

DHARMA KINGS AND FLYING WOMEN:
BUDDHIST EPISTEMOLOGIES
IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY
INDIAN AND BRITISH WRITING

by

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Dharma Kings and Flying Women: Buddhist Epistemologies in Early Twentieth-Century Indian
and British Writing

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The British fascination with Buddhism and India's Buddhist roots gave birth to an epistemological framework combining non-dual awareness, compassion, and liberational praxis in early twentieth-century Indian and British writing. Four writers—E.M. Forster, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Lama Yongden, and P.L. Travers—chart a transnational cartography that mark points of location in the flow and emergence of this epistemological framework. To Forster, non-duality is a terrifying rupture and an echo of not merely gross mismanagement, but gross misunderstanding by the British of India and its spiritual legacy. To both Krishnamurti and Lama Yongden, non-dual awareness is a source of wisdom. For Krishnamurti, initially it is separation and then later, it is wisdom in action. For Yongden, it is experiencing the entire world as beloved, transcending personal territories and boundaries and expanding appreciation and connectedness out beyond imagination. Finally, for Travers, it is a magical display that represents restorative justice to the cosmos, a way of bringing things back into balance and bringing healing to the universe.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

GLOBAL TRANSACTIONS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BUDDHISM

The early decades of the twentieth century mark a fascinating and surprisingly under-examined era of Buddhist influence on British and Indian literature. By 1900, ideas about Buddhism had been circulating around Britain and India for over 100 years. In novels, paintings, and poetry, British artists were expressing their (sometimes idealized, sometimes jarringly racialized) ideas about the historical Buddha, the history of Buddhism, or contemporary Buddhists in Asia.¹ In India, the life of the Buddha, and particularly, his identity as an Indian, was also in circulation, as a British discovery, as an Indian hero and exemplar in ethics and leadership, and even at times an inspiration and model for future Indian independence.² The absorption of Buddhist images and ideas into both British and Indian cultural spaces included the recovery and interpretation of Buddhist sites, buildings, and artifacts; the conversion to Buddhism by Britons and Indians; organizations such as the Theosophists, who claimed Buddhist roots in the formation of a syncretic religion; and artistic production featuring the Buddha and Buddhist ideas.

While the complex literary interfaces amongst Buddhism, England, and India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been more well studied and documented, the early

¹ Some notable British and European works are Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* (1879), Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922), and James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933).

² Some notable Indian works are Nabin Chandra Sen's *Amitabha* (1895), Aghoranath's *Sakyamunicarita O Nirvana Tattva* (1882), Krishnabehari Sen's *Asokacarita* (1892), Satyendranath Tagore's *Bauddhadharma* (1901), and Sunita Devi's *The Life of Princess Yasodhara* (1929)

twentieth century is a larger gap in the academic record. Recent books by Mark Lussier (on Buddhist influence on British Romanticism) and Jeffrey Franklin (on Buddhism and the Victorians) claim that the British fascination with Buddhism culminated at the end of the nineteenth century. I view the situation differently, and indeed argue that rather than a diminution of interest in or influence by Buddhism, the twentieth century ushered in a new era in which the images and ideas that had been circulating around British and Indian cultural spaces—of the Indian roots of Buddhism, of the historical Buddha, of the core ideas and practices of Buddhism—were being reshaped and injected into British and Indian cultural forms in new ways, making them feel at times more British than Indian, or more contemporary than ancient, and at times were a reclaiming of something authentically Indian. What had been out there (to the British) came home to Britain and intermixed with what felt British. What had been appropriated and taken out beyond India was being reclaimed and brought back home to India.

The British fascination with Buddhism in the nineteenth century resulted in a colonial proprietary ownership of the understanding of Buddhism. This sense of ownership brought the first seeds of Buddhism to Britain. What the British did not realize is that those seeds, once planted, would reap unexpected results. A new epistemology—of non-dual wisdom intertwined with compassionate action—had been sown and was coming through in the cultural work of British and Indian writers. The British tried to control the message. They tried to limit what the historical Buddha was, what Buddhism meant, and how it could be received. But this new epistemology had its own life force, and it came through in ways that could not be controlled through colonial power.

This dissertation will look at the uncontrollable life force of this new epistemology. What I argue in the following chapters is that while the British tried to assert interpretive control over

what Buddhism was, what it looked like, and how it manifested, the wild variety of Buddhist schools, lineages, and practices had already migrated and planted themselves into British and Indian cultural spaces and that the interpretive authority that the British were so invested in could not stand. What came through, instead, was an epistemological legacy that was both encumbered by Anglo India's colonial legacy and thrillingly evocative of decolonizing possibilities.

Buddhism has become such a rich and important tradition in the twentieth century because of its emphasis on liberation. All schools of Buddhism speak to a human longing to be free from suffering. Liberation is also at the heart of the anti-colonial work of the early twentieth century. Spiritual activists such as Sri Aurobindo brought into play a kind of liberation that manifests through activist as well as spiritual work. This longing was particularly apt for the early decades of the twentieth century, when millions of colonized subjects were examining their own status as occupied peoples, where fascist dictatorships were asserting collective control over their citizens, and in the lands of European colonizers, like Britain and France, where some citizens were contemplating their own culpability in empire. Some forms of Buddhism emphasize the personal nature of liberation, and it is no surprise that this form of Buddhism became for the British the doctrinally correct form. But other forms of Buddhism offer a different view of liberation, one in which any subject's liberation is directly tied to the liberation of all. Thus the nature of liberation and the kinds of liberation are at play when we think about Buddhism in the twentieth century.

The epistemology of non-duality and compassion offered new forms of knowing that were liberatory but costly and tricky. We continue to see the cost today, one hundred years later, in the work of scholars like David Loy, who argues that the Mindfulness Industrial Complex reinscribes the very things that people are seeking freedom from; or Judith Simmer-Brown, who

writes that mindfulness without compassion is a palliative tool that entrenches selfish self-interest and does not lead to true liberation. To be free requires completely giving up one's personal territory. It also requires a commitment to work for the liberation of all, regardless of personal affinities or affiliations.

This epistemological terrain, based on some of the foundational Buddhist doctrines including the Three Marks of Existence (suffering, impermanence, and no self) provides a vehicle for dissolving from a state of certainty, solidity, and conceptuality to a state of uncertainty, fluidity, and non-conceptuality. These precepts of Buddhism, all part of some or all of the Buddhist schools for thousands of years, first entered British and re-entered Indian consciousness in the eighteenth century and rose to a frenzy of fascination in the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century, they had become both more dynamically activated and were in open negotiation between England and India (through, for example, the story of King Ashoka or the work of B. R. Ambedkar) and at the same time they were being absorbed into British and Indian culture such that they were starting to feel familiar, native, and always already part of a British or Indian cultural, spiritual, and artistic identity.

This dissertation charts the progression in the relationship between an epistemology of non-duality and engagement with de-colonization—as a way of knowing that acknowledges the complexities of cultural/spiritual appropriation. This is not the first time that Buddhism is entering a new political or cultural space. The history of Buddhism is one of punctuated movements from society to society, radiating out from India in all directions. Nonetheless, the early twentieth century is a moment in which the tradition of Buddhism's migration to new lands and new cultures is crossing a powerful threshold. I examine this new migratory phase of early twentieth-century Buddhism by looking at four authors (E. M. Forster, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Lama

Yongden, and P. L. Travers) who wrote about the interface of colonial and spiritual engagement. Each author describes the experience of non-dual awareness and its relationship to compassion from a particular social location and each of these authors expresses the anxieties, necessities, and inspirations surrounding the de-colonizing of India from that particular location. Through these four author snapshots, we see a connection between the mental liberation of non-duality and the physical liberation from colonial control.

This connection (between mental and physical liberation) has existed for the duration of Buddhism and it is one of the reasons that Buddhism was considered so radical. It radically challenged the status quo of ancient India. The edicts of Buddhism challenged the practice of animal sacrifice, of maintaining a rigid caste system, and the ability of women to join the community of practitioners. At the heart of Buddhist doctrine there is something that fundamentally challenges the status quo and that calls everything into question. At the same time, there is something slippery and vague in Buddhism that renders it susceptible to state control and to ideological manipulation. We can see this manipulation, for example, in the use of Zen monks by Japan's fascist government in the 1930s and 40s.³ Zen precepts and training protocols were used by the Japanese military to prepare soldiers to view their military duty as a spiritual practice.

It is important to try to define non-duality here, even while acknowledging that this is virtually impossible. From the outset, too, I have to admit that this term, because it is so slippery, can easily mean different things to different individuals.⁴ Simply put, what I mean by non-duality

³ Brian Daizen Victoria writes extensively about this in his book *Zen at War*.

⁴ Matthew Kapstein, Anne Klein and others have written about the dangers of misreading or misinterpreting non-duality. For example, I do not mean to conflate non-duality and mysticism in this dissertation. I understand that these are two separate and occasionally intertwining

is the transcendence of conceptuality, which also means pre-language awareness. As eleventh-century Tibetan lama Ngok Lotsawa writes, “the ultimate truth is not only beyond the dimension of language and expression, it is beyond intellectual understanding” (qtd. Ringu 4). Emptiness, the view that nothing exists in any permanent, unchanging, nonaggregated form, plays an important role in all forms of Buddhism, but is more central and doctrinally important in the Mahayana and Vajrayana lineages of Buddhism than in the Theravada. Ways of relating to non-duality have been highly elaborated through nuanced practices in many Buddhist lineages over several hundred years. The tradition known as Madhyamaka involves a process in which conceptual mind exhausts itself to such a point that it opens to non-conceptual awareness. This system of Madhyamaka, devised by the second century CE Indian yogi Nagarjuna, teaches “that realization of the subtle emptiness of all phenomena is a prerequisite for the path of liberation from cyclic existence” (Hopkins *Meditation in Emptiness* 30). The seven-fold reasoning process devised by Nagarjuna can take decades to work through or it can culminate very quickly, exploding assumptions and habituated preconceptions in a flash.

The central core of this system of practice is to generate and closely examine compassion; thus non-duality in the Mahayana system of Buddhism is intertwined with practices to generate compassion. Through successive stages, the feeling of love for one’s mother becomes an appreciation of kindness, which becomes desire to repay the kindness of others, which becomes realization that self and other are not separate. In a foreword to Sopa and Hopkins’ book on Tibetan Buddhism, the current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, writes about the intertwined relationship between selflessness and compassion:

experiential phenomena. I hope that my reader can accept my working definitioin of non-duality as it follows in the text.

Buddhahood—the state of being a source of help and happiness for all sentient beings—is attained through method and wisdom. The chief method is the altruistic aspiration to highest enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, and the chief wisdom is the correct view of emptiness—the realization that phenomena do not exist in their own right. An altruistic aspiration to highest enlightenment is induced by love and compassion which are in turn induced by applying knowledge of one’s own plight in cyclic existence to others. It is first necessary to realize the manifold sufferings of cyclic existence, both the obvious, such as physical and mental pain resulting from war, and the non-obvious, such as the mere fact of having a mind and body which are so composed that the aggregation of secondary circumstances will create immense pain. (Sopa and Hopkins ix)

Non-duality, then, is both an ungraspable, non-conceptual concept and a fully embodied practice. Recent work on making sense of non-duality from a Western perspective can help round out how we can think of it and work with it. Luce Irigaray writes that approaching non-dual awareness “is not a matter of thinking any way one pleases. It is necessary *to learn again to think without centering on the object* [emphasis mine], for example, to think in a living and free manner, unattached, neither egological nor possessive. This does not mean not thinking but being capable of going beyond the inertias of thought in order to set its energy free” (Irigaray 67). Irigaray’s perspective is helpful in thinking about how we train and deploy our mental faculties in the right way.

Irigaray reports that as she moved more deeply into her investigation of non-duality, she was obliged to attend to spiritual traditions emanating from India. Like Irigaray, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also found herself needing to investigate Buddhism in order to more thoroughly explicate the non-dual nature of queerness. Sedgwick seeks to define non-duality, both in straightforward terms and through spatial analogy. She recognizes that we might examine the “cognitive and affective habits and practice involved,” but that trying to get to prescriptive forms will not help us understand the core meaning or process (1). Instead, she encourages us to “explore some ways around the topos of depth or hiddenness” (8). Rather than seeking meaning in *beneath* and *behind*, she is interested in *beside*:

Beside permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object. Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations, as any child knows who's shared a bed with siblings. *Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations. (Sedgwick 8)

Sedgwick's focus on the spatial offers two helpful elaborations. First, by invoking the spatial, she forces us to contend with the human dimension of non-duality. When we think of beneath, behind, and beside in relation to stories, we have to consider people and the hierarchies that govern and sometimes agitate people. When those people are situated within empire, *beside* takes on a very particular meaning. She is asking us to let dualistic boundaries dissolve conceptually even while we see the structures of dualism firmly in place around us. On an ultimate level, the boundaries never existed. On a relative level, through a socially agreed upon construct, they exist. The second helpful elaboration that Sedgwick offers is the embodied dimension, which gives us a clue about how to drop beneath discursively-constructed fabrications that pass for reality. Our bodies can experience without using words. Without words, consciousness has a chance to know itself without judgment or bias, without justifications, rhetorical strategies, or hierarchies.

For Asians growing up in a Buddhist-dominated culture, non-duality is woven into the cultural fabric through stories, superstitions, and doctrines. For Europeans encountering Buddhism in the early twentieth century, non-duality might feel foreign, depersonalizing, alienating, or an exhilarating new frontier. In each of the following chapters, I will explore how non-duality and compassion were at times threatening and at times a compelling portal for liberation. First, though, it is necessary to consider an overview of Buddhism's history as a transnational tradition of liberation.

One of the dangers in writing about Buddhism is that it has not been one thing, one easily definable tradition, for at least 2000 years. The story of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni Gautama, dates to roughly 2600 years ago in what is now northern India and Nepal. Emerging during an era known as the Axial Age, a time of great shifts in thinking, it was also a time of vibrant exploration in India, and so Shakyamuni Gautama's community of followers joined many others in India that were exploring different methods to find answers to spiritual questions. Thus what came to be known as Buddhism was one of many religious minority communities in India and remained so for two hundred years, when the leader of the Mauryan dynasty, Emperor Ashoka, converted to Buddhism and elevated the tradition to greater prominence and contributed to the exporting of Buddhism to other lands (in his case, to the island kingdom just south of India in what is today Sri Lanka). Over the past 2400 years, Buddhism has been a truly transnational tradition, as it traveled throughout Asia and with each entry to a new land, took on and absorbed native cultural forms and practices. Buddhism has rarely supplanted pre-existing religious traditions but instead has tended to co-exist and at times incorporate the beliefs, flavors, and practices of those older religions and traditions. For hundreds of years before the turn of the twentieth century, Buddhism had been divided into three distinct groups: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.⁵ Because Buddhism had virtually disappeared in India by 1200⁶ and because of

⁵ Sumita Chakrabarti writes that “around one hundred and ten to twenty years after the death of Buddhadeva, Buddhism was divided into two groups called Hinayana and Mahayana. The Hinayanis maintained the traditional philosophical thought where *Nirvana* can be attained for one's own self only. Mahayanis went for a reformatory change and sought [sic] *Nirvana* for all” (Dash 41).

⁶ As Jeffrey Franklin writes:

For a complex range of historical reasons—including persecution by Brahmins, invading waves of Muslims, and absorption into modern Hinduism—Buddhism began declining in the land of its birth starting around the third century CE. By that time, it had migrated north through Tibet and China and south to Ceylon and Burma, and by the twelfth century, when it was extinct in India, it was the most widely practiced religion throughout Asia. By the eighteenth century, however, the

these groupings, it was easy for the British to make assumptions about the credibility and purity of the different groupings. As I will discuss in greater detail later, such assumptions fed a British colonial attitude toward Buddhism and critically misrepresented the complexity and the variety of traditions that fall under the umbrella known as Buddhism. It is possible that Buddhism has never been one easily codifiable thing, but it is certain that within two or three hundred years of its founding, Buddhism had taken on a rich variety of expressions and views that it manifest the common injunction that the Buddha taught in 84,000 different ways because humans had so many divergent needs and styles of hearing his teachings.

After generations of being marginalized and diminished, and finally disappeared, by Hindu and Mughal governments, Buddhism was, by the time the British arrived in India in the seventeenth century, a cultural treasure trove to be unearthed. As scholars such as Donald Lopez and Philip Almond have put it, Buddhism was ripe for “discovery.” This discovery was of course imbricated within a colonial system of appropriation and authority. Stephan Batchelor identifies three conditions for Buddhism’s “birth” in the west: the rationalism of the Enlightenment, a decline in religious “authority,” and “the consolidation of colonialism” (231). For the British, controlling the story of who and what India was led to the creation of various intellectual industries, including archaeology, philology, and religious studies. Buddhism was particularly ripe for “discovery” by the British and other European colonial agents because it had not been a live religious tradition in India for over a thousand years by the time the Europeans engaged in their interpretive work. Unlike Hinduism and Islam, Buddhism was something that could only be

physical traces of Buddhism’s existence in India had been erased, demolished in persecutions, dismantled for building materials, and covered over by meters of accumulating soil. No living Indian knew where the ancient sites of Kapilavastu or Kushinagar were. Only after the British invasion and occupation of India were the origins of Buddhism rediscovered, unearthed, cataloged, and either restored or carted off to museums (141).

apprehended via buried structures and texts written in non-living languages. Whereas any claims that the British might make about Hinduism, either in living practice or history, could be disputed by living Indian practitioners, scholars, and translators, the stakeholders for Buddhism were, for the most part, living in other countries.⁷ Further, by telling stories about a grand Indian past, the British could hold up in contrast a present that they could construct as in need of intervention and remediation. Indians, they might acknowledge, had once been a great people but the present-day Indians needed British intervention and guardianship.

The nineteenth century understanding of Buddhism in Europe was dominated by British interpretation of artifactual evidence of the Indian roots of Buddhism. From the founding of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta by Sir William Jones in 1784, to the founding of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 1824, to *The Lotus Sutra*, the first canonical Buddhist text to be translated into a European language from Sanskrit in 1852, to Alexander Cunningham, who pioneered the archaeological excavation of Buddhism in India through the Archaeology Survey from 1861 to 1865, and finally, the founding of the Pali Text Society in 1881, the century was saturated with interpretation of Buddhism and Buddhist textual history. The accumulation of material and interpretation fed what Said terms the discursive construction of an essentialized Orient, including at times participating in a colonial rhetoric justifying the Raj. At the same time, this work literally unearthed India's Buddhist roots. Nowhere is this more significant than Francis Buchanan's work to uncover the remains of Bodh Gaya, the site associated with the historical Buddha's enlightenment. And nowhere is the speciousness of crediting the British with the discovery of Indian Buddhism more apt than the story of Buchanan in Bodh Gaya. Buchanan, as were most Raj Buddhist site enthusiasts, was aided by an Indian translator and guide. In this

⁷ Most prominently, all or a significant portion of these countries were then and are now Buddhist: China, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Korea, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), Burma, Bhutan.

case, Buchanan's unnamed Rajput guide had converted to Buddhism after contact with monks from Ava (Burma). The guide was able to explain the significance of Bodh Gaya, tell the story of Ashoka, and show Buchanan where he could find other sites in the region related to the Buddha.⁸

The interpretive industrial complex relating to Buddhism that grew up during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was possible for several reasons. For one thing, Buddhism "felt" compellingly familiar and resonant to European scholars (unsurprising since what they labeled Buddhism was essentially their invention). Mark Lussier writes that "European commitment to its own epistemic form of enlightenment, albeit in its positivistic aspect, could not but become fascinated with a religion without dogma and committed to deconstruction. The first major philosophical engagement occurred through Arthur Schopenhauer, who often evoked Buddhism in later (post-1844) editions of his masterwork *The World as Will and Representation*" (103). For another, although Buddhism was thriving throughout much of Asia in the nineteenth century, the budding world of Buddhology that fed the appetites of Raj administrators and British audiences was centered on India, where the tradition had been absent for nearly a thousand years. Thus the task of interpreting a now-dormant version of the tradition fell largely to the Europeans, who were happy to, as Almond claims, create Buddhism in their own (Victorian) image. Fantasies about what might emerge from "the Orient" could be realized via the efforts of the colonials tasked with translation and analysis. "Schopenhauer's interest," writes Lussier, "stimulated by what Friedrich Schlegel termed the 'Oriental Renaissance' and mindful of his admonition that the 'highest Romanticism' would emerge from the 'Orient,' saw

⁸ Charles Allen documents the role that Indian, Burmese, and Sri Lankan Buddhists and translators played in explicating India's Buddhist roots. In most cases, the existence of the translator is noted but no name is documented in the record.

in emerging Buddhist texts ‘a reconciling vision of wholeness’ (Batchelor, 253) well matched to the continued refinement of epistemologies of the Western Enlightenment” (Lussier 103-4).

The imaginary forms of Buddhism and an “Oriental Renaissance” that Lussier refers to laid the foundation for a constellation of interpretations directly tied to colonial control. Philip Almond argues that “the Western creation of Buddhism progressively enabled certain aspects of Eastern cultures to be defined, delimited, and classified” (4). Almond charts the process of the “creation of Buddhism” into two distinct phases (12). During the first four decades of the nineteenth century, Buddhism was imaginatively and physically located “out there” in Asia, “in a spatial location geographically, culturally, and therefore imaginatively *other*. Buddhism, as constructed in the West, made manageable that which was encountered in the East by travelers, diplomats, missionaries, soldiers, traders, and so on.” (Almond 12-13). By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the spatial and imaginative locus had shifted. “Originally existing ‘out there’ in the Oriental *present*, Buddhism came to be determined as an object the primary location of which was the West, through the progressive collection, translation, and publication of its textual *past*” (13). By 1860, Buddhism “had become a textual object, defined, classified, and interpreted through its own textuality.” It was “beginning to be judged by a West that alone knew what Buddhism was, is, and ought to be. The essence of Buddhism came to be seen as expressed not ‘out there’ in the Orient, but in the West through the West’s control of Buddhism’s own textual past” (13). One ironic aspect of this reality is that by shifting the center of balance to the West, the interpreters of Buddhism helped bring Buddhism to the West in a profound, inexorable way.

Donald Lopez further notes that this European invention known as Buddhism became “naturalized into a temporal element of a historical progression by the designation ‘classical.’

This hypostatized object, called ‘Buddhism,’ because it had been created by Europe, could also be controlled by it, and it was against this Buddhism that all of the Buddhisms of the modern Orient were to be judged, and to be found lacking” (*Curators of the Buddha* 7). The normalization and naturalization of one kind of Buddhism into a vision of a pure Buddhism is a detail that continues to confuse and trouble western convert Buddhists. We can read Lopez and Almond for assistance in understanding the colonial maneuver of creating the British understanding of the Buddha, but the literary texts themselves offer tremendous insight into the process of making sense of disquieting and complex aspects of non-duality as well as the reclaiming of a more nuanced view of Buddhism, as seen in the following chapters.

The imaginative creation of Buddhism was bolstered by the literary production that echoed the work of European scholars and inevitably embellished upon it. Perhaps the most notable work of the Victorian era was Edwin Arnold’s epic poem about the life of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia*. First published in 1879, *The Light of Asia* went through at least 100 editions in England and the United States. Anglican clergyman George Cobbold wrote in 1894 that *The Light of Asia* ““probably more than any other work of the day has been the means of drawing the attention of English-speaking people to Buddhism”” (Qtd. in Almond 2). We can see the impact of *The Light of Asia* in Forster’s direct and indirect references to Buddhism in *A Passage to India*. By 1924, Buddhism was as much a British industry as an Indian one. The political players on the ground might represent the then-living Indian religions of Islam and Hinduism, but the disquieting fragrance of Buddhism permeates Forster’s novel, as I will argue in Chapter 1.

The importance of *The Light of Asia* extended beyond Britain, however. Its publication had a significant impact on Indian intellectual enquiry into its Buddhist roots and inspired numerous novels, poems, and plays about the Buddha or Buddhism. Swami Prabhananda writes,

“During the 19th century, Buddhism’s contact with the West gave it a much-needed fillip, as also a new lease of life in India. The increasing interest of European scholars stirred the hearts of Indian intellectuals” (Dash 6-7). Authors such as Nabin Chandra Sen, Aghoranath, Sri Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, and Rabindranath Tagore drew from western intellectual and cultural production, but also had an Indian industry to draw from. For example, Tagore drew from the work of Buddhist scholar Rajendralal Mitra to help him develop works such as his plays *Malini* (1896) and *Ashoka* (1933) (Dash 84). In the midst of the burgeoning Indian interest in Buddhism, organizations arose. The Mahabodhi Society was established in 1891, forging a tie between Indians and monastics from Ceylon. The Bengal Buddhist Association was established in 1892, which helped to support and promote Buddhist themes in a region of thriving literary production.

At the same time, and in the midst of British interpretive control, the doctrinal diversity of Buddhism sometimes had its own life force. Mark Lussier argues that despite attempts to create and deploy a western enlightenment model of the Buddha—rational, dualistic, predictable—there was something about Buddhist texts, even those written or interpreted by westerners, that resisted “enclosure” by Western enlightenment (7). He describes a decentering of the self that emanates from Buddhist thought and this decentering, he says, “embraces emptiness as its epistemology” as well as “moves away from a self-centered sovereign sense of self toward an expansive view of interdependent consciousness” (85). For Lussier, the western Romanticist movement, with its turning away from rationalist thinking, surrendered into a consciousness that opened up to some of the core values of Buddhism. McMahan confirms that the “idea of nonduality of subject and object, for example, is present in both Romantic idealism and Mahayana thought and thus provides a point of contact between the traditions” (87). My concern with this view is that Lussier and McMahan are overlooking the centering on the

individual in Romanticism, the surrendering into one's own imaginative powers as opposed to surrendering any pretense of a self.

Sometimes, interpretive work signaled ambivalence about empire. Kathryn Freeman argues that British readers in the nineteenth century misunderstood the idea of nonduality and mistranslated it as the "sublime," or "transcendence." "Nondualism is not synonymous with transcendence: the latter connotes a line to be crossed which, from the perspective of the former, is illusory. The fact that British readers of the period described the Indian texts in terms of a transcendental sublime should reveal their Westernizing of the texts" (155). This mistranslation, she claims, signals anxiety and ambivalence toward "Enlightenment epistemology which they saw the Indian texts as both challenging and duplicating" (141). I would argue that a further thing is happening. Even as the term "non-dual" is being mistranslated, misapprehended, and variously spelled, a crucial engagement is happening with a concept that is potentially profoundly disruptive and threatening to any colonial or hegemonic system of thought. A Romanticist writer might grab hold of the dissolving into non-duality and think that it means the pre-eminence of the individual, the dissolve resulting into a cosmic oneness rather than the ultimate lack of solidity woven into the Three Marks of Existence. Such a mistranslation could still result in a process of destabilization that knocks solidity out of the reader.

As Suleri and others have pointed out, the India constructed by the Buddhist interpretive complex was more complicated than monolithic, at times more destabilizing than reifying. As Suleri writes, "the idiom of colonialism is necessarily proleptic: it must anticipate the transfer of power even in the articulation of the acquisition of power" (21). As a path towards liberation, Buddhism's prolepsis is both promised and caught in a colonial battlefield of interpretation and authorization. On an individual level, a practitioner uses the means available to them to progress

even as they must examine the impact of their actions and the potential harm they cause. So, too, on a collective level, any Buddhist organization or community has to reconcile their work towards the liberation of all with the relative truth that they do harm along the way. As soon as the center of gravity shifted to the West, what Jeffrey Franklin calls the “counter-invasion” began. This invasion involved the migration of Buddhist ideas into Britain via doctrinal texts, stories, and artifacts appropriated and brought back to centers of study in the west: “the thousands of scrolls, robes, prayer wheels, figurines, singing bowls, tapestries, statues and other items, including the Amaravati bas-reliefs, accumulated in London museums” (19). But, claims Franklin,

the primary vehicles for the counter-invasion were texts produced primarily in Europe, though also in Anglo-India and other imperial enclaves, in response to the foreign human contacts, artifacts, and manuscripts already mentioned. The end of the eighteenth century saw accelerated publication of translations, government reports, travelogues, and missionary narratives, among other types of texts, issued from or pertaining to countries with ties to Buddhism. (19)

This counter-invasion, argues Franklin, profoundly changed British culture (7). The look, the feel, the conceptual textures of Buddhism began to subtly permeate British culture production. In turn, the interpretive industry forged a new version of Buddhism, now known as Buddhist modernism. The term Buddhist modernism was first used by Heinz Bechert in 1966 (*Staat und Gesellschaft*). Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere use the term “Protestant Buddhism” to highlight the relationship between Buddhist reform in Sri Lanka in response to Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century. Donald Lopez refers to “modern Buddhism” as a movement that has created an international, cosmopolitan, virtually non-denominational version of Buddhism. McMahan notes that Buddhist modernism operates on “Weberian assumptions” (12)—that in the twentieth century, people are seeking new ways to re-enchant their world. At the same time, the alignment of Buddhism with Protestantism echoes Weber’s

theory, presented in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, that the development of Protestant individualism runs parallel with laissez-faire capitalism.

Lopez, McMahan, and others are helpfully pointing out the spiritual-ideological interference of colonial powers in defining Buddhism. But Loy has critiqued the term “Buddhist Modernism” as being myopic about the variety of views across Buddhist schools. Buddhism, he argues, has been in flux for millennia, holding and practicing from so many different perspectives. For the purposes of my research, I acknowledge the British attempt to draw a clear, thick line around “true” Buddhism and I see that as deeply problematic in terms of what is “real” or “really” Buddhist. At the same time, the line itself is a sign of some kind of new view, a version of Buddhism that is coming into being. And, just as importantly, the line wobbles and blurs and it is those moments of wobble that are illuminating and reveal an oppositional discourse.

McMahan refers to the “cross-fertilization of traditional Buddhism and the discourses of modernity” (89). The problem with this is that Buddhism as a tradition is a vast constellation of cross-fertilizations of different traditions. With regards to Buddhism, “purity” is a myth that gets invoked to territorialize a sectarian view. Nonetheless, western scholars brought a whole new perspective to bear on its consideration of Buddhism.

By the early twentieth century, glimpses of non-conceptuality were dotting the intellectual and artistic landscape in the West. Experimental writers, abstract painters, modernist musical composers and new scientific theorists⁹ were all exploring the frontiers of consciousness and ways to represent consciousness. Some of these explorations also consciously included a

⁹ Some notable examples: Arthur Schopenhauer, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Friedrich Nietzsche, Lafcadio Hearn, T. S. Eliot, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Hermann Hesse, Christmas Humphries, William James, Claude Monet, Marcel Duchamp, Constantin Brancusi, and John Cage.

consideration of empire and liberation. Although he does not mention Buddhism, Pericles Lewis roots out and examines the perpetuation of a kind of spirituality that continued into the 20th century in England. “In my view, the early twentieth century was a period when elite groups started to consider the spiritual possibilities of life outside a church or synagogue, even as the broader culture remained largely—and traditionally—religious, particularly in the English-speaking world” (3). Modernist writers, says Lewis, “find their own form of religious experience in meditating on the sacramental power that can no longer be contained in the church—or on the social imagination that once conferred power in the church” (4). One of the strands informing the spiritual nature of modernist writing is undoubtedly Buddhism. The sacred is elided but not erased. Non-conceptual awareness can be invoked or presented but little can be said about it with any certainty. Definitions do not stay static. Non-duality undermines the reifying of binaries like good and evil.

Meanwhile, in India, the 1920s and 1930s saw the growth of a popular independence movement draw upon Buddhism and the example of the Buddha to ground their anti-colonial rhetoric. Gandhi repeatedly invoked the Buddha as an Indian hero and prototype freedom fighter, often comparing him to Jesus or discussing ways in which the Buddha helped to improve Hinduism, such as by doing away with animal sacrifices. Gandhi said, “‘Buddha’s teachings like his heart was all-expanding and all-embracing, and so it has survived his body and swept across the face of the earth’” (qtd. in Dash 1). Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya had written in 1897 that the first person who had preached and practiced equality in Indian society was the historical Buddha (Dash xii). Nehru wrote that he put the Buddhist king Ashoka at the same level as Jesus as a source of inspiration for a non-violent struggle for justice against the British (Allen 355).

In the midst of the Western construction of Buddhist modernism, Asians were joining in the process of revisioning their spiritual tradition. These voices were creating a mosaic of different perspectives. For a Nehru invoking the Buddha as anti-colonial freedom fighter, there was an Anagarika Dharmapala, the star of the World Congress of Religion in Chicago in 1893. Dharmapala was one of the leaders of the Ceylon Buddhist reform movement that had come under pressure and direction from the Church of England and the British government to align its doctrinal view with the version that British interpreters had created. Amongst other things, Dharmapala announced that the Buddha rejected the idea of a “supreme Creator.” Instead, the Buddha taught evolution and the laws of cause and effect. (McMahan 91). The twentieth century continued a tradition within Buddhism of allowing new forms, new shapes, and new rhetorics to emerge.

The four authors in this dissertation (Forster, Kirshnamurti, Yongden, and Travers) all include an intervention of non-dual awareness intertwined with a theme of liberation from bondage. Each chapter looks at a framework built by or through the British Empire that is then overturned through a glimpse of non-dual awareness. That non-duality is invoked textually so that the audience can get the feel of it and the lived experience of it. Then each author gives us clues about the significance of that overturning via non-duality. In each chapter, I will look at the colonial structure, the ways in which non-duality comes through in the text, and then discuss the significance of the revision of the Raj-built framework. Over the span of the four chapters, we see a transition from deep colonial anxiety, to an Indian reclaiming of the authority to tell their own stories, to one such story and the kinship between non-duality and a system of ethics, and finally to the radical re-positioning of sites of non-duality to traditional British spaces.

I am looking at a few snapshots from this era. The four authors that I have chosen represent both a range of social locations and a clear continuum of working with non-duality from the 1920s through the 1930s. I do not consider these writers or texts to be iconic, though they are distinctively definitive of their time, each in their own way, and they present ways in which British and Indian writers were grappling with a Raj-built framework for understanding India's spiritual legacy and offering back responses indicative of their locations.

Srinivas Aravamudan coins the term *Guru English* to describe a theolinguistic hybrid formation that incorporates linguistic register, literary discourse, transidiomatic environment, and a commodifiable cosmopolitanism in the contact zone where Indian spirituality meets Western longing, appropriation, and entrepreneurship. Guru English, I would posit, is the mother language of the emerging epistemology of non-duality and compassion. But the grandmother languages are Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Oxonian English. The "cosmopolitan and diasporic logic" of Guru English both exposes the lie of fixed thinking with regard to any Indian spiritual tradition and invigorates a tradition of energetic engagement and flexibility in meaning making.

To allow for the rub between cultural perspectives to fully represent such an energetic engagement and the full range of points of view, I am applying a Saidian contrapuntal reading of my texts. Edward Said notes, "What I left out of *Orientalism*, was that response to Western dominance which culminated in the great movement of decolonization all across the Third World" (*Culture and Imperialism* xii). Interestingly, though not noted by Said, Buddhism already had a history of resistance to hegemonic cultural control. It was already primed to play a role of resistance. But it also undermined nationalist tendencies, as it broke down binarisms, which adds a layer of complexity.

A contrapuntal reading, which makes room for both an imperialist view and the resistance to that view, in this case includes a reading of British and Indian authors writing about Buddhism in the 1920s and 30s. This reading creates a dialectical tension between an the experience with non-duality and compassion of the colonizer, who needs to be fully engaged with culpability and the implications of cultural appropriation and the colonized, whose experiences with non-duality and compassion gesture toward liberation.

Chapter 1 investigates ways that non-duality and Buddhist transactions help the British lose control of their colonial (and anti-colonial) narratives in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. While an ostensibly anti-imperial novel, *Passage* reveals two surprising elements that reveal deep fissures in the liberal humanist framework that allowed for a generous, dignified, secular, and tepid opposition to the Empire. The first fissure is the famous cave scene, easily the most modernist moment in the novel. The cave itself is a direct encounter with non-dual awareness. The inability of the British characters to accommodate non-duality reveals the terror of facing the otherness of indeterminacy. The second fissure is more subtle and more profound. There is, I argue, a haunting in the novel of something quite terrifying to even the terribly sympathetic Forster. This story, which appears to show the inability of any party to adequately govern India, is haunted by the emerging presence of Ashoka, the third century BCE emperor whom the British has just brought back into the historical record through their diligent archaeological and interpretive work. In their self-satisfied presentation of Ashoka to the world, they possibly failed to recognize that they had given back to India their own national hero, a king for the ages. Although never directly named in the novel, Ashoka's sites are named or referenced, including the cave of the famous scene. The lingering aura of dissonance signals the unease of a Raj not

only in disrepair, but one which has unearthed the story of a national leader who is on the verge of becoming a primary symbol for Indian self-governance and greatness.

Chapter 2 looks at the work of Jiddu Krishnamurti, which demonstrates how non-duality can be reclaimed and deployed for Indian autonomy. Discovered as a young boy by the leadership of the Theosophical Society and raised by them to become the World Teacher who would spiritually unite the world, Krishnamurti overturns the colonial control of the Theosophists and their construction of a new syncretic religion in 1929 when he rejects his mantle of World Teacher and breaks from the Theosophists. Krishnamurti then embarks upon a career of writing and spiritual teaching with a message of warning for following the dictates of any organization, political or religious. This moment of separation from his Western handlers is both the subaltern writing back to correct the misrepresentations of the Theosophists' claims about Buddhism and a warning about collectivist movements that require absolute obedience and unquestioning loyalty. Krishnamurti's work, from the 1920s into the following decades, evolves from the sensation of announcing separation from colonial control to the generation of self-recognized wisdom in action.

In Chapter 3 I look at the representation of Tibetan Buddhism in the novel *Mipam*, which insists that the Buddhist view on non-duality is inextricably yoked with an ethical system that values compassion. Written by the ethnic Tibetan Sikkimese writer Lama Yongden, *Mipam* explicitly responds to the European fantasy of Tibet as a land both demonic and in need of British occupation and supervision. Yongden demonstrates that Tibetan Buddhism might appear to be full of magic and romantic danger, but at its core it is tied to a culture predicated on the values of kindness, sympathy, honesty, and integrity. The practices of Tibetan Buddhism,

described in detail for a naive audience, demonstrate a path of progression and growth out of selfishness and greed into a liberatory frame of mind.

Chapter 4 brings us back to Britain with P. L. Travers' series of books about Mary Poppins, and shows how non-duality in the 1930s looks and feels both distinctly British and "other," an other that has migrated into British cultural space to make a distinctly anti-colonial mark. Mary Poppins revises empire in various ways. Blown into the lives of a middle-class British family by an eastern wind, she brings the world—and change—with her. Mary, I argue, operates as a kind of dakini—a figure found in tantric traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism. The dakini is a powerful female figure who flies, acts as protector, helps transmit teachings and guide practitioners through powerful portals of insight into non-duality and compassion. Author P. L. Travers is bringing the East back to Britain and injecting some restorative justice for colonial practices of control and exploitation.

Each author reflects back two things about non-dual awareness: what it feels like and what it represents to him or her. To Forster, it is a terrifying rupture and an echo of not merely gross mismanagement, but gross misunderstanding by the British of India and its spiritual legacy. To both Krishnamurti and Lama Yongden, non-dual awareness is a source of wisdom. For Krishnamurti, initially it is separation and then later, it is wisdom in action. For Yongden, it is experiencing the entire world as beloved, transcending personal territories and boundaries and expanding appreciation and connectedness out beyond imagination. Finally, for Travers, it is a magical display that represents restorative justice to the cosmos, a way of bringing things back into balance and bringing healing to the universe.

If the early twentieth century is a time of, as Jessica Berman calls it, the enforcement of liberal subjectivity, then non-duality is a force that undermines that completely. The

multidirectional flow of global literature and global spiritual experiences has brought a gap in consciousness back to Britain. The transnational cartography of the four authors in this dissertation are helpful markers in charting this flow and noting the quality and signification of moments of non-duality.

CHAPTER II

THE ASHOKAN LEGACY IN *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*

When scholars talk about the presence of religion in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, they nearly always talk about some combination of Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. These are the three religions represented via characters, buildings, festivals and doctrinal points of view. Jainism and Buddhism each get a mention, but Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity are the three religions of the novel and the three religions that matter, culturally and politically, in India in the 1920s. It is perfectly reasonable to focus on these three religious traditions in the novel. However, as I will argue in this chapter, a fourth religion, Buddhism, saturates the pages of *Passage* in a marginally tangible but nonetheless powerfully impactful way. This Buddhist presence infiltrates and unravels the Forsterian liberal humanist fabric of the text through encounters with non-dual awareness in the famous cave scene and through the haunting of the text by Ashoka¹⁰, the third century BCE Indian Emperor, newly unearthed by British archaeologists, famously Buddhist, and an exemplar of what a good king should be.

The novel itself, published in 1924 and written over a span of eleven years, from 1913, when Forster returned from his first trip to India, to 1924, after his return from his second trip there, is a kaleidoscopic snapshot of an empire in existential crisis. An array of characters from a variety of social locations mingle, bump into, and collide with each other in a dance of colonial distrust and feeble, tenuous friendship that flashes into a replaying of the uprising of 1857 and the Amritsar massacre of 1919 when a white woman accuses an Indian man of sexual assault.

¹⁰ There are multiple spellings for Ashoka in circulation and the very act of selecting which one to use in this dissertation is fraught with colonialist implications. As with words in languages other than English, I chose to go with the simplest spelling that could help my reader know how the name is pronounced. The most recent scholarly work on Ashoka, Nayanjot Lahiri's 2015 biography, uses this spelling, which helped to confirm my decision.

Despite tremendous personal interest in and sympathy for Indian history and culture, Forster transmits British anxiety about England's future relationship with India and the inability of sustainable intimacy and trust between Indians and British. Edward Said writes about *A Passage to India* that "Forster's India is so affectionately personal and so remorselessly metaphysical that his view of Indians as a nation contending for sovereignty with Britain is not politically very serious, or even respectful" (*Culture and Imperialism* 204). I appreciate this critique, which is why I advocate that we not try to determine how realistic the characters are with regard to their religious beliefs or their political aspirations. Professor Godbole is, as Forster readily confessed, nothing other than the imagination of a British writer.

Forster represents Hindu and Islamic festivals as a backdrop for British anxiety. What moves through the core of that anxiety, though, is the culmination of over 100 years of British fascination with and excavation of India's Buddhist roots. The story of the British "invention" of Buddhism, thoroughly detailed in the Introduction, involved the creation of a figure known as The Buddha, an avatar of probity and propriety, easily mythologized and made larger than life because no texts or words in his own hand existed. The Buddha became like Jesus, translated to the world 200 years after his life and open to divergent interpretations.

The case of Ashoka, who lived roughly 200 years after the historical Buddha, is another matter entirely. Ashoka's words, carved into stone and found throughout the Indian subcontinent, make him more human and relatable, but in particular they make his meaning quite clear. Ashoka, I hope to demonstrate, is an invisible but potent symbol of resistance to British hegemony that moves through the text just as Ashoka's story moved through Indian resistance movements. The novel itself cannot control him. He hovers as an interesting footnote in a British

archive but he inflects the text with the best argument for Indian independence, using a secular, rational schema for how to be a just ruler.

What Said refers to as Forster's remorselessly metaphysical bent is a sign that Forster has been touched with the eastern spiritual mania that gripped English society. Forster had, indeed, been literally touched in September, 1912 when he met Edward Carpenter and his partner George Merrill, who had been practicing yoga for some time. This often-recounted meeting was an important moment for Forster, who never practiced in any spiritual tradition after he gave up Christianity. When Merrill touched Forster on his lower back, a jolt of energy passed through, which Forster later reflected on: "It was as much psychological as physical. It seemed to go straight through the small of my back into my ideas, without involving thoughts" (Moffat 113-14). This moment of non-conceptual awareness, transmitted perhaps via a yogic practice, had a profound impact on Forster, who reported that his novel *Maurice* was conceived on the spot.

Passage features a battle between mystical moments (small and large) and a secular liberal humanist stance of using a good rational mind to solve problems and forge or mend relationships. There are repeated moments of interplay between conceptual thinking and non-duality throughout the novel. What rarely happens in the midst of non-duality is any attempt at compassionate action. Non-duality almost always is followed by a moment of self-absorption if not outright terror for British characters. A series of indeterminate gaps open up in the narrative that cannot be reconciled in conventional ways and it is not possible for the British characters to accommodate them and maintain a solid liberal humanist secular world view.

Much scholarship has been done on changes in religion during the inter-war period. One prominent view is that the twentieth century is the era in which the rise of secularism has fully taken hold, that religion no longer signifies in countries like England, that the numinous has

departed the land. Recent scholarship has complicated this view in various ways. Charles Taylor has argued that secularism cannot be defined as the mere absence of religion or the natural evolution towards rationality. Taylor calls these “subtraction stories” which fail to engage in the levels of complexity inherent in a secular era. He defines secularity as a social condition in which the belief in God is no longer assumed, unchallenged, unproblematic. In a secular age, belief and non-belief are both viable options (*A Secular Age*). Anthropologist Talal Asad shares Taylor’s desire to avoid a reductive, uncomplicated view of secularism. In particular, he emphasizes the multiple meanings, exclusions, and biases of secularism. For Asad, “religious” and “secular” are not fixed categories (25).

Meanwhile, in India, independence leaders such as M. K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru deployed and revolutionized spiritual terms in service of a new political and rhetorical vision. Terms such as *swaraj* (self rule), *swadeshi* (self reliance), *satyagraha* (the power of truth or love), and *ahimsa* (nonviolence) became tools to bring the spiritual and the political together in a discursive resistance to imperial dominance.

Back in the England, secularism fed an anxiety shot through with the awareness that the coherent world of the nineteenth century had given way to something unstable and unclear. In *Colonial Odysseys: Empire and Epic in the Modernist Novel*, David Adams argues that the shift toward secularism creates a “god-shaped hole” that twentieth century writers attempt to fill with the trope of the odyssey. Whereas in the nineteenth century, the odyssey allows characters to “escape from problems of modernity and celebrate the empire” (10), by the twentieth century the odyssey has become a journey into “estrangement and death” (30). Novels such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *The Voyage Out*, *A Passage to India*, and *A Handful of Dust* expose the inadequacies of secularism to help the subjects of empire cope with the prospect of death or the

absolute. *A Passage to India* charts another kind of odyssey, or rather a series of odysseys. On a small scale, there are the individual odysseys of the British characters who have come to India to work, to marry, or to see the country. On a larger scale, the entire Raj is an extended odyssey that has indeed featured estrangement and death, but its level of self-awareness of its estrangement is in question.

If Forster was not a practitioner of any religion, he certainly held a sympathetic and kindly interest in the religious traditions of others. This interest extended to the often homosocial world in which he moved on his visits to India as well as the preparatory reading that he did before those trips. His good friend Syed Ross Masood, whose family helped found the Aligarh Muslim University, was a host and guide during his two trips to India. During his second trip, Forster was in the midst of the Hindu princely world as the Private Secretary of the Maharaja of Dewas. But Forster also knew about and read about Buddhism.

Forster had a lot to choose from for his reading. By the turn of the twentieth century, there was virtually an entire industry of books written about Buddhism by British writers alone, as well as competing Buddhist interpretive industries in France, Germany, and the United States. As detailed more extensively in the Introduction, the British had a particular point of view that they needed to impart, a narrative of who the historical Buddha was and what true Buddhism was.

Donald Lopez writes that

the early centuries of Buddhism in India were deployed [by European writers—both scholars and creative writers] to evince the vitality of classical Indian civilization, a vitality that had long since vanished in India and lately manifested itself in Europe. The Buddha was seen as the greatest philosopher of India's Aryan past. Buddhism had a complete philosophical and psychological system, based on reason and restraint, opposed to ritual, superstition, and sacerdotalism. This Buddhism could thus serve as a substitute self for Victorian Britain. (*Curators of the Buddha* 6)

Lopez and other contemporary scholars of religion have dissected the ways that the British, French, and Germans fleshed out a history of Buddhism to fit their needs. Lopez writes, “One of the many products of colonialism is knowledge, produced first by explorers and merchants, then by colonial officers and missionaries, later by specialists in archives and institutes in the metropole and colleges and universities in the colony” (Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La* 157). By the twentieth century, there were dozens of best-sellers in circulation, extolling the life the Buddha as well as the laudatory work done by British archaeologists and translators in unearthing India’s ancient history.

One such best-seller was Vincent Smith’s *Ashoka, The Buddhist Emperor of India*, first published in 1909 and into its third edition in 1920. After over 100 years of piecing together material evidence, largely in the form of inscriptions found on rocks and pillars scattered throughout India, the story of Ashoka emerged to delight and astonish Indian and British audiences.

Ashoka inherited his throne on the Mauryan Empire from his father Bindusara, who inherited it from his father Chandragupta. Chandragupta, writes Vincent Smith, “became the first strictly historical emperor of India and ruled the land from sea to sea” (14). Ashoka expanded on the territory that he inherited and ruled an empire that extended from Kabul in the northwest to Mysore in the south and from Saurashtra in the west to Bengal in the east (Ghokale 87). The Mauryan Dynasty that Chandragupta founded lasted for probably only five or six generations, with Ashoka reigning from 269 to 232 BCE (Thapar 51). Nonetheless, the expansiveness of the empire made the British take notice and the nature of Ashoka’s self-presentation and self-promotion captured the imagination of a generation.

Although no written records other than the inscriptions survived, and indeed no buildings have been found that can be identified as Ashoka's palace, there are two sets of evidence to introduce who he was. One is the inscriptions, which I will describe in some detail shortly. The other is a set of Buddhist texts, written some hundreds of years after his death by monks in different parts of Asia. In these texts—the *Asokavadana* in the northern Buddhist tradition and the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* in Sri Lanka, Ashoka is a highly mythologized Buddhist superhero, who moves through a deeply transformational conversion after the horrific battle at Kalinga in eastern India. Ashoka becomes a Buddhist and transforms his life and his kingdom into a land of righteousness.

While these Buddhist texts helped preserve a memory of Ashoka throughout much of Asia, even as it all but disappeared in India, the stories themselves are not read as reliable sources on the life of Ashoka. The inscriptions, however, delivered in the first person, in Ashoka's voice, during his life, provide a detailed look at his empire and his style of ruling. In the dozens of inscriptions carved into rocks and pillars and scattered from Afghanistan down to Karnataka, Ashoka presents himself to seemingly multiple purposes. The inscriptions come in a variety of scripts, most commonly Brahmi, the earliest Indian script used for Sanskrit and Prakrit. But some of the inscriptions are bilingual, for example employing Greek or Aramaic, most likely because people in the region the inscriptions are found also spoke those languages. Scholars also note the importance in Ashoka's use of Prakrit, the language of the people, rather than Sanskrit, the language of elites. According to Romila Thapar, the inscriptions fall into two categories. There are the "declarations of the king as a lay Buddhist to his church," and there are "proclamations to the public at large" (3). In these latter inscriptions, Ashoka lays out his policy of *Dhamma* (the Prakrit form of the Sanskrit word *dharma*). Thapar emphasizes that *dhamma* is

not distinctly tied to Ashoka's affiliation with Buddhism, but that *dhamma* "was a policy rather of social responsibility It was the building up of an attitude of mind in which social behaviour, the behaviour of one person towards another, was considered of great importance" (3-4). This understanding Ashoka's *dhamma* sets the stage for our understanding of him, and his role in *Passage*. Thapar translates Ashoka's *Dhamma* as virtue; it is the virtue that becomes a binding factor of a very multicultural society.

There are five details that Ashoka repeatedly emphasizes in his inscriptions. He advises his subjects to be obedient to their parents, to be generous to holy people, to avoid killing, to spend little, and to own as little as possible. He repeatedly says that the state values the well-being of animals and humans. To that end, the government has built hospitals for both animals and humans. The government has planted shade trees, dug wells, and set up comfort stations on the main roads. Ashoka admonishes against animal sacrifice or hunting for sport or the use of animals for entertainment. He preaches religious tolerance and encourages female lay disciples and nuns. He expresses remorse for the suffering he caused in Kalinga (Ahir 54-63).

Although Nayanjot Lahiri has recently pointed out that Ashoka's name was preserved in rarely-viewed ancient Indian texts, it is safe to say, as Strong has, that "[a]fter the demise of Buddhism in India . . . in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, even the association of the pillars with the name of Asoka was forgotten" (Strong 9). Ahir writes, "Asoka was forgotten by his countrymen to such an extent that after the twelfth century A.D. even his name disappeared from the pages of Indian history" (vii). While the Buddhist mythological, almost magical Ashoka lived on in Ceylon, Tibet, Burma, China, and elsewhere, Ashoka the king of much of the subcontinent of India no longer existed to virtually all Indians by the eighteenth century, when Europeans began finding inscriptions and trying to make sense of them. From 1750, when Padre

Tieffenthaler found fragments of the inscription from the Delhi-Meerut Pillar, into the 1800s, when more pillars were found and then the Rock Edict at Girnar by Major James Tod in 1822, the evidence for Ashoka accumulated. Finally, in 1837, James Prinsep translated Ashokan inscriptions into English for the first time and for the next several decades, more and more of Ashoka came to light. In 1877, Alexander Cunningham published “Corpus Inscriptorum Indicarum,” a comprehensive work on the inscriptions. Through confusion about the Brahmi script, Ashoka’s practice of referring to himself as *Devanampriya* (“Beloved of the Gods”), and in particular, the wide geographical range of the rocks and pillars, it took 100 years for Ashoka the King to emerge from British inspection.

Vincent Smith’s 1909 history of Ashoka was his formal coming out to the modern world. An Ashoka industry was launched. In the 1920s, books were written by British, Indian, and European scholars, all weighing in on the importance of Ashoka¹¹. There has been continuous research by Indian and western scholars ever since. Smith’s biography is a mixed bag. It presents English translations and commentary on all of the inscriptions and an overall assessment of Ashoka. His summation is that “no student of the history of religion can ignore Asoka, who stands beside St. Paul, Constantine, and the Khalif Omar in the small group of men who have raised to dominant positions religions founded by others” (21).

If Smith recognizes the greatness, the importance of Ashoka, he also does so from a perspective steeped in Orientalizing and othering. Thapar writes that Smith’s biography is full of

references to autocracy and despotism as was common to many colonial historians invoking the theories of James Mill. Even when he was being more positive, there was the caveat of ‘after the Oriental manner.’ For him Asoka was ‘a masterful autocrat ruling church and state alike with a strong hand’ but at the same time intermittently a monk and something of a missionary. These were in a sense, contradictory statements, and in any

¹¹ Some notable authors are D.R. Bhandarkar in 1925, J.M. McPhail in 1926, R.K. Mookerji in 1928, and Louis de la Vallee Poussin in 1930.

case they did not hold for long since there was little evidence to support them. (Thapar xxxiv)

If Smith had a limited perspective on Ashoka, he did nonetheless help to put Ashoka on the map. In his *The Outline of History*, H. G. Wells writes: “In the history of the world there have been thousands of kings and emperors who called themselves ‘their highnesses,’ ‘their majesties,’ and ‘their exalted majesties’ and so on. They shone for a brief moment, and as quickly disappeared. But Ashoka shines and shines brightly like a bright star, even unto this day” (qtd in Allen 347). Ashoka had become a king for the ages. In ancient India he was a *dharmaraja*, a Dharma King. In twentieth-century Europe, he had become what some have also called him, the *cakravartin*, or Universal Monarch. The exemplary good king.

In India, he was a powerful signal to a growing independence movement staring down the most powerful empire of the moment and making a case for self-determination. In the 1920s through the 1940s, Ashoka became a symbol for not only enlightened rulership, but for a strong, enlightened Indian ruler. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote that he put Ashoka at the same level as Jesus as a source of inspiration for a non-violent struggle for justice against the British (Allen 355). Ashoka eventually became a symbol for the newly independent India in 1947. The Ashoka lion, which sat atop his pillars, is the contemporary symbol of India and the *dharmacakra* or Dharma Wheel of Ashoka became the symbol on the Indian flag.

All of this is to say that of course Forster knew who Ashoka was and if he did not intentionally set his novel in Ashoka’s capitol of Pataliputra, now Patna, in order to bring Ashoka explicitly into the novel, he had to feel Ashoka’s breath on his neck as he described the land that was the heart of Ashoka’s empire. Just as the fictional Chandrapore (named surely after Ashoka’s grandfather Chandragupta) is based on Patna, the fictional Marabar Caves are based on the actual Barabar Caves in the Barabar and Nagarjuni hills. These seven caves were all hand

carved out of granite during Ashoka's time and most are inscribed with an epigraph explaining that they were given by Ashoka to the Ajivikas, an ascetic religious group. The most dramatic scene in the novel is thus an Ashokan site.

Forster wrote to his mother on January 29, 1913, during his first trip to India, about a visit to Bodh Gaya, enclosing in his letter to her a leaf from the tree which stands as proxy for the one that Gautama Buddha was sitting beneath when he became enlightened (*Selected Letters* v. 1 183). In that same letter, he describes visiting the Barabar Caves. He tells her that "it was suggested we should visit the Buddhist caves." He describes the caves themselves:

The caves are cut out of the solid granite: a small square doorway and an oval hall inside. This sounds dull, but the granite has been so splendidly polished that they rank very high among caves for cheerfulness. Date—250 B. C.: as early as anything in India. One often has a frieze of elephants over the door, but in the rest the only decoration is the fine Pali inscriptions on the sides of the entrance tunnel. Standing inside one sees these in the strong sunlight, and beyond them the view. We lit candles which showed the grain of the granite and its reds and greys. The nephews also tried to wake the echoes, but whatever was said and in whatever voice the cave only returned a dignified roar. (*Selected Letters* v. 1 184)

This description is followed by a comment that demonstrates that Forster has some interest and proficiency with the difference between what is Buddhist and what is Hindu:

Masood has again arranged for me and I am now sponging on Nawab Syed Zafar Nawab Saleh, in whose carriage I went to Boddh Gya. Boddh Gya—not to be confused with the Vishnu temple at Gya about which I wrote to Ruth & Agnes—is the place where Sakya muni (as he was then called) obtained enlightenment—i.e. became Buddha; and it is the most sacred place in the Buddhist religion. Buddhism, though it started in India, has now died out from it, and so the pilgrims to the Boddh Gya temple are all from distant countries e.g. Burma and Tibet. Tibetans were there this afternoon, squat people with rough hair, filling the ante chamber of the temple and crouching between the barbaric pillars. (*Selected Letters* v. 1 184)

In these passages Forster demonstrates an adequate understanding of the caves, of their provenance, and of Buddhism. He does not name Ashoka but he clearly knows Ashoka. He might have read Smith's description of the caves: "The cave dwellings excavated in the

refractory gneiss of the Barabar and Nagarjuni hills near Gaya by Asoka and his grandson for the use of the Ajivikas, although not beautiful as works of art, are wonderful monuments of patient skill and infinite labour, misapplied as it seems to the modern observer” (134). He might just as possibly learned of their history from a local guide. The novelist in Forster then appears to begin thinking through how he would stage a scene featuring the caves. “The view when one drives up and sees everything suddenly from the edge of the embankment, is, as books say, ‘not easily forgotten.’ There can’t be anything like it in the world” (*Selected Letters* v. I 185).

Forster visited the Barabar Caves over a year before the outbreak of World War I and several years before 1919, but *A Passage to India* was revised and completed against the backdrop of the dramatic events of those intervening years in India. Much of the drama constellates around 1919, an important year for the British occupation of India. Mutually unsatisfactory attempts at shared governance, anti-sedition laws, a growing Hindu-Muslim collaboration, British concern that another Mutiny was brewing, and a perception amongst Indian advocates for independence that Britain was reneging on promises to grant home rule in exchange for the participation of Indian soldiers in World War I all converged in Amritsar. In response to the Rowlatt Act, which authorized the police to seize and imprison any Indian suspected of plotting against the Raj, Indian resistance leaders organized a *hartal*, a work stoppage or strike. In these early days of a technique that would later be refined and successfully executed with non-violent discipline, the strike led to riots and violence on both sides. The most egregious, for the British, was the attack by Indian nationalists on Marcella Sherwood, the supervisor of the Mission Day School for Girls in Amritsar. Four days after that attack, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer marched 90 troops into the Jallianwala Bagh, where thousands of Punjabis had gathered for a religious and cultural festival, and ordered the troops to shoot.

Estimates range from 379 to 1000 people killed, and over a thousand more were injured. In the days following the massacre, Dyer issued the infamous crawling order, which stipulated that all Indians crawl on their bellies down the street where Sherwood was attacked. Even those who lived on the street in question, and had played no role in the violence, were required to crawl.

His fascination with the variety of perspectives in India and the possibility of traversing them compelled Forster to write a novel that concurrently celebrated India, critiqued an empire that failed to see these possibilities, and held out some promise for community across the colonial divide. The tensions inherent in Amritsar come through in *Passage*. In July 1919, Forster received a letter from his old Cambridge friend and Anglo Indian government official Malcolm Darling. Forster had previously noted that Darling managed to have deeper and more meaningful contact with Indians than most of the other Raj administrators he met, and Darling's ability to see the humanity in the Indians he was sent to govern comes through in the letter. Darling wrote of the courtyard where the massacre took place: "I have seen the place—a death trap . . . God it makes me sick to think of it" (qtd. in Furbank Vol. Two 61). Still, the letter crackles with the confusion of the loyal civil servant. "Home Rule is so much in the air, that now the only way is to let them have it. Let 'em taste the poison they long for" (qtd. in Furbank Vol. Two 61). Home rule is poison, presumably, because the Indians, in Darling's view, cannot effectively govern themselves, and will just make a mess of what the British have given them when they try. Darling might have a benign sympathy for the Indians, but he does not appear to have much confidence in their abilities to self-govern.

Such ambivalence about Indians' ability to govern themselves comes through in *Passage* as well. Forster may draw the Turtons and Burtons as unsympathetic bullies, but there are no Indians in his novel who step forward and make a meaningful case for self-governance. Aziz

repeatedly invokes a dreamy nostalgia for the Mughal rulers but the actual movement for independence that dominated the British newspapers is nowhere to be seen in the novel. Instead, we get a sardonic narrator proclaiming: “India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last comer to the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood. Waddling in at this hour of the world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps” (361). A heated exchange between Fielding and Aziz becomes a diatribe by a narrator, and the disembodied nature of this diatribe brings us back to Ashoka, haunting us from the margins of his kingdom, expressing remorse over his own brutal mistakes rather than doubling down with within the “unspeakable limit of cynicism,” Ashoka who has brought his own religious value system to bear in creating a government that serves all members of its society, who promotes compassion, generosity, and a concern for the most vulnerable in that society. While Ashoka hovers at the margins of the text, the characters engage in a convergence of religion and politics that mirrors the news of the day. The intermingling of religion and governance in *A Passage to India* highlights the deployment of religion in the construction of a colonial rhetoric in Anglo India. Religion is deployed by the British to re-inscribe their colonial power. It is deployed by Indian activists to resist colonial hegemony and to assert an independent subjectivity.

India had always been, for the British, a site of contest where conquest and religion intermingled, but the darker aspects of this contest were now inescapable for Forster. If the liminal space of spiritual and cultural hybridity was a place of transformation for Forster, it was also a place where the rhetoric of empire was shifted into high gear. This was not a new phenomenon. In 1892 a former Cabinet Minister, Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke, wrote, “For a century the Englishman has behaved in India as a demi-god . . . Any weakening of this

confidence in the minds of the English or of the Indians would be dangerous” (qtd in Sayer 147). The term “demi-god” might merely refer to secular power and have nothing to do with spiritual mysticism. Yet court documents in the Dyer case demonstrate the full force of religion invoked in the construction of a colonial rhetoric. Dyer testified about the decision for the “crawling orders”:

It is a complete misunderstanding to suppose that I meant this order to be an insulting mark of race inferiority. The order meant that the street should be regarded as holy ground, and that, to mark this fact, no one was to traverse it except in a manner in which a place of special sanctity might naturally in the East be traversed. My object was not merely to impress the inhabitants, but to appeal to their moral sense in a way which I knew they would understand. (qtd. in Sayer 142)

This rather remarkable claim was surely not believed by anyone who heard it. Cynical expediency aside, Dyer’s comments conjure up a heady blend of religious persecution and a kind of black magic designed to terrify the natives. If religion was one of the markers of difference between occupier and occupied in the Raj, some British were willing to design weapons using the template of religious discourse.

The use of religion in the rhetorical battles in 1920s India was not limited to the British, however. The work stoppages known as *hartal*, effectively executed and refined by leaders such as Mohandas Gandhi, were rhetorically tied to Hindu funeral practices. The uprising in Amritsar that culminated in the April 13 massacre began as a *hartal*. Derek Sayer quotes Murlie Dhar, who “explained in the *Tribune*, 13 Apr. 1919: ‘What is Hartal? . . . when the dead body of the [anti-sedition] Rowlatt Acts is still in our midst, we have suspended all business and must remove the corpse from the house before the people can break their fast and resume business” (136). The secular movement for a modern independent state was forced to make room for the potent rhetoric of Hindu ritual. The logic of *hartal* as funeral practice gestured toward both the

spiritual identity of the majority population of India and its difference from its occupier, as well as the deceased status of British law.

Forster's response to such deployment of religion in the construction of a colonial (and anti-colonial) rhetoric was to acknowledge it— to explore its layers and possibilities and connect it back to his interest in the hybridized consciousness of the spiritually open-minded world traveler. *A Passage to India* begins with an encounter in a mosque between the Muslim Indian Dr. Aziz and the Christian English Mrs. Moore. Dr. Aziz begins by contemplating the parade of conquerors of India as a backdrop for his appreciation of Muslim identity:

A mosque by winning his approval let loose his imagination. The temple of another creed, Hindu, Christian, or Greek, would have bored him and failed to awaken his sense of beauty. Here was Islam, his own country, more than Faith, more than a battle-cry, more, much more . . . Islam, an attitude towards life both exquisite and durable, where his body and his thoughts found their home. (16)

His reverie is interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Moore, crossing into what should rightfully be (he feels) a forbidden zone. Being the open-minded, Forsterian sort of traveler, Mrs. Moore is able to cross the chasm and make indelible contact with Dr. Aziz. Rather than profaning the space, as he fears, she endows it with added meaning by invoking a universal God who knows and understands all pure intention. “God is here,” she says in response to his comment that English ladies do not take the trouble to follow Indian spiritual decorum if nobody can see them (18). Her “God is here” communicates a double message: his God is worthy of her respect; and her God respects the sacredness of the mosque. This both satisfies and touches Aziz. There is possibility for understanding here, for knowing and extending courtesies to one another, not because it is required, but because it is the decent and spiritually right thing to do. This gives Aziz back a feeling of agency and power that his humiliating encounter with the Callendars earlier in the evening has taken away from him. The contact does not diminish his sectarian bias,

but it softens it: “As he strolled downhill beneath the lovely moon, and again saw the lovely mosque, he seemed to own the land as much as anyone owned it. What did it matter if a few flabby Hindus had preceded him there, and a few chilly English succeeded?” (22).

Dr. Aziz’s intermingling of religious identity and the discourse of secular power is more than matched by Mrs. Moore’s civil servant son Ronny Heaslop and other Anglo Indians in the novel¹². In an exchange that echoes Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke, Mrs. Moore and Ronny discuss the English position in India. In response to what he views as his mother’s naïve, feminine, and romantic desire to engage too softly with the Indians, Ronny chastises and corrects her:

“We’re out here to do justice and keep the peace. Them’s my sentiments. India isn’t a drawing-room.”

“Your sentiments are those of a god,” she said quietly, but it was his manner rather than his sentiments that annoyed her.

Trying to recover his temper, he said, “India likes gods.”

“And Englishmen like posing as gods.” (51)

Mrs. Moore sees the fraught, complex position that the English occupy in using any kind of spiritual discourse to control their colonial subjects. It is troubling to her precisely because she seems to be interested in respecting and even connecting with the sacred, such as the mosque where she has met Dr. Aziz. Ronny’s relationship to religion appears to be more straight-forward and less complicated. He is British; thus he is Christian. Christianity may be part of what marks Britain as civilized, advanced, humane. For some, it is part of what the British bring to a place like India. But Ronny’s job is not to investigate too closely into the nature of the Christianity being practiced in the Raj. His job is to trust the sanctity of the system and to follow his orders. And if ruling India means becoming a god, he sees no sacrilege or problem in doing this. District

¹² “At Chandrapore the Turtons were little gods; soon they would retire to some suburban villa, and die exiled from glory” (*PI* 27).

Superintendent of Police McBryde tells Fielding in a heated moment: “‘Read any of the Mutiny records; which, rather than the Bhagavad Gita, should be your Bible in this country. Though I’m not sure that the one and the other are not closely connected’” (187). Religion and power struggles are intertwined throughout the novel, just as they were in India in the 1920s.

But if the English have used religion as a tool of conquest, the burgeoning anti-occupation movement is learning a few things. A committee has formed, echoing the bridging of the real Indian National Congress and Muslim League to strengthen the movement against the British:

Hamidullah had called in on his way to a worrying committee of notables, nationalist in tendency, where Hindus, Moslems, two Sikhs, two Parsis, a Jain, and a Native Christian tried to like one another more than came natural to them. As long as someone abused the English, all went well, but nothing constructive had been achieved, and if the English were to leave India, the committee would vanish also. (114-115)

While Forster may have readily opened himself up to a hybridized experience of India, and he sees the utility of various religious groups collaborating against the British, he displays a cynicism about these groups coming together and working through their inherent differences. The British are a convenient trope for a forced togetherness.

There is perhaps a tenuous bond between the politicization of spirituality (or the spiritualizing of politics) that runs throughout the novel and the moments of non-duality that also dot the text. There might be no bond at all or we might think of these different connections with spiritual experience as representing the range of human experience. When we think about non-duality in *Passage*, we can think in terms of what in Buddhism is known as relative and ultimate truth. True non-duality dwells in the realm of ultimate truth even as humans live with dualized experiences and value systems. The characters in the novel need to figure out how to navigate the tension between the ultimate and the relative.

We see multiple small moments of non-dual experience, beginning with Mrs. Moore on her first night in Chandrapore. Stepping outside of the club, where *Cousin Kate* is being performed, Mrs. Moore feels a connection with the moon that she does not experience back home. "In England the moon had seemed dead and alien; here she was caught in the shawl of night together with earth and all the other stars. A sudden sense of unity, of kinship with the heavenly bodies, passed through the old woman and out, like water through a tank, leaving a strange freshness behind" (28). This moment can easily be read as the essentializing of the Orient that westerners do. At the same time, social spaces that can accommodate non-dual awareness do tend to engender moments of openness and the dissolving of subject and object. A country that has hosted thousands of years of non-dual practice amongst myriad groups and communities is going to have some interesting things happen, however we frame those moments.

Professor Godbole, the most vocal representative of Hinduism, offers an invocation of non-duality as a kind of oneness, with all parts of the whole feeding the whole and in some sense being the whole. There is something compelling in his "'All perform a good action, when one is performed, and when an evil action is performed, all perform it'" (196-7). This could offer an invitation to the reader to think about colonial complicity. This would be more compelling if Godbole demonstrated any human concern for Aziz's situation. In the encounter he has with Fielding, Fielding is thinking too small, too personal: his own feelings for Aziz. And Godbole is thinking too big, too impersonal, where no individual really matters. It is as if to say that the British may be making some mistakes in India, but the holy people of India are incapable of the specificity needed to govern. For Godbole, "'When evil occurs, it expresses the whole of the universe. Similarly when good occurs'" (197).

The most potent encounter with non-duality happens in the caves scene. The caves have been read to mean different things by different readers. Frederick Crews' assertion that the caves reflect back what the visitor projects into them is a very secular liberal humanist perspective. It makes sense and yet offers little assistance in sorting out the transnational context from which that projection emerges. Nayanjot Lahiri refers to the caves as the "anti-spiritual centrepiece" of the novel (231). G.K. Das sees the caves as a framework for Forster to invoke and replay the events in Amritsar (47). Parminder Kaur Bakshi reads the caves as the hallmark of the "social disintegration of the structures of heterosexual society and marriage" (216). Charman L. Sahni interprets the caves as "Pure Being, the ineffable transcendence of *nirguna Brahman*" (138).

Ashoka comes most fully into the text with the Marabar Caves. The fictional Marabar Caves as mentioned earlier, are based on actual caves in north central India. The Barabar Caves are just north of the city of Patna (the model for Chandrapore, so dolorously described in the novel's opening). They are also just down the road from the town of Bodh Gaya, site of the enlightenment of the historical Buddha.

But there is more about the caves that brings them into an exploration of leadership and overlapping relationships between power and spirituality. In addition to being very near Bodh Gaya, the Barabar Caves are just north of Patna, home of Ashoka's capital. During his reign, Ashoka gave the caves to a religious group to be used for practice. They were not Buddhist, Hindu, or Jain, but followers of Maskarin Gosala, a contemporary of Sakyamuni Buddha and the Jain philosopher Mahavira. Ashoka donated three caves during his rule (the first in 258 BCE). Two more were donated by his descendant Dasharatha (Allen 225).

Before any character steps inside a cave, before their provenance can be discussed, the caves are invoked in vague terms as having had some unremembered, unrecorded past. "To call

them [the caves] ‘uncanny’ suggests ghosts, and they are older than all spirit. Hinduism has scratched and plastered a few rocks, but the shrines are unfrequented, as if pilgrims, who generally seek the extraordinary, had here found too much of it. Some saddhus did once settle in a cave, but they were smoked out, and even Buddha, who must have passed this way down to the Bo Tree of Gya, shunned a renunciation more complete than his own, and has left no legend of struggle or victory in the Marabar” (136). Forster here is either consciously taking fictional license in changing the caves’ provenance or pointing to the ways in which ancient sites are spoken about, with careless imprecision. We know from his letter to his mother that he knew that the caves are Buddhist. We can assume that he knows that they have a connection to Ashoka. He might even know about the Ajivikas and thus the comment about the saddhus being there might be a nod to them.

In the novel their provenance is contested. They are vaguely thought to be Buddhist or Jain, but definitely not Hindu. They are so ancient that they are seen to be before or beyond time. This trope of an India that is beyond time is in contrast to the burgeoning fields of archaeology and philology that were thriving during this time. Things that might “feel” beyond time were, in fact, being measured, quantified, and dated. They were being brought back into time. They were coming to time, or time was coming to them. Forster depicts this British “invention of Indian spirituality” during the trial:

The Magistrate displayed interest in archaeology.

An elevation of a specimen cave was produced; it was lettered “Buddhist Cave.”

“Not Buddhist, I think, Jain”

“In which cave is the offence alleged, the Buddhist or the Jain?” asked Mahmoud Ali, with the air of unmasking a conspiracy.

“All the Marabar caves are Jain.”

“Yes, sir; then in which Jain cave?”

“You will have an opportunity of putting such questions later.”

Mr. McBryde smiled faintly at their fatuity. Indians invariably collapse over some such point as this. He knew that the defence had some wild hope of establishing an alibi,

that they had tried (unsuccessfully) to identify the guide, and that Fielding and Hamidullah had gone out to the Kawa Dol and paced and measured all one moonlit night. “Mr. Lesley says they’re Buddhist, and he ought to know if anyone does.” (247-48)

Whatever confusion there might be about the history, spiritual or otherwise, of the caves, can be resolved by the administrators authorized to gather and interpret the archaeological record.

This was certainly one sort of colonial enterprise by the British, bringing something that otherwise looked timeless into time, their time, under their control and interpretation. And there is perhaps a subtle or not so subtle critique of the Indians for having lost or lost control over the story of Ashoka. Just as they had lost or lost control over the story of Gautama Buddha.

For me, the caves are the place where the logic of colonialism breaks down. When Mrs. Moore enters the first cave, something happens which shakes her to her core. She cannot say exactly what it is that happens (which she gives the shorthand label of “boum”), but later, she is able to reflect upon its significance. She compares the vastness of this overwhelming moment with religion as she has previously known it. “But suddenly, at the edge of her mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words from “Let there be Light” to “It is finished” only amounted to ‘boum’” (166). Mrs. Moore has a mentally explosive and completely inexplicable experience in the cave that both displaces her from her life as she had known it and establishes a new kind of possibility for her: “What had spoken to her in that scoured-out cavity of the granite? What dwelt in the first of the caves? Something very old and very small. Before time, it was before space also. . . The unspeakable attempt presented itself to her as love: in a cave, in a church—Boum, it amounts to the same. Visions are supposed to entail profundity, but—Wait till you get one, dear reader!” (231). So much is said about the horror that Mrs. Moore clearly experiences through her time in the cave. Less is said

about why she sees love at the core of it. Whose love? What kind of love? It is possible that the horror that she feels is her inability to meet or return the love offered.

Mrs. Moore is doing what any rational liberal humanist would do. She is trying to make logical sense of her experience and incorporate it back into a world view that works for her. She might be willing to make room for some new religious system, but this experience does not allow for that. Subject and object have dissolved for her in the cave and the orderly world, which had been none too comforting to her before she entered the cave, is now blasted wide open.

If Mrs. Moore and Adela, who has also had a mind-blasting experience, have had a glimpse of non-duality, one of the hallmarks of Buddhist epistemology, they have not been graced with any inkling of compassion, non-duality's necessary twin. Adela's first impulse is to accuse Aziz of attempted rape. Mrs. Moore's is to withdraw into herself, to keep herself as contained and removed from others as possible. Even as Adela becomes injured in her flight down the hill away from the cave and then lies mentally wounded by the experience, Mrs. Moore has nothing to offer to her future daughter-in-law:

But Mrs. Moore showed no inclination to be helpful. A sort of resentment emanated from her. She seemed to say: "Am I to be bothered for ever?" Her Christian tenderness had gone, or had developed into a hardness, a just irritation against the human race; she had taken no interest at the arrest, asked scarcely any questions, and had refused to leave her bed on the awful last night of Mohurram, when an attack was expected on the bungalow. (221)

Until, that is, Adela, speaks of the echo. Then Mrs. Moore perks up and takes interest. Adela is worried that she won't ever be rid of it. "'I don't suppose you ever will'" is Mrs. Moore's response. Adela begs the older woman to explain what the echo means; she believes understanding it will comfort her. But, Mrs. Moore responds, if Adela doesn't know, Mrs. Moore can't tell her. Adela calls her unkind. "'Say, say, say,' said the old lady bitterly. 'As if anything can be said!'" (222). Without the training in bringing compassion to bear on non-duality, the

experience is horrifying. It is the nihilism that so many western scholars accuse Buddhism and other eastern religions of being. Mrs. Moore has experienced a breach, a rip in the fabric of her sense of the world, which frees her up to reject Adela's supplication for support, but she is not free. She no longer has any foothold, any sure thing to give her the support and guidance that she needs to navigate her way through this new landscape.

This conversation between Adela and Mrs. Moore encapsulates a colonial rupture that cannot be closed through long habit of bearing with things. It further reveals the devastation to all involved when there is no habit of compassion. There is no Ashoka entreating his subjects to be fair, kind, and generous, to think of the well-being of others. If Mrs. Moore, who is respected and liked across a cultural spectrum, had been able to use the devastating rupture as an opportunity to see something new and had the instruction to generate love and compassion above all in the breach of these new kinds of mental experiences, she could have seen the damage that Adela was doing and stopped it. She could have spoken on behalf of Aziz. She could have opened to a vaster awareness of the damage that the British were doing in India. Instead, she retreats in self-absorbed bitterness. "She was by no means the dear old lady outsiders supposed, and India had brought her into the open" (223). This is the ultimate colonial nightmare. She cannot escape her awareness of the moral bankruptcy of her situation.

Forster conveniently lets Mrs. Moore slip off quietly into her afterlife with her cave experience largely unexplicated. But two lesser crossers-over, Adela and Fielding, have a chance to sum up their relationship to mystery and empire at the novel's end: "Were there words beyond which they could never touch, or did all that is possible enter their consciousness? They could not tell . . . Perhaps life is a mystery, not a muddle; they could not tell. Perhaps the hundred Indias which fuss and squabble so tiresomely are one, and the universe they mirror is one. They

had not the apparatus for judging” (293). Adela and Fielding might have neither the apparatus to judge nor the words to describe the mystery or muddle of their experience of India. But they are indelibly marked by this experience. They will forever carry this mark, which might allow them greater comfort with the indeterminacy of the late-colonial British subject. No gods, they. No rulers of others or seekers of adventure at the expense of the subaltern.

The ghostly presence of Ashoka is enough to cause the creator of the story to feel the lack of a good king ruling over India or England. This extends to one of Mrs. Moore’s final thoughts in India, as she is traveling back to Bombay, where she will board a ship for England. “‘I have not seen the right places,’ she thought, as she embayed in the platforms of the Victoria Terminus the end of the rails that had carried her over a continent and could never carry her back” (233). She then lists the places she would never visit: Asirgarh, Delhi, Agra, Kashmir, as well as “the obscurer marvels that had sometimes shone through men’s speech; the bilingual rock of Girnar, the statue of Shri Belgola, the ruins of Mandu and Hampi, temples of Khajraha, gardens of Shalimar” (233).

The bilingual rock of Girnar is one of the places that Mrs. Moore should have visited. It is, of course, one of the rocks in India bearing an inscription by Ashoka. It is bilingual because the inscription is in Prakrit and Sanskrit, covering his fourteen major edicts: prohibiting animal slaughter under certain circumstances; providing for care of animals and humans; being generous to Brahmans; loving dharma or virtue; concern about the treatment of slaves; wanting to know about his subjects’ well being; fostering tolerance for all religions; describing his first pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya; condemning popular festivals that cause harm; condemning the desire for fame; elaborating on virtue; emphasizing the need for religious tolerance; celebrating dharma or virtue as more important than military victories; describing the inscriptions placed around the kingdom.

Mrs. Moore should have visited the bilingual Girnar rock because it was a portal to Ashoka. She could have benefitted not because he was a historically important or powerful king, or that he had ruled most of the Indian sub-continent. Rather, Mrs. Moore should have visited the Girnar rock because the inscriptions might have shown her something about compassion that could have mitigated the horror and helped her make meaning of her rupturous experience in the cave. She could have encountered a good ruler, one who engendered tolerance, charity, and well-being, rather than a cynicism and a need for control.

The British were bewitched with Ashoka for a few reasons. First, they had dug him up.¹³ He was, in their thinking, theirs. Second, he had left behind an extraordinary body of evidence through the rocks and pillars, all of which were available to them. Third, he was Buddhist, which fit the British schema of holding Buddhism up over Hinduism. This could explain (to the British way of thinking) why India had had good governance in the past but not in the present.

Indians were then able to take what the British and other European interpreters generated about Ashoka and claim new signification. First, he was theirs, in the most fundamental sense possible. He was an Indian king. Second, the extraordinary body of evidence showed what a truly good king did, and that was the opposite of what the British had been doing. They could deploy Ashoka not merely as a focus of national pride but as an exemplar of Indian resistance to tyranny. And third, Ashoka's Buddhism was a helpful reminder that the Buddha was Indian, that Buddhism was another legacy that the British neither owned nor had the right to control.

¹³ Indeed, the British claimed that Ashoka had been completely lost to the historical record until they resurrected him. To this day, there is debate between Indian and British scholars about this. In 2012, Charles Allen reiterated the point that India had lost Ashoka until the British dug him back up. In 2015 Nayanjot Lahiri responded that while Ashoka was largely lost to India, his memory was still preserved in some rare ancient Indian texts.

What do we make of Ashoka's inscriptions? Are they directives, are they suggestions, are they descriptions? Who are they intended for? And why should any of this matter? When thinking about Forster, we can assume that he has heard of Ashoka and that some of these details of the inscriptions are known to him. This is going to get Forster thinking about what a king is, what a good king is and does. In considering Ashoka's relationship to Forster, it is less important what the ultimate meaning of Ashoka was and more important to consider what Ashoka could signify to Forster. Forster cares about humans, at the human level. He understands that the state has to make decisions based on collective-level considerations, but he cares about the individual. Ashoka manages to invoke the well-being of the individual in the inscriptions. He manages to paint a picture of himself as an individual, one who feels remorse about the mass killings in Kalinga. We have a fairly robust picture of Ashoka. He thinks of himself in paternal terms. As king, he is the father to his subjects. He cares about animals. He does not want to cause unnecessary suffering. He does not want to kill animals for sport or entertainment.

R. C. Dutt wrote in 1908 that “the claims of Asoka to greatness rest less on the extent of his empire and of his powers, than on the liberal and catholic spirit which inspired his internal administration and his foreign policy, and fervent love of truth, and the desire to spread the truth, which have made his name a household word from Siberia to Ceylon” (qtd. in Ahir 191). This description of Ashoka speaks directly to why Forster is a liberal humanist. Ashoka is about human-scale love and decency, the kind of love and decency that Forster has spent his career extolling. Forster values friendship before country because without such friendship, without such loyalty, no country is worth inhabiting.

Even Vincent Smith ceded that Ashoka's ethical system came close to Christianity. “Although Asoka probably had no clear faith in a living, personal God, his teaching certainly

attained to a level of practical morality little inferior to that of the Church of England in many respects, and superior in one point, by the inclusion of animals within the circle of neighbours to whom duty is due” (Smith 67).

The edicts flesh out how to govern a multicultural society. How to take care of everybody’s needs. How to be good. Ashoka presents himself as one who wants to be good and do good, rather than to be strong or be legally right. Ashoka, writes Romila Thapar, perhaps the foremost Ashokan scholar, “appears to many people in many guises, a conqueror who forsook conquest when he saw the suffering it caused, a saint, a combination of monk and monarch, a political genius, a king with a rare understanding of human beings—and so the images can be multiplied” (1). Thapar writes that Buddhism during Ashoka’s time was a “socio-intellectual movement.”

In some ways, Thapar’s reading of Ashoka’s interrelationship between Buddhism and governance feels very secular. It is far more about making a good society using reasonable means than embracing a mystical credo. This aligns well with a liberal humanist perspective. Ashoka is, quite likely, the king that Forster longs for. He is also, perhaps, the king that England longs for and that is why he became such a star in the 1920s.

At the same time, Ashoka was both colonial and anti-colonial trope. Most of the major sites of Buddhist India had been destroyed by the 14th century. The British literally dug Ashoka back up and gave him back to India. In doing so, certainly they were controlling the message, colonizing India’s history along with its wealth of material goods and human labor. But something may have moved outside of their control, as both Indians and sympathetic anti-colonial British absorbed the story of Ashoka and started to re-make him as an enlightened ruler, in stark contrast to the British.

The problem with such knowledge is that as it travels, it can take on many significations and be re-deployed in new and unexpected ways. The British wanted to see themselves as the best governors of India. They brought the country together, gave it institutions like a centralized education system and a railroad, and brought elements of “civilization” to it. The East India Company was a for-profit enterprise, in India to earn revenue and transport goods back home. But the Raj existed on behalf of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria and later, King Edward VII, and then George V. The work of Prinsep, Cunningham, and Smith produced an opportunity for head to head comparisons between Ashoka and the British monarchs on whose behalf Indians were starved, shot out of canons, and forced to crawl down streets.

To the British, the Indian Princes were indulgent, corrupt leaders who could not organize or govern properly. The Mughals were despots. But Ashoka brought the country together over 2000 years earlier and he both espoused and, apparently, lived up to his espousals of ethics and tolerance. And he was 100% Indian. In discovering and giving Ashoka to India, they created the perfect figure for Indian nationalist solidarity. Ashoka contributed to a national identity, a national mythology, a creation story for the nation. Further, Ashoka was a pluralist leader of a diverse society. The British may have proclaimed some value in pluralism, but their rule over India and all of their colonial holdings revealed deeply held beliefs in hierarchy and divisions. Ashoka, on the other hand, explicitly embraced a pluralistic view, not only granting freedom of religion, but mandating that religious minorities not be persecuted, especially by Buddhists aligned with him.

So much of *A Passage to India* is about governance, what it means to govern ably and well. It is a scathing critique of the way the British are ruling. We could read the text as an argument that if the British just ruled better, just treated Indians better, things would be easier for

everybody. There could still be divisions and hierarchy and the transfer of Indian wealth back to England. The story of Ashoka undercuts that altogether.

Romila Thapar writes:

our admiration for him is great when we consider the courage with which he attempted to expound and impose *Dhamma*, particularly in the complex cultural milieu of the third century B.C. Religious texts of the time stressed man's responsibility to his religion and to his ancestors. To these Asoka added yet another responsibility, perhaps the most important, that of responsibility to one's fellow human beings as he expresses it in the 6th Rock Edict. Asoka's humanism lay not in his insistence on non-violence whenever and wherever possible, but more important, it lay in his insistence on responsible social behaviour, and in his understanding of human limitations, when in his earlier edicts he preached moderation in action. (Thapar 271)

Ashoka can be seen as a humanist, a secular leader drawn by his own deep faith and desire to follow a set of rules laid out by a revolutionary spiritual guide 200 years earlier. He haunts our novel not because he represents harm or malice to Britain or even the Raj, but rather because he forces the informed reader to see that the paucity of choices that Forster offers, the lack of true choices, really, for good governance, are not the end of the story.

Forster leaves us in the end with less certainty and more possibility. The colonial rhetoric has been deployed, religion has been invoked, battles have been fought. And in the midst of all of this, despite the cynicism and the hyper-management, an unmanageable force has come through. For some of the characters, that force unravels the rhetoric, renders it inoperative. In a letter to Malcolm Darling written a few months after *A Passage to India* was published, Forster spoke of his formative experiences at Kings College, Cambridge, of the connections and openings they afforded. He also spoke of the limitations of his Cambridge experiences that he was then trying to break through. India had given him material to go further and he offered *A Passage to India* as a prospective guide to others to make a similar journey:

Kings stands for personal relationships, and these still seem to me the most real things on the surface of the earth, but I have acquired a feeling that people must go away from each

other (spiritually) every now and then, and improve themselves if the relationship is to develop [sic] or even endure. A Passage to India describes such a going away—preparatory to the next advance, which I am not capable of describing. It seems to be that individuals progress alternately by loneliness and intimacy, and that legend of the multiplied Krishna (which I got, like so much that is precious to me, by intercourse with Bapu Sahib) serves as a symbol of a state where the two might be combined. The ‘King’s’ view over-simplified people: that I think was its defect. We are more complicated, also richer, than it knew, and affection grows more difficult than it used to, and also more glorious. (*Selected Letters Vol. Two* 63)

Forster’s summing up of what it means to be human—complicated, rich, challenged, and glorious—remind us of how even a flawed, lukewarm critique of empire can help us build resources to resist empire.

Forster closes his novel with a remarkable image. At the Hindu festival for Krishna in Mau, Aziz and Ralph Moore are floating in a boat on the water when they see an inexplicable sight. “Floating in the darkness was a king, who sat under a canopy, in shining royal robes” (351). The image unnerves them both. It is followed by an accident that upends boats and sends people into the water. Knowing that the current Rajah of Mau has just died, Aziz is not sure if he is seeing a ghost. The rational answer is, of course, that they are looking at an artistic representation of the king. The less rational read is that a king has been present in this novel from the beginning, haunting the Raj and floating in the darkness in shining royal robes.

CHAPTER III

“THESE ARE NOT MY WORDS”:
THE THEOSOPHISTS, KRISHNAMURTI, AND AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF NON-DUALITY

“It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.”

Jiddu Krishnamurti

When Jiddu Krishnamurti died in 1986, at the age of 90, he was recognized as one of the most impactful spiritual teachers of the twentieth century. From his discovery at roughly the age of 14¹⁴ by Theosophical Society leader Charles Leadbeater, to his anointment within the Theosophical community as the World Teacher who would unite all of humanity, to his renunciation of that title and subsequent role as singular, iconoclastic teacher, philosopher, interlocutor with the twentieth century, Krishnamurti had an extraordinary life. The popular American Buddhist journal *Tricycle* reports that Krishnamurti’s “enlightenment and authenticity were affirmed for hundreds of thousands of people around the world. His books are printed in over forty languages, and of the fifty titles available in English, over thirty-five have sold more than 100,000 copies each” (Sloss 65).

Krishnamurti’s extraordinary and singular life, which would have been remarkable at any point in history, is doubly fascinating for its historical moment. His life coincided and often intersected with events and themes pertinent to India’s confrontation of the British occupation, its development toward statehood, and its construction of a national identity. At the time of his birth, British occupiers and Indian subjects were still haunted by the memory of the uprising of

¹⁴ His birth date is not definitively known. Based on family memory and astrological records, his birth is believed to lie somewhere between May 1895 and May 1896. His first biographer, Mary Lutyens, believes his birth date to be May 12, 1895.

1857 and its devastating aftermath. The pretense of a purely amicable occupation of India had burned away, leaving rawness, confusion, suspicion, and uncertainty in its wake. The Indian Congress Party, formed in 1885, was well established and working through an evolutionary process of determining its goals and strategies, from wanting a more equitable partnership with Britain (as a member of the Commonwealth) to seeking complete autonomy and independence. The turning point of World War I and its aftermath intensified the call for the decolonization of India amongst many Indians, even if the British did not make visible moves in that direction.

Through all of this, two other cultural phenomena were at work and while not necessarily deeply visible to many Indians, were having a huge impact on what the public face of India would become as it took its place as a sovereign state. The first, the British industry of interpretation of India's spiritual history, had been underway since the late eighteenth century and had contributed to the creation of the modern discipline of comparative religious studies. The second, the growth of the Theosophical Society, would bring together the imperialist enterprises of cultural appropriation and missionary dissemination of a "tradition," offering a syncretic new/old religion both to westerners hungry for the fruits of a mystical East and to Indians seeking a modern, engaged spiritual path.

This chapter examines the contest that played out in India and England during the early decades of the twentieth century, but especially during the teens and twenties, over the construction of the narrative of Jiddu Krishnamurti. I examine the ways in which the Theosophists colonized and deployed the body and mind of Krishnamurti with a complex matrix of deferred authority and colonial ventriloquism, involving, amongst other methods, the channeling of unseen beings and the recordings of trance dictations. The power dynamic flipped in 1929, when Krishnamurti threw off his title and broke from the Theosophists. The process of

constructing, reclaiming, and reconstructing Krishnamurti is a layered, twisting, complicated contest of colonial control and proclamation of agency. In particular, this narrative of Krishnamurti engages questions of authorship, of authority to speak, and ownership of the devices and discourses of spiritual practice. In this chapter I argue that Krishnamurti nimbly demonstrates how to resist the hegemonic western colonial control of Indian spirituality. In doing so, he asserts his and others' rights to forge their own path, spiritually, ideologically, and socially. Ultimately, in reclaiming his authority to tell his own story, to teach in his own voice, Krishnamurti offered to his Indian and western students an epistemology of non-duality and insight into transformations in consciousness that would have a profound impact globally, amongst people seeking new forms of meaning making, and at home in India, where he returned regularly for the rest of his life, to teach and found schools and consult with the political architects of an independent India,¹⁵ to whom he modeled an independence, a way to not adhere to any one framework of belief. The first half of the twentieth century was a time of systemic thinking, of the proliferation of "isms" designed to make the world better and people happier. Krishnamurti's core message did two things: it undercut the power of the "ism" in a clear, powerful warning of the danger of letting others do our thinking for us; and it transmitted the heart of an engagement with non-duality that became a kind of anti-praxis praxis.

Through this chapter I hope to show the evolution of the early years of the Theosophical Society as a syncretic, appropriative spiritual organization. My aim here is not to do an exhaustive or definitive analysis of the Theosophists, who were and still are a remarkably influential group. I want to especially acknowledge recent work by Gauri Viswanathan and others on the Theosophical influence in opening up explorations of consciousness and meaning

¹⁵ Krishnamurti was consultant and (purportedly) confidant to both Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi.

making in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Viswanathan has remarked in particular on the importance of the Theosophical approach of providing a new way to explore spirituality that is not reliant on a theistic or triumphalist perspective. In this chapter, as I look at the construction of Krishnamurti and his eventual disavowal of the individual that the Theosophists were constructing, I have to acknowledge that Jiddu Krishnamurti might not have become the spiritual teacher that he became without the training and influence of the Theosophists. To do justice to the process of the construction and dismantling of Krishnamurti as the World Teacher, I feel it necessary to spend some time tracing some of the major ideas and approaches of Helena Blavatsky, Charles Leadbeater, and Annie Besant.

Krishnamurti's formal break with the Theosophical Society in 1929 marked his emergence as a new kind of spiritual teacher with a powerful message for the twentieth century. Like Blavatsky, Besant, and the other leaders of Theosophy, he was interested in power, which he labeled "Truth." But his Truth contested and opposed institutionalized religion, nationalism, or organized systems of power or thought. His message from 1929 until his death in 1986 was that Truth is a "pathless land," a reality that cannot be institutionalized, aggregated, racialized, or essentialized. His core message undercuts any form of collectivization, even as his hybrid identity capitalizes on mythologies of an enchanted East and utilizes a valorization of humanist individualism and rational thought. Krishnamurti continually undercut and challenged any reductionist thinking about what it meant to be Indian, to be a spiritual person, or to be a spiritual guide or leader. His core message, intellectual and challenging at times to apprehend, was also extremely difficult to follow, since it refused to prescribe any method. Krishnamurti helped bring a new, modern way of thinking about non-duality into the twentieth century. His was not a Buddhist epistemology but it was, perhaps, an epistemology of non-duality that both rode the

waves of fascination with Buddhism and other eastern religions and pushed back—hard—on the dogma, the idea of being able to teach or to learn how to practice in order to open to non-dual awareness.

In the process of defying both British and Indian systems of spiritual and nationalist totalities, Krishnamurti's example calls forth what Said terms a contrapuntal approach to reading culture and empire, one in which we view the intertwined and overlapping histories (*Culture and Imperialism* 19) and maps of interactions (21) between colonizers and colonized in order to “think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others” (36). By reading the narrative of Krishnamurti contrapuntally, we “take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it” (79). This is absolutely necessary with Krishnamurti because he was so fully the product of the colonial intervention of his Theosophist guardians. We can actually, to some degree, see the processes of imperialist thinking and resistance to that thinking in his own communications. By the time he was an adult, he had become a thoroughly hybridized individual, very British in speaking, manner, and lifestyle, and very Indian as well.

Our contrapuntal reading of Krishnamurti is enhanced by Gauri Viswanathan's examination of religious conversion within an imperial context, which she argues subverts the secular power of empire. Viswanathan writes that reading conversion illuminates and explicates how to read across imperial borders. Using Said's contrapuntal reading as her basis, she says, we can read “not only the interdependence of histories and culture—the ‘overlapping territories’ that Said describes in *Culture and Imperialism*—but also the ripples and currents that interrupt, retard, reverse, or accelerate what would otherwise be an undisturbed flow of history, ideas,

movements, and lives” (*Outside the Fold* 4). The early twentieth century was a time of tremendous spiritual exploration, experimentation, and conversion, both in England and in India. While the nineteenth century saw a heightened fascination with eastern religions, the twentieth century was a time of greater commitment on the part of thousands of Britons to Hinduism, Buddhism, and, of course Theosophy.

The majority of Krishnamurti’s life, and the entirety of his narrative, is deeply informed by the politics and perhaps the poetics of conversion. He is the consummate occupier of Bhabha’s hybrid, liminal space: “this interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (*Location of Culture* 4). During his youth and young adult years Krishnamurti converts in multiple directions, from Hinduism to Theosophy (saturated with a syncretic amalgam of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and other assorted mystical beliefs, including a hefty dose of European spiritualism), then his biggest conversion from Theosophy to his “pathless land.” He also shifted identity (in terms of dress, language, and diet) from Indian Brahmin to British, to a hybrid that allowed a repeated crossing back and forth amongst English, American, and Indian markers, as he traveled between England (where devotees housed and cared for him) and India (to Adyar, where the Theosophists had their international headquarters) in his youth and then in his later adult years between the United States (where he had a home in Ojai, California) to India (to Madras, where he had a home and a support network just a few miles away from the Theosophical Society’s headquarters at Adyar).

Viswanathan writes, “If dissent expresses itself most powerfully as conversion, particularly to minority religions, the reasons are not hard to understand. By undoing the concept of fixed, unalterable identities, conversion unsettles the boundaries by which selfhood,

citizenship, nationhood, and community are defined, exposing these as permeable borders” (16). Krishnamurti had converted to Theosophy while still a child and so that crossing of boundaries can barely be called a conversion, let alone a renouncing of anything. Nonetheless, it was a change that marked and identified him, that set him apart from his fellow Indians who had not converted. He became a part of a hybrid community that consisted of Indians and westerners and that was, on the one hand, led and run by westerners, but on the other hand, was readying itself to be led by him, an Indian. It is impossible to say how much autonomy he would have had if he had stepped into his role of World Teacher, but it is worth noting that his position from his inception as “Theosophist” was the future spiritual leader of the organization, which adds a special level of complexity to the way that conversion was operating in simultaneously reconstructing and potentially resisting colonial systems of power and authority. Krishnamurti’s second conversion, from Theosophy to his “pathless land” of no religion, is a more clear act of resistance and it is arguably a deeper dive into complexity, given that he is renouncing the hegemony of the institution in the strongest terms possible while maintaining the cultural trappings—the clothing, the secular approach to intellectual engagement, the speech—of a westerner. Krishnamurti’s iconoclastic approach signaled one way to both respond to the hegemonic forces of institutionalized religion and to re-write and re-claim his own narrative.

Krishnamurti’s reclamation of his own voice and his subsequent message of the possibility for opening to the pathless land of non-dual awareness, or choiceless awareness as he called it, is a powerful refutation not only of the colonial control of the Theosophists and the British in India, but also of the new era of Buddhist and Hindu and other eastern spiritual teachers who were offering methods, paths, and programs to Indians and westerners from mid-century on. Whether or not one agrees with Krishnamurti’s assertion that people could not

become enlightened by following any guide or teacher, he helped to offer the view that people interested in spiritual development had to take personal responsibility for their lives and minds. They could not hand over their agency to anybody and expect to find liberation.

In order to understand the construction of Krishnamurti as the World Teacher, and indeed in order to understand one of the dominant shapers of western thinking about eastern spirituality, we have to know who the Theosophists were at the turn of the twentieth century. By describing the early decades, up to Krishnamurti's involvement with them, I hope to demonstrate the colonialist impulses of the organization but also to convey something of the attraction of this organization that influenced the work of some of the great thinkers, artists, and change-makers of the century.¹⁶

Although founded in New York in 1875 by Russian Helena Petrovsky Blavatsky and American Henry Steele Olcott, the Theosophical Society was quickly drawn into the colonial world, and in particular, the colonial interface between Britain and India. Their genesis, though, marks a global syncretic movement mid-wifed by Darwin, Dissenters, and mystics. The Theosophists at the end of the nineteenth century emerged out of a rich mix of disappointment and doubt about western religions and fantastical hopes for the prospects of eastern religions. Joy Dixon writes that "'eastern' occultism was an exotic import—a product of colonial trade which arrived in England along with cashmere shawls and Benares ware" (Dixon xii). As with the importing of any new category of merchandise, some of the attraction for such "eastern occultism" was undoubtedly the tantalizing draw of the new and different. And, as I have discussed at length in the Introduction and first chapter, there was a significant industry carrying

¹⁶ A very partial list includes M.K. Gandhi, William James, Alexander Scriabin, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, L. Frank Baum, W.B. Yeats, Kahlil Gibran, and Arthur Conan Doyle.

stories, interpretive commentaries, and colorful paraphernalia to a public (in England and India) ready to consume it.

Peter Washington adds an additional contributing factor for the growth of New Age movements in the nineteenth century, which he argues was enhanced by the decline in prestige of Christianity in the west:

Long-standing doubts about Christian doctrine and arguments about institutional status were intensified by the growing prestige and authority of natural science and the increasing sophistication of biblical exegesis. While technology encroached further on the sacramental sense of a world created and sustained by divine power, advanced textual and historical scholars, drawing on the disciplines of philology and etymology, were demythologising the Bible and humanising Christ himself. (8)

Such humanizing fed a new longing to bring diverse traditions together under one umbrella of spirituality and meaning making, a “search for a single key that would solve the mysteries of the universe” (Washington 9), a “desire to find unity in diversity became a nineteenth-century obsession in direct proportion to the confusing multiplication of new ideologies” (Washington 9). “In such a context,” writes Washington, “Jesus appeared not as the unique Christ, but as one influential teacher among many, together with Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, Manu and Lao Tzu” (Washington 8). Such a cultural context interfaces easily with the colonial exchange bringing European ideas and practices into relationship with Indian ideas and practices. Such syncretic explorations, however, were not new in the nineteenth century. There had, in Europe, been previous movements that are seen as the precursors to the Theosophists. For centuries, Europeans had sought to bring science and spiritualism together, under the guidance of such thinkers as Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) and Franz Anton Mesmer (1735-1815). By the nineteenth century organizations such as the London Dialectical Society, the National Secular Society, and the Society for Psychical Research were providing alternative world views to the western theistic traditions.

Blavatsky and Olcott met in the heady mix of American spiritualist circles and there formed the basis for what would become a complicated and wildly successful new spiritual community. Initially claiming an Egyptian/Greek foundation story for theosophy, Blavatsky and Olcott soon capitalized on the late-nineteenth century craze for Tibet as the source for guidance and leadership toward enlightenment. Blavatsky and Olcott moved to India in 1879, settling in Adyar, near Madras on the south-eastern coast. Peter Washington writes, “Towards the end of the nineteenth century it was becoming clear that an enormous and enduring public appetite existed in the West for new and exotic forms of religious belief to supplement or even replace orthodox forms of Christianity. . . . Interest in eastern cosmologies and the occult was rapidly increasing, and both often appealed especially to those who longed for radical political and social change” (Washington 25). The move to India was an act of expediency, as Blavatsky and Olcott had worn out their welcome in New York, but it was the natural place for them to land, not only for the relative proximity to Tibet (Blavatsky made at least one trip to Simla in the north and claimed to have spent extensive time in Tibet, which I will discuss later), but because there was a ready membership amongst both Indians and British in India. Adyar became an ideal home within which Theosophy could flourish and expand.

Fundamentally, Theosophy involves a syncretic approach that allows for a universalizing blending and accommodation of any number of established religious traditions. Blavatsky’s claim, writes Roland Vernon, “was that she had rediscovered a primordial wisdom, the key to life and divinity, which pre-dated and superseded all religions, cultures and theologies; her revelation of this ‘secret doctrine’, she maintained, would transform religious consciousness in the western world, and signal a new era in the history of humanity” (7). For Europeans, Indians, and others, this was a claim that was too hard to resist. To be part of a movement of true and

authentic wisdom, the ultimate wisdom, a path that could liberate humans from the misery and conflict that they currently saw, this was a powerful draw. It held out a promise of salvation and the thrill of being part of something so much bigger and more meaningful than the mundane lives that people were then living.

Such syncretic universalizing allowed for a diverse membership, which speaks to another aspect of the Society that both breached convention and had its finger on the pulse of the prospect of a future heterogeneous society. Under Blavatsky, the Theosophical Society attracted people with a wide range of interests: “spiritualists, dissenting Christians, atheists, agnostics, and political subversives, together with freemasons, occultists, and members of Hermetic, Rosicrucian and alchemical societies” (Vernon 10). The common ground shared by this diverse membership was a millenarian belief that the old world, the world as it had been, was soon to die off and give birth to something new, a new age in which all of the power, magic, and insight that humans had accessed and harnessed over millennia could emerge and blossom. Human “knowledge, power and consciousness were on the cusp of a golden age, a new epoch that would be facilitated by the rediscovery of ancient ‘theosophy’—the very wisdom which Blavatsky claimed as her qualification” (Vernon 11). Such wide-ranging membership speaks to the wide range of spiritual groups and practices in the late nineteenth century. But to bring such disparate groups together speaks to a canny understanding of what people were searching for and what could bring all of these people in under one tent or spiritual identity and practice.

Blavatsky’s most potent source of power and authority came purportedly from her relationship with beings whom she called the Masters or the Mahatmas (or more formally the Great White Brotherhood of Masters). Ancient and semi-divine, the Masters lived in remote Tibet and rarely saw others. Though Blavatsky claimed to have spent time training with them in

Tibet, by the late nineteenth century, she received communication and instructions from them through astral travel and channeled letters. This deferral of authority granted Blavatsky double entitlement to power. If she seemed suspect or not terribly personally powerful, she could point to the invisible Tibetan Masters as the real holders of the power. Tibet had by the late nineteenth century become a conceptual holding place for all manner of European fantasy, paranoia, and imagination about magical and/or demonic beings (which I will discuss at length in the next chapter). Thus Blavatsky capitalized on the current fascination with Tibet, and then she doubled down by claiming that she had restricted access to these teachers, who communicated to her from an astral plane or by leaving letters for her. Blavatsky could claim that the whole system came from them but that she alone could decipher and deliver the system. She maintained the status of disseminator without the complication of explaining any inconsistencies or troubling lack of manifestations of big magic.

The core Theosophical doctrine that Blavatsky laid out was a carefully delineated hierarchy of beings, some earthly, some celestial, each with a specific role in unrolling a new age of enlightenment on earth. Roland Vernon explains:

According to the orthodox Theosophy that Krishnamurti would one day inherit, the Great White Brotherhood of Masters, Blavatsky's brain-child, had a very distinct Indian slant. High up in the hierarchy, above the Masters who retained their bodies in order to teach, was an elite quintet of entities, angelic in substance, who, it was claimed, acted as a bridge between ignorant humanity and all-knowing, unnameable divinity. At the head of the hierarchy was the Lord of the World, who was said to have the physical appearance of a teenaged boy, perceptible to a privileged few, and then only on the most auspicious occasions and in a state of trance. Beneath him came the Buddha, followed by a trinity of Lords: the Mahachohan, the Manu, and the Maitreya, whose appearances were similarly rare. The Maitreya was the World Teacher, who was said to 'descend' into human incarnations, for the advancement of mankind, at various times in history. (Vernon 12)

While most of these beings (including two of the Masters whom she deemed her primary teachers, Kuthumi and Morya¹⁷) do not appear in other religious systems or traditions, the name Maitreya does belong in the pantheon of Mahayana Buddhism as the future Buddha, occupying a position much like that of the Theosophists' World Teacher. The Theosophists are cleverly interpolating Maitreya into their pantheon of largely (apparently) made-up figures and in so doing they are staking their (possibly) biggest claim, that a World Teacher will appear to lead the masses to enlightenment, to an existing popular religious tradition.

The society was extremely successful from the 1880s forward for several decades. By 1885, there were 121 chartered lodges, 106 in India, Burma, and Ceylon, where most of the membership then lived (Washington 68). By 1920, society membership had extended substantially into Europe and the United States, and numbered 36,000. At its height in 1928, it was 45,000 (Washington 139). Such numbers reflect that the Society had an understanding of what people were seeking and not finding elsewhere. Membership soared after the first World War. It is worth noting, too, that membership swelled in Asia first and then moved to Europe and the United States. The colonial appropriation of Buddhism and Hinduism were first successfully deployed in the home countries of these traditions and then brought to England and elsewhere as yet another import from the East. But, and this seems important to emphasize, the membership of the Society, in India and in England, was always racially mixed. Gandhi encountered Theosophy in London and remarked later that this was a place where he was welcomed by British people

¹⁷ I can't help but wonder if Blavatsky weren't riding the waves of popularity of the work on the Maurya Dynasty and Ashoka, by naming one of her primary guides Morya. See Chapter 1 for a description of the Maurya Dynasty in India.

and where he was introduced to Hindu ideas that had not appealed to him back in India. He has credited Theosophy with his own reclamation of his spiritual heritage.¹⁸

Under the leadership of Blavatsky, the Theosophists partially instantiate the discursive construction of the East that Edward Said discusses in *Orientalism*. Blavatsky positions herself as not only holder but authorized disseminator of “esoteric” elements of Tibetan Buddhism, redolent of an imperial attitude that claims authority for “the distillation of essential ideas about the Orient” (*Orientalism* 205). While Blavatsky’s version of “the Orient” does not quite adhere to the set of characteristics that Said emphasizes—hers is not an Orient filled with sensuality, despotism, inaccuracy, or backwardness—there is an essentializing “separate and unchallenged coherence” (*Orientalism* 205) at work and the silence of all authoritative voices but her own inform her *strategic location*, which Said defines as “a way of describing the author’s position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he [sic] writes about” (*Orientalism* 20).

This turn toward India and Tibet was controversial within the Theosophical movement. It was unsettling for some to cede the highest spiritual power to non-westerners. At the same time, until the 1920s, the message was firmly controlled by the western leaders of the Society. Blavatsky was creating a global organization and a world view that viewed the east as the repository of the ultimate wisdom, but needed the vehicle of westerners such as herself to decipher and decode that wisdom.

Blavatsky left India in 1885, having been accused of plagiarizing the works of others and performing parlor tricks masquerading as astral interjections. Riding a wave of popularity, the society continued to grow and thrive. In 1907 the leadership was passed to Annie Besant, who picked up the reins and carried on the work. Besant brought her own more politically charged

¹⁸ James Hunt details this episode in Gandhi’s life in his book *Gandhi in London*.

approach to religious practice and social change. Having worked for women's and workers' rights back home in Ireland, Besant came to India with sympathy for the country and the people. She would work for decades for material improvement in the lives of Indians and for Indian home rule. Ultimately, however, she held onto an imperialist view that India was best placed as a more respected member of the British Commonwealth and not as an independent nation.

There is no question that Blavatsky is the spiritual mother and mastermind of the theosophical movement. When Besant took over leadership of the organization, she did make changes that shifted the direction and some of the spiritual views of the organization. Nonetheless, the basic foundation that Blavatsky established was never entirely usurped. Its fundamental world view draws from Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and theories of evolution. As Joy Dixon writes:

Officially, the TS [Theosophical Society] (then as now) had no dogmas, but it did develop a distinctive set of teachings, which most members identified as theosophy. These teachings emphasized an immanentist and evolutionary vision of spirituality: the universe, seen and unseen, was One Life, which evolved to consciousness (in a series of immensely complicated cycles) through a diversity of forms, governed by the mechanisms of karma and reincarnation. These teachings, theosophists claimed, were the divine wisdom, the esoteric truths of all religions, philosophies, and scientific systems.. This was an ancient wisdom which, they argued, had been best preserved in the great spiritual traditions of the East. (Dixon 4)

Vernon writes that Besant's Victorian belief in progress and service informed her approach to leading the Society. "Theosophy provided her with a platform, and from this she propounded her design for the future of mankind: the creation of a heaven on earth, the bringing about of a better age in which harmony, justice, equality and peace would reign" (36). This was a pivotal shift for the Theosophical Society and it had an important impact on not only Krishnamurti's education but the way that members experienced their spiritual path. While the emphasis on spiritual heights, heavenly bodies, and signals from the cosmos still pertained to life

in the organization, there was a new emphasis as well on politics, social engagement, and the quality of life of the members of the Society.

This is the Theosophical Society that Jiddu Krishnamurti entered. The World Teacher promised by Blavatsky was discovered by Society leader Charles Webster Leadbeater in Adyar in 1909. Born into a middle class Brahmin family near Madras, Krishnamurti was groomed to become the Theosophists' World Teacher, a spiritual teacher who was destined to unite all of humanity and all religions. Although Besant had been traveling through America and Europe speaking about the coming of the World Teacher and predicting that he would be found in the west, she embraced Leadbeater's choice and began the training of fourteen year old Jiddu Krishnamurti. One of the first stages of his training was a hybridizing of his identity, an Anglicizing of his person and his education. Krishnamurti, who would be called Krishna by his Theosophist elders, was thrust overnight into an intense process of changing his lifestyle. He had lessons in English (which meant that he had to learn English very fast), he ate British food and slept in a British-style bed, and dressed in European clothing and wore a western haircut. (Vernon 58).

The Anglicizing of Krishnamurti was probably less a question of choosing England over India as a nod toward the marketing power of a global identity for the World Teacher. "Besant's view was that Krishna should be groomed as a cosmopolitan, or, more precisely, a commonwealth, figure; his British connections would be all-important in gaining him access to a wider stage. The World Teacher could not be exclusively Hindu. It was his role to present the most sacred elements of oriental wisdom on an occidental platform, thereby bridging east and west, Hindu and Christian, as opposed to elevating one to the exclusion of the other" (Vernon 58). This was a brilliant marketing strategy that saw the financial value of such hybridization but

also the political value of bringing different cultures and perspectives into discursive relationship. For the time being, at least, until Krishnamurti assumed his role of World Teacher, the power determining the message of the teachings remained in the hands of the western leadership, primarily with Besant and Leadbeater, who was the boy's main teacher. Thus something that appeared on the surface quite radical did at the same time reinscribe a colonial appropriation of India, and the overlay of western forms onto the body of young Jiddu Krishnamurti.

Such hybridizing of Krishnamurti might have de-racialized him and de-politicized him during a time when tensions were beginning to run high in the Raj. He could have appeared to straddle both worlds, but instead he almost rose above either. Poet and professor E. A. Wodehouse described him thus: “This delicacy of purity seemed to go right down through his nature—giving the impression of one absolutely unspotted by the world” (qtd. in Vernon 60). This was not an accident. The Society needed Krishnamurti to be figuratively and perhaps even literally above the mundane world. If he was to become, or was already, the World Teacher, Maitreya, he had to have the presence of a god, or to be god-like.

The dawn of the twentieth century became an optimal platform for Besant's millennial tendencies and Krishnamurti's personality and demeanor played into the situation. Catherine Wessinger characterizes Besant's leadership of the Theosophical Society as holding the goal to “alleviate the misery caused by the industrial revolution in Great Britain” (55). Krishnamurti became the focal point for a longing for messianic redemption in an apocalyptic moment.

The Theosophists, most notably Besant and Leadbeater, carried on the practice initiated by the society's founder Helena Blavatsky of channeling, transcribing, and presenting the spiritual teachings of the unseen Tibetans known as the Mahatmas or the Masters. As he settled

in to his new life and training with Besant and Leadbeater, Krishnamurti appeared to be the perfect vessel from which the World Teacher could emerge. Quiet and dreamy, he was often perceived as developmentally disabled. His sweetness, physical beauty, and initial gift with language created the right “look” for the World Teacher in training. Later moments in which Krishnamurti galvanized large gatherings into emotional devotion further sealed his status. As he developed further, however, his own voice asserted itself. Periods of frustration and quiet rebellion against his Theosophist handlers gave way eventually to the formal break with the organization, a rejection of all organized religions, and a condemnation of the belief in a spiritual teacher who would act as Christ-like savior. But for now, the process involved learning to be the Krishna that his teachers expected him to be.

When Annie Besant took over the Presidency of the Theosophical Society, the message of who spoke for or represented Theosophy started to become more complicated—both more hybridized and at times more explicitly ideological. Besant’s approach to communicating Theosophy resembles the process of “transposing” that Julie Codell and Dianne Sachko Macleod offer as an alternative view of the cultural interactions between colonized and colonizer. In response to what they term Said’s “monolithic Orientalism,” they argue for a variety of “transpositions,” in which cultural and other forms of influence traveled in both directions across the colonial divide, including “the direct influence of the colonies on British social behaviour and ideology; the interventions and indeed dominance by some ‘native informants’ over British representational practices in word and image; the rich exchanges inscribed by anxiety, ambiguity, mimicry and desire” (5), all of which come into play through the narrative of Jiddu Krishnamurti.

Under the leadership of Annie Besant, the Indian Theosophists defied many of their American and European co-religionists by claiming that the heart of their wisdom tradition would be found in the east, through ancient Indian sources, not in a western tradition informed by Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian belief systems. Nonetheless, Besant angered many of her Indian followers by veering away from traditional Hindu practices. Her relationship to India's status was equally fraught and mixed. As the President of the Indian National Congress, Besant advocated for Indian Home Rule and greater autonomy and self-realization for Indians, but her view did not extend to actual Indian independence, however.

At the same time, the appointment of the young boy Jiddu Krishnamurti to be the future World Teacher was deemed ideal because he was an “empty vessel” ready to be filled with the instructions and wisdom of the Masters, whose teachings were apprehendable by a small, select, mostly western group of disciples. Thus as Krishnamurti matured, he held a liminal position in which his words of wisdom were fed to him by his European handlers, who in turn performed a reverence for him as a god in training.

For Krishnamurti himself, questions of agency and independence were first a very personal affair, as he found and asserted his right to construct his own identity. During the 1920s, as he was stepping further and further out onto the Theosophical Society's public stage, giving talks in India, Europe, and the United States, he introduced new levels of complexity to the messages of his order. Moments of transposition morphed into subtle resistance and then a disruption of the discourses of hierarchy that informed the representational strategies of the Theosophical movement.

The structure within which Besant was operating, while explicitly hybridized and anti-colonial, had at the same time a strongly colonizing element. This was nowhere more prominent than in the question of whose voice was articulating the core message. As Joy Dixon notes,

The inequalities of power that structured exchanges in the colonial context mark theosophy's syncretizing impulse as a distinctively colonial one. Theosophists claimed to uncover the esoteric truth of traditions from beneath their exoteric accretions, to rescue a form of knowledge that had fallen into degraded forms in modern-day India. Theosophy was therefore a kind of middle-brow orientalism (in Edward Said's sense), which reinscribed divisions between eastern mysticism and western science. (11)

The ultimate authority in the organization resided with the partially-disembodied Tibetan masters, who spoke to and through a chosen few. Initially they had spoken solely to Blavatsky, but Leadbeater soon claimed the gift of communication with them as well. Later, Krishnamurti would spend nights receiving their messages from the Tibetan masters while in a trance state. He would speak the messages from the unseen Tibetans and Leadbeater would transcribe them. Krishnamurti would awaken from his trance states with no memory of the channeling and transcriptions. This is yet another example of the tangled relationships of authority within the Society. Like Blavatsky, who could claim that any directives or teachings were coming from the Tibetans and that she was merely the vessel who received and transmitted them, so Leadbeater could claim that the Tibetans worked with Krishnamurti as their vessel and that he, Leadbeater, was merely the secretary recording the messages.

A 1911 book published by The Theosophical Society signals the complicated hierarchy of authorship and the mixed messages inherent in the promotion of Krishnamurti as an enlightened sage. Titled *Adyar: The Home of the Theosophical Society*, the book is an homage to the 263-acre estate owned by the Theosophists on the edge of Madras, India and housing its international headquarters. In a series of photos and short descriptions, the book presents a narrative of empire, of land claimed and then necessarily increased (the estate grew from 27

acres to 263 between 1879 and 1911), of buildings echoing the multi-storied, multi-columned vastness of European status, of gardens named after the elite members of the corporation, of the taming and organizing of land, commercial activities, and information.

The photos are the work of Krishnamurti himself. His words, however, are nowhere to be seen in the text. Instead, a Preface written by Charles Leadbeater refers to “my brother Krishnamurti” and his intentions for the book. Krishnamurti, says the author of the Preface, “has conceived the idea of putting before the Theosophical Society a series of views of the buildings which constitute the Headquarters, so that the members of the Society who have not the privilege of being here in the flesh may nevertheless know something at least of the outer appearances of its real home, the true centre of its activities” (*Adyar* 1). The photos themselves can operate as a wordless communiqué from Krishnamurti’s heart and the heart of the Society. In this text, Krishnamurti is named as Alcyone, a pseudonym given to him by Leadbeater, yet another displacement.

In his Preface Leadbeater continues that as

Alcyone [Krishnamurti] resides here among us, it would seem appropriate that he himself should write the description of the buildings which he has photographed for us. That he is well able to do this his descriptive articles in *The Lotus Journal* show, but he has asked me to undertake it, because of the fact that I first came to Adyar twenty-seven years ago, and have visited it at various periods since then, and so can describe from my own knowledge the older aspect of the place, and the changes which have come over it. (*Adyar* 1-2)

The message here is that Krishnamurti is giving his assent to Leadbeater to deliver his communication. This is a kind of double reverse ventriloquism in which the colonized subject is endowed with the authority to speak, but defers it back to the colonizer. What complicates the situation even more is that the “true” teaching comes from the disembodied Tibetans, whose words Blavatsky, Leadbeater, and Besant merely channel and repeat.

During his formative training, Krishnamurti would join Blavatsky, Leadbeater, and Besant as one endowed with the capacity to channel the Masters. He would spend time in a specially designated Octagon Bungalow at Adyar with Leadbeater, “recounting” his astral projection from the night before. Leadbeater would write down what Krishnamurti related to him, which were then billed as discourses with Master Kuthumi. These notes were published as *At the Feet of the Master*. “The title,” writes Vernon, “gives quaint reference to the medium of their inspiration (Krishna at the feet of Kuthumi), and the spirit in which they should be read (seekers at the feet of Krishna)” (61). The forward emphasizes the special relationship amongst the Theosophists, Krishnamurti, and the Masters: “‘These are not my words; they are the words of the Master who taught me’” (qtd. in Vernon 62). The “my” here becomes almost deliciously ambiguous. Is this Krishnamurti speaking about the Master Kuthumi? Leadbeater, widely believed to have been the true author of most of Krishnamurti’s communications, writing about Krishnamurti or Kuthumi? Krishnamurti referring to Leadbeater?

The ambiguousness of who Krishnamurti actually was or could be followed him throughout his life. There was an almost relentless need to compare him to Jesus and/or the Buddha. This fit nicely with the Theosophists’ syncretic appropriation of any spiritual tradition that aligned with their message, but the comparisons to Jesus and the Buddha are particularly significant. In seeing him as (like) Jesus, Europeans could bridge new age mysticism with the religion of their families. And in the Buddha, they could indulge in the colonial appropriation of the east. Krishnamurti himself actively participated in the comparisons, especially with the Buddha.¹⁹

¹⁹ One such example: “Krishnamurti commented in his letters to Lady Emily that he was moved by the tales of the Buddha’s life as recounted in such writings as Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of*

The process by which Krishnamurti case off his designated role of World Teacher was not abrupt. By the early 1920s Krishnamurti was showing signs of resistance to the title and the work associated with it. On December 28, 1925 he gave the first amplified address ever done in India at one of the society's annual gatherings. His talk consisted of three sentences: "He comes only to those who want, who desire, who long. And I come for those who want sympathy, who want happiness in all things. I come to reform and not to tear down, I come not to destroy but to build" (qtd. in Vernon 157). This "talk" marks an enormous shift in Krishnamurti's public persona. Instead of his usual role of vessel for the disembodied Maitreya, speaking in the third person, he spoke in the first person. Initially some believed this to be a signal that Maitreya had truly entered Krishnamurti (as was the expectation) and was now literally, physically speaking from inside of him. However, it became clear that the opposite was true, that he was, for perhaps the first time, speaking for and as himself in public. In this address, he gives clues as to his mood—sympathetic, wanting to help—and his intention—to reform, not to destroy. This intention, while not as violently oppositional as it could have been, is nonetheless a signal of a newly-claimed agency. Only one who has authorized themselves to act can reform. This Krishnamurti is not the passive, compliant empty vessel ready to do whatever he is told to do. This Krishnamurti is developing an autonomous voice.

The December 1925 speech marked the beginning of a series of public pronouncements that unfolded an increasing claiming of that voice. The following summer (1926), at his annual teaching gathering at Castle Eerde in the Netherlands, Krishnamurti displayed yet another new level of authority. For the first time, he spoke about the attainment of heaven or enlightenment as

Asia and in Paul Carus's *The Gospel of the Buddha* ("An Instance of Dependent Origination: Are Krishnamurti's Teachings *Buddhadharma*?" 87).

not being dependent on a prescribed path. It was not, he claimed, to be found in Tibet or some other far-off land, but was available to anybody, here and now (Vernon 161). In 1927, teaching again at Castle Eerde, he moved even further away from the idea of institutionalized religion. Vernon reports that Krishnamurti attacked the known suspects of organized religion. “Dogmas, ceremonies and rule-books must be renounced, as must priests and gods. They are a false comfort, a crutch, a ‘spiritual drug store’, and they have dislocated man from the ground of his being” (172). He quotes Krishnamurti: “‘I hold that doubt is essential for the discovering and the understanding of the Truth . . . examine yourselves by that and scrutinize the very knowledge which you are supposed to have gained’” (qtd. in Vernon 172). This pronouncement gets closer to the beating heart of the Theosophical movement. What would they be without their dogmas, ceremonies, and books? The Theosophists might welcome the doubting mind and even a refinement in understanding the hierarchy of the evolution of spiritual development of humanity. This is a workable possibility in their system of thinking. But to say that books, that teachings, that teachers are not necessary, that they must be renounced, calls into question the point of an organization like the Theosophical Society, at least as it was then operating. This speech is a more explicit shot across the bow.

The big, momentous break then came in the summer of 1929, at the annual gathering in Ommen, the Netherlands. On August 3, Krishnamurti dissolved the organization established by Annie Besant for him, the Order of the Star of the East, and delivered the speech that he would claim for the rest of his life to be his main message and philosophy. At its core was this: “‘I maintain that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect . . . Truth, being limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever, cannot be organised; nor should any organisation be formed to lead or to coerce

people along any particular path” (qtd. in Vernon 181). This message is the precursor and the foundation of Krishnamurti’s teaching on non-duality or choiceless awareness. From his perspective, we cannot access that choiceless awareness from any prescribed path. For a teacher to claim that they can teach others how to access non-duality is not only untrue but counterproductive because the path laid out will move the practitioner away from the possibility of experiencing non-duality. Thus the religious organizations, and especially those emanating from eastern spiritual traditions or performing a new age syncretic blend, are particularly harmful.

Krishnamurti’s moment of break with the Theosophical Society is doing several things. As a doubly colonized subject (first by the British and then by the Theosophists), he is casting off his ventriloquist’s suit and claiming his own voice. If he had been the society’s mimic man, he has thrown the script into the fire and written a new one. Homi Bhabha writes that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (“Mimicry” 126). Krishnamurti’s role as World Teacher was “other” twice removed. His rejection of that role might have perpetuated the slippage, excess, and difference that Bhabha speaks of here, but he has set new terms for its signification. “The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha “Mimicry” 127). Krishnamurti takes this menace to a new level by defying all boundaries and all propriety as established by the Theosophical Society.

“Mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*,” says Bhabha (128). Krishnamurti both is and is not a mimic man. His message for the singular will to find one’s own way, to reject anybody else’s path, is a bridge between European Modernism and the burgeoning movements of translation of eastern spirituality. Vernon writes, “In the cultural climate of the 1930s, with the rise of Abstract and Expressionist art, when previously revered laws of form and harmony were tossed aside in the name of experimentalism, Krishnamurti’s nihilistic stance and denials of authority were fashionably modern” (188). I would not myself refer to Krishnamurti’s stance as nihilistic. He is, though, participating in a moment of deep engagement with and exploration of human consciousness that is very much aligned with other explorations happening at that time. Because of his unique location, of being at the center and thrust to the forefront of a movement drawing from mystical enquiry, he can speak to the energetic flow of this enquiry and give language to the artistic meaning making that is happening not merely around him, but in some cases because of and in honor of him.

Following the speech of 1929 and until his death in 1986, Krishnamurti delivered, in various forms and for various purposes, the same message. The same words and themes are repeated over and over: inquiry, discovery, awareness, freedom from the known, knowledge vs. learning, and the obscurational mirage of thought. Thought, he said,

is not your thought; it is thought. We have to learn how to see things as they actually are, not as you are programmed to look. See the difference. Can we be free of being programmed and look? If you look as a Christian, a Democrat, a Communist, a Socialist or a Catholic or Protestant, which are all so many prejudices, then you will not be able to understand the enormity of the danger, the crisis, that we are facing. If you belong to a certain group, or follow a certain guru, or are committed to a certain form of action, then, because you have been programmed, you will be incapable of looking at things as they actually are. It is only if you do not belong to any organization, to any group, to any particular religion or nationality that you can really observe. If you have accumulated a great deal of knowledge from books and from experience, your mind has already been filled, your brain is crowded with experience, with your particular tendencies and so on; all that is going to prevent you from looking. (*The Network of Thought* 8)

This message is one of the first challenges that Krishnamurti lays down. How can we live without any kind of affiliation? Without any belief system or path of one kind or another. Presumably, he understands that we do have these crowded brains that he speaks of. His view, however, is that the more we crowd them, the more programmed we are, and the more difficult it will be for us to come to that state of non-duality that he terms choiceless awareness.

Our relationship with our thoughts is one pivotal key in the work that he invites us to do. He speaks repeatedly about the danger of thinking, but he also readily acknowledges that we cannot not think. In the same speech cited above, delivered in 1981 in Saanen, Switzerland, he anticipates the questioner wondering how to stop thought. His response: “That is not the point. The point is to understand the nature of thought, to look at it” (12). It is this looking at things, at experience, at mind, at each other, that is the core element of Krishnamurti’s anti-praxis praxis. “Inquiry means hesitating, finding out for yourself, discovering step by step; and when you do that, then you need not follow anybody, you need not ask for correction or for confirmation of your discovery. But all this demands a great deal of intelligence and sensitivity” (*Choiceless Awareness* 7). Krishnamurti does not tell his audience how to engage in inquiry, but he does emphasize, over and over, that inquiry is the place from which discoveries happen. Inquiry is both an action and a state of mind, a state of open curiosity seeking to understand rather than expecting to acquire knowledge. The world of knowledge is a closed system, but to inquire allows for the possibility of learning, which opens up the system and keeps an energetic stream flowing rather than shutting down.

He describes such inquiry as like “talking things over together as two friends” (*Choiceless Awareness* 7). This image is another important and often-repeated trope for Krishnamurti, who became a sort of Interlocutor with the West in series of dialogues with

famous writers, scientists, spiritual teachers, and artists²⁰. The conversational image allows for a back and forth and, ideally, a focus on learning rather than dominating or winning an argument. What we discover, he says, “has very little importance. The important thing is to discover, and after discovering, to keep going.” These moments of tiny gestures towards praxis are as much as we get from Krishnamurti. We have to pay close attention to the feel of the not-quite-instruction. It is, admittedly, surprising to seek to discover but to not care about what we are discovering. It is also challenging to put into practice. Discovery is so exciting! We want to share, to bring a discovery more closely into our lives, to make sense of it. This, Krishnamurti would say, is all part of the programming that gets humans into such trouble. The point, he says, is to die to our discoveries, meaning to let them dissolve or to dissolve our relationship to them. He claims that “if you die to what you have discovered the moment you have discovered it, then you can flow like the stream, like a river that has an abundance of water” (*Choiceless Awareness* 8). In this I would argue that Krishnamurti is an academic’s nightmare, but he might be giving his most potent clue about how to find the pathless land that he speaks of.

The greatest or possibly most helpful discovery that we make is of ourselves. In a speech in 1959 he said, “The discovery of ourselves is endless, and it requires constant inquiry, a perception which is total, an awareness in which there is no choice” (*Choiceless Awareness* 9). This awareness is not a form of self-improvement. It is, he says, “the ending of the self, of the ‘I’” (*Choiceless Awareness* 34). Here, more than ever, Krishnamurti sounds very Buddhist. He is describing a state of mind in which a dissolve happens, the separation of self and other disappears, which is a kind of wisdom.

²⁰ The book *The Limits of Thought* features an extended dialogue between Krishnamurti and the theoretical physicist David Bohm. The book *Questioning Krishnamurti* is a series of dialogues with an array of high-profile partners, including Jonas Salk, Iris Murdoch, Huston Smith, and Walpola Rahula.

Scholars in recent decades have observed strong resemblance between Krishnamurti's epistemology of non-duality and Buddhism as it is often defined and presented in western countries. Krishnamurti is possibly one of the important creators of the phenomenon known as Buddhist Modernism. Hillary Rodrigues notes that instead of trying to control conditioning, Krishnamurti advocates exercising "choiceless awareness": "Choiceless awareness is closely related to what Krishnamurti calls attention, a state in which the dualistic distinction between the observer and that which is observed dissolves" (43). Rodrigues likens this to the early Indian Buddhist teacher Nagarjuna (mentioned in the Introduction of this dissertation): "Emptiness may be understood as the inability of conceptual thoughts to convey the true nature of reality, and as the absence of any permanent, independently existing entity" ("J. Krishnamurti's 'Religious Mind'" 50).

William Jackson observes that Krishnamurti's pathless land both introduced something extraordinarily fresh onto a landscape riddled with entrenched ideas about how a spiritual teacher should be and something that resonated with perceptions of what might be unique about Buddhism. He writes, "J. Krishnamurti's radical self-inquiry runs counter to much in the trends of our time. It is often assumed today that everyone is part of some camp, politically motivated, ethnically identified, economically determined, language bound, and gender defined. Krishnamurti asks if it is 'possible to live in this world without the nightmare of identification and the ceaseless struggle to achieve a result'" (288). Further, Jackson says, "His deconstructing of the elusive self by analysis and inquiry, seeing into the way it grows and hardens, and how it can be dissolved by a clear still mind almost has a Buddhistic aura" (288). It has to be noted here that the very big difference between Krishnamurti's teaching on non-duality and any Buddhist

understanding or teaching on non-duality is that in Buddhism, there is always a path, a set of teachings, and teachers who help guide practitioners along that path.

While Krishnamurti is explicitly and almost single-mindedly interested in non-duality, albeit from his idiosyncratic “pathless land” perspective, he says very little about the other focus of this dissertation, which is compassion. Krishnamurti discusses the topic of compassion in his extended dialogue with David Bohm, yet they are largely coming to a way to understand and define the term rather than invoking or speaking to the experience of it. For Krishnamurti, “Seeing, doing, compassion—it’s all one. Not ‘seeing, then doing, then compassion’. Seeing and the doing is the whole. And then there is that seeing as the whole. In that there is compassion” (*The Limits of Thought* 14). Yet while he does not speak openly about compassion as a practice (a word he uses only to throw scorn at other spiritual teachers), his thinking about the problems of the world and his speaking about engendering a friendly dialogic relationship with ourselves and others, is steeped in the precepts of compassionate action.

In a review of the book *The Limits of Thought*, in which Krishnamurti engages in his dialogue case with David Bohm, Loriliai Biernacki notes that Krishnamurti “wants to excoriate the structures which bind our identities, and he wants to embark on this venture unencumbered by tradition, since tradition ‘conditions’ us” (96). Krishnamurti and his conversation partner Bohm “attempt to lead us out of a strictly oriented positivist view into something less mechanical than thought, what Krishnamurti calls ‘total perception’” (96). Biernacki observes traces of Hindu philosophy, with Samkhya and Vedantic worldviews structurally directing the argument” (97). However, she also acknowledges that he is more true to his claim for an understanding of enlightenment beyond structured worldviews

when speaking from what he dubs the place beyond thought. There a resonance that comes from the depth of his experience with a fullness and a poetry which waxes

eloquent. In fact, I would suggest that the real power of this book lies in its ability to inspire, to evoke a transformation in the attentive and open reader, by some inexplicable osmosis, to convey an experience of the freedom that Krishnamurti has himself experienced beyond the habits of thought. (97)

It is this power to evoke transformation that is finally Krishnamurti's legacy. Unbounded as it is, his "pathless land" is an ephemeral blueprint for liberation from anything binding. It requires a willingness to roam in a big space, to radically change our relationship with thoughts and our thinking process, at least from time to time, to let the boundaries dissolve when they can, and to always orient toward experience with a sense of friendly inquiry.

Whether any of this vision of human potential came as a result of Krishnamurti's training with the Theosophists is a mystery to me. What is indisputable is that both the Theosophists and Jiddu Krishnamurti had tremendous impact on the twentieth century and both entities continue to have impact. For one, the mystical is a portal to a higher power as humans move up an evolutionary scale toward divinity. For the other, the extremely ordinary practice of looking and learning uncover a vast, open awareness that is fundamentally every human's birthright.

CHAPTER IV

“ALL IS VAIN BUT KINDNESS”: A PRAXIS OF LIBERATION IN *MIPAM*

I have travelled in many lands, and come into contact with the foreigners of the West. In this way I came to read, over and above the technical treatises of European Orientalists, books which in the form of novels claimed to describe Tibet and the customs of its inhabitants. In these I found subject for no little surprise. When the hilarity—mingled with some measure of indignation—excited by the extravagant descriptions of certain writers had subsided, I felt that it was undesirable that readers should be led into error by such accounts, since they in their turn might disseminate incorrect notions on the strength of what they had read and believed to be the truth.
 Lama Yongden²¹, Author Note for his novel *Mipam*

Lama Yongden’s Author Note contextualizes his inspiration for authoring his novel *Mipam*. Yongden, an ethnic Tibetan who had grown up in the Himalayan Indian-Tibetan border region of Sikkim, and was adopted as an adolescent by the Belgian-French adventurer Alexandra David-Néel, was well positioned to set the record straight. Originally published in French for the Paris publisher Plon in 1935, and then translated into English by Percy Lloyd and Bernard Miall and published in London by John Lane in 1938, *Mipam*’s provenance reflects the complex world that it describes. In the 1930s, both Paris and London were riding the downward curve of a roughly century-long European obsession with Buddhism in general and with a particular slant on Tibetan Buddhism. As I have described in depth elsewhere in this dissertation, Britain had “invented” Buddhism in the nineteenth century, patterning the historical Buddha after a Protestant Victorian gentleman. By the end of the nineteenth century, Tibet had come into focus

²¹ The English edition of the novel names the author as Lama Yongden. The term “lama” refers to Yongden’s status as a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner of a particular level of experience. Yongden is elsewhere named both Aphur Yongden (a transliteration of a Tibetan name) and Albert Arthur Yongden (Anglicizations of the Tibetan name). In this chapter I refer to him simply as Yongden.

for the British and became the subject of extensive fantasies about its culture and religion, which I will describe in this chapter.

In this chapter I read *Mipam* as the revision of the European fantasy of Tibet. Three intertwined and sequential elements—point of view, selflessness, and compassion—operate in the novel to display and enact for the reader an epistemology of non-duality. This epistemology, through layering and shifting points of view, dissolving a false barrier between self and other, and the subsequent dawning of compassionate concern for other living beings, builds a powerful testimony that challenges nearly all precepts of empire, a system that requires emphasizing cultural differences in order to justify domination in the service of profit. *Mipam* is not necessarily a direct indictment against the British Empire, yet it presents an alternative way of viewing humanity and a praxis that undercuts imperial rhetoric. If Chapter III showed us how Jiddu Krishnamurti invoked non-duality in his anti-praxis praxis, Chapter IV gives us a view on a fully fleshed out praxis, a path to freedom as practiced within Tibetan Buddhism.

Yongden is giving his western readers an alternative to the fantastical versions of Tibetan Buddhism that they have received in novels written by British authors. Yongden offers to his audience a view of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism that is indeed full of magic and a magical view of a sacred world that challenges and refutes both a monotheism of Christianity and a pure rationality and materialist view of secularism. Unlike British authors such as Kipling, Haggard, and Hilton, however, Yongden's magic is founded in the actual beliefs and practices of Tibetan Buddhism. As such, the sorcery, communion between humans and animals, miracles, and memories of past lives are grounded in the fundamental views of the religion. Magic here is rendered up in a full-bodied, heart-breaking, very human look at the traditional systems of karma, codependent arising, reincarnation, etc. Further, far from presenting an idyllically

glamorized Tibet of peaceful, enlightened beings, his Tibet is full of the stuff of real human drama and real dharma: pride, jealousy, lust, and revenge. Yongden's revisions of the imperial fantasy of Tibet insist that Tibet be seen as a real place, albeit with some extraordinary ideas and practices.

Mipam answers the European fantasy of Tibet in various ways. It addresses the dangers of fixating too much on magic and revenge. It offers us English missionaries and the inevitable debate about cross-cultural religious conversions and cultural misunderstandings. It examines the very topical question of women as religious practitioners and the tensions between following one's religious longings and one's worldly longings for love and family.

Any of these topics would be worth examining, but this chapter will focus on something that I argue is even more notable and even more electrifying in *Mipam*. Yongden is offering up in narrative form the doctrinal foundation of Tibetan Buddhism. His novel enacts an epistemology of non-duality and shows how humans work with this epistemology on a theoretical and on a lived experience level. In particular, calling into question his assumption of a separate self propels the protagonist Mipam into a dawning inescapable compassionate concern for other living beings, which in turn serves as a portal to the realization of a non-dual awareness.

How Yongden delivers this doctrinal lesson is just as significant as the lesson itself. Through a layered shifting of point of view, Yongden both addresses and interpellates his reader into a world in which we not only see but potentially feel and experience the journey from prideful, self-centered, deceitful child to a (still human) being who has seen through the mirage of duality and has stepped through petty self interest.

Yongden's novel does not confront the British version of Tibetan Buddhism with the call to stay away and keep out. Nor does he hold up a tradition that proves the manifest superiority of Tibet, the Tibetan people, or Tibetan Buddhism. Instead, he offers a world view through which any human could transcend their own greed, violence, and hatred.²²

In order to understand the significance and then the construction of an epistemology of non-duality in *Mipam*, I will look at the British relationship with Buddhism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then its configuration of Tibetan Buddhism as a corrupt aberration of Buddhism. After looking briefly at the literary deployment of dual valorization and demonization of Tibetan Buddhism in Kipling, Haggard, and Hilton, I will look deeply at the epistemology of non-duality in *Mipam*. First, though, because the novel is so obscure, I will briefly rehearse the plot of *Mipam*.

The novel *Mipam* is part fictional hagiography and part picaresque novel about a Tibetan boy named Mipam born into a family that has lost its fortune and status in the aftermath of a European incursion into Tibet (probably Francis Younghusband's campaign of 1904). As we track Mipam's emotional and spiritual development and follow him through numerous

²² A note on authorship: Lama Yongden's adopted mother is indisputably more famous than he is. It is safe to say that he would not have even dreamed of writing or publishing *Mipam* if he had not met her. Yongden met David-Néel in 1914 when she became a student of the Tibetan lama known as the Gomchen of Lachen in Sikkim. She hired Yongden to be her servant and later adopted him as her legal son. Yongden accompanied David-Néel on her subsequent adventures, traveling into Tibet, including to Lhasa, then forbidden to foreigners not sanctioned by the British government. Yongden and David-Néel translated numerous Tibetan Buddhist texts over the years, most especially by the second-century CE Indian yogi Nagarjuna, one of the most important elaborators of Himalayan Buddhism. Because David-Néel was so famous and her adopted son a cultural Tibetan from a modest family in Sikkim, some readers have questioned his authorship of *Mipam*. This essay will not attempt to determine definitively whether or not he wrote all or some of the novel. In her journal, David-Néel refers to "Albert's book" and only his name has ever been attached to it. For the purposes of this project, I assume that Yongden is the sole author of *Mipam*.

adventures (almost too numerous and fast-paced to track), we get an ongoing view of Tibetan culture and religion. We meet Mipam at his birth and learn that there were many portents of his status as a special spiritual being. Because of these portents and because a local high Buddhist lama (the term *lama* typically refers to someone who has done a significant level of practice) has recently passed away, Mipam's parents believe that he must be a tulku, an incarnation of the recently-deceased lama. They do what they can to position Mipam for discovery as the tulku but another nearby baby is named instead. In the aftermath, Mipam's mother continues to hold her firm belief in her son and his father, less devout, gives up in disgust and proceeds to treat Mipam like any normal boy. Mipam's adventures begin when he is quite young. He meets wandering ascetics who tell him that he is special, in fact that he is the son of Chenrezigs, the bodhisattva of compassion (in Mahayana Buddhism, a bodhisattva is a special being—sometimes human, sometimes not—who has promised to forego becoming enlightened until all other sentient beings have become enlightened). He has a mystical night in a hut with a hermit in which his heart is opened to the suffering of all living creatures. He encounters a leopard in the forest who seems to befriend him and whom Mipam saves. He is sent to live with a succession of people who demonstrate that Tibetan Buddhists can be as hypocritical, selfish, and cruel as in any other religion. At the age of 13, Mipam falls in love with 10 year old Dolma and they promise to marry when they are older. For the next several years, Mipam lives with dual aspirations—to gain fame and wealth so that he can ask for Dolma as his wife, and to go further in understanding his special relationship with Chenrezigs and with a Buddhist path of practice and realization. As he moves from one household to the next, and then finds himself on the run after defending Dolma and taken into protection by her father, Mipam continues to shift from one certainty about his future to the other. Forced to flee to China, Mipam becomes a successful trader and amasses

enough wealth to allow him to seek Dolma back in Tibet. Alas, she has already been promised to Mipam's brother and although her father is willing to let Dolma marry both brothers (allowed in some parts of Tibet), Mipam refuses and embarks on his most important adventure. Refusing to be Dolma's second husband and unwilling to return to his home in China, Mipam wanders the Tibetan countryside until he comes to a monastery and seeks refuge in order to determine his fate. Here he discovers that he is the tulku, or incarnation, of that monastery's great lama, who for many generations has been incarnating and living lives of difficulty. This difficulty is the result of the original lama, who had given up his wife to become a monastic. The wife cursed him and thus prevented him and all of his successors from achieving the ultimate state of understanding. Now, in this lifetime, Mipam is able to transcend that obstacle, as is Dolma, newly married but dying just after taking her own monastic orders. She communicates with Mipam telepathically that she will be reborn as a boy so that in 10 years, she can come and study with him.

As Yongden says at the outset of his novel, *Mipam* is a direct response to the European construction of a fantasized, fabricated Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. Over the centuries, the British occupation of India had generated a thriving industry of appropriation, classification, and scholarly analysis of Indian history and culture. While Tibet never became a direct colonial holding for Britain, it was viewed by the British as a tantalizing prize either as a future territory or trading partner, or simply as a place that the British needed to keep other empires out of (this need to prevent other empires from claiming Tibet is a core focus of the latter half of *Kim*). Like Burma and Ceylon, whatever status the British might commandeer Tibet to take, it would be administered through the Raj and thus India and Tibet would come into relationship through British mediation.

From the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century, Tibet had figured prominently in the imaginations of Raj administrators, enthusiasts of Buddhism, and authors. It was the jewel of the Great Game, the race between England, Russia, and France to map and control routes through Asia; its mountains and weather aligned to provide a naturally protective barrier and the Tibetan Buddhist stance of keeping its monasteries off limits to outsiders served to make Himalayan Buddhism an enticing mystery for westerners. For those few individuals who did get access to Tibet and Tibetans, its colorful lamas, nomads, and religious practices added to the spectacle that needed only a fantasist's imagination to flesh out the details.

As I discuss at length in the Introduction, while the British and other European colonial occupiers of Asian nations did not literally invent the religious or spiritual tradition known as Buddhism, their interpretive intervention in the historical documentation, analysis, and codification of the many strands and lineages of Buddhism created something that has its own life, its own identity, separate from the traditional forms of Buddhism that the Europeans found in Asia. This intervention played an enormous role in shaping what westerners experienced when they encountered Buddhism, through books and the practice paraphernalia that traveled back to the west. The intervention also had a substantial impact on what happened in Asia itself, most notably the Buddhist reform movement in Sri Lanka (known as Ceylon under the British occupation).

If, as Philip Almond argues, by the early twentieth century Buddhism “came to be determined as an object the primary location of which was the West, through the progressive collection, translation, and publication of its textual *past*” (13), then we have to consider what a person like Lama Yongden needs to contend with in writing back to an increasingly monolithic industry of interpretation about Buddhism. What Yongden was contending with was not merely a

“Buddhism” made in the image of a Victorian gentleman. He also had to work with the fact that Tibetan Buddhism had been deemed a perversion of the “true” or “pure” Buddhism of the British imagination.

As I note in my Introduction, while the European construction of the Buddha was the exemplar of heroic probity and rationalism, and while the schools of Buddhism known as Theravada more closely resemble the European construction, the form of Buddhism practiced in Tibet fell victim to British opinion on two counts. First, it did not resemble Buddhism as the British had imagined it. And second, an easy comparison arose in which Tibetan Buddhism was to Buddhism what Catholicism was to Christianity, in the eyes of the Protestant British scholars. Tibet often became a proxy in the ongoing culture wars between the British and French. Just as the French were often constructed in literature and essays as floridly sensual, effeminate, untrustworthy, and prone to an irrational, superstitious faith, so too were Tibetans constructed as connected with something sinister, perverse, and a corruption of “true” Buddhism.

While Europeans made some contact with Tibet as early as the fourteenth century, and there was intermittent contact over the following centuries, by the nineteenth century, very few Europeans had been to Tibet and the stories that came back to Europe only added to a confused understanding of Tibetan history, culture, or religion. At the same time, the location of Tibet was a gap on the map that had to be filled and promised the prospect of new routes to China and east Asia. To do that map work and to fulfill the insatiable imperial spirit of inquiry, Tibet’s inexplicable religious beliefs and practices were too tantalizing to ignore. Even from the point of view of external images, Tibetan Buddhism was easy to compare with Catholicism. The ornate iconography in Tibetan Buddhist temples, much more dense, colorful, and aromatic than in other schools of Buddhism, was one reason why the comparisons were readily made. Another is that

Tibet has incorporated the shamanic pre-Buddhist tradition known as Bön into some of its practices. Thus in Tibetan Buddhism there are stories of people who fly, walk with magically fast speed across vast distances, exhibit almost superhuman control over their bodies, and control the weather.

The terms *lama* and *Lamaism* became early markers of difference for Tibet, setting it apart from other sectors of Buddhism. According to Donald Lopez, “As early as the mid-eighteenth century Protestants were comparing Tibetan Buddhism with Roman Catholicism,” invoking the image of idolatry (*Prisoners of Shangri-La* 29). The comparison continued into the twentieth century, but was particularly robust during the nineteenth century, when Britain was competing with France for imperial dominance in various parts of the world, especially in Asia and Africa. Lopez writes, “It is against the background of original Buddhism and anti-Papism that the Protestant discourse on Lamaism must be placed; Lamaism, with its devious and corrupt priests and vapid sacerdotalism, would be condemned as the most degenerate form of Buddhism (if it was a form of Buddhism at all) in the decades just after Roman Catholicism was being scourged in England” (*Prisoners of Shangri-La* 32).

Repeatedly, and in numerous ways, Tibetan Buddhism was labeled as corrupt and dangerous.²³ What Yongden is writing back to is not merely a British construction of the Buddha or of Buddhism. He is also writing back to the complex misreading of Tibetan Buddhism and the British deployment of that misreading as part of its imperial competition with France.

²³ Philip Almond writes:

For Major Alexander Cunningham, Buddhism had become decadent by the middle of the seventh century A.D. Already by this time, he claimed, the monks had become an indolent and corrupt body content to spend their lives in the monotonous routine of monastic life. Compared with those of more ancient days whose ‘bodily abstinence and contemplative devotion, combined with practical exhortations and holy example, excited the pious wonder of the people’, the corrupt practices of later Buddhists countenanced the idea that the more useless they became in this life, the more suited they were for the next. (38)

But Yongden is also writing back to the very complicated British fascination with Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. Yes, British scholars and other writers described Tibetan Buddhism as corrupt and idolatrous by. But Tibet was also often figured as a place of magic, of healing, a place that just might contain the ultimate secrets of the world. As Thomas Richards writes, “Tibet was the place where, in the 1870s, British theosophists like H. P. Blavatsky located the spiritual masters of the universe. And ultimately it was Shangri-La, the unmapped library where a complete knowledge lies in a state of suspended animation awaiting the day when it can again be brought back to life to reanimate state control over knowledge amidst a world in ruins” (Richards 12). Such a view aligns easily with the impulse to occupy and appropriate the resources that the empire claims are being left unused and appreciated by the local population. This is one of the core arguments that the British used to justify their presence in India. In the case of Tibet and myths about Shangri-La, the myth itself, constructed and deployed by the imperial power, becomes a rumored rationale for occupation, dominance, and resource extraction.

Shangri-La or not, Tibet needed to be controlled. Envoys were sent over the mountains to gather information about the viability of subduing the Tibetans, of trading with them, or of occupying and annexing them. By the nineteenth century, the British had begun a slow movement northward, sending troops and spies into the mountains, asserting their presence in new places, and trying to determine how best to dominate Tibet. They took over the Darjeeling district in northeastern India and claiming a treaty from 1861, established a protectorate in Sikkim, a mountainous region tucked between India and Tibet. In 1910 Charles Bell negotiated a delicate understanding with the nearby kingdom of Bhutan, also tucked between India and Tibet, to the west of Sikkim. Foster and Foster write, “The British political strategy termed by Lord

Curzon the Great Game required that Russian expansion eastward be stopped short of Buddhist Central Asia” (116). In 1904 Francis Younghusband led an armed force into Tibet to force a treaty, leaving “at least one thousand Tibetans dead before it achieved its purpose of securing a trade agreement with Britain,” writes Lopez (*Curators of the Buddha* 262). Britain continued to compete with Russia and France over dominance of Tibet until after World War I. Although it never had complete control over Tibet, it came closer than any other nation until the Chinese occupied and claimed Tibet after World War II.

Mipam was written and is set after the British had made their successful incursion into Tibet in 1904 and the subsequent trade agreement which gave the British control over the borders between Tibet and India. Although these mountainous borders were impossible to completely control, the British presence in Lhasa, and the agreement between the Tibetan and British governments meant that any Westerners not sanctioned by the British were likely to be discovered sooner or later and thrown out when they were discovered.

Such anxiety about the need to control the borders of Tibet and “protect” something precious found in or near Tibet dominates three of the most iconic novels written about Tibet in the early twentieth century. In his comments about the “extravagant descriptions” of Tibet by western authors, Yongden might have been referring to Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* (1901), H. Rider Haggard’s *Ayesha: The Return of She* (1905), or James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* (1933). All three novels feature Tibetan lamas and “lamaseries” that convey far more about European fantasies of a mystical, magical Tibet than anything related to the actual Tibet. These novels certainly reflect British fascinations and anxieties concerning religions of various kinds in an increasingly secular world, about the relationships between the British and other European colonizers and their

colonized subjects, and about the nature of the ethics and efficacy of native religions such as Buddhism.

If, as Thomas Richards claims, “An empire is partly a fiction” (1), then the fiction of empire holds special significance in instructing, disciplining, and reinforcing the norms of empire. A novel like Kipling’s *Kim* “equates knowledge with national security” (Richards 5). Such security is, of course, related to the colonizer and has little to do with the colonized. Nevertheless, the British were rhetorically invested in making their case for the benefits of empire for all involved.

This is certainly true for Kipling. *Kim* (1901) is in some ways the boiler plate English presentation of the Tibetan lama. The protagonist, street urchin Kim, meets a kindly Tibetan Lama Teshoo and becomes his *chela* (acolyte). In this novel Tibetan Buddhism represents a space from and through which a necessarily hybrid European child can traverse a diverse society, crossing cultural, linguistic, and spiritual boundaries in order to bring disparate people together and further the British cause in the Great Game. The Teshoo Lama is a sympathetic and wondrously childlike figure who is boundlessly generous but rarely much concerned about anything other than his quest to find the River of the Arrow and the well-being of his friend Kim. While relatively benign, the lama shows few discernible signs of being an actual Tibetan or an actual Buddhist. He is there to support and affirm his friend Kim, who ends up supporting and affirming the project of empire.

Ayesha, the Return of She (published in 1905) is H. Rider Haggard’s sequel to his more popular *She*. Its opening scenes feature a Tibetan lamasery and an Abbot, Kou-en, who recounts his past life experiences for his European guests in order to draw ties to a pan-Oriental witch known as Ayesha. Like the Teshoo Lama, Kou-en is kind but largely vacant as a character. He

appears to be present in the story to demonstrate the availability of the colonized world to serve the needs of colonizers and possibly to draw an inverse parallel through association between a dangerous form of magic (via Ayesha) and a more benign form of magic (via the lamasery).

This view of Tibetan magic that is both all knowing and strangely passive (and in need of western intervention) is replicated in James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. Here another lamasery offers refuge and insight to westerners, who discover that the secret of Shangri-La is that the people do not age. Like Kipling, Hilton drew upon real figures related to Tibet (the Teshoo Lama is based upon the Panchen Lama). *Lost Horizon* is based on the mid-nineteenth century French abbé Evarist Huc, who wrote an account of his time at Kum Bum monastery. Like Huc, Hilton was speculating wildly about much of Tibetan Buddhism. Unlike Huc, Hilton never set foot in Tibet (Foster and Foster 139). There are Tibetans in the novel, though Hilton has them say almost nothing. Shangri-La is largely populated by Europeans and Chinese who take advantage of the resources of the magical environment, thus proving the need for western intervention to appropriately exploit what the Tibetans clearly cannot do for themselves. Tibet further serves as a safe haven for Europeans and practically the entirety of European high culture while the western world is on the brink of self-destruction.

All three of these novels place Tibet as a necessary counter-weight to European intervention in Tibetan land, religion, and culture. Tibet without European intervention does not signify, which is particularly interesting given how invested Tibet had been in the nineteenth century in controlling and excluding European involvement in land, religion, and culture. For the British, Tibet was alternately a necessary land mass that had to be understood and mapped in order to control and protect trade and military routes and a place with such fascinatingly rich landscapes, people, and religious practices that it was too enticing to ignore. Thomas Richards

writes, “An empire is by definition and default a nation in overreach, one nation that has gone too far, a nation that has taken over too many countries too far away from home to control them effectively. All the great historical empires, ancient and modern, have had to come to terms with the problems of control at a distance” (Richards 1). In the 1930s, Britain, was coming to terms with its state of overreach. Authors such as Aphur Yongden were helping that process by showing a Tibet that did not feed an imperial appetite, did not serve to aid, mirror, or confirm any foreign occupying power, or, for that matter, any abiding power at all. *Mipam*’s scope was much bigger and more primordial than that. At the same time, as his Author Notes states, Yongden is addressing the western world and its fascination with Tibet. The three intertwined elements—point of view, self & selflessness, and compassion that we will now examine operate, I argue, to enact an epistemology of non-duality that challenges the British view of Tibet and holds up a generous overview of key aspects of Tibetan culture and religion.

The generosity of Yongden is worth emphasizing. Tibet at this time was not invested in opening its borders to the west, in explaining its religious practices or, in fact, explaining much of anything about itself. Yongden is reaching across the privacy and secrecy that Tibet had enacted for itself and sharing some important facets of his culture. In doing so, he is giving those westerners fascinated with the exotic trappings of Tibet something real, conceptually digestible, and potentially worth pondering and applying to their own lives. By writing about his culture in a novel, he can tell a story and always fall back on the premise that the whole thing is fictional. But by including his Author Note, he is also making clear his intention of setting some of the record straight with regard to Tibetan Buddhism.

The first aspect of enacting an epistemology of non-duality that we see in the novel is a shifting point of view. H. M. Daleski discusses changing point of view in terms of the crossing of

narratorial borders and the “shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds” (237). Daleski notes four kinds of narratorial borders: third person to first person; impersonal to personal; consistent to inconsistent use of free indirect discourse; and a movement beyond a monologic code in interior monologue. These four categories operate to shift the framework of a narrative and thus to highlight a particular perspective with respect to subjectivity. Mipam’s border crossings, however, conjure up an entirely new realm of how we might think of point of view. On one level, the character Mipam goes through extraordinary changes, which are seen by others and by himself. Over the course of his story, he experiences repeated moments where his private sense of self is dissolved and he feels not merely empathy for others, but actually comes to experience the suffering of others as completely inseparable from his own suffering. His Buddhist development is directly tied to an ability to dissolve that sense of a separate self. It culminates when he remembers his past lives and comes to understand the core karmic conditions of those many lifetimes, when he can let go of a private desire for personal satisfaction or happiness because his larger desire is to transcend a boundaried consciousness. To complicate this narrative strand, author Yongden is writing for a western audience for whom the very idea of transcending boundaried consciousness is completely foreign. At the same time, the novel is written in a way that invites the audience to take their own internal journey toward dissolving a separation of self and other. He signals to the reader at times that there are levels of insight and understanding about the dissolving of self and other in the world he is depicting. There are insiders and outsiders, both culturally (for example the Bön practitioners, the Buddhists, and the Christian missionaries) and in terms of spiritual insight and development.

Very early on in the novel, as Mipam’s family is preparing for the monks of Chös Khor monastery to come to their district in search of the incarnation of their recently deceased abbot,

we see an assortment of domestic rituals performed to clear an auspicious path for the monks. There is a subtle sense of competition between the local Bön sorcerer and two local lamas from the neighborhood. The two lamas, “who had now entered the house, but sat apart from the rest, they all began to read, at the tops of their voices, passages from various Sacred Books, accompanying their reading with the beating of their small drums, the ringing of little bells, and the sonorous utterance of ritual exclamations. As for the Bön, who had returned to his place beneath the tree, he was chanting over his victims [animals sacrificed for both good luck and for lunch] which were laid out on a bed of leaves” (4). This picture is presented with an outsider point of view. The drums and bells are not named. This is possibly for the benefit of the (presumably Western) audience, but it also creates an aura of outsiderism; it normalizes the act of not knowing the details of the scene. In this social setting, too, each character is both on the inside and on the outside of some situation. The Bön practitioner is outside to the lama, and vice versa. For the Western reader, there is no absolute outside location to occupy. This eradicates any sense that the Tibetan scene is one homogeneous mass of indecipherable activity. There is specificity as well as uncertainty for each character. The narrative will build upon this as Mipam’s story progresses and he has experiences that he cannot explain in words but that deepen his sense of trust that the world around him is full of compassionate energy, of beings seen and unseen that extend themselves to help others.

Daleski uses the example of Henry Fielding and his ability to create two worlds—“the world of the fiction and one in which his narrator is regularly transformed in the author” (239). There is, in Fielding, a knowing wink to the audience, a relationship that speaks to a meta relationship with the text. If Fielding creates two worlds, then Yongden is creating a multiverse in which the apparent separations between individuals, between human and gods, between one

lifetime and another, are drawn, like an etch-a-sketch, to be dissolved, and are seen dissolving and opening to an interconnected network of actions of wisdom.

Midway through his story, Mipam goes to a temple to make an offering to Chenrezigs, the Bodhisattva of compassion. He finds himself caught up gazing at a statue of male and female deities in union. “Mipam lingered in contemplation of the image of the terrible couple, embracing each other, crowned with skulls, crushing, under their multiple feet, both human beings and animals” (147). This graphic description of a scene both compelling and slightly horrifying has a destabilizing effect on Mipam and on the reader. Mipam of course knows things about Chenrezigs that Yongden’s average reader doesn’t. Yongden could have provided a version of Chenrezigs that is pure love. Chenrezigs, as the Bodhisattva of compassion, is sometimes depicted with hundreds of arms, equipping him with the means to help endless suffering beings. Yongden did not need to tell us that Mipam sees the couple crowned with skulls and crushing humans underfoot. Or he could have followed this line with one describing to his western reader that the crushed people represents the ego that gets in the way of spiritual development and that the crushing is done in the most unconditional outpouring of love. By giving us the line that he does, he knocks us slightly sideways, just as Mipam, for probably different reasons, is knocked slightly sideways in this scene. Eve Sedgwick writes, “The defining figure of Mahayana Buddhism, the bodhisattva in turn is defined almost simply as a being whose commitment to pedagogical relationality approaches the horizon of eternity” (Sedgwick 161). Chenrezigs is thus present—for Mipam and the reader—for our development. We are meant to learn something from Chenrezigs.

At this moment, in a space of the horizon of eternity, Mipam “sees” something beyond his ability to rationally explain it. It is an “exchange of recognition” that Sedgwick discusses,

“As if the template of truth is already there inside the listener, its own lineaments clarified by the encounter with a teaching that it can then apprehend as ‘true’” (165). Yongden then shows us the dissolving of Mipam’s conceptual mind into a moment of non-conceptuality:

He had seen more than one of these symbolical representations. Not knowing what they meant, they had never arrested his attention, and even at that moment he did not seek to inquire into the significance of the fantastic forms of the ‘Father’ and the ‘Mother’ who rose so threateningly before him. Plunged into a sort of trance, he sank into another world, where his faculty of thinking could not follow him, and there remained in him only a confused sensation of finding himself on the edge of a dark precipice, on the point of casting himself over it. (147-8)

Right on the edge of duality, Mipam is suspended, neither cast into an illumination of new insight nor able or willing to cast back to regain a conceptual foothold. Likewise, the reader might find herself in a similar state.

Gary Yamasaki offers another way of examining point of view as he discusses the exegetical role of point of view in making sense of Christian Biblical texts. He cites Boris Uspensky’s work in his argument that point of view functions on five planes (temporal, spatial, psychological, phraseological, and ideological) to explicate the spiritual messages in the text. *Mipam* does operate on these five planes that Yamasaki cites as important, seeking symbolic and one-to-one direct equivalents for moments of perspectival angles. But, as with Daleski’s work, I want to highlight how the novel demonstrates a degree of immediacy and relatability not possible through mere doctrine. We see Buddhism as a tradition of practices, some confusing, some frightening, some inspiring, but all designed for an existential transformation. It is not just magical wish fulfillment. There are outer and inner processes and at times a nod to a secret process of transformation. Yongden instantiates these processes for Mipam and invites the reader along to bear witness or to go even deeper into a praxis of seeing beyond the imperial necessities of domination, difference, and profit.

Mipam operates both extradiegetically—seeing events through an external narrator *and* intradiegetically—seeing events through shifting perspectives. Yes, we see Mipam’s point of view, but we also see the points of view of other characters and of ourselves. This, I propose, serves not the narrative but the reading experience of the audience. The narrative operates on the audience. It pulls us through Mipam’s transformation, which is not a mundane transformation. He is traveling quickly through a process in which he exhausts his ego-clinging to status, security, and a conventional happy ending. Most importantly, his transformation requires that he drop his own desire for a conventional self. The narrative is didactic so that the reader can apprehend Mipam’s transcendence of his ego.

In the midst of an unstable point of view, of magical lamas who empower Mipam to pull food out of rocks or walk through walls, we never lose a human dimension. Robert Thurman writes, “The essence of Tibetan culture is defined by this experience of real Buddhas dwelling among them. It is thus a civilization that feels itself touched by Buddhas, marked by having experienced the living impact of real Buddhas” (Thurman 1). Such a world view that brings the mundane and the sacred into intimate conversation forces us to expand what we can accommodate in the point of view of a narrative. As Thurman explicates, “Tibetans live in a multidimensional universe; they are quite aware that a single event appears quite differently to different beings. Thus in history they posit an ‘ordinary perception’ . . . and an ‘extraordinary perception’ . . . ; or sometimes ‘outer,’ ‘inner,’ and ‘secret’ levels of history” (Thurman 6). We must return again to an appreciation to Yongden for the generosity in writing a story that covers the outer, inner, and possibly to some degree the secret levels of Mipam’s journey to freedom.

This journey is fundamentally about crossing the threshold between an attachment to a personal sense of self and the dissolve of that attachment. Mipam learns very early about the

“false sense of an ‘I’” and this becomes the core teaching for him, and potentially for us the readers. Tibetan teacher Ringu Tulku writes, “Emptiness is established through analyzing mere appearance with the great reasoning of interdependence” (Ringu 202). Emptiness, the view that nothing exists in any permanent, unchanging, nonaggregated form, is a central tenet in Buddhism and has been highly elaborated through nuanced practices in Tibet over several hundred years. The tradition known as Madhyamaka involves a process in which conceptual mind exhausts itself to such a point that it opens to non-conceptual awareness. This system of Madhyamaka, devised by the second century CE Indian yogi Nagarjuna, teaches “that realization of the subtle emptiness of all phenomena is a prerequisite for the path of liberation from cyclic existence” (Hopkins *Meditation on Emptiness* 30). Jeffrey Hopkins writes, “During the first stage a yogi gains an initial familiarity with the meaning of emptiness through one of several reasonings. He proceeds through three basic essentials in meditation: identifying the object negated in the view of selflessness, ascertaining that selflessness follows from reason, and establishing the reason’s presence in the subject” (44). The seven-fold reasoning process can take decades to work through or it can work very quickly, exploding assumptions and habituated preconceptions in a flash. “‘I’ do not inherently exist because of (i) not being the aggregates, (ii) not being an entity other than the aggregates, (iii) not being the base of the aggregates, (iv) not inherently being based on the aggregates, (v) not inherently possessing the aggregates, (vi) not being just the composite of the aggregates, and (vii) not being the shape of the aggregates” (Hopkins *Meditation on Emptiness* 48).

Mipam’s sense of self as separate is called into question at virtually the outset of the novel. He is out with the family’s cattle and when it is time to return home, he cannot find the family’s bull. Afraid of the punishment that he will receive from his father if he returns without

the bull, he stays out all night and sleeps on the ground. He awakens to a strange golden light. “At a distance of a few paces a crouching leopard, motionless, was contemplating him with his large, green, watchful eyes” (13). Mipam and the leopard gaze at each other until his brother Dogyal, sent to look for him, stumbles upon the two. “The youth [Dogyal] did not notice the mysterious light in which that corner of the forest was steeped, but he quite clearly saw the leopard and Mipam, both motionless and quietly gazing at each other.” Thinking to save his brother, Dogyal shoots an arrow at the leopard, but Mipam, in horror, jumps in the way and receives the arrow in his shoulder. Mipam survives the arrow and the ensuing operation that his brother performs to cut a chunk of his flesh out in order to save him from the poison on the tip. But something has happened to him.

Mipam is not confused about who he is or who the leopard is, but this strange moment of communion, in which their so-called natural order of relations is suspended, propels him to question everything he has previously seen or learned about the separation between beings.

His experience in the forest, when he had awakened to find a leopard gazing at him, had endowed him with a curious mental alertness. So the leopard, that was said to be so vicious, could really be friendly! . . . He had seen the big handsome beasts with their spotted coats brought back to the village, still bleeding, hanging by their four paws to a branch carried on the shoulders of two hunters . . . Oh! how wicked it would have been to let him shoot his poisoned arrow at the beautiful beast that seemed to love him! Mipam’s wound was still hurting him, but he did not regret the action that had saved the leopard’s life. Distressed because his parents and the village folk did not know what goodness was, he had, to his sorrow, felt himself a stranger among them, and now, although he was so little, he was wandering in quest of his true family, of a land where men do no harm to those / who have not harmed them and do not hastily call those wicked whom they do not know. (18-19)

Like any practitioner having an initial moment of small transformation, Mipam is experiencing a shifting epistemology. An important element of this epistemology is that everybody occupies a degree of outsider-dom. To see the world in its deeper dimensionality requires that Mipam drop the conventional perspective of his father and mother. He has not yet

abandoned a need for some kind of status and security, but he is traveling outside of the norms of his community. A short time later, Mipam is out wandering near his home and meets a yogin, a wandering pilgrim ascetic. The yogin asks Mipam where he is going. Mipam replies, “I’m going to the land where people love one another” (19). The yogin sees something special in Mipam and tells him, “Whoever he may be who calls himself your father, you are verily a son of Chenrezigs²⁴ The land you seek is not to be found where you are going. It waits for those of your race to create it” (19). This meeting establishes Mipam’s tie to Chenrezigs, which will provide a recurring image and theme throughout his story.

Wandering on, Mipam comes to the hut of the hermit Yönten Gyatso, and here he has one of the most powerful experiences of the book. This scene, which builds a bridge between the dissolving of a false barrier between self and other and an active practice of compassion, is the heart of the spiritual teaching in the novel and the heart of Mipam’s journey. Having put Mipam to bed, the hermit begins his evening meditation. Mipam, however, stays awake and watches through the night as the hermit engages in his practice, a practice that invites all sentient beings, in all states of suffering and confusion, towards him. Mipam is stunned by the experience.

Now everything seemed new to [Mipam]. He listened and felt with the power of the senses multiplied a hundredfold, or rather, with senses different from those that serve us every day. And what he listened to was not simply the padding of beasts seeking their food through the thickets: what he was aware of was not merely the smell of the wet earth, of the fallen, rotting leaves, the breath of the trees and the fragrance of herbage. A pitiable, passionate choir of voices rose from the encircling shadows, invaded the hut, and crept, suppliant, to the feet of those who dwelt there. It spoke of the pains of sentient beings sacrificed to the wants of others; of cropped leaves, of insects devoured, and of the pain of those who fed on them, eyes on the alert, ears pricked up, hearts quivering with fear, knowing that stronger than they were seeking to devour them in turn. Other harrowing voices bemoaned the horror which some felt for their own acts, when, driven by the imperious tyranny of hunger, they crushed the helpless plants or felt the creatures they were tearing to pieces writhing under their teeth. In horror, in despair, the voices howled or sobbed, timid or clamorous, and what they did not express, what the sad

²⁴ Chenrezigs, known in Sanskrit as Avaloketeshvara, is the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

singers were doubtless incapable of discerning in the depths of their dim-lit thoughts, was a consuming thirst after goodness, for the friendship which they found neither around them, nor in themselves. (23)

Mipam spends his night observing the hermit and weeping. At dawn, the hermit begins his day.

Mipam ponders what has happened and what he has witnessed. “Had he slept? Had he passed the whole night in contemplation? Mipam was too engrossed in his own thoughts to ask himself the question. He only knew that his host had remained upright and motionless all through the night” (24). The hermit tells Mipam that he is too young to think about what he has just witnessed, ““Very few grown men could bear their weight,”” he says. He adds some measure of explanation: ““You must understand, you who are so distressed by the malevolence that all creatures manifest toward one another, that at the root of every cruel act there is a false notion of our “I” and of that of others”” (24).

Mipam has been ushered into a dramatic shift in his direct experience of the world. He cannot now unknow or unremember hearing the cries of suffering beings. He cannot undo the care that he felt for the insects and animals afraid in the night. Yönten Gyatso gives him very little further instruction other than to acknowledge that Mipam is too young to try to take on the kind of practice that he, Yönten Gyatso, has been performing all night. That practice is likely that of tonglen, common in Tibetan Buddhism, and often translated as “exchanging self for other.” The point of the practice is, as Yönten Gyatso tells Mipam, to inquire into the false notion of “I” and others, as well as to work on opening up a heart of compassion, in order to be able to act when the time is right to act to alleviate the suffering of others.

Eve Sedgwick offers helpful insight in making sense of such radical practices that dissolve barriers that seem so clear and immutable. She talks about shaming and smuggling as helpful images. “Shaming, smuggling: the two ambitions gesture at, and in a sense can stand for,

a tradition of philosophical/linguistic play between constative [describing something as it is] and performative [language constructs reality as we know it] utterance” (Sedgwick 32). In Mipam’s experience with Yönten Gyatso, what is constative and what is performative? Appearances and conventional wisdom have taught Mipam that he is not an insect or an animal that needs to prowl in the night for food, that this is what is. What he has experienced with Yönten Gyatso has suddenly called into question that view. He cannot unremember the dissolve and the emotional merge that he experienced in the night.

Sedgwick offers further elaboration on the pedagogical implications of Tibetan Buddhist praxis. She writes, “A likely reason Buddhism places its rich psychology of learning at front and center in this way, rather than deprecating any apparent circularity, as most Western thought does, is that *the fact of recognition itself is an end as well as a means of Buddhist knowing* (emphasis mine)” (Sedgwick 167). Mipam is having a jolt of recognition of something critical; from the standpoint of Buddhist epistemology, it is something that he was born knowing and is just now recognizing. It will take more experiences and adventures for him to take in the full measure of the interconnectedness of all beings that he has just glimpsed, but his education is well under way and there will be further jolts of recognition along with heart-opening practices that will reunite him with his potential to let go of petty ambition or desire for revenge. He is learning how to generate compassion, which in Tibetan Buddhism is a necessary accompaniment to any experience of non-duality.

In that early scene with Yönten Gyatso, Mipam begins to learn about the transformative power of compassion. Yönten Gyatso says to him, “The ordinary man loves those whom he thinks are good: the wise man extends his warmest sympathy to those whom he sees are wicked, because he has plumbed their misery To-day you are to keep in mind these two words only:

Pity and loving-kindness. They are the keys to a magic power, and the names of the first stages of the path to the country of your dreams. Hold them in your memory” (25). To value pity and loving-kindness requires a radical shift in how we view the world. Instead of assuming that whatever he receives is due to his work and self-regard, Mipam is learning that his happiness and the happiness of the world depend upon his ability to regard others, to think about how others feel. “They are the keys to a magic power.” This magic power is not metaphorical.

Jeffrey Hopkin’s translation of Kensur Lekden’s *Meditations of a Tantric Abbot* explicates the process of generating compassion. This involves seven stages: recognition of all sentient beings as mothers; becoming mindful of their kindness; intending to repay their kindness; love; compassion; unusual gratitude; and altruistic mind generation (Hopkins *Compassion in Tibetan Buddhism* 37). In order to generate compassion, one needs to draw to mind the “field of observation of a compassionate mind,” which is that “all sentient beings who have any of the three types of suffering—of pain, of change, and of being so composed as to be always ready to undergo pain” (41). This doctrinal explanation can help scholars and advanced practitioners parse out the lineaments of compassion as a complex, nuanced terrain. Such parsing can theoretically help a practitioner go deeper in their engagement with compassion, help them see where they hold back or get stuck, where they hold bias or where their own pain blocks a reservoir of kindness and generosity. There is, theoretically, benefit in such philosophizing about compassion. We also see in Mipam the instantaneous outpouring of emotion, the embodiment of compassion, and as his stories roll forward, we see his need to act, to save whomever he can when presented with that possibility.

Compassion is directly related to the practice of Madhyamaka that I have already described. So often labeled (especially by westerners) as nothing but nihilism, Madhayamaka is

explicitly drawn in connection to “the three practices of common beings—compassion, non-dual understanding, and the altruistic mind of enlightenment” (Hopkins *Compassion in Tibetan Buddhism* 84). As Yönten Gyatso explains to Mipam, to dissolve the false sense of separation between self and other means that we feel, care, and spontaneously desire to do what we can to alleviate suffering.

Mipam experiences a magical transcendence of compassion when later still in the novel, on the run, he is desperate for food. He meets a mysterious lama in a cave who tells him, “He whose heart is filled with love for all existing beings, to him all treasures are open, and he can draw from them to his heart’s content in order to relieve their poverty” (104). And then: “You must learn to know yourself” (104). This is not only an invitation but a command into a new kind of epistemology. Mipam magically accesses food which keeps both him and Dolma alive. But he also has yet another transmission about the direct relationship between caring for others and finding a portal to his own liberation.

Thinking on this later, Mipam wonders, “Who was he, then? Was he *another* than young Mipam, the son of a village headman, a clerical novice and the servant of a *gyalpo*? Could it be that he was *another* than that Mipam whom he knew so well—another whom he knew not at all?” (108). He is coming to a newer level of self knowledge that is perhaps better called self-less knowledge. Mipam now sees the fiction of separation between himself and others. Opening to a different reality brings him into direct contact with beings that defy logic.

Such knowledge leads him further away from any kind of conventional success and further into a need to protect and save whomever he can. Having made some money as a trader, he immediately spends it to save the lives of the yaks who carried his goods from Tibet to China, knowing that they will be killed or sold off for further servitude. His traveling companions are

dismayed but they also understand the motivation: “in Tibet every action inspired by compassion arouses, even amongst the coarsest and most materially-minded peasants or traders, an intuitive feeling of respectful admiration. Chenrezigs of the thousand arms, the symbol of Infinite Compassion, was not chosen in vain to be the Supreme Lord and Protector of the lofty Land of the Snows [Tibet]” (165). From a Buddhist epistemology, he is buying his own freedom as well. Yongden is also giving us an important glimpse at the importance of compassion in Tibetan culture. Mipam’s traveling companions might not share his desire to give the yaks their freedom. They might even see his action as a kind of folly. He is setting his own well-being back by giving all of his money for their freedom. Yet they respect it and they can see that Mipam, in saving the yaks, is honoring Chenrezigs and thus Tibet.

After experiencing even deeper heartbreak that he cannot save even more yaks from a life of drudgery and slaughter, Mipam meets another mysterious lama who magically knows his story, his motivation, and his karmic destiny. ““You saved five yaks from death; that is what deprived you of your money, and you wept because you were not able to save a greater number. Chenrezigs likewise despaired because he could not free all beings from sorrow” . . . “All is vain but kindness”” (175). Once again, Mipam’s relationship to Chenrezigs, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, is brought into high relief. Mipam is both compared to Chenrezigs but also brought into close proximity to the Bodhisattva of Compassion. As his heart is developing, he is getting closer to Chenrezigs and Chenrezigs is able to become more vibrantly alive, not only to Mipam but to others, like his fellow traders, who are reminded of Chenrezigs.

Mipam’s multicultural experiences, taking him to different parts of Tibet and then to live in China, include an encounter with a group of western Christian missionaries as well. A British couple running the mission are particularly odious in their emphatic need to break the Chinese

and Tibetans they meet of any of the components of their previous spiritual lives. The Australian missionary Mr. Simon, however, presents to Mipam the example of goodness, compassion, and kindness that is not Buddhist but fully embodies the values that Mipam has learned in his religious training. Mipam comes to have an exchange with Mr. Simon that moves forward his spiritual development and leaves him able to appreciate goodness in others of other cultures even when he does not agree with their core belief systems or practices. Mipam is trying to get Mr. Simon to admit that he no longer believes in a Christian God, that he no longer has faith. Mr. Simon responds with an observation on the importance of love. “What I know is that He [Jesus] loved men, that He tried to teach them to love one another. Faith is a small thing, my friend; love is of greater price” (234). Mipam is touched by Mr. Simon’s spirit of charity, but he also feels that his friend has missed something important about Buddhism. He says to Mr. Simon, “You do not know what our religion is. You have only come across ignorant monks, just as absorbed in amassing money as we traders are. It would be as well for you to know what our Masters teach, so that you will not carry back with you, to your own country, false ideas about us” (235). Mr. Simon surprises Mipam by telling him that he will not return to Australia, that he will stay in Asia and do whatever work is helpful, not as a missionary but as a man who wants to alleviate suffering. Mipam’s response is that Mr. Simon is a true bodhisattva, that whatever religious label he might attach to himself, his actions are the true testimony of his worth and his goodness.

This lesson helps Mipam open his own heart further. By saving the yaks, Mipam has denied himself the chance to ask for a marriage with his beloved Dolma. He lets his personal heartbreak open into a universal broken heart. “Following the habitual bent of his mind, Mipam enlarged the circumference of his vision. Apart from his individual sufferings and those of the friends he was losing, he visualized the multitudes of broken hearts, the victims of their own

weakness, the oceans of tears shed by slaves fast bound by fetters of their own forging” (278).

We have seen Mipam move from the eye-opening experience of feeling the suffering of others to a conscious choice to enlarge the circumference of his vision.

In this scene, point of view is an unstable valence that forces the reader to step into Mipam’s love and broken heart, and through him, to shift focus to the suffering world of animals and humans and other beings, to his friends, and then beyond to the multitudes, for whom his consciousness has expanded to accommodate and whose ethical system cannot deny or ignore. Point of view is thus a portal into the process of dissolving a barrier between self and other and in so doing, uncovering a boundless compassion for the entire world.

In writing so extensively and passionately about the process of falling in love with all beings in the universe, Yongden did more than assert an alternative to an imperialist view of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. He offered a portal to an epistemology that provokingly challenged the major premises of the western world. As Mipam learns and teaches his readers, profit, personal status or romance, and mundane adventure are not the paths to wisdom and true fulfillment. Rather, learning how to enlarge one’s heart, and acting on it, despite how others might scoff, is the pathway to freedom. Eve Sedgwick writes, “Not only Vajrayana but the whole of Mahayana Buddhism . . . is radically self-defined in pedagogical terms” (Sedgwick 160). *Mipam* as a novel is a pedagogical tool for a praxis of non-duality and compassion that can undercut the imperial rhetoric of dominance, profit, and difference.

CHAPTER V
MARY POPPINS NEVER EXPLAINS

“Mary Poppins is never explicit. Perhaps she has Oriental blood.”

P. L. Travers

As I have shown in the previous chapters, by the 1930s, England had had many decades of culture production and literary output devoted to Buddhism and competing Buddhist epistemologies. The British construction of a Modernist, secularized version of Theravada Buddhism was forced to make room for the epistemological framework of Mahayana Buddhism, including non-duality and compassion. If writers like Jiddu Krishnamurti and Lama Yongden were bringing non-dual awareness and practice front and center in a discussion of spirituality, they were doing so from the social location of the Indian subcontinent. This fourth and final chapter explores how non-duality and compassion have landed in Britain in the form of a hybridized character, Mary Poppins. Mary’s arrival signals a new era in the cultural engagement with a Buddhist epistemology.

P. L. Travers published her first three Mary Poppins books between 1934 and 1943; *Mary Poppins* (1934) was quickly followed by *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935), which was followed by *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1943).²⁵ Each of these novels offers a view of middle class life in interwar London, featuring a cast of characters that range from the mundane to the mysterious to the extraordinarily magical. The social, economic, and domestic challenges of the Banks family, their neighbors Admiral Boom and Miss Lark, and other members of their

²⁵ Travers published five more Mary Poppins books after these three (between 1952 and 1988), though reportedly for largely financial reasons. These first three books stand together thematically and structurally, quite distinct from the later books.

neighborhood are transformed by the arrival of Mary, who brings with her not merely her own community of magical beings, but a way of seeing and relating to a world of magic, and an always-magical world, that she transmits to the Banks children.

Mary Poppins, I argue, is a hybrid spiritual figure, part Tibetan Buddhist dakini and part British witch. Her hybrid construction demonstrates that exotic spiritual beliefs and images were being absorbed into the British psychological landscape. The “east” that had been colonized by the British was coming back to England and being rendered as British in a hybrid mix.²⁶ In doing so, Mary is also reactivating and re-energizing the traditional British magical woman.

By looking at some of the components of the trope of Mary’s magic, I will show that she operates not to anglicize an Asian figure but rather she brings the role of the dakini into British cultural space. Mary operates throughout the series of novels to demonstrate an epistemology of non-duality and compassion, in which a binary system of logic is overturned and dissolved. In this space, certainty about the physical world—what it is and how it operates—completely disappears. Mary becomes a teacher and a guide to Jane and Michael Banks. She shows them and invites them into a universe that, though newly uncertain, is replete with an ethos of compassion. Mary Poppins’ enactment of an epistemology of non-duality and compassion is three-fold: she shows us herself transcending binaries, flipping the narrative, dissolving a rational world while at the same time refusing to speak about it. Further, her magic is always done to help others heal from colonial wounds or to teach the Banks children about the harm done to others. The non-dual is non-conceptual. To conceptualize the magic would prevent Michael and Jane, her students, from gaining access to transcendent understanding.

²⁶ McMahan and Lopez have written insightfully about the European appropriation of Tibetan Buddhism, as discussed in earlier chapters of this dissertation.

I will look at specific moments in all three books in which Mary and a fellow dakini-like character, Mrs. Corry, manifest the trope of the dakini through fierce and fearful discourse while also inspiring devotion; through the somatic gestures of dance, flight, and mirror gazing; through inter-species reversals; and through the refusal to explain. I will then discuss how the arrival of the dakini into British cultural space offers something that the traditional British witch or European sacred female figures had previously not done. The dakini serves to protect the mind of her student but only in order to reveal the non-dual nature of reality. Such praxis, coming in the form of a hybridized figure, creates the space for Jane and Michael, as well as the reader, to both confront an other in ourselves and to interrogate and possibly dissolve boundaries of difference constructed for the purposes of colonizing and commodifying humans, animals, and lands. There are glimmers of possibilities in the Mary Poppins books for the British to confront the shadows of their colonial desires and crimes. Mary Poppins might adamantly refuse to explain things in words, but her gestures indicate a praxis of liberation found in an epistemology of non-duality.

We get our first clue about how to read Mary in our first encounter with her. Before we know who she is, we are not even sure what she is. We see her through the Banks children's eyes as a shape that bangs heavily against the garden gate and then the front door. We're not sure it is human, let alone sentient. It is fitting that we see her through Jane and Michael's eyes, since it is the relationship between Mary and her two oldest charges that matters most through the three books. What the children initially see, while looking out for their father's arrival home on a blustery afternoon, is a shape, moving and being moved by gusts of wind as it approaches the front door of the Banks family home.

Then the shape, tossed and bent under the wind, lifted the latch of the gate, and they could see that it belonged to a woman, who was holding her hat on with one hand and carrying a bag in the other. As they watched, Jane and Michael saw a curious thing happen. As soon as the shape was inside the gate the wind seemed to catch her up into the

air and flung her at the house. It was as though it had flung her first at the gate, waited for her to open it, and then had lifted and thrown her, bag and all, at the front door. The watching children heard a terrific bang, and as she landed the whole house shook. (*Mary Poppins* 6)

What they see first is a mystery. Something is coming toward them, toward the house. As this thing becomes more clearly a person, the strangeness does not let up but in fact gets more intense, as she is thrown violently against the door.

This blending of the arrival of something strange and unknown, and the violence of its arrival, is redolent of empire, but also of the magic that Mary brings and represents. Throughout the set of stories, strangeness and empire are often present. The wind, too, plays an important role. Jane and Michael experience the wind as possibly sentient. The wind has flung her against the gate, waited for her to open it, and thrown her against the house. The reader is left not knowing if this possibly sentient wind is friend or foe, to the woman or to the household.

The uncanny arrival of Mary to the Banks household signals a whole new way of operating within and making sense of interwar Britain. The household itself is typically middle class, with a father who works in the City, keeping the cogs of empire going, and a mother presiding lightly within a domestic space ostensibly made for her but giving her very little to do. There are multiple servants (perhaps more than was realistic in the servant-starved interwar years or for a banker's family, though their presence in the home allows the Banks household to represent a range of British social practices). The children literally and figuratively grow and expand with each book, displaying both Travers' views on the development and potential of human consciousness as well as the horizons of possibility within new spiritual trainings and frameworks. And then there is Mary, who controls every space she enters and performs dual roles as servant and master—ostensibly she is a servant in the household, but from her first conversation in which she commands her job interview, she is clearly in charge. Her arrival

marks the beginning of a training of the two oldest Banks children, Jane and Michael. In adventures large and small, Mary shows Jane and Michael a world that their parents are unable to see. How they learn is just as important as what they learn about this world, as we see them standing on and crossing the threshold of the numinous again and again.

When Mary Poppins blows in from the east wind and lands, or rather, is thrown by the wind against the Banks' front door, the Weberian notion of a disenchanted twentieth century is rocked and overturned. What Mary is, what she signifies—as a spiritual teacher, protector, or guide—has been a source of curiosity and speculation amongst fans and critics of the novels. Valerie Lawson writes, “Mary Poppins has been called the ‘mother Goddess,’ a witch, the good fairy, a wise woman, the ‘ecstatic Mother’ as exemplified in Artemis and Sophia, Mary Magdalene or the Virgin Mary. She is said to contain Zen secrets or to epitomize Zen” (145). Giorgia Grilli argues that Mary is a provocateur signaling the coming waves of social change in twentieth-century Britain. She could be seen as a more modern kind of servant, rebellious in order to be faithful to her employers' needs. She could be “employed” by something much bigger than the Banks family, by some non-human force for good. She could be a quintessentially old-fashioned British witch or she could embody a syncretic blend of all of mythology.

One potentially important but baffling aspect of Mary's identity is where she comes from, where home is for her. Mary is not explicitly other than English, but at the same time, she is marked by an otherness. Regardless of where Mary actually comes from (which we never learn), we can help deepen our understanding of her identity by examining who she is as a spiritual figure in the novels. Travers was notoriously coy about who or what Mary Poppins was. In at least two encounters, she affirmed the possibility that Mary had some element of Zen, but this

was after Travers herself had become a serious student of Zen, many years after she wrote the first three books. While a case can be made that Mary embraces a universal mythological position, there are two images in particular that seem to emerge through her. The first is the already-mentioned trope of the traditional British witch. Mary doles out magical potions, she flies, and she communes with the natural world.

The second image that Mary projects is less obvious but no less surprising when we consider the British fascination with Asian spiritual traditions. We might, I contend, view Mary as a western representation of a *dakini*, a powerful, terrifying female figure found in tantric Hinduism and Buddhism who acts as protector, teacher, and guide. The *dakini* was already known in Europe via, among other writers, Alexandra David-Néel, Laurence Austine Wadell, and Walter Evans-Wentz, which I will discuss more fully later in this chapter. Meanwhile, different versions of Buddhism had also traversed Europe through the often mangled offerings of the Theosophists and other groups and teachers, who blended actual Buddhist and Hindu teachings and practices with their own (usually Orientalist) fantasies and fabrications. While Travers became a dedicated student of Georges Gurdjieff in the late 1930s and of Zen in the 1960s, her first encounter with Asian spirituality was through her friendship with followers of Theosophy in Ireland and England in the 1920s and 30s.

To some extent, Mary is a product of her time and place. Although her author was born and raised in Australia until her early twenties, Mary lands in and appears to be a subject of interwar England. The first two novels were published in and are set in 1930s London,²⁷ and although the third was published during World War II, the war itself is not a feature of any of the

²⁷ Despite Travers' instructions to the Disney producers of the 1964 film to set the story in Edwardian England, the illustrations for the books done by Mary Shepard with Travers' close collaboration set the story in the 1930s.

stories. Where Mary comes from and goes to in between the three books is a source of regular speculation by the other characters. There are hints that she travels beyond earth, into the cosmos. But when she comes back, she comes to England, and while she is there, she is experienced as English. I say “experienced as English” because Mary’s identity becomes more and more a mystery as the stories progress. While she clearly has some reason to be in England, and she looks and sounds English, there is also something “other” about her. She has not been interpellated into a system of thinking that dominates the London that she lands in. There are norms and rules, most of which she breaks. And yet she also proclaims her propriety and adherence to rules of behavior (even when her claims contradict her behavior).

The London that Mary lands in at the beginning of *Mary Poppins* is full of challenges. By the 1930s, England was in the throes of a global recession that would lead to another world war. While none of the characters in the novels is struggling to stay alive, roughly half of them are working class and we hear repeated references to financial challenges in the Banks household (the name of the family highlights a focus on finances). In the midst of economic turmoil, Britain was experiencing an identity crisis, as many of its major colonies were rocking the empire with nationalist and de-colonizing movements.

If we want to think about Mary as a possible dakini, we first need to know what the dakini represents in Tibetan Buddhism and then look at how it got translated to European audiences by early western explorers. Since Travers was not herself a student of any form of Buddhism when she wrote the first three novels, I am not arguing that she consciously or informedly wrote Mary as a dakini. Rather, I contend that the dakini, or rather the western ideas about the dakini, had flown west and were circulating in the cultural spaces in which Travers is moving.

The dakini pre-dates Buddhism in India, but when she moved from Hinduism to Buddhism, her valence shifted. The term dakini itself, writes Judith Simmer-Brown, is “attributed to a minor player in the pantheon of deities associated with indigenous non-Brahmanical traditions of India. Dakinis were demonic inhabitants of cemeteries and charnel grounds, delighting in the taste of human flesh and blood and dancing with ornaments fashioned from the bones of decaying corpses. They were identified as witch-spirits of women who died in pregnancy or childbirth” (45). Thus the dakini in ancient Hinduism was liminal, terrifying, and threatening to the social order. Dakinis embodied what was placed on the margins of ancient Indian social order: “female, outcaste, impure—and therefore were powerful outlaws” (Simmer-Brown 45).

As the dakini was absorbed into Tibetan Buddhism by the end of the first millennium AD, she retained many of the physical characteristics and behaviors of her Hindu incarnation, but the significance shifted. Instead of representing a threat to the matrix and hierarchy of an institution, instead of being a demon or monster, the dakini came to represent a threat to ego, the term in Buddhism that refers to the mental processes and structures that keep people from recognizing their inherently free and perfect nature. Simmer-Brown writes that “as the dakini became assimilated into classical Buddhism, her meanings came to reflect the most treasured and profound of teachings, especially those related to emptiness and wisdom” (Simmer-Brown 50). The dakini thus went from being a threatening monster to a powerful protector and guide towards liberation.

Above all, the dakini represents emptiness. “Emptiness,” writes Anne Klein, “sometimes called selflessness, is in classic Indian and Tibetan Buddhism the most essential quality of persons in the sense that it is inviolable and always present” (123). The dakini’s job, then, is to

help people see their nature as empty, through the magic and skillful means available to her. Amongst the many stories of dakinis that circulate in Tibetan Buddhism, there are varied descriptions of the dakinis themselves. “She may appear in humble or ordinary form as a shopkeeper, a wife or sister, or a decrepit or diseased hag. She may appear in transitional moments in visions, her message undecipherable. If she reveals herself, if she is recognized, she has tremendous ability to point out obstacles, reveal new dimensions, or awaken spiritual potential” (Simmer-Brown 4). The appearance of the dakini—both in terms of somebody able to see her for who she is, and the details of what she looks like—are specifically dependent on what the person she encounters needs. If that person needs to see her as beautiful, she will be beautiful. If they need to see her as hideous, she will be hideous. Her appearance is one of the many ways that she helps, teaches, and guides people.

The praxis of the dakini is founded upon a tension or recursive engagement between conceptual and non-conceptual. As Klein writes, “Buddhist epistemologies, while clearly articulating the profound intertwining of language and subjectivity, also emphasize that one’s mind has a dimension that is neither primarily gained nor governed through language” (Klein 61). The dakini’s job is to help individuals to see the world before concept governs our experience. When we can apprehend the world directly, before thought or language intervenes, then we see things non-dualistically. The dakini helps us to overcome dualism in a process that Klein calls “cognitive nondualism,” “the experienced dissolution of separation between subject and object” (21). The dakini uses whatever methods will get the job done, and thus her methods are often startling or even terrifying.

The dakini is seen to teach through a series of symbols. Simmer-Brown delineates two levels of symbolic play:

One level is primary and literal, drawn from ordinary experience, expressible in words and ordinary images, and susceptible to conventional interpretation. This first draws us to another level that is profound and directly inexpressible and that lends itself only reluctantly to interpretation. The second level comes before language or discursive reason and defies any other means of knowledge. It is not merely a reflection of objective reality but reveals something about the nature of the world that is not evident on the level of immediate experience. (25)

Within Tibetan Buddhist doctrine, dakinis are viewed as potentially real supernatural or even ordinary females. They are also experienced as potentially metaphorical, examples to help practitioners develop their minds in order to see the true nature of reality. Either way, they are given powerful importance in all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and Tibetans revere and pay homage to dakinis and often pray to encounter one. They are dangerous only because they are willing to do anything to rupture the conceptual mind that obscures reality.

While I maintain that Travers did not encounter a deep, direct education in the dakini, she nonetheless moved in European circles that were conversant in the stories of dakinis. By the 1930s, only a small handful of Europeans had spent much time in interior Tibet. But amongst that small handful of travelers, a few spent months or years in Tibet, sometimes in monasteries or in people's homes, soaking up and recording the practices, doctrines, and histories of the pantheon of Tibetan deities, including the dakini.

It is understandable that early twentieth-century European descriptions of the dakini were so sensationalized. The dakini is a challenging construction. Symbolically, metaphorically, in artistic representation, and in the way that Buddhist practitioners might speak of her as real and potentially embodied in a real living person, there is virtually nothing about her that a colonizing occupation would not find abhorrent. Female. Powerful. Disorderly. To the Tibetans, she is the highest form of teacher, yet she is still terrifying and confusing. She is found in charnel grounds, eating the flesh of corpses. She wields her power in terrifying ways. She is said to strike mind-

stopping terror in individuals who encounter her. In artistic representations, she challenges the most liberal-minded European. Thankas (paintings) and rupas (statues) of dakinis show them dancing naked, adorned with garlands of human bones.²⁸

By the 1930s, Tibetan Buddhism was well represented in popular culture and media coverage in Britain. Writers such as Laurence Austine Waddell, Walter Evans-Wentz, and Alexandra David-Néel regaled their readers with outrageous tales of corpses being animated, monks walking at miraculous speeds, and terrifying and/or enchanting flying women. Some of these accounts were based on actual time spent in Tibet and others were based on fantasy and misunderstandings of others' accounts, but all fed a hunger for exotic adventure and the promise of a mystical tradition that could heal and transform a modern world.

One of the first western texts that discusses the dakini is Helena Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888, and one of the most influential books in generating interest in eastern religions amongst Europeans. As I describe in greater detail in Chapter 2, Blavatsky claimed that her text had been transmitted to her by Tibetan lamas known as the Mahatmas, and that she was merely the vessel that channeled them. *The Secret Doctrine* was one of the foundational texts of the Theosophical Society, which claimed to have brought together the ultimate wisdom from various spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Blavatsky positioned the dakini as part of a group of non-human beings who could help humans evolve into the master race that was the human destiny. But, she wrote, dakinis themselves, while "credited with the art of 'walking in the air,' and the greatest *kindness to mortals*; [have] *no mind*—only animal instinct" (Blavatsky 2:284-5).

²⁸ As a side note, we have to also consider the possibility that dakinis were sometimes deployed (via practice or conversation) in order to frighten people away from Tibetan Buddhism, whose core teachings are meant to be secret and protected.

While the Theosophists had tremendous influence on many seekers, adventurers, and intellectual in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was still a common view, especially amongst employees of the British Empire, that Tibetan Buddhism was full of dark magic and no more than a perversion of the true Buddhism practiced in places like Sri Lanka. This view was disseminated by Laurence Austine Waddell, who travelled extensively through the Himalayas (including Tibet) while serving the British government in various capacities. Waddell claimed to have received extensive teachings on Buddhism. His message about Tibetan Buddhism followed the view that it was a corrupted form of Buddhism and participated in rituals that could only be termed demonic. In his popular *Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*, one of the first books on Tibetan Buddhism published in the west, he wrote, “The higher ritual [in Tibetan Buddhism], as already known, invites comparison with much in the Roman Church; and the fuller details now afforded facilitate this comparison and contrast” (xi). Dakinis were part of a “deep-rooted devil-worship and sorcery For Lamaism is only thinly and imperfectly varnished over with Buddhist symbolism, beneath which the sinister growth of poly-demonist superstition clearly appears” (xi).

Walter Evans-Wentz’s 1927 translation of the *Bardo Thodo* (inaccurately translated as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*) discusses the role of dakinis in Tibetan Buddhist practice and iconography. Although the translation is widely considered inaccurate and heavily influenced by Evans-Wentz’s participation with Theosophy,²⁹ it was a more sympathetic reading of dakinis and Tibetan Buddhism overall. Alexandra David-Néel, who claimed to have been the first western woman to travel and practice Buddhism in Tibet, described the dakini thus: “These are a kind of fairies who play a great part in mystic Lamaism, as teachers of secret doctrines, and are styled as

²⁹ John Reynolds argues that Evans-Wentz used a Theosophy framework to present this material on how one should proceed through different phases of consciousness after death.

‘mothers.’ They often appear in the shape of an aged woman and one of their peculiar signs is that they have red or green eyes” (David-Néel 168). David-Néel and Evans-Wentz referred to dakinis as fairies. Waddell was less enchanted, referring to them instead as demonical furies and witches.

As popular authors in the early decades of the twentieth century, Waddell, Evans-Wentz, and David-Néel all fed a public hungry for exotic stories that stirred adventure-lust while also affirming the strategic formation of a colonial rhetoric. And these stories fed the still-avid European seekers flocking to organizations like the Theosophical Society. Indeed, Travers herself was part of that cohort of seekers looking for meaning in the east while longing to revive the ancient roots of wisdom dormant in the west.

After moving to London in the 1920s, Travers made deep connections with a series of writers and artists who introduced her to prevailing mystical trends in Europe. Through George Russell (known by his pen name AE), she became connected with W. B. Yeats, and Alfred Richard Orage. These men offered an education in Theosophy, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Occultism. Lawson writes, “Russell introduced her to the meaning of fairy tales, to myths, the spirit world and Eastern religions” (Lawson 88). Travers described AE chanting Eastern scriptures to her as they walked across the Irish countryside (Lawson 107). Though Travers was later to become deeply devoted to the spiritual teacher George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff and then to two western Zen teachers, the first three Mary Poppins books were only written under the influence of the highly syncretic blend of Irish fairy tales and a western appropriation of Indian

spiritual traditions, all of which had been touched in some way by the work of Helena Blavatsky and Theosophy.³⁰

Once people like Waddell, Evans-Wentz, and David-Néel had written about dakinis for European audiences, the dakini had become both a product of western imagination and a source of the further weaving of fantasies and fears about the exotic East. Thus when Travers encountered Russell and Yeats in Ireland, or Orage in London, their talk of Theosophy, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Occultism undoubtedly included the dakini, one of the more colorful, tantalizing, and magnetizing beings related to spiritual traditions emanating from Asia.

I am not claiming that Travers consciously constructed Mary as a dakini of any sort. Rather, I argue that elements of the dakini, as confused and Orientalizing as they might have been, were circulating and that Mary has been sprinkled with them. The dakini had landed in Britain in the pages of books and was loose on the land. Liberator or demoness, she was a force to be reckoned with, even if on an almost unconscious level.

Mary Poppins, as literary character and pop culture icon (which she absolutely was before Disney transformed her into another beast altogether), has been the object of fan fascination and subject to various critical analyses. There is something about Mary that invites deep reflection and a desire to psychoanalyze. To Stefan Bergsten, Mary is a pan-cultural cosmic figure, a little Christ, a little Dante. To Laura Hoffeld, she is a sign of generational imbalance, where twentieth-century parents are helplessly unable to control their children. Jonathan Cott sees Mary as a Zen figure. Kenneth Reckford sees a Dionysian influence. To Perry Nodelman,

³⁰ “Gurdjieff, Orage and Ouspensky were all the spiritual offspring of Madame Helena Blavatsky, whose Theosophical Society had so influenced Yeats and AE. Ever since she had heard AE talk of theosophy, Pamela [Travers] had had a weakness for its blend of orientalism, Hindu philosophy and the occult. But from Orage onward, she was a total convert” (Lawson 131).

Mary is heartless. To Valerie Lawson, Mary has come to repair a damaged world. Giorgia Grilli sees Mary as firmly situated in the twentieth century dilemma. She argues that Mary “sheds light on the conflicting drives and desires that underpin the life of an individual. Resulting from a dialectical play between two extremes, this conflict manifests itself in our desire for adventure while also seeking security, or in our desire for freedom while also craving the stability that a disciplined routine will bring.” (Grilli xv). Mary, she argues, operates as a provocateur of the uncanny. “The disturbing situations Mary Poppins brings about are so surprising not because they are entirely new, but because they recall some remote or highly intimate experience that, for some reason, has been erased from everyday consciousness and subsequently forgotten” (Grilli xvi). Patricia Demers refers to Mary as “the prim shapeshifter” who “partakes of a mythically alive universe at the same time that she capably manages the domestic reality of 17 Cherry Tree Lane” (viii). Travers, writes Demers, “offers tentative constructs of unity and concord to bridge differences of geography and attitude” (viii).

These analyses of the books offer thought-provoking insights into what Mary Poppins represents or what she offers to her audience. They fail, however, to fully incorporate two critical features of these novels. The first is the syncretic spiritual dimensions in Mary’s construction. The second is the setting in which the books were written, during that era of a waning empire. There are too many references to empire in the novels to ignore and not take into consideration how empire interfaces with spirituality.

The first very notable characteristic of the books is that they are remarkably not pro-empire. If this is so, then this is another “turn” in a new direction. Kutzer argues that children’s fiction in general is “highly conservative, interested in preserving the past rather than in preparing children for a realistic adult future” (xvi). In particular, though, she contends that

during the early twentieth century, “some of the most revered of British children’s texts support the culture of imperialism—not the politics of imperialism, but the ethos that both produces imperialism and is engendered by imperialism” (xv). While the authors that Kutzer looks at, such as Kipling, Burnett, and Nesbit, all do have a clear investment in the construction of a pro-empire narrative, Travers is more complicated. Mary’s liminal status, operating as neither colonizer nor colonized subject, her power over authority figures, her control over every story and adventure, figure her as something quite special. One could argue that she operates well outside of any colonial system whatsoever. Hers is a fantasy landscape. But I am arguing that Mary engages empire in a special way. She goes head to head with figures of imperial power. And she deploys an epistemology of non-duality that overturns hierarchies and calls into question the very basis for hierarchical thinking. Her magic deconstructs empire. In the following sections, I look at specific instances in which Mary undermines a colonial system and offers an epistemology of non-duality that in turn operates as a praxis of liberation.

As I noted earlier, Mary is delivered to the Banks household by an apparently sentient wind, marking a rupture of a conventional landscape. If the wind carries a potency that we’re not quite sure about, Mary too announces a similar kind of indeterminate power in her first interaction with the children. She uses the strategy of anger and insult to control the interaction, to shift the focus, and to reveal her magic. Thus magic comes through when they are slightly off balance. There is an interesting blend of the children not knowing, feeling a bit self-righteous, and being susceptible to surprise. We will see this mixture over and over again throughout all of the books.

Once inside the house and having assured Mrs. Banks that she will take the position, Mary deploys more magic for the children, and only for the children’s eyes. Part of the potency

of her magic is that only they can see it. She rides the banister upstairs, going deeply into the imperial home, and then proceeds to unpack her bag. The exchange between Mary and the children is their first lesson in engagement with her magic. How she responds to their claims is clearly a critical component of this magic. Looking inside the bag, the children see that there is nothing inside it and say so. “‘What do you mean—nothing?’ demanded Mary Poppins, drawing herself up and looking as though she had been insulted” (*Mary Poppins* 11). She then removes from the empty bag a starched white apron, a large cake of Sunlight Soap, a toothbrush, a packet of hairpins, a bottle of scent, a small folding armchair and a box of throat lozenges. When Michael challenges this sight and reaffirms that he just saw an empty bag, Jane hushes him. Already we see Jane catching on to the rules of the training. If things don’t add up, it’s better to stick with Mary’s narrative, even if it belies what they see. In this first encounter, Mary administers medicine to everybody and when Michael vehemently resists, “Mary Poppins’s eyes were fixed upon him, and Michael suddenly discovered that you could not look at Mary Poppins and disobey her. There was something strange and extraordinary about her—something that was frightening and at the same time most exciting” (MP 12). The blending of fear, obedience and the underlying current that Mary’s fierceness is a form of caretaking rather than harm, all point to her as a dakini.

In every subsequent story, throughout all three novels, Mary assumes a posture of outrage when the children point out a magical moment. Her outrage is inflected with the language and images of middle class respectability: “sober, honest, hard-working” (*Mary Poppins* 47); “‘I was properly brought up!’” (*Mary Poppins Comes Back* 60); “‘You spend the afternoon with a well-brought up, self-respecting pair like my cousin and myself. And all you can do afterwards is to

make a mock of us”” (*Mary Poppins Opens the Door* 61-2). She threatens and calls the children names when they begin to question her version of things.

Another character that echoes the same almost inexplicable ferocity is Mrs. Corry, another dakini-like figure who features in the chapter “Mrs. Corry” in the first novel. Mrs. Corry owns a candy shop that Mary takes the children to. She might be a bit more beyond the human realm than Mary, since her candy shop disappears as soon as the visitors leave it. The shop seems to exist for the sole purpose of allowing an encounter with Jane and Michael.

In this story we see something about the nature of the guide and her students. In this case, Mrs. Corry’s students are her two daughters Annie and Fannie. She dominates them the way that Mary dominates Jane and Michael, but with even more intensity and inexplicable cruelty. They are not allowed to question, challenge, or think for themselves. In fact, the daughters are reduced to cowering and crying. We first see this when Mrs. Corry asks Jane and Michael if her daughters have offered them any gingerbread. One daughter, Annie, says that they were just about to when Mrs. Corry pounces on the daughters, bellowing what right they had to offer her gingerbread.

“You only thought! That is very kind of you. But I will thank you not to think I can do all the thinking that is necessary here!” said Mrs. Corry in her soft, terrible voice. Then she burst into a harsh cackle of laughter.

“Look at her! Just look at her! Cowardy-custard! Cry-baby!” she shrieked, pointing her knotty finger at her daughter.

Jane and Michael turned and saw a large tear coursing down Miss Annie’s huge, sad face, but they did not like to say anything, for, in spite of her tininess, Mrs. Corry made them feel rather small and frightened. (*Mary Poppins* 123)

Just as Jane and Michael easily overlook Mary Poppins’ fierceness in their full participation in her magical world, so too do Annie and Fannie join and support their mother in her mystical work. There is a kind of anti-logic at play in the way that the youngsters commit themselves to their teachers’ dictates.

In addition to the fierceness that we see repeatedly in Mary, there is another element that is just as important in her relationship to Jane and Michael. This is devotion. They are devoted to her as soon as they meet her. Minutes after her arrival in the Banks home, Michael asks her if she will stay with them forever. Michael calls out to her from bed: “‘Mary Poppins,’ he cried. ‘you’ll never leave us, will you?’” (*Mary Poppins* 14). This heartfelt querying repeats in each novel, when she returns after an absence. There is something in Mary that engenders not merely loyalty and obedience, but downright devotion. We see this devotion in the children, in the animals, in the humans who know her for who she is.

With both the fierceness and the devotion, there is a system of exchange that defies conventional understanding. Mary and Mrs. Corry are both free from something but also tied to something. Mrs. Corry is not running a business for profit, but there is an economy of rupture. She offers gingerbread to the children and they in turn give her payment by sticking a coin on her body, which magically stays in place. This is reminiscent of one conventional wisdom about dakinis, which is that one should offer them gold. If they throw the gold away, they are a wisdom dakini and can offer powerful instruction. If they keep the gold, they are too dangerous to engage with. Mrs. Corry does not appear to need the money that Jane and Michael offer her, but we later learn that she does need the gilt stars stuck to the top of the gingerbread back. She needs the stars returned so that they can be put back in the sky. The logic of reclaiming the stars and climbing a ladder to glue them back to the sky requires not a leap but a rupture, a complete tearing through of any previously-established schemata of how the universe is organized or what ordinary-looking women can do.

The gingerbread scene is reminiscent of riddle games in which no correct answer exists. For Fannie and Annie, there is no way to avoid being terrorized. But this scene is folded into a

narrative involving hospitality and material exchange. And once again, thinking is loudly invoked and then undermined as the most dangerous path to take in this realm. There is something powerfully magical about the description of Mrs. Corry's soft, terrible voice. The menace in that voice, the danger. And then the mocking of her crying daughter. Grilli writes that "Mary Poppins's characteristic severity never disappears, and its purpose soon becomes clear: it is a device through which the impossible can become possible without becoming too overwhelming" (Grilli 19). My view is that the severity performs two functions. It keeps the devotion that the children feel for Mary from melting into a pool of enervated goo, and it keeps the children off balance, which keeps them from thinking too much. By staying in a more open, non-conceptual state, they can cross the thresholds that she invites them to cross. Simmer-Brown writes about the dakini as "other," as a threat to our construction of an already-known world. "As an outside awakened reality that interrupts the workings of conventional mind, she is often perceived as dangerous because she threatens the ego structure and its conventions" (41). Mary is both dangerous to the constructed conventional world as well as protector to Jane and Michael as they venture forth into a space beyond their imaginings. She is simultaneously insider and outsider. She comes from and returns to a mysterious place. While in England, she has a mission that is definitely dangerous to the world as Mr. and Mrs. Banks know it.

Coupled with her ferocity is Mary's refusal to explain herself. Over and over, the children ask questions or seek clarity on a strange occurrence. Over and over she says nothing. She even refuses to refuse, leaving the children to conclude that she doesn't explain. This lack of explanation can be seen as a cute trope, another of Mary's eccentricities. But it is also potentially one of her most powerful tactics in a praxis of non-duality. Sometimes her refusal is gentle and deflective. Sometimes it is harsh, as after their visit to Uncle Albert, who finds himself floating

in the air in his flat when he starts to laugh. The children and Mary have been invited to Uncle Albert's home for tea, but when they arrive, they find him floating up near the ceiling of his drawing room. Mary is not amused but neither does she refuse to take part in the party. Uncle Albert explains that because it is his birthday, laughing causes him to float. He invites the children to laugh and float with him. As the three are enjoying the experience, they beg Mary to join them on the ceiling. She remains unamused, but Albert reveals that she is the great exception; she does not need to laugh in order to float. And so, unlaughing, she floats up to the ceiling with them, and magically brings the tea table floating up to join them, so that they can have tea together.

Having had this direct experience of magic, Jane and Michael then encounter the other side of the experience, in which one does not speak of it. On the bus ride home Michael asks Mary how often her uncle gets "like that."

"Like what?" said Mary Poppins sharply, as though Michael had deliberately said something to offend her.

"Well—all bouncy and boundy and laughing and going up in the air."

"Up in the air?" Mary Poppins's voice was high and angry. "What do you mean, pray, up in the air?"

Jane tried to explain.

"Michael means—is your Uncle often full of Laughing Gas, and does he often go rolling and bobbing about on the ceiling when —"

"Rolling and bobbing! What an idea! Rolling and bobbing on the ceiling! You'll be telling me next he's a balloon!" Mary Poppins gave an offended sniff.

"But he did!" said Michael. "We saw him."

"What, roll and bob? How dare you! I'll have you know that my uncle is a sober, honest, hard-working man, and you'll be kind enough to speak of him respectfully. And don't bite your Bus ticket! Roll and bob, indeed—the idea!." (*Mary Poppins* 45-47)

Michael's "We saw him" speaks for the reader as well, who has "seen" the party described in words and seen the illustrations. As readers, we are interpellated into Jane and Michael's epistemological training. We further track their follow-up looks to each other as they communicate the appropriate behavior in these moments, as Mary has taught them.

Michael and Jane looked across Mary Poppins at each other. They said nothing, for they had learnt that it was better not to argue with Mary Poppins, no matter how odd anything seemed.

But the look that passed between them said: "Is it true or isn't it? About Mr. Wigg. Is Mary Poppins right or are we?"

But there was nobody to give them the right answer. (*Mary Poppins* 47)

Whether they actually doubt their own senses or recognize that to speak about the magic reduces it to a conventional logic that will never add up, the children increasingly go along with her system.

While some critics, such as Grilli, argue that the books criticize and defy logic as a way of seeing the world (19), I argue that the stories are not so much an argument with conventional logic as a guide to non-conceptual experience. There is something brand new going on here. It is not so much about defying logic in order for some new understanding to come through. It is about experiencing everything—one's body, the world around, one's consciousness—in a way impossible through conventional thought or conventional speech. Mary Poppins does not refuse to explain so that the children can do their own thinking for themselves. Explaining would close the rupture, would kill the magic, and would prevent the children from seeing the world in a new way. The training that Jane and Michael undergo repeatedly cycles through their experiences of fear, obedience, devotion, and magic. The magic, it is clear, will not happen without their adherence to Mary's dictates.

The praxis of an epistemology of non-duality comes through most tangibly through Mary's actions. These include moments of looking—at herself or an exchange of secretive looks shared with another initiated character; and through activities such as flight, dance, or relating to the phenomenal world. All of these actions involve a surface level body component. Her outer body is able to do things. But what she is doing becomes more clear to Jane and Michael the longer they are around her.

Possibly the most perplexing and difficult to recognize as a magical act is her tendency to look at herself in mirrors. Mary is repeatedly referred to by the narrator as vain or conceited. The evidence for this vanity is that she looks at herself carefully when she passes a reflective surface. Early in the first book, she looks at herself in the Tobacconist's shop window. "Mary Poppins put her hat straight at the Tobacconist's Shop at the corner. It had one of those curious windows where there seem to be three of you instead of one, so that if you look long enough at them you begin to feel you are not yourself but a whole crowd of somebody else" (*Mary Poppins* 30). This both depersonalizes and amplifies something about her. It signals something to us even though we aren't sure quite what. We can take this description of Mary as vain at face value and think no more about it. Or we can enquire into the significance of the process of there being three of her.

Some critics have attempted to address Mary's supposed vanity. Demers writes, "There are some logical problems about Mary Poppins' vanity. Although never seen shopping for herself, collecting her pay, or spending her own earnings, she nevertheless takes great pride in her mysteriously acquired and uniformly prim clothes" (78). Mary is certainly seen as vain. She is labeled such. But Mr. Banks is also said to spend his working days at the bank cutting out pennies, so perhaps the narrator is not our most reliable source. Mary does look at herself in mirrors and shop windows. There appears to be some purpose for that, though what that purpose is is never clearly spelled out.

Another scene involving a shop window holds a further interesting detail. Walking with Jane and Michael on their way to the bank, she looks at her reflection to make sure the flowers on her new hat are still pink roses and not turned into common flowers like marigolds. (*Mary Poppins* 105). This image uncannily positions Mary as located curiously between England and

India. Is Mary a fair English rose or is she marked by the flower associated with India and especially with sacred offerings in India? This need to be certain suggests that her construction as English nanny is so unstable that she might shift her identity in front of them.

The act of looking in a mirror or other reflective surface involves the looking but also the mirror itself. Mirrors sometimes feature in Tibetan Buddhism, often to signify vast space, unbounded by concept, a primordial space from which anything could emerge. Mirrors reflect things back at us, both dualistically and non-dualistically. Simmer-Brown writes, “Looking into her heart center, the practitioner is looking into a mirror, seeing the mind and the entire world in dramatically different perspective” (Simmer-Brown 2). There is a deep relationship between the mirror and the heart of the dakini. Mary’s interest in her own reflection suggests an interest in something, but whether that interest is focused on herself or a constructed self seen by others, or something even more mysterious, it is difficult to say. For the narrator to repeatedly call Mary vain, however, seems to signal something that we need to distrust about the narrator rather than a simple character flaw in Mary.

While Mary’s reflected relationship with her corporeality holds significance, we find further engagement with bodies that are more dynamic. The story “Mrs. Corry” includes some vivid moments of bodies engaged in cosmic duties. After that previously-mentioned moment of chastising and humiliating her daughters, Mrs. Corry turns to the Banks children with effusive, if morbid, charm. First there is Mrs. Corry breaking off fingers and offering them as food (*Mary Poppins* 120). “She broke off two of her fingers and gave one each to John and Barbara. And the oddest part of it was that in the space left by the broken-off fingers two new ones grew at once” (*Mary Poppins* 120). Broken off, her fingers become candy for the infants. The shock of the macabre is transformed into culinary delight. This moment is mildly reminiscent of one of the

tropes of the dakini. She carries a blade with which she slices her abdomen in order to show another the cosmos within her (or the non-duality between self and cosmos). Slicing her body open, she pulls her skin apart to show that there is nothing but sky and space underneath. Simmer-Brown writes about the dakini that “she teaches directly not through words but through actions. Specifically, she teaches with her body, cutting open her very heart to reveal her wisdom” (Simmer-Brown 2). There is also the traditional stories of the dakinis who live in charnel grounds feeding on the flesh of corpses as a way to demonstrate the illusory nature of the physical world.

After meeting Mrs. Corry and receiving gingerbread from her, Jane and Michael witness a special activity performed by Mrs. Corry, her daughters, Annie and Fannie, and Mary Poppins. The gingerbread had been decorated with gilt paper stars, which the children carefully pack away in a box. Secret looks have passed between Mrs. Corry and Mary regarding those stars, as mentioned earlier (*Mary Poppins* 126). After the children have gone to bed, Mary collects the stars and, with Mrs. Corry, they climb long ladders held by Annie and Fannie and glue the stars to the night sky (*Mary Poppins* 128-33). Mary Poppins and Mrs. Corry are thus protectors of the cosmos. “As each [star] was placed in position it began to twinkle furiously, sending out rays of sparkling golden light” (*Mary Poppins* 133). The activity performed by the four women suggest their special relationship in bridging the mundane and the sacred. The fact that the children get to observe this activity suggests that they are brought in, they are part of it to some extent. This is one of many of their learning experiences with Mary. They are learning that, first, things are not what they appear. But further, the sacred needs to be tended to; it needs intermediaries. Perhaps Jane and Michael might become such intermediaries or perhaps they will simply have the knowledge and respect of those chosen to play this role.

Of all of the ways in which Mary manifests magic, the physical magic that Mary Poppins is most famous for is probably flight. There are numerous instances of Mary in flight throughout the books. Her arrivals and exits all involve wind or being airborne. She arrives on the east, on a kite, and on a firework. She exits on the west wind, on a merry-go-round that carries her into the sky (turning into a star), and through a door that shimmers in the air. Uncle Albert floats when he laughs and the children also need to laugh in order to float. But Mary does not need to think of something funny to float (*Mary Poppins* 37).

Just as Mary Poppins is best known for flight, so are dakinis. “Dakinis are depicted as moving through the open space of wisdom. They are known in Tibetan as ‘space-journeying ladies,’ or ‘females who travel through the sky’” (Klein 159). Flight for a dakini has considerable symbolic meaning. The dakini, writes Simmer-Brown, “awakens the experience of groundlessness and lack of reference point through her soaring in space or the sky (*kha*). She abides nowhere but arises continually in the practitioner’s experience as an emblem of space” (Simmer-Brown 52). Whenever we see Mary in flight, there is groundlessness in that the conventions of gravity are suspended. Sometimes flight involves a group, such as at Uncle Albert’s house, or the neighborhood flying about the park on peppermint stick horses. Sometimes flight involves Mary’s arrivals and departures. Jane and Michael are always involved, either as witnesses (to the arrivals and departures) or as fellow flyers, floaters, and sommersaulters-in-air.

Grilli recognizes the role that flight plays in subverting the hegemonic “normal.” “Through flight,” she writes, “we transcend the ‘real’ or the purely ‘realistic’ definition of the possible, and gain access to a double or a plural identity (belonging, for example, to earth and sky, or to human and suprahuman), which subverts the logic founded on binary structures and

noncontradiction—principles that in the Western world and culture have been considered to be absolutes and underpin identity itself’ (Grilli 43-4). However, Grilli complicates the role of flight in the children’s development. She sees a lack of conscious choice in their involvement with flying.

The children’s bodies gain a sense of autonomy once removed from the norms of weight, stasis and habitual postures, which in turn exposes them to new experiences. This however is accompanied by a sense of disassociation, denying them the possibility of willfully deciding when to initiate or end the experience, or the form that this physical victory over the laws of nature will take. So these experiences are always accompanied by a moment of disorientation, surprise, or confusion. Mary Poppins on the other hand, is never in the least bit flustered. (Grilli 10)

It is true that Mary never appears at all flustered or out of control (other than her arrival in *Mary Poppins*). However, it is less clear to me that by bringing the children into a world of flight, she is removing autonomy from their experience. Rather, she is opening them to further, deeper possibilities of human experience and understanding. She allows them to see things that she does not allow their parents to see.

Grilli complains that the Mary’s liminal location and her acts of crossing thresholds make her too unstable to allow for any fixed meaning to be attached to her. From one epistemological point of view, this could be valid. My argument throughout, however, is that Mary’s instantiation of an epistemology of non-duality forces us to experience the melting of concept, including the binary of good and bad, or this and that.

The epistemological shifts that I see throughout the stories happen most vividly in moments of reversals. There are inter-species reversals but also just moments where the energy changes direction abruptly. Such reversals almost always foreground the colonial elements surrounding and embedded within the stories. One dramatic reversal happens on Mary’s birthday. Because her birthday has fallen on a full moon, she has a special party at the zoo. Jane

and Michael arrive to find that the animals and humans have switched places. “‘Why, it’s all upside down!’” Jane exclaims (*Mary Poppins* 156). The inter-species reversal is not a mere bit of whimsy, however. There is deep significance in the animals communicating their anger at their treatment and their need to reverse the conditions with their captors. Jane and Michael encounter a seal who tells them clearly that it might be delightful to watch the animals at the zoo, but it is not so fun to be an animal at the zoo.

“Come on, you two! In you come. Let’s see *you* dive for a bit of orange-peel you don’t want.” It was a bitter, angry vice, and looking down they saw that it came from a small black Seal who was leering at them from a moonlit pool of water.

“Come on, now—and see how *you* like it!” he said.

“But—but we can’t swim!” said Michael.

“Can’t help that!” said the Seal. “You should have thought of that before. Nobody ever bothers to find out whether I can swim or not.” (*Mary Poppins* 157)

Jane and Michael are forced to consider the life of the zoo animals from their point of view. They are subjected to the bitterness of the objectified and the oppressed but the power of this scene lies not in the anger of the Seal and the other animals but rather in the audacity of having them switch places with the folks like Jane and Michael who thoughtlessly go to the zoo without considering the animals’ lives. When the Seal learns that they are affiliated with Mary Poppins, though, he begs their pardon. Their status immediately changes and they become special guests in this special scene. As always, Mary holds supreme importance to the animals at the zoo.

The humans end up in cages because they’ve been “left behind” (*Mary Poppins* 162)—which could signal a colonial adventure turned horror story reminiscent of Conrad or Waugh. “Children of all shapes and sizes, from babies in long clothes upwards, were scrambling about in another cage. The animals outside regarded these with great interest and some of them tried to make the babies laugh by thrusting their paws or their tails in through the bars” (*Mary Poppins* 160). They find their neighbor Admiral Boom in a cage. Running about his cage, “spluttering

with rage,” Admiral Boom spouts nonsensical imperial commands: “‘Blast my gizzard! All hands to the Pump! Land, ho! Heave away there! Blast my gizzard!’ shouted the Admiral. Every time he came near the bars a tiger prodded him gently with a stick and this made Admiral Boom swear dreadfully” (*Mary Poppins* 161-2). Admiral Boom, spouting military commands, unmistakably signals colonial disaster. How could the tiger prodding him not remind us of Asian colonies agitating for their independence? Jane asks a lion how the humans ended up in the cages. “‘Lost,’ said the Lion. ‘Or rather, left behind. These are the people who’ve dawdled and been left inside when the gates were shut. Got to put ‘em somewhere, so we keep ‘em here. He’s dangerous—that one there! Nearly did for his keeper not long ago. Don’t go near him!’ And he pointed at Admiral Boom” (*Mary Poppins* 162). Several things are worth noting here. First is the fantasy scene of the colonizer and colonized reversed. Second is that while their social location as Londoners would normally make them subject to the same treatment as the others who have been left behind, their connection to Mary grants Jane and Michael special immunity. And finally, this reversal of circumstances comes directly through Mary’s magic. The zoo is in this state because it is her birthday.

Mary is the link that both holds together and subverts the colonial order in this scene. She is the reason that the animals have temporary control over the humans. Repeatedly, animals talk to Mary and she is able to commune with them as equals. They revere her but she is not particularly better than them. Scenes such as the one at the zoo show how the rupture of the old order makes space for new kinds of communication, new ways of seeing and making sense of the world.

The reversed duality dissolves completely as the story progresses. Jane and Michael meet the Hamadryad, a large snake who invokes the overturning of the colonial order and, in that overturning, a profound openness emerges. First the Hamadryad acknowledges the reversal:

“Tonight the small are free from the great and the great protect the small Even I—” he paused and seemed to be thinking deeply, “even I can meet a Barnacle Goose without any thought of dinner—on this occasion. And after all,” he went on, flicking his terrible little forked tongue in and out as he spoke, “it may be that to eat and be eaten are the same thing in the end. My wisdom tells me that this is probably so. We are all made of the same stuff, remember, we of the Jungle, you of the City.” (*Mary Poppins* 174)

This assertion is not merely a philosophical view. He means this literally. “The same substance composes us—the tree overhead, the stone beneath us, the bird, the beast, the star—we are all one, all moving to the same end. Remember that when you no longer remember me, my child” (174-75). Michael challenges the Hamadryad: “But how can tree be stone? A bird is not me. Jane is not a tiger” (175). To answer Michael, the snake points to the Grand Chain, a circle of animals surrounding Mary, swaying together as one mass. “Backwards and forwards went the swaying crowd, keeping time together, swinging like the pendulum of a clock. Even the trees were bending and lifting gently, and the moon seemed to be rocking in the sky as a ship rocks on the sea” (MP 175). Swaying between Jane and Michael, the Hamadryad murmurs, “Bird and beast and stone and star—we are all one, all one—” (175).

The words of the Hamadryad give way to the experience of the animals and humans bound up in this scene. Likewise, Michael’s and Jane’s words of questioning and challenging such non-duality dissolve as they surrender to this moment. Their surrender becomes dreamlike and they awake in their home wondering if they have dreamt the experience. Evidence on Mary indicates otherwise, but the dreamlike aspect of their experience suggests that to surrender to non-duality requires relaxation and a suspension of conventional logic. At the same time, there are some powerful ideological implications in seeing colonizer and colonized, as connected,

chained together even. Great and small can come together and find freedom and protection together. They need to dissolve the conventional roles that they play with each other to do so. In this world, it does not require trust so much as a relaxing into the magic of the situation. This is not a blueprint for a conventional changing of the political landscape but it is a blueprint of praxis for an epistemology of non-duality and a claim for the transformative possibilities of non-duality.

As Mary Poppins conveys an infiltration of eastern spiritual practices, or a limited but nonetheless potent western understanding of eastern spiritual practices, there are several salient elements that come through. One element is that conventional knowledge occludes magical knowledge. In one story, after Mary talks to Andrew the neighbor dog, the children ask Mary what they were talking about. She does not tell them anything substantive, just acknowledges a general conversation with the dog, but the children push and insist on knowing the nature of the conversation, at which point she becomes angry and haughty. Jane tries to intervene: “‘Oh, Michael,’ said Jane, ‘she’ll never tell us if you talk like that’” (*Mary Poppins* 55). The children’s desire to know things informs them that they cannot seek conventional knowledge. The nature of “knowledge” is altogether different. Not only is it beyond what they can think, it is well beyond what can be stated in language. All that the characters can do is talk about the importance of not talking about it. While this might seem coy or silly for a novel, it is an extraordinary moment of transcendent reach on the part of Travers to even attempt.

Connected with a privileging of magical knowledge is the understanding that each individual has the capacity to activate and engage magic. They do not need to rely upon a higher source, if they can only find the inner resources. This is a deeply Buddhist understanding that contradicts a theistic view that a higher power always needs to be supplicated. Such an

understanding is confirmed by Lawson, who cites a note written by Travers about spiritual agency: “‘We are all looking for magic. We all need to feel we are under a spell and one day a wand will be waved and the princes that we truly feel ourselves to be will start forth at least from the tattered shapeless smocks. But indeed we have to wave the wand for ourself. If only we could refrain from endlessly repairing our defenses. To be naked and defenseless. Oh we need it’” (Lawson 8).

The third element is that things are not always what they appear to be. Mary, an ordinary-appearing nanny, is actually a magical being who flies, talks to stars and animals, and can pull back the veil to show a world more profound than Jane or Michael could have imagined. But there are other human figures who reveal their specialness, too. Robertson Ay is one such. On the surface, Ay, a servant boy in the Banks home, is typically seen sleeping in closets and in the garden, in closets, or anywhere else he finds himself. What work he does for the household is usually done “wrong,” as when he shines Mr. Banks’ shoes in two different colors. The conventional view of an inadequate servant is complicated when Ay is later revealed as one of the Ancient Ones, one of Mary Poppins’ special group, who see through the veils of ignorance and can be deployed in magical ways. We might call them spiritual activists.

The fourth element is that rupture can be a portal to liberation. Grilli argues that “although she teaches good manners to her charges and is always impeccably well-dressed and composed, she provides access to experiences that counter what is considered conceivable by a particular social context, and it is for this reason that she can be considered a provocateur” (*xviii*). She is a provocateur only from a western epistemology. From a Buddhist epistemology, she is a guide, gesturing toward the ineffable. It is in these moments of instability and shock, that Jane and Michael can see something new. This something new is nothing less than a sacred

world that exists all around them but is overlooked or invisible to nearly everybody. It is not a byproduct or sign of unhappiness. It is a whole new world and a whole new way of seeing that world.

Jed Esty offers a contextualizing framing through which to examine Mary's location. In *A Shrinking Island* Esty notes that elite British literature in the 1930s reflected an imperial contraction, manifesting a "redemptive agency of culture, which is restricted by national or ethnolinguistic borders" (2). This anthropological inward turn, he argues, brings a literary focus back to England and to traditional English forms such as the Pageant Play. Mary, a young English nanny working for a London family, both exemplifies a traditional British location and complicates Esty's inward turn. Everything about her is both British and not at the same time. If British literary audiences need a focus on Englishness and English forms, they are nonetheless getting a dose of "elsewhere" in Mary. She is both English and not English. She carries signs of the empire coming home.

The world of the Banks family, as Jed Esty has argued, was shrinking, becoming more explicitly English and less cosmopolitan. Culture production was becoming increasingly focused on a recovery and celebration of Englishness. Mary complicates this landscape in a way that does not refute Esty's claim but rather forces us to see how even a retrenchment into Englishness could not deny the influences of the Empire. The Other has traveled back "home" to England, or rather, has made a home in England, and this settling in—of vestiges of Asian spirituality, mixed with syncretic European spirituality and fantasy—this settling in was not going to dissolve with the dissolution of the Empire. The Others in England—Mary, Robertson, Mrs. Corry, Uncle Albert—know each other. They practice together in the park, on the steps of the bank, in the nursery. They have fully infiltrated the inner core of the Empire's capital. Travers shows us the

Others; she shows us solidarity amongst them and she shows them teaching a new way of knowing to the sons and daughters of empire. She displays subversion without terror.

Esty looks at the movement toward recovery of an English national culture as a way to mitigate England's imperial past and provincial future (163). One of the leaders of this movement, T. S. Eliot, argued that English art would deteriorate if it remained within the domain of rational cosmopolitanism. Mary's work is hardly rational, and she is not cosmopolitan in the conventional sense of the word, but she holds about her a cosmic cosmopolitanism. She does not merely travel effortlessly from capital to capital, but from star to star and is fluent not only in human languages but in animal, star, tree, sun. And yet, at the same time, she is adorned with the markers of England. She speaks repeatedly about being proper, sober, hard working, and respectable. And while these invocations might carry a hidden double message, they are still part of her vocabulary. She wears the costume of middle class respectable Englishness while belying that respectability by transcending it. She valorizes and undermines Englishness at the same time.

Esty writes that the reverse colonization and birth of culture studies makes England "into a minor culture susceptible to romantic discourses of local color and to realist protocols of ethnography" (165). If this is true, where does that leave Mary? She can certainly be seen as an example of lowbrow culture and as such, is less susceptible to the rules governing high literature. There is something distinctively local color about her, though. The stories are dotted with nuggets of colorful characters—and some are distinctly local, but some are not. There is, in fact, an unambiguous blending of worlds. These worlds can speak to each other but they are quite distinct nonetheless. The setting of the stories might seem to fall into that recuperative discourse of Anglocentrism that Esty discusses, but Mary and her allies resist an Anglophilia that would

wash away the sins of empire. If there is any healing from empire happening, it happens through the restorative justice of the nighttime zoo or the secret healing rituals that Mary enacts in the park, the sky, or on another plain.

We could see Mary as most definitely embodying an “insular romance of wholeness” (Esty 8). She brings order out of the disorder of the Banks household. They are on the verge of a breakdown when she arrives. There are money problems, the house itself is not in good shape, and the family cannot keep a nanny. She arrives and spit spot, order reigns. She administers medicine, she organizes, and she brings a sense of harmony and tranquility to the home. But. The question of insular is tricky. Yes, she is devoted to her employer’s home and family, which is quite insular. But at the same time, she has a connection all the way out to the cosmos. She has friends everywhere, amongst the poor and working class of London, and all manner of life forms. She is there and here at the same time, on some level, which dissolves any true claim to insularity.

Esty writes, “Modernism’s nativist and culturalist turn represents the first part of a decolonizing dialectic in which the tropes and modes of colonial knowledge came home to roost at the end of empire” (9). We can see Mary participating in this dialectic by being both servant and master. She is both at once but we can only experience her as one or the other, never both at the same time. And she serves her employer while also serving those who stand in opposition to him. We could view Mary as an infiltration of the colonial subject to Britain and she might be so well disguised as a British lass that the folks around her do not recognize her for what she is. On the outer level, she has come to save Britain. But on a cosmic level, she seems to have come to serve those who have been dominated by the British imperial system—the servants, the animals, the land itself. She wields her magic on their behalf. She is also there to show Jane and Michael

an alternative to the imperial system that they have been born into. As students and worshippers of Mary, they are learning what she is and coming to see the world in a way radically different from their parents. Perhaps they will forget all of this, just as babies forget their natures by the time they are a year old. But perhaps they will forge ahead into a new generation of British who will turn away from empire, or who will look for ways to heal the damage caused by empire.

Another dialectical framework might be helpful in making sense of Mary as a dakini. Simmer-Brown cites Paul Ricoeur's work with symbols and a dialectic of consent and suspicion as critically helpful. "Having fully consented, the subject may reconstruct the symbol into meaningful myths, stories, and paradigms concerning the dakini. This dialectic of consent and suspicion becomes the essential way in which the full range of the dakini symbol may empower the subjectivity of the practitioner" (Simmer-Brown 28). One way that consent happens, in Tibetan Buddhism and in the Banks household, is through devotion, through the heart-opening moments in which glimpses of emptiness translate back to conventional mind as a longing and that longing gets attached to a person or a figure. As soon as Mary enters the Banks home, the children long for her. They entreat her to promise that she will never leave.

The dakini shows nonconceptual reality. In the world of Tibetan Buddhism, a practitioner moves from dwelling solely in "the dualistic tendencies of the mind, which allow no escape from pain," to "unnoticed aspects of experience. What dawns is a new kind of subjectivity, a capacity to know nonconceptually the actual knowing process itself, which is nondual awakened awareness" (Simmer-Brown 93). Klein describes the "spacious realm she inhabits" as uniting "compassion and wisdom, conventional and ultimate, subject and object, conditioned things and the unconditioned emptiness" (Klein 160).

Each of the three Mary Poppins novels follows a familiar structure, with a series of stories that almost replicate themselves in similarity. The first story in each book marks the arrival of Mary. There is a story involving a family member who moves through the air. There are special parties in which a healing ritual takes place. Animals are liberated. Stars are restored. With each successive novel, however, Travers increases the tension in an anti-colonial, libratory dialectic. In *Mary Poppins*, she helps Miss Lark's purebred dog Andrew to bring a ragamuffin scamp of a dog home. In *Mary Poppins Come Back*, she liberates Miss Andrew's Lark, a wild songbird trapped in a nearby field and held captive for two years. In this story, Mary shows herself more fully as both protector and liberator. She protects the family from Mr. Banks' former governess Miss Andrews and she liberates the bird. Miss Andrew is the very picture of an imperial bully. Mr. Banks refers to her as the Holy Terror. She goes where she wants and controls every situation through insults, fear, and intimidation. She has, obviously, met her match with Mary Poppins, who responds to Miss Andrew's first demanding suggestion about how to care for the children with "I bring the children up in my own way and take advice from nobody" (*Mary Poppins Comes Back* 40).

Before her next showdown with Miss Andrew, Mary discovers the bird, has a conversation with it, and learns that it has been trapped in its cage for two years. After freeing the bird, who joins a long list of beings grateful and devoted to Mary, Mary takes on Miss Andrew. "Mary Poppins fixed her eyes upon Miss Andrew and Miss Andrew, suddenly spell-bound by that strange dark gaze, began to tremble on her feet. She gave a little gasp, staggered uncertainly forward and with a thundering rush she dashed towards the cage. Then—was it that Miss Andrew grew smaller or the cage larger? Jane and Michael could not be sure. All they knew for certain was that the cage door shut to with a little click and closed upon Miss Andrew"

(*Mary Poppins Comes Back* 51-2). In “Full Moon,” the animals reverse places with the humans to enact a temporary structural change. The humans have been left behind, but in a rather impersonal way. In this story, it is quite personal. Miss Andrew is held accountable for her greed and cruelty and she has to personally apologize to Mary before being let out of her cage.

The story “Topsy-Turvy” is also a replication of a previous story (“Laughing Gas”), but this one also becomes more personal, though in this case it is the children, and particularly Michael, who come in for a closer relationship to Mary’s magic. Instead of going to visit Mary’s Uncle Albert, they are going to visit her cousin Mr. Turvy. And instead of finding him floating in the air, they find him doing somersaults in the air. And as with Uncle Albert, the children, and then Mary, also find themselves suspended in the air, this time upside down along with Mr. Turvy. The world turned upside down is repeatedly invoked. On the walk to the bus stop Michael declares to Jane that he will practice standing on his head when he gets home (*Mary Poppins Comes Back* 125). This declaration by Michael sounds suspiciously like an intention to adopt a yoga practice, which had its fans in 1930s England.

Perhaps the most poignant progression is found in the stories devoted to the development of human consciousness in the Banks babies. In “John and Barbara’s Story,” we learn that babies can talk to the sunlight, to the local starling that comes to visit the nursery, and to Mary. We learn, too, that they lose this openness and ability within the first year of life. In “The New One,” the fifth Banks child is born and we learn what humans are like in the first hours after birth. The Starling is back, taking advantage of a baby that still knows how to speak to the world. The Starling invites Annabel to tell them where she has come from. “‘I am earth and air and fire and water,’ she said softly. ‘I come from the Dark where all things have their beginning . . . I come from the sea and its tides . . . I come from the sky and its stars, I come from the sun and its

brightness . . . And I come from the forests of earth”” (*Mary Poppins Comes Back* 140-1). Mary Poppins gently rocks Annabel’s cradle as she continues to remember her journey. ““I heard the stars singing as I came and I felt warm wings about me. I passed the beasts of the jungle and came through the dark, deep waters”” (142). The Starling and its Fledgling tease Annabel that she will forget all of this within a week. All humans forget, he says, except for Mary. All other humans might forget, but Mary’s work helps guide her students back into a state of openness that dissolves the dualistic tendencies that induce forgetting.

The third book, *Mary Poppins Opens the Door*, goes further into an epistemology of non-duality and anti-colonialism. It opens with a full invocation of Britain’s colonial history. It is Guy Fawkes’ Night. Mary returns to the Banks family by riding down on a spark from a rocket that the children have set off in the park. We are reminded of the empire and of attempts to overthrow it. The children are sad that their father has left and threatened not to return. In his place, though, the chimney sweep (unnamed, known only as the Sweep) has entered the home to attend to the chimney and offers to take the children to the park. His soot-darkened features, though, get him called names by the cook Mrs. Brill: first “Hottentot,” then “Hindoo.” Another servant, Ellen, calls him “black heathen.” The world is shifting, as fathers are in short supply, and dark-skinned servants come to stand in for them.

Another story in the third book, “The Cat that Looked at a King,” gives us a meditation on monarchy and authority. Michael’s china cat comes to life and they hear its story from Mary. The story is replete with colonial anxiety about authority. The Kingdom is clearly falling into disarray and when the cat arrives, it provokes the King to challenge it to a game of riddles, in order to demonstrate the King’s superior knowledge. The cat obliges and beats the King. In this challenge, colonial enterprise is on full display: the King asks the cat questions about measuring,

categorizing, and digging great holes. The cat, in turn, asks the King philosophical questions and finally asks what is the strongest thing in the world. The answer: Patience. The Queen actually delivers this answer. “For, in the long run, it is Patience that overcomes all things” (*Mary Poppins Opens the Door* 85). The King is shown up by the loyalty of his Queen, his Prime Minister, and his Page, and then he has a moment of transmission with the cat. The cat instructs the King to look fully at him, to look into his eyes. “Within that shining, piercing gaze he saw his own reflection” (88). The cat commands him to look even closer. In this moment, the King transforms utterly and he no longer cares about being clever, but about being merry.

After one final healing ceremony in the park, the third book ends with “The Other Door,” as Mary prepares to leave for good. In her leave-taking, we see again the use of the reflective window, and this time Jane and Michael see something. They see her magically reflected back to them, opening an invisible door, with a wide-open sky beyond (264). They can now see what was obscured to them before. As she departs on a cosmic journey, they are left to hold the space that she has opened up for them in her epistemological training.

This epistemology, emanating from Britain’s colonial experience, is both tied historically to its past but also gestures towards a future in which self and other, so necessary to maintain a colonial rhetorical framework, can dissolve. Kutzer writes that “even when children’s books are not looking nostalgically at Britain’s Arthurian or Roman past, they are still nostalgic for an arcadian, pre-industrial, peaceful past” (132). This is not Travers’ world. There is nothing peaceful about a woman thrown against a door, celebrating her birthday in a zoo full of human colonial figures in cages, or aligning with the abject servants of a society. There is never a looking backward to a valorized past. Rather, conventional mind and conventional beliefs are torn, shattered, and dismantled to reveal moments and experiences that resist binary thinking.

Travers and the other writers I have looked at in this dissertation have all captured an aspect of the historical moment in which the colonial contact between England and India has yielded a glimpse of an epistemology that invokes non-dual awareness and compassion. This historical moment will give rise to an explicit resurgence of interest and engagement in Buddhism in both India and England. In India, the mid-century occupation of Tibet by China will bring in thousands of Tibetan refugees, including the Dalai Lama. Scholars such as Lal Mani Joshi will create an Indian industry of Buddhist studies. By the middle of the twentieth century, Buddhism will become pervasive in formerly non-Buddhist countries around the world, but especially in Europe and the United States. By 1950, dozens of Buddhist teachers from all branches of Buddhism will migrate to western countries to teach to convert Buddhist students. The different Buddhist communities that establish themselves in western countries will have to contend with questions of cultural appropriation and inclusiveness. Organizations such as Buddhist Peace Fellowship and the Center for Transformative Change continue to bring Buddhism's promise of liberation into conversation with non-duality and compassion from an anti-colonial standpoint.

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