Dusky Countenances: Ambivalent Bodies and Desires in the Theosophical Society

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Madame Helena P. Blavatsky, Col. Henry Olcott, and William Quan Judge founded the Theosophical Society in New York City on 17 November 1875. In a circular drafted by Olcott with Blavatsky's assistance, the theosophists wrote that the goal of the members of the Theosophical Society was to acquire "an intimate knowledge of natural law, especially its occult manifestation," in order to develop the latent powers in man and reveal the hidden mysteries of nature. Theosophists argued that such a society was necessary because of the historical stagnation produced by "*dogmatic* theology" and the "materialism of science," which they claimed they countered by revealing to "Western nations the long-suppressed facts about Oriental religious philosophies, their ethics, chronology, esotericism and symbolism." Indeed, the Theosophical Society's mission was to create a universal and enlightened brotherhood that could overcome religious and racial divisions through, they continued, "a knowledge of the sublime teachings of that pure esoteric system of the archaic period, which are mirrored in the oldest Vedas, and in the philosophy of Gautama Buddha, Zoroaster, and Confucius."[1]

According to Blavatsky, secluded masters living in Tibet, called "Mahatmas," communicated these secret and hidden ancient precepts of the society to her and gave her the responsibility to disseminate their teachings to the uninitiated. In their travels from the United States to India in order to spread this knowledge, Blavatsky and her entourage employed a spiritualist rhetoric that emphasized the importance of supernatural and hidden phenomena. However, Blavatsky argued that theosophy did not simply foreground spiritualism but revived ancient Indic traditions while remaining immune from the constraints of British colonial rule. At a time when the

[1] "The Theosophical Society: Its Origins, Plan and Aims," in *The Golden Book of the Theosophical Society,* ed. Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1925), 26.

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popularity of occult and paranormal phenomena such as spiritualism and mesmerism had grown across the globe and anticolonial sentiments had begun to emerge throughout the subcontinent, Blavatsky's teachings struck a chord, and the Theosophical Society quickly attracted large numbers of adherents, including numerous educated Indians.[2]

One such Indian devotee, Mohini Mohun Chatterji, a Bengali solicitor from Calcutta, began his theosophical career on 16 April 1882, when he was elected the assistant secretary of the Bengal charter of the Theosophical Society.[3] He quickly rose to the upper echelons of the Theosophical Society, becoming one of the key Indian theosophists and a *chela*, or "disciple," of the Mahatmas. Chatterji's ability to enter the upper stratum of the Theosophical Society, however, required that he evacuate his physical body and desires, which, in theosophical teachings, served as a hindrance in gaining a more superior esoteric knowledge. Following this spiritual prescription, Madame Blavatsky declared that Chatterji could become as great as the Mahatmas themselves because "he is a virgin, and never looks on women, he is an ascetic."[4] Less than two years after his initial election, on 5 April 1884, Chatterji, who had become an exemplar of Blavatsky's call for disembodied spirituality, traveled across the English Channel along with Colonel Olcott, arriving in the metropole of an empire that considered itself to be at the peak of its imperial power in order to propagate knowledge from the East within the avowedly cosmopolitan milieu of the London Theosophical Society.

Yet this professed universal brotherhood and enchanted space of the Theosophical Society, which loosened boundaries between Indians and Europeans, also cultivated anxieties; theosophists were less successful at sublimating bodily life and desire than they claimed. This anxiety came to

[2] Gauri Viswanathan writes: "The phenomenal, worldwide growth of the Theosophical Society under the tutelage of Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott, with its international headquarters set up in Madras, India, is one important indicator of the widespread enthusiasm for astral study among Europeans and non-Europeans alike" ("The Ordinary Business of Occultism," *Critical Inquiry* 227, no. 1 [2000]: 1–20, 2). For the spread of spiritualism and the occult in different settings, see Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); John Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[3] Chatterji came from an illustrious genealogy and was a descendant of the famous Hindu reformer Ram Mohun Roy, as well as the Tagore family. For example, the *Theosophist* 4 (December 1882) noted, "Babu Mohini M. Chatterji, Assistant Secretary of the Bengali Theosophical Society, has been visiting his relative the venerable Debendranath Tagore, at Dehra Dun" (8).

[4] Vsevolod Solovyov, *A Modern Priestess of Isis*, trans. Walter Leaf (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1895), 139.

the fore on 9 October 1885, when Blavatsky wrote to Patience Sinnett, the wife of the English author Alfred Percy Sinnett, rigorously defending Chatterji against what Blavatsky deemed to be spurious accusations of sexual impropriety. Blavatsky argued that the accuser, Miss Leonard of the French Theosophical Society, had attempted to seduce the ascetic Chatterji in Paris and, when rejected, outright lied about the nature of her relationship with Chatterji. Blavatsky fumed that Miss Leonard was a temptress who inveigled Chatterji into the woods and then suddenly, when she realized that "her overtures in words were left without effect—slipped down her loose garment to the waist leaving her entirely nude before the boy."[5] Blavatsky argued that Miss Leonard, rather than assenting to Chatterji's chaste refusals, behaved like one of the "unmarried spinsters [who] pursue men into their bedrooms; strip themselves naked before a man they have sworn to seduce—in full day light, in woods, and—because that man won't have them, they swear revenge."[6]

Blavatsky believed that Miss Leonard's actions were not exceptional but rather symptomatic of how the women of the Theosophical Society generally perceived Chatterji. She scorned the multiple women who "burn with a scandalous ferocious passion" for the pure Hindu disciple who was too chaste and focused on preserving his spiritual purity to even consider the possibility of such liaisons. Blavatsky posited that by ignoring their advances, Chatterji only fueled their abnormal passions and cravings—a desire she likened to "that craving of old gourmands for unnatural food, for rotten Limburg cheese with worms in it to tickle their satiated palates."[7] Although Blavatsky initially defended Chatterji against charges of sexual indiscretions unbecoming to a *chela*, she was later swayed by public opinion, and Chatterji became, as the *New York Times* described him, a "black man" who "abused his lady-killing powers."[8] A few years later, Blavatsky had forgiven the women she had labeled "sacrilegious, hypocritical harlots," while Chatterji found himself disgraced and back in India—a footnote in the history of the Theosophical Society.[9]

This article examines how such a radical change in perception came about. I argue that it was Chatterji's body, simultaneously rendered sensual and sacred, an object of both desire and revulsion, that played a critical role in both his acceptance in theosophical circles and his eventual withdrawal from the society at the end of the nineteenth century. At a time when, as Joy Dixon argues, the "dominant tendency of many British theosophists

[5] Helena P. Blavatsky to Patience Sinnett, 9 October 1885, in *Letters of H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett and Other Miscellaneous Letters*, ed. A. T. Barker (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1924), 123.

[6] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 28 November 1885, in ibid., 125.

[7] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 9 October 1885, in ibid., 123.

[8] "Blavatsky in Trouble in Paris," *New York Times*, 5 April 1886.

[9] Helena P. Blavatsky to Patience Sinnett, 9 October 1885, in Barker, *Letters*, 123. Chatterji would eventually return to England, but not through his theosophical ties.

[was] to look for a Mahatma in every Indian member they encountered," Chatterji's bodily performance and comportment confirmed Orientalist certainties of representation that sustained the immutable, timeless Indian as a legible object for British consumption.[10] But the Theosophical Society also provided a liminal space; bodies—and the manifold racial, gendered, and sexual ambivalences that bodies entail—were in a state of constant flux, renegotiated in tune with the myriad new social and political movements that both exhilarated and horrified during the fin de siècle.[11]

Chatterji's travels in the West highlight the multiple and contradictory positions his body occupied both within and outside the structure of colonial rule: as a salvific Christ-like figure, a sexualized archetype of Indian beauty to both men and women, and an embodied confirmation of "Oriental" religion. The contradictory and paradoxical positions that Chatterji embodied force us to consider the vertiginous sexualized, gendered, and racialized aspects of identity, which remained resistant to being bound in place within an order of things. Indeed, Joan Scott reminds us, "It is precisely the futile struggle to hold meaning in place that makes gender such an interesting historical object, one that includes not only regimes of truth about sex and sexuality, but also the fantasies and transgressions that refuse to be regulated or categorized."[12] Following Scott's insights, I highlight the multiple erotic fantasies and transgressions surrounding Chatterji in order to disclose how relations within the Theosophical Society simultaneously fragmented and sustained the boundaries of exclusion that rendered bodies and relations abject.

Colonial fears of sexual relations between racial groups played a central role in constructing these exclusionary boundaries, fomenting bodily crises and anxieties in both the metropole and colony. Ann Stoler argues that by the mid-nineteenth century miscegenation had become "a focal point of political, legal, and social debate, conceived as a dangerous source of subversion, a threat to white prestige."[13] Durba Ghosh argues that the attempt to keep miscegenation hidden on the Indian subcontinent revealed that "at

[10] Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 30. Most famously, Edward Said argued that Orientalism, as a nexus of knowledge and power, creates an "ontological and epistemological distinction" between East and West. This distinction creates authoritative knowledge about the East that cements a representation as a certainty (Said, *Orientalism* [New York: Vintage, 1978], 2). Timothy Mitchell expands on Said's insights and argues that one central premise of the colonial project was to enframe the colonized in order to render them "picture-like and legible" and thus "readable." Within such a logic, non-European visitors would find themselves "not just visitors but objects on exhibit" (Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991], 33, 13).

[11] Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 85.

[12] Joan Wallach Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 5.

[13] Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's "History of Sexuality" and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 7.

the heart of British colonial society in India, in spite of moments of cultural tolerance and compatibility, were deep-seated anxieties about hybridity and corrupting British norms of respectability."[14] But Blavatsky sought to curtail such anxieties through her calls to disembodied spirituality, which created avenues for contact outside sexual desire. Indeed, the occult, as Gauri Viswanathan argues, provided an acceptable form of "cross-fertilization of language, history, and literature without the racial 'degeneration' caused by sexual contact."[15]

However, the emphasis on the unseen and mysterious nature of the world within the structure of theosophical theology, though unconventional and providing opportunities for exchange between colonizer and colonized at the end of the nineteenth century, also sustained racial hierarchies. That is, though foregrounding a transgressive disembodied spirituality, Blavatsky still emphasized an evolutionary understanding of race, albeit an esoteric one (a disembodied, hidden, and spiritual dimension of knowledge).[16] Challenging Darwinists who centered hereditary traits in human evolution, Blavatsky argued that the motor to evolution was actually an unseen and secret component that she called "karma." Blavatsky claimed that karma was the "unseen and unknown law which adjusts wisely, intelligently and equitably each effect to its cause, tracing the latter back to its producer."[17] Thus, Blavatsky concluded, certain racial groupings, such as what she called the "Aryan root-race," were more developed not because of their physical or bodily prowess but because of a karmic advancement that was not visible to the naked eye and that created superior effects, such as their ability to access hidden knowledge forms.

Relying upon karma to understand race, Blavatsky argued that "no amount of culture, nor generations of training amid civilization, could raise such human specimens as the Bushmen, the Veddhas of Ceylon, and some African tribes, to the same intellectual level as the Aryans, the Semites, and the Turanians so called." Certain racial groupings would fail to develop, she argued, because due to this enchanted element of karma, "the sacred spark" is "missing in them and it is they who are the only inferior races on

[14] Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 30–31.

[15] Viswanathan, "The Ordinary Business," 2.

[16] For more on Blavatsky's understanding of race, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). Though I try to present Blavatsky's understandings of race coherently, it is also important to note that Blavatsky's understandings are highly contradictory, and as Peter van der Veer notes, "It is almost impossible to penetrate the way in which Madame Blavatsky appropriated racial evolutionism in convoluted notions of root-race and sub-races" (*Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001], 65).

[17] Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (London: Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888), 149.

the globe." Mixing these different karmic races through sex and marriage, Blavatsky posited, would create sterility, for it would undo the karmic law of cause and effect. Indeed, her evidence for the very existence of karma rested upon what she argued was repugnant racial mixing. She wrote that "it is a most suggestive fact—to those concrete thinkers who demand a physical proof of Karma—that the lowest races of men are now rapidly dying out; a phenomenon largely due to an extraordinary sterility setting in among the women, from the time that they were first approached by the Europeans."[18] Despite her denunciation of the Darwinists, Blavatsky's esoteric conceptualization of race made interracial sex as abhorrent to her as it was to theorists of biological race; she believed that relationships brought together different causal evolutionary chains and would thus corrupt the karmic movement of racial groupings.[19]

But despite Blavatsky's efforts to overcome the body and sexuality in her search for the transcendent in an astral realm, theosophist bodies—alongside their attendant racialized, sexualized, and gendered ambiguities—persisted as an irreducible feature of theosophical culture.[20] That is to say, the sheer unpredictability of bodies alongside their accompanying desires proved to be as intractable a problem for the spiritual program of the theosophists as it was for the broader colonialist enterprise. Therefore, even though the Theosophical Society's corpus of knowledge sought to both limit and escape the body's effects, the body itself continually created crises, fissures, and failures, as it remained potent and heterogeneous within the lived world. By attending to these bodily expressions of desire within Theosophical Society, this article foregrounds how theosophists' sexual desires and attachments exceeded colonial and theosophical demarcations, both of which sought to control and regulate sex to prevent interracial unions. Indeed, bodies and desire confounded both theosophical theology and colonial discourse, which, as Chatterji's sexual liaisons within the Theosophical Society reveal, led to immense discord and strife.

I foreground a psychoanalytic reading practice in order to understand this discord.[21] As Ranjana Khanna argues, using a psychoanalytic approach "makes

[18] Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, vol. 2, *Anthropogenesis* (London: Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888), 421, 779.

[19] It is also important to note that, for Blavatsky, once one developed one's karma, then sex would be unnecessary because the lower self, the physical body, would be under control. This development would be a return to an earlier state before humans had corrupted themselves and become bestial. For more, see John L. Crow, "Taming the Astral Body: The Theosophical Society's Ongoing Problem of Emotion and Control," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (2012): 711–12.

[20] Viswanathan, "The Ordinary Business," 2.

[21] Psychoanalysis provides a robust critical vocabulary to consider such fissures. For example, the body with all its desires is unable to be fixed historically or materially because it remains haunted by *jouissance*, which is the "disturbed balance" that "accounts for the subject's passage from a Nothing [in its unity with the mother] unto Something [a subject]." It is the place of the subject, which is always-already displaced with regard to it—a status of ambiguous

apparent the psychical strife of colonial and postcolonial modernity."[22] There is, however, a certain circularity involved in using psychoanalysis to understand relations within the Theosophical Society. As Joy Dixon and Alex Owen reveal, by undermining bourgeois understandings of the autonomous subject through theosophy's science of the soul, which emphasized the radical interiority and incoherence of the self, the Theosophical Society advanced understandings of the self as not being bound to the physical body—an intellectual position that anticipated the theoretical insights of psychoanalysis.[23] Moreover, by moving beyond the physical body and coherent subjecthood, occultists had numerous avenues to reconsider established notions of race, gender, and sexuality. As Dixon persuasively argues, their belief in reincarnation "enabled men and women to understand their own desires and gender identity outside of the most biologistic of Victorian formulations of separate spheres, drawing on past-life experiences as an explanation of their often unconventional sense of self."[24] This emphasis on a mysterious and hidden spirit world, for example, as Marlene Tromp aptly notes, highlighted by nonwhite spirit control during séances, "made the sexually transgressive behavior that Spiritualism already fostered more tolerable"; that behavior then also became "a potent device for violating the sexual and social restrictions embodied in white Victorian womanhood."[25]

Yet psychoanalysis cannot be reduced to an interiority, for psychoanalysis also requires us to analyze how this interiority itself is structured and dismembered by objects. Both this interiority and its objects are unstable and in constant motion, requiring continuous psychic revision. But this revision does not simply produce violation or transgression, it also maintains the coordinates that order relations. Freud perceptively reminds us that people, though offered such possibilities for violation and forced to confront crisis and failure, "never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them."[26] Taking into account

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and transitory excess. As an excess, *jouissance* thus reveals how even though a "symbolic universe may be nicely set up," such as a colonial order of things, it can still be entirely upended, for *jouissance* refuses to be entirely fixed or integrated properly into a particular historical universe (Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* [New York: Verso, 1997], 48–49).

[22] Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), x.

[23] Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 143; and Joy Dixon, "Sexology and the Occult: Sexuality and Subjectivity in Theosophy's New Age," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7, no. 3 (1997): 428. By 1910 more advanced theosophists would even claim that "occultism anticipated the insights of psychoanalysis" (Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 143).

[24] Dixon, "Sexology and the Occult," 428.

[25] Marlene Tromp, *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 77.

[26] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans. and ed. James Strachey (1915; London: Hogarth, 1957), 244.

such crisis alongside the difficulty of abandoning one's position in relation to the object of desire even when other possibilities beckon, psychoanalysis demands that we consider how the Theosophical Society, though providing opportunities to challenge the logic of empire, also remained unable to detach itself from those constraints.

Therefore, while producing fissures within the common stereotype of the effeminate Brahmin, Chatterji's and Miss Leonard's sexual transgressions do not simply reveal how the Theosophical Society and other spiritualist groups cultivated alternative modes of subjectivity that countered the regulatory power of colonial rule.[27] Instead, spiritualist milieus, which cushioned subjectivities deemed deviant in society, simultaneously negated the disjunctive possibilities that emerged. Indeed, in order to name and suppress these unthinkable coordinates of sexual desire, Blavatsky represented Leonard, and later Chatterji, as presenting the threat of moral degeneration in which the treachery of the biblical temptress "Mrs. Potiphar" and the horror-inducing "blackest villain" took representational precedence.[28] Though Blavatsky sought to secure both the boundaries of the Theosophical Society and colonial desire in order to preserve a disembodied racial purity, the vigorous language of infidelity and impurity Blavatsky used to name Chatterji's and Miss Leonard's sexual transgressions also reveals the serious opportunities their sexual relationship presented to the Theosophical Society and to society at large. After all, Chatterji and Leonard, by engaging in such transgressions, disclosed the possibility of acting otherwise in the prevailing order of things.

Negotiating Race in Theosophy

The Theosophical Society entertained these possibilities while upholding a racialized conception of transcendent subjectivity. Yet Blavatsky's arguments did not simply affirm colonial knowledge formations through her hierarchical racial understandings. Rather, Blavatsky challenged Orientalist scholars and officials determined to decipher the native through positivist science in order to educate and govern the population. For example, amused by "the completeness of their scientific delusions" that sought to account for and understand the spiritual component within the Hindu tradition through positivist knowledge, Blavatsky chided those who attempted scientific inquiry, such as the German philologist and Orientalist Max Müller, who had sought to delineate the secrets of the Hindu tradition through translation and linguistic analyses. She argued that "our scientists do not—nay, cannot

[27] Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

[28] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 2 February 1886, in Barker, *Letters*, 172.

understand correctly the old Hindu literature."[29] Demanding insight into the spiritual content of Hindu knowledge not bound within the structure of empirical knowledge, Blavatsky instead posited a new synthesis from which to examine the Hindu tradition—one that did not simply rationally dissect Hindu texts and practices but simultaneously considered the inner spiritual realm embedded within the mystical and universal contours of an ancient and esoteric knowledge.

In other words, Blavatsky argued that in order to understand the ancient traditions of the subcontinent, it was essential to discover the correct data that could unlock these ancient texts—data that remained outside the reach of Orientalist scholars who ignored the evidence revealed within a sacred secret doctrine and strictly privileged the profane. In contrast, Blavatsky argued that a completed data set was not visible to the profane eye, because it remained buried within "the tomb of time" and thus required the understanding of spiritual dimension—the Secret Doctrine—to pry it open.[30] This Secret Doctrine was, as Blavatsky defined it, "the universally diffused religion of the ancient and prehistoric world," revealing the shared roots of all religions. This hidden knowledge, Blavatsky argued, "provided proofs of its diffusion, authentic records of its history, a complete chain of documents, showing its character and presence in every land, together with the teaching of all its great adepts," and it was to be found within "the secret crypts of libraries belonging to the Occult Fraternity."[31] Indeed, as Sumathi Ramaswamy argues, Blavatsky believed that "it was possible to gain extra-ordinary knowledge" through occult training, which then "allowed her to read 'the Archaic Records' of peoples and places long forgotten by material science and indeed incapable of ever being discovered by it."[32]

But by bringing together religion and science in this manner, theosophists added an enchanted dimension to the material foundations of race at the end of the nineteenth century, thereby infecting their attempted liberation of humanity with racial hierarchy. In other words, for theosophists, race was not strictly grounded within nineteenth-century scientific efforts to empirically quantify human difference. Rather, their racial categories were infused with the fabulous geographies and temporalities of the occult, as revealed within a secret doctrine available to the initiated. This doctrine accounted for the multitude of human difference through a polygenetic understanding of racial evolution that occurred because of karma, which was, Blavatsky argued, irreducible to the physical body and world.

India occupied a special liberatory space within theosophy's theology. Within the Theosophical Society's understanding of time, India was under-

[29] Helena P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, vol. 1, *Science* (New York: J. W. Bouton, 1877), 581.

[30] Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 2:133.

[31] Ibid., 2:xxxiv.

[32] Ramaswamy, *Lost Land of Lemuria,* 90.

stood to be recalcitrant to the horror brought forth by the quickening pace of the modern. Indeed, Blavatsky wrote that India remained "the country less explored, and less known than any other," even though it was the nation to which "all the other great nations of the world are indebted for their languages, arts, legislature, and civilization."[33] Blavatsky argued that racial mixing had corrupted contemporary India, even though, for Blavatsky, the presence of a virginal and pure karmic India remained for the spiritually enlightened initiates to find. This presence did not simply signal the ossification of an ancient culture that needed redemption through modern knowledge formations, such as classic Orientalists tried to do. Rather, theosophists believed that India's stable hidden conceptual inheritance signaled possibilities for a better future, existing as a cause that could only create positive effect. Or, as Blavatsky argued, "the religion of the ancients is the religion of the future," a religion that preceded even Brahmanism.[34] Therefore, within this enchanted elongated time lay not only hidden knowledge revealing a lost greatness but also the unexplored karmic effects of the past that, Blavatsky argued, the Mahatmas and their Indian knowledge disclosed.

This esoteric understanding of karmic-based evolution reverses the racial logic of scientific racism wherein Indians subsist beneath the level of European superiority. For example, Blavatsky critiqued Sinnett, who she argued could not write about Indians without prejudice because he valued contemporary understandings of the body and civilization. In contrast, Blavatsky explained that the body was not a sign of advancement, for "the weaker the physical, the stronger *spiritual* perceptions." And since the spiritual signaled a more advanced race, and Indians spiritually, Blavatsky wrote, were "immensely higher than we [Europeans] are," then Indians were more advanced racially. Indeed, Blavatsky argued, "the physical point of evolution we have reached only now—they have reached it 100,000 years ago, perhaps. And what they are now spiritually you may not hope to reach in Europe before some millenniums yet."[35] Yet though this superiority signaled a range of different possibilities, it did not exist as accessible to the population within India. Rather, decrying the overly bodily attuned practices of what she deemed "exoteric Brahmanism," which led to corrupted visions of Hindu thought, Blavatsky wrote, "Decidedly, the Hindus of the nineteenth century are a degenerate and blaspheming race!"[36]

[33] Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, 585.

[34] Ibid., 613. In her article "Misconceptions," written in 1887, Blavatsky did locate Vedic thought as the earliest religion. She wrote that "none of the great religions, neither the Ethiopian nor any other, has preceded the religion of the first Vedists: ancient 'Budhism' [*sic*]." Buddhism here is dislocated from Gautama Buddha (Blavatsky, "Misconceptions," in *Collected Writings of H. P. Blavatsky, Vol. 8 (1887)*, ed. Boris de Zirkoff [Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1958], 75).

[35] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, September 1886, in Barker, *Letters*, 238.

[36] Helena P. Blavatsky, *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1908), 159.

Theosophy's racial logic, revealed within Blavatsky's writings, underscores the complexity of negotiations that occurred within the Theosophical Society's spiritual program. These negotiations produced a particular supernatural Indian ideal, the Masters, who subsisted outside what both theosophists and Orientalists considered the corrupting influence of the body and native practice exhibited most profligately by the Brahmins, who, at the head of the Hindu caste structure, functioned as key mediators of Hindu ritual and text to the general populace and colonial officials. These Brahmins, Blavatsky argued, were "those treacherous enemies of the people" who emphasized ritual dogma and material practice, rejecting the Secret Doctrine and its esoteric redemption.[37] In contrast to actually existing Brahmins, the Master ideal Blavatsky upheld was a stable and secure, albeit incorporeal, inheritor who remained a key arbiter of ancient texts, functioning as the keeper of, as Blavatsky wrote, the "evidence of [India's] past glories," which lay "in her literature."[38]

The Mahatmas, who, Blavatsky argued, communicated this knowledge and evidence to her, were exemplars of this ideal. Blavatsky argued that they were "exalted beings who, having attained to the mastery over their lower principles are thus living unimpeded by the 'man of flesh,' and are in possession of knowledge and power commensurate with the stage they have reached in their spiritual evolution."[39] Access to this lost future/past and Masters unimpeded by the "man of flesh" was not available to the rationally attuned Orientalist scholars or the Brahmins, but, as Blavatsky argued, it was accessible to "a few Occidentals from Europe-America who, led by their Karma to the happiness of knowing certain Adepts of the secret Himalayan Brotherhood (the Mahatmas), attempt, under the inspiration of these Masters, to lead the priesthood of India back to the primitive and divine esotericism."[40] Relying on their belief that the enchanted nature of karma had revealed the secrets of the world, Blavatsky and her European theosophical counterparts attempted to establish their transcendence and spiritual authority over what they viewed as the debased bodily logics of both Hindu and Buddhist orthodoxy and modern science. They believed that their spiritual projections provided an opportunity for those with the correct accruement of karma to overcome both material degeneration and corruption by returning to a primitive esoteric past.

[37] Ibid., 17. Also, for example, Blavatsky argued, "It is the esoteric teachings and the initiates of the Future whose mission it is, and will be, to redeem and ennoble once more the primitive conception so sadly profaned by its crude and gross application to exoteric dogmas and personations by theological and ecclesiastical religionists" (*The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, vol. 1, *Cosmogenesis* [London: Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888], 381).

[38] Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, 585.

[39] Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Glossary* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1892), 201.

[40] Blavatsky, "Misconceptions," 90.

Exhibiting the Brahmin

Mohini Chatterji believed that he could not secure ancient transcendent knowledge without Blavatsky and her teachings, which he thought would revive India's primitive esotericism. In order to gain this knowledge, Chatterji followed Blavatsky in decrying current Brahmin practice as degenerate and in rejecting secular science in favor of esoteric knowledge, which she claimed to be able to access because of her karmic superiority. However, even though Blavatsky argued that Chatterji should overcome his racial burden and resist physicality and flesh to exist as a pure and evacuated body linked to an esoteric past, his physical body remained central to his interactions with theosophists. This became apparent on 20 February 1884, when he set sail to Europe from Bombay on the SS *Chandernagore*. Arriving in France in March 1884 and traveling to Paris, he received a letter from the Mahatma Koot Hoomi. The letter instructed the younger Chatterji on how he ought to carry himself:

> When *Upasika* [Blavatsky] arrives, you will meet and receive her as though you were in India, and she your own Mother. You must not mind the crowd of Frenchmen and others. You have to stun them; and if Colonel [Olcott] asks you why, you will answer him that it is the interior man, the indweller you salute, not H. P. B. [Blavatsky], for you were notified to that effect by us. And know for your own edification that One far greater than myself has kindly consented to survey the whole situation under her guise, and then to visit, through the same channel, occasionally, Paris and other places where foreign members may reside. You will thus salute her on seeing and taking leave of her the whole time you are at Paris—regardless of comments and her own surprise. This is a test.[41]

When Blavatsky and Olcott arrived in Paris on 28 March 1884, Chatterji followed through on Koot Hoomi's orders. Once Blavatsky appeared on the platform, Chatterji sprinted toward her, bent down, and bowed as Olcott and others looked on with awe. These prostrations continued. One evening while in Paris, Blavatsky introduced Chatterji to the Russian novelist Vsevolod Solovyov, who was making his first appearance in Paris's occult scene. As soon as Chatterji entered the room, Solovyov wrote, recalling the incident later, Blavatsky "raised her hand, and Mohini bowed himself to the earth and almost crawled as though to receive her blessings."[42] Only

[41] Charles James Ryan, *H. P. Blavatsky and the Theosophical Movement: A Brief Historical Sketch* (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1975), 144. In theosophy, the Mahatmas referred to Blavatsky as Upasika. The etymology of the Sanskrit/Pali term signals "one who serves," which implies, Jan Nattier argues, "to associate with and be of service to the monastic community" (*A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to "The Inquiry of Ugra" [Ugraparpṛcchā]* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005], 79n11).

[42] Solovyov, *A Modern Priestess*, 18.

when Blavatsky laid her hand on his head did Chatterji get up and introduce himself to Solovyov.[43]

Chatterji continued his journey on 5 April 1884 and headed across the Channel to London. Chatterji's first entrance into the Theosophical Society's social life in London occurred at one of Alfred Percy Sinnett's many evening soirées. Charles Leadbeater, a key convert to Theosophy in 1883, wrote in his memoir that Olcott and Chatterji "stood on the hearthrug in front of the grate and some two hundred people were brought and introduced to them one by one." Leadbeater mused that "Mohini, being a Brahmin, was quite unversed in Western customs, and I believe that it caused him acute discomfort to allow that crowd of wine-drinking *Mlechhas* [barbarians] to seize him by the hand."[44] Solovyov experienced this discomfort firsthand in Paris as well, for when he went to shake Chatterji's hand, Chatterji exclaimed, "Excuse me sire, I may not!" Solovyov, astonished, asked Blavatsky in Russian why Chatterji would not shake his hand, to which Blavatsky responded, "Why, there is no helping it. You see, he is a *chela*, just the same as a monk or an ascetic, you understand; he has to keep off all, must keep off all earthly influences; do you know, he never so much as looks at a woman."[45] When Solovyov persisted and continued to express his incredulity at Chatterji's refusal to shake hands, Blavatsky assuaged Solovyov's concerns by arguing that Chatterji "has acquired a very delicate organization, he feels too much the influence of human magnetism, which can be transmitted by too close intercourse, by touch of a hand or kiss; so he refrains from it in order to keep himself perfectly free."[46] Sinnett reiterated this point to a reporter in 1887, arguing that "the Babu by much and promiscuous hand-shaking lost some of the virile power or magnetism that he desired to reserve to himself for his occult mysteries."[47]

While looking to maintain his newly redeemed purity by rejecting bodily practices, including physical touch, Chatterji lectured widely in London. Francesca Arundale, a friend of Blavatsky and a key theosophist who entertained fellow members at her home frequently, wrote that his lectures "were

[43] Such examples are numerous. For example, W. Q. Judge writes: "Mohini threw himself at H. P. B.'s feet and kissed the hem of her robe, which action seemed the appropriate outcoming of the profound admiration and respect we all felt toward the wonderful being whose loss we will never cease to mourn" ("H. P. B. at Enghein," *Lucifer*, July 1891).

[44] Charles Leadbeater, *How Theosophy Came to Me* (1930; repr., London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1967), 23, 24.

[45] Solovyov, *A Modern Priestess*, 18.

[46] Ibid. Again, such examples are numerous. For example, the *San Francisco Chronicle* articulated this point in 1887 when Mohini was in Boston: "Mr. Mohini has or had (he may have got over it by this time), a great aversion to much hand-shaking; in fact he would shake hands as little as possible, scarcely ever with men and only with a few ladies or such as he felt an affinity toward" (Charles Lillie, "Mohini in Boston; Homage to the Dusky Hindoo Theosophist," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 January 1887).

[47] Charles Lillie, "Mohini in Boston; Homage to the Dusky Hindoo Theosophist," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 23, 1887.

much sought after, and we rarely closed our doors till one or two o'clock in the morning." She praised his "clear and forcible explanations clothed in such beautiful language."[48] The *Chicago Daily Tribune* concurred, reporting that "it became fashion to have the youthful philosopher at social dinners and receptions, and he was a drawing card in many well-known London homes during the season."[49] But it was not his esoteric knowledge alone that kept him in fashion; Chatterji's physical appearance was also central to his popularity. Isabelle de Steiger, the English painter, first encountered Chatterji at an evening gathering of her theosophical friends where Chatterji "was a very welcome addition to [their] company." Chatterji wore what Madame Blavatsky informed Steiger was "the correct Thibetan [*sic*] costume," which consisted of "a long tunic of rich black velvet; with a full skirt girded at the waist. This was bordered with thick glossy black fur." The collar of his coat was also "bordered round the throat, as at wrists, with the same thick black fur," but, thankfully, "there was no hint, of course, of the horrible feminine habit of wearing the whole slain animal hung round the throat and shoulders." Steiger concluded that altogether, particularly with his "Russian leather high boots," Chatterji "presented a very picturesque appearance."[50]

In spring of 1884, Chatterji's bodily comportment and appearance played a particularly important role in an ongoing dispute within the Theosophical Society centered on the value of different knowledge systems.[51] Even though Blavatsky sought to disavow Chatterji's physicality, the reasons that Chatterji emerged as invaluable in the effort to steady the Theosophical Society centered on his body and appearance. Indeed, Blavatsky herself argued that Chatterji would help her situation precisely because he "will be invested with an *inner* as well as with *outer* clothing."[52] Chatterji took on even greater significance after rumors spread that Blavatsky could not come to resolve the matter herself because "she had fallen very seriously ill in Paris and was even supposed to be in considerable danger," though, as Leadbeater writes, if she had been well, "she would have probably settled the dispute off-hand."[53]

In a particularly tense meeting in London on 7 April 1884, when elections were scheduled to take place, Chatterji played a central role in cementing Blavatsky's hegemony over the direction of the Theosophical Society. The

[48] Francesca Arundale and C. Jinarajadasa, *My Guest: H. P. Blavatsky* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1932), 31.

[49] "A Scholar from India: Babu Mohini Mohun Chatterjee Now in New York City," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 28 November 1886.

[50] Isabelle de Steiger, *Memorabilia: Reminiscences of a Woman Artist and Writer* (London: Rider & Co., 1927), 259, 260–61.

[51] For more on this divide, see Joscelyn Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 333–62.

[52] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, January 1884, in Barker, *Letters*, 65.

[53] Leadbeater, *How Theosophy Came to Me*, 34.

meeting took a turn for the worse and, Leadbeater relays, "was dragging along in a dreary and fruitless manner." Suddenly, there was a sharp yell: "Mohini!" The "stately and dignified Mohini," Leadbeater describes, "came rushing down that long room at his highest speed, and as soon as he reached the passage threw himself incontinently flat on his face on the floor at the feet of the lady in black."[54] This was all to the crowd's surprise and dismay, as Arundale relates, for "with one or two exceptions no one there present knew anything of Indian customs, nor of the reverences shown in saluting a Guru[.] Mohini Chatterji prostrate[d] himself on the ground before her" until Mr. Sinnett pronounced, "Let me introduce to the London Lodge as a whole—Madame Blavatsky!"[55]

Joy Dixon compellingly argues that "the early history of the Theosophical Society in England was a series of struggles over which gender, class/caste, and 'racial' identities would become the markers of (spiritual) authority."[56] Together, Chatterji's prostrations and Blavatsky's grand entrance as the esteemed leader of the Theosophical Society reveal such contestations. For example, Blavatsky's own leadership role seemed to confirm the society as a space that subverted gendered norms by accepting women's agency.[57] But though Blavatsky's indeterminate position between transcendence and immanence created multiple possibilities, she also upheld core tenets of Orientalism.[58] Extending Edward Said's insights into the Indian subcontinent, Ronald Inden argues that India became the space that preserved "the emotional and imaginative, the moral and religious aspects of Man"—a space that existed, Inden continues, as "a living museum (and keen marketplace) of religious humanism, of far-out psychic phenomena, yogic health practices, and ultimate experiences."[59] Indeed, within this Orientalist logic, Europeans and Indians, Gyan Prakash writes, "appeared as autonomous, ontological, and essential entities" in which Indians became objects instead of subjects in their own right.[60]

Chatterji's bodily comportment alongside his encounters in London disclose the centrality of Orientalism in creating particular capacities for

[54] Ibid., 35, 36.

[55] Arundale, *My Guest*, 21.

[56] Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 39.

[57] The literature explaining the subversive feminist possibilities within spiritualist movements is vast. See, for example, Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London: Virago Press, 1989).

[58] Gauri Viswanathan too notes that "relationships of power are never fully suspended" ("The Ordinary Business," 4).

[59] Ronald Inden, "Orientalist Constructions of India," *Modern Asian Studies* 20, no. 3 (1986): 435–36.

[60] Gyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, no. 2 (1990): 384–85.

him in the Theosophical Society.[61] The Theosophical Society subordinated the multiple contestations within diverse tradition in favor of a knowable and idle Hindu body politic. Upholding this stable and coherent rendition of Indian tradition, theosophists provided Chatterji an uncontaminated inheritance of an ancient esoteric tradition that was, paradoxically, visually inscribed onto his very body. On the other hand, Blavatsky, between the transcendent Mahatmas and Chatterji's immanence, revealed the philosophical logics and contestations embedded within this ancient tradition embodied by Chatterji. Thus, Blavatsky, not Chatterji, offered the possibility to overcome Hindu racial degeneration. Chatterji's stabilized and secured inheritance, therefore, though preventing his annihilation, removed him as an active subject within the world. Instead, for theosophists, Chatterji, as is clear in Steiger's description, functioned as an artifact or pictorial object for theosophical consumption.

This process continued the Orientalist logic that, Bernard Cohn argues, created "the categorical separation between dark subjects and fair-skinned rulers."[62] This belief and identity, centered on the Other, elided the possibility of real difference in the Theosophical Society. Indeed, unable to access the Masters' teachings without reference to Blavatsky, since she revealed their secrets, Chatterji could only emerge as a literal supplement to those teachings.[63] But this Orientalist totality did not just make Chatterji an inert complement to Blavatsky. Instead, Chatterji's very being, which included his own sexual desires, irreducible to an astral realm or exhibition, continuously wounded the members of the Theosophical Society, constantly revealing an impossibility that structured their relations. This impossibility of Orientalist totality, then, required the incessant repetition of Chatterji's exhibitory performances in the metropole. Constant comments about Chatterji's picturesque appearance, his refusal to touch anyone, and his unceasing prostrations in order to embody Indian customs laid bare the systemized, yet fragile, nature of belief articulated by the requirement that Indians had to continually perform what constituted proper Indian behavior.

[61] In a compelling reading, Diane Sasson similarly notes, "Chatterji was expected to fulfill Western expectations about the mysterious East," and, she concludes, descriptions of him suggest "he played a role designed for him by Blavatsky" that exploited "European Orientalism" (*Yearning for the New Age: Laura Holloway-Langford and Late Victorian Spirituality* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012], 81, 94). However, although Sasson argues that Chatterji's exhibitory role in the metropole reveals the strength of Orientalist formations, I contend it is because of Orientalism's fragility that Chatterji incessantly repeated such performances. I want to thank Leslie Price for referring me to Sasson's work, even though I have not been able to give this important work the sustained treatment it deserves, as it was brought to my attention late in the editorial process.

[62] Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 107.

[63] Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity within History*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), 63.

MISTAKE IN BEING WHITE

Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton have argued that bodies played a central role in colonialism because they were key sites "through which imperial and colonial power was imagined and exercised."[64] Scholars have noted how Indian bodies were construed as "exotic spectacle[s]" or as "'unnatural' or 'perverted' form[s] of masculinity."[65] But bodies alongside their desire are also irreducible to social inscriptions or colonial power.[66] Therefore, although the Theosophical Society relegated the body to a subordinate position in its conceptual framework, Chatterji's body simultaneously subsisted outside this colonial imaginary as a body that was, as Luce Irigaray notes in another context, "heterogeneous to this whole economy of representation," revealing the impossibility of colonial power.[67] Thus, existing as an unspeakable possibility, Chatterji's inscrutable body, enchanted in a disenchanted world, was never fully absorbed into this exhibitory Orientalist logic and, at times, gave way to reveal the impossibility of such a logic altogether.

Chatterji's sexualized experiences with other men in the Theosophical Society reveal such bodily fissures. For example, Leadbeater's memoir includes an account of the night that Chatterji met the famed Irish writer and poet Oscar Wilde. Wilde, though he had given hints of his homosexuality in London, would marry Constance Lloyd in 1884, the very same year he met Chatterji.[68] Chatterji had only recently arrived and was unfamiliar with the social scene. Leadbeater reports that Wilde, "habited in black velvet, with knee breeches and white stockings," approached Chatterji and "was introduced, bowed gracefully and in retiring said in a very audible stage-whisper to Mrs. Sinnett: 'I never realized before what a mistake we make in being white.'"[69] Solovyov, too, lauded Chatterji's physical body in vivid detail:

> His figure, which was narrow-shouldered and not tall, was clad in a black cashmere cassock; his thick blue-black wavy hair fell to

[64] Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette M. Burton, "Introduction: Bodies, Empires, and World Histories," in *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History*, ed. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette M. Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 6.

[65] Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 31; Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, 2.

[66] I invoke this irreducibility not to authorize or fix a more legitimate body that can be recovered but to dwell within its very impossibility. I follow Kathryn Bond Stockton, "Bodies and God: Poststructuralist Feminists Return to the Fold of Spiritual Materialism," *boundary 2* 19, no. 2 (1992): 113–49.

[67] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 152.

[68] Ari Adut writes, "In the early 1880s, Wilde, the quintessential poseur, put his audiences in a state of uncertainty about his sexuality. His homosexuality was mostly a matter of conjecture in London except in circles proximate to the author" ("A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 1 [July 2005]: 213–48, 227).

[69] Leadbeater, *How Theosophy Came to Me*, 24.

> his shoulders. The upper part of his bronze face was strikingly handsome—a wise forehead, not very high, straight eyebrows, not too thick, and most magnificent velvety eyes with a deep and gentle expression. . . . It was only his nose, straight but too broad, and, dark blue lips, projecting through a not over abundant growth of his thick moustache and beard that prevented his being perfectly beautiful. In any case his appearance might be considered very attractive.[70]

Solovyov was not alone in his reaction. An article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* describing Chatterji's arrival gushed that "there was a splendor as of some astral oil about his dusky countenance and thick black locks; while his big dark eyes were as piercing as those of Madame herself. Men gazed upon him with awe, and ladies with enthusiasm."[71] Indeed, it is clear that Chatterji's body exceeded both Blavatsky's efforts to portray him as virginal and colonial tropes about effeminate Bengali perversions; he was an object of desire for both European men and women.

Chatterji also received attention from men when he traveled to Dublin to proselytize in April 1886.[72] William Butler Yeats, the renowned Irish poet, "was impressed by the envoy sent by the Theosophist leader Madame Blavatsky," and he wrote in his autobiography that "the coming of a young Brahmin into Ireland helped to give our vague thoughts a shape."[73] Yeats reported that Chatterji arrived in Dublin "with a little bag in his hand and *Marius the Epicurean* in his pocket, and stayed with one of us, who gave him a plate of rice and an apple every day at two o'clock; and for a week and all day long he unfolded what seemed to be all wisdom."[74] Chatterji "sat there beautiful, as only an Eastern is beautiful, making little gestures with his delicate hands, and to him alone among all the talkers I have heard, the delight of ordered words seemed nothing, and all thought a flight into the heart of truth."[75] Yeats wrote that his encounter with Chatterji "was my first meeting with a philosophy that confirmed my vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless."[76] Yeats described the meeting

[70] Solovyov, *A Modern Priestess*, 18.

[71] Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 30.

[72] W. B. Yeats, "A Pathway," in *Early Essays*, ed. George Bernstein and Richard Finneran, vol. 4 of *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 289. Though the *Dublin University Review* reported that at the Dublin Hermetic Society's second meeting on 30 June 1885 Mr. Johnston, a member of the London Lodge, announced, "There is some possibility of the celebrated Mr. Mohini visiting Dublin some time towards the end of the year," it was not until April 1886 that Chatterji appeared in Dublin ("Notes and News," *Dublin University Review* 1, no. 7 [1885]: 66).

[73] Yeats, "A Pathway," 289; and Robert Frederick Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life*, vol. 1, *The Apprentice Mage, 1865–1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 47.

[74] Yeats, "A Pathway," 289. *Marius the Epicurean* is a novel written by Walter Pater and published in 1885.

[75] Ibid.

[76] W. B. Yeats, "A Reverie over Childhood and Youth," in *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1953), 55–56.

with Chatterji in his poem "Mohini Chatterjee," which transformed some of their conversation into verse:

> I asked if I should pray.
> But the Brahmin said,
> pray for nothing, say
> every night in bed,
> "I have been a king,
> I have been a slave,
> nor is there anything.
> Fool, rascal, knave,
> that I have not been."[77]

In 1935 Yeats wrote to Chatterji (now old and blind and living with his daughter in London) thanking him for his lifelong influence: "I have often wondered where you were. . . . I write merely to tell you that you are vivid in my memory after all these years. That week of talk when you were in Dublin did much for my intellect, gave me indeed my first philosophical exposition of life. When I knew you, you were a very beautiful young man; I think you were twenty-seven years old, and astonished us all, learned and simple, by your dialectical power. My wife tells me that I often quote you."[78]

Meeting Chatterji, therefore, left Yeats spellbound, even years later. Recognizing Chatterji's constitutive effect, Yeats even went as far as to liken his meetings with Chatterji to Alcibiades's encounter with Socrates.[79] In this formulation, Chatterji, embodying the figure of Socrates as the "subject who is supposed to know," who is neither male nor female but an enigmatic desire, forced Wilde and Yeats to investigate the lack at the core of their subjectivity.[80] That is, within both Wilde's and Yeats's encounter, Chatterji is no longer reduced to the stability of his body, which legitimates the plentitude of a colonial order of things. Instead, Yeats and Wilde found that the certainty of their own subjectivities had been disturbed and transformed through the encounter with Chatterji. In other words, this encounter did

[77] W. B. Yeats, "Mohini Chatterjee," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1933), 284–85.

[78] Yeats, "A Pathway," 292. For analyses of how Mohini Chatterji influenced the poetry of Yeats, see P. S. Sri, "Yeats and Mohini Chatterjee," in *Yeats Annual 11,* ed. Warwick Gould (London: Macmillan, 1995); Naresh Guha, *W. B. Yeats: An Indian Approach* (Calcutta: Jadavpur University, 1968); and Harbans Rai Bachchan, *W. B. Yeats and Occultism: A Study of His Works in Relation to Indian Lore, the Cabbala, Swedenborg, Boehme and Theosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974).

[79] Yeats, "A Pathway," 291.

[80] The quote is from Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 225. Slavoj Žižek reminds us that the "subject" itself is nothing but the failure of symbolization, of its own symbolic representation—the subject is nothing "'beyond' this failure" ("Class Struggle or Postmodernism?," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left,* ed. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek [New York: Verso, 2000], 120).

not narcissistically annihilate difference by rendering Chatterji simply as a stable body; rather, their desires, perhaps homoerotic, provided an opportunity to acknowledge this enchanted Chatterji as something else that was not consistent with the colonial order. Wilde and Yeats could then reorient themselves to new subject formations. Indeed, Wilde's transgressive and queer wit points to the possibility of an Other who is not an object that sustains the world but an Other that allowed Wilde to ponder his own emptiness by recognizing alterity in himself (the "mistake *we* make in being white"), thereby foregrounding being's contingency contra the certainty of representation.[81]

Ferocious Passion

Wilde and Yeats were not the only theosophists to see Chatterji outside his exhibitory role. At the end of 1884, after spending the summer months in Germany, Chatterji returned to Paris and, in the forests of Fontainebleau, initiated an affair with an Englishwoman, Miss Leonard. This affair, however, quickly came to a halt once Miss Leonard found out that Chatterji had a wife back in India. Distraught, Miss Leonard took torrid tales about Chatterji and the hundreds of love letters he had written to her to the president of the French Theosophical Society, Madame de Morsier. Morsier quickly acted and contacted members of the Theosophical Society to ascertain if the allegations were true. Miss Leonard's accusations quickly made their way to Blavatsky when S. Krisnaswami, a Marathi Brahmin and also a disciple of Koot Hoomi, informed her of Chatterji's alleged misconduct.[82]

At first, Blavatsky summarily rejected the possibility that Chatterji could have engaged in this sexual relationship. She decried the charges as heretical, referring to Miss Leonard as sexually insatiable and bent on seducing Chatterji. Blavatsky emphatically insisted that "Mohini is pure and innocent."[83] She decried the deviant women who were denouncing him, arguing that although Miss Leonard was "the most frankly dissolute," she was not even "the most lustful or sinful." Instead, since Miss Leonard had not entered the Theosophical Society to become an adept, which would require her to renounce sex, Blavatsky continued, Miss Leonard "must be a cocotte by nature and temperament."[84]

Though softening her tone toward Miss Leonard, Blavatsky continued unleashing her vicious expressions for other women higher up in the

[81] For an analysis that foregrounds the ambivalent and disruptive nature of homosexual desire within colonial relations, see Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

[82] S. Krisnaswami had numerous aliases: Babaji, Bowaji, D.N., Dharbagiri Nath.

[83] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett and Patience Sinnett, 12 October 1885, in Barker, *Letters*, 127.

[84] Helena P. Blavatsky to Patience Sinnett, 9 October 1885, in ibid., 123.

Theosophical Society who were entranced by Chatterji. Blavatsky stated that they reminded her not only of spoiled cheese but also "of the 'Pall Mall' iniquitous old men for forbidden fruit—ten year old virgins! Oh, the filthy beasts!!"[85] Blavatsky's reference to "Pall Mall" linked Chatterji to child sex trafficking by alluding to William T. Stead's July 1885 series of sensationalist newspaper articles, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.[86] As Gretchen Soderlund writes, Stead attempted to "frame teenage prostitution as slavery" in order to investigate urban vice and had gone as far as overseeing "the purchase of a thirteen-year-old virgin for five pounds from her mother." Stead's exposé sent Victorian society into a state of moral panic about vice and the corruption of society, which eventually led to a massive crackdown on commercial and homosexual sex while producing social purity vigilance.[87] Similarly to Stead's sensationalism, Blavatsky linked the rampant desire for Chatterji in both London and Paris at the end of the nineteenth century with perversion and moral degradation. Within Blavatsky's rendering, the pure Brahmin on exhibit doubled as the child virgin requiring rescue while revealing the moral turpitude of theosophist women and their unnatural desires.

But such desire did not reveal immorality. Instead, the conflicts within the theosophists' description of Chatterji's body challenged the historical consistency that Blavatsky had tried to create. That is, Blavatsky's sharp rebukes revealed her need to maintain her image of Chatterji as a stable object that could be exhibited outside the realm of human desires. Yet it was precisely Chatterji's unstable and enchanted body, eroticized on multiple planes, that undid the separation between the astral and bodily forms that were central to Blavatsky's theology. For example, one "golden haired amanuensis," Blavatsky seethed, "went so far as to write in a trance an 'order' from some unknown great adept 'Lorenzo.'" Blavatsky exposed this fabricated order, which commanded Chatterji to make the woman "his alter ego" and to take "his own body to do with her body as he pleased." The woman under the guise of Lorenzo, Blavatsky continued, instructed Chatterji that "such a union was absolutely necessary for the development of both [Chatterji and the woman]."[88] Sex between the two was necessary because, unlike Blavatsky's separation of realms, the pseudonymous Lorenzo revealed that "the psychical [had] to be helped by the physiological and vice versa." It is clear that though Blavatsky set out to subordinate the physical realm within her spiritual program, the body itself remained central to the

[85] Ibid.

[86] For more on William T. Stead's articles, see Gretchen Soderlund, *Sex Trafficking, Scandal, and the Transformation of Journalism, 1885–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 24–66.

[87] Ibid., 39, 24.

[88] Helena P. Blavatsky to Patience Sinnett, 9 October 1885, in Barker, *Letters*, 124.

psychical for theosophists in their interactions with Chatterji—as Lorenzo, the ghostly adept, reveals quite vividly.

Chatterji, however, Blavatsky explained, rejected such advances because "he is pure and is determined to preserve 'chela-purity' and chastity." Yet it was not enough for Chatterji to reject these temptations. Instead, relying on the biblical tale of Potiphar's wife, who, angry at Joseph for resisting her seduction attempts, falsely accuses him of rape, Blavatsky worried that "one of these days one or the other of the London Potiphars shall turn round in her fury and act like Mrs. Potiphar of the Pharaohs, shall father her own iniquities upon Mohini and—ruin the Society and his reputation."[89] Blavatsky believed that the key to saving Chatterji and thus preserving his purity was to convince the president of the French Theosophical Society, Morsier, that Miss Leonard had lied. There remained "one thing for the boy to do," she wrote to Sinnett, airing her complaints: "The measure is violent and requires moral courage or—the full force of innocence: let Mohini go to Paris[,] face [Miss Leonard] before Mme. de Morsier and force her to confess her vile lie and calumny of the Potiphar she is."[90]

Timothy Larsen has noted "the remarkable extent to which the Bible was a dominant presence in Victorian thought and culture" and that "the Bible provided an essential set of metaphors and symbols."[91] Blavatsky was no exception; she relied heavily on biblical allusions to make her arguments. As we have seen, in her anxious attempts to reproach Miss Leonard for her transgressive behavior and the effects of the physical, Blavatsky constantly mentioned the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Though the tradition of exegesis about Joseph and Potiphar's wife is varied, Joshua Levinson argues that a "disproportionate amount of cultural energy focuses on one particular scene—the sexual encounter between Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39)."[92] This sexual encounter provided an opportunity to consider the preservation not only of sexual norms but also of cultural continence. Similarly, Miss Leonard's body also troubled the purity of a karmic past's transmission Blavatsky and the theosophists sought to locate in Chatterji. Once Chatterji's pure stable body and culture were disturbed by a disruptive Other such as Miss Leonard, Chatterji too, in Blavatsky's rendering, became vulnerable to degeneration. Blavatsky's deployment of the story of Potiphar's wife was an effort to delegitimize Miss Leonard's seduction, preserve the image of Chatterji's racial purity, and secure the boundaries of theosophy's racial order.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett and Patience Sinnett, 12 October 1885, in ibid., 127.

[91] Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1, 4.

[92] Joshua Levinson, "An-Other Woman: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife; Staging the Body Politic," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 87, no. 3/4 (1997): 270.

HINDUS AND EUROPEAN LADIES

In the face of the dissolution of Chatterji's purity, theosophists sought to discredit Miss Leonard. According to Constance Wachtmeister, a prominent wealthy theosophist and Blavatsky's close ally, Sinnett set about unearthing Miss Leonard's past in order to dishonor her and save Chatterji's reputation. As Wachtmeister put it in a letter to Mrs. Sinnett, "Let Mohini be saved at all costs. . . . [A] conspiracy is being formed to over-throw the Society and disgrace Mohini. No delay, but act promptly, form your Committee [of defenders] quickly, get all possible evidence together, and find out all you can about Miss Leonard's antecedents." Wachtmeister believed that Miss Leonard was "a paid agent [who] from the first [sought] to endeavor through Mohini's disgrace to harm the TS [Theosophical Society]."[93] By attempting to exclude Chatterji's and Leonard's sexual relations and name them otherwise (as "Mrs. Potiphar" or a conspiracy) in order to preserve the Theosophical Society, Blavatsky's and Wachtmeister's speech became riddled with anxiety and terror. But much of this anger was directed toward women who, functioning as a site of unrestrained sexuality contra the virginal Hindu, became a key threat to the purported universal astral brotherhood between colonizer and colonized in the Theosophical Society.

Many of Blavatsky's efforts to maintain this brotherhood proved difficult. Blavatsky noted that if Chatterji failed to convince Morsier of his innocence, Miss Leonard "shall become the heroine of the day and Mohini shall be hooted out," because if she could convince one, then she would be able to persuade theosophists in London as well. It was imperative, Blavatsky argued, for Chatterji to reveal his innocence; otherwise, he would become the site of ridicule. Such mocking would be reserved not for Chatterji alone but for the entire theosophical structure, including the Masters. Indeed, Blavatsky wrote, "the ridicule will be for Mohini and the blasphemous laugh for the Masters of such a chela [disciple]." This ridicule, Blavatsky worried, would exclude Chatterji from the boundaries of the Theosophical Society, and once he was excluded, Blavatsky noted, he would be sent back to India, where "the scandal shall do no harm—except perhaps to the extent of strengthening the contempt of the Hindus for European ladies."[94]

Embroiled in investigatory anxiety, Blavatsky eventually concluded that unlike Chatterji's more lustful paramours, Miss Leonard viewed her affair with the Brahmin as "terrible" and "the last outburst in her life—the 'last rose of summer.'"[95] Blavatsky told the Sinnetts that she had sent a letter to Miss Leonard reporting that Blavatsky was aware of the whole story but had not told anyone. Moreover, Blavatsky assured Miss Leonard that she still

[93] Constance Wachtmeister to Patience Sinnett, 13 December 1885, in Barker, *Letters*, 265.

[94] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett and Patience Sinnett, 12 October 1885, in ibid., 127.

[95] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett and Patience Sinnett, 28 November 1885, in ibid., 127.

respected her. If Miss Leonard did not go public with her story, Blavatsky explained to the Sinnetts, "there are more chances for her now than ever," but Blavatsky trembled "lest vanity and womanly pride should prove stronger in her than devotion to the Society and Cause."[96] But Blavatsky's letter was not met with sympathy, and Miss Leonard turned the letter over to her lawyer, threatening to sue for libel. Already mired in controversy, Blavatsky found herself in more trouble when Miss Leonard also produced a hundred or so letters that Chatterji had sent to Miss Leonard professing his affections, providing clear evidence of Chatterji's active bodily life.

The Blackest Villain

As Miss Leonard's threat to sue loomed large, Indian bodies continued to trouble theosophical pretensions. For example, S. Krisnaswami, a Maratha Brahmin, challenged Blavatsky's control over the Theosophical Society and made a play to convert theosophists to his side by proclaiming to be a higher *chela* of the Mahatmas than Blavatsky proclaimed. S. Krisnaswami terrified Blavatsky, who expressed her great distaste in a letter to Alfred Sinnett: "Here's a fanatic for you of the blackest dye. You do not know yet those Southern Brahmins." He was, Blavatsky argued, "capable of what he threatens at any moment. He is capable of taking upon himself murder, accuse himself of lying and having helped to INVENT the Masters, of anything. He is an occult Nero quite capable of burning Rome and burying himself under its remains." Indeed, Blavatsky lamented that Krisnaswami not only accused the Theosophical Society of being "a dead failure" but also blamed Blavatsky and her European followers of "desecrating the Masters."[97] Krisnaswami's actions became tied to Chatterji's indiscretions, for Blavatsky tied these Indian discrepancies together. Blavatsky argued that Krisnaswami's evil nature had influenced Chatterji and had "poisoned his mind" against her.[98] Blavatsky also warned Sinnett that Chatterji was likely to repeat anything he was told to Krisnaswami. In order to maintain ranks, Blavatsky advised Sinnett to "frighten, poor dear Mohini and make him see the horror of Bowaji's [Krisnaswami's] charges."[99]

While offering a theory of racial difference that, following the prevailing theories of the time, presented southern Indians as inferior to their northern counterparts, Blavatsky still argued that Chatterji would not be able to overcome the common historical bond that tied him and Krisnaswami together as abject black Hindus. Blavatsky argued that the troubles caused by Chatterji's sexual indiscretions would lead him to side with his fellow

[96] Ibid., 128.
[97] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 23 January 1886, in ibid., 167.
[98] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 16 February 1886, in ibid., 184.
[99] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 27 January 1886, in ibid., 169–70.

Hindu.[100] Indeed, as Chatterji became more tied to the body, reducible, for example, to a broader Hindu milieu, Blavatsky's representational certainty began to sway. Blavatsky pondered that if Chatterji was guilty, "then he is a ruffian and a hypocrite capable of anything." Blavatsky continued skeptically, "You see I am kept entirely in the dark about him, Mohini. What do I know about him, his real inner life except what the Masters allow me, know and tell me? He may be the blackest villain and Masters have cast him off as a probationer long ago—for what I know."[101] Thus, as Chatterji's karmic past and historical consistency grew ever more enigmatic in the eyes of his theosophist colleagues, Blavatsky began to identify him with contemporary Brahmins and even southern Indian Brahmins, all of whom Blavatsky lumped together under the language of corruption and blackness. Revealing the instability of colonial symbols in nineteenth-century Britain, Chatterji became an enigmatic site for anxiety and threat as the pure image of his past disintegrated and Blavatsky was no longer able to neatly categorize him within her taxonomy. Indeed, once Chatterji's body, increasingly entangled in sexual and other relationships with the theosophical world, was no longer received or transmitted as a stable inheritance of past esoteric karma, his past became murkier, a threat of possible villainy.

On 29 January 1886 Chatterji sent a letter to Blavatsky that was addressed "my dear mother" and that defended Krisnaswami. Chatterji found it difficult "to understand how you could have thought that Babaji seriously intended to wreck the Theosophical Society (for one thing he has not the power) although I quite see that his conduct has been quite strange and unaccountable."[102] Chatterji's letters to Blavatsky had previously been quite warm, but, as Wachtmeister explained, Chatterji's "epistle has quite a different tone to any of his former letters and he also begins to throw stones at her." These supposed betrayals, Wachtmeister argued, revealed the obscene underside of the *chelas*—that they remained agents outside their esoteric inheritance. Disappointed in the inability of Indian theosophists to resist desire in order to represent their ancient inheritance, she declared that "if this is the stuff of which Chelas are made I hope no more specimens may be sent to Europe."[103]

As the libel case began to proceed alongside other legal troubles, Blavatsky despaired, arguing that she would have "prefer[red] living under Chinese and even Russian laws." She appealed to Sinnett to get the charges redressed and to "investigate Mohini's Don Juanic crime."[104] Facing legal threats from Miss Leonard's lawyer, Blavatsky asked Sinnett to "please employ a good lawyer (I have a few pounds from my aunt I can spend) to go to those wretches

[100] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 2 February 1886, in ibid., 171–72.
[101] Ibid., 172.
[102] Mohini Mohun Chatterji to Helena P. Blavatsky, 29 January 1886, in ibid., 270.
[103] Constance Wachtmeister to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 17 February 1886, in ibid., 289.
[104] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 29 January 1886, in ibid., 178.

and have a good talk." Blavatsky wanted Sinnett "to tell them, that if they have indeed letters from Mohini to her 'more than a hundred in number' and that if they can show the lawyer one endearing term showing love familiarity," then Blavatsky would "acknowledge [her] mistake publicly."[105] Sinnett advised Blavatsky to send a letter herself to Miss Leonard's lawyer, which she prepared.

Though Blavatsky's defense of Chatterji grew ever more muted, she still could not tie Chatterji's body and his esoteric inheritance to sex. That is to say, she could not accept that Chatterji was a sexual being with desires. On the one hand, Blavatsky did not believe that Chatterji was guilty, because, she argued, he never had sexual intercourse with Miss Leonard and thus never "[consummated] the last criminal act." She was, however, able to concede that he might have sent letters. Though Blavatsky wanted it "known plainly that it is the writing of even such letters that I do not approve of," she still defended Chatterji. Chatterji's letters, Blavatsky argued, "gave [Miss Leonard] a certain right by flirting and flapdoodling with her in a way little behooving in a chela." Still, Blavatsky wrote that she "saw plainly that he was guilty not of sexual intercourse, but of yielding to an adoration that tickled his vanity, of corresponding with a woman in love with him."[106]

Although Blavatsky admitted the flirtatious and vain nature of Chatterji's letters to Miss Leonard, she refused to openly declare his transgression: "Had I even believed in my heart that he was guilty I would screen him [Chatterji], a chela, one connected with Masters—with my own body." Blavatsky claimed that she would not only sacrifice her body but also maintain secrecy: "I would have cut off my tongue before saying or confessing [the transgressions] to anyone." Her sacrifice, however, would not occur to save Chatterji but to efface Chatterji's actions. Indeed, Blavatsky argued, "I would have done everything secretly and underhand [*sic*] to rid the Society of such a hypocritical monster."[107] Chatterji's monstrosity became apparent in the declaration and consummation of his love for Miss Leonard, which challenged Blavatsky's understanding of the ideal Brahmin. Therefore, Blavatsky believed that she could reverse the very process through which Chatterji tied together the physical and psychical by immolating her body. Such a sacrifice, Blavatsky posited, would negate Chatterji's transgressions while redeeming the Masters' secret doctrine.

Miscegenation and Its Fragments

Though Blavatsky sought to disavow Chatterji's bodily transgressions, even offering her own immolation, the subversive and racialized danger that sex presented to the Theosophical Society could not be curtailed so easily; sex

[105] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 16 February 1886, in ibid., 185–86.
[106] Ibid., 185, 184.
[107] Ibid.

was viewed as a racial danger in the colonial space because, as Stoler points out, "illicit sex gave rise to bastard children."[108] These unclassifiable bodies visibly challenged not only the racial logic that governed the colonial project but also theosophical beliefs in pure Brahmin genealogies and pasts. Olcott recognized the danger that Chatterji's sexual transgressions could lead to racial mixing. He wrote to Blavatsky that her analogy to "Mrs. Potiphar" was apt, and he wondered whether "[Chatterji] has not really played the goose and manufactured a Eurasian. Alas! poor Mademoiselle Theosophie, how thy lovers do compromise thee—ange guardienne!" Olcott then revealed his fear that the Chatterji case was a sign of the wider threat posed by miscegenation. He asked Blavatsky whether "there [are] any more soiled petticoats to be washed in front of the Chateau Grundy? If so let us have them all out at once and empty the buck-basket."[109] For Olcott and other theosophists, the horror of Chatterji's crime lay in its potential to produce a human future not bound to a clear karmic past. In raising the specter of possible children, Olcott reminded Blavatsky that her attempt to preserve Chatterji's symbolic role in the Theosophical Society by refusing to openly acknowledge his transgressions could not erase the danger Chatterji's transgressions would cause. In other words, Olcott worried that Chatterji's sexual escapades would leave a material residue that could fragment the theosophists' esoteric world.

Both the American and British public became aware of this predicament when gossip about Chatterji's transgressions hit the papers in March and April 1886. The *New York Times*, *Sunday Times*, and *Pall Mall Gazette* published multiple exposés highlighting Chatterji's affair with Miss Leonard. Theosophists had clearly failed in their attempts to suppress the story.[110] The *New York Times* reported that in Paris in 1884, "the chela opened his Messiah eyes and the ladies of the noble Faubourg, imitating the ladies of Tyburnia, doubtless at the suggestion of Mme. (or Mlle.?) Blavatsky made him presents of velvet robes and bought cigarettes at 10f. a package." Though the prospects for the Theosophical Society looked bright, problems arose, the article continued, when Blavatsky tried to extract too much from Chatterji's body, which "revealed that fact that Thibetan [*sic*] gospel was often a cover for calumny."[111] The *Sunday Times* similarly emphasized Chatterji's effects on women. In an exposé relying on a secret informant, the *Sunday Times* reported that the theosophists "sought . . . to indoctrinate the women with the principles of, practically, free love under the guise of 'harmless emotions' and that in this manner

[108] Stoler, *Race*, 46.

[109] Henry Steel Olcott to Helena P. Blavatsky, 19 January 1886, in Barker, *Letters*, 328.

[110] In her memoir, Steiger recalled later that Oscar Wilde's brother William had "with wise kindness managed to have the gossip . . . suppressed" (*Memorabilia*, 265).

[111] "Blavatsky in Trouble in Paris."

lived the Mahatmas."[112] Chatterji became, as the *New York Times* asserted, "the chela, the black man who had offered himself to 'learn practically the hidden mysteries of nature, and the psychical powers latent in man' abused his lady-killing powers, and strange accounts came to Paris of his adventures in the forests of Fontainebleau." This indiscretion was reported as symptomatic and not reducible to just a single affair. Indeed, the *New York Times* insinuated that Chatterji as "the lady-killing chela was discovered to be far from a disinterested slayer of hearts."[113]

As public intrigue intensified surrounding Blavatsky, the indiscretions grew more troublesome for the Theosophical Society, since the letters Chatterji had sent Miss Leonard had not vindicated Chatterji. Wachtmeister wrote that once she saw "the letter which Mohini wrote to [Miss Leonard] after the disgusting scene in the wood," she recognized that the letter was "sufficient to show that at any rate [the scene] did not disgust him." Blavatsky, Wachtmeister argued, had been duped, for "had Madame B. [Blavatsky] at that time known that [Chatterji] had written [Miss Leonard] nearly a hundred letters in six months filled with idealistic sentiment she would never have written as she did." Wachtmeister hoped to bring about an amicable ending to the whole affair. She explained that she had heard that Miss Leonard "would be satisfied if Mohini returned to India—and if Madame made her an apology." Wachtmeister found this request reasonable and tried to arrange the matter.[114] Miss Leonard also appealed to Olcott for redress, and he sent her a letter, asking her if he could arbitrate the matter in order to prevent the case from proceeding to the courts, especially since, as Olcott realized, "H. P. B. [Blavatsky] ha[d] unquestionably involved herself legally in this matter."[115]

Blavatsky relented, recognizing that Miss Leonard was "not a Potiphar—and [Mohini] is not the Joseph—morally (if he is physically) that I took him for."[116] This misrepresentation by Blavatsky led Olcott to ask her if he should take both Chatterji and Krisnaswami back to India with him. He explained, "I am not willing to leave them in Europe all alone: neither is strong enough to stand it. They will only bring scandal upon the T.S. in the long run by their indiscretion."[117] Indeed, once Chatterji no longer stood for bodily purity and stability, theosophists sought to secure the boundaries of the racial order by exiling him from the European space altogether. Though Chatterji would eventually return to Europe as an old man on his own terms, Blavatsky and Olcott, by recognizing him as a subject with desires, decided to literally remove his body from the contours of Europe.

[112] "Interview with a 'Chela': Theosophistic Humbug," *Sunday Times*, 28 March 1886.
[113] "Blavatsky in Trouble in Paris."
[114] Constance Wachtmeister to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 19 March 1886, in Barker, *Letters*, 297.
[115] Henry Steel Olcott to Helena P. Blavatsky, 2 March 1886, in ibid., 332.
[116] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 16 February 1886, in ibid., 186.
[117] Henry Steel Olcott to Helena P. Blavatsky, 17 March 1886, in ibid., 332.

Chatterji did not take Blavatsky's attempts to remove him from the Theosophical Society without protest. He published a manifesto, "A Few Words on the Theosophical Organization," that challenged Olcott's and Blavatsky's authority in the Theosophical Society. Though Blavatsky preferred to remain on friendly terms with Chatterji, she could not ignore this threat. Blavatsky told Alfred Sinnett that Chatterji was usurping their authority and had withdrawn the "living Teachers and ideals" from the society and, in turn, "substituted for them himself." Chiding his "wiliness and cunning," Blavatsky denounced Chatterji's "black ingratitude and cold heartedness to Olcott and all." She worried London Theosophists would "be lost in a fog of Maya created by the young gentleman," for Chatterji, it appeared, was placing them under his control.[118]

Blavatsky's language of blackness and disease signaled her fear that degeneration threatened both the esoterically pure past and the future of the Theosophical Society. Indeed, in the hope of preventing such a crisis, she substituted racialized signifiers of blackness for the formerly pure virginal Brahmin in order to render Chatterji's desires legible and to protect her own transcendent karmic subjectivity. The persistent references to blackness signaled theosophists' fears about the looming dangers the body and its unaccountability posed. But despite Blavatsky's efforts to continually rearticulate Chatterji in order to make legible and counteract the effects of his sexual act, crisis reigned in the Theosophical Society. The "Jesus on wheels," Blavatsky wrote to W. Q. Judge, had turned his back on those to whom he owed his Sainthood: on her and Olcott.[119]

CONCLUSION

By 1888 Chatterji had resigned from the Theosophical Society and had returned to India. He continued to write, and he resumed his practice as a lawyer. In her memoir, Isabelle de Steiger recalled meeting with Chatterji one last time at Mrs. Arundale's house after his one-year sojourn in the United States and before he left for India. Steiger noted a stark change in Chatterji's appearance. She no longer recognized "the kind and able young man who had arrived in London two or three years before . . . full of faith, hope, and delight in foreign travel—full also, of his own destiny and aims and eager to see life as Madame Blavatsky and others had described to him." His appearance now repelled Steiger: "His centrally parted, Christlike waving black hair had been cut very short, and by a bad barber," and "it fell in short uneven lumps anyhow." His eyes, once "velvet, black-brown, with even eyebrows, and thick eyelashes," had now "changed to dull yellow orbs, without shadow in eyelashes." Steiger reflected that his eyes'

[118] Helena P. Blavatsky to Alfred Percy Sinnett, 21 September 1886, in ibid., 137.

[119] Helena P. Blavatsky to William Quan Judge, 3 October 1886, in *H. P. Blavatsky: Collected Writings*, ed. Boris de Zirkoff (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Press, 1958), 7:137.

once serene and "static expression" now held an "inquisitive look." His usual "black velvet fur robe" had been "replace[d] by a yellow and black and white check or plaid—a sort of complete ready-to-wear suit as seen in cheap tailors' shops." Steiger despaired that "East and West had met, but what an embrace! I shuddered."[120] Indeed, once the object on exhibition became intertwined with the spectators themselves, theosophists found it difficult to bear the perverse display.

Steiger's despair dramatizes the danger that the theosophists faced when desire could no longer be contained within the esoteric realm of the Mahatmas and instead became embodied in sexual relations. For Steiger, Chatterji's body no longer symbolized an organized and serene past full of hope. Instead, it signaled a fragmented and chaotic future, which was made visible in a formerly pure but now cheapened Indian body. Such contradictions produced horror because they could not be ordered coherently even by those with access to astral planes. Yet even while facing the disintegration of their classificatory framework, Blavatsky and other theosophists refused to dwell within the anxieties embedded within the ambiguities and contingencies of the body and desire, which revealed the multitude of indeterminable positions that lay in wait. Instead, Blavatsky struggled to sustain meaning in a colonial order of things in which the body and desire continuously refused both categorization and regulation.

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[120] Steiger, *Memorabilia*, 264–65.