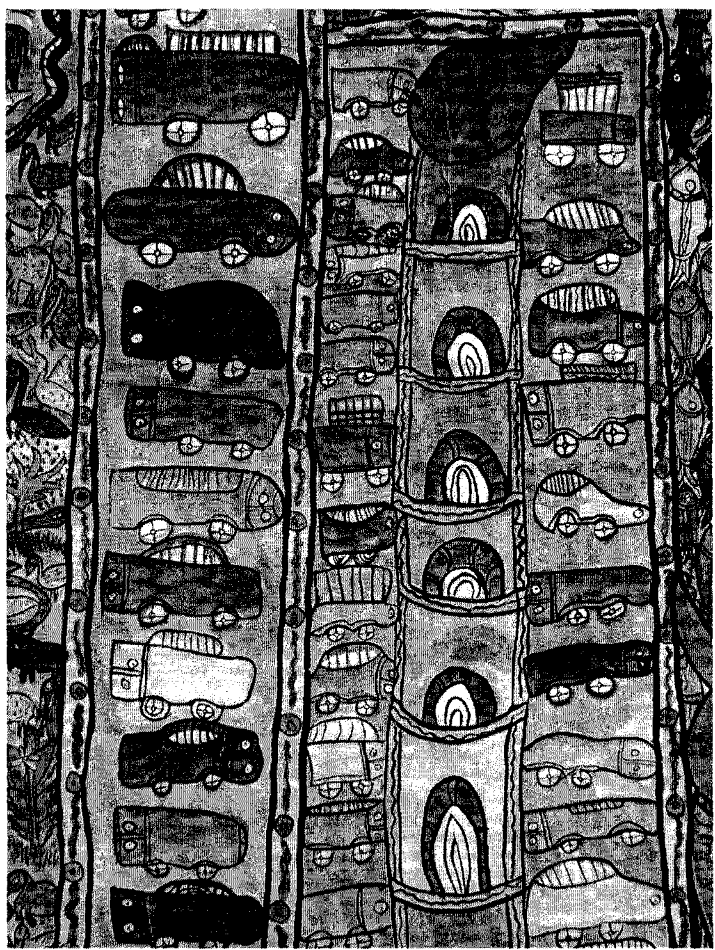

Figure 6.11: Detail of Imaginary Map scroll showing Calcutta and the underground Metro.

Calcutta is remarkable for being choked by motor vehicles of every description. Traffic jams are more common place actually than empty road. The average speed in a car during the day is said to be only about twenty kilometres per hour. The noise and throng of automobiles defines, in part, what is unique about Calcutta, and lends it its shape and resonance. New fly-over construction projects dot the city as the municipal authorities try to bring some semblance of order to its motorized chaos. Calcutta seems almost to pride itself as being the city with the highest suspended particulate count of any in the world. The *Hindustan Times* publishes a pollution index every day. The suspended particulate count is consistently around 330 micrograms/cu meter. The safe maximum level listed by the Eureka Forbes Institute of Environment, which the *Hindustan Times* takes as its scientific source, is 200 micrograms/cu meter. Mostly due to the exhaust of motor vehicles, it is also said, although I think this an exaggeration, that the suspended particulate counts are equivalent to smoking a package of cigarettes a day.

What makes Swarna's images of Calcutta all the more fascinating, is the fact that, as her brother told me, she had never been to the city prior to painting

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the scroll. Her image of Calcutta was entirely one constructed from heresay and imaginative conjecture. This imaginative construction is most evident in scroll's depiction of the underground metro that runs in a single line North and South through the centre of the city (see figure 10). Ram told me that his sister had not ever seen the metro, nor pictures of it[398] and that again, as with the city above, she was depicting the metro purely from stories told to her by friends and family who had actually been to Calcutta. How to depict, in two dimensions, an underground metro, especially if one has not seen it with ones own eyes? Where does the train run? Where is the city in relation to the below ground train? How does one descend into the earth to re-emerge again in a different location? Swarna depicts the metro with eight arched openings sequenced in a line running from the top to the bottom of the central city panel. Each arch is painted in red, and at the top of the imaginary tunnel ("imaginary" for from the plane of the painting, as with the actual ground of the city, no tunnel is visible; we are left to imagine at its mysterious below ground depths) is the largest of the red openings, presumably the main one through which the train enters.

The arched openings of the metro are distinctly organic, and devoid of any mechanistic association. They are as suggestive of temple doorways or openings, as they are vulval or vaginal. This organic or anatomical representation of the truly imagined metro is suggested again in the images of the city as a space for motor vehicles. Swarna's cars, trucks and buses, those symbols of the business of the city, are anthropomorphised. Headlights have become eyes: stern, blank, surprised, curious, bewildered, angry—emotions not foreign to urban experience. The city has become an agitated, emotive space, one contrasted to the relative peace, fertility and happiness of the bordering forest, and beyond, the mythical rivers and marriages of fishes. Was she told of the emotive experience of the city by those who returned to the quiet of the village? Did she draw their experience through an imaginary, archival repository, one contextualized in hybrid myths? And why was their experience primarily one of machines? Rabindranath suggests an answer, one that refracts the intimate with the foreign as that between the proximate and the city.

> When we know this world as alien to us, then its mechanical aspect takes prominence in our mind; and then we set up our machines and our methods to deal with it and make as much profit as our knowledge of its mechanism allows us to do.[399]

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[398] Pictures of the metro are forbidden. One day, deciding to tempt fate, I tried to surreptitiously take a few pictures whilst in the underground. I managed three pictures, but was soon accosted by an irate citizen who tried to snatch my camera from me. After much argument and some creative banter in Bengali, he disappeared to summon two police men, who, upon arrival, accompanied me to one of the station master's offices. There, I was questioned by authorities as to why I would want to take pictures of the metro. I pleaded my ignorance as a stupid tourist and showed them my camera. They were more interested in the fact that the camera was digital and as such an unknown technology. They were puzzled as to how it could take photographs without film. Assured that I had deleted the pictures (I hadn't), they let me go with a warning, and a kind invitation to enjoy my stay in Kolkata.

[399] "The Religion of the Forest" (1922)p.48

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I was drawn to Swarna's "imaginary map" because of its depiction of the city as against an imaginary landscape of a mythical and narrativized Bengal. The scroll's simple, romanticized images are rendered as iconic and sacred—rivers, animals, marriage, religious stories, Durga, green forests, people, animated machines. The images themselves partake of the sacred quality of the original[400], and, indeed, many of the scroll's images, directly intermingle the sacred with the secular, the natural with the city. The imaginary topos of Bengal is produced by the scroll as a pure and sacred representation of an iconic originary, something reposing in the minds of the observers, but "compared to which the real object can only be observed...in its corrupt and profane real-life context."[401] The actual, resonant and resistant object of Bengal is taken out of its context in a specific place and time and located in an abstract, imaginary and historical past *qua* future, a timeless present.

It is easy to see why these images were enticing to Bengalis, especially upper middle-class, urban Bengalis in the late 70s and early 1980s, and still, to some extent, those same classes today. Like the literature of Rabindranath and Jibanananda, and, indeed, through it, *pata* scrolls speak to "a special kind of archival resource"[402] with which society was re-made after a period of immense upheaval and strife. By idealizing the past though technique, form and the content of the images, the aesthetics of the scrolls acted as a repository for constructing timeless values and virtues as material for re-making the communal self.[403] They resist the bureaucratizing and formalizing of artistic practices and representation by playfully rendering the object world through animation and colour, and in doing so they return a sense of innocence to the lost golden age. They thus secure for themselves a popularity that resists high culture incursions replete with the sanctimony of the city, and so bring the nostalgic past to the present.[404]

☙

Pata Representations of the Present

In describing Bengalis to themselves, the scrolls fulfill a crucial function of social production and collective representation. But the scrolls have always, also, been situated in the work of bringing the world to Bengal. In 1989, the Alliance Française de Calcutta and the Crafts Council of Bengal, commissioned a project

[400] Chatterjee, "The Sacred Circulation of National Images" (2003)p.284
[401] Ibid.p.285
[402] Chakrabarty (2004)p.677.
[403] Ibid.
[404] Ibid.

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which, in the bicentennial commemoration of the French revolution, had *patua* artists depict the story of the French Revolution.[405] In their distinctive style, the *patua* artists painted seemingly endless carts of white wigged men being beheaded by strange guillotines, armies of uniformed men clashing in streets, horses and palaces, jails and kings, governments and debates.

If the French Revolution marked a period of peculiar horror, which, in subsequent years has been the subject of interminable interpretive reiterations for both justifying and condemning the legacy of the modern, then the events of September 11th, 2001, might also mark, for our equally peculiar time, another horror which we are now only just beginning to galvanize as definitive. September 11th has reached deep into the recesses of the present. So deep in fact that Pingla, too, has attempted to represent the now mythic story of planes crashing and bodies falling, of distant, elusive bearded men and righteous outrage.

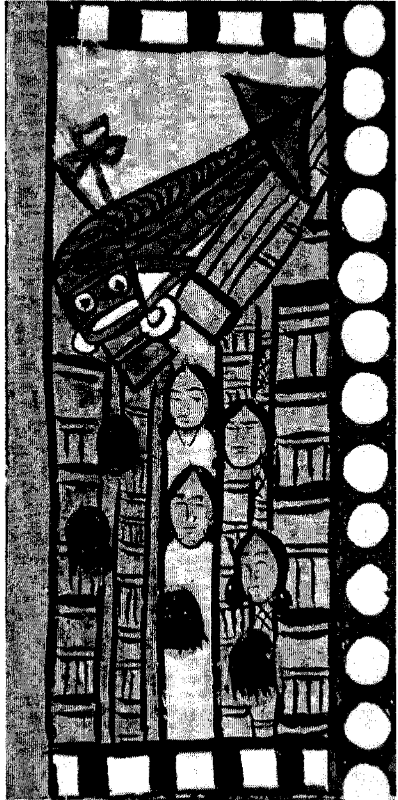

Figure 6.12: Detail of 9/11 Pata scroll. Artist: Ram

When I bought Swarna's almost bucolic map, another caught my eye amidst the pile that Ram unfurled as we sat excitedly together. Both of us were excited for the similar reasons. I was excited at the glorious mine of academic possibilities, known and unknown, revealing itself before my eyes. Ram was excited that he was about to make a few sales. One of those that caught my interest in particular was painted by Ram himself. It brought the global present through Bengal in a distinctive *patua* way. Ram proudly displayed his *pata* scroll which tells the story of 9/11.

Ram's 9/11 *pata* scroll, pictures of which are detailed in what follows, is 144 inches in length, and like the "story-map", 20 inches wide. It is made up of 6 24 inch sheets of stiff painted paper glued sequentially to various sequences of cloth. Bright red and yellow are the predominant colours of the scroll, with brown, black and white figuring the buildings and planes. Green, blue and a flesh toned orange round out the palette. Each 24 inch piece of paper is dominated by one scene, unlike the more traditional layout of Swarna's "map" scroll whose form is not correlated to its medium. Along much of the length of the 9/11 scroll, painted borders with smaller repeating, figurative images bound the work.

[405] See, *Patua Art and the Development of Scroll Paintings of Bengal: Commemorating the Bicentenary of the French Revolution*, eds. Alliance Française de Calcutta and Crafts Council of Bengal (Alliance Française de Calcutta: Calcutta, 1989)

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Figure 6.13: First panel of 9/11 scroll depicting planes crashing into World Trade Centre (detail).

The scroll depicts the story of 9/11 and its global political consequences. The first panel (see figure 6.13) shows the events, in New York City, of planes crashing into the World Trade Centre. Unlike the televisualized, mind's eye image of the event, the artist has depicted the WTC in shades of brown and black. There are no fiery explosions. Painted in repeating vertical patterns, the WTC is portrayed with distinctly hybridized inflections of Mughal and *mandir*[406] architectures. The windows are arched. Engraved columns bound the windows and run the length of the towers. But, the towers are depicted as broken and toppling. A bewildered, wide-eyed, white plane is caught in the midst of the collapse. Three people fall upside-down from the collapsing buildings, their bodies bent, faces expressionless. Two prone figures lie presumably dead at the base of the buildings. Others, some with their eyes closed, stand amidst the toppling

[406] A "*mandir*" is a Hindu temple.

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ruins, forlorn and sad. Space is flattened. There is neither foreground nor background. Nor is there a depiction of scale; people are three stories tall. One figure despairs, its arms held above its head; between its hands, a head, eyes closed, clearly dead. Time is flattened too. The events of crashing, falling, collapsing, and mourning are conflated into a fixed present.

On either side of the main panel, smaller repeating images of Osama Bin Laden, bearded, in white and with a bullet belt, alternate with repeating images of airplanes, collapsing buildings, and human heads. These repeating images are separated by perforated borders of black and white. It is as though the borders mimic a film-strip[407], and thus gesture to the visual repetition and reiteration of cause and blame which has come to define the event for a collective memory.

Figure 6.14: G.W. Bush's war council (detail).

The repetition of both the Bin Laden figures and the collapsing buildings carries through onto the second panel. There, in a large central portrait, distinctly European colonial figures are seen debating around a table (see figure 6.14) The figures are represented with long, shoulder length hair and in waistcoat-ed dress. Several are seated in chairs; others are standing. Ram told me that the figures represented George W. Bush and his war council. It is significant that the figures are depicted as 18th or 19th century European colonial figures. *Pata* scrolls have long had a history of depicting, as Ram termed them, *sahibs*. In scrolls, the *sahib*, whether historical or contemporary, are tellingly always represented as colonial figures. Two of the figures are depicted as faceless.

[407] I owe this insightful observation to Craig Campbell.

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Figure 6.15: Bin Laden and television (detail).

In the third panel (see figure 6.15), Bin Laden, clearly Arabic is shown with his corresponding war council. One image shows Bin Laden seated before a television on whose screen is shown buildings falling. In another, he is seen either instructing his soldiers to action, or preaching. The long haired consorts are also, strangely, shown as faceless. Or, perhaps their backs are turned to the viewer.

The subsequent middle three panels of the scroll depict the mobilisation of the American and coalition armies in their search for Bin Laden in the mountains of Afghanistan. The fourth main image panel (see figure 6.16) shows the foreign forces gathering.

Figure 6.16: US army amassing (detail).

The differences in their painted skin colours, flesh tone and yellow, indicate, Ram told me, the multi-racial (black and white) make up of the American military. Below the gathering coalition forces, a subsequent panel (remember that the scroll is telling a story which, like its medium, is unfurling through time)

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depicts four helicopters flying over the oceans to look for the Taliban forces which are represented as hiding in the mountains of Afghanistan. One of the helicopters—yellow, the other three are red, brown and orange—has crashed into the ocean and lies in pieces, perhaps shot down by Bin Laden's followers. Fascinatingly, like the white plane amidst the chaos of the WTC, the helicopters are each depicted with a face—two eyes and a mouth (see figure 6.17).

Figure 6.17: Helicopters searching Afghanistan (detail).

These machines are anthropomorphised in the same way that the vehicles which represented Calcutta were anthropomorphised by Ram's sister. Behind one of the helicopters' faces, two figures are shown flying the aircraft, each again with the long hair and moustache symbolic of the *sahib* and historical coloniality. Interestingly, as well, the faces of the Taliban are all virtually identical, and not at all dissimilar to the images of Bin Laden portrayed in the margins of the scroll.

The second from last panel (see figure 6.18) depicts the war in the mountains of Afghanistan. American forces are shown amassed in the mountains. Armed figures are searching for hidden Taliban. The Taliban are shown "beneath" the mountains, presumably in caves, and similarly armed. On either side of the image, repeating figurative representations of Bin Laden appear again, but are alternated this time with images of a distinctly dour looking George W. Bush. Bin Laden, in contrast, is shown smiling faintly. As with the previous borders, the filmic para-text of the repeating frames suggests narrative as well as visual repetition.

This somewhat pleased visage, and relieved comportment, on the part of Bin Laden is carried over into the overall tone of the final frame of the scroll (see figure 18). There, seated on a white horse, hidden amidst the mountains, Bin Laden is shown triumphant. In the top right hand corner of the frame, a helicopter cranes its neck amidst the mountains in a futile search for Bin Laden and his followers. Futile because, as Bin Laden indicates in the bottom of the frame, he is well hidden in a cave. That Bin Laden is shown on a white horse is significant. The white horse is inextricably associated, in Muslim as well as Christian iconography, with heroic sacrifice, martyrdom, and the heavenly reward of paradise.

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Figure 6.18: Warring armies in the mountains (detail).

Figure 6.19: Bin Laden on white horse (detail).

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That Bin Laden would be depicted as martyr and hero is not unexpected, especially given, as I mentioned earlier, the hybrid character of Chitrakara social groups. Chitrakars and *patua* artists are neither Hindu nor Muslim, but a complex mix of both cultural and religious traditions. As Biswanath Bandopadhyaya describes in his 1957 survey of Chitrakara villages north of Calcutta, Chitrakari (also Patidari) groups,

> ...perform namaz, or the Muslim form of prayer, and celebrate the Id festival in the Mohammedan fashion, but do not eat beef like other Muslims. Their marriage rites are performed by Muslim judges or Kazis, according to Islamic law; but the Kazi is not allowed to interfere in any other social affair. Marriages are strictly limited to their own group or caste, and no marriage takes place with any other member of the Muslim community. The Patikaras have retained Hindu names and worship Hindu deities like Shitala or Visvakarma; but this is done without the help of Brahmana priests. Elderly men belonging to the caste perform the necessary rites.
>
> The Chitrakaras or Patidaras do not accept cooked food and water from Muslims, or from Hindus belonging to the Scheduled Castes. Nor do they exhibit their scrolls or sing songs in the homes of the latter. They accept food and water only from high caste Hindus; but fruit and sweets from all castes, including Muslims. But the high castes and the scheduled ones do not accept water or cooked food from the Patidara. The local Mohammedans also do not accept food or water from them.[408]

Both scrolls that I have detailed here blend the secular with the religious. Both also blend the past with the present. They make the past resonate within the present, for the present. And both, as recent responses within a social and cultural context of urbanization circulate as artefacts and commodities, and are, as such, consumed as both markers of social uniqueness on a global stage, and as certain evidence of the commoditization of culture. The difficult present of Bengal is dealt with by reading it through the past. But as Partha Chatterjee suggests, this is not to say that Bengali modernity is "backward looking" or "resistant to change." That would be, as he says, "unjust."[409] Rather, reading the present through the past, and in a distinctively idiomatic way, speaks to "an attachment to the past which gives birth to the feeling that the present needs to be changed, that it is our [i.e. the Bengali and, perhaps, Indian] task to change it."[410] It is this unique capacity, or modality, of coping with the present through the past that

[408] Biswanath Bandopadhyaya (1957)p.14-15
[409] Partha Chatterjee, "Our Modernity" (1998)p.209
[410] Ibid.

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renders, for Chatterjee, Bengali modernity "radically different from the historically evolved modes of Western modernity."[411]

I read the consumption of the *pata* scrolls and their continued interpretation of the present through imagistic and narrative lens of the past as instances of this unique delimiting of Bengali modernity. But I also read them as caught up in "historically evolved modes of Western modernity." They are at once hybridized responses and resistances to forces like urbanization, mechanization and commoditization, and at the same time products of those forces. The scrolls and their receptions thus inscribe a "deeply ambiguous"[412] post-colonial attitude to modernity.

The scrolls and their makers sit at interestingly ambiguous communicative interstices. The scrolls, as commodities, are not mechanical reproductions[413], but they reproduce, through the repetition of traditionally stylized images, and in repeated narrative contexts and forms that gesture to practices of authenticity, an imaginary aura of collective participation and cultural memory. They thus develop and continue, in visual form currents narrativized and naturalized by cultural figures like Rabindranath and Jibanananda.

As received repositories or archives of stories, these imaginary productions, within the present, are not burdened with the imperatives of continuing a tradition, in part because the scrolls are themselves products of a bastardized hybridity. The scrolls mix the secular with the mythic in a way that allows their consumption to be particularly malleable for a present, one interested in (re-)asserting collective belonging by converging, as Benjamin says, vague accumulations of unconscious data.[414]

They are products of the unclean or other for both Muslims and Hindus and so can be variously consumed as commodities without the trappings of religiosity, and so be mobilized in unspecific, but socially or politically replete ways. The scroll imageries thus mediate the past for an increasingly secularizing urbanity interested in constituting a subjective present that sees itself as "returning" to an arcadian or pre-lapsarian future. The scroll imageries, content and form, as Benjamin writes in the short fragment, "The Great Art of Making Things Seem Closer Together", have "the power to generate nearness."[415] They make the imaginary past seem closer to the present, and so, in a consumptive participation, and as anamnetic "archives" to use Chakrabarty's phrase, make those within the urbanizing environments (metropolis, rural villages and nation-states) also seem closer together. Perhaps they try to heal, or at least recuperate, what is broken.

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[411] Ibid.,p.210
[412] Ibid.
[413] Walter Benjamin "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" *Selected Writings Volume 4 1938-1940* (Belknap Press: Cambridge, Mass.,2003) 251-283.
[414] Benjamin (1968)p.157
[415] Walter Benjamin, "The Great Art of Making Things Seem Closer Together" *Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927-1934* eds. M.W. Jennings, H. Eliand and G. Smith, (Belknap Press: Cambridge, Mass.,1999)p. 248

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A Bengali doctor of medicine, in conversation with William Butler Yeats, noted that "to read one line of Rabindranath's is to forget all the troubles of the world."[416] Yeats himself noted, reflecting on that same conversation, that Rabindranath's words,

> ...display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long....If the civilization of Bengal remains unbroken, if that common mind which—as one divines—runs through all, is not, as with us, broken into a dozen minds that know nothing of each other, something even of what is most subtle in these verses will have come, in a few generations, to the beggar on the roads.[417]

Yeats made this observation just prior to the First World War. Almost one hundred years later one must ask whether that Bengali "common mind" is indeed now "broken into a dozen minds." In 1957, some 45 years, two world wars, a couple of partitions and an independence later, the Bengali Nirmal Kumar Bose suggested that urbanization was indeed in the process of breaking it apart.

Today, fifty or so years on, the fact that the scrolls are purchased, and now less frequently so, suggests that perhaps, if there ever was a common mind or civilization—history is always already imagined—it is indeed broken apart. There have been, as the result of the City, its wars and nation-state-making, many beggars on the roads of Bengal and into Calcutta. Indeed, it is the beggar who defined Calcutta for many years. But, as though a name change could re-write history, start anew and fresh, without history, Calcutta is now Kolkata. Even that attempt suggests an irrevocable brokenness. Now the pieces of the common mind, the archive, are scattered as nostalgia and kitsch, and sold, romancing the past, as commodities, divested even from the material contexts of their heterogeneous landscapes and practices. This commoditization evidences, yes, the "decay of the traditional modes of transmission of culture"[418] whose principle cause has been urban modernity. They also evidence an attempt to memorialize an imaginary past, but now through an apparatus whose conditions for the possibility of practice are completely delimited by the presence of the City.

The City has taken upon itself to resurrect the past, gather together various pieces, and sell, under the guise of education, an edification to the modern who has forgotten her past. Nowhere was this more evident than in "Swabhumi, the Heritage Plaza."

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[416] W. B. Yeats, "Introduction" *Gitanjali* (2000) p. ix
[417] Ibid.
[418] Bose (1957)p.9

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Swabhumi: Buying 'My Land' and Oneself

At the far end of the E.M. Bypass, long after the boy with the 9/11 photograph-shirt, with its front and back exploding towers, passed me on his bicycle, I came upon *pata* imagery truly mechanically reproduced. I found them, in forms similar to that of the unknown boy who passed me on the Bypass, on t-shirts.

Its deceptive expanse gestures less to homey nestling than to a lounging, mall-ish sprawl of anonymity. Nestled across the road from the Subhash Sarovar lake, amidst a few trees, and on a rise tucked behind the private, 325 bed, 50 specialty Apollo Gleneagles Hospital (owned by the multi-national Apollo Group with hospitals in Saudi Arabia, the U.K., Dubai and Lagos), and across the E.M. Bypass from the "luxury business hotel"[419], the Hyatt Regency Kolkata, "Swabhumi, The Heritage Plaza" provides, for a price, an "educative and participative experience" for those seeking "to explore their roots and heritage."[420]

The walled compound that is Swabhumi is the result of a joint venture between the civic government of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation and the private corporation, Gujarat Ambuja Cements. Modelled on similarly themed and amusement parks in Europe and South East Asia, Swabhumi is built on "a small hillock" of 13.5 acres. When it opened in 2001, the park, it is claimed, "metamorphosed the way people of this metropolis [I.e. Calcutta] think about art and culture."[421]

'Swabhumi' provides cultural entertainments, arts and craft shopping, and a "food court offering rare and authentic delicacies" in an environment which attempts to mimic 19th century rural Bengali village life. Indian values in a leisure environment. The park promises the visiting Calcuttan and tourist alike—indeed, behind the walls of Swabhumi, there is no difference—"an opportunity...to understand about his or her roots, and it imparts to the visitor an experience of a bygone era as if through a time machine."[422]

Swabhumi is a bit like a cross between a mall and a museum, except that there is nothing old. Everything is new. And what artefacts there are, in the form of handicrafts, are there for sale. What you will buy in the process of experiencing the park will edify you, for you will be buying, as the park proudly proclaims, "authenticity."[423] Swabhumi's "heritage shopping and entertainment plaza"[424] caters to those who have the ability to partake of the neighbouring Hyatt hotel's "pioneering hospitality concepts."[425] Yet, its marketing appeals are directed to

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[419] http://kolkata.regency.hyatt.com/hyatt/hotels/index.jsp. February 8th, 2006
[420] "Swabhumi, A Heritage Plaza" promotional literature, http://www.swabhumi.com/home.html February 8th, 2006.
[421] http://www.expresstravelworld.com/20010831/tradetalk8.htm February 8th, 2006.
[422] http://www.swabhumi.com/home.html February 8th, 2006.
[423] Ibid.
[424] Ibid.
[425] http://kolkata.regency.hyatt.com/hyatt/hotels/services/index.jsp February 8th, 2006

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"everyone who wants to trace their roots, and understand what has been inherited over the ages."[426]

Those who light fires in the ditches of the E.M. Bypass to cook their meals; those who still gather fodder for their animals from beside the marshy, litter strewn lake and the busy bypass; those who wait for rickety buses outside the fake stoney walled edifice of the Hyatt, which separates the global participant of the City from the merely local (the barbarian), those who scavenge their homes in the shadows of Swabhumi's walls, do not seek their roots in Swabhumi.

But for those largely upper-middle class, educated professionals for whom belonging is a question and an anxiety, and thus for those who do seek to produce themselves in the play of transacted signs, Swabhumi offers itself as,

> the ideal location as the park is associated with indigenous values and is oriented towards preservation of our heritage. In the fast globalising city, this is an effort to preserve the typical identity of our city and its customs.[427]

It is a forgotten irony that Calcutta has always been a fast globalizing city.

It probably goes without saying that most people who arrive at the gates of Swabhumi don't arrive on foot after walking much of the length of the E.M. Bypass. For them there is the parking area on the south side of Moulana Abdul Kalam Azad Sarani, formerly, and still, known as Narkeldanga Main Road. Everyone, however, has to walk up the winding staircase ("Follow the Yellow Brick Road", I thought, as I entered.) to enter: *Swagatam!*[428] At the top of the stairs one is given the choice between a "Treasury", the "Village", and "Satisfaction."

Tellingly, around the entirety of Swabhumi revolves "Sambhar, the Urban Courtyard". "*Sambhar*", meaning "treasury", intones what presumably awaits one. To the left and right are *Shilpagram* ("Artist's Village") and the *Shantushti* food court ("Shantushti" means "Satisfaction"). In the Urban Courtyard one can partake, in good capitalist fashion, of a number of consumptive choices. "Watch a cultural performance on the open air stage!" Most evenings at Swabhumi, scheduled events, often song and music programs, take place on Sambhar's "urban" stage. These song programs are commonly performances of *Rabindra sangeet.*

Nostalgia is thick, though thickly sanitized, in Swabhumi. Children's theatre, quiz show contests and popular music concerts are often performed as well on the main stage. All programs, though, are geared to provide an atmosphere of anaesthetized "family fun." Perhaps one might opt to watch a carefully chosen,

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[426] http://www.swabhumi.com/home.html
[427] http://www.swabhumi.com/santushti.htm#Suva
[428] "Swagatam" means "Welcome" in Sanskrit and Bengali. Sanskrit doesn't use punctuation, never mind exclamation marks.

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safe, film in the "Bioscope" theatre; "Bioscope", presumably, because, in watching, you will learn something about your natural self in the excitedly marketed, "digital theatre."

The scopic gaze of the commodity looking back at you is also thick, and thickly sanitized, in Swabhumi. Perhaps you might like to experience the real reason you are there: to shop. Several stores around the "Urban courtyard" and its two-story shopping mall peddle items to "enhance your urban lifestyle."

> Touch & Glow's Shahnaz Hussain herbal products, hair styling, massage, skin treatments...Chesta's wrought iron furniture, candle stands, crockery, jute items...Hansagamani's attempts to bring colorful fabrics near to the rest of the country....Karuja's exclusive woodcarvings and handloom from Burdwan....Indo style Leather bags, belts, wallets, folders... Aashiana's wrought iron furniture, table lamps, shades and other home decor items....Infinity Exports' terracotta and ceramics...Riddhi's block printed dress materials, kurtas, sarees, terracota, jewellery...[429]

It was in one of these "urban shops" that I saw the t-shirts decorated with *pata* imageries. They were being sold as part of a women's development project funded by the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID). The DFID had partnered with Jadhavpur University's Women's Studies Centre, the Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre and the London School of Economics in a 12 month project to encourage women *pata* artists "in the means to empower themselves economically and socially."[430] Through the development workshop the *patua* women artists were instructed in modern production techniques, and in the use of "modern, artificial colours" which were deemed longer lasting and more user friendly. A tag on one of the t-shirts indicated that the garment was "machine washable." The development initiative funded by the DFID and rationalized by the universities, sought "to preserve the dying art of rural *pata* images in West Bengal."[431] Irony is not so thickly spread at Swabhumi.

Should one choose to explore less machined, more 'authentic roots', one can opt to shop in the traditional zone of *Shilpagram*. There, in the various material incarnations of the "artists' village" one can explore "quaint shops with earthy wares" where "soft spoken shopkeepers and their handwork remind you about the diversity in rural Indian art."[432] Two "bazaars" or markets, "*Karigarer Haat*"[433] and "*Meena Bazaar*" are contrived to present the supposed authenticity of imaginary village life.

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[429] Ibid.
[430] See *The Telegraph* newspaper, Saturday, February 21st, 2004.
[431] Ibid.
[432] http://www.swabhumi.com/shilpagram.htm
[433] "Haat" is Bengali for "market."

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> Full of gaiety, colours, boisterous and interesting people...bangles, jewellery, handicrafts, lampshades, trendy custom-made jewellery made of letter beads, glass showpieces, the *mehendi* artist, the micro calligrapher who'll write your name on a grain of rice, the magician...[434]

After experiencing the traditional market, only physical hunger remains to be slated. The 25,000 square foot "Shantushti: the food court" pretends, with a similar simulacral diversity, to offering, through its variously themed restaurants—some air-conditioned—the "cultural diversity of India in a single venue." There one can enjoy "rare and authentic delicacies from the four corners of India ~ North, South, East and West" in surrounds which mimic the architectural styles of each geographic locale, and amidst which one may sit and "chill out with a glassful of Pepsi."[435]

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In analyzing the commodity space precursor's to Swabhumi, Benjamin wrote that the international or world exhibitions tantalized the masses who were excluded from consumption by imbuing them "with the exchange value of commodities to the point of identifying with it: 'Do not touch the items on display.'"[436] Such spaces he wrote, provide access to a phantasmagoria to which an individual abandons herself. Swabhumi carries this experience one step further, confident in the fact that all the world, and those who visit, are now phantasmagoric themselves. The real commodities in Swabhumi are the visitors themselves. As Benjamin writes elsewhere, the exhibition spaces and "the entertainment industry", of which Swabhumi is a part, "facilitates [phantasmagoric inculcation] by elevating people to the level of commodities. They submit to being manipulated while enjoying their alienation from themselves and others."[437] The space of the Heritage Plaza forgets those who remain outside and who are unable to enter due to their poverty; they are the necessary waste of modernity. Signs inviting visitors to "Touch the mud, earth, water and wood" relish the materialization of mythic fantasy.

Fundamental to Swabhumi is the attempt to provide an "experience" for the consumer. The 'Heritage Park' works to build a sense of interaction and participation within the experience of consumption. Mud huts (made of concrete), thatched roofs and other mimetic gestures to 19th century rural Bengali village architectures, interactive musical and astrological programs ("Try your hand at the Sitar, Dotara or Tabla in the music courtyard" or "Find out how your past

[434] http://www.swabhumi.com/shilpagram.htm
[435] http://www.swabhumi.com/shantushti.htm
[436] Benjamin, "Exposé of 1939" (1999)p.18.
[437] Walter Benjamin, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (Schoken Books: New York, 1978)p.152

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lives are influencing you today with a session with the astrologer."), invitations to "Touch the mud, earth, water and wood" which make up the various artefacts and commodities, all contribute to materializing a sense of imagined authenticity and belonging within the consumptive experience that makes up a visit to Swabhumi. It is interesting too that the park deliberately heralds a 19th century historical moment as its identificatory touchstone. Village life today is too contaminated with the urban to cohere any imagined material authenticity. Only a projection beyond both the proximate present and its constitutive difficulties, into an imaginary golden age can fully make near the experience of authenticity and the imaginary narratives of cultural continuity.

As an amusement park and mall, Swabhumi cunningly mobilizes the dream of nationalist belonging, distils various material signs and practices of community and subjectivity, and sells them back to you. Swabhumi spatializes the capitalist and nationalist dream-worlds of commodity fetishism, and, within an urban experience which produces, as Yeats says, "a dozen minds which know nothing of one another" reconstructs an imaginary life-world rendered presumably legitimate through the rhetorics of authentic and didactic consumption.

This production of a dream-world even extends to the fact that Swabhumi has created its own mythology or "legend" to legitimize its contemporary rendering. In this it's imaginative reconstruction is perhaps no different than the dream-world productions of Disney. Herewith, "The Legend" of Swabhumi.

> *Once upon a time, where the land of Swabhumi now stands, was an enchanted hillock. And in that hillock there was a palace where lived the Happy Prince.*
>
> *Prince Khushi,*["khushi" means "happy" in Bengali] *as he was called, had the magic power of never growing old and never feeling depressed and lonely. It was a special gift given to him the moment he was born by a pale yellow moonbeam. So that even during the day, when you couldn't see the moon's allure, it worked! When Prince Khushi was hardly eight years old his mother died. The old King married again within a few years. The nasty new Maharani*[438] *decided to banish Prince Khushi from the kingdom. The old King, besotted by his new consort, told his son that he had decided to grant him a barren hillock where he could go and seek his fortune. A barren hillock! What was poor Prince Khushi to do? But to be a loyal son and please his father, he left the kingdom on his horse, accompanied by a handful of his devoted courtiers. Little did he know then that the faithful moonbeam followed him!*
>
> *The fantastic boon not only anointed him at times of difficulty but it also touched all that he walked upon and saw. So the barren hillock, within the short span of a year, became rich with bounty, the trees became golden with never-ending fruits and the*

[438] "Maharani" means "Queen"; the step-mother is always wicked, isn't she?

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> *birds that flew over the garden felt a special joy. The lines of sorrow creasing the Prince's brows disappeared and he decided that he would, in his own domain, banish sadness forever.*
>
> *He always believed that people had the option to do different things that made them cheerful. The subjects of Prince Khushi were never at a loss to do varied jobs and enjoy themselves.*
>
> *Prince Khushi had a soft spot for things that were beautiful. In his travels he had met a wise old architect who lived in a cave. Prince Khushi invited him to build his fabled palace and breathe into it a special alchemy that held the world spellbound.*[439]

Spell-bound indeed. Bound, Benjamin might argue, under the spell of phantasmagoric sleep and somnambulant wake-fullness of the modern, capitalist urban experience. Benjamin used dream in two somewhat contradictory, but connected, senses. First, his use of dream referred to the indentured, automatic slumber by which moderns participated in the everyday perpetuation of their exploitation by submitting to the fetish for commodities. Benjamin's second use of dream, however, appeals to the dream as a resource for political and revolutionary mobilization. If we are dreaming as in sleep, then we, or more likely our suitably cognizant and dialectically awakened children, can awaken the modern from its slumberous spell.

> [W]e seek a teleological moment in the context of dreams. Which is the moment of waiting. The dream waits secretly for the awakening; the sleeper surrenders himself to death only provisionally, waits for the second when he will cunningly wrest himself from its clutches. So, too, the dreaming collective, whose children provide the happy occasion for its own awakening.[440]

Dreams thus contain the redemptive possibility that we might mobilize the revolutionary hope latent within bourgeois sleep to liberate political possibility, and so ensure a productive critique of capitalist exploitation; as Witte, says bringing out into the open, "the utopian element concealed within [the] expressivity of nineteenth century bourgeois culture."[441] Dreams as repositories, for Benjamin, can teach us of our unconscious desires, and so, in critical awareness, be exercised as a political therapeutics. Children play an important role for Benjamin in this revolutionary project. He thought that it was the task of children "to bring the new world into symbolic space. The child, in fact can do what the grownup absolutely cannot: recognize the new once again."[442] What

[439] http://www.swabhumi.com/legends.htm
[440] Benjamin (1999) [K1a,2]p.390
[441] Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography* (Michigan State Press: Detroit, 1991) p.179
[442] Ibid., [K1a,3]p.390

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happens though when we all become infantilized? When the distinction between adult and child is blurred by stories of happy princes? What happens when the constitutive story of the new is remade into a child's story of the past?

Benjamin sought out these dreams in the commodities and in the objects in which they inhered as phantasmagoria and fetish. He, thus, also sought out the houses and urban milieux in which these dreams were collected: arcades, exhibitions, shops, streets, etc. Swabhumi is interesting because it makes the nation-state a container for the commodified dream-image of modern, child-like participation. Nationalism is mobilized through commodities and within a space explicitly devoted to re-enchanting fragmented urban experience with the material accoutrements and narratives of imaginary belonging. The dream of the nation-state becomes real in the rhetorical and imaginary dream-house of Swabhumi, and it is materialized and legitimized in commodity exchange. Materialized too, in a clean and uncomplicated, simplified, and re-enchanted way, one devoid of the anguish and impoverishment that contaminates the real experience of nationalism, the Real that urinates against the walls of Swabhumi, the Real that uses it to erect a temporary home. The nationalist dream that once separated itself from colonialism now retreats behind the walls of a mall, and ignores, like the many private estates whose inhabitants flock to the sanitized nation to which they wish they could belong, the vast uncontainable waste it has produced.

Swabhumi boasts that it "brings together the cultural diversity of India at a single venue." History, however, repeats itself with Swabhumi. Swabhumi is nothing new. It is the latest instantiation of modern standstill, empty time in a city whose modernity repeats itself day after day. One hundred and eighteen years before Swabhumi opened its doors to metamorphose the way people thought about themselves, in 1883, on the expanse of the Maidan in the centre of the city, the International Calcutta Exhibition opened its tent flaps promising, "with electric lights and a fanfare of trumpets," to do much the same.[443]

The Calcutta International Exhibition materialized, much as Swabhumi does today, the city of dream within the city of painful actuality.[444] When H.J. Reynolds, the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University spoke of the exhibition at a Convocation during the exhibitions, he suggested that the exhibition was "an educational agency, and as such it cannot but have made an impression even on the most simple rustic, who regarded it with a kind of stolid wonder,—as a mere *jádughur*, a mere palace of magic."[445]

The exhibition and its contents were also given, in Marx's phrase, some "theological niceties."[446] When Lord Ripon, then Viceroy of India, declared open

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[443] *Official Report of the Calcutta International Exhibition 1883-84* Vol.1 (Bengal Secretariat Press: Calcutta, 1885)p.16

[444] Curtis M. Hinsley, "Strolling Through the Colonies" *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* ed. Michael P. Steinberg (Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 1996)p.122

[445] Ibid.p.18

[446] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol.1* ed. Frederick Engels (International Publishers: New York, 1967)p.71

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the Calcutta International Exhibition on December 4th, 1883, he repeated the words, and the dream of all such exhibitions, with which the Prince Consort opened the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London.

> I confidently hope that the first impression which the view of this vast collection will produce upon the spectator will be that of deep thankfulness to the Almighty for the blessings which he has bestowed upon us already here below, and the second the conviction that they can only be realised in proportion to the help which we are prepared to render each other; therefore, only by peace, love, and assistance, not only between individuals, but between the nations of the earth.[447]

It is to that colonial ur-space for the commodification of the nationalist dream that we now (re)turn.

Allegorical postscript to Swabhumi

> Ever more callously the object world of man assumes the expression of the commodity. At the same time advertising seeks to veil the commodity character of things. In the allegorical the deceptive transfiguration of the world of the commodity resists its distortion. The commodity attempts to look itself in the face.[448]

Swabhumi makes much of the fact that it is built on "the only site in the whole of the city with a natural hillock." Swabhumi's promotional literature contends that this hillock lends,

> a certain ambience to the site. If there is natural beauty and undulating landscape, lush greenery, quite[sic] & sylvan surroundings on one side, it is flanked by the Subhash Sarovar lake on the other...The site is ideal to induce the Kolkatan to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city.[449]

Swabhumi's use of the conditional, "if", is telling. The barren hillock upon which the plaza was built, upon which the fabled Prince Khushi was sent to seek his fortune, is indeed "natural." But it is not "natural" in the sense of being

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[447] Lord Ripon quoting the Prince Consort in his opening speech at the Calcutta International Exhibition, December 4, 1883, as quoted in the *Official Report of the Calcutta International Exhibition 1883-84*, p.16.

[448] Walter Benjamin, "Central Park" trans. Lloyd Spencer and Mark Harrington, *New German Critique* Issue 34 Winter (1985)p.42

[449] http://www.swabhumi.com/legends.htm

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shaped by non-human forces. Rather, the hillock is the natural product of urban modernity. The hillock is an old landfill.

Swabhumi is built on the top of an old dump. Once on the outskirts of the city, the Kadapara dump was covered over in late 1960s as the ever expanding city began to encroach.[450] Still to some extent on the outskirts of the city, although it is surrounded by a major bypass, a hospital, luxury hotels and the nearby suburb of Salt Lake, the immediate surrounds of the heritage park do little to hint at the area's former incarnation. The advertising "legend" of Prince Khushi actively represses this history.

Dig a little into the earth and the face looking back is one we moderns prefer not to see.

> Language has unmistakably signified that memory is not an instrument for the reconnaissance of what is past but rather its medium. It is the medium of that which has been lived, just as the soil is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. Whoever seeks to gaze more closely at ones own buried past must proceed like a man who excavates. Above all, he must not shy away from coming back time and again to one an the same fact – scatter it just as one scatters earth, root it up just as one roots up the soil...Indeed, the images that are extracts from all earlier contexts stands as valuables in the frugal chambers of our later insight – like torsos in the collector's gallery. [451]

Indeed, the landfill upon which Swabhumi has been built does lend a certain, if allegorical and thus unperceived, ambience to the site. I am being facetious, of course. Modern consumer society works to conceal or repress the Real thrust of commodity culture, and renders tradition authentic only in the act of consumption.[452] The "legend" of Prince Khushi is deliberately engaged for this effect. It is phantasmagoria made conscious, if explicit only in a child-like tale. As such, it has as its underlying impulse the expression, "albeit in what is often distorted and repressed unconscious form...our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived."[453] Swabhumi joins together in a single mechanism of retreat, localism, consumption, sanitization, nationalist reification and fantasy, a repressed mass cultural entertainment of wish-fulfillment and symbolic containment, which

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[450]See "City of Joyful Shoppers" in *The Hindu* newspaper, Friday February, 11th, 2005
[451]Walter Benjamin, "Excavate and Memory", *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927-1934* eds. M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland and G. Smith, (Belknap Press: Cambridge, Mass.,1999) pp.576-77.
[452] Ananya Roy, "Nostalgias of the Modern" *The End of Tradition?* ed. Nezar AlSayyad (Routledge: London and New York, 2004)p.64
[453] Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" *Signatures of the Visible* (Routledge: New York, 1992)p.34

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resolves anxiety and the unrealizable into an imaginary and illusive commodity of existing social harmony.[454]

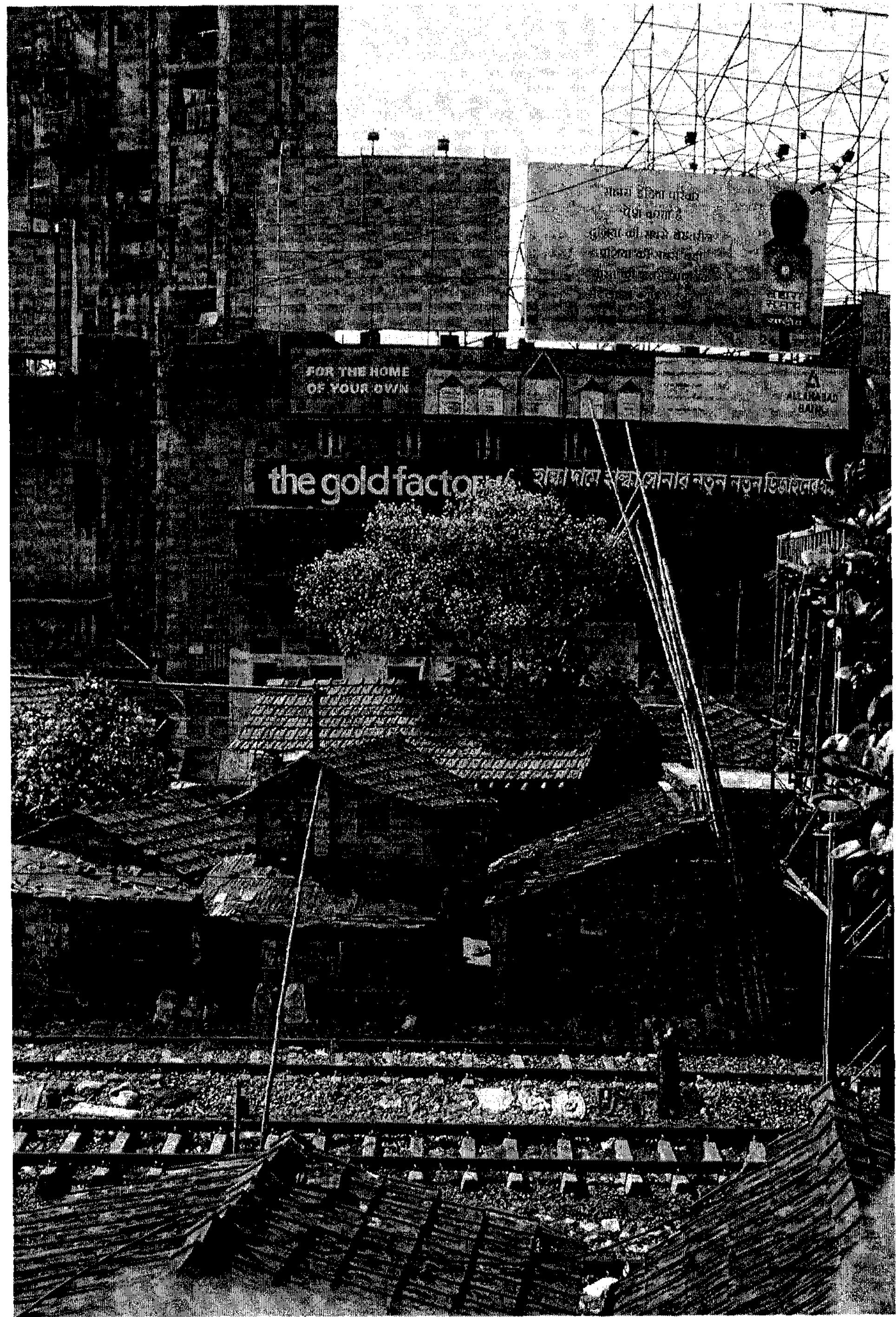

Figure 6.20: Railroad side homes and sign. Dakhuria, South Calcutta. Photo by author.

[454] Ibid., p.25. See also Lutz Koepnick, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln and London, 1999)p.197.

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Part VII: The Return of Calcutta's Commodity Spaces and their Ruin

Figure 7.1: Decaying Pandal, Dakhuria Lakes, South Calcutta, 2003. Photo by author.

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Cantata[1]

Coro in gruppi—

1° Figli del Gange, di gioja un dì
Nel'orizzonte spunta forier
2° In vincol santo getil pensier
Tutte del mondo le genti unì
1° Figli del Gange, d'inni sien piene
Le nostra labbra, le man di fior!
2° Come sorella tra noi conviene
Ogni region che schiara l'astro d'or.

Assolo di soprano—

Le braccia v'apro, o popoli!
L'India son io—son io
Che vi saluto ai limiti
Del sacro suolo mio.
Ben giunti siate un'opera
Solene oggi a compir
Ne le cui vaste linee
Grandeggia l'avvenir!..
L'universal Concordia,
L'universal lavoro
Di civiltà son cardini
Di civiltà tesoro.
Unanimi porstriamoci
A questo sol novel
Che su la terra irradia
Tutto il fulgor del ciel!...

Coro di donne e fanciulli—

Ma ai canti mescendosi
Dei regni adunati
Il canto risuona
De l'Angla corona
Eletta da'fati
Sul Ganga a vegliar—

[1] Cantata sung, in Italian, at the opening of the Calcutta International Exhibition, December 4th, 1883, by members of the Italian Opera. Words by Signor Enrico Golisciani. Music by Herr Mack. *Official Report of the Calcutta International Exhibition 1883-84 Vol.1*, (1885) pp. 6-7. Hereafter, *Official Report* (1885).

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E ratti scuotono
I cuori a quell canto
E grate si velano
Le ciglia di pianto,
E un grido prorompe
Che tutti trascina
D'un uomo solo al par:
"DIO SALVI LA REGINA"

Tutti—

Che tuonino i bronzi, echeggin gli squilli..
Che fendano l'aere I cento vessilli!
Sorelle, ecco l'ora!—Si schiude la nostra
Per l'arte e l'industria magnanima giostra.
Fu sotto il possente tuo scudo, o Vittoria,
Cotanto concesso a l'Inda citta!
Per te, Regal Donna, quest'ora di Gloria
Degli anni più tardi l'oblio sfiderà.

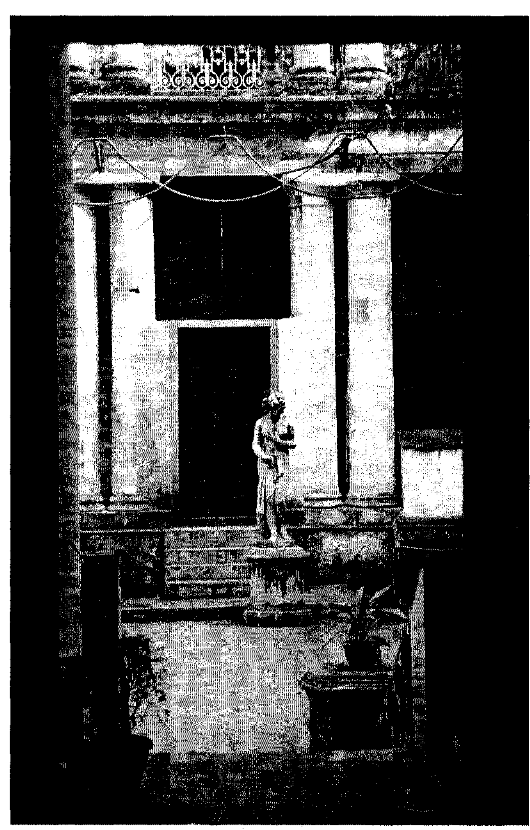

Figure 7.2: View inside north Calcutta courtyard, Nimtola, 2004. Photo by Author.

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Cantata[2]

(Translation)

Sons of the Ganges! Lo! A day of mirth
And happy augury
Hath dawned upon our Eastern sky,
And all the nations of the populous earth,
Knit in the sacred bands
Of peace and gentle thoughts, have joined harmonious hands.
Sons of the Ganges! Raise
A joyous hymn of praise,
And let your heads with flowers, your lips with songs, be crowned;
For all the nations round,
On which doth shine day's golden star,
Have sent their tribes from far
With sister voices sweet to swell the peaceful sound.
See where India, like a bride,
Her jewelled arms doth open wide,
With heart of welcome greeting all
That come to her high festival.
Brother nations! With us meet,
Here the solemn work complete
Be our joyful hands begun,
Born of what this day is done.
Before our glad prophetic eyes
What glorious years to come in long procession rise.
Hail sweet Concord, nurse of good.
Universal brotherhood!
Fount of wealth and rich increase,
And the smiling arts of Peace.
Lo from the East a light is springing
A sun of hope and promise fair,
Illuming all the earth, and flinging
A heavenly radiance thro' the air!
Echoes of the mighty sound,
Commingled nations' choral strain,
Across the mountains and the main
Shall to Britain's isle rebound,
Greeting her who heaven hath crowned
O'er the Ganges realm to reign.
O mother! As the tuneful message flies
Our hearts are moved within us, softly rise

[2] *Official Report* (1885) pp.7-8

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Unbidden tears and dim our grateful eyes.
Hark to the cry of prayer and praise
That all in chorus raise,
Prince and peasant great and mean,
GOD SAVE OUR EMPRESS-QUEEN.
Shout! A noble work is done!
Join the thunder of the gun!
Wave a hundred banners high,
For the prosperous hour is nigh
When in peaceful rivalry
Invention, Art, and Labour meet
And for a bloodless palm compete.
Such grace, Victoria, hath thy guardian power
Given to this city of thine Indian land;
Nor shall the peaceful honours of this hour
Yield to Oblivion's touch or Time's defacing hand.

Figure 7.3: Calcutta International Exhibition Commemoration Medal, Struck and Issued by Government of West Bengal, Supplement to *Official Report* (1885). Author's collection.

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The devaluation of the world of objects in allegory is outdone within the world of objects itself by the commodity.
Walter Benjamin, "Central Park", p.34

The Spatialization of Historical Returns

In a series of photographs taken in Barrackpore Park, located some 16 miles north of Central Calcutta on the banks of the Hooghly River, the Calcutta and Simla based 19th century, colonial photographer, Samuel Bourne, attempted to visualize urban material presence as the mythic, imperial emblem of political, racial and cultural authority. Bourne engaged an emotive, aesthetic method of the picturesque which, although ostensibly apolitical, attempted to naturalize the European colonial presence on the subcontinent as timeless and inarguable.[3] This romantic and political aesthetic is particularly evident in his photograph *Gothic Ruin, with Creepers, in Barrackpore Park, 1867* (see Figure 7.4, below).

Figure 7.4: Gothic Ruin with Creepers in Barrackpore Park, 1867. Photograph by Samuel Bourne. In Hight and Samson eds. (2002)p.90

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[3]Gary D. Sampson, "Unmasking the Colonial Picturesque" in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, eds. Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson (Routledge: London and New York, 2002)pp.84-106

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In the photograph, "*Gothic Ruin*", a European-styled Gothic ruin is foregrounded by the civilized humility and penitence of a Victorian lady. Palm trees burst out of the soil behind the lady, who, in reflective and prayerful repose, is seated in a clearing of overgrown, uncivilized jungle. In the background a church like ruin is covered by dark foliage. The ruin visually counterpoints the female figure's crisp, white cleanliness and obvious stately virtue. The photograph thus attempts to visually underscore an ideological narrative wherein the Raj triumphs over native and natural India in a modern, historicist linearity of universal, totalizing progress. In particular, the figure of the ruined church, together with the pensive and prayerful Victorian lady against the obviously tropical foliage symbolically consecrates the narrative of imperial history as eternal. Figuratively and historiographically, the image and device of the 'Gothic ruin' legitimates the divine and historical right of colonial presence.

What is interesting, however, about Bourne's image is the fact that the ruin pictured in the background is not real. There were, of course, no Gothic ruins in Calcutta's Barrackpore Park in 1867, nor, indeed, in all of South Asia; nor were there ever. The photograph is staged. It is an ideological construction veiled by oblique reference and real creepers. It attempts to re-write history in order to ideologically portray, through the photographic picturesque, the image of a feminized, benevolent Empire as timeless; or, if you will, as always already legitimate, and thus, as part of a continuity which should not be questioned.[4]

That the image is photographic and not painted or drawn, and that it was taken in 1867, some twenty seven years after photography was first introduced into the Sub-continent, speaks to the fact that colonial photography had assumed, by the time Bourne took the picture, a scientific and documentary status in the colonial firmament. In 1855, photography was introduced as part of the curriculum at the military academy at Addiscombe, in Surrey. At much the same time, the East India Company considered photography to be the most accurate scientific medium for documenting topographic landscapes and for gathering survey information.[5] Clearly, Bourne, though a private photographer, but one who made extensive survey and architectural records throughout India,[6] was manipulating a formalized, scientific or technological discourse to produce an ideologically laden aesthetic whose representational character could not, supposedly, be impugned.[7] The photographic image of the ruin thus attempts to communicate a certain civilizational inviolability. Explicit within Bourne's images is the construction of a perceived power of imperial presence and natural

[4] It is interesting to consider that the very fact of Bourne's taking this picture speaks to a certain perceived threat and hence perceived need to legitimize a British colonial presence. The photograph was taken ten years after the famous "Mutiny" or "Uprising" (today we might say "insurgency") of 1857, at a time when the foment of nationalism and resistance would certainly have been in the air in Calcutta, and thus a worry to the fixity and continuity of empire.

[5] Maria Pelizzari, "Introduction" *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture and the Politics of Representation, 1850-1900* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2003)p.13

[6] See Arthur Ollman, *Samuel Bourne: Images of India*, Untitled: 33 (The Friends of Photography: Carmel, California, 1983).

[7] Ibid.,p.7

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superiority, a superiority, as he wrote in 1870, which was second only to God.[8] Bourne is famous for having written in an 1863 issue of the *British Journal of Photography*, that the power of photography was such that the lens of a camera could convince Imperial subjects of their necessary acquiescence better than the barrel of a gun.

> From the earliest days of the calotype, the curious tripod, with its mysterious chamber and mouth of brass, taught the natives of this country that their conquerors were the inventors of other instruments besides the formidable guns of their artillery, which, though as suspicious perhaps in appearance, attained their object with less noise and smoke.[9]

Bourne was right, of course. We are still being convinced, only by different empires.

In contradistinction to Samuel Bourne's imperial romanticism, ruins, for Walter Benjamin, illuminate and visualize the profanity of history. They are the latent lie which Bourne's hubris tries, ironically, to conceal through the photograph. Ruins signal a catastrophic immanence within history, emphasize its tenuous materialization, and reveal the time-bound, inevitability of death and decay for the modern. For Benjamin, the ruin unmasks the reifying, picturesque story propagated by the imperialist revisionism of Bourne, the latter of which materially celebrates the commodified narratives of modernity, rationality and imperialism. Rendering history visible, the ruin's allegorical face releases, for Benjamin, the truth content of history's catastrophe[10] from the veil and fetish of modern urban phantasmagoria, which themselves attempted, as the opening Cantata intones, to preclude "Oblivion's touch" and "Time's defacing hand."

In light of Benjamin's thinking on ruin and allegory, I present, in what follows, pictures of the commodity spaces of Calcutta's modernity through three faces of its spatialized dreamscape: the historical, the extant but ruined, and the new. I argue that the Calcutta International Exhibition of 1883-84, the Metropolitan Building—a ruined colonial arcade and department store—and, the Forum—a new shopping "multiplex" in Calcutta—are each facets of the same commodity dream exercised by urban modernity, and can be linked, through the return of homogeneous and empty history, to the standstill of the present. The Metropolitan Building is the allegorical present around which the commodity spaces of past and future circulate in a process of perpetual and catastrophic return.

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[8] James Falconer, *India: Pioneering Photographs 1850-1900* (British Library: London, 2001)p. 28.
[9] Samuel Bourne, "Photography in the East", *British Journal of Photography* July 1st and September 3rd 1863 as quoted in Ollman (1983)p.6, and Falconer (2001)p.28
[10] Benjamin, "Central Park" (1985)p.50

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I suggest that the Calcutta International Exhibition of 1883-4 is an historical precursor to the contemporary space of Swabhumi and its emergent air-conditioned ilk in Kolkata. Although the Calcutta International Exhibition (CIE), was "entirely of a temporary character"[11], as was common of international exhibitions of its type following London's *Great Exhibition* of 1851, it not only showcased the wonder and extent of the Empire's commodity reach, it also attempted to represent a particular linear and progressivist history of India to Indians and the world. In the words of Anne McClintock, whom I quoted earlier, the CIE ensured that "the progress narrative began to be consumed as a mass spectacle."[12]

Through the dreamscape of the commodity the CIE constructed an imaginary Indian history for Indians and the world, which it then sold to everyone who bought a ticket to, or read of, the spectacle. This imperial manifestation of progressive history and the present "corresponds to a viewpoint according to which the course of the world is an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things."[13] Things at the CIE embodied both the dream of modern urban progress and a certain unified story of collective pastness. Ironically, as we shall see, these images dialectically fed the tides of emergent nationalism which were gaining considerable strength in Calcutta at the time.

Such a success was the Calcutta Exhibition, that on its close in March of 1884, it was hoped by both the then Viceroy and Governor-General of India, the Marquis of Ripon, and the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, the Honourable Augustus Rivers Thompson, that "there might spring out of this Exhibition some permanent institution."[14] Given the fact that the Viceroy opened and closed the temporary Calcutta International Exhibition from the steps of the permanent, palatial and grand Indian Museum, and given that the CIE utilized, as part of its grounds, the space of the museum, it is curious that both he and the Lieutenant Governor called, in their closing speeches, for a "permanent institution." There already was one. They could only have had in mind a space devoted to the exchange and celebration of modern commodities; a place from which to sell the many wonders and tools of the Empire and its material evidences of modern progress in a space as perpetually productive of the dreamt mass as the Exhibition grounds proved to be.

Indeed, their wishes came to pass. On the 5th of August 1885, five months and five days after the CIE closed its tent flaps, the Whiteaway, Laidlaw Company, then "the premier department store east of the Suez"[15] as it billed itself, opened a shop in central Calcutta. It, too, proved an enormous success, and soon

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[11] *Official Report* (1885)p.27.
[12] McClintock (1995)p.57
[13] Benjamin "Exposé of 1939" (1999) *AP* p.14
[14] Lord Ripon echoing Mr. Rivers Thompson in his address at the close of the Calcutta International Exhibition, March 10th, 1884, *Official Report* (1885)p.25
[15] Internal informational document on the Metropolitan Building published by Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC), author's collection. Since 1957, the LIC has owned the Metropolitan Building.

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after moved to a palatial, permanent site at the corner of Chowringhee Road and Corporation Street. The new building, designed and built by the London firm of Mackintosh Burn Ltd., was an example of a late arcade cum department store. Its multi-storey edifice spoke, when it opened, of solidity, grandeur, imperial continuity and cosmopolitan participation. It attempted to monumentalize the myth of a 19th century imperial permanence, and stood, facing West, at the heart of what was then one of the richest streets in the East.

Today, however, the building, though still extant, is largely a ruin.[16] Now called, popularly, the Metropolitan Building, it stands at the corner of Jawaharlal Nehru Road and S.N. Banerjee Road.[17] Its ruins, and half hearted renovation, amidst the contemporary chaos of a struggling 14 million, speak to the memory of colonial emporia and to a certain sentimental nostalgia that naturalizes capitalist and imperial valuation.[18]

As a ruined, late 19th century arcade and department store in the centre of the post-colonial city, the Metropolitan Building is a visual index of modern dream traces. It is an emblematic and allegorical microcosm of the larger city and world processes. In Benjamin's words, it is "a world in miniature." At the physical and moral epicentre of Imperial Calcutta, and as a ruin—although Calcutta is full of them—the Metropolitan Building encapsulates and illustrates much of what Benjamin means by modernity possessing a latent catastrophe. Its face, the façade, is an inevitable one that reveals what builds beneath the mask donned by the myth of modernity everywhere.[19]

The Metropolitan Building is but one interesting, yet perhaps notable instance, amongst innumerable others, where this mythic mask has sloughed off. I appeal to it as a visual and spatial allegory around which I articulate both contemporary visual and material dreamscapes, and read it as a particular historical marker of the urban spatialization of the commodity fetish.

☙

[16] At the time of my many visits to the building in 2003 and 2004 the building was a ruin. However, for the past year and a half, efforts to renovate the building have been underway. Supported by monies from the World Monument Fund and the building's owner, the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) these renovations have largely preserved the building's exterior in a manner reminiscent of its former condition. Much controversy has surrounded the renovations. Much of the support provided by the World Monument Fund, and Rs. 5 crore donated by the West Bengal Government for the renovation has disappeared. It was only after political pressure under the scandal of the money's disappearance, that the LIC has made an effort to restore the building. The renovations of the interior have, however, continued to be a failure and the building is today still very much a ruin, if one whose death mask has been polished. See, "Heritage Vandalism – Metropolitan Building Under Siege" by Staff Reporter, *The Telegraph* newspaper, Calcutta, Saturday, June 3rd, 2006.

[17] The building has not moved. Only the names of the roads have been changed.

[18] Ananya Roy (2004)p.65

[19] "The finished work is the death mask of its intuition" Walter Benjamin in a letter to Florens Christian Rang, January 10, 1924 as quoted in Missac (1995)p.219n.57

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Figure 7.5: Exterior of the Metropolitan Building from Jawaharlal Nehru Road, February 2004. Photo by Author.

"The prosperous hour is nigh" or the Forum

> *At the most we gaze at it in wonder, a kind of wonder which in itself is a form of dawning horror, for somehow we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their existence as ruins.*[20]

Calcutta's contemporary cityscape evidences many returns to dream spaces each of which invoke a particular commodity image of urban modernity. I begin with one contemporary manifestation of the Metropolitan Building, the Forum, one of a recent spate of new consumption palaces in Kolkata.

In early June of 2003, Janam Mukherjee took his *jethi ma*[21], his elderly and somewhat frail aunt, to the mall. The Forum, a mall and cinema multiplex on Elgin Street in central Calcutta, had just opened. On its opening in May of 2003 it was billed as the first of its kind in Eastern India. To Janam, however, who was

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[20] W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (Penguin: London and New York, 2001)p.24

[21] "*Jethi ma*", translates in English as "aunt", but refers, in Bengali, to ones father's brother's wife. English cannot convey the specificity of the many Bengali denotations for each specific familial relation. Janam Mukherjee is a personal friend of the author.

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born near Detroit, the mall was like any other mall in America; he tried to stay away from them. Yet, Janam was curious to see the much lauded and supposedly "new face of Calcutta." Wanting to treat his housebound and ailing aunt, he decided to take her to see Aishwarya Rai star in the recently opened, blockbuster Bengali film *Chokher Bali* which was playing at the Forum's much publicized multiplex. The talk of the town, the film was an adaptation of the 1902 Rabindranath Tagore novel of the same name, one his aunt, like most educated Bengalis, knew well and loved. Not sure she could survive anymore the raucous experience a typical Calcutta cinema can be, he thought the new mall and cinema multiplex might be more comfortable.

Air-conditioned, clean, orderly, and to Janam at least, familiar, despite its apparent newness, the Forum was a site of sanitized exclusion. Its mimetic sheen promised the comforts of monied accessibility, and gestured, as an idealized microcosm of the dreamt, capitalist metropolis, to the phantasmagorias of the rest of the world, 'to the way life ought rather to be lived.' Janam wanted too, to use the Forum to show his aunt, first hand, some of what life was like elsewhere, in that vague and imaginary place to which her brother-in-law had moved. Janam's father had moved to America after finding it difficult to cope psychologically and socially in the aftermath of having witnessed immediate family members murdered in the Great Calcutta Killing of August, 1946. A metallurgical engineer, he completed a PhD and subsequently taught at the University of Michigan where he researched and developed new and better metals for military aircraft and missiles. Janam was born in Ann Arbour and, but for a few visits to Calcutta, has lived in Michigan all his life.

Figure 7.6: The Forum, November, 2003. Photo by author.

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Other than its size, nothing particularly distinguishes Calcutta's new mall from any we might be familiar with here in the west/north/or centre, however you want to characterize us. The Forum is small, tiny by our bloated standards, but not unlike other malls ubiquitous to the urban imagination in, now, most of the world. Constructed of glass and steel, its four stories house an open, central well crisscrossed by shiny elevators whose futuristically lit mechanisms shuttle preening, self conscious teenagers to, amongst other things, a Pizza Hut in the food court, the Adidas store, the Nike store, the Benetton store, the Levis and Dockers store, a video arcade, a lingerie store, a Swarovsky crystal store, a "candy" store, and, of course, the 4 theatre multiplex which screens the latest from Hollywood, Bollywood and Tollywood at the top of the Forum.

As an arcade and multiplex the Forum is literally, in Benjamin's words, a theatre of purchases[22], a "refuge for the dreaming collectivity"[23], a "temple of commodity capital"[24] and "a city, a world in miniature"[25], site of collective urban desire, eroticized objects and commodified bodies.[26] Costumed door-men guard the entrances to the small glass fronted building, allowing only those with the outward habits of worldly consumption into the Forum. Arrive at the Forum in *dhoti* and *chappal*, and, if allowed in by the costumed *durwan*, your presence will certainly be made conspicuous by the increasingly inconspicuous globalized, brand-named company of low ride jeans and mobile phones. The Forum hides from the un-containable, and acts, as Swabhumi also does today as a globalizing site for the domestication of desire. Janam was worried whether his *jethi ma*, in her widow's white sari and sandals and obviously somewhat poor, would be allowed into the building. As he told me though, should the need arise he had the fall back legitimacy of his American accent and passable Bengali to legitimate his and his guest's presence in such a place. He was happy that he did not have to open his mouth to exercise that license. They enjoyed the film, its luxurious images, and the luxury of the Forum, a cool respite from the intense summer heat outside. They shared popcorn and a Coke, but passed on the nachos with cheese and the "masala" pizza also on offer at the concession.

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[22] Benjamin (1999) *AP* [C°3]p.829
[23] Ibid., [K1a,2]p.390
[24] Ibid., [A2,2]p.37
[25] Ibid., [A1,1]p.11
[26] Ibid., [A1a,2 and A6a,4]p.33,48. See also, Gilloch (1996)p.126

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Figure 7.7: Inside the Forum, *The Telegraph* newspaper, Calcutta. April 31st, 2003. "Metro" Advertising supplement. Photo by Subhashish Bagchi.

As they bumped home in a taxi to Hazra Road, down the old Chowringhee Road, and through the dilapidated lower middle class neighbourhood of Bhowanipur, they chatted about the film and its adaptation of Rabindranath's novel. But Janam, as he told me later, was also interested to ask his aunt what she thought of the Forum. A thoughtful, reflective woman, she remarked, after some time gazing out the window, "It isn't Calcutta." When asked what she meant, she explained, "Calcutta is old and crumbling. That place, [meaning the Forum] it is too new." They disembarked, and as Janam helped her up the stairs to her home overlooking Hazra Road, she thanked Janam for taking her to the movies. She enjoyed the film, and was glad she saw the Forum, but she never wanted to go back. "It didn't feel like here," she said.

The "here" of which Janam's *jethi ma* speaks is, as we have seen in the course of this essay, neither particularly old, nor is it foreign to the fetish of the new, the commodity, or their dream-spaces. Indeed, the city of Calcutta was founded upon, and continues to be flayed by, the mercantile phantasmagorias of commodities and their constitutive myths of modern progress. Quintessentially a city of modernity, Calcutta was built around the unfettered promise of *laissez faire* commodity capital. It became a place whose moral and spatial *topos* was shaped,

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from the first, by the extraordinary modern contradictions precipitated through those same lenses of commodity fetishism and capitalist exploitation: mythic luxury and equally mythic decay; the mutually constituting forces of internationalization and localism; complex intersections of tradition and modernity, community and society, cohesion and fragmentation; an originating site of nationalism, and today, of globalizations begun well prior to British imperial arrival in the 17th century.

But Calcutta, I have suggested, is a place for all kinds of mimicries and historical returns.

"Jewelled arms doth open wide", or The Calcutta International Exhibition

Outside of the kitsch space of Swabhumi, and beyond the incongruous, anonymous geography of the Forum which actively attempts to forget its history by forging an imaginary image of the rest of the world, *pata* scrolls are today sold, as I indicated earlier, in a similar spectacular space of commodity participation. On the grounds of the Maidan in the centre of the city, *pata* artists come to the annual Calcutta Book Fair where they sell, along with other indigent artists, their paintings in an area called the Montmartre.

The Calcutta Book Fair is a long standing annual fair and urban ritual[27] held in the late winter every year in Calcutta. It prides itself on being the largest of its kind in the world, and, in an attempt to legitimize its place in a global circulation of cultural and market capital, consistently compares itself to the Frankfurt Book Fair. In 2005 the area given to the fair on the Maidan was 800,000 square feet, 200,000 square feet of which was taken up by 535 book stalls.[28] The fair attracts publishers, wholesalers and retailers from throughout India, as well as several foreign countries, although the majority of its stalls house retailers and publishers from West Bengal and Kolkata. All manner of books are displayed, celebrated and sold: children's books, maps, government publications, school texts, magazines, popular fiction and non-fiction, English, Bengali and Hindi books, literary and scholarly books, poetry, comics and pulp fiction. Hundreds of thousands of people throng the fair to explore the stalls, buy books, be seen, and to socialize. Every available space within the already crowded grounds is filled each evening by groups of people sitting in circles of friends and family enjoying their outing. Musical entertainment is provided, as are food stalls which sell the usual, convenient fair-type snacks.

Entrance to the fair is reasonably affordable, and great pride is placed by the city's literary elite and by the various governments in the fair and its success. Every year the fair lends an international theme country to its proceedings. In 2006, the theme country was Spain, and in 2005, the theme country for the fair was France. In the middle of the grounds that year, a replica of I.M. Pei's Louvre

[27] Roy (2004)p.69
[28] http://www.kolkatabookfair.com

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glass pyramid was erected. Each year replicas of buildings or heritage sites in the theme country are duplicated on the grounds of the book fair, and often the more well-to-do publishers and sellers decorate their individual stalls in an interpretation of the theme or a mimicry of a notable structure in Calcutta. In addition to the Louvre's Pyramid, The Eiffel Tower, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Raj Bhavan, Louis Khan's National Assembly, and the West Bengal Government's Writers' Building have all been temporarily and clumsily duplicated in miniature form. Honorary literary guests are invited to speak each year, although their presence is more symbolic of a wished for international participation as it is literarily productive or resonant. Gunter Grass, Jacques Derrida, Richard Dawkins have all made appearances at the Calcutta book fair. The stalls for the fair are temporary efforts made of wood, fabric and plastic, and though the fair falls during relatively dry weather, Calcutta's unpredictable climate can cause havoc with the grounds and its buildings. Dust is endemic, as is mud when it decides to rain, and unfortunately adds to the already dismal and somewhat pathetic gestures of the exhibition.[29]

But, such commodity spectacles are not new to the Maidan. Calcutta has known many previous gatherings in celebration of the commodity, many of which have also been held in the centre of the city on the Maidan. They all have worked to inscribe modernity and Calcutta through the spectacle and allegory of the commodity, and so centralize it in a global narrative of progress and ruin.

Those powerful constellations which shaped *Jethi Ma's* perceptions of the everyday decayed city and its history, and which shaped South Asian colonial and post-colonial modernity were brought together, totalized, exhaustively catalogued, miniaturized, reified and celebrated, when the Calcutta International Exhibition, opened its doors, on a "wet and gloomy" afternoon on the 4th of December, 1883. The Calcutta International Exhibition opened its doors to celebrate modernization and imperial progress through the spectacle of the commodity. In its three month run from December through until the 10th of March, 1884, when it closed in the "excessive heat"[30] of an afternoon ceremony attended by "large numbers of both Europeans and natives of India"[31], the exhibition attracted "over a million"[32] visitors. So many visitors, in fact, that it has been likened as "India's own *Great Exhibition*" [33], a colonial version of the first international exhibition which was inaugurated, in London, on the 1st of May 1851.

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[29] In this judgement Roy and I are in agreement. See Roy (2004)p.71.

[30] H.H. Risley, "Report on the Calcutta International Exhibition, October 1885" *Revenue and Agriculture Department Papers, Oriental and India Office Collections*, British Library, London, P/2490, p.5

[31] *Official Report* (1885) p.18

[32] Ibid.,p.17

[33] Peter H. Hoffenberg, "Photography and Architecture at the *Calcutta International Exhibition*" *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation, 1850-1900*, ed. Maria Antonella Pelizzari (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2003)p.176.

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In attracting its many visitors, the exhibition surpassed the attendance of similar exhibitions held throughout India prior to 1883-84, and indeed, of similar colonial exhibitions held prior in Melbourne and Sydney. It was the intent of the CIE "to attract as large numbers as possible, and to place the Exhibition within the reach of the masses."[34] As such, in a calculated effort to produce commodity desire as a marker of belonging, the international exhibition was open to everyone who could afford the nominal ticket fee, European and "native" alike; in fact, the more "natives" the better. This, we shall see, had both its intended and its unintended consequences.

Open from 10:00 in the morning to 6:00 in the evening, the admission fee to view the spectacle was 4 annas. If one wished, however, "to see the Exhibition with more comfort", Wednesdays were "reserved" and an "admission fee of one rupee was charged."[35] One could, given the means, tour the exhibition without the crush of the hoipoloi; presumably, "comfort" here refers to class. In an effort to extol the modern virtue and power of industry, and so, no doubt, to enhance the aura of Imperial magic and mastery amongst the Empire's subjects who were expected to flock to the exhibition, organizers initially opened the temporary buildings in the evenings, and charged 8 annas to enter under the electric lights. Few took advantage of this spectacle, and with admissions "insufficient to pay for the cost of lighting"[36] within a month entrance was restricted to daylight hours only.

As an indicator of its importance as a public spectacle, train fares to the exhibition were lowered to entice non-urban and country folk. Prior to its opening, "everything that was possible had been done by means of advertisements and hand bills distributed through the villages to make the existence of the Exhibition known."[37] A newspaper campaign was started to entice South Asians, as was a public lecture circuit also organized. Lectures were presented in a variety of languages and to social clubs, as well as to "Hindoo and Mahomedan colleges."[38] The CIE also welcomed women to its grounds, and went out of its way in an effort to meet the local needs of both Hindu and Muslim women, by setting aside "*zenana* days" for women who wished to keep *purdah*.[39] These efforts, though slow to start, met with some success. Large attendances, however, were "attributed principally to the fact that news of the Exhibition only began to spread among the masses outside Calcutta after it had been open for some time."[40] Its attractive power was as a spectacle.

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[34] *Official Report* (1885) p.16
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.,p.17
[38] Jules Joubert's *Shavings and Scrapes in Many Parts* (J. Wilkie and Co.: Dunedin, 1890)p.183 as quoted in Hoffenberg (2003)p.179
[39] Risley (1885)p.5. *Purdah* refers to the more traditional or orthodox custom in Hindu and Muslim cultures of keeping women hidden from the public and the male gaze.
[40] *Official Report* (1885) p.17

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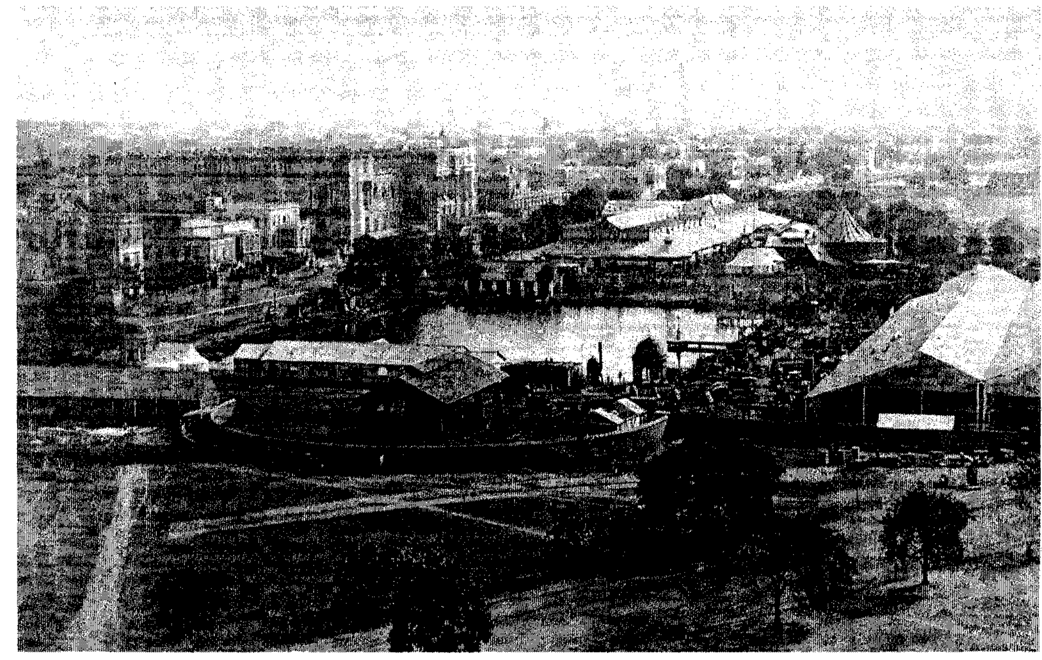

Figure 7.8: General View of the Exhibition (Maidan side) from the Ochterlony Monument, Supplement to *Official Report* (1885), Survey of India Office, Calcutta, February 1885. Photo by Major J. Waterhouse, Author's Collection

Eventually enough of the masses came to the Exhibition to prove the endeavour, in the minds of the organizers and colonial government, a success. In his closing address to the CIE, Lieutenant-Governor Rivers Thompson declared that,

> [a]s a spectacle, then, I think we may fairly congratulate ourselves on the keen interest which this Exhibition has excited in the native mind; and as an Exhibition for India, the primary aim of our efforts has been secured.[41]

When it did eventually close after three months due to the intensifying heat and the impending promise of that heat becoming worse in the nearing summer months, it was remarked with regret that the exhibition could not have influenced more native minds. "[H]ad this [I.e. the heat] not been the case, there can be little doubt that large numbers of natives would have continued to throng the buildings for many months. Unfortunately, however, the early closing was unavoidable."[42] The intent of the CIE had been, through the means of spectacle, to educate and entertain, principally, non-Europeans in the wonder that was European modernity and the Empire. "[I]t is very gratifying to know that so large a number of people profited by the opportunity given to them of seeing all that is best of Indian and foreign produce."[43]

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[41] Ibid.,p.22
[42] Ibid.,p.17
[43] Ibid.,pp.17-8

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The Exhibition grounds themselves were almost entirely of a temporary nature. Tents and exhibition buildings were erected in the Maidan and around a few tanks across the road from the Indian Museum which also participated in the Exhibition. A wooden bridge across Chowringhee Road connected the somewhat small museum exhibits to the larger, temporary display sheds in the Maidan. And sheds they were. The "mere extemporised sheds" were erected from materials recovered from "dismantled government buildings" which were then erected in a design similar to that of a previous exhibition in Christ Church.[44] Cramped due to the enormous number of displays and exhibitors (over 2,500 exhibitors and over 100,000 exhibits, numbers that dwarfed previous Indian exhibitions[45]), the site, it was remarked, was too small, and "ill adapted" to the city's sometimes unpredictable and "boisterous weather."[46] One surmises that the authors of the *Official Report* are being diplomatic. Accounts of the opening day's rain and cold, and attempts thereafter to project an image of splendour, ease and the certainties of modernity reveal the site to have been rather "dirty and sad."[47] If I can use the experience of the 2004 Calcutta Book Fair, one hundred and twenty one years after the CIE—held as it is in much the same location, to garner some sense of the late Victorian experience—I might be inclined to be less diplomatic than the *Report's* authors.

The area of the International Exhibition was roughly 22 acres. The various, mostly temporary, sheds and tents were first grouped and assigned geographically, and then thematically divided. The material and earthly plethora of the Imperial and modern world was displayed rather luxuriously for the visitor. Archaeological, geological, and zoological exhibits shared exhibition space with jewellery, machinery, military, horticultural, electrical, agricultural, carceral[48] and artistic exhibits. Space was made available for refreshment counters and a bar, which themselves were further categorized and segregated into Hindoo, Mahomedan and European "tastes."[49] A bandstand graced the promenade, and a Burmese theatre bordered one of the tanks.

The centre piece of the Maidan side of the exhibition was the Indian Court which housed the various regional exhibits from the Sub-continent: Calcutta, Bengal, Jeypore, Rajputana, Punjab, Mysore, etc... . The structure housing the Indian Court was unique because, of the temporary buildings on the site, it was the only one to have been built with iron girders. The dream of the most modern was reserved to herald India into a new and spectacular era. As Benjamin remarks about the use of iron construction which attempts to lend the aura of permanence to modern buildings,

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[44] Ibid.,p.28
[45] Hoffenberg (2003)p.179
[46] *Official Report* (1885)p.28
[47] Benjamin (1999) *AP* [F1,2]p.150.
[48] Perhaps as an indication of the industrialization of the carceral and its importance as a sector in the modern economy of the Empire, the Bengal Jail Department was given its own exhibition building.
[49] *Official Report* (1885)p.28

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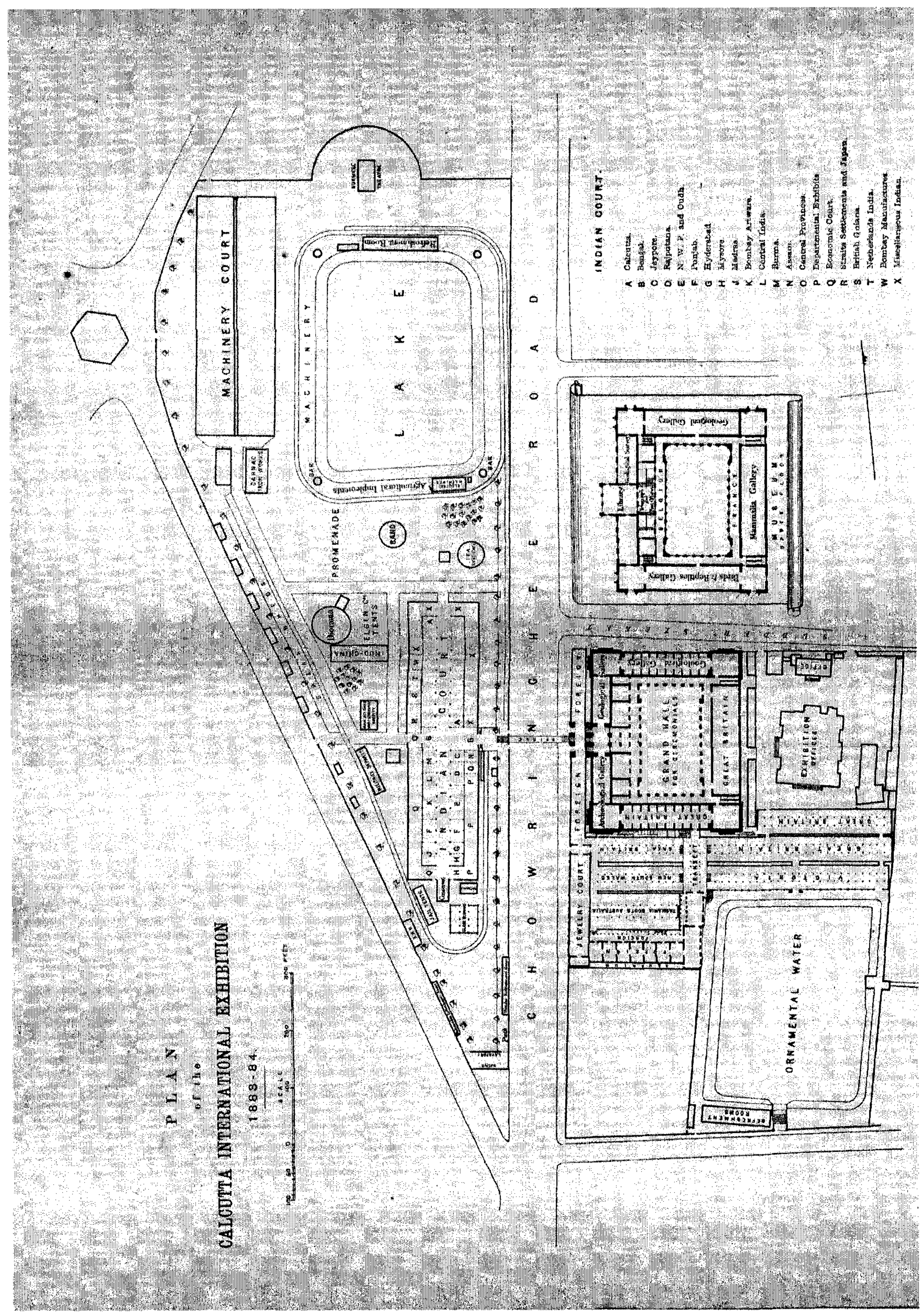

Plate 4: Plan of Calcutta International Exhibition, Supplement to *Official Report* (1885). Author's collection.

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> [T]hese vain attempts are the most authentic proof that technological production, at the beginning was in the grip of dreams. (Not architecture alone, but all technology is, at certain stages, evidence of a collective dream.)[50]

But the realm of the modern dream materialised, or at least gestured to, by the use of iron girders, co-existed side by side with an equally phantasmagoric dream: that of an imaginary and unified ancient Indian history.

Each of the sections of the Indian court was approximately 400 square feet in area, and each was decorated in a style and architecture specific to its geographic locale.[51] Thus, for instance, the north end of the Calcutta Court, was decorated with,

> a massive model of a Hindu temple in the neighbourhood of Calcutta, the exit being through the centre gateway, a copy of a very ancient Hindu structure. The whole was elaborately moulded and carved in wood painted a deep stone colour, the floriated mouldings, borders and bosses, including the massive elephants; heads and tigers' masks in high relief being heavy gilt.[52]

The Calcutta Court blended, as did the city itself, its Hindu accents with the colonial, European influences. The entrance to the court was spanned by an arch "bearing the arms of the town of Calcutta, with their characteristic supporters,— two adjutants and motto, '*Per Ardua Stabilis Esto*'[Firm in Adversity]."[53] The effect of this cultural juxtaposition, as it was noted by the organizers, was that of "contrasting well" with other courts within the larger Indian Court.

> [T]he decoration of this court contrasted well with the adjoining Indian Courts, which, with their wealth of barbaric splendour in gold and silver, steel armour, strange weapons, and masses of gorgeous colour in the rich drapings of valuable carpets, shawls and *kinkabs*, made up a *toute ensemble* extremely handsome and effective.[54]

Such contrasts between the civilized, modern European and the "barbaric", if splendid, non-European traditionalisms were "effective," because, as Hoffenberg argues, the Indian Court, produced, through the commodity dreamscape, "a vision

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[50] Benjamin (1999) *AP* [F1a,2]p.152
[51] Hoffenberg, (2003)p.182
[52] *Official Report* (1885)p.113
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.

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of India's 'ancient' heritage as uncontaminated and authentic, seamlessly linking past, present and future."[55] In other words, the deliberate juxtaposition of the Indian and the European produced an historical narrative which constituted the Indian as "old" or "traditional" or "simple" and the European as "new", "modern" and "progressive." As I suggested earlier, such contrasts, perceived in the light of contradiction, we still employ in our characterizations of the city, and India today.

One reason, perhaps, for this continued juxtaposition between the splendid Indian primitive and the marvellous European progressive is due to the fact that the Indian or Oriental has been typically exoticized as luxurious and decadent. The CIE too was redolent with rich drapings, gold and silver, jewels, fine shawls and exotic armoury, and was certainly a place for the spectacularization of exoticism and luxury. A jewel court, located along Chowringhee Road south of the museum was constructed out of brick to house the celebrated Bengal state jewels then in the possession of the Nawab of Murshidabad. These jewels—14 emerald and diamond necklaces, 2 emerald pendants, 2 diamond tiaras, 5 serpiachs, 3 jewelled spice boxes, armlets, a jade bowl with inset rubies, an enamelled scimitar inset with rubies and a state scimitar, gift of Queen Victoria—were all displayed in one section of the jewellery court. The Maharaja Aftab Chand Mahtab Bahadur of Burdwan also exhibited 3 crowns with rubies, diamonds and emeralds, two diamond necklaces, and a gold throne. The Maharaja Rajendra Kisor Singh of Bettia displayed his family's riches as did the Maharaja Radha Prasad Singh Bahadur and Maharaja Krishna Pratap Sahai. Two Nawabs, Abdul Ghani and Ahsanulla of Dacca also exhibited their wealth, as did numerous wealthy families who displayed their paintings and sculptures.

The 1885 *Official Report* exhaustively details, in page after page, the inordinate luxury and excess of the exhibitions' spectacles. In all of the various themed rooms throughout the Exhibition, British, colonial, foreign and Indian, European and non, the effect of the galleries must have been that of staggering extravagance. As Gyan Prakash writes,

> Exhibitions...offered a feast to the Indian eye. Depending on the scale, no effort was spared to produce an attractive spectacle: ceremonial arches, palatial structures, military bands, lakes, fountains bathed in coloured lights, food stalls, wrestling competitions, pony races and regional theatre—all combined to impress the public eye and draw it to agricultural products, manufactured goods, machines, scientific inventions, and new methods of living and working.[56]

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[55] Hoffenberg (2003)p.182

[56] Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1999)p.33

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As such, the image of the Sub-continent portrayed to native and non-native alike was one of untold wealth and inexhaustibility. This wealth too was gathered and displayed under the auspices of modern colonial management, with Calcutta, at the time, as the chief refracting space of this wealth creation and control. The image of the world as available, inexhaustible, appropriable and inert was condensed and magnified in the concentrated urban space of the CIE, and rendered realizable or attainable through the display of the novel modern industrial commodities. The decorative luxuries, in conjunction with the more mundane utilitarian commodities like agricultural implements and electric engines, produced in the viewer the phantasmagoric dream of the modern, and instilled its wish-images in the minds-eye of the spectators.

☙

If only temporary, the Calcutta International Exhibition was, as Benjamin wrote of similar such spectacles, "a place of pilgrimage to the fetish commodity."[57] Benjamin quotes Hippolyte Taine's 1855 exclamation that "all of Europe was on the move to view the merchandise."[58] The success of the Calcutta International Exhibition suggests that perhaps it was not only all of Europe, but many other and distant parts of the globe as well, and that these were in turn on the move to see, as it were, modern Europe.

One of the expressed intents of the Exhibition was to promote free trade amongst regions and nations, to revive local manufacturing, and to display the natural and industrial wealth of the Empire.[59] In particular, one of the central endeavors of the CIE was to promote trade alliances with the relatively near colonies in Australia. In his address to the exhibition's inauguration, the Viceroy of India stressed the "great importance of developing the trade between this country [i.e. British colonial India] and Australia."[60] He expressed the hope that "if the exhibition furthers the development of that trade, that result alone will be amply sufficient to justify and reward the labours of those who have carried out this undertaking [i.e. organizing the exhibition]."[61] Australia was one of the major exhibiting colonies represented. New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia were each given their own substantial exhibition spaces. Aside from British, Indian and Australian colonial exhibitions, French and Belgian colonial interests were also represented. Austria, Tonquin, Cochin, Japan and the Dutch East Indies had their own smaller exhibit spaces and awards were given to displays from numerous European, Asian and American countries.

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[57] Benjamin, "Expose of 1939" (1999) *AP* p.17
[58] Ibid.
[59] "Proceedings from the Arts and Museums Committee held on Friday, the 7th December, 1883", *Proceedings of the Revenue and Agriculture Department*, January 1884, Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library, London, P/2280 No.3. See also Hoffenberg (2003)p.176.
[60] *Official Report* (1885)p.15
[61] Ibid.

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But, the CIE was far more than simply a trade show amongst colonial powers. Part museum, part arcade, part carnival, part department store and bazaar (since some exhibits could be purchased as souvenirs in the exhibit area[62]) it "erected the universe of commodities."[63] A temporary city in miniature, the exhibition celebrated the Imperial and technological masteries over nature and culture as it exhaustively catalogued the artefacts of modern Empire and industry. These artefacts were celebrations, but they did have an educative aspect as well. Wrapped up, of course, in the spectacular presentation of European modernity was the didactic effort at convincing, through the phantasmagoric appeal of novelty and commodity desire, the "native mind" of European technological, cultural and social superiority. Thus, through the display of commodities and people's participation with and through them, the CIE attempted to construct in the spectator a sense of mass participation. Those who ventured were inscribed by the exhibit as both of a mass, but also, as such, a part of a larger global discourse. Mr. Rivers Thompson made this imperative explicit in his closing speech pronouncing the Exhibition a success in shaping the "native mind."

> To Europeans, exhibitions of the kind are familiar enough. To Indians it was in every sense a novelty, in the magnitude of the enterprise, the variety of the display, and the splendour and value of the collections; and the gratification in the spectacle will have been all the greater in the discovery that honour and distinction were especially reflected upon the beautiful illustrations of native art and native industry. Who has seen the beautiful carpets and shawls from Kashmir and Agra, the silken and muslin fabrics of native manufacture, the silver-work of Cuttack, the ivory-work from Murshidabad, the wood-carving from Burma, and the brassware from Benares, Jaipur, and many other cities, but must realise the great resources of native technical talent in those directions in which delicacy of touch and colouring are especially called into use. And if a native artisan or mechanic has stood aghast at the marvels wrought by the mechanical appliances of Europe constructed for the relief and diminution of manual labour, or gazed in astonishment upon the stupendous powers which steam and electricity have been brought to exercise even in the consumer uses of human needs and requirements, and if these sights now only excite wonderment when contrasted with the simpler but often

[62] Hoffenberg (2003)p.176
[63] Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* (1973)p.106

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> ingenious contrivances of his own handicraft, we can trust to the growing forces of the wider education in all its branches which your Lordship's administration [I.e. Lord Ripon the Viceroy, in attendance] will have promoted for the diffusion of that special knowledge which shall appropriate the lessons which the Exhibition has taught for the benefit and advancement of India.[64]

While the Lieutenant-Governor recognized the place and importance Indian regional artefacts had in the exhibition, these artefacts, "simple but...ingenious contrivances", were exhibited as counterpoints to the modern "marvels" and "astonishments" of "steam and electricity." The European technological artefacts were very clearly exhibited with the intent of promoting their efficiencies (the "diminution of manual labour") and their capacity to be employed and exercised in consumptive utility. As such, the CIE went beyond being simply a museum for the display of curiosities. It inculcated, through the demonstrative display of commodities and their use value in meeting everyday needs and requirements, the desire or aspirant wish image on the part of the viewer to possess these material things of use and so also participate as a modern in a wider world process. The CIE thus became a site for the production of the commodity fetish. The explicit message of the CIE was that if the "native" could possess these modern instruments, then his life would be better.

The extensive display of the many aesthetic and craft objects from around India played a key role in producing narratives of tradition and narratives of the modern. By being "contrasted", as Rivers Thompson indicates, to the supposedly "simpler" native technologies, modern European marvels are discursively produced within the space of the Exhibition as effective and efficient novelties, and thus as wish-images or desired objects. Exhibitions like the CIE, "create a framework in which...use-value becomes secondary."[65] The displays were doubly effective in the sense that they could not, for the most part, be physically consumed. As Benjamin writes, they produced their phantasmagoric effect in the masses by forcibly excluding them from consumption and as such, by producing subjective identification with commodities in the injunction, "Do not touch the items on display."[66]

A similar redactive phantasmagoric production was constituted by the display of indigenous or "native" artefacts which effected the production of subjects within narratives of spatio-temporal belonging. The inclusion of the indigenous object or artefact in the Exhibition and its display, but with the order "Do not touch!", separates the object both from its everyday context, and from its specific use. Indeed, its very display produces it and the contexts of its use as a reified artefact and fetish object. The object thus becomes a transacted sign or

[64] *Official Report* (1885)p.22
[65] Benjamin, "Exposé of 1939" (1999)p.18
[66] Ibid.

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symbol of cultural and social identification, one which marks boundaries of community, identity, subjectivity and nation. Identity and subjectivity thus became a matter of spectacle and a matter of productive desire, at the same time as the same objects asserted a discursive production of inter-subjective belonging.

On the one hand this happened in so far as the objects in the CIE were displayed within a restricted, consumptive space. Access was not free. The Exhibition was both a private and public venture between Jules Joubert and a conglomeration of Asian and British businessmen and the Government of India's Revenue and Agriculture Department. Though supported by the colonial state apparatus, it was chiefly a private endeavour which operated with the intent of making a profit. At the end of the exhibition, the Lieutenant Governor had to explain to the Viceroy, with "some anxiety"[67], the fact that the Exhibition was over-budget by "a balance of one lakh"[68] rupees. The space of the CIE, thus, was not one simply constructed for the edification of a public good. It was first and foremost a business venture, one that sought to secure foreign markets and trading relations, and at the same time as instilling in a subject population the desire for commodities, also make a profit. The fact that the original International Exhibition in London in 1851 made an unexpected profit of £50,000 became a standard or model for all subsequent international exhibitions.

But, on the other hand, the "transformation of modernity itself into a commodity, of its experience and thrills into a ticketed spectacle, of its domination of nature into domestic comfort, of its knowledges into exotic costume, and of commodity into the goal of modernity"[69] produced the world as so much transacted artefact, at once distanced from, yet appropriable to possession and manipulation. In other words, by hanging "native art and native industry" on walls, and by contrasting that now imaged and imagined pastness with the supposed new and better, the everyday techniques of the new masses' worldly mediation were transformed by the urban apparatus of their display. They were made traditional by the urban commodity space of the modern, and, as such, objectified and reified as symbolic components in the work of subjective self-manifestation and self-description. Subjects were thus required to produce or account for themselves on a world stage and through a framework of imaged and imagined things.

At the same time that the object or material world was excluded, displayed and reified, so too was the geographic world reduced and made appropriable within the confines of the Exhibition. The CIE manifested in miniature a cosmopolitan possibility before the gaze of the incredulous visitor. If the object became a sign or marker of identity through its association with a miniaturized geographic locale, it became, at the same time caught up in a discourse of authenticity. Authenticity was produced and communicated through a symbolized, geographic image as much as it was objectified and de-contextualized

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[67] *Official Report* (1885)p.22
[68] Ibid.
[69] Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Polity: Cambridge, 1997)p.14-15

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in the artefactual nature of the exhibits. The CIE unified an imagined space as much as it condensed stories of past, present and future and projected them onto a world (or 'worlding') stage.

The CIE mimicked repeatedly with its temporary, decorative exhibit spaces numerous religious and indigenous sites throughout the sub-continent. Many of these re-constructions were built by South Asian artisans. The designs of the exhibits were constructed by "local experts" in culturally specific areas of aesthetic and craft. The use of local artists thus lent an aura of authenticity to the material decorations which graced the exhibition. What is interesting about these decorations, however, was the fact that they were amalgams of indigenous art and craft. They blended cultural influences, traditions and materials in ways that were not constitutive of the real to which they referenced.

A particular example from the CIE, which became well known in its display in London at the South Kensington Museum during the *Colonial and Indian Exhibition* (1886) was the Gwalior arch. The Gwalior arch formed the entrance to the Indian Court. Through it one entered the Court's central hall before which one was graced by a crystal fountain guarded on both sides by two life sized papier machè elephants fashioned "by Jeypore workmen and caparisoned in the Jeypore and Bengal styles."[70] But the Gwalior arch, like the elephants, and most other decorative elements of the CIE was entirely conceived for the spectacle of the Exhibition. It was not based on any existing arch in Gwalior, but envisaged in an imaginary manner to illustrate the carving of many periods congruent with central Indian history.[71] The eclecticism of the arch's carving, drawing as it did from many parts and traditions, and amalgamating them into a purely imaginative structure, invented and presented a past and story of its history for India. It figuratively and literally collapsed the heterogeneous times and geographies of the sub-continent and presented them as a unified and geographic whole through the commodity space of the Exhibition.

As Hoffenberg notes further, the Exhibition and its eclectic themed exhibits, themselves largely self-conscious and imaginative productions,

> gave visitors the sense of a total environment compatible with general notions about traditional India, thereby linking the exhibition experience and the external space recreated at the show.[72]

India came to be invented or produced as a natural and historically legitimate place through such events as the Calcutta International Exhibition. The CIE was thus a place of educative production as much as it was a celebratory space of colonial modernity. Importantly, then, the Exhibition produced in its various themed rooms, a history of the sub-continent by displaying the diverse wonders of

[70] *Official Report* (1885)p.32
[71] Hoffenberg (2003)p.183
[72] Ibid.

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a constructed "Indian" antiquity for those, Indian and English alike, who pilgrimaged to the manifest dream-world which encapsulated the promise of modernity in India through its display of things.

But this promise was, at the time, subject to some considerable contestation and re-interpretation. On the one hand, the CIE embodied a deeply colonialist and imperial production which celebrated modern science in a pedagogical or didactic air of barbarian mass education. Hundreds of thousands streamed to see the marvels of the modern before their very eyes. In the same way that Bourne and the colonialist attitude assumed the Indian landscape empty and infinitely malleable, so the Exhibition assumed the "native mind" acquiescent to the will of supposed colonial superiority.

But as Gyan Prakash notes, this assumption is fraught with ambivalence, for, in displaying the wonders of the modern in an educative way, such action imparts a subjective agency to the "native mind."[73] This irony becomes all the more telling when it is obvious to the overwhelmingly native spectatorship that the exhibition and its displays are products of interactive, mediated processes, and far from the imposition of British unilateral interpretations,[74] an irony which did not escape commentary at the time. *The Bengalee* magazine noted that even though the CIE represented a noble and instructive effort, it's commodity driven spectacularity and luxury ignored the material conditions of the many who would visit.

> If an Exhibition were held among the remote barbarians of the Sandwich Islands, the spectacle would create astonishment, the projector would probably be worshipped as a god—an honour that would perhaps be extended to some of his commodities—but nothing solid or substantial would follow. These barbarians have no capital, and even if their curiosity were deeply stirred, and their inclinations moved, there would be wanting the capital to manufacture.[75]

In other words, what is the point of inculcating, in luxurious display, the dream of the technological modern, if those very people you want to reach do not have the means to buy the commodities on show? At bottom, this question posed at the time had a latent subtext of colonial unrest.

Incredibly, the Viceroy of India made the same observation in his very public closing remarks to the CIE on the steps of the Indian Museum in March of 1884. Lord Ripon publicly chided the organizers of the CIE for their ostentation and over-dependence on the display of luxury, a luxuriousness he too recognized as beyond the means of most who visited.

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[73] Prakash (1999)p.26
[74] Hoffenberg (2003)p.181
[75] *The Bengalee*, November 17, 1883 as quoted in Prakash (1999)p.40

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> In one respect I must say that the European exhibits in this Exhibition have not altogether fulfilled some of the hopes which I at least entertained. The requirements of the wealthy have been thoroughly considered. Articles of luxury and splendour are to be found in these Courts in plenty, but little has been done to show what might be accomplished to supply the wants of the masses of the people; and specially the wants of the cultivators of the soil. Now I have no doubt that that has arisen mainly from the ignorance of the needs of these persons in that respect. Nothing can be more natural; but nevertheless I can assure the capitalists and inventors of Europe and America that there is ample room for the exercise of skill and ingenuity to supply the wants of the agricultural classes of this country, and to provide them with implements calculated to supersede the rude and primitive instruments which they now use. No doubt to do this may be beset with various difficulties, for we all know how attached the rural natives are to the practices and habits of their forefathers; but nevertheless I believe that those who have the skill and the capital to devise improved agricultural implements would find a fair field, as time goes on, for the sale of articles of that description in this country.[76]

Was the Viceroy aware of how the Exhibition and its deliberate selling of commodity dreams and unattainable phantasmagoric wish images would be interpreted by the average person and a mobilizing Bengali elite? He was surely aware that the exhibition would fuel the already growing disenchantment amongst Indians which was exercising itself in the public efforts of nationalist organization. The opening of the Exhibition was itself embroiled in a very public political debate over the Ilbert Bill of 1883. The Ilbert Bill was a highly contentious piece of legislation which asserted the right of Indian judges to preside over cases involving British subjects in India. The opening ceremonies of the CIE were boycotted by the Anglo-Indian community in protest of the bill, for the bill pitted the growing influence of the nationalist Indian National Congress against a status quo conception of Company rule.[77] Lord Ripon was accused at the time by many in the Anglo-Indian community of siding with the interests of nationalism and for weakening the reigns of Imperial control by ascribing too much to Indian agency.

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[76] *Official Report* (1885)p.26
[77] Hoffenberg (2003)p.188

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The CIE thus came at a crucial time in the discursive production of Indian nationalism in Calcutta. Indians were searching for ways to represent themselves but were doing so within an apparatus of modern nationalism and self-government. Calcutta was, as we have seen, the urban locus for these efforts at self description and collective mobilisation. Exhibitions like that of the CIE presented the modern and the Indian side by side, and allowed the formation of narratives of ancient unity and collective belonging. These it contrasted to the European.

What is interesting about the conjunction of the CIE and nascent nationalist organization, is the fact that the modern nationalist narratives of belonging took place within, and were framed by, spaces which were dominated by the commodity imperative. Narratives of community were packaged and sold to the spectators, and then taken up, repackaged and subsequently transmitted through the modern frameworks and images of the nation state and modern progress to the countryside from whence they then were mobilized in mass collective politicizations. What it meant to belong to a particular community was defined, to some extent at least, by the types of frameworks and stories constructed within the highly concentrated and reified spaces and productions of the exhibition and its explicit urbanity.

Indeed, the way in which a unified past is imagined, communicated, mobilized and sold in the work of justifying narratives of power and belonging continues to find enormous cultural and social resonance today in consumptive spaces like Swabhumi. Swabhumi is a direct descendant of the Calcutta International Exhibition. It packages history within a concentrated urban space and communicates belonging through the sale of specific commodities whose imaginary production is premised on an essentialist and naturalized aura of authenticity. As David Harvey remarks,

> cultural institutions – museums and heritage centres, arenas for spectacle, exhibitions, and festivals – seem to have as their aim the cultivation of nostalgia, the production of sanitized collective memories, the nurturing of uncritical aesthetic sensibilities, and the absorption of future possibilities into a non-conflictual arena that is eternally present. The continuous spectacles of commodity culture, including the commodification of the spectacle itself, play their part in fomenting political indifference. It is either a stupefied nirvana or a totally blasé attitude that is aimed at.[78]

Where Swabhumi differs subtly from the space of the Calcutta International Exhibition is in the fact that it, as a nostalgic stupefaction device,

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[78] David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000)p.168

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does not even attempt to attract the masses to its spectacles. In fact, it actively refuses those whose cultural and monetary capital falls short of the cosmopolitan standard of present participation. Swabhumi is actively exclusionary in the way that the CIE was not. It uncritically takes for granted the blasé attitude the modern metropolis has bequeathed over a long century of fragmentation. Lord Ripon's chastening, and the *Bengalee*'s editorializing betray a certain modernist attempt to address material inequality, however wrapped up they are in a conception of linear history, modern technological progress and atavistic, cultural prejudice. Swabhumi ignores the question of material inequity even as it begs at its entrances, instead preferring infantalizing nostalgias and concrete reifications.

What is it that might account for this shift? We need to look at a commodity space which intervenes in the years between the Exhibition and its contemporary manifestations. To the Metropolitan Building we now turn.

"Yield to Oblivion's touch or Time's defacing hand", or the Metropolitan Building

The temporary tents of the Exhibition framed the old and the new together in a historicist production premised on the aura of authenticity. They enervated the phantasmagoric power of the commodity. The desire these fantastical rooms awoke needed an outlet in a more permanent form of purchase and possession, one perhaps, that as the Viceroy and the Lieutenant-Governor suggest, makes available the modern promise in a more sustained and everyday fashion. This collective desire to consume the extent and wonder of the mass-produced and ready-to-hand found its anodyne a stone's throw from where the exhibition closed its flaps in the "excessive heat" of March 10th, 1884.

In 1882, Sir Robert Laidlaw founded the Whiteaway, Laidlaw Company which would soon become as it billed itself "the most attractive and convenient showroom of the kind in the city."[79] Initially the Whiteaway Laidlaw Company opened a location on the north side of the Maidan in 7 Esplanade East not far from Government House and the Great Eastern Hotel. A small department store when it first opened, it catered almost exclusively to the wealthy Europeans and Bengalis of Calcutta. It proved so successful in its initial ventures that it soon moved on August 5th, 1885, from its location at 7 Esplanade East to a new and palatial site at 4, 5 and 6 Chowringhee Road and Corporation Street.[80]

When the new building opened it was an example of a late arcade cum department store, and its monumental edifice spoke, when it opened, of Occidental hubris, as well as of commemorative imperial continuity and grand cosmopolitan participation. It was built of iron girders throughout and housed four stories of shopping, eating, and accommodations. It attempted to monumentalize the myth of a 19th century imperial permanence, and stood, facing West, at the heart of

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[79] Advertisement in *The Statesman* newspaper, Calcutta, September 12, 1905.

[80] Ranabir Ray Choudhury ed., *Early Calcutta Advertisements 1875-1925: A Selection from The Statesman* (The Statesman: Calcutta, 1992)p.452n16.

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what was then one of the richest streets in the East. It was a premier shopping destination in Calcutta from 1885 till 1947, selling in its halls a universe of novelties: everything from bicycles, to men's and ladies' clothing, to house wares, shoes, toys and innumerable exotic and everyday commodities from throughout the colonial world.

Figure 7.9: Copy of advertisement in *The Statesman* newspaper, February 1885.

Built and designed by Mackintosh Burn, a London based architectural and engineering firm, its style reflected a classic, Victorian commercial aesthetic. The building is a froth of Baroque, Romantic, Palladian, Art Nouveau, and, perhaps even, Mannerist features. Inverting and inventing exterior space, it housed within the multilevel department store, a restaurant and café, as well as in its upper levels, flats, once called Victoria Chambers. Its form gestured to the classical arcade. Covered walkways and glass ceilings, the remnants of which are extant today, accessed the flats on the upper floors. It was as a department store, however, that it enchanted the dream of a city as a world in miniature.[81] It interiorized the street, shutting out the unwanted – the natural elements and their social counterparts – by providing the cosmopolitan world in commodity form for the exclusive, through exclusion. It hid, as the Forum and Swabhumi do today, from the un-containable, and acted, as the Forum and Swabhumi also do today, and as the Exhibition did before, as a globalizing (a "worlding" site) for the domestication of desire. The Whiteaway Laidlaw store was *the* premier shopping destination in Calcutta from the 1880s until 1947. It sold everything one might expect in a luxury department store. At its height it was considered to be the Harrods of the East and the "Store of a Million Gifts." Indeed, it was a colonial arcade and department store similar to the type that fascinated Benjamin, for it was a space entirely devoted to the celebration of the commodity dream.

A 1925 Christmas advertisement (see figure 7.10) in the newspaper, *The Statesman*, then the pre-eminent English language newspaper in Calcutta[82] illustrates the "fairyland dream" of the commodity world that one could find in the Metropolitan Building. The store is sold as "a Fairyland delight filled with

[81] Benjamin (1999)*AP* [A1,1]p.31
[82] *The Statesman* is still extant as an English language daily in Calcutta, but it is a pale shadow of former self.

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joys and joys of joys that no youngster (of 7 or 70) should miss." Interestingly, we see in this ad copy an infantilization of the adult subject as one who might be seduced, child-like, by the commodity dream world. Swabhumi's contemporary infantilism has early colonial precursors. Under the overhead caption, a print "from an actual photograph" of a "story-land zoo" complete with stuffed animals, toys, rocking horses and nativity scenes is shown and valued at Rs. 10,000, an enormous sum of money in 1925.

The store excitedly proclaims its spectacularity with the repeated invocation to "Come and See, Come and See": "The Zoo in a Toy Store", "The Dream o' Dreams Fairy Ship" and "The Real Old Father Christmas." Whiteaway, Laidlaw and Co is constructed and sold as a place where magic materializes through the spectacle of the commodity. Not only is it a place of dreams, but a place where the ultimate dreams, the "dream o' dreams" and the "joys and joys of joys" reside. The implication is, of course, that one could, given the financial capacity, participate in this "sumptuous delight and magic" by buying the dreams on offer.

Figure 7.10: Christmas Advertisement, December 1925, *The Statesman*

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Although noted for its spectacular and luxurious Christmas displays, the department store was a site for everyday consumption, if your consumptive means and needs extended to the latest in motoring hats, wicker chairs, football jerseys, kimonos, "swimming togs", auto bells, "Italian silk Kayser undervests", straw French sailor hats, Flapper style cloche pull on hats, lace cape collorettes and servants' liveries. The Whiteaway Laidlaw Co., was not a place for the "native" masses. Indeed, in its many advertisements, it is the luxurious, and the specifically European or colonial luxury, which is sold. All of the figures and fashions in the advertisements I came across in *The Statesman*'s archives are directed to European customers. The women and men pictured are all represented as European, and the holidays to which sales are directed are also colonial holidays, with Christmas being especially celebrated by these sales.

Figure 7.11: Whiteaway, Laidlaw and Co ad for football jerseys, *The Statesman* July, 1890

Figure 7.12: Whiteaway, Laidlaw and Co. ad for Servants' Livery, *The Statesman*, November 1902

The only non-European figure I found in numerous Whiteaway, Laidlaw and Co. advertising representations was pictured in November of 1902. It depicts a sketch (see figure 13 at left) of a barefoot, Indian man servant dressed in a long robe of South Asian styling who is wearing a turban and a beard. In the context of the other myriad advertisements which all represent Europeans and European fashions, it can be suggested that the Whiteaway, Laidlaw Co. store saw itself very much in an urban cultural milieu in which those with surplus capital were not racially South Asian. Indeed, the South Asian, if this advertisement is any indication, were considered the servant classes to the European.

It is interesting to note that the Indian servant pictured in Figure 11 is barefoot. Numerous advertisements for shoes, men's and women's, are amongst *The Statesman's* advertisement collection. Shoes play a special part in racial and civilizational signification. Urban Europeans, and other foreigners from supposedly more

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civilized climes (I.e. North America) did not, generally, wear sandals which were considered the characteristic footwear worn by a person of South Asian origin—peasants and natives of lower class, certainly not gentlemen. The ads for shoes often emphasized the fact that they were not made in India, and were instead from Italy, or made with "British Labour" only. The implication communicated by these ads was that shoes were markers of civilized, cosmopolitan modernity.

A similar participatory modernity was also communicated by the many ads for men's business and leisure suits. Although at the time in Calcutta Bengali

Figure 7.13: Advertisement in *The Statesman*, 1905

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merchants and business men were amongst the most successful and wealthy, all of the men and fashions pictured in the ads are distinctly European, and the suits sold as being made of the most luxurious cloths and finest of materials. Cosmopolitan consumptive participation in leisure and modernity was also communicated by ads for such diverse commodities as "real Japanese kimonos, Specially Suitable for Gentlemen's hot weather dressing gowns" (April 1905), ladies motoring hats, "The Traveller", "The Brighton" and "The Express" (September 1905), and for wicker or cane chairs from China (October 1901).

Walter Benjamin notes that "for the first time in history, with the department stores, consumers begin to consider themselves a mass. (Earlier it was only scarcity that taught them that.)"[83] The self-representational discourse produced the Whiteaway, Laidlaw and Co. department store in its advertising communicates a different type or conception of mass belonging than that produced around the ambiguous rhetoric of the Calcutta International Exhibition. With the department store you begin to see, in the advertised appearance of readily available mass-produced commodities, a shift to a participatory modernity premised in the capacity for purely consumptive modern participation. The mass is now the mass that can buy leisure, luxury items and a world luxuriously mediated. Those who cannot are either servants for the mass, or completely forgotten altogether. The use, in the period ads, of pronouns like "You", or commands like "You Must Go" or "Ask Us" personalize the viewer's involvement in a wider cultural dialogue of collective consumptive participation, one that takes for granted a mass belonging, and one that also takes for granted the commodified mediation of living through leisured consumption. The world is no longer figured as that which resists and which must be struggled against. Rather it is regarded as an earthly trifle or nuisance which can be made amenable to ones somewhat bored will should the need arise. But to meet that need, there is the latest domestic novelty.

Gone are the International Exhibition's industrial spectacles of steam engines and agricultural products. Instead the participatory framework is completely de-lineated by urbanized dwelling and its things, the accoutrements of a domesticated urban lifestyle. Leisure goods and leisure fashions reign paramount. The production of a mass through the department store landscape of the commodity is further entrenched, racially stratified and geographically delineated through the Whiteaway, Laidlaw and Co's emphasis on fixed prices. The practice of fixing prices demarcated a modern European urban boundary from the more traditional South Asian topography of the bazaar. In the "outside" bazaar bargaining is, and was, the norm. Prices vary depending on any number of factors including your relation to the shop keeper, your cultural community, your ethnicity and language, your gullibility, your wit and smarts in striking a bargain, your charismatic persona, etc. But the department store eradicates these contingencies from the colonial experience of shopping. This is due to a number of factors including the mass production of artefacts. Fixing prices in an exclusive

[83] Benjamin (1999)*AP* [A4,1]p.43

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and exclusionary "inside" landscape and moral universe of commodities materializes the social desire to foster urban civility amidst a landscape of colonial foreignness and perceived barbarity. Thus, everyone who can afford a desired object pays the same amount. This, of course, has an effect on mass class stratification. If you want to procure novelty objects in the department store space, you have to pay for them like everyone else, which also means participating in a similar social class, and playing a particular socio-economic game. In Calcutta at the turn of the 20th century, this participation had racial boundaries, as we have seen communicated through things like advertisements, and no doubt,

Figure 7.14: Advertisement in *The Statesman*, September, 1905

Figure 7.15: *The Statesman*, March 1890

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these boundaries were maintained by the exclusionary space the Whiteaway, Laidlaw building erected.

The presence of the Whiteaway, Laidlaw Co building and department store in Calcutta represented a thoroughly urban and urbanizing face to the commodity dream. The Calcutta International Exhibition explicitly tried to mediate the city and the country, and so urbanize, through the spectacle of the commodity and the industrial wonders of modernity, the native mind. The country still had a place for the Exhibition, but its place was already one beginning to be framed and produced through the narratives of urban modernity: the commodity, industry, and nationalism. The department store takes the commodity dream and its narratives of progress one step further and incorporates modern participation fully through the material landscape of urban domesticity. The assumption is that progress, embodied by the permanent universe of the commodity and its ever renewing spectacular plethora, is a given. Bored at having conquered the earth and its (barbaric) peoples we can now play in the glow of our amused success. The country or non-urban entirely disappears, and if it does appear, does so as something to be leisurely consumed, as with, for instance, ads for swim wear or for motoring hats, all the better and more comfortable to traverse ones conquered terrain. Corresponding with this intensification of a socialized urbanization through the entrenchment of the commodity apparatus and its fetishized participation, social exclusion within the commodity spaces becomes exaggerated. The "native mind" and part of the country (why else would Lord Ripon suggest that they needed educating in industrial agriculture) constructed as a mass by the CIE, disappears and is instead represented as a servant to the modern consumer. The excluded native and thus country is what works; the city is what plays—why else would seventy year olds be interested in fairylands of toys?

What is most evident in the more permanent shift from the commodity institution of the Exhibition to the commodity institution of the department store is a corresponding shift from interests in commerce to those of leisure. The CIE had, as one of its main goals, the securing of long term commercial trading interests, and therein, of educating a newly formed sub-continental mass in a modern global development. In the Exhibition, the commodity was still tied to public narratives of being useful, hence Lord Ripon's criticism that the Exhibition was more luxurious than practical. But, the department store has as its main object the securing of "convenience" and "lifestyle" through the fetish of the commodity, and so forgets or ignores that aspect of work and materiality which give us pause to reflect in mourning and melancholia on transience, fragility and death.

> With the disappearance of the obstacle...mourning also disappears, and just as the dramatic structure is emptied, so too is the scenic structure, which looks elsewhere for

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> its justification, now that allegory, where it is not omitted, has become a hollow façade.[84]

The department store, in forgetting and ignoring the work of remembrance and mourning, in Benjamin's phrase, liberates itself from the "servitude of being useful."[85] And it is with this foregoing and excluding of the promise latent within the modern that history grinds to a halt for Benjamin. The utopian possibility of the material collapses and we come to play about in departments of signs, exchanging, consuming and throwing away, more concerned with what the commodity says of us, than what we can do with the commodity. We become, says Benjamin, bored, and "we are bored when we don't know what we are waiting for."[86] In a sense, the CIE knew what it was waiting for, but couched such promises in the rhetoric of the commodity and the display of useful things. The department store no longer knows of that for which it waits, but simply reiterates the dream and fairy land fantasy over and over again through the constant luxurious circulation of the latest novelties and fashions.

Boredom and luxury are intimately interwoven for Benjamin. "Boredom is a warm grey fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream. We are at home then in the arabesques of its lining."[87] It is precisely through the exclusion and forgetting of materiality in luxury that we fall most fully into the dream-sleep of the phantasmagoric fetish. The always latent ruin within the commodity is forgotten, and indeed, actively ignored in favour of the latest and newest which only tightens the grip of the dream. The Whiteaway, Laidlaw and Co's department store attempted to fuse the dream of the city, fully designed and imaginatively realized, with the commodity in a fairyland or fantasy-scape of modernity which actively refused (literally and figuratively) its earthly profanity in which inhered its proximate, but always othered, face.

☙

"...cell of the city's architecture"[88]

As Benjamin's work in and through the allegorical gaze is at pains to emphasize, "*tempus edax rerum*" (Time devours all things). The forlorn promises of the allegorical gaze, its "rags of time"[89] pronouncements, are evident in the place of the once regal department store and arcade. Today, the Metropolitan

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[84] Benjamin (1998)p.213
[85] Benjamin as quoted in Missac (1995)p.191
[86] Benjamin (1999) *AP* [D2,7]p.105
[87] Ibid. [D2a,1]p.105-06
[88] Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, "Naples" in *Selected Writings Vol.1 1913-1926* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge Mass. and London, 1996)p.414-21.
[89] See John Donne's poem *The Sun Rising* collected in, *A Poet's Choice* by Elizabeth Jennings (Carcanet: Manchester, 1996)p.18-19.

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Building, a few short underground metro stops north of the new Forum, is a working ruin, something Janam's aunt might recognize as a part of her homely landscape. I visited the ruinous building many times and became enthralled with its ghostly, sarcophagal presence.

Trees grow from its façade; its insides have been gutted, hollowed out, the iron girders in the ceilings, like ribs, exposed. Halls, once teeming with shoppers and goods and dreams from around the world, are empty. Piles of masonry rubble and crumbling columns speak little of its once former splendour. Wooden stairs are cracked and precarious. The elevator, a caged wrought iron mechanism complete with pulleys and levers, stands idle and broken. When it rains, water pours down through the roof and upper floors. Its arched windows are cracked, yellowed and broken. They emit a jaundiced light that falls on the still, dusty floors as the noise of the city outside continues. Billboards across the street are latticed through the windows by their rusted ironwork—fragmented white teeth smiles for 'Pepsi', 'Time Pass' animal crackers, 'Reliance' mobile services, and a child (always a child, all the better to proclaim your innocence of betrayal) for the Life Insurance Corporation of India. Reminiscent of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, a once—and still—beautiful Art Nouveau stained glass bay window above the Chowringhee entrance is broken and almost beyond repair.[90] Inset in the window, heralded by writhing flowers and bathed in yellowed light, a bust of some worthy colonial gentleman has been defaced by surrealist vandals. They have painted him in a white beard and crowned him with a flowerpot for a hat.

After Independence and the subsequent vacancy of the Whiteaway, Laidlaw and Co department store, the building was bought by the 'Metropolitan Insurance Company' (hence its current moniker as "Metropolitan Building"). It housed for a few years the American Embassy and KLM airlines. They too vacated. In 1956 the building's title was transferred to the Life Insurance Company of India, which owns the building today. In 2001, an almost irretrievable ruin, the building, considered an iconic and significant expression of colonial history, was placed on the 100 most endangered buildings list by the World Monument Fund. Due to inaction and the mismanagement of funds, it has since been removed from the list, although today efforts to renovate the exterior façade and interior halls are, as I have mentioned, underway. The renovation itself, undertaken with the expressed intent of replicating original construction techniques, signifies history's immanent betrayal of industrial and commodity dreams. Why else mimic as closely as possible the past if not to repeat it?

> As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations.[91]

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[90] I have since learned that the renovators broke the period leaded stain glass with hammers and have replaced the window with commercial clear glass.
[91] Benjamin and Lacis, "Naples" (1996)p.416

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Today, the Metropolitan Building, like its parent city, though in condensed miniature, is a palimpsest traced over by its multiple users, contexts and histories. The Allahabad Bank operates a small outlet. One steps dangerously over a hole to the bottom level at the bank's 2nd floor entrance. In a ground level corner, a dreary nationalised craft emporium sells souvenirs and folk art to tourists, Indian and foreign alike. Here now are the indigenized commodities, piled in musty, unappealing bunches, dusty and forlorn, that the Exhibition first narrativized those many years ago. In an upper tiny room, a small gallery offers intermittent viewings to local visual artists' work. Laundry hangs from balconies underneath an iron sign—Life Insurance For Security—and a broken clock. Time stands still.

On another upper floor, facing the Maidan, and one of the city's main transportation hubs and the tram depot, and in the distance the viceroy's palace (now home to the governor of West Bengal), a well to do family maintains an incongruously opulent flat. Their neighbours are the homeless, migrant labourers, and home servants who have claimed squatter's rights. An unmanned, though functionally complete, legal office whose notice of eviction is faded by time opens onto one of the old glass hallways. A few small enterprises (a soap works, an export office, and a trade-licensing office) maintain addresses, although on my many visits I never once saw anyone there. Peering through a hole in a wall I saw an office complete with desk and chair and telephone at the ready, covered with dust; an oil painting of an Edwardian colonial gazed impassively on the still-life commercial scene. I chanced one day upon Life Insurance of India Corporation employees and their families having a staff picnic in a dreary, dilapidated back room. They stepped over piles of rubble strewn by the apathetic and aimless attempts at restoration as they collected and ate their lunch packets. A migrant Bihari family working on the restorations lived in one of the upper bay windows. The youngest boy spent his days staring out on the organized confusion of the Esplanade's underground entrances and the hawkers below.

Outside and surrounding the Metropolitan Building the footpaths and the streets have, in good allegorical fashion, re-claimed the commodities and their sellers, the same street which was interiorized by the department store in the "bourgeoisiement", as Benjamin called it, of the collective, commodity dream spaces. These footpaths are everyday scored by hawkers who sell jeans, tee-shirts, deodorants, photo albums, toys, watches, all the things that the arcade, in whose shadow they set up temporary shop, once sold. The dreams of leisure have now become mechanisms of coping. Maybe they always were. On Saturday's the stalls and their sidewalk homes are packed with shoppers. It is difficult to move down the crowded footpaths. But inside, once teeming with shoppers and dreamers, the ruined halls of the arcade are eerily quiet, a melancholic, cool refuge from the mad traffic blaring outside.

The façade of the building is today plastered with movie posters, advertisements, banners and political leaflets. Day labourers, carpenters mostly, gather in the mornings to be hired, or not, on its south west corner. Children play cricket in its back entrance. Men casually urinate in corners, or against the bamboo renovation scaffolding. Trees, those interpenetrative, redemptive, earthly

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and serendipitous gestures to the impossible grow from cracks in the building's modern façade.

The Metropolitan building encapsulates and exemplifies Benjamin's allegory of the ruin laying bare history in its own representation. As a ruined "city in miniature" the Metropolitan building visualizes, as Benjamin argues the allegorical gaze must, the visible and the invisible.[92] "History here presents itself to vision in ambivalences fixed to a series of catastrophic scenes, frozen, fixed in images."[93] The building materializes the discontinuous structure of a series of moments – transitory, failed attempts to capture the continuity and permanence of meaning and design against the world.[94] It is the porous city in miniature, a "cell of the city's architecture."[95] As with the larger metropolis, "one can scarcely discern where building is still in progress and where dilapidation has already set in."[96] The public and private intermingle, spaces and times layer in the present, but all are dominated by the exchange and exhibition value of the commodity.

Figure 7.16: Metropolitan Building, Kolkata. April 2003. Photo by Author.

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[92] "Considered in allegorical terms…the profane world is both elevated and devalued. This religious dialectic of content has its formal correlative in the dialectic of convention and expression." Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1998)p.175.
[93] Buci-Glucksmann (1994)p. 103.
[94] Gilloch (1994)p.136
[95] Benjamin (1996) "Naples"p.416
[96] Ibid.

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Figure 7.17: Metropolitan Exterior from Jawaharlal Nehru Road. February 2004. Photo by Author.

Figure 7.18: Interior of Metropolitan Building. February 2004. Photo by Author.

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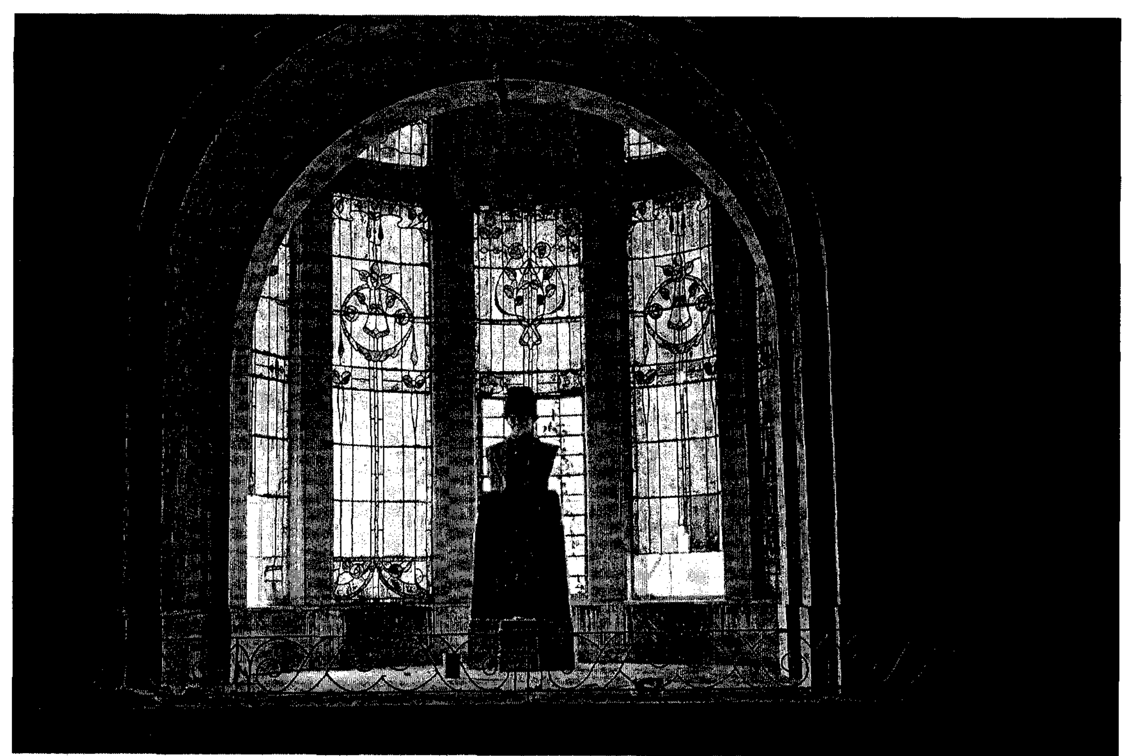

Figure 7.19: Art Nouveau Bay Window, Metropolitan Building. February 2004. Photo by Author.

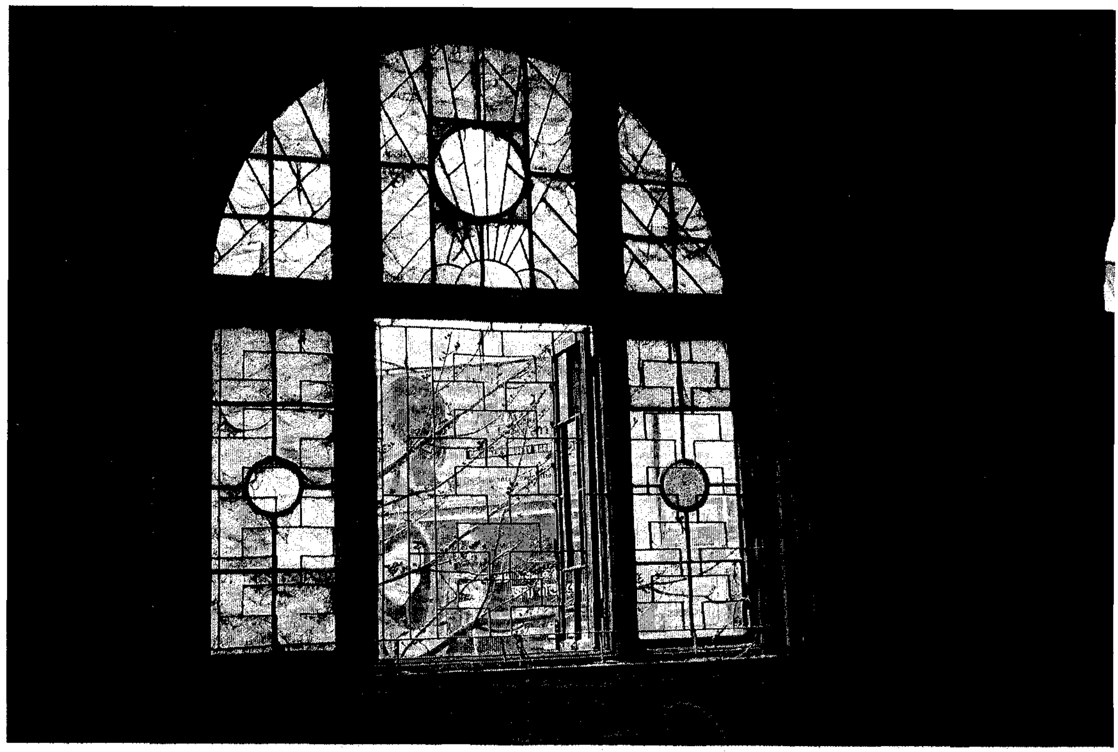

Figure 7.20: Billboards through south window. February 2004. Photo by Author.

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Figure 7.21: West entrance with hawkers and posters. February 2004. Photo by Author.

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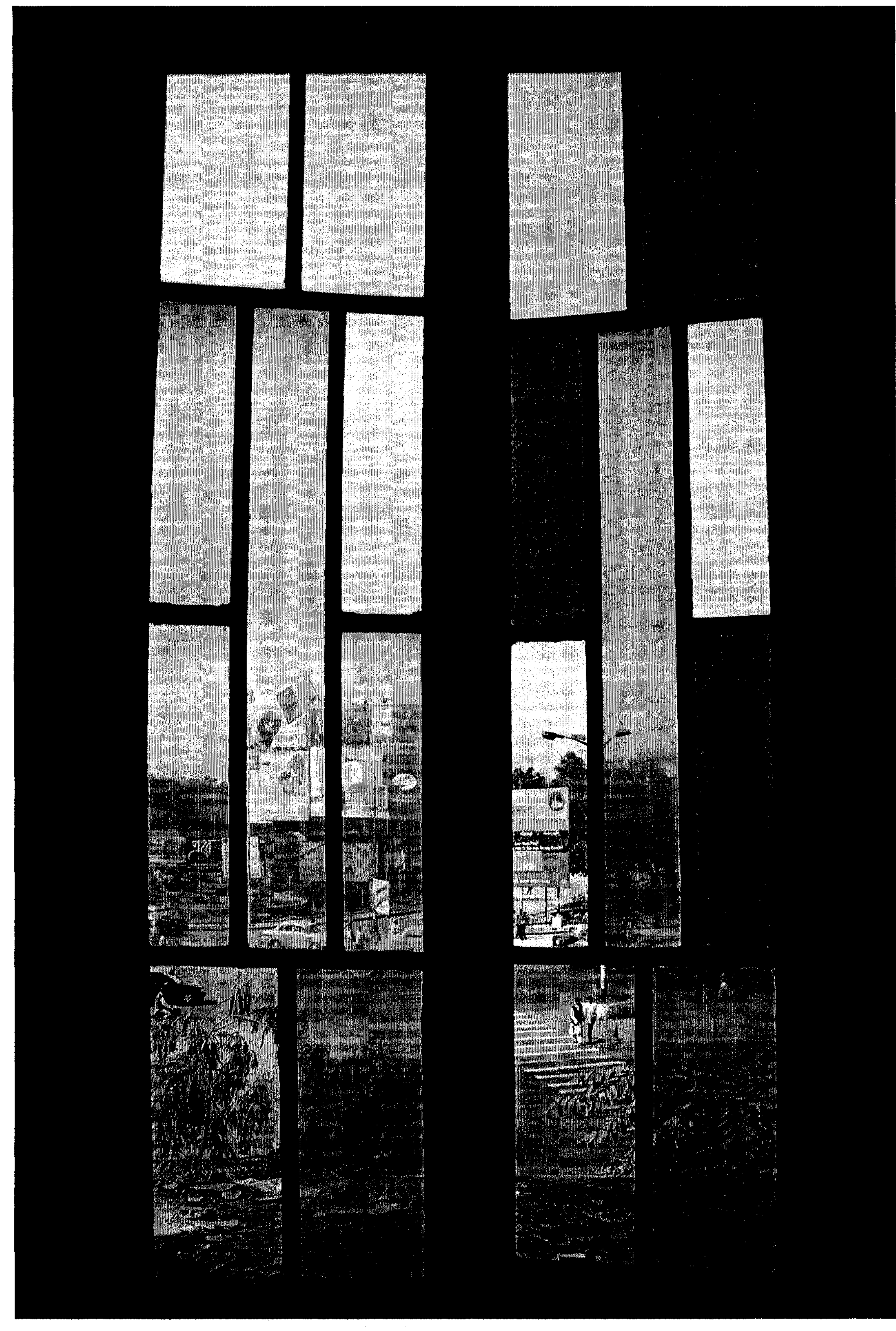

Figure 7.22: Looking West. Second Floor. February 2004. Photo by Author.

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Figure 7.23: Interior Hall. February 2004. Photo by Author.

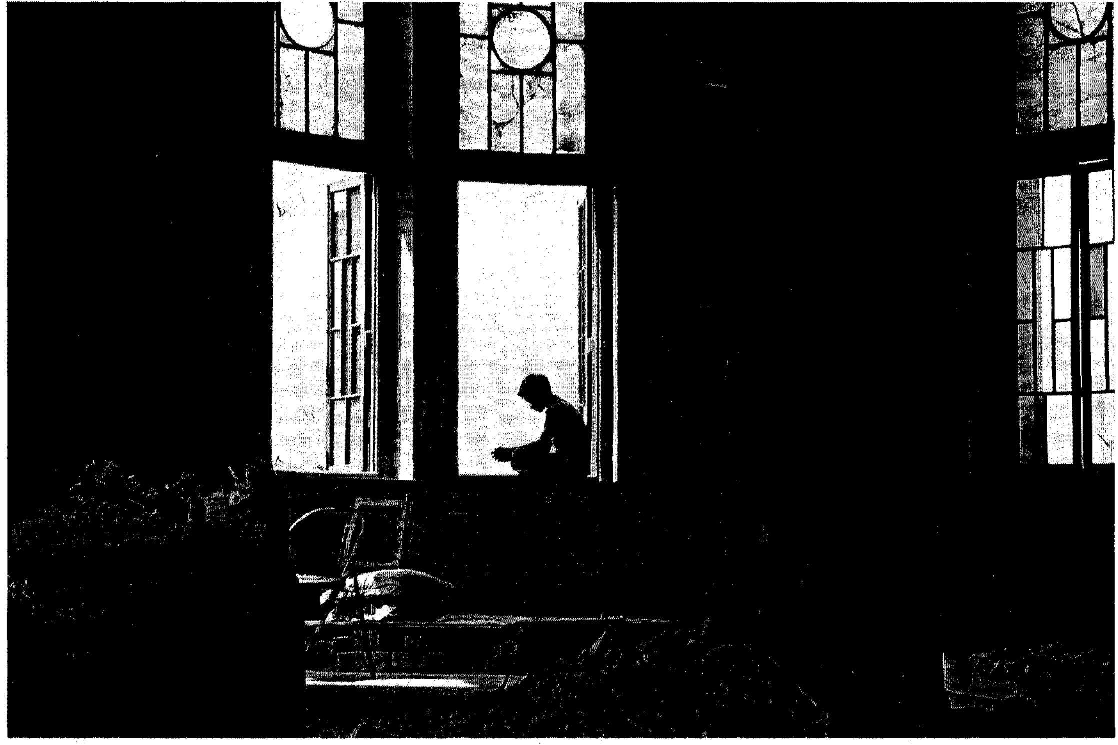

Figure 7.24: Bihari boy in bay window. February 2004. Photo by Author.

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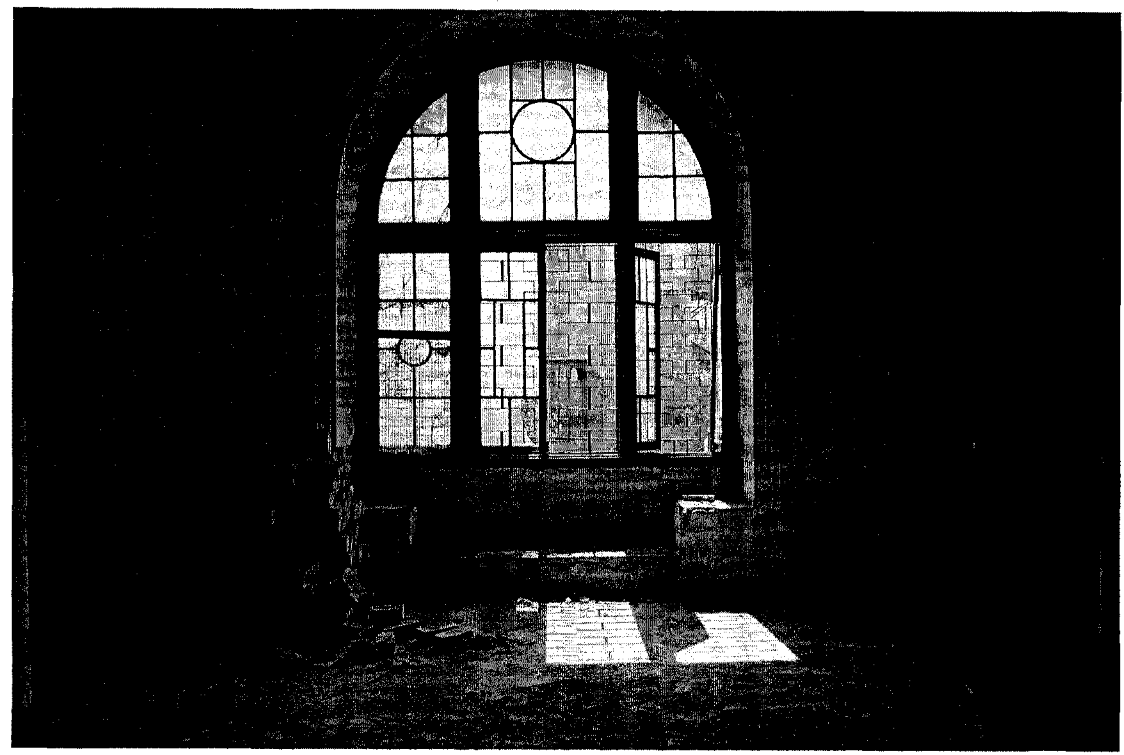

Figure 7.25: Silence and dust. February 2004. Photo by Author.

Figure 7.26: Debris piles, interior. February 2004. Photo by Author.

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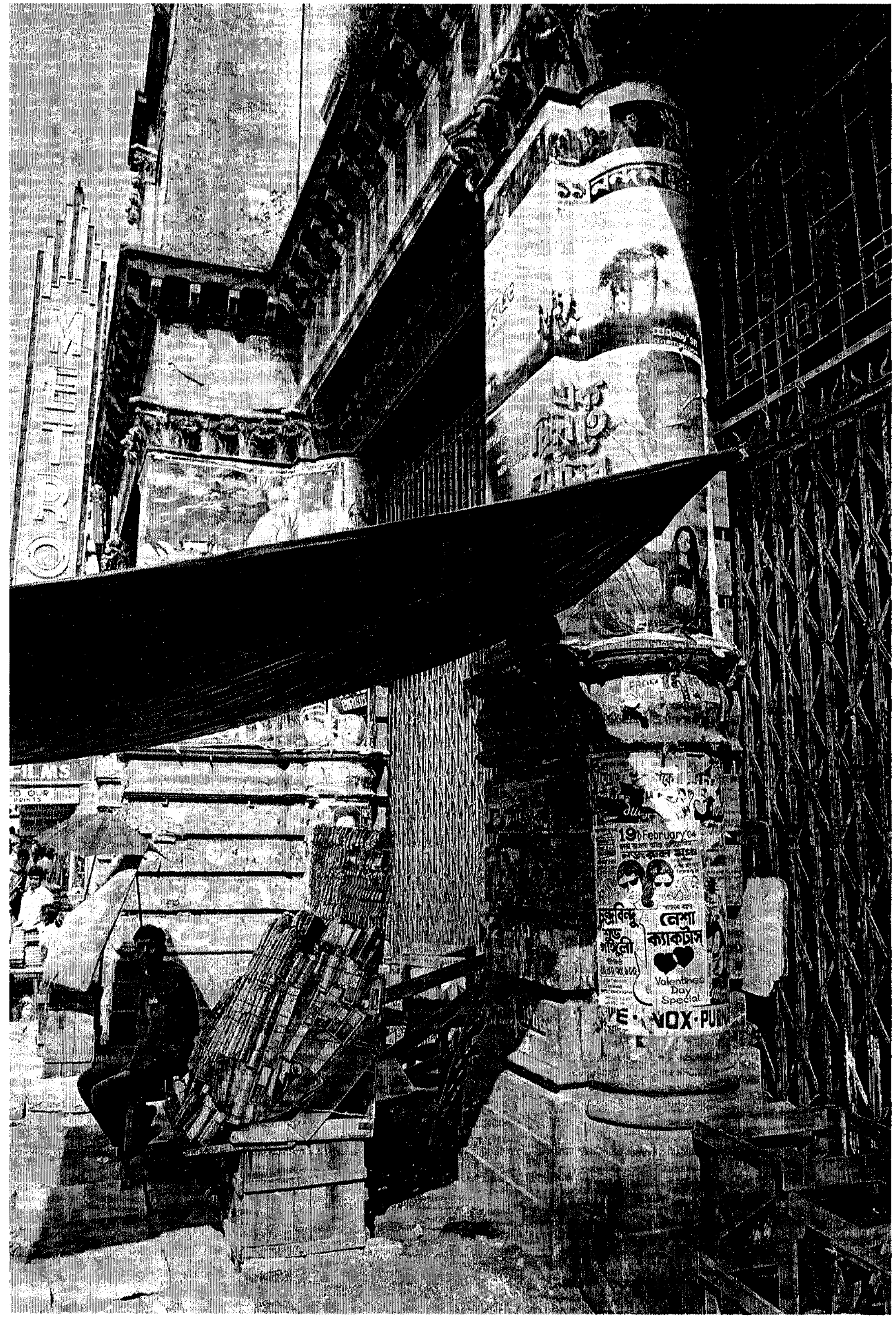

Figure 7.27: Hawker selling contraband from Bangladesh in shadow of Metropolitan Building. February 2004. Photo by Author.

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Unitech's 'Uniworld City'

> The development of the forces of production reduced the wish symbols of the previous century to rubble even before the monuments representing them had crumbled.[97]

Janam's aunt's judgements, together with the presence of the new malls like Swabhumi and the Forum, and their growing counterparts, point to the return of certain faces to the many faced Kolkata. Since the middle of the 1990's the idea of what the Indian city should be, and should look like, is in the process of being re-worked by the global image of the post-industrial city populated by an urban and increasingly affluent middle class. Kolkata is today becoming more service dominated, driven by the storms of global finance rather than by the industrializations of post-independence. The effect of these supposedly new changes is that the city space is differentiating itself, despite functional interconnections. New managerial classes are segregating themselves physically, in spaces like the Forum, from what is perceived to be local and undesirable. Large sections of the population, like that of *jethi ma's* impoverished, overworked and beleaguered family, are increasingly shut out of such places, and, indeed, regarded as, if not completely socially insignificant, then marginal at best, and socially and politically disruptive at worst. As we have seen Partha Chatterjee comment, such new spaces "have more in common with anonymous, globalized spaces of capital than they do with the local cultural contexts into which they are imported, and against which they stand as spaces of difference,"[98] hence, *Jethi Ma*'s invocation that "It doesn't feel like here."

Colonial ruins and their present masked forms evidence a repetition, in Eagleton's words, "so agonizingly empty"[99] that it is increasingly difficult to imagine a possibility other than the nostalgias which conflate liberal historiography with colonial idylls and bourgeois commodity culture. Evidence of a culture of immanent nostalgia abounds in contemporary Kolkata: from the heritage theme-park of Swabhumi where one can re-discover identity by buying folk-art t-shirts, to the Sunday mausoleum seriousness which surrounds the Victoria Memorial, to the self-congratulatory renovations of the Metropolitan building, to the gated, glass and steel mini-cities and malls sprouting up around the city, developments whose many storied walls rise above the ever expanding waste of modernity. These nostalgias are neither revolutionary nor redemptive ones, despite Bengal being ruled by an ostensibly communist government since 1977. They continue, rather, Samuel Bourne's picturesque reminiscences of the future by inventing grander and more elaborate designs on the future. However,

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[97] Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" in *Reflections* trans. Edmund Jephcott (Schoken: New York, 1978)p.161

[98] Chatterjee (2004)p.146

[99] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Verso: London, 1990) pp. 316-340

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as Benjamin and the ruin remind us, it is precisely this attempt, again, an attempt which is constituted by the modern urban apparatus, which is our catastrophe.[100]

☙

In one sense, these new manifestations are not "here", in Kolkata. They try to resurrect the commodity dream of the modern city precisely by forgetting its local and difficult past, a face whose histories insist on the remembering the presence and inevitability of the *facie hippocratica.* Instead, these new constructions attempt to condense and rearticulate the world through the commodity dreamscape of infinite malleability. The world now is the commodity to be packaged, sold and consumed. The promotional literature for "Uniworld City Heights", a new development currently being built on the outskirts of Kolkata makes this effort at complete commoditization and spatial forgetting explicit.

> Come Home to the World—UniWorld City...a place where you can rediscover the magic of long walks in the moonlight, the indulgence of western architecture, the oriental charm of Asia and fine elements of American lifestyle. Experience an oasis with wide open, traffic free spaces, yet so close to business centers, malls and entertainment hubs. A world created with the vision to bring the best in the world to India. Enter the world of UniWorld City.[101]

This project in Kolkata by India's largest development company, 'UniTech Development Group', is part of a larger framework of infrastructural urbanisation precisely premised on a totalizing model of commodity driven modern urban development. Unitech's corporate "Philosophy" is, again, unflinchingly direct.

> Together with our customers we are helping to build whole communities across India. From Mumbai to Delhi, millions of families live in a Unitech home or work from a Unitech office. They drive along our roads and rest in our hotels. Children learn about the world from our classrooms while residents unwind in one of our many clubhouses. Soon they will be shopping in our malls or having fun at a Unitech theme park. We are proud to

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[100] Benjamin, "Central Park" (1984)p.51, and see also Dianne Chisholm, *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (University of Minnesota Press: Minnesota and London, 2005)p.256.
[101] http://www.unitechgroup.com/projects/residential/kolkata/unitech_heights/index.shtml

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> touch the lives of so many. We are proud to be India's leading property developer.[102]

Were one to buy an apartment (for an average of 3.5 million INR) and live in Uniworld City Heights, one would enter an ostensibly fully contained and packaged world as city/city as world. Behind the walls of the city, the allegorical, the supplementary and the porous are explicitly expunged and militated against. Manicured with theme zones and water bodies the "placid" grounds situate your home behind walls equipped with "audio communication from the guard unit to respective apartments", "panic alarms"; "barrier protected Proximity Card access for cars" ; "CCTV Surveillance" and "24-hour digital video recording surveillance of select entry points."[103]

Your boredom will be placated by "a swimming pool, kids splash pool, spa room, banquet facility, air conditioned squash court with imported playing surface, indoor badminton court with imported playing surface cum multi purpose room, 100% power back-up state of the art gymnasium, multi-media room with a capacity of 20 people with state of the art theatre projection, steam & sauna, multi cuisine café, kid's play area both wet & dry with imported equipments, games room – pool, billiards, cards, business centre, flood lit tennis court, dedicated area for aerobics & yoga, common lounge area and pool area along with landscaped sit-out and hi-fi connectivity."[104] The work and texture that the world and the Real constitute have been flattened in a pure consumptive experience of dwelling.

Benjamin's figure of the ruin fought mightily against such fascisms. For Benjamin, the critical allegory of ruin, personified and materialized here by the space of the Metropolitan Building, visualizes both immanent destruction and dreamt redemption. As he writes of the ruin in the *Trauerspiel*, the figure of decay points to something else, "a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them to a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them."[105] In his essay "Naples", written at the same time as he was writing the *Trauerspiel*, he seems to suggest that the poor, those many who surround the Metropolitan Building with their stalls selling jeans, pyjamas, deodorant, photo albums and themselves, somehow, in the porous shadow of the ruin, participate in this gesturing towards sanctity, towards a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations." The porosity which "poverty" imbricates, he writes, "has brought about a stretching of frontiers that mirrors the most radiant freedom of thought."[106] Participation in modern porosity "preserves the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations."[107]

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[102] http://www.unitechgroup.com/company/philosophy.shtml
[103] http://www.unitechgroup.com/projects/residential/kolkata/unitech_heights/index.shtml - June 21, 2006
[104] http://www.axiomestates.com/uniworld.htm - June 21, 2006
[105] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1998)p.175
[106] Benjamin, "Naples" (1996) p.420
[107] Ibid.p.416

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Would that this were so. Those poor who mingle the spaces and times of the building and the city are not filled with the radiance of some improvisational empowerment. What is redemptive about the fact that the rubble they gather up is reused to sell more of the same? They too are caught in the catastrophe of things. Their lives are determined by the flux and wane of commodity wish-images and the dreams they communicate, even as they parasitize, necessarily, the structures and dreams of more permanent and exclusive structures.

The porous ruin of the Metropolitan Building is emblematic of both the latent catastrophe at the heart of modernity, some of which has yet to play itself out, and of the recurrences of the ever-same, the transient passage of novelty into what it attempts to overcome. More than just an image of things to come, the Metropolitan Building is, today, a space of improvisation, but it is, as such, of coping with a world which never goes as we might hope. If there is any redemption to be found in its ruinous presence, then perhaps it is limited only to the resilience which comes from that always already tragic human coping within the continuation of the ever-same.

Benjamin also wrote that so long as there is still a single beggar, there is still myth.[108] The beggars, and those who struggle to cope by turning the arcade into a street and the street into an arcade still labour under conditions which are determined by mythic modern urban imperatives. They are forced to behave in urban ways.[109] My point about urbanisation's saturation of the phenomenal lifeworld is just that global social and ethical horizons are now spatialized ever more by the commodity and technological conditions for the possibility of modernity. These horizons take shape in and through the modern urbanity and instrumental technicity materialized by Uniworld City. We are impoverished now, more than ever before, of the possible conditions for thinking otherwise, and this impoverishment is a reduction and tightening of moral and conceptual horizons. We are actively engaged in forgetting and eradicating other means of mediating and dwelling within the collective experience of being human. Our lived and imaginative horizons are increasingly populated by the image and presence of the modern city and our capacity to resist and change these conditions is diminished.

The tension between the figure of the beggar as both gesture to the beyond and impossible present mirrors Benjamin's well known tension between historical and messianic time. Benjamin attempted, as Adorno wrote, to engage the "obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically."[110] If the aim of the dialectical image was to blast the historical object out of the continuum of history[111], and so within the ruins and from the rubble of history, reconstruct a material lifeworld which does not have the beggar as its child, then something needs to guide the reconconstruction. But what? If we were to resolve this

[108] As quoted by Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (Verso: New York and London, [1951] 2005)p.199
[109] Pile (2005)p.1
[110] Adorno (2005)p.152.
[111] Benjamin (1999)*AP* [N10a,2]p.595

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tension, then would the imposition of meaning betray the critical insight of the dialectical image in the first place? Is this not why Benjamin began the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" of his *Trauerspiel* with Goethe's insight that wholeness is not possible?

> Neither in knowledge nor in reflection can anything whole be put together, since in the former the internal is missing, and in the latter, the external; and so we must necessarily think of science as art if we expect to derive any kind of wholeness from it.[112]

The art that Benjamin might recognize as suitable to the task of reflexive representation would be fundamentally a fragmentary one; like experience itself. "For the world is deeply ailing"[113], if not broken, and it cannot be put whole. We must cope with that tragedy. How we cope might go some way to dulling the edges of the fragments. I simply submit, and perhaps Benjamin would concur, that the phenomenological horizon of the modern technological and urban lifeworld is reaching a point of saturation such that the conditions for the possibility to think otherwise, through the work of difference, are becoming muted, and are fast disappearing. This perhaps has always already been our peculiar tragedy. Fragments need to be retooled, and in order to cope, we need a tool box other than the one provided by the conditions which produce our returning present.

[112] Benjamin (1998)p.27
[113] Adorno (2005)p.200

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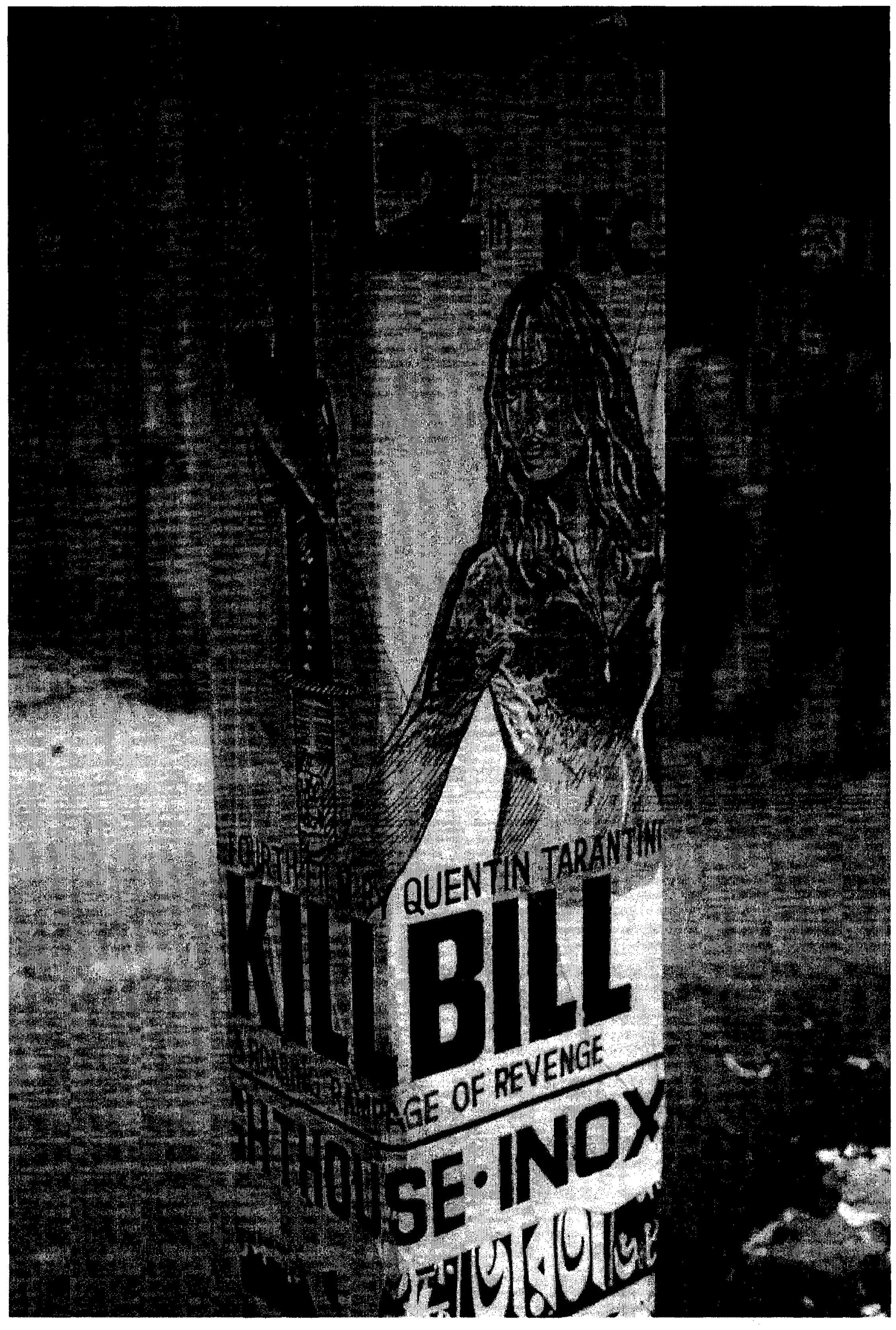

Figure 7.28: "Kill Bill" movie poster. Rash Behari Road. Photo by Author.

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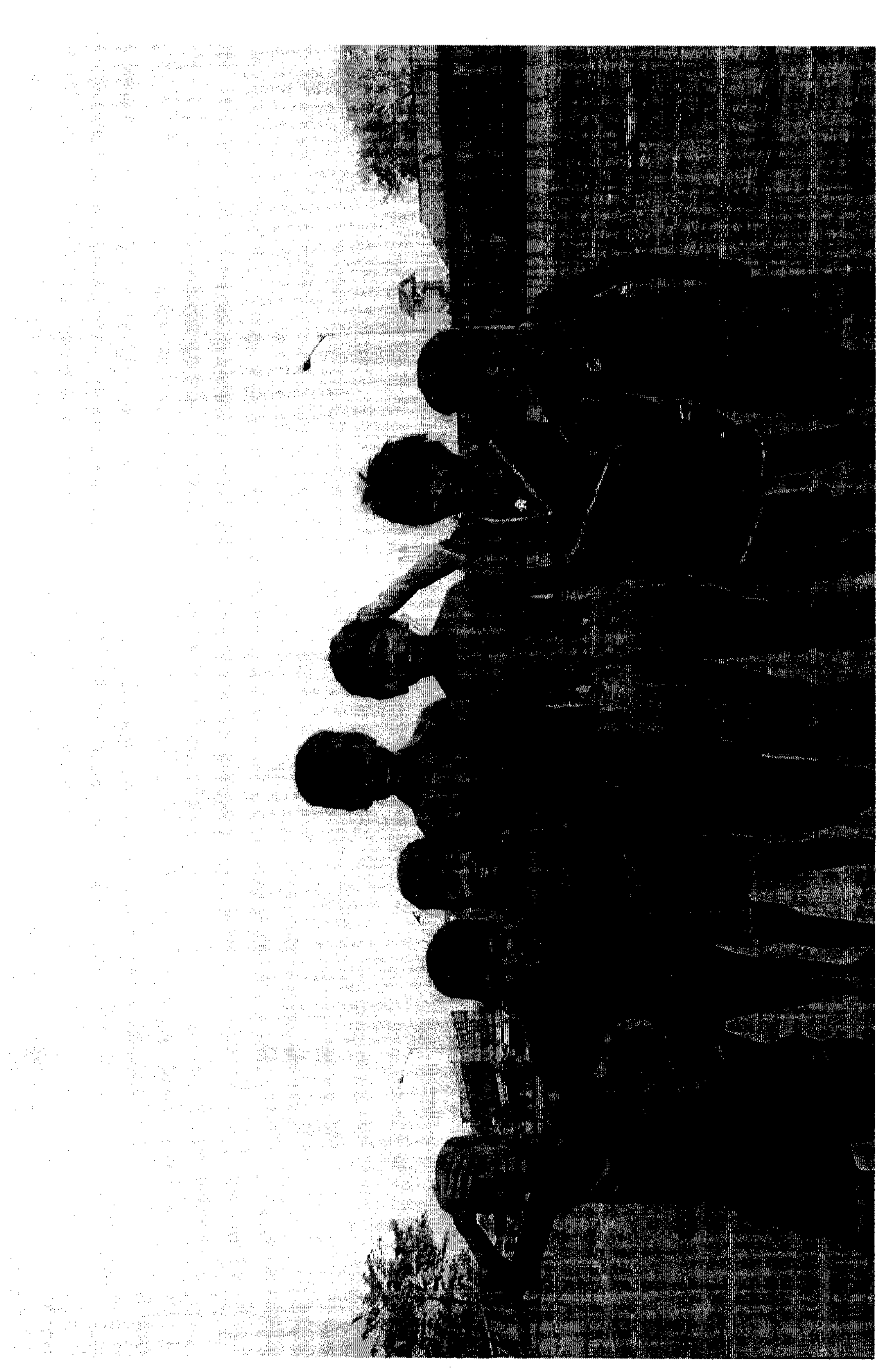

Plate 5: Children near Diamond Harbour. January, 2004. Photo by Author.

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Muhammed Samir wakes early. The stillness of the still sleeping city surrounds him as he lies quietly, high above the street, in a small room in the world. Careful not to wake his wife and son next to him, and careful not to wake his mother asleep beneath, he lowers himself to the cool, concrete floor. Twelve by sixteen feet is all the room his family really needs, or has. He can hear his mother sleeping and he can make out her back beneath the bed. Cursing to himself in the dark as he fumbles with the steel clasp on the green wooden door, afraid that he will wake his little sleeping family, Sami steps out over the threshold.

Outside it is still dark, although the sky is beginning to intimate the grey of dawn. The city is quiet below him. There is a slight chill in the air. Soon it will be warm. A crow is perched on the ledge which surrounds the building. Sami listens. Pigeons are cooing on the window sills below the roof. Below them he can hear someone creaking a hand pump and water splashing. A taxi rumbles around the Park Circus roundabout—then quiet. The laundry line and its few sheets, a shirt upside down, its arms in a motionless flail for the ground, hangs limp and still in front of him. No-one else is awake.

Shuffling about a pile at the doorway, Sami can't locate his sandals. One of the children must have moved them last night. Deciding he doesn't need them, he pads around the corner to the toilet. The smooth swept floor of the roof, that subtle boundary of home, gives way, as he turns the corner, to the sensation of a few pebbles under his feet. He walks towards the toilet at the back of the flat expanse that makes up the roof of the building on which he lives.

Sami lives on the roof of an eight story building. His small room is one of a dozen or more similar rooms shared by, this morning at least, sixty three people. The numbers fluctuate depending on who is off visiting the village, or who is visiting from the village. Some of the families are related, most are not. Sami's brother also lives on the roof with his wife and three children. A few of the people with whom he shares the roof are from as far away as Andhra Pradesh. Though he can speak four or five languages and several dialects, when the family from Andhra talk amongst themselves at night after they eat their different food, Sami can't understand what they are saying.

The roof is a good place to live. It is away from the maelstrom of the street. It is relatively private. People respect, for the most part, one another's space. Not much heed is given to the fact that Muslims and Hindus and three Christians share the rooms on the roof. Sami's wife cooks beef when they have the money. Nobody seems much to mind. The roof is difficult in the summer when the heat pounds through the sheet metal. Then, everyone sleeps on mats outside under the moon. The roof has drains and is sloped nicely so that the rainwater runs away quickly. Much better than being below. Some of the homes around the bottom on the street are flooded when it rains heavily. Sami is happy on the roof; one day they might have enough for their own room inside a building, but for now, the roof is fine.

The floor of the toilet is damp on his feet and Sami wishes he had found his plastic sandals. It is dark inside but he can make out the hole in the floor. Pulling up his lungi he pees into the black. A few drops splash warm against his feet.

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He steps out again into the greying dawn. He wishes he could stay home with his wife and son and mother. He could sit in the shade, smell the laundry drying, and listen to the children playing. He and his wife could go to the market together. Maybe they could have some time alone; afterwards, they could have a nap together in the afternoon. As evening passes into night, he and his boy would sit on the bed together and watch their supper being prepared. These things he wishes as he washes his face and hands at the tap. The water is cool and refreshing. A kite is flapping its way south, its wings slow and black in the pre-dawn sky.

The door creaks as he enters his room again. They are still asleep; his mother beneath on the floor, his wife and son on top. Sami removes his shirt and pants from the peg behind the door. He undoes the knot of his *lungi* and steps out as it falls to the floor. As he pulls on his pants, the belt buckle jangles and his wife stirs at the sound. She turns towards him and sleepily opens her eyes. In the dark, as he buttons his shirt, he smiles at her. It will be many hours before he sees her again, and he wishes he could stay. He wishes this every morning as he prepares to leave.

As he steps out of the room again and closes the door behind him, the sky is a shade lighter. He can see the pile of shoes more clearly now but spots his sandals in the pile next to his brother's room. As he retrieves them, he can hear his brother snoring inside. Sami hopes his brother will find some work soon; he is starting to drink too much. There is a chill in the air, and he can feel his shirt slightly damp, but he will warm on his walk to work.

The winding iron stairs clang and shake as he makes his way down to the courtyard, past the broken stairwell window and its ledge of pigeon shit and feathers. A cobweb strung in the night clings to his face, across his lips and moustache. As he wipes his hand across his face at the tickling irritation, he remembers that he will have to shave later today during his bath. It has been a couple of days and he doesn't want Mr. Banerjee to say anything.

When he emerges at the bottom of the stairs, old Mr. Das is shuffling about in the doorway of his ground floor flat preparing, as he does every morning, to give his two budgies their constitution, as he calls it. After a walk around the building in the calm of the early morning, the birds will spend the day in their cage in the shade of the stairwell entrance. Mr. Das and Sami greet each other with a glance, and Sami passes quickly out into the courtyard. Mr. Das doesn't like that people live on the roof, much less that motley crew above.

Sami crosses the courtyard and walks out under the high arched opening at the south end of the courtyard, out onto the street. The Park Circus roundabout is busier, but less so than it will be soon. For hours all day, and well into the night, it will be a constant, fuming, noisy throng of screeching buses, honking cars and taxis, and clattering trams, people thronging, and sellers hawking their fruits and vegetables and trinkets. The guava seller is crouched, leaning against the wall next to the archway, smoking. He will stay there most of the day selling his guavas. Sami remembers when his father did the same thing. When Sami was thirteen, his father died unexpectedly. Then Sami had to leave his day school to

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find work. It was luck that the mission agreed to take him on as a helper in the guesthouse. He has been there since, and in the fourteen years moved from the kitchen to being a waiter and room help.

Sami makes his way around the edge of the traffic circle, past the closed up restaurants, and across the roadway leading to the new flyover. He pauses to let the first tram of the morning clatter past. Several buses lurch towards him around the bend heading south. He pauses again, cautious that they might cross his path. Everyday in the city, buses strike down pedestrians through needless haste. Their drivers sometimes escape the mobs who throng to seek redress at their carelessness. If, as is usually the case, the pedestrian is killed, the bus, possessed of ill luck, is burned.

Figure 8.1: Bus damaged in riot. Gol Park. Author Photo.

One of the buses is going to Gol Park. Sami wishes he could take it, but three rupees each way, six days a week, adds up. His work is just close enough that he can walk; with rent and food and a new baby on the way he can't justify the expense. So, he walks the forty minutes to work in the morning, and he walks home in the evening. The walk home takes a little longer because traffic is still heavy at 9:30. Asutosh Chowdhury Road between Park Circus and Gol Park is, in its entire, in the process of being dug up, the tram tracks replaced and the road resurfaced. The street is thus a ruin from one end to the other, much worse now than its usual dilapidated state. Great ditches on either side have been dug to expose and re-bury wires and pipes. Footpaths have disappeared. In the evenings, Sami has to snake single file over and through piles of earth and rubble, a task made all the more difficult when crowds of vehicles jostle the street for any available space. Thankfully, it is easier in the morning. With little traffic, Sami can walk on what remains of the road.

The footpaths past the meat sellers and the city offices are on the only remaining stretch that has yet to be dug up, so the walk is unimpeded until the petrol station and the school; thereafter, until Gol Park, it is a hassle. Sami will be happy when this demolition and construction is finished. But it seems interminable. The city is always unearthing itself. New telephone cables, new tram tracks, new concrete roads, new bridges. And repairs every year to what was just newly installed. They say it will make things better, but it only seems to prolong the need for repair. And they are late again with this road construction. What this place will be like when the rains come, if the work is not completed on time, he can't imagine.

The neighbourhood changes as he walks south. From the mostly Muslim names on the signs in the poorer surrounds of Park Circus, the city becomes wealthier, more Hindu, more English, as he moves south. A new restaurant—Chinese—has opened on the east side of the road. It has tinted glass doors and windows so that only those inside can see out, and so that those outside cannot see

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in. Sami wonders what the customers must think as they sit inside and look out every evening on the constant upheaval; maybe that's why the glass is shaded. He knows the many thoughts and feelings of looking in from the outside; he has looked in all his life.

He passes the ostentatious, newly built temple. It is all marble and carved and clean and carefully washed every day. It is guarded by uniformed men, and was built by an incomprehensibly wealthy family who don't know what to do with all their money. What a waste, he thinks, as he passes. So much else could have come of that money. And the temple has nothing of the sacred that age can bring. He wonders if ever it will. The new temple looks like one of those fancy new glass shops that seem to be sprouting up around the city. He read in the paper last week that this same family is building similar temples all over India. Such self-regard doesn't stop people from visiting though. Every night on his way home, the temple is crowded with families, the same people he sees going into and coming out of the glass restaurant and the computer cafes and the new, shiny shops.

Figure 8.2 : Woman with posters

As he passes by one of the open excavations, he can see behind a blue telephone switching box. Road workers, men and women, are emerging from a temporary plastic lean-to. They look blankly at him as he passes. Their days will be spent digging and carrying earth on baskets on their heads. Their black plastic home has been secured to the top of the wall which surrounds the science and technology museum. Movie posters have been pasted to the concrete wall next to the temporary shelter. Someone has scratched the eyes out of each of the photographed figures. A woman has had her mouth torn out as well. This repeats itself three times with each poster. The stone wall glares violently out at Sami, and he hurries on.

Buildings continue to evidence wealthier lives as he moves south. Despite the piles of earth and debris and seeming decay all around, their walls and gated entrances, tall apartments and balconies are decorated with potted plants and flowers. Under their balconies, the computer cafes and automated tellers, though now closed and shuttered, will soon open to young people, people not much younger than Sami, but for whom life is something other than he will ever know. "Sunny Apartments" he reads on one sign. Why "Sunny" he asks himself? He

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wonders this every morning when he passes. The durwan is asleep again on a plastic chair by the front entrance.

When he arrives on the corner of the large Ballygunge Road intersection, the one with the filling station and the AC restaurant, and the pharmacy, Sami has to wait for several taxis and cars to pass. It is busier now as the city begins to rouse itself. The cars don't seem to pay attention to the lights and nor does Sami. He has to keep walking or he will be late for work. He walks on past the shoe shops, the music store, the pharmacies, the new Pantaloons department store which, though its glass façade is shuttered, is still guarded overnight by a tired looking man in uniform. Every evening on the sidewalk in front of the bustling department store, a few snack vendors and a man making balloon toys for children do a brisk business. Sami bought an elephant once, and paid far too much. It made him happy to see his son's face when he gave it to him. But in a couple of days, he saddened to see the elephant's trunk and legs grow limp and dull and the novelty lose its charm.

At the Gariahat Junction, before crossing Rash Behari Road, he stops to scan the newspapers being laid out on the tarpaulin next to the *chai* seller. Headlines of Muslims and guns and violence and blame seem so foreign to his own life and experience. He doesn't understand. On the cover of *The Telegraph* is a picture of a beautiful model in the city for a jewellery store opening. She has a white smile and is wearing a lifetime's worth of gold around her neck. He wishes he could give his wife something nice like that one day.

After crossing the tram tracks and walking up under the flyover, passing the rag pickers and their naked children who camp every night in the dry dust underneath the concrete bridge, passing the market on his left which is preparing to open, its vendors arranging their fruits and vegetables, past more bank machines and shut up shop after shut up shop he arrives at another roundabout, though this one smaller than Park Circus. Soon the flower sellers will begin to set up, gather flowers for their arrangements, scatter water in front of their temporary stalls, sweep the pavement. The old blind woman on the corner by the music shop is asleep on a piece of cardboard. A fragment of blue from her ragged saree pokes from beneath her grey blanket. Her blue plastic bowl, the one she uses to collect coins and discarded orange and yellow marigold petals, is beside her, empty.

The building where Sami works dominates the southern side of the traffic circle. It is white and four stories tall with curved temple like domes on each corner of its roof. It is a mission and a cultural centre. In addition to its library, concerts, lectures, publication house and small museum, the centre offers language classes throughout the day. Sami, though, works in the guest house. The guest house, comprising the entire eastern and southern side of the complex is one of the main features of the institute. People from all over the world, and from across India, mostly devotees, scholars and students, come to take advantage of its affordable hospitality and supportive environment. Sami has met and served people from many countries. There is a woman from Romania who has lived there for almost nine years, and with whom Sami is friendly. As he passes underneath,

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and before climbing over a pile of construction rubble, he glances up at Danadidi's window. Perhaps she is awake, reading, smoking one of her hand rolled cigarettes.

He passes the makeshift bus stop. The city has recently cut down the trees around the mission to widen the roads. This they did in the night as the roads are too busy during the day. Crows nested in the tops of the trees. Last week, on the morning after they had cut down the trees, a baby crow, lost and bewildered amidst the destruction, flapped its featherless wings and squeaked in the dust. He thinks again, as he passes the spot, that the baby bird's slow death was the saddest thing he had ever seen. He turns to enter the mission's south gate. It is 6:45.

Mr. Kanungo, the gate keeper from Orissa is there in his guard's green, a beret and full, curved moustache. He smiles and greets Sami warmly. Sami waves and heads up to the staff room which he shares with Kundu. There he changes into his white uniform and shoes. Breakfast begins at 7:00 and he has to be there to begin serving guests.

Thankfully there are only a handful of guests staying at the guest house. When it gets busy, the days can be long and tiring. The dining hall is empty when he arrives. Plates and settings were set out the night before, so there is only to wait until guests make their way down. Monoj emerges from the kitchen. Sami has known Monoj since he started working at the guest house many years ago. Monoj is twice Sami's age, greying, spectacled. He has two daughters in a village south of Calcutta, in 24 Parganas, one of whom was married last year. Monoj and Sami greet each other quietly with that worn comfort and almost distance that comes from the constancy of working everyday together. Neither needs to ask how the other is doing; they only saw each other a few hours ago.

The first guest down, a foreigner, sits at Monoj's table. He is tall, white, soft looking, balding and with a brown undistinguished beard. He comes often to the mission to read and translate Sanskrit texts. Sami has heard that he is a professor of Indology from Lithuania. He had never heard of Lithuania (or Indology) prior to this man's arrival, and, though the man has told him where it is, he can't remember. Somewhere near Europe. Monoj disappears for the cornflakes and warm milk and to take the man's order. Not that there is much choice: eggs any style and toast.

Sami waits at the back of the dining hall and watches. His job allows him to watch people at their most vulnerable: eating, sleeping, washing, dressing; when people can't but let their guards down to accept something else into their bodies, or in preparation for the world outside their rooms, their temporary homes. The Lithuanian man looks tired and still a little sleepy. Perhaps it was noisy with the ongoing construction last night. The Greek couple asked to be moved to the other side of the courtyard due to the nightly discomfort of sawing and digging and hauling away.

More guests arrive and Sami fetches cornflakes and hot milk. The rest of the breakfast hour until 8:30 is taken up trundling back and forth from the kitchen with cornflakes and boiled eggs and omelettes with and without chillies

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and toast and empty plates smeared with tomato sauce and thermoses of tea and coffee. All of the guests seem to be busy and don't waste time over breakfast, which is a blessing. Sami then can have more time to himself.

Today he does not have room duty. Were he to, which he sometimes prefers, Sami would have to change sheets, towels and bring afternoon tea to guests, but today he is only responsible for work in the dining room. After breakfast the lunch settings are put out, and Sami retires back to his room to wash and shave. Kundu is working in the mission's courtyard garden, so Sami has the room to himself, for which he is grateful.

The dormitory is quiet and cool and he has the shower to himself. While he washes he thinks of his little boy, of what he and his mother must be up to now. What will they do when his son comes of school age? Sami's salary, though reasonably secure, is not enough to pay for English language school. With only a limited education, his son will have little before him—if he is lucky—than the rote constancy which has come to define his father's life. And this will soon change too as his wife is pregnant with their second child. The news, when she announced it a couple of weeks ago was cause for celebration, but also for worry.

And there is little in his village for them. Only the city now holds the promise of work and of a better life. Sami's other two brothers still live in the village in Chapra in Eastern Bihar, the same village Sami is now learning not to call home. His mother is visiting from the village where she usually lives with her two sons and their families. But, she has stayed longer now than she ever has in the past.

Though the city is getting busier and more frenzied, the village too is changing. A dam was built by the government some distance north near the Nepal border. Now, every rainy season, the crops are flooded and the land soaked. Snakes swim in the water as it sits waiting to drain, and for the past two years people have been bitten. People become sick with the stagnant and filthy water, and the village becomes uninhabitable until the water recedes. When complaints have been levied against the government, they are told to move the village to higher ground; such is the price of progress, only a little to pay for the modern conveniences of electricity. But what is electricity if one can't grow crops to raise money to pay for electricity? Sami's brothers have told him that they will move to the city, to Patna or Kolkata, should the same thing happen again this year. Then the choice for his own son will be made as home will become irrevocably the city. Perhaps that choice has already been made, only Sami has yet to fully accept it. While he shaves he notices that he has aged. He looks older somehow, although he doesn't feel much different than he can remember.

As he dries himself and pads back to his room, he can only reassure himself that something will change in the near future to placate the worry he wakes with every morning. The overhead fan is pleasant on his shoulders as he puts on his white vest and lungi. He has thirty minutes till he has to be back in the kitchen to help with lunch preparations, and he lies down on the bed to close his eyes. Outside, through the open window, Sami can hear the city in all its rush and noise. The almost constant horns from the street, muted by the concrete walls and the

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warmth of the mid-morning are reassuring as he lies and listens to the pigeons coo on the sill in the shade under the eves. A white lizard is lying motionless on the wall above his head.

Lunch in the dining hall is always busy. Staff from the teaching, library and publishing divisions in the mission are allowed to eat lunch in the guest house dining hall. A few of the regulars come in to eat and sit at Sami's tables. The crippled economist who has, in his retirement, turned his hand to writing on philosophy. The young Dalit woman who has written a book on her struggles against caste. The formidable professor of Sanskrit, who always wears a scarf no matter the heat. One or two guests too have come in for lunch, and a new, though regular visitor to the guest house, a professor from Dacca is here with his two wives. Being the only Muslims in the room and recognizing each other from their previous interactions, he and Sami exchange salaams and niceties. Lunch is the usual: rui fish, dhal, rice and vegetables, and a pappad as a gesture to luxury. This will be supper too.

When the guests have finished and the lunch cleared, and the supper service laid out, Sami and his co-workers cross the street to the dormitory's main hall where they eat together of the same that they served the guests. Eating though is communal and without the formalities of service. It is, hence, more comfortable. Though the food is the same everyday, Sami doesn't mind it much.

After lunch he has been asked to help with sorting laundry and keeping an inventory of sheets and towels. This will keep him busy most of the afternoon, and out of the gaze of his superiors and the manager. He and Bijoy will work together in the relative peace and coolness of a storage room counting and sorting and folding.

And that is how the afternoon uneventfully passes. They chat about other workers and their lives, about guests past and present, about the mysterious Mr. Banerjee, the manager of the guest house and thus their boss, who can be pleasant, jovial and relaxed one day, and angry, bitter and vindictive the next. They suspect it is his rumoured late nights with his wife's brother. They speak also of home, of families, of villages and the city, of who is visiting whom and when. Although Bijoy and Sami have known each other for a few years, Sami keeps the fact that he and his wife are expecting another child quiet. He has only told one other person outside his family, and that was a guest from Canada who he befriended and told in a moment of excitement and perhaps indiscretion soon after learning of his wife's pregnancy. Sami wondered why he told this man as he does not know him well, but doesn't regret doing so; the man from Canada is becoming a friend.

Bijoy is from West Bengal, near Arambagh, the town now famous in Eastern India for its modern chicken farms and processing facility, and for the same company's growing chain of small, self-serve western style groceries which, though neither Sami nor Bijoy can afford to shop there, are becoming increasingly popular in Kolkata. Only slightly older than Sami, Bijoy has two children, a girl and a boy, whom he sees intermittently as work allows.

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After working in the storage room for most of the afternoon, Sami has been assigned to help with the afternoon's tea service. At four, he boils water and arranges cups and aluminium tea pots and biscuits and milk and sugar on the trolley which Monoj will use to serve tea to those of the guests who are in their rooms. After Manoj takes the trolley to the elevator, Sami gathers together a tray to serve tea to the guest house office workers. Four cups and four saucers and eight AnneMarie biscuits and milk and sugar.

Mr. Banerjee is at his desk reading the newspaper, the *Anandabazar Patrika*. A desk fan is gently waving one of the corners not fixed down with a glass paper weight. Banerjee doesn't look up when Sami brings tea but continues reading.

After tea and for a couple of hours before the supper service in the dining hall, Sami has little to do. So, he returns to the dormitory and his room where he rests. The day has been undemanding and he takes advantage of its ease. These days are few, and tomorrow he will not have the luxury of breaks as he is on both room and dining hall detail. Although his job is not physically taxing in its specific responsibilities, his days are long. He sees little of his family other than in the late evenings when he returns home, and during his one day off a week, Tuesdays. Sometimes in this period before supper, he takes the opportunity to change into his street clothes to run small errands for his wife, usually to the pharmacy for medicines for this or that minor ailment. Tips that he earns from guests go some way to paying for extras. Once, after a particularly generous tip from an Australian couple who stayed for two weeks, and for whom he was their room attendant, Sami earned enough to buy his wife a gas cooker. This luxury means that she can cook indoors in their small room. Prior to the arrival of the gas cooker, she would cook outside due to the smoke from the dried coal dust briquettes and the small clay brazier. Cooking with gas has improved their everyday lives enormously, although it has brought some resentment from those on the roof unable to benefit similarly. It has also brought rumours and innuendo, given that Sami's monthly salary could not alone have afforded such a modern convenience. These, though, have been small prices to pay, and indeed, may have also translated into a recognizable increase in Sami's respect from those on the roof.

Evening, and its quick darkness falls as Sami lies on the bed in the dormitory. He can hear the crows gathering in their dusk migration to the nearby lakes and park, where, as the sun sets, they gather by the thousands to squawk and dance and fight in the trees, below whose branches the city's well to do take their exercise, and in which the crows settle down with the night to sleep.

At six in the evening, he rises. Donning again his white uniform, Sami returns down the stairs to the dining hall. Supper preparations are well under way. He helps with the preparation of the sweet tomato chutney, stirring it as it cools, and then portioning it out into individual serving bowls. If lunch had pappad as a small grace from the rote of the ordinary, the evening's gesture is sweet tomato chutney.

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The other waiters are each working and as the evening turns to the dinner hour, little is spoken. The dinner service will be the busiest of the day. New guests have arrived, and almost everyone staying at the institute will eat in the dining hall. Soup is portioned out into the thermoses and set on the tables. Pink paper napkins are placed at each setting. And then they wait. Soon enough, of course, guests arrive in tentative bunches. Until the dinner service ends some two hours later, Sami is kept busy to and fro the kitchen fetching rui and rice and veg and dhal, and, for an after dinner sweet, *misthi doi*, small plastic containers of sweetened curd eaten with their accompanying tiny pink plastic convenience spoon.

After dinner several guests retire to walk amidst the courtyard's potted dahlias. Sami and his co-workers clear the dishes, wipe the tables and set out the breakfast needs for the morning. They eat afterwards, as they did their breakfast and lunch, in the dormitory and of the same food as the guests. Sami is one of the first to leave after finishing supper. It is 9:30 by the time he leaves the mission. He has a walk of 40 minutes ahead of him. If he is quick he will be home in time to see his son before bed.

Garihat Road is clogged with traffic, and he weaves around the hot fronts of buses and honking taxis to make it to the other side. A blast of cold air hits his feet as he passes by the guarded door to the air conditioned automated bank teller. The old blind woman in blue is on her corner. Her blue plastic bowl is filled with wilted marigold petals and maybe underneath them a few coins. The shops around the circle are finishing up their day's trade, and the flower sellers are packing their wares. Ganguram's is washing its floors and Sami can smell the shop's delicious sweets as he passes. The market too is closing up as he passes, weaving his way around, with the rest of the pedestrians, the ditches and the piles of rubble and garbage.

And it is like this for most of his walk home. Past the same shops and buildings he passes in the morning, though their lives are very much on display, instead of asleep behind shutters and the pre-dawn light. Past the trinket vendors and paan sellers, their packages of silver and green on blocks of melting ice, past more bank machines, and an electronics shop, its television wall unified in showing the same advertisement, past the computer cafes with its patrons staring intently, individually, in sectioned cubicles, chatting and cruising, past the a/c restaurant on the Ballygunge corner, where fat well-to-do men go to drink, and up the long stretch, across and around the ditches, and piles, and bricks, mindful always of traffic and rushing buses, past the road workers settling down for the night, their small cooking fires smoking, the coals orange in the clay brazier, faces tired, past the glass Chinese restaurant with its western looking Indians, their private cars waiting with driver out front, and on up the road to Park Circus and home.

The Circus is busy with vehicles, but intermittent enough that he knows they will soon dwindle and stop for the night. On top of his building he can see small flags waving in the breeze.

The stairs clang and shake as he jogs up the spiral staircase to the roof; a last exertion of a long day. Soft light bulbs cast a warm glow about the roof as he

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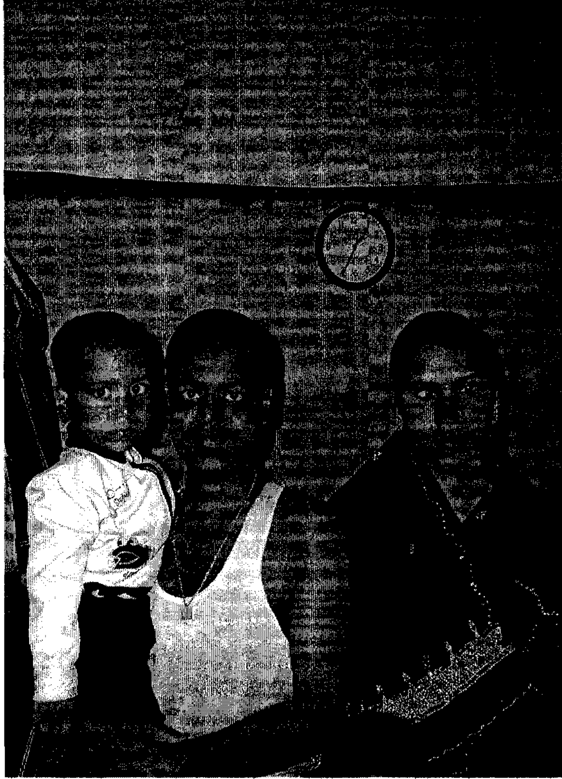
is welcomed home with a hug from his son. Everyone is awake. His wife, smiling, asking about his day, offering him water and something small to eat. The neighbour's children are preparing for bed, and his mother is washing dishes by the drain in the side of the wall. In their room, he changes into his lungi and returns to the roof to rest a while before sleep. He leans on the wall surrounding the roof. A crow hops a few feet away, watchful of his mother washing up, eyeing the few grains of rice about to be washed out the drain and down to the street. A soft breeze swirls the city around Sami's head: smells of dry exhaust, the softness of the sewer, oily cooking, sweet laundry, but also that top note from far away, from outside the city, of the world that stretches off into the built horizon.

A fight has erupted around the hand pump below. A crowd has gathered to take sides amidst the pushing and yelling, and a chase ends in a few awkward blows and more loud recrimination. On a roof top across the way, in the blue light of a bare bulb, a small calf is tethered to a pole. It stands still, waiting. The light from the warren of lanes in the bustee below glows warm and reassuring from the cracks in its intermittent roofs. In the glow of a room, behind the bars of a window, a man reads on a bed. The breeze is warm and pleasant. Crows and kites can be heard, as can be the flutter of small flags.

Dotted with the intermittent glow of orange bulbs, for as far as Sami can see, the skyline is the texture of the city, the curve of the world. He is tired. He turns to his small room to sleep.



It is not accidental that...today only within the smallest and intimate circles, in personal human situations, in *pianissimo*, that something is pulsating... .

Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation"

Figure 8.3: Muhammed Samir with his wife and son. February 5, 2004, Kolkata. Photo by Author.

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Plate 6: View of Kolkata skyline, Park Circus, Kolkata. February 2004. Photo by Author.

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Appendix I

"Kolkata" is the official name of the city once known as Calcutta. However, the city is known and referred to by both names, and by both Calcuttans and non-Kolkatans alike. Its names and their uses are not without significance.

Beginning January 1st 2001 "Kolkata" has been the official designation given to the approximately 187sq km metropolitan mass which, now home to some 14 million people, lies on the banks of the Hugli River in West Bengal, India (Lat 22°23'47"Long. 88°23'34"). Since the city's storied and disputed colonial inception by Job Charnock in the summer of 1690, and till the Supreme Court decision on December 23rd, 2000 which changed its name to Kolkata, the urban agglomeration had been referred to as "Calcutta." "Calcutta," it is generally taken, is an anglicised transliteration of the colloquial Bengali, "Kolkata", itself from "Kalikata", the name given to the smallest of three villages on the banks of the Hugli, which, when amalgamated by Job Charnock under license with the Nawab and Arangazeb on Aug 24, 1690, became Calcutta.

The story of the city's multiple namings, from pre-colonial arrival to the present, is long, convoluted, internecine, and hotly debated. See Gourdas Basak, "Kalighat and Calcutta", *Calcutta Review* No.CLXXXIV, Vol. XCII, January 1891,pp.309-322; P.T. Nair, *Calcutta in the 17th Century* (Firma KLM: Calcutta 1986)pp.24-64; Sukanta Chaudhuri, ed. *Calcutta: The Living City Vol. 1* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990)p.1; Pratap Chanda Chunder, "Calcutta: The Controversial City" *The Quarterly Review of Historical Studies* Vol. XXVII, April-September 1997, No.1and 2 pp.44-53; and Sukanta Chaudhuri, "On Naming Cities", *View From Calcutta* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2002)pp.227-233.

Today, some political import is given to which name you choose to use. Both names are common, with Kolkata gaining in popularity as it more closely represents the Bengali pronunciation. However, many within the city prefer "Calcutta." "Calcutta", they argue, reflects the ambiguous and difficult history of the city, a history that does not need to be re-written and forgotten in the efforts of Hindu and Bengali nationalism. Like the name changes to Madras (now Chennai) and Bombay (now Mumbai), the change to Kolkata reflected a perceived need to individuate and distinguish the contemporary Indian nation state from its colonialist origins. These changes to colonial names took place within political contexts of increased Hindu nationalism, a trend opposed by many. In Madras, unlike Kolkata, Chennai is seldom popularly used, and often openly shunned as indicative of the north's incursions into Dravidian culture.

Within Calcutta, re-naming began with the re-naming of many important streets. Once of British origin and reference, the street names were changed to reflect a nationalist and Bengali distance from empire: Cotton St. became Mirza Galib St, Circular Road became A.J.C Bose Road, Baker Rd became Kanai Battacharya Rd, Chowringhee Rd became Jawaharlal Nehru Rd, etc. But, old

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habits die hard, and many people continue to refer to the streets by their original British names. Some 'Indianised' names seem to exist only on paper.

I shall use 'Kolkata' and 'Calcutta' interchangeably with deference to context, a practice that reflects many everyday textual and oral practices in the city, in West Bengal and, indeed, in India and its diasporas generally. Within official contexts, for example, in post offices, on forms, within government departments, and in selected English language newspapers (*Hindustan Times*, *The Asian Age*, *The Times of India* and *The Statesman*), etc., 'Kolkata' is usually used. Within historical, artistic, critical, everyday, and some conversational contexts, and even in some other English language newspapers (*The Telegraph*) 'Calcutta' is often, though not exclusively, used. Both names refer to the city and compound its variant imaginaries.

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Appendix II

The Invention of "India"

I worry about using "India" to describe the location of ancient, sub-continental, cultural practices, hence the scare-quotes around Indian. "India", from the sixteenth century Spanish or Portuguese, which itself is from the Greek, Latin and Persian roots which refer to the Indus River and the lands east of it, is a decidedly European appellation which unifies, in a determinately Orientalist Othering, a vast geographic and social polysemy. Prior to colonial arrival in the 16th century, the word "India" would have meant nothing to those living under Mughal rule in Bengal. Today, "India" refers to a very recent nationalist edifice which unifies a vast array of languages, traditions, locales, customs, religions etc... under a modernist state apparatus which can be very tenuous, contested and provisional indeed. As a Keralian academic and political theorist mentioned to me in conversation, the Indian state is as artificial and bewildering a unity to the subcontinent as would a similar unification of Europe be to those living east of the Caucus Mountains and between the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas. Socio-culturally, he claimed, the visitor from Kerala has little to nothing in common with the Bengali. "We both eat rice," he said, "but that's about it."

Partha Chatterjee, Gyan Prakash, Gyanendra Pandey, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ashish Nandy, Ranajit Guha, Sumit Sarkar, David Arnold, C.A. Bayly, Sudipta Kaviraj, Aijaz Ahmad and others, many from the Subaltern Studies group are some of the most recognized authors on the subject of Indian political and social nationalism working in India and abroad today. It is inadequate to situate these hesitant comments within their subtle yet monumental works.

I want simply to recognize that the use of "India" as a reference to pre-Euro-colonial (ie.pre-1500 AD) occupation is problematic. Referring to a tradition in the 2nd century BC as "Indian" seems to me only to work as an imprecise and inadequate geographical marker, and nothing more. Moreover, it is a decidedly colonial apparatus of naming read through the European imperative of modern nationalist identity formation. As Kaviraj writes, "[India] is an historical object, and it is essential to speak about the contingency of its origins against the enormous and weighty mythology that has accumulated on its name." See Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India" ***Subaltern Studies VII*** eds. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992) p.1. For a similar recent arguments see Manu Goswami (2004) and in the context of a contemporary nationalized Hinduism, see Gauri Viswanathan, "Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism" *Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming).

There is nothing inherent or essentially "Indian", in a nationalist sense, about socio-cultural activities dating back over 2,000 years. Indeed, the Patua, as we have seen, are exemplars of the malleability and polysemy of social groups, rather than a collective repository of any natural or essential Indian-ness or

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Bengali-ness. Their practices and life-worlds have been shaped by tribal, animist, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jaina, and European influences which incurred themselves repeatedly over the centuries in Eastern South Asia, and thus they are an interesting microcosm of a larger "Indian-ness" which is similarly polysemic, ancient, modern, responsive and contradictory all at the same time. The unreflexive use of "India" or "Indian" sometimes works to cover over or ignore this complexity by invoking a nationalist frame through which we are told we must necessarily understand a deeply complex and difficult referent.

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