

Transcendentalism became an important site through which Hindu texts, such as the Gita, the Laws of Manu, the Vishnu Puranas, the Vedas, and the Upanishads, became part of the American philosophical and religious imagination. For instance, Emerson was effusive about the Vedas, which he called “the Bible of the tropics.”<sup>32</sup> His poem “Brahma” (1857) was much influenced by his reading of the Vishnu Purana and the Katha Upanishad.<sup>33</sup> That Melville too was well acquainted with the Vedas is clear in his discussion of whaling in *Moby-Dick* (1851), where the narrator Ishmael uses images from Hindu mythology to prove his knowledge of whaling as well as the value of whaling in different cultures.<sup>34</sup> However, while the Vedas were popular with nineteenth-century American writers, it was the Gita that the Transcendentalists devoured, with both Thoreau and Emerson speaking of their fascination with this Hindu scriptural and philosophical text. Thoreau carried the Gita with him to Walden Pond, and his treatise *Walden* (1854) contains numerous references to India. For American writers and thinkers such as Thoreau, India represented the ancient, old, spiritual, sentimental East in contrast to the youthful and rational USA. Concerned as the Transcendentalists were with spiritual India, they turned a blind eye, willfully, to political India and the realities of British colonialism in India. Thus, there was no space in their work to engage the anticolonial 1857 Indian Sepoy Rebellion, even as the event was covered widely in prominent American magazines such as *Harper’s Magazine* and the *Knickerbocker* and made appearances in popular American fiction of the time. References to India—whether as the main theme or hovering suggestively in the background—also appeared systematically in the work of major and minor nineteenth-century male and female American writers, such as Walt Whitman, Louisa May Alcott, Lucretia Maria Davidson, John Greenleaf Whittier, and James Russell Lowell, among others. Whitman’s poem “A Passage to India” (1869)—written to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal that would increase geographical contact and intimacy among nations—is the best known and most frequently discussed of these. Others included Davidson’s poem “Amir Khan” (1829) set in Kashmir, India; Lowell’s poems such as “An Oriental Apologue” (1849) and “Dara” (1850); and John Greenleaf Whittier’s “The Brewing of Soma.” In Davidson’s poem of a doomed love affair, India appears as a land of riches: “Rich vases, with sweet incense streaming/Mirrors a flood of brilliance beaming . . . And marble pillars, pure and cold,/ And glittering roof, inlaid with gold,/And gems, and diamonds . . .”<sup>35</sup> These sensual descriptions of the wealth of the fabled East were staples of Orientalist discourse on India. Even an author of no less stature than Alcott contributed to this repertoire of images. India appears not only in Alcott’s popular novel *Little Women* (1868), where (exotic) goods and commodities from India serve to animate the protagonist’s imagination, but in her relatively obscure sensational short stories that she published anonymously in periodicals such as Frank Leslie’s *Lady’s Magazine* and Leslie’s *Illustrated Newspaper*. In the thriller “Fate in a Fan” (1869), a villainous gambler-father, who served as a soldier in the East, has brought back with him a poison—a “subtle Indian perfume”—that is hidden in his hapless daughter’s fan to stupefy his gambling opponents.<sup>36</sup> This story echoes and foreshadows Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Speckled Band” (1892), which also depicts a villainous father’s use of “Indian”

things (an Indian snake in Doyle's story) that threaten his daughter's life. Alcott's shocker "The Fate of the Forrests" (1865) involves Hindu thuggism (and mind control and mesmerism), an oft-used trope in British sensational colonialist fiction. These stories use India as a shorthand for the inscrutable and inexplicable, perpetuating the image of India as a place of strange rites, deadly poisons, and murderers. One thus sees here both the shifting attitudes toward India by the late nineteenth century as well as the contradictions and ambivalences that had characterized the India–USA encounter from the late eighteenth century onward. India was simultaneously exotic and barbaric, advanced and regressive, a place of rich spiritual or philosophical texts and of heathen cultures. It is thus not ironic or inexplicable that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries both witnessed an "Oriental craze" where India was in vogue again and showed up variously in American material culture and the arts as well as the hardening of racial Vivek Bald notes that between 1880 and 1920, "the United States was in the grips of a craze over India and 'the Orient' that was, in some ways, larger and more pervasive than anything that has occurred since [...] Americans of all classes and walks of life were drawn to an 'India' that was, in essence, a collective fantasy."<sup>37</sup> The Indian Nautch Dancers (along with snake charmers and jugglers), for instance, who arrived in 1880 in New York to perform in Augustin Daly's show *Zanina*, were treated as exoticized spectacles and commodities in newspaper reviews; and although these were the first dancers from India to perform on the American stage, the Indian dancing girl had been circulating as an "Orientalist fantasy" since the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>38</sup> Indian goods were also in demand again in the modern obsession with foreign or imported Eastern goods within the new culture of mass consumption. Magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* include numerous references to Indian goods. The "New York Fashions" column of *Harper's Bazaar* on August 8, 1868, for instance, noted that "A fancy for India goods is one of the caprices of the summer. The French Empress, with characteristic love of variety, has clothed herself in the soft, fleecy India muslin, in Corah silks, and pongee, and of a sudden they are the fashion." The June 13, 1872 column noted that "the world of fashion is out of town" where "India goods are chosen for sea-shore dresses." *The Decorator and Furnisher*, a New York-based magazine of interior decoration published in the late nineteenth century, in an article on "Indian Textile Fabrics" (February 1895), noted the high demand for Indian goods and how the variety of textiles was suitable for all sorts of drapery and decorations. Indian design was championed by the likes of the American designer and painter Lockwood de Forest (1850–1932), who played an important role in creating an Indian style of interior decoration in the late nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup>

32. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1904), 314.

33. This was not a one-sided love affair. Rabindranath Tagore declared his affection for Emerson during his own tours of the United States. In 1916, he told an American journalist, "I love your Emerson ... In his

work one finds much that is of India" (247). Another Indian visitor, Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, similarly praised Emerson: "He seems to us to have been a geographical mistake. He ought to have been born in India" (quoted in Arthur Christy, "Orientalism in New England: Whittier," *American Literature* 1, no. 4 (Jan 1930): 392.

34. In addition to Indian scriptures, Melville was clearly aware of, and recorded, the presence of Indian sailors on the maritime circuits as he

wrote about them in his books of the sea, *Moby-Dick* and *Redburn*.

35. Lucretia M. Davidson, "Amir Khan," In *Amir Khan and Other Poems*, ed. Samuel F.B. Morse, A.M. (New York: G. and C. and H. Carvill, 1829), 10.

36. Madeleine B. Stern and Daniel Shealy, eds., *The Lost Stories of Louisa May Alcott* (NY: Citadel Press, 1993), 68.

37. Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 16.

38. For a detailed discussion of the racialized and gendered discourse surrounding the bodies of these Indian women dancers, see Priya Srinivasan, "The Nautch Women Dancers of the 1880s: Corporeality, US Orientalism, and anti-Asian immigration Laws," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 1 (March 2009): 8.

39. A 2015 exhibition at New York City's Cooper Hewitt Museum focused on Lockwood de Forest (1850–1932), America's leading Aesthetic movement champion of Indian design. During a year-long stay in India in 1881, de Forest established a studio guided by an Indian Jain merchant, Muggunbhai Hutheesing, in the western Indian city of Ahmedabad (in Gujarat), where he employed master craftsmen to create decorative teak wood and brass panels that he imported to the USA. <http://www.cooperhewitt.org/events/current-exhibitions/passion-for-the-exotic-lockwood-de-forest-frederic-church/>.