The Unaccustomed Vanishing Point

Procheta Olson

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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THE UNACCUSTOMED VANISHING POINT

A Thesis Presented

by

PROCHETA MUKHERJEE OLSON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2017

Art
THE UNACCUSTOMED VANISHING POINT

A Thesis Presented

by

PROCHETA MUKHERJEE OLSON

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DEDICATION

To Dane,

from Desolation Row.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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***
ABSTRACT

THE UNACCUSTOMED VANISHING POINT

MAY 2017

PROCHETA MUKHERJEE OLSON, B.A., CALCUTTA UNIVERSITY

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Susan Jahoda

The Unaccustomed Vanishing Point is an exhibition of miniature paintings and installations that explore the irregular and fluid terrains of multicultural exchanges in India. Although drawing heavily from Mughal and Persian painting traditions, the paintings are rife with allegories of the postcolonial history, politics, and visual and material culture of contemporary India in the age of globalization. The installations, on the other hand, navigate the intersection of sensory experience and memory while simultaneously examining the dynamics of transnational experiences. Together they map the overlapping boundaries of the personal and social to probe into the complex interplay of cultural hybridity, class, and identity.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: MEMORY, A FIELD OF INTENSELY CONTRADICTORY FORCES

"What does it mean to be a young person in Delhi today? It can mean waking up to an alarm clock made in China, downing a cup of tea from leaves first planted by the British, donning jeans designed in America and taking a Japanese scooter or a Korean car to get to an Indian college, where the textbooks might be printed with German-invented technology on paper first pulped in Sweden. The young Indian student might call his friends on a Finnish mobile phone to invite them to an Italian pizza or even what they think of as an Indian meal, featuring naan that came here from Persia, tandoori chicken taught to us by rulers from Uzbekistan and aloo and hari mirch that first came to India only 400 years ago from Latin America. (And the most desi thing of all, of course, is suspicion of anything foreign.” – Sashi Tharoor

"The best ethnographic fictions are, like Malinowski’s, intricately truthful, but their facts, like all facts in the human sciences, are classified, contextualized, narrated, and intensified.” - James Clifford, Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art.

There is a point in every person’s developing consciousness when shapes and colors start to sharpen into objects and places. Rhythms become customs, actions become behavior. We wake into this world as one wakes from a dream, gradually and then suddenly. I too found myself suddenly awakened to, and able to navigate a field of intensely contradictory forces. On one hand was the world of my grandmother and on the other, that of my parents. My grandmother’s world was quieter and firmly situated in the past whereas my parents’ world was modern and evolving as swiftly as India at the time. Colliding and colluding was the constant and massive presence of La Martiniere, Calcutta – the 19th century English medium school in which I was educated. Like restless planets that spin on their axes even as they revolve around the sun, these entities that danced with and around one another were by themselves charged confluences.

The Unaccustomed Vanishing Point is a collection of miniature paintings in oil and watercolor and a set of installations that draw from these experiences of complex and contradictory cultural dimensions. Together they explore the intersection of the personal and the social along with that of memory, ethnography, and imagination.

My Grandmother’s World: The Past Lingering in the Present

I cannot remember a time when I did not partly, if not at times fully, live in my grandmother’s house. Two blocks away from my parents’ little flat in South Calcutta, my maternal grandmother lived in a two-building apartment complex most likely to have been built in the 30s. The older of the two buildings betray a modest Art Deco accent and was almost fully occupied by a small community, the extended family of the landlord. The rest of the complex was occupied by a tight-knit community of more-or-less unassuming middle class families typical of that time. This community also consisted of a handful of domestic staff, many of whom still live there with their families. Not an unsurprising aspect of Indian culture, they locked up at night, washed cars, ran errands, humored my childhood ramblings, and sometimes when a poor, hungry thief was caught red handed, they let off some steam by taking justice into their own hands.

My grandmother was two years a widow when I was born. Introduced to my grandfather through her brother, they got better acquainted when he was asked to tutor her in preparation for her matriculation exams. So, they fell in love and ignored all boundaries of class and caste to start a new life together. But their class and caste histories were already out of sync when they met. He was a Brahmin boy from a village in Bengal. His family may have seen better, more aristocratic days but he had left, like many did in those days, in pursuit of English, table-manners, and professional success. He had left in search of

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³ Jon Lang, A concise history of modern architecture in India (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan Private Limited, 2010), 12.
Calcutta. She was not a Brahmin but born in the city, to one of the landed elite, with some of the urban flair of the early years of the 20th Century. Yet, the self-made boy from the village possessed a greater command of the foreigner’s language and manners, something that was commemorated long after he was gone. It would not be a sentimental exaggeration to say that he was never really gone. Like many Hindu homes, his portrait held prime real estate in the house, with a garland of fresh flowers encircling the frame. On special occasions his forehead (in the photograph) would be decorated with a tiny scrawl of ornamental motif, much like the design on the forehead of a Hindu bride or groom. My grandmother did this, as tradition would have it, with a freshly-made paste of sandalwood. However, when her hands started losing their steadiness and this awesome baton got passed on to me, we switched to a popular (and in those days, the only) brand of store-bought poster paint. On this altar also sat his thick, horn-rimmed spectacles and in the evenings when she went around the house waving fragrant incense at the statues and framed prints of Hindu Gods and Goddesses and murmuring prayers under her breath, she would stop in front of his portrait and give him the same respect.

Furthermore, every time I did something that fell below the standards of Bengali educated middle class etiquette, such as wasting food, refusing to study, or avoiding chores, I was quickly reminded that I wouldn’t have dared had he still been there. In the Indian society of the late 80s, I didn’t know too many men who helped with housework. Therefore, when it was mentioned that as soon as this Gandhian came home from work he’d head straight to the bathroom to wash himself and the clothes he wore that day, the intended lesson was twofold. Not only that “God helps those who help themselves” but also, “cleanliness is next to Godliness.” While his ideological stature was well established the thing that intensified his presence, through and even more so because of his absence, was their deeply passionate romance. Every idle afternoon, evening, and night my grandmother tenderly revealed treasured memories of how they met, the first years of their marriage, their movie dates (post-marriage of course), and how he liked it when she put silver pins in her hair, tightly wound in a glossy black bun. I remember

4 My grandmother was full of such idiomatic admonitions. Another favorite of hers was “Waste not, want not.”
the time he refused to drink his customary, after-work evening tea because she wasn’t home to share it with him. The time she ran out on the streets, her saree flowing behind her dramatically, when the envoy carrying the dead body of her favorite film star drove past their street. Did he roll his eyes behind a newspaper, slightly jealous? Though forbidden, I imagined how they might have kissed tenderly as I had begun to notice on snatches of Hollywood films I was too young to see. Finally, she never failed to repeat (probably when my parents bickered) how they would never fight in front of the kids. They would wait till they could drive off to the nearby lake where they could fight to their heart’s content without disturbing the imaginations of their children. This was one of my favorite stories and I conjured up every detail – the looks they might have exchanged over the dining table when they decided it was time, the heavy silence in the car, the passionate fight by the curved, concrete benches, a few of which you might still find on your walks by the lake. It had been whispered at home that when grandfather passed away she had given up on life (at least food and grooming) for three days, convinced that she too would be ‘taken’ any instant. Instead, she lived long enough to spend the next two decades writing poems to him, both in Bengali and English, on every anniversary of his birth and death. It was no small matter that these were grandly published in a tiny corner of a reputed Bengali newspaper and that bastion of English dailies, with its formidable blackletter font, The Statesman. The original manuscripts were, of course, neatly folded and kept before his photograph.

Vivid in my memory is being woken up day after day and dressed by my grandmother to go to school. Nearby, my older sister would appear, also getting ready to catch the same school bus. It was in the quiet of the hot afternoons, after school, when I lay with my head in the nook of her sleepy arm, that she imprinted on my imagination her life stories. As I listened, mouth slightly open and drooling, I envisioned every detail of their lives played out in that house. Gaston Bachelard suggests that “the house we were

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born in is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams." Emphasizing its organic connection with the time we spend in it daydreaming, he calls the home a center of imagination. How much more, then, when this house had the character of an age gone by, full of the nooks and corners in which stories hid.  

Typical of pre-independence homes, the rooms had tall ceilings punctuated with little openings of plastered latticework - for cross ventilation. There were three rooms, laid out in a straight line, one leading to another. The kitchen and bathroom had lower ceilings (closer to the 10 ft. we are used to although even shorter). This was because above them lay the dark unknown of the crawl space, made even more ominous by a locked, grilled gate. She told me about the time a relative, most likely one of my grandfather’s cousins visiting from the village, brought home an owl. For whatever reason, that owl ended up staying with them as a temporary pet, lurking in that crawl space whenever it wasn’t perched on top of their steel almirahs. On many sleepless nights, I would lay there and imagine that the owl was still there, its eyes staring at me through the unfriendly grill. I never managed to once climb into that space though I imagined it was full of hidden gems such as old family secrets. Once when they were cleaning out that space, someone tossed down a plastic bag full of old toys. In it were relics from my mother’s childhood: a plastic tea set, Victorian style. Time and space collapsed in that moment as the world of my English books and the surreal possibility of my mother once having been a child became evident through the tangible object in my hand. Every little detail in that house reeked of a different time. The light switches were fat, round, and stubborn. The ceiling fans heavy. The bathrooms were unglamorous, the kitchen sink made of stone, and between each door a raised, concrete threshold. However, the furniture was very modern. I remember the simple wood frame of the glass top coffee table. Its streamlined curves and art deco legs spreading out like the wings of an airplane. The art deco elements were most pronounced in the tall windows that lay enclosed in sturdy wooden shutters. With low, polished red cement seats and trellised grills, each window was crowned by a skylight. These skylights were color blocked with a simple geometric

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7 Ibid.
pattern of vivid crimson, blue, yellow, and green. Sometimes I would play house on these window seats and, at other times, I would hang off the grills pretending to be a bus conductor (the Calcutta kind), wanting nothing more than to be one in real-life.

These shuttered windows, tall ventilated ceilings, together with the polished, red cement floor peculiar to Bengali homes of that time, made the house a cool haven in hot summer afternoons. With the men at work and the older children at school, between domestic chores and worldly pursuits, my mother, grandmother, and aunts, rolled about on this icy cool floor, dripping gossip under a haze of post-carb drowsiness.

There was another house that emerged from my grandmother’s stories. It was the house in which she grew up. With checkered marble floors, ornately carved furniture, lush Victorian carpets, the fabled Belgium mirror, walls wrapped in wallpaper from the legendary Lazarus & Co., it performed the mythical grandeur of elite, Victorian Bengal.8 Again, my mind was stirred by images of the carriages in which her father would be driven to the banks of the Ganges for his pious morning bath and how my great-

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grandmother, a 9-year-old bride, fell asleep during her wedding because it was way past her bedtime. As my school bus rolled passed the spot where the house used to be, I pictured the half-digested lunch that might have spilled out of the guts of their pet dog who had been run over by those new motor vehicles. And finally, I will never forget that she still carried with her a little hurt for not being allowed to fulfill her childhood wish in that home – to at least once wear a pair of shorts, or “half-pant”, as we would say.

I spent one half of my formative years in the pre-liberalization, pre-internet age that still held old values and the other half in the post-liberalization, post-internet age. I still remember a time when my grandmother’s dishes were washed with ash (where the cleaning lady brought it from was a mystery to me). Water was brought in, by the same mashi, in buckets and kalsis (large water tumblers), from the neighborhood tube-well. These were poured into the mid-century relic of a water filter, or elaborately boiled, cooled, and strained before consumption. One clay tumbler always sat beside her bed on a Victorian doily, with an overturned steel glass straddling its graceful handmade neck. Years later, perhaps in my preteens, these got replaced by more sophisticated counterparts: the now ubiquitous Vim detergent bar and Aquaguard.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 2. Detail of Resemblance to Any Persons, Living or Dead**

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9 Mashi is the Bengali word for maternal aunt. In India it is the norm not to call elders by their first name. Even if you’ve just met them you’d normally address them with a familial title.
I address this split in my paintings repeatedly. In this detail of *Any Resemblance to Real Persons, Living or Dead*, the kitchen on the left of the image is dingy and unlike the modern, modular kitchens that are taking over upper middle class homes in India these days. The bags hanging over the calendar on the wall is reminiscent of pre-liberalization times in Calcutta when there weren’t any departmental stores and shopping carts were almost unheard of. Groceries were bought fresh every day from the neighborhood bazaar and that woven synthetic bag was a prominent feature of the marketing ritual. The red gas cylinder too is symbolic of state regulated amenities and the hanging wire file is a relic of the past when it was common to find piles of receipts crudely held together with a wire hanging from the kitchen wall. In sharp contrast, the room to the right is cast in the electronic glow of a computer and collaged with posters which become windows to the Western world. There are clothes strewn all around and the figure of a girl is seen wearing a lettered hoodie. Only the letter “U” is visible telling us it is a university sweatshirt typical of American universities and suggests the dreams that many educated young Indians dream of going abroad to study.

Despite the seemingly unsophisticated use of ash to clean dishes, my grandmother was one of the most elegant women I ever knew. Her sartorial style rarely deviated from the simple white cotton sari accented with an equally subtle gold chain and bangle. Her hands were always busy folding clothes, ironing, or making little dresses for my dolls. She was a voracious reader, and as is the case with many Bengali women of that time, she intimately loved, and was well-versed in, the works of the great Bengali bard, Rabindranath Tagore. My grandmother is most responsible for my vernacular imagination. She filled my head with the fascinating world of ancient folktales with an equally fascinating cast: sleeping princesses, angry sages, many-headed deities, and amnesic Kings. Born almost three decades before independence,

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10 Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a Bengali poet, playwright, and author. In 1913 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature - the first Asian to do so - for a celebrated collection of poems which he himself translated. His liberal and visionary ideas about education and culture had a prominent place in the conversations leading up to Independence and right after. He was knighted in 1915, an honor he resigned after the 1919 Jallianwalla Bagh massacre, as a protest against British policies in India.
she passed on to me her love of morality and a quiet sense of nationalism - or at least deeply moving stories about national heroes and songs that upheld the hard-bought freedom.

**My Parents: The Present Lingering in the Future**

Like many other children around me, I felt that every Indian adult’s moral compass seemed to perpetually quiver between academic devotion and financial redemption. Of course, my parents were bewildered by my average results. My engineer father, who worked in the Middle East, first in Syria and then until retirement, in a little U.A.E nowhere-town called Dibba, loved reminding me, “Arrey, you toh didn’t see our days of struggle.” Then, alluding to my older sister, “Now, didi knows what that was like.” And then finally, turning to my pretending-to-be-elusive mother, would ask, “Na go?” On cue, and without lifting her gaze, my mother would pipe in, “Hyan. Diaper kenar-o poysha chilo na.” Indeed. We didn’t even have money to buy diapers.

Figure 3. Detail of Palimpsest, Oil on Panel, 8” x 10”, 2016. Trincas is one of the legendary Park Street restaurants that features in the love story of many Bengali urban couples in the 70s
Having pressed through the financial hardships of his childhood with that fabled Indian weapon, the pristine report card, my father had made his way out of a small town, into the nation’s most competitive engineering college, finally landing in the urban space of Calcutta. It is there that my parents met and fell in love amidst Bengali theater, Bengali Neorealist cinema, Hollywood classics, Elvis Presley, jazzy Park Street restaurants, and communist slogans painted bold red on city walls. They married and within the first year, my mother was pregnant. To support this new family, and perhaps fulfill his already burning desire to make something of himself, he grabbed the first opportunity he got to go abroad. Thus, began his working relationship with cement plants in the Middle East. In contrast to my grandmother’s world, their sphere was constantly in motion.

As a child, one often fails to comprehend how young their parents actually are. It is only in hindsight that I could truly see them as individuals and appreciate the ruptures that have marked their, and by extension, our lives. Firstly, we were always in a long-distance relationship. Political strife in the region, the need for familial support in raising children, her own architecture career, and finally the guarantee of a “good English medium education” kept my mother back in India. As a result, we traveled back and forth, carving out our familial bond and identity against contestations of place and time. Secondly, my father who is deeply tied to the cultural expressions of his Bengali identity, felt intensely disconnected from his place of origin. The isolation and barren geography of factory locations didn’t help. Thirdly, this diasporic extension introduced new ideas of consumerist self-expression to our imagination: technological innovation in the form of electronic goods, home comfort, food packaging/branding, toys, and stationery. At a time when these things were rarely, if at all, available in India we became familiar with double-sided tape, highlighter pens, post-it notes, microwave ovens, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, liquid detergent, canned coke, sliced cheese, and tetra pack milk cartons. We also picked up the language of brand logos: McDonalds, Pepsi, Wendy’s, KFC, etc.
In the painting *Dreaming of the West*, I show these objects and innovations in a domestic space, creeping up like a climber plant against the wall of a staircase. However, the place is topsy-turvy and it’s hard to tell which is the right side up since the stairs seem to go up but the floor and door frame is turned sideways. Each object is very small in scale but nonetheless they are depicted in great detail. The delicate, jewel-like quality of these objects wrapped in tendrils juxtaposed with their uniform scale which reduces the size of a dishwasher to that of a milk carton, and the flatness of the surrounding space strikes a fine balance between a fetishization of these goods and a rejection of them. Eventually, we were slowly able to afford some of these items, and on occasion bring them back to India, where they embodied very different cultural values. Another dimension of our dual existence was that objects such as powder milk and canned luncheon meat, were attributed with a higher value in India than in a place like America. Finally, the cultural specificity of a rural Gulf town came with a set of social/public rules that we constantly switched in and out of.

These diasporic influences were constantly contested by our emotional and social attachment to Calcutta. Similarly, my parents’ identity as the young, modern urban middle class of India in the 80s was always in play with their traditions and the resulting contradictory social spheres. For example, through anecdotes and recollections, my mother nurtured the narrative of her Bengali medium education as a defining factor of her identity. Her intimate social circles were wrought in the vernacular and grounded in colloquial
parlance. Yet, having inherited it from her father she insisted on passing on to me the language of fine
dining etiquette: crossed fork and knife to indicate you’re still working on your plate, placed together at
the side to indicate you’re done. She also insisted I know the difference between a serviette, a
handkerchief, tissue, and paper napkin. On one hand, they were very active in the social spheres of their
inherited Hindu religion, on the other, they treated all organized religions with skepticism. My father, who
is perhaps most skeptical of the blind recitation of mantras delighted in challenging my memory of the
Sanskrit sun salutation. One day my mother would be the image of a Bengali wife at Durga puja festival -
red bordered white sari, vermillion smeared on her cheeks, next day she would be navigating a world of
concrete, pipes, electric channels, and scaffoldings, single-handedly managing the difficult egos of
Calcutta construction workmen.

The imagery in my painting A Tryst with Destiny draws generously from the meeting point of these two
worlds. The checkered floors, arches, and ornamental moldings. are reminiscent of old Colonial Bengali
houses like the one my grandmother grew up in. The houses are crowded together to create a mix of
modern and old architecture. Above the roof of a house on the left one can get a glimpse into the
neighbor’s house where a ceiling fan hangs and is evocative of my parents’ flat which stood in close
quarters to surrounding ones. Billboards selling underwear and Coca Cola raise their heads beside a
patchwork of various types of architecture, both historic and modern. Under their shadow a group of
ladies, like those in a few of my mother’s circle of friends, sit around a spread of tea and cakes enjoying
high tea in the manner of the English. These personal recollections are woven into the larger social fabric.
In one room, a person can be seen trying to sleep fully ignoring the erotic scene on his laptop. On his
walls, there is a Trotsky poster and beside him a famous Bengali book by Tagore. Together they show the
confluence of cultures that drive the Bengali intellectual and suggest the intersection of the revolutionary
turns in Bengal’s history and its interests in literature.
One of my favorite activities in Nursery School was singing. It was not singing itself that held my attention, but that we assembled in big circles and pantomimed every song. Two fingers perked up behind the head for Peter Rabbit and an imaginary curvy woman for Bonnie, who forever lay over the ocean like the fair maiden in Keats’ Grecian Urn. There was also the very emphatic questioning hand gesture that is peculiar to India, to ask “how much is that doggie in the window - bow wow.” What made me look forward to singing was that every now and then there would be a song about night-time at an English country farm. The pantomime ritual around this song gave me the much-loved opportunity to lay down and steal a 30 second nap.

Even at the age of three, I was not a morning person. But that is when my journey with La Martiniere began. Roll no 88/106. The number is burned in my memory. Lest I forget, it reminds me that the year was 1988, the same year that my father moved to the United Arab Emirates. I stayed at La Martiniere till
2003, which is when I graduated at age 18. A lot changed in India during that span but, even so, the historic school kept its tryst with time.

Figure 6. Sleeping Again, Watercolor on Archival Paper, 6” x 4", 2017.

The specificity of La Martiniere’s colonial roots lie in the fact that it was founded by a soldier in the East India Company. Major General Claude Martin was a Frenchman from Lyon who came to India on the French side but through a chain of historic events, landed up with the British. As the school motto of Labore-e-Constantia might suggest, accounts of his life are consistent in portraying a philanthropic man who energetically pursued creative and intellectual work – ranging from constructing lavish palaces to hot air balloons. These accounts also suggest that Martin acted as a mediator between key Company figures and the reigning prince of Awadh where he was posted. In fact, he fell so in love with Lucknow, in Awadh, that he was willing to accept a Captain’s salary in exchange for being allowed to remain there. Soon after he left the Company’s service and stayed on in Lucknow as a full-time employee of the Nawab of Awadh. Upon his death in 1800 he bequeathed a bulk of his large fortune to the founding of three schools for boys and girls: one each in Lyon, Lucknow, and Calcutta. After several legal debates over the interpretation of his will, in which his own Christian faith was questioned and challenged, the Calcutta school in which I studied was opened in 1836, although only to Europeans and Eurasian Christians. This direction is at odds with the rest of Martin’s will which detailed instructions for the life-long care of his
non-Christian companion, dependents, and employees.\textsuperscript{11} It also conflicts with his explicit instructions regarding the interest that would be generated from his donation, which were to be given in equal portions to “the poor of all persuasions whether Christians, Mussulmans, or Hindoos, inhabitants of Calcutta, Lucknow, and Chandernagore.”\textsuperscript{12} After several attempts made between 1850 and 1918, the school finally started admitting non-Christian, Indian students in 1935 – a move, which a contemporary newspaper describes as one that would have been heartily welcomed by the founder had he been alive.

The Lucknow school, housed in Martin’s final and epic building project, is enormous in its scale and aesthetic scope. However, while the Calcutta school building cannot match its arcade of sculpted lions, angels, and pillars, it is impactful precisely because of its fine balance between grandeur and simplicity. The physical experience of being in this environment had a peculiar effect on my imagination. It wasn’t that its neoclassical structure was a surprising phenomenon - the inheritance of Calcutta comes with ample Corinthian columns and pediments. Even when one doesn’t have access to them their visibility is undeniable. But unlike many of these structures that are in a state of decay or being used in ways that are incompatible with their original use, La Martiniere’s interiors are manicured and congruent with its customs. Of course, to greater or lesser degrees this is true of several other English medium schools and colleges of Calcutta. The clubs and racecourses too have preserved their physical as well as complex social structure.

The specificity of La Martiniere’s architectural influence is located in the quality and quantity of time I spent on its grounds. I was initiated into this space at an early age and my experience of the place was augmented by an everyday performance of its rituals. Is it not peculiar to start wearing a uniform at three and then continue wearing the same uniform till one comes of age at fifteen? Even as the uniform changed for Class XI and XII, the code remained the same: black hair ties only, polished black regulation


\textsuperscript{12} Samuel Charles Hill, \textit{Life of Claud Martin, Major-general In the Army of The Honourable East India Company (Classic... Reprint)} (S.L.: Forgotten Books, 2016), 89.
shoes, spotless white socks to match the spotless white uniform, no makeup, no nail polish, no jewelry, no missing school belt, badge, and P. T. skirts down to where the middle-finger touched the legs (which of course were hiked up after school).

Figure 7. Lining Up on Either Side and Waiting For The Boys to Ask at The School Socials, Watercolor on Archival Paper, 6”x4”, 2017.

Figure 8. Singing Grace at the Founder’s Day Dinner, Watercolor on Archival Paper, 6”x4”, 2017.
Moreover, there were houses, flags, school songs, eulogies, canticles, toasts, and dances. Also, peculiar was the spatial dynamic of reciting the School Prayer at morning assembly, in a chorus of 1,440 students at a given time, in a quiet, large hall while creaking fans whirred and distant traffic beeped outside.

La Martiniere’s architecture also provided a colonial grandeur and mystery coincident with the books I was reading. The imagined communities I gained through books like Malory Towers, Little Women, Pride and Prejudice, etc., were hungering to be rooted in a congruent geography. Outside, the multiple worlds of modern India were at odds with each other but within the arched vaults of the school there was a seamlessness that accommodated my imagination.

Additionally, the old school buildings with their wide, open, green fields, trellised porticos, humongous columns, tall ceilings, secret tunnels, haunted wooden stairways, dark corridors, and padlocked rooms provided “the dramatic tension between the aerial and the terrestrial” that Bachelard refers to in the

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*Bachelard et al., The Poetics of Space*
Poetics of Space. As I drifted away from textbooks that almost never held my attention, my solitude and boredom turned to daydreams that lingered in the nook between the last pillar and the wall, and the hollow at the head of the sloping wooden desks that once held inkpots. It became the house that let me dream in peace.

My everyday bus ride to school started with lanes of broken brick, women washing their clothes on the sidewalk while their children played beside them, and little banyan tree saplings growing in the crevices of old aristocratic homes collaged with billboards. The architecture did not make sense. The promised glamor of the billboards didn’t add up. The ancestors, both native and foreign, who oversaw the aesthetic order, had left their posts. Modernity had taken over and it was growing fast, verticality over verticality, little matchbox offices over little matchbox flats, with clothing, washing, drying on racks in balconies where pigeons shat and husbands smoked. Even immediately outside the school stood a Hallmark gift store and a renowned bakery amidst electric boxes splattered in betel juice and Bollywood posters, around which, men urinated. In the evenings when the pee stank, flies buzzed around the matted heads of the homeless who sniffed the glue off the posters. To the left, the road that was once a ditch to keep off Northern invaders, bellowed with the type of incessant honking that is peculiar to India.

How does one describe this school and its band of loyal alumni united by shared traditions? Do I call it a colonial school? Surely, three of the four school houses are named after important Englishmen, even the infamous Macaulay. The school insignia has an East India Company ship engraved on it. School dances and Founder’s Day dinner comprise archaic rituals, the latter including a song that cries, “Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us...” (Whose fathers?) In fact, it is the only school in the world to have received Royal Battle Honors for the role it played against the native rebels in the First War of Independence, 1857. Then in 1942 the Boys School in Calcutta was evacuated, and shifted to its Lucknow counterpart, to accommodate British, American, and Indian troops who were retreating from North

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
Eastern Front in its battle with Japan. Yet, it is here that the seed of national identity that my grandmother instilled in me was nurtured. It is here that I learned to say, “India is my country. All Indians are my brothers and sisters...” and it is here that I bristled with indignation when I read about a young Gandhi being thrown off a very racist train.

Figure 10. Enacting the Quit India Movement in a School Play, Watercolor on Archival Paper, 6”x4”, 2017.

It is here that I played a random protester in a Quit India Movement reenactment and here that I first participated in the corporate singing of the national anthem. Do I call it Christian? Certainly, we prayed in

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16 Derek Morris, "Martiniere Memories 1938-1945," Old Martinians Association (Inc.) Western Australian Branch Newsletter 24 (September 1991)
Christ’s name at morning assembly and through some hymns I got a vague sense of His person. Once a year there was a special prayer service at a nearby church but unlike several other English-medium schools there was no regimented Bible reading nor were there any nuns and fathers parading around.

Finally, do I call it that thing that it has been called the most, the thing it is most likely to be guilty of: an elite institution? Certainly, the institution has taken great care in curating a certain type of identity that functions as cultural capital.\(^\text{17}\) In a nation that is obvious in its failure to ensure that every child goes to school, a school with the added frills of tradition and the luxury of a well-rounded liberal education is most definitely a privilege. However, the sentiment behind these traditions was constantly at war with the uninhibited consumerism that was spreading across the city during my time. Therefore, narratives that totalize the image of La Martiniere as an elite school gloss over the lived experiences of its individuals who experienced this contradiction between brand-mania that their parents could afford and notices from the school that rebuked the display of branded goods. They also wrongly convict the position of the low to middle income members who either made great sacrifices to send their kids to this school or were beneficiaries of Martin’s trusts. I have recently been made aware of the ridiculous amount of influence and “donations” that are required to get into La Martiniere these days but I have also heard that by middle class standards, the fees weren’t exorbitant in the 80s nor the admission process unjust. Most importantly, in my personal experience I never felt very elite. While the dominion of the business-rich Marwaris in the elite social spheres of Calcutta is a widely acknowledged fact, I felt that it was particularly intense in my Section (each class typically being divided into three sections), the derivative, “bong”, from Bengali, being used to mock anything from oiled hair, to studiousness, to rice-eating.

In the series of miniature water color paintings on paper, I trace the conflicting cultural dimensions of my experience in La Martiniere and capture the effect of its dramatic architecture. The painting *Crying Home Through Boys’ School Because That Boy Spread Those Vicious Rumors About Me* captures the universal

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quality of teenage life and shows how these unfurled against the backdrop of a monumental architecture. Does the architecture appear indifferent to the figure’s angst or consoling?

Figure 11. Crying Home Through Boys’ School Because That Boy Spread Those Viscous Rumors About Me, Watercolor on Archival Paper, 6”x4”, 2017.
Other everyday events occur on this stage, like the ritualistic Wednesday haircut for the boys from the school barber which was essentially punishment for not meeting uniform regulations. It also shows the strange familial yet competitive relationship between the boys’ school and the girls’ school which, despite following the same code and history, were separated not only by a physical wall but also the adolescent haze of othering between the sexes.

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It is in this world of hybridity that my journey begins. I became a site of reception for these cultural productions, a witness, but also an agent. And from this the work flows – drawing its language from the argotic vocabulary peculiar to a cultural cross breed.
“I existed in New York, but I lived in India, taking little memory trains. The fields at dusk. Birds flying home overhead, your car stopping by the side of the road and you getting out. Noticing minute things again: the complexity of the gnarled peepal tree by the roadside, the ants making their way around it. It is warm and close and humid... Dinner is waiting in the city, at the house of your aunt” - Suketu Mehta, Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found.  

“My friends had forsaken the seaside rocks in front of our building, which a shantytown had completely taken over, for the attractions of a video-game parlour. The palace in the compound downstairs, which had become a girls’ school, had sprouted an extra storey. I resented this. We need to have the rooms of our childhood preserved intact, the same pictures on the wall, the bed in the same corner, the sunlight come in at the same angle at the same time of day. I felt that this room had been let out to a boarder, and I could never move back in. I was no longer a Bombayite; from now on, my experience of the city would be as an NRI, a non-resident Indian. But even when I was living there. There were whole worlds of the city that were as foreign to me as ice fields of the Arctic or the deserts of Arabia.” - Suketu Mehta, Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found.

I didn’t know it at the time but on Independence Day, 2007, I had left India. There is an India that I cannot sever myself from. It has happened and cannot be undone. The India that I left behind, that is happening without me, even as I pass through it, is not wholly mine. There is a house by the corner of our street that belonged to the family of a boy named Joy. I spent many Sunday evenings during high school, sitting on the stoop outside with neighborhood friends. Sometimes we drank vodka inside and for a brief period while the two of us chatted on the phone all night, I saw the glare of his cellphone from my terrace three houses away, and he saw mine. Within a year or two he died in a motorcycle accident; it felt surreal to think he was still in his teens and that he once had a crush on me. Probably moved by pain or to make more money, his parents have rented out the front room to an overpriced French Bengali designer boutique. This new manifestation does not mean anything to me.

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19 Ibid., 11.
I would like to be rich so that I can always go home. Will it always be home? Even when I have kids? Every
time I do go home, I catch more India with the India I know. This is easy. I speak its body-language, I speak
its clothes. I speak the holes on its clothes. I even speak the latest, clip-on gamcha bow tie because the
internet showed me and I knew enough India to read it quickly. Besides, there were signs telling its
coming long before I left. This new is not new.

Until that day in August when I left, my memory had mostly concerned itself with people. The first injury,
the first break up, the first kiss. Like cheesy daydreams in 80’s Bollywood films in which rooms full of
people dissolve into a technicolor blur while the hero and heroine dance, these memories were larger
than their places. But now being uprooted from its native geography, my body has folded back in on itself,
finding through the mind in memories of places, well-trodden paths. Bachelard says about memory and
inhabited spaces, that when we go to live in a new house an entire past comes with us. As these
memories of our past-dwelling places get relived through daydreams, an "immemorial domain" opens up
where "memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for the mutual deepening of the
other." When I first arrived in the U.S. I lived in Boston. The heady mix of Anglican facades with dirty
corners, noisy intersections that were once sites of historic bloody massacres, and the promenaded
harbor was close to home. The commonality was in the essence of the city - I was in a different culture
but having grown up in a big, historic city with a metro in its belly, I was not out of my element. In fact,
the commonality added novelty to the difference. It is when I moved to the noiseless horizontality of
western Massachusetts that I felt I needed that immemorial domain, to reiterate the “spatial practices”
that were determined in childhood.

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21Bachelard et al., The Poetics of Space
In *Space and Place*, Yi-Fu Tuan defines place as pause if space is that which allows movement, adding that each pause in movement, therefore, has the capacity to transform location into place.\(^{23}\) The abstract spaces of my memory, then, become places as they are valorized through repeated recollections, marking out the area of my fieldwork.

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“Ultimately my topic is a pervasive condition of off-centeredness in a world of distinct meaning systems, a state of being culture while looking at culture... A modern “ethnography” of conjunctures, constantly moving between cultures, does not, like its Western alter ego “anthropology,” aspire to survey the full range of human diversity of development. It is perpetually displaced, both regionally focused and broadly comparative, a form both of dwelling and of travel in a world where the two experiences are less and less distinct.” - James Clifford, *Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*\(^{24}\)

“An objects or place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind. Long residence enables us to know a place immediately, yet its image may lack sharpness unless we can also see it from the outside and reflect upon our experience. Another place may lack the weight of reality because we know it only from outside - through the eyes as tourists, and from reading about it in a guidebook.” - Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*\(^{25}\)

Trinh Ti Minhà has famously defined the position of the insider who is an outsider, a position in which the roles of the native informant and the participant observer, or translator, collapse. She suggests that “the moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside.”

\(^{23}\) Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and place: the perspective of experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
\(^{25}\) Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, 18.
Like an outsider, she steps back and finds things that as an insider she would have never considered worth recording or showing. Clifford Geertz describes the latter as “experience-near,” concepts which, being bound up in the unconscious of lived experience, are not suspected to be “concepts” at all.\textsuperscript{26} At the same time, unlike an outsider, “she also resorts to non-explicative, non-totalizing strategies that suspend meaning and resist closure.” Operating in a similar manner, I can identify visual clues from the inside and interpret them from the outside, and vice versa. \textit{The Unaccustomed Vanishing Point} is such an exercise: “a continuous tacking between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of events.”\textsuperscript{27}

In contemplating James Clifford’s’ concerns about the authenticity of cultural representation in view of my own ethnographic work three things come to mind. One, what could better meet the requirement of “intensive fieldwork” than the authenticity of unconsciously lived experience.\textsuperscript{28} The ethnographic depictions in my artwork is based on firsthand experience. Moreover, in my artwork the distance between “fieldnotes” and interpretation collapses as the line between the self and other is blurred. Being my own

\textsuperscript{27} Clifford, \textit{The Predicament of Culture}, 33.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 24.
native informant, the translation of cultural events happens simultaneously with their experience. Furthermore, this line between the depicted other and the ethnographer is particularly non-existent such as when the site of fieldwork is my own memory. Three, being visual in nature my ethnographic work is more likely to support multiple interpretations - “indigenous readers will decode differently the textualized interpretations and lore.”29 Such readings can create further hybrid ethnographies which can be superimposed onto this ethnography.

Of course, Clifford cites Bakhtin’s views on the polyphonic novel, such as Dickens’ and Dostoevsky’s fiction. “For Bakhtin,” Clifford writes, “preoccupied with the representation of non-homogeneous wholes, there are no integrated cultural worlds or languages. To posit such abstract unities are constructs of monological power. A ‘culture’ is, concretely, an open-ended, creative dialogue of subculture, of insiders and outsiders, of diverse factions. A “language” is the interplay and struggle of regional dialects, professional jargons, generic commonplaces, the speech of different age groups, individuals, and so forth.” How much more, then, will the restless flows of global cultures which I evoke in my paintings resist totalized depictions. Therefore, they appear as curious collections of fragments, competing and coexisting with each other.

To successfully reveal the intricate junctures of cultural hybridity in my personal experiences (both as a child between the three colliding worlds and then as a transnational citizen), as well as the broader narratives of India, I have employed what Clifford calls “ethnographic surrealism” - a theory and practice of juxtaposition. Like the traditional fieldworker, the surrealist works in “defamiliarized cultural reality” (their exotic worlds such as Paris) but unlike the former, who strives to make the unfamiliar familiar, the surrealist makes the familiar strange.

29 Clifford, The Predicament of Culture, 52; Geertz, “From the Native's Point of View,” 43-44.
Operating in a similar manner, I subvert my now familiar experience of the West and make it unfamiliar in the painting *Dreaming of the West*. I reached back into my store of memories of what I exoticised when I didn’t have any unmediated experience of this world, and supplemented these findings with accounts gathered from others who have made a similar move to the West. The painting depicts a patchwork of topsy-turvy images associated with the appeal of the West. I have already talked about the mysterious, exotic appeal of the consumer goods that appear to the right of the painting. In another section, the cozy interiors of a traditional colonial parlor opening out to a scene such as can be found in early American folk paintings is symbolic of the exoticized view of the large, open, lush landscapes of the Western countryside, often resulting from films like Sound of Music. Through a window, which also challenges the inscription of “inside” and “outside”, a stereotypical image of “white Christmas” can be seen - an iconic feature in imaginations of the West. Unfurling through another section is a messy jungle of beautiful,
ornamental flowers in bright colors, growing in and out of a typical street-side, French cafe promising the luxury of time and the association with images seen in films. In a dark, blue, carpeted bedroom the figure of Tupac is seen appearing behind the shadows of a gilded Baroque bed. A strange concoction of the familiar and strange, it alludes to the way narratives surrounding gangster rap taking place thousands of miles away get adopted into the imagination of Indian youths, who fervently follow them. Finally, interwoven are the now mundane roads with neatly painted lanes that appear like ornamental borders.

![Figure 15. Installation View of While You Were Away](image)

I also address this dynamic relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar in the installation *While You Were Away*. This work is a culmination of a collaborative project with an American friend, Emily Griswold, who lives in my hometown in India. Every day for a month we recorded our initial experiences of the place that we had just moved to. These impressions are inscribed on objects that are peculiar to this new place, something we hadn’t seen in our country of origin. By conjuring up the surprise we felt while navigating what is now a familiar cultural terrain, we deconstruct and examine the process of our assimilation. In this manner, we hope to create a consciousness of similarity and difference while also showing how personal narratives act as gateways into the larger collective. Moreover, depending on who
the viewer is or where this installation is shown, what is expected to be unfamiliar becomes familiar and that which is expected to be familiar appears strange. Through a constant interplay of similarity and difference, the here and the elsewhere is mapped in a manner befitting the shifting “scapes” of “global modernity.”

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The formal qualities of the paintings also become storytellers of cultural connections and differences. Although miniature in scale and closely following the format of Eastern traditions of miniature art they also follow tenets of Western oil painting. While the color palette is as bright as their native counterparts, the surface is frequently textured with brush strokes typical of oil paintings. The flatness of space pulls the paintings to their eastern roots, while the surface tension of the raised layers of oil paint pull them away from the smooth surfaces of eastern miniatures. On the other hand, the miniature watercolors depicting my memories of school conjure up fragments of memories that hover in the undefined and unbounded spaces of the imagination. Rendered in delicate pastels they appear ethereal and ephemeral. Like Clifford’s model of ethnographic surrealism these paintings do not attempt to hide their cuts and sutures.

The cultural assemblages in my paintings juxtapose a heteroglossia of symbols systems. Places become props and props become places, repositories of cultural production. Posters appear repeatedly, almost always of Western influence and almost always tattered. They remind us that “the familiar turns up in the ends of the earth.” In the painting, Wait, What You Don’t Know Madonna, it is the tattered image of Harry Belafonte on a wall, an ominous glint in his eyes eerily suggesting a subterranean other of felt reality. Another tattered poster, this time of Sinatra, appears in the painting Palimpsest. There are others in the body of work: a Justin Bieber pin up, a Trotsky poster, a peppy reminder on the walls of a call center.

31 Geertz, “From the Native's Point of View,” 26-45
32 Clifford, The Predicament of Culture
with the words ‘Team’ and ‘Inspire’, a Coca Cola billboard, an underwear ad, a billboard selling Fair and Lovely, then another, with something printed in Hindi, partially covered.

I do not have to go far to create juxtapositions of architecture in telling the story of India. I do not have to interrupt and reverse the flow of realism to reveal the surreal. It is already a collage, an assemblage of cultural signifiers. Antilia, the iconic 570 ft. tall residence of the Ambanis, appears twice with its crazy geometry and even crazier implications - allegedly, a domestic staff of 600, 3 helipads, 50-person movie theater, hanging gardens, and ice rooms - once in the Tryst with Destiny and then again in Palimpsest. It towers over the architectural relics of older cultural processes and symbols of mass-produced modernity. There are Mughal arches, old Calcutta terraces, imagined French cafes, and call centers. Gaudy, bright green walls inside a tiny room remind us that the last place we saw that was in a tiny dark room in a slum.

Privacy is the binding up of space through the construction of place. Without a boundary, there is no difference between the inner and the outer, the personal and public. In the city, the ground belongs to someone else. The sky is free but sometimes it pours. Privacy is a luxury that we take for granted. In these paintings, the private is sometimes turned inside out. Walls disappear and yet through the sutures of juxtaposition the space is made clear.

Traditional Mughal painting employs borders to bind up space. Although these paintings are generously informed by the pictorial format of Mughal and Persian miniatures, I sometimes subvert the traditions by situating them in a more contemporary context. In the series of portraits depicting the changing dynamic of the service sector in urban India, I use the language of mass-printed, machine-made gift wrappers and the visual economy of packed gifts and goods to depict the borders. In the painting Palimpsest, the border is generated by the places within. It is the negative space of worlds in motion.
In *Verily I say Unto Thee* there is a delicate balance between the flatness of the border and the flatness within. However, a stark contrast appears between the quiet idleness of the private and the crowded interplay of elements in the public. In *Any Resemblance*... the border disappears entirely while the space within erupts into places. Finally, the flattened perspective is significant because of its historic position in Indian art. Criticized by Europeans, whose ability to realistically render three-dimensional space was just as awe-inspiring to native Indian artists, it is an indexical reference to pre-colonial identity. It is also emblematic of my ethnographic approach, which encourages the viewer to comprehend a wide range of conflicting social realities rather than to assume a fixed position in the viewing of culture.
Figure 17. Verily I Say Unto Thee, Oil on Panel, 8”x10”, 2016.
Growing Up in The Middle of The Land

I may have been three, or I may have been four, when my Nursery school teacher asked my mother if we spoke English at home. My mother admitted that although they did I mostly lived with my grandmother who didn’t. Concerned, the teacher made a suggestion that bordered on a warning - “Make sure you do.” Two or three years later, when they started teaching the Bengali alphabet, I was behind. It looked like all the other Bengali kids had been learning the script at home, but not me! Confused and embarrassed, I looked around. Everyone seemed to know what they were doing but, to me, the letters just looked like squiggly drawings - an alien language. So, now, my Bengali teacher called my older sister who went to the
same school and with serious concern, declared it imperative I learn half the alphabet by next class.

There began the battle between Bengali and English in my life. I once heard an anecdote about a man, who, when he met Rabindranath Tagore at a party, apologized, “I am sorry I am speaking in English; my Bengali is not so good.” To this, the poet gave a characteristically facetious response: “Apnar engriji toh khub bhalo na.” (I see your English is not that remarkable either.) In the land of the Bengali educated middle class, there was an unspoken expectation to be great at both. To be 100% Bengali (or Indian) and 100% English. To know the order of forks and knives, and to also know how to sit cross-legged on the floor, on your birthday, while your grandmother decorated your forehead with sandalwood, while someone blew a conch shell, to celebrate the occasion. The home was an irrational terrain; two worlds
each competing for its own hold. But school was firmly fixed. When we had to be excused to go to the toilet, we had to prove that we knew the difference between “May I” and “Can I” and even during “free periods” it was strongly suggested we refrained from speaking in the vernacular.

Even to this day my father doesn’t fail to wryly comment that one of the worst mistakes he ever made was to send us to an English medium school. He laments, “the problem is, you kids think in English and then translate to Bengali. We think in Bengali and then translate to English” Regrettably, despite all of my conscious efforts to relearn and refill the gaps in my cultural knowledge, I will likely always err on the side of ignorance.

Closing to The Beginning

I was recently reading about these Sanskrit scholars who spent years mastering the complex language but faced a dim future because they had no English language skills. It reminded me of the rich society people who have frequently been made fun of because of their mispronunciations in English. Where did this begin? Almost all scholarship about the dominion of the English language in India cite Thomas Babington Macaulay’s infamous minute on education as a definitive starting point. Spilling out of the hallowed confines of academia, scraps and pieces still get passed around on the internet in the form of graphic memes, usually highlighting the most shocking, the most conceited parts of his peroration. Years ago, when I had first encountered the quotations I too had felt rage, and confusion. After all, one of our school houses was named Macaulay and year after year, a section of La Martiniere for Girls fell into neat columns of yellow pleated skirts for march past, or at my time, on the field where they effortlessly beat the other houses. In a curious childhood way, it seemed justified, then, that our playground taunt for this house was “yellow, yellow, dirty fellow.” It therefore became an important part of my studio research to find out

how this history fits with my own experiences of cultural contradiction as well as my interest in revealing the complex dimensions of class and culture.

When the Parliament of the United Kingdom renewed its charter for the East India Company in 1813, it provided a fund for developing the education of Indians. Preoccupied with wars, treaties, and debt settlement at the time, the Company was reluctant to take on this responsibility. Initially the Committee of Public Instruction in Bengal, established in 1823, pursued a bifurcated path: promoting English on one hand while simultaneously fostering Arabic and Sanskrit learning, on the other. But by 1820s a considerable Anglicist faction stood in opposition to the Orientalists. In fact, in 1834 the ten members of the Committee was equally divided into the two groups.

It is in the context of this impasse that Macaulay’s infamous Minute is situated. While the general stance of his rhetoric is clear, he goes back and forth between talking about common dialects that are “so poor and rude” and Arabic and Sanskrit, which had its own hierarchical specificity. He reluctantly grants credit to Eastern poetry but in his verdict, he concludes that the oriental languages are unsuitable for scientific or historical work, in the latter, not even measurable to his Saxon and Norman predecessors. At a time when nationalism has taken problematic turns in contemporary India it feels vain and superfluous to add to the monumental, although sometimes legitimate, claims of India’s past. It is interesting to note, though, that at a much later date, when India was writing its constitution at the threshold of independence the Drafting Committee rejected a petition to have the official version of the constitution be written in Hindi on the grounds that “English was better placed to incorporate the technical and legal terms of the document.”

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35 Ibid.
Another charge that Macaulay makes is against the intersection of Oriental languages, especially Sanskrit, and the religion it propagated. He negates an education that focuses on teaching youths “how they are to purify themselves after touching an ass or what texts of the Vedas they are to repeat to expiate the crime of killing a goat.” He also reminds his audience that Indians themselves had been desiring an education in English. These two points, in fact, intersect in the cultural processes leading up to Macaulay’s speech. In the late 20s and early 30s of the nineteenth century, Young Bengal was already revolting against the conventions of traditional Hinduism, against idolatry and the priesthood. In her essay ‘Young India: A Bengal Eclogue,’ Rosinka Chaudhuri cites the following illustration from the writings of Peary Chand Mitra:

Peary Chand Mitra comments on these young men’s penchant for ‘ridiculing the Hindu religion’, citing instances when, ‘they were required to utter mantras or prayers, [but instead] repeated lines from the Iliad. There were some who flung (sic) the Brahminical thread instead of putting it on.’ One of the newspapers of the period memorably accused the youth of this generation of ‘cutting their way through ham and beef and wading to liberalism through tumblers of beer.’

The dialectic and discursive nature of painting is apt for addressing these collisions of language, class, and religion that continue to this day. The interpretive range of visual imagery allows me to present multiple facets within one painting, enabling me to make a nuanced commentary on the history and social realities of India. In my painting Palimpsest, one can see the ghost of a Macaulay-like figure casting an ominous shadow on depictions of a socio-political landscape that is already complicated by the politics of fairness creams, billionaires’ homes, and the much-debated holy cow grazing in the distance. A contrast can also be seen in the languages of the billboards. These cross-cultural contradictions collapse in a single icon,

37 Young Bengal was a nomenclature given to a group of notorious Bengali students from the Hindu College, around the 1820s and early 30s. Also known as Derozians, after their radical teacher Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, they excitedly challenged Hindu orthodoxy with ideas gained from their liberal, western education.

such as the image of the English daily, *The Hindu*, being read by a man in the midground.

Figure 20. Palimpsest, 8”x10”, Oil on Panel, 2016.
The push for English language was not solely the Englishman’s concern. Ten years prior, one of the most important and contentious figures of 19th century Bengali society, Rammohun Roy, had started energetically pursuing reforms in Hinduism and education of Indians. In the imagination of the modern Bengali woman he holds a special place as they remember the “long and protracted battle” he fought against Sati, the Hindu custom of widow immolation. The intention of Roy and others like him was “to be informed of everything that the English gentleman learnt,” taking from it “that which they found good and liked best.”

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39 Chaudhuri, introduction, 1-16.
40 Ibid.
Roy, and other Indians who welcomed the English language were celebrated bilinguals, moving easily in and out of both languages. My own experiences of bilingualism are echoed in the language of my painting in which I marry the grammar of Eastern miniature paintings and Western oil painting. Traditional Mughal and other Indian miniature paintings have been painted in watercolor on paper and are populated with indexical references to contentious political histories. Amidst scatterings of peripheral quotidian activities, such as a mother breastfeeding her baby or a dog perking its ear up to a strange sound at night time, these histories unfold through a play of space and scale. Figures that are more important are bigger in size and assume a more central position whereas those of less social importance are scaled down. Space is flattened through a shallow perspective with figures depicted in profile and architecture and scenes stacked one above the other rather than receding into space like in Western paintings. When the painters of this tradition in the Mughal ruler Akbar’s court saw the western oil paintings brought in by the Jesuit priests in the 1500s they got excited to find three-dimensional renditions of the human face.41 They

energetically started copying these on paper with their traditional watercolor medium, a pattern that emerged again when native painters were hired by 19th Century Europeans. These Europeans, although admiring of the discipline and obsessive labor of the native artists, were strongly disapproving of their inability to render realistic space. I reverse this process by reverting to more traditional methods and drawing my understanding of space, figure drawing, and portraiture from Eastern manuscripts and depicting them with western painting media and methods.

It is hard to find scholarship on the middle classes in India that does not at least once refer to Macaulay’s clearly defined intention of creating “a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in moral and in intellect.” During that time a social group called the bhadralok did, in fact, emerge and continues to exist today in some manner though their relationship with power and wealth is extremely irregular and complicated. While it is tempting to dismiss them as a homogenous entity, Tithi Bhattacharya shows the complicated position they held between the colonizer and the colonized:

“... the bhadralok was a composition of a landed rentier class, and the petty-bourgeoisie which colonialism forced to occupy contradictory class locations... For, the rentier class indulgence in literary occupations was not so much a matter of necessity...For the salaried class of the bhadralok, education was not merely a source of material sustenance, but because it was such, the only register of self-identity.”

She further demonstrates the stratification of the petty bourgeoisie. The top rungs formed a large portion of the intelligentsia but they had limited operational control and were, by no means, the ruling class. The lower rungs were often petty landowners, who came to the city under duress in need of means to supplement the negligible income they derived from their holdings. They became the white-collar workers or the disparaged Bengali keranis - Indo-Portuguese for writer/clerk.

44 Ibid.
I show a similar connection between English, class stratification, and employability among the petty bourgeoisie of contemporary Indian society in my painting *The Neighborhood Flight Academy*. It draws its language from the low-level flight academies that have opened recently in competition with more prestigious training institutions. Their promise of escape to a different life attract many young people from very low-income households with only high school education and limited English. In my painting one such person is seen delicately treading on a globe, balancing a Spoken English book and a grooming guide on her head while simultaneously carrying a food tray. An umbilical cord connects her to her mother who appears kneeling on a cloud of checkered marble floors like that of colonial houses. The cleaning bucket and the mop in her hand is meant to suggest that she is a domestic maid, thereby alluding to the class origins of the central figure.
A haunting image cited by Bhattacharya from a 19th century text has dark and desperate implications which can easily be applied to the pressing need and demand for English language skills at present:

Some gentlemen coming to Calcutta was astonished at the eagerness with which they were pressed for books by a troop of boys who boarded the Steamer from an obscure place called Komercolly. A Plato was lying on the table and one of the Party asked a boy whether that would serve his purpose. ‘O yes’, he exclaimed, ‘give me any book’. The gentleman at last hit upon the expedient of cutting up an old Quarterly Review and distributing this [sic] articles among them, expressing their regret that why [sic] there was no English School in the place and saying that they hoped that the Governor General to whom they made an application on the subject when on his way up the country, will establish one.45

Two Sides of the Same Coin: Arguments for and Against English

There have always been many debates for and against English. In spite of using it frequently in his cause for nationalism, Gandhi famously rejected it.46 In contrast, Tagore welcomed western literature into India

45 Ibid.
for creating a “bifurcation” in the “mental system” that he thought so “needful for all life growth”, and for bringing “elements some of which supplement and some contradict” the nation. 47 This debate continued well into the threshold of India’s independence causing much controversy during the framing of the constitution. Ramchandra Guha, in his seminal work India After Gandhi, talks about the problems this created and shows that the reading of the cultural role of English in a land of many languages is a complex and complicated one. While some wanted to throw out all people who didn’t speak Hindustani others set themselves on fire, martyring their lives to have English as the language of the constitution.” 48

And So It Is

There have been times that states have tried to abolish English from public schools. Both instances, first Gujarat in the 50s and then Bengal in the 80s, have been widely condemned. In response to the “fetishization of the rejection of English”, 49 specifically the changing of street and city names, Suketu Mehta makes a poignant assertion that to change the name of the street he grew up on is to do a “disservice” to his memory. 50 In his article about bilingualism in India, Guha concedes that while other scholars of his age and younger draw from source material in their native languages, they are unable to contribute to it. He says that they, and he, “are admittedly cosmopolitan, but in a somewhat shallow sense, knowing the world well without knowing the locality much - or at all. My study of the events that led to this cultural conundrum is part of my effort to know my own history well and to know it beyond generalizations that simplify the roles of the colonizer and the colonized. In my paintings, I have shown how these roles are now assumed by different local actors through the division of class and cultural capital.

Moreover, my paintings play out against this historic stage - culturally hybrid interiors littered with

48 Guha, India After Gandhi, 394-396
49 Guha, “The Rise and Fall of the Bilingual Intellectual.”
50 Mehta, Maximum city.
conduits of the English language such as magazines, newspaper, and Western music posters. The characters appear performing the mundane and intimate rituals of their daily life against the backdrop of these disoriented settings navigating mismatched props, legacies, and identities. They exemplify the complex manner in which English speaking members of the country are not simply agents of this phenomenon but products of it, and their personal and emotional identity is welded to this mixed inheritance.

Figure 25. Wait, What?! You Don’t Know Madonna?! Oil on Panel, 9”x3”, 2015.
“...if a global cultural system is emerging, it is filled with ironies and resistances, sometimes camouflaged as passivity and a bottomless appetite in the Asian world for things Western.” Arjun Appadurai, Modernity at Large

I was born in 1985, within a few days of the new Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi’s first budget. Sometimes blessed as a worthy precursor to the later, more definitive economic liberalization, this ambitious budget promised “a clean break with the past.” As the state loosened its steel grip around industry, trade, and taxes, “euphoria spread like an epidemic through the country’s middle, professional and managerial classes, among entrepreneurs and industrialists.” Production levels of import-sensitive industries in the automobile and electronics sector grew hand-in-hand with the middle-class demand for television sets, VCRs, and washing machines. Although these policies were pro-business, they fell short of being pro-market. Entry and exit by domestic or foreign firms were still restricted, and remained so until a major debt crisis in 1991 pushed India to throw open its doors to the world. Even as the economy, trade, and the middle classes have expanded, the Indian landscape has since witnessed a growing influx of new cultural iconography by way of global media, products, and capital.

51 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 29.
52 Guha, India After Gandhi, 687.
54 Panagariya, "India In The 1980s and 1990s"; Guha, India After Gandhi, 580
55 Dubey, "Vishwanath Pratap Singh’s Budget Makes a Clean Break with The Past."
56 Leela Fernandes, India’s New Middle Class, 1st ed. (Minneapolis, Minn. [u.a.]: Univ. of Minnesota Press, n.d.), 35-39.
57 Guha, India After Gandhi, 683-684
Although irregular and politically contested in its regional specificity, prominent among the early entrants were American products and television which further stratified the classes into those who responded to the appeal of MTV, F.R.I.E.N.D.S, Reebok, Nike, McDonald’s, Pepsi, etc. and those who did not.

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This was by no means the starting point of American influence on the Indian imagination, which goes at least as far back as early 19th Century, if not farther, to the ice that was shipped from Walden Pond and the controversial copies of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*.\(^59\) Neither was it the starting point of American screen culture in India, which dates back to 1910s, when American reels were exhibited in a limited capacity.\(^60\) In my own family I have inherited private narratives cast under the spell of Golden Age Hollywood and the historic theaters in which they were shown that date back to my grandparents’ youth. But the ubiquity, speed, intimacy, and seamlessness of the private screen, in partnership with the global flows of people, capital, and commodities radically transformed the scope of its effect on the imagination.\(^61\)

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\(^{61}\)Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*. 
Among the ideas imported from shows like ‘Friends’ was a new economy of aesthetics and space.

Although India still fosters some of the oldest enlightenment-era style Coffee Houses, inscribed with a rich history of political and intellectual debate, the youth of urban India craved the spatial dynamic of places like the cafe in Friends which could support its interests in global modernity. Such reiminations have played no small part, in the recent decades, in the ever-increasing growth of stylized cafes that conflate the cultural economy of aesthetics, recreational dining, and discernment. With every passing year cafes have become more and more specific in the ideas that they inculcate. What used to be generically novel (laminated walls, bean bags, guitars hanging on a rack) have now become replicas of faraway worlds. As a result there is such a thing as Paris Cafe, a legitimate haven amidst the overflow of people and pollution, but nonetheless problematic in its visual inscription - the gilded baroque interiors are walled by street-facing glass windows covered in lace so as to block out, among the traffic and dirt, the generations of homeless that live on the same address. Sometimes these foodways are opened by individuals, who, in spite of considerable access to recreational experiences abroad and a latent dislike for their immediate locality, would feel “adrift” and “valueless” outside of their social positions in India. By curating these spaces they cater to others like them who are already well-versed in these international experiences and desire access to them within the local. In the process, they also betray a desire “to teach modern India how to eat.” They are not without help in this area. Not only have shows like Top Chef radically broadened the “knowingness” of its audience, a single hashtag is now packed with an immediate world of suggestions. Customers in turn respond to these hashtags by adding images of their own experiences thereby further advancing the visual economy of self-fashioning, discernment, and consumerism.

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63 Ibid.
64 Mehta, Maximum City, 38.
65 Ibid.
This is only one of the many visible icons of post-liberalization reimaginations of the nation. Every time I return to India I am met by new place symbols that even a few years ago I didn’t have the vocabulary to define. Bar Stock Exchange, Hackerspace, Makerspace, Co-Work Spaces being novel additions to the now-familiar Wi-Fi cafe, sports bar, and shopping mall. The restructuring of urban space has also reordered the identity and class locations of service personnel. Unlike their correspondents in the west, the retail staff at foodways and malls are comprised of members from extremely low-income households, with limited English and primary education, and in many cases, the individual being the first in their family to have a job. Specialized training gained through these appointments, exposure to the social practices of customers, and “mediated depictions of unknown places”, then, become the “strips of reality” through which they gather “useful, albeit partial clues” to globalized modernity.

Figure 28. (Door Opens) - Bonjour! Oil on Panel, 6”x4”, 2017.


An example of this fragmentation is depicted in my series of portraits on the emergent shapes of the service sector in India. The central figures in these paintings repeatedly appear linked to a visual icon of vocational English speaking training and a smartphone. Based on actual observations, the painting, *(Door Opens) - Bonjour!* emphasizes the disjointed linguistic culture of the employees of Paris Cafe who, otherwise ill-equipped to speak English, are taught to greet customers with “bonjour” when they enter, and “merci beaucoup” when they leave. In my painting, I capture this disorientation of language by writing out the greeting, ‘bonjour’ phonetically in the Bengali script. The disjuncture is further pronounced by the ironic social relationship between the customer and the staff in which upwardly mobile, English savvy customers only first understand the meaning of these French words through their interactions with the staff.

![Figure 29. The New Amazon Delivery Guy, Oil on Panel, 6”x4”, 2016.](image)
In the same series, I also show how businesses have in turn been shaped by the social structure. The possibility of e-commerce in India, which is a very new phenomenon, is contingent upon strategies that circumvent the unreliability of the national postal system. Chief among these is the facility of in-house delivery fleets. The portrait, *The New Amazon Delivery Guy*, maps the visible signs of this contest between the nation and its economy. Unlike their counterparts in the west, the delivery person can be seen riding through highways and narrow lanes on a motorcycle, with a bulky backpack. The motorcycle replaces the profile of the stallion in historic Mughal paintings; the protagonist is the central figure and in his hand is a smartphone, unmistakably displaying a GPS map. The smartphone screen further illustrates the balance of disjuncture and conjuncture by the dual symbolism of the map which simultaneously orients and disorients, the latter through the abstraction of physical space. In the distance stands an institutional structure that promises fluency in English, ironically spelt incorrectly. Together they illustrate the complex interplay of class, cultural capital, and agency, and map the idiosyncrasies of the nation’s culture and economy.

The influx of global media and commodities have also generated, and in turn been perpetuated by hybridized local productions of visual texts such as film and advertising. Adopted by both multi-national corporations as well as Indian companies, the visual code of post-liberalization advertisements strategically conflate dichotomies of global/local, traditional/modern, nation/self. In the process, foreign products are nationalized while Indian products fetishize the progress of the nation. Recent Bollywood films that cater to urban middle classes are similarly coded with the argot of the urban youth - a hybridized language of global brand culture and modern technology within the context of the local. These can be loosely divided into two categories based on their implications. While one category propagates a re-imagination of social values by presenting alternative lifestyles along the lines of social structure,

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69 Fernandes, *India’s New Middle Class*, 41-65.
gender, professional identity, familial relationships, etc., the other comprises of glossy, feel-good, family-friendly romances that glamorize indigenous identity within the extravaganza of commodity culture. The effect of such cultural processes are three-fold. First, they perpetuate their own existence by successfully engaging a broader range of consumers, from conservative to liberal. Secondly, they perpetuate the cyclical flow between self-fashioning and commodities by inspiring image-conscious processes of belonging and individuation. Finally, they suggest a win-win paradise of modern “elsewhere” within the matrix of cultural rootedness, thereby preserving a generative relationship between the consumer and the geographic specificity of the nation’s economy.

An extreme instance of this commodity culture is captured in my painting Everything You Need Is Here in which a couple is depicted in fine apparel punctuated by a scattering of branded embellishments. The image is rendered in a very stylized manner - a blend of Mughal miniatures and Bengali folk paintings. In juxtaposition to this very ‘local’ and ‘national’ tone is the flurry of global commodities. The logos and recognizable patterns form a language of their own - the unmistakable Burberry scarf, the Mercedes car keys, the Apple iPhone, the Nike t-shirt, Callaway golf clubs, and the Swarovsky and Victoria’s Secret bags among others. Furthermore, the scale of the central figures is exaggeratedly larger and tower over the miniscule and almost indistinguishable figures of what appear to be ‘hired help.’ The remarkable difference in scale between the two sets of figures show the problematic patterns of access and denial surrounding this cultural capital. It is further highlighted by the direction of the main couple’s gaze - facing away from the figures at their feet, looking westward with a fixed gaze. In other paintings, the presence of Western, or global products are more inconspicuously blended into their surroundings further showing the various degrees in which they are appropriated and how that connects to stratifications of the classes.

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70 The 2016 film, Ki & Ka is a good example of this. It follows the narrative of a newly married couple in which the husband desires to stay at home and keep house while the wife strives for professional success in the corporate world.


72 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 9.
Figure 30. *Everything You Need is Here*, Oil on Panel, 8.8"x4.8", 2016.
Narratives that reduce these changes to a simple condemnation of “Americanization” or “commoditization”, simplify the intricate variances of lived realities, reducing indigenous actors to a homogenous group of mere subjects without agency. An obsessive pursuit of consumption-based, image-centric identities is undeniably problematic, but that is not solely an Indian problem. Also, tied up with the processes of liberalization are trajectories of technological and economic progress and micro-narratives of aspirational and entrepreneurial efforts that have, in many instances, transcended historic processes of power over the lines of caste, class, and religion. 73

Furthermore, as Appadurai asserts, these narratives fail to consider “that at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized.” 74 Not only do cultural products change as they pass through different contexts, they are contested by the inventive capacity and winning appeal of evolving local creative productions. It is also important to keep in mind the complex structure of sub-stratification within classes, and that the subaltern is not often in direct contact with the west but gathers its clues from that which has been processed, appropriated, and reproduced by the classes immediately above them. Thus, a simplified binary of East vs West fails to conclude that the cultural narrative of globalization is not one of erasure, but that of contestation and hybridization.

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74 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 32.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The paintings in the exhibition *The Unaccustomed Vanishing Point* draw their visual language from my personal experiences of the culturally hybrid worlds in which I grew up. Depictions of these personal experiences then become gateways into the broader cultural history and terrains of the social. Through these paintings, and operating from an unfixed position between cultures, I examine issues of exile, memory, heritage, history, race, class, and cultural hybridity. My practice is situated in the context of diasporic artists who originate from and inhabit similar “scapes” of cultural fluidity. My work resonates with those of artists like Salmaan Toor, Ambreen Batt, Saira Wasim, and Vinod Balak who address similar juxtapositions of cultures. While the paintings and installations in this body of work trace the irregular contours of the culturally hybrid terrain of globalized India, it is by no means a conclusive study. Rather, this exploration is a continuing practice of seeing and showing, documenting and decoding, remembering and reimagining.

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