
PART II

Public Spheres, Public Media, and the Creation of Public Knowledge

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Photography in the “Contact Zone”: Identifying Copresence and Agency in the Studios of Darjeeling

Abstract Among the many novel cultural technologies that the British introduced to the Himalayas in the second half of the nineteenth century was photography. Although initially deployed as a crucial instrument for use within colonial documentation projects, by the 1880s the camera had become more closely aligned with tourism and the other “pleasures of Imperialism” that could be enjoyed by Europeans in the hill stations of the Himalayas. With its views of the high peaks and its diverse community, Darjeeling became a prime location for the production and consumption of photographs framed according to outsiders’ criteria of landscape and ethnic type genres. Examining the creation and circulation of such images within the visual economy of Darjeeling allows us to overturn some of the assumptions of previous scholarship on colonial-era photography in which a severe power imbalance between the colonialists and the colonised has been emphasised. Instead, this essay suggests that within the social spaces of photography in the contact zones of the Himalayas, it may be possible to detect important signs of indigenous agency and transcultural interaction.

Introduction

In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992, 1), Mary Louise Pratt described the “contact zone” as a terrain often characterised by “asymmetrical relations of power,” but she also sought to emphasise the dynamics of copresence and the interactions that could occur within it between coloniser and colonised. Borrowing the term “transculturation” from anthropology, Pratt highlighted the potential for subordinate or marginal groups to “select and invent from the materials transmitted to them by the dominant or metropolitan culture” (Pratt 1992, 7). This process could then lead to the production of “auto-ethnographies” in which colonial subjects undertook “to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s own terms.” Since Pratt’s study was based on the analysis of literature, her approach has been avidly adopted by literary scholars, historians, and others whose primary source material is textual, but her call to arms has also been heard by some of the leading figures in cultural and museum anthropology, most notably by James Clifford.¹ His reformulation of the concept of the contact zone as a tactic for overturning power imbalances in ethnographic museums, has led a number of such institutions worldwide to reconfigure themselves and collaborate with source communities in a more reciprocal and ethical manner. It has also had an impact on the archival procedures that are conducted behind the scenes in museums, as curators and academics have begun to re-examine the copious quantities of objects and documents amassed in the heyday of colonial collecting to reveal alternative histories and acknowledge the role of indigenous agents in their production. This was one of the agendas that informed the Tibetan Visual History project conducted at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford between 2006 and 2008. During the process of conducting meticulous research on more than 6000 photographs of Tibet taken between 1920 and 1950, we identified the Sikkimese orderly, Rapden Lepcha, as the author of many of the photographs of Tibet that had previously been assigned to his employer, the senior British colonial civil servant and Tibetologist, Charles Bell.² Projects of this sort attempt to overturn the silencing effect of colonial archival processes and to highlight the transcultural instead. A similar aspiration underpins the research presented here, in which I discuss photographic material that currently is largely stored in museums. However, rather than just interrogating the archives, I have also used some of their contents to reconstruct the social spaces in which photographs came into being and circulated in British hill stations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By examining photographs that were created and consumed both by colonials and members of the

1 See the chapter on contact zones in Clifford 1997.

2 This project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the United Kingdom, led to the creation of The Tibet Album website. Six thousand historic photographs and further information on Rabden Lepcha can be seen there: <http://Tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk>.

indigenous communities of those places, I seek to demonstrate that the contact zones of the Himalayas need not only be seen as domains of utterly unequal power relations. Of course, in matters of land, labour, property ownership, and many other aspects of the political and social relations that pertained between these groups in this period, there was great inequality, but this only makes the interactions that occurred in the "visual economy" (Poole 1997) of one particular hill station all the more remarkable.

Darjeeling: a hub of cosmopolitan copresence

The Himalayan town of Darjeeling, in West Bengal, is highly amenable to this line of enquiry since in addition to being a vitally important centre for trade, colonial administration and tourism, it was also a major locus of photographic activity from the 1880s onwards. The combination of these factors meant that from the time of its creation as a sanatorium, cantonment, and pleasure zone in the mid-nineteenth century, Darjeeling was to become a place of brief, as well as protracted, encounters between a wide range of different communities. The presence of Europeans (mainly British), indigenous peoples of the hills (such as the Lepcha and Bhutia), Nepalese labourers, businessmen from other regions of India, and Tibetan traders and monks, meant that it was one of the most ethnically diverse, even cosmopolitan, conurbations of British India.

That diversity was undoubtedly part of the hill station's appeal to European visitors, as is evidenced by the many photographs of its "indigenous" residents that are now stored in museums and private collections around the world. A "Greetings from Darjeeling" postcard printed at the turn of the twentieth century encapsulates the extent to which it had become renowned as a site for collecting sights (figure 1). The tourist was drawn there in order to experience the exceptional features of its natural environs at first hand and to observe its non-European inhabitants at close quarters. Both categories of visual consumption were appreciated by virtue of their marked difference from their equivalents in the plains. After 1881, when the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway was completed, attention to such distinctions had already been carefully framed by the view from a steam train as it wended its way laboriously through the foothills. During a journey of many hours, passengers could peruse photographically illustrated guidebooks with commentaries that alerted them to the variations of flora, fauna, and human interest that could be observed from its windows. The traveller had therefore already cultivated a particular kind of regard for the Himalayan environment and its occupants before he or she even reached their final destination. On arrival in Darjeeling, the touristic requirement for a souvenir of those subjects was increasingly met by a large number of photographic businesses, including branches of some of the major firms of the day, such as Johnston and Hoffmann, who had their headquarters in Calcutta. In fact, the proliferation of studios in Darjeeling between 1880 and 1947 suggests

a strong correlation between the demand for photographic reproductions and the desire amongst consumers to possess a record of contact with the appealing otherness of Imperial Darjeeling, a desire that was met by the mass reproduction of photographic prints within its burgeoning visual economy. Once the postcard format was introduced in the late 1890s, the consumer was presented with readily affordable copies of scenic views and depictions of “ethnic types” that could be inserted in an album to document their stay. When posted to friends and family with a short missive on the verso, such cards advertised the delights of the town and enticed others to go there. In these ways the print culture of Darjeeling blossomed alongside its tourist trade, and photography augmented the appeal of the hill station via the national and international networks in which it circulated.³ Ultimately, the more Darjeeling was construed as a place of contact and difference, the more the production of photographs intensified.



Figure 1: Unknown studio (probably Johnston and Hoffmann), Greetings from Darjeeling, postcard, Darjeeling or Calcutta, printed around 1900.

In catering to consumer demand, Darjeeling photographers produced images that fell into two main genres. One of those ultimately derived from anthropological modes of seeing and recording that had been initiated in the 1860s under the auspices of the British administration. The most extensive exercise of this sort was *The People of India* project directed by John Forbes Watson and John William Kaye at the request of the Governor

3 The scale of the circulation of postcards can be gauged from the *Imperial Gazetteer* of 1908 which states that more than 270 million postcards had been safely distributed by the Indian postal service in that year alone.

General of India Lord Canning, between 1868 and 1875.⁴ By documenting the inhabitants of the subcontinent according to ethnicity, religion, caste, and employment, photographers created the visual equivalent of a census and a vast archive of purported "types" that could be classified and compared by colonial administrators and ethnologists. Unsurprisingly, given Darjeeling's proximity to some of the highest peaks of the Himalayas, the other genre that gained great popularity was landscape photography, but it arose more from the domain of fine art than the social sciences.⁵ The depiction of the beauties of nature had been a well-established topic for European artists from the eighteenth century onwards, and owning a landscape painting became a key marker of symbolic capital for members of the aristocracy and the aspirational bourgeoisie. In the nineteenth century, the invention of photography democratised this form of imagery, making it more affordable and accessible to less elite classes, including those in the middle and upper echelons of the British colonial service in India. It was this market that was served most ably by professional photographers such as Samuel Bourne, who famously left Nottingham in 1863 to seek his fortune in the subcontinent and made it very successfully by establishing the photographic firm Bourne and Shepherd at another hill station, Shimla, and creating a series of prize-winning pictures of the Himalayas.

In the extensive coverage of his career, Samuel Bourne is usually celebrated as a pioneer who applied the stylistic vocabulary of the English picturesque to the mountains of north India and privileged the spectacle of untouched wilderness.⁶ However, during the time of his photographic outings from Shimla in the 1860s, the hills and valleys of the Himalayas were already in the process of being remodelled according to British tastes and needs, with the construction of schools, churches, roads, bridges, and railway lines, and the planting of trees and cash crops (especially tea) that would make the British feel at home in their South Asian surroundings. Of course, that project was entirely dependent on the labour and collaboration (or rather coercion) of those who had lived in the region for many generations. Though largely powerless in political and economic terms, and often undocumented in the historical record, in photography it is the very workers who made this project possible who are the focus of attention. The professional photographers of Darjeeling generated innumerable prints depicting those whose toil supported the lifestyles of the colonialists in their homes and businesses, and who created the products they loved to consume. Frequently repeated subjects included the "coolie" (or porter), the tea carrier, the rickshaw puller, the gardener, the cook, the milkman, the orchid seller, the weaver, and even the curio seller (figure 2). Both

4 For a detailed study of the genesis of *The People of India* project see Falconer 2002.

5 Himalayan landscape photography (in its popular form) also has its roots in the topographical survey movement that flourished in India the mid-to-late nineteenth century. I elaborate on this in Harris 2016.

6 For more critical studies from among that literature see Sampson 2002 and Chaudhary 2012.



Figure 2: Bourne and Shepherd, "A Hill Coolie Girl," hand-coloured postcard, Darjeeling, 1890s.

photographers and their clients appear to have revelled in the portrayal of the "types" who reduced the white man's burdens so that he could concentrate on the "pleasures of Imperialism" (Said 1993). As Saloni Mathur (2007) has pointed out in her discussion of another favourite trope of hill station print culture, the white woman carried aloft in a dandy by local men, the "natives" are literally the bearers of European civilisation embodied, in this instance, in female form (figure 3). Imagery of this sort readily confirms a fundamental complaint articulated in post-colonial scholarship on nineteenth century photography in British India: that it reifies the supremacy of the colonial in contradistinction to subordinated "others" and it celebrates unequal power relations visually.

However, it is important to point out that Darjeeling photographers did not just pander to their clients' liking for studies of mountain ranges or exotic ethnic types. Much of their activity was devoted to the production of portraits for Europeans who were either long-term residents of the town, visitors "up for the season," or short-term holiday-makers. For all these



Figure 3: Thomas Paar, "Dandy," postcard, Darjeeling, 1890s.

groups, the social scene in Darjeeling appears to have been hectic. Parties, plays, pageants, and sporting events had to be attended. Dinner jackets, ball gowns, and fancy dress had to be acquired for, as Dane Kennedy has put it, "illusion was essential" to the operation of Raj-era hill stations (Kennedy 1996, 8) (figure 4). They were places for seeing and being seen within the giddy whirl of Anglo-Indian social encounters. In this environment, a flattering index of an individual's appearance was of crucial importance in fostering friendships, forging professional bonds, and prompting romantic alliances.

Fortunately, the version of the photographic print known as the *carte de visite* had become readily available in Darjeeling from 1880 onwards. It literally provided a calling card that made the visage of the visitor manifest: a "certificate of presence" (Barthes 1981, 80) that could also be augmented by their signature and a message (figure 5).⁷ For women of the "fishing fleet" who travelled to Darjeeling to engage in the marriage market, such cards had the particular benefit of displaying the desirability of their wares to potential suitors.⁸ Given that there were around half a dozen permanent studios operating in Darjeeling by the close of the nineteenth century (along with a good number of itinerant photographers

7 Every bungalow and villa in Darjeeling had a post box where potential visitors could hand-deliver their calling cards and make an appointment with their occupants.

8 The "fishing fleet" refers to the young women who flocked to India from Britain in search of husbands and whose presence was much desired in the second half of the nineteenth century, when ideas of preserving racial purity among the British were prevalent.



Figure 4: Johnston and Hoffmann, studio portrait of a British couple in fancy dress, cabinet card, Darjeeling, inscribed 1894.

from the plains who set up shop temporarily for the season), it seems that a portrait sitting in one of those establishments had by that time become an essential component of any sojourn in the hills. Accordingly, photographic businesses of this period flourished as much from the income engendered by portraits of colonials at play, as it did from those of the colonised at work.

The social stratigraphy of photography

However, in existing publications on photography and empire in India, those two parties are usually presented separately, either in glossy tomes that reek of "colonialist nostalgia" (Rosaldo 1989) or in the works of anthropologists and post-colonial studies scholars. In the former, the reproduction of historic photographs tends to eulogize the opulent lifestyles of the colonial *saab* and *memsaab*, while in the latter, that world



Figure 5: Fred Ahrlé, portrait of a young British woman, signed Ethel Buchanan, carte de visite, Darjeeling or Calcutta, inscribed 1895.

is justly derided as a prodigious producer and voracious consumer of photographic ethno-exotica. Similarly, the first focuses on portraits of individuals of European heritage and the second on anonymous indigenous "types" and the cultural environment they inhabit. Much could be said about how disciplinary parameters (in populist colonial history versus those of anthropology, for example) have been instrumental in creating this chasm and the degree to which the contents of ex-Imperial archives have determined the outcomes of research, but this is not the place to pursue the subject. In short, for a variety of intellectual and ideological reasons, the two worlds of colonial and non-colonial (or indigenous) photography have been viewed retrospectively as sharply bisected spheres of manufacture and reception. But just how accurate is this characterisation? What happens if we attempt to reconstruct the social spaces in which photographs originated rather than merely studying the objects that have been extracted from them and preserved ever since in discrete archival and academic domains?

In one of the few essays to pay analytical attention to photography during the colonial period in the Himalayas, the distinguished visual anthropologist David MacDougall suggested in *Photo Hierarchicus* (1992) that not only were the two communities (“native” and “non-native”) separated, but that they were also vertically stratified according to topography and ethnicity, with those who were white quite literally occupying the higher ground.⁹ He noted that the locations of studios were distributed along topographical fault lines, with those designed to serve a European (i.e. mainly British) clientele positioned on the upper ridge of the town, while those for non-European clients were situated lower down the hillside in the “native bazaar,” an area generally deemed to be off-limits for colonialists. This concurs with the accounts of historians of Imperial India who have stated that the public spaces of hill stations were socially demarcated in various subtle and not so subtle ways. For example, at Shimla, the Mall was closed to local people at various times of the day and for key dates in the Imperial calendar.¹⁰ As E.M. Collingham’s *Imperial Bodies* (2001) reveals, a form of apartheid was in operation across the private and public domains of British India, in which the movements of certain kinds of people were carefully orchestrated and the very existence of those deemed particularly undesirable were rendered invisible, if at all possible.

However, my research indicates that the social stratigraphy of photography in Darjeeling was not as rigid as it may have been in Mussoorie or Shimla, and that (at least in its upper levels) there was a degree of mobility. The doors to photographic establishments, even if owned and managed by members of the white elite, were not always closed to non-Europeans. I will even go so far as to suggest that those spaces were sometimes shared and that certain local patrons should be seen as key agents in the production of photography. They were not just subjects of the Imperial camera but, in their work as logisticians, translators, technicians, and facilitators, became “culture brokers” and key intermediaries who provided access to their community for colonial photographers and influenced the manner in which the latter operated.¹¹ A few of those late nineteenth century innovators also became photographers themselves. Paying attention to these previously unacknowledged figures offers an important corrective to the notion that photography was always an imposed, alien technology that remained solely in the control of the politically dominant community.

9 Although he does not cite it, MacDougall’s title is evidently a play on that of Louis Dumont’s famous 1966 study of caste in India, *Homo Hierarchicus*.

10 Kanwar (2003) provides further detail on such matters.

11 The term “culture broker” (or “cultural broker”) has been used by anthropologists since the 1960s when paying attention to the role of individuals who mediate between their own community and outsiders. Such individuals are often multi-lingual, highly knowledgeable, and in possession of considerable cultural capital. They are also often at the forefront of initiating change at a local level and in generating new forms of interaction beyond it.

The studio of Thomas Paar

A postcard created in Darjeeling around 1906 provides a valuable starting point from which to pursue this discussion (figure 6). Not only is it a visual document that enables us to situate the practice of studio photography in the heart of a colonial hill station, but it is also an object of that practice, for this view of Thomas Paar's studio in Chowrasta was produced to advertise his services.¹² On the verso he printed this message: "The largest and finest collection of Darjeeling views, types, postcards, souvenir albums, in all styles and sizes" and boasted "One of the finest equipped studios in the East. Excellence of work well known all over India and Europe." The recto



Figure 6: Thomas Paar, the studio of Thomas Paar in Chowrasta, Darjeeling, advertising postcard created by Paar shortly after his new studio was completed in 1906.

reveals further important information. The building emblazoned with Paar's name has clearly been designed with photography in mind: large windows penetrate the front and side walls, a wide balcony protrudes from the rear, and the whole structure is orientated towards the west to maximise the chance for sunlight to fill the interior spaces and illuminate Paar's subjects. Beneath a sign directing customers "to the studio," three Europeans in pith helmets appear to peruse a selection of his merchandise on a noticeboard. Nearby, some porters and a rickshaw puller wait for

12 Very little is known about the life and career of Thomas Paar. There is even some uncertainty about whether his first name was Thomas or Theodor, but since the majority of my sources list him as Thomas I have done the same. I will publish further results from my research on Paar in a chapter of a forthcoming monograph on the history of photography in the Himalayas.



Figure 7: Thomas Paar, The Woodlands Hotel, Darjeeling, multi-view advertising postcard, created sometime between 1899 and 1905.

business. A lone figure on the balcony gazes back towards Paar as he captures an image of his fine premises. Perhaps he is an assistant observing his employer in action?

Paar's studio could not have been in a more prime location. Since the foundation of the hill station, Chowrasta had been the epicentre of sociality, commerce, and Imperial spectacle in Darjeeling. The main thoroughfare (the Mall) passed through it, a bandstand and fountain adorned it, and its open space functioned as the venue for large gatherings of people and the observance of significant events, such as the visit of a dignitary from the plains. As Paar's postcard reveals, by the early twentieth century, the Darjeeling outpost of the famed Calcutta emporium Francis, Harrison, Hathaway and Co. had been installed there and Moore's Darjeeling Tea-shop was next door. Out of shot, but still in close proximity, were the principle hotels, clubs, and restaurants that catered to British customers. In fact, it is likely that cards like this one were deposited in high-end hotels precisely in order to entice holidaymakers to visit Paar's studio. He also photographed at least one of those institutions, as is demonstrated by a multi-view card created for the Woodlands Hotel, which trumpets the qualities of an establishment "under European management," "magnificently situated" for views of the snows, and conveniently close to the railway station (figure 7). From this refined and commodious vantage point and surrounded by other Europeans, the Woodlands apparently attracted a superior class of clients, including (as the card informs us) the Viceroy

of India, Lord Curzon.¹³ A symbiotic relationship therefore seems to have flourished between photographers and the owners of other enterprises servicing the tourist trade, reminding us once again that photography was itself a decidedly commercial undertaking.

There can be little doubt that the prominent position of Paar's studio in Chowrasta augmented the reputation of its proprietor and made it easily accessible to Europeans in search of a fine quality portrait.¹⁴ It was located at the uppermost level of the social stratigraphy of Darjeeling with only Observatory Hill, a site of sanctity to Buddhists and Hindus and a major tourist attraction by the late nineteenth century, at a higher elevation. I have begun to map the locations of studios in Darjeeling between 1870 and 1947, but although this project is currently incomplete, in general terms MacDougall's vertical hierarchy seems to hold true at least until the 1920s, when Newari and Indian photographers began to take over businesses that had been set up by British entrepreneurs. However, although European photographers were usually situated in the upper reaches of the town and local photographers at a lower level, further consideration of Paar's studio indicates that we should not presume that those who entered it were only elite Europeans. This can be demonstrated by assembling the products of his workspace and thereby re-populating it with portraits of his clients, for they have literally left their *carte de visite* in museums and libraries, as well as in family collections and other more private domains to this day. These objects allow us to begin to document the "types" of people who frequented his studio and to reconstruct the performances they delivered in front of his camera. Most unusually, we can even identify some of them by name.

The prints that survive from the Paar studio today record a surprisingly diverse clientele. They include portraits of a bandsman from the 2nd Battalion of the Black Watch by the name of Johnnie Lawson, a young white woman called Emilie, a Maharajah (probably from the plains), two smartly dressed Indian boys (perhaps students at one of the prestigious private schools of Darjeeling), the Rev. G.P. Pradhan, the Nepalese pastor of a local church, and Thutob Namgyal, the 9th *choegyal* (king) of Sikkim (figure 8).¹⁵ From just this small sample we can deduce that Paar's customers were drawn from a broad range of ethnicities and that senior members of the local community were among them. We can also imagine that wealthy Indian visitors to Darjeeling, such as maharajahs and their offspring, might take the opportunity to be portrayed by a photographer who could boast of an international

13 Since Nathaniel Curzon was Viceroy of India between 1899 and 1905 this card can be dated to that period.

14 The area around Chowrasta had been the site of some of the earliest photographic studios in Darjeeling, such as those of John Doyle and Robert Philips in the 1870s and 1880s.

15 There is also an important portrait of the thirteenth Dalai Lama that has been published in print and postcard format under the name of Thomas Paar. It was undoubtedly taken at some point during the Dalai Lama's exile in India between 1910 and 1913 and possibly in Kalimpong, rather than in Paar's Darjeeling studio; see Harris 2016.



Figure 8: Thomas Paar, framed and signed portrait of Thutob Namgyal, the 9th *choegyal* of Sikkim, from the personal collection of Sir Charles Bell, Darjeeling, 1890s.

reputation and “an unrivalled success with children.”¹⁶ But frankly none of this information would be available to us if we based our analysis solely on artefacts curated by museums and archives founded in the colonial period. Very few Paar portraits of Europeans or elite members of Indian society have been deposited in such institutions, whereas innumerable depictions of representatives of the Bhutia, Tibetan, Lepcha, and Nepalese communities of Darjeeling are available for the researcher to uncover. This undoubtedly reflects the simple facts that Paar went into mass production of “type” photography in order to meet the demand from his customers, and that later, those same images became highly sought after by institutional collectors. On the other hand, there was little need to reproduce Johnnie Lawson’s portrait more than a few times, since only his family and friends would have

16 From the frontispiece to an album of views of Darjeeling published by Paar in about 1910, in my collection.



Figure 9: unknown studio, "Tibetan Mendicant," hand-coloured postcard, Darjeeling, 1890s.

treasured and preserved it. As a result, the photographic record of British individuals who lived and died in Raj-era India is now mainly curated by their relatives, or by military and provincial museums in Britain. Meanwhile the prodigious replication of the ethnic type genre by the likes of Thomas Paar has ensured that it is enshrined en masse in the larger, ex-Imperial archives, such as at the Royal Geographical Society, the British Library, or the Royal Anthropological Institute. One of the most troubling effects of this multiplication is the anonymization that accompanies it. The names of the non-Europeans who entered a studio such as that run by Paar are rarely recorded, leaving images of their bodies to simply connote collectivities and communities with labels such as "Bhutia beggar," "Nepaly Mother," "Tibetan Lama," "Coolies," "Bhutia Lady," "Tibetan Mendicant," and so on (figure 9). However, in what follows, I present some rare instances where it has been possible to reverse the silencing of archival processes and to assert the transcultural features of the "visual economy" of Darjeeling.

Identifying the “type”

When more than a century has passed since their creation, it is usually extremely difficult to insert individual identities back into the outputs of the anonymizing machine that was colonial print culture in India in the late nineteenth century. For this reason, the examples I present here are highly significant. They refer to the three most ubiquitous stereotypes purveyed by Darjeeling photographers: the Buddhist monk or lama (used to signify Tibetan Buddhism more generally), the Bhutia layman (used to signify Himalayan masculinity of the non-monastic variety), and the Tibetan woman (used to signify the allure of Himalayan females). Each of these subjects was enacted visually by clients of Thomas Paar.

THE MONK OR LAMA: SHERAB GYATSO

If visitors from the plains of India initially travelled to Darjeeling to gaze upon the awesome grandeur of the Himalayas, they also came to observe difference in terms of ethnicity and religion, and of one religion in particular: Tibetan Buddhism. Even though Tibet was inaccessible and could only be imagined beyond the mountain ranges, at least Darjeeling offered the pleasing prospect of encountering followers of its religion at close quarters. Since the fantasy of Tibet and the reality of Tibetan Buddhism were key factors in determining the desirability of Darjeeling as a tourist destination, it is no surprise that there are numerous depictions of Tibetan monks, replete with the accoutrements of their religious practice, in museum collections. Among them, one individual features more often than any other. With his pointed beard and hooded gown, this distinctive figure stands out in the many postcards, guides, travel narratives, and even advertising materials he appeared in, to the extent that he seems to have become the poster-boy for Tibetan Buddhism in the hill station between 1890 and 1910. (He can be seen in the Woodlands Hotel postcard for example.) But of course in all these iterations his true identity has been omitted and he is merely captioned as “a Tibetan at prayer,” “a Lama,” or a “Himalayan,” or “Buddhist” monk. It was through a stroke of good fortune that I discovered an original print from Thomas Paar’s studio in an archive and was then able to establish who this man actually was. The print in the collection of the University of Pennsylvania’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology is inscribed with just three words: “Mongol Lama, Sherab” (figure 10). Further research has revealed that his full name was Sherab Gyatso and that he had been the head of a Geluk monastery at Ghoom on the outskirts of Darjeeling. Since he had arrived in India via Tibet from Mongolia he became known in English-speaking circles in Darjeeling as the “Mongol Lama.” While in Tibet, he is said to have served as tutor to the eighth Panchen Lama at Tashilhunpo monastery and to have been a noted astrologer and translator. We know that he had moved to India by 1875 because he founded the Yiga Choeling Monastery at Ghoom in



Figure 10: Thomas Paar, "Mongol Lama, She-rab," albumen print, Darjeeling, 1890s

that year and presided over it until 1905.¹⁷ At least one author, a colonial administrator of a later period, has suggested that the establishment was designed for "political meetings," though he does not elaborate on their nature.¹⁸ Clearly Sherab had an illustrious career as a religious leader, but publications by Tibetologists indicate that he also had close connections with the British Indian government and its intelligence services. They state that he was a teacher in the Bhutia Boarding School, an establishment where young Tibetans and Sikkimese were trained to act as "interpreters, geographers and explorers" who might one day be useful if Tibet were "ever opened to the British."¹⁹ He certainly assisted his friend, the Bengali Sarat Chandra Das, when he sought to publish the results of two clandestine missions to Tibet on behalf of the British government, a collaboration

17 1905 is given as the date when Sherab Gyatso left Ghoom. See "Yiga Choeling Monastery, Ghoom," accessed August 26, 2016, <http://yiga.choeling.com>. Various years have been given for the foundation of Ghoom monastery but E. C. Dozey's date of 1875 is the most likely. See below.

18 E. C. Dozey (2012 [1922], 83).

19 Sir Alfred Croft, Director of Public Instruction in Bengal in the 1870s and 1880s, cited in Waller 1990, 193. Also see MackKay 2011.

that exemplifies the close relationship between information gathering, photography and British Imperial ambitions in relation to that country. In the 1890s, Sherab helped Das with the illustrations for his book *Journey To Lhasa and Central Tibet* by posing as a Tibetan in several scenes that were staged for Das's camera in Darjeeling. For example, he appears as a "black hat dancer" in one illustration and as a worshipper in a "Tibetan Temple" in another.²⁰ At around the same time, Sherab also had his portrait taken in Paar's studio. The photographer then put his image to work and repeatedly reused it in the contexts described above.

But what might Sherab's motivation for visiting the studio have been? When discussing the participation of "native" people in performances for the camera or at fairs and museums in America in the nineteenth century, James Clifford proposed that "People lent themselves to the projects of explorers and entrepreneurs for a range of reasons, including fear, economic need, curiosity, a desire for adventure, a quest for power" (Clifford 1997, 198). Of course it is impossible to retrospectively reconstruct the intentionality behind a historic portrait from the subject's point of view, but when entering Paar's studio, several considerations are likely to have influenced this senior Buddhist monk. He may well have been curious and he very probably received remuneration for sitting for the purposes of "type" photography. But he may also have embraced the opportunity to create images that would distribute his personhood among his followers and augment his aura and authority, as the thirteenth Dalai Lama would later do when he entered the visual economy of Darjeeling during his exile in India between 1910 and 1913.²¹ Like many of the Europeans who stood in the same studio space, perhaps Sherab simply wanted to own a good likeness of himself to circulate as a calling card within his social networks (which included British colonial officials), and to participate as an equal in the photographic exchange system of Darjeeling. However, once photographed by Paar in a commercial situation, he also rescinded control over how his image would subsequently be sold to others, well beyond his immediate circle, and reproduced over time. Even so, we could argue that Sherab Gyatso retained some agency in the making of a potent icon of Tibetan Buddhism that continues to have purchase today. He is currently immortalized at the monastery he founded in Ghoom in a clay statue and a painting, both designed by local artists in Tibetan style but derived from Paar's photographic portrait. There he is remembered and reindigenised according to his stature as a Tibetan Buddhist adept and leader, rather than as a character typecast by the replicatory regime of colonial photography.

20 The book was eventually published in London in 1902 by John Murray. For a longer discussion of this staging of Tibet in India, see Harris 2012.

21 I discussed the creation of the first photographic portrait of a Dalai Lama (the thirteenth) in Harris 1999 and have returned to the subject of how senior religious figures in Tibetan Buddhism used photography for their own ends in Harris 2016.

THE BHUTIA LAYMAN: SONAM WANGFEL LADEN LA

If Sherab Gyatso was apparently a willing subject of the colonial camera, Sonam Wangfel Laden La was that and much more. As a young man of Sikkimese/Tibetan heritage, he contributed to a number of photographic projects under the direction of Thomas Paar in which he regularly performed the role of a Tibetan or "Bhutia."²² Among the postcards and prints I have studied, he can be identified acting as "a layman receiving a blessing" in a Buddhist temple or appearing to preside over a "divinity dance" by Tibetan monks (figure 11).²³ (Laden La is the figure standing side-on to the camera at the end of the back row.) That scene was recorded outside the Tibetan



Figure 11: Thomas Paar, "Divinity Dance" at the Bhutia Busty monastery, albumen print, Darjeeling, 1890s.

Buddhist monastery at the Bhutia Busty in Darjeeling, at around the same time that the sightseeing itinerary of the 1896 *Guide to Darjeeling* directed visitors there to observe "absurd and grotesque lama dances" (1896, 40). Should they be reluctant to do so, the guide's author advised that photographs, some of which were "worthy of the best collections" could instead

22 Laden La was born in 1879. To judge by the surviving portraits taken by Paar, he seems to have made his first appearances for the camera at around the age of twenty.

23 I have been able to make these identifications by consulting the biography of Laden La published by Nicholas and Deki Rhodes (2006) and examining other portraits of him that are either in public archives or the possession of his family.

be acquired in the centre of the town. (1896, 41). As we have heard, Thomas Paar clearly sought to service the tourists' passion for prints and he evidently needed to venture out of his studio on occasion to record the phenomena they might have witnessed. But in order to capture an image of the monks in their full *cham* (masked dance) attire, the services of an intermediary were required. Laden La was the culture broker who made that possible. His presence in this print alludes to the fact that he was not simply a photogenic prop for Paar's pictures, but was also instrumental in arranging them.

Due to the elevated status of his family in Darjeeling and his command of English, Laden La had been selected at a young age to participate in various British activities in his hometown. He was educated at the Bhutia Boarding School (where he knew Sherab Gyatso) and later at an English medium college in Calcutta. By the age of twenty-five, his aptitude for government employ led to his appointment as the personal assistant to Colonel E. H. C. Walsh, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling district, and soon Laden La was involved in frontier intelligence work and the formation of a network of informants in his neighbourhood from whom he could gather intelligence. He later entered the Imperial police force and became a key figure in Anglo-Tibetan diplomacy, acting as the principal local facilitator and intermediary for the thirteenth Dalai Lama during his stay in India between 1910 and 1913. Ultimately Laden La's skills and long service were rewarded with the highest accolade that could be bestowed by the Raj to an Indian: the title of Rai Bahadur.²⁴ But he was not merely a dutiful servant of the Empire. Laden La was also a founder member of the Hillmen's Association that lobbied for Darjeeling to gain autonomy from the rest of Bengal, and the head of the *Gompa* (Monastery) Association in the region. Such roles no doubt augmented his capacity to act as a negotiator in Thomas Paar's photographic interactions with Tibetans and other followers of Buddhism in and around Darjeeling. Without Laden La's connections in Buddhist monasteries, it seems unlikely that the colonial photographer would have been able to depict them. In fact, in the notes Paar wrote to accompany a print of *The Divinity Dance*, he describes Laden La as a *munshi*, the Persian term used across the Raj administration to denote a secretary of South Asian heritage or a person respected for their linguistic skills. In inserting himself into that image, Laden La demonstrated that he was not only fluent in the many tongues spoken in Darjeeling, but that he was also proficient in the language of photography and its representational power. We also know that by the first decade of the twentieth century he had begun to use a camera himself, and when he travelled over the Himalayas in the 1920s, he became one of the first Tibetans to photograph the country of his forefathers. Laden La therefore went above and beyond the capacity for "colonial subjects to represent themselves in ways that *engage with the colonizer's own terms*" (Pratt 1992, 7).

24 Information in this brief biographical sketch is largely derived from Rhodes 2006.

THE TIBETAN WOMAN: ANI CHOKYI

Of the numerous voyeuristic representations of Himalayan women that were fabricated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—ranging from the “coolie” with her load to the “comely” girls of the Darjeeling bazaar—Paar’s studio was responsible for some of the most glamorous but, regrettably, the names and life stories of his sitters are, for the most part, lost to us. For example, a depiction of a young woman with the composure and dress of a noblewoman posing beside the rich brocade drapes of his studio is merely captioned: “Bhutia girl” (figure 12). Other prints preserved in albums created by Paar’s customers give a similarly ravishing impres-



Figure 12: Thomas Paar, “Bhutia Girl,” albumen print, Darjeeling, 1890s.

sion of Himalayan femininity and hint that both they and the photographer were capable of appreciating the beauty of his non-European clients. Perhaps it was for this reason that a senior woman in Darjeeling society visited the studio in Chowrasta in around 1900 to have a series of portraits taken. A half-length and full-length portrait (probably taken at the same session) still exist in various archival contexts, the latter of which presents

an image of a confident Tibetan matriarch (figure 13). Standing before a painted rose arbour with grass at her feet and clad in full Tibetan dress, for those accustomed to type photography this figure might at first appear to be out of place. However, she can be construed as entirely at home in such an English garden setting (however simulated), for this is Ani Chokyi, the head of a prominent Tibetan-Sikkimese family, the owner of a number of businesses (including a brewery), and one of the richest women in Darjeeling. She and other members of her family (such as her adopted son Laden



Figure 13: Thomas Paar, full-length studio portrait of Ani Chokyi, albumen print, Darjeeling, 1890s.

La) were highly Anglophile. Such families spoke the English language, ate English-style food, decorated their homes in the English manner, and filled their gardens with English varieties of plants. Since Paar had a large range of different props and backdrops in his studio, his clients were able to select whichever they found most appropriate for the performance of self they chose to enact there. So rather than interpreting this photograph as an example of a European aesthetic imposed on a subaltern subject, we might deem it to be a document of Ani Chokyi's proud self-fashioning and a reflection of the hybridity of lifestyles in a colonial contact zone.

Ani Chokyi was clearly a woman of substance in her own right, but she was also the wife of one of the most experienced *pundits* in the employ

of the British government, Ugyen Gyatso. He is best known for accompanying Sarat Chandra Das on his secret journeys to Lhasa and for creating the first map of the Yamdrok Tso, a major lake in Tibet, in 1883. What is less well known is that Ani Chokyi accompanied Ugyen during the many months of a gruelling expedition that was designed to fill a void



Figure 14: Thomas Paar, "Tibetan Lady" (Ani Chokyi), hand-coloured postcard, Darjeeling, printed around 1900.

in the colonial cartographic record of the country that lay beyond British India's northern border. She was therefore a woman of determination and accomplishment with good reasons for wanting to be immortalised by Paar's camera. With her strong head for business, Ani Chokyi was also probably only too aware that her image might be used to signify ethnicity, gender, and religion if the photographer were to convert it into a postcard. This Paar did and sold it to Darjeeling visitors under the title *Tibetan Lady* (figure 14).

The transcultural photograph

Though small in number, these case studies reveal that a transcultural mode of engagement with photography was in operation in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Darjeeling. Certain individuals adapted the technology of the coloniser to suit their own purposes and crafted the visual equivalents of Pratt's "auto-ethnography." In Chris Pinney's discussion of a nineteenth-century photograph of a group of Sudanese men, he detects the transcultural in bodily demeanour and facial expressions, in which the subjects appear to register signs of disinterest and even resistance to the colonial camera (Pinney 2013, 35–37). Similar expressions of disdain can also be found in the visual records of Imperial India, including the Himalayan type postcards of the sort described in this essay. But by paying close attention to the specifics of the social contexts in which photographs came into being and their afterlives in circulation, collection and display, it may be possible to uncover other modes of interaction with the colonial camera in which, rather than being rejected, it was actually embraced. When studying the visual economy of Darjeeling it seems to me that "colonised" people articulated their relationships with family, friends, and other figures in their social networks in a manner not entirely dissimilar to that of the "colonials." Photographs taken by the likes of Thomas Paar could be used in indigenous contexts to forge social bonds, to augment prestige, to articulate religious authority, to evince beauty, and much else besides.

I was alerted to the pertinence of this notion, past and present, when I had the privilege of being introduced to the owner of the Windamere Hotel and its collection of photographs. Although the Windamere is now the most up-market hotel in Darjeeling, it was, and to some extent remains, a home. When I met Sherab Wangfel Tenduf La there in 2014, we toured the premises looking at the many prints that adorn its walls. For him they were family photographs, rather than decorations triggering colonial nostalgia in the minds of the hotel's customers. This was especially evident when we approached a large head-and-shoulders portrait of a Tibetan woman in the reception room where guests assemble to take high tea (in the English style, of course). Sherab paused and explained, with some emotion, that this was his great-grandmother Ani Chokyi. He confirmed this by pointing out that the mount framing the print had been inscribed with the words: "Rai Bahadurani Chokyi, our loving mother" in the handwriting of his great uncle, Sonam Wangfel Laden La. The image that Paar had reduced to "type" and sold as "Tibetan Lady" was in its rightful place and continuing to function (as its subject had probably intended) as an index of a beloved individual.

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Figures

- Fig. 1–5, 7, 9, 14: Author's collection.
 Fig. 6: Courtesy of David Churchill.
 Fig. 8: Courtesy of National Museums Liverpool.
 Fig. 10–13: Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

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