

Introduction:
Colonial Commodities and the
Naturalization of Empire

Have you Indian curiosities? I thought they were only for ladies?
—Charlotte Yonge, *The Clever Woman of the Family*

Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, a novel deeply committed to making moral connections between the home and the world of commerce, begins and ends with invocations of infants, the issue of a corrupt and a virtuous couple respectively. Chapter 2 introduces Mr. and Mrs. Veneering, ambitious social climbers whose fall into bankruptcy at the novel's end parallels the restoration of John Rokesmith/Harmon to his family money. In addition to their "bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London," complete with new furniture, friends, servants, plate, carriage, horses, and pictures, the Veneerings have a "bran-new baby"¹ to complete the scene. This nameless Baby is nothing more than an empty sign of its parents' unimaginative and unscrupulous acquisitiveness, a trait exemplified by Veneering's purchase of a seat in Parliament for £5,000 and his subsequent "over-jobb[ing] his jobberies," for which he is at last forced to resign.² Conversely, Dickens concludes the story of John Rokesmith/Harmon's disciplining of and marriage to the formerly grasping Bella Wilfer by rewarding the couple with wealth and a child.

The symmetry of these babies, small images of the two sets of parents who in turn are each other's mirror opposite, is disrupted by a third infant: the "Hindoo baby in a bottle"³ who resides in Mr. Venus's shop.

Floating in its liquid grave, this small corpse, subjected to none of the sentimentalizing with which Dickens generally treats the infant dead, may be read in several ways. It is a neatly contained refraction of the larger bodies that Gaffer Hexam pulls out of that larger body of water, the Thames, for pay. It serves also to mark the stillborn romantic ambitions of Mr. Venus, the articulator of bones, and is referred to as “his own Hindoo baby.”⁴ But this “Indian baby,” along with its shelfmate, “African ditto,” cannot, once so labeled, be just a baby. It is a “Hindoo,”⁵ but it is also an object bottled for display and a commodity for sale in a shop. Writing on what she calls the density of objects, Annette Weiner posits

a continuum along which objects may be ranked according to their symbolic densities. At one end of the continuum are inalienable possessions—objects that should be kept within the closed context of family, clan, dynasty, or corporation, for example. Other, less prized possessions vary in their symbolic densities and, therefore, in their degree of interchangeability. Like commodities, things at the other end of the continuum without much symbolic density are exchangeable merely in terms of the value of their replaceability . . . [but] symbolic densities differ radically even with objects that are physically alike.⁶

Weiner here opposes symbolic density and interchangeability, but qualifies the opposition by claiming that even “objects that are physically alike” may possess different symbolic densities. In using this example I do not wish to suggest that the baby is in any way interchangeable with other things exactly like it; rather, interchangeability in this context means exchangeability. That is to say that as a commodity, the preserved corpse is exchangeable for money (Marx’s universal equivalent), yet the majority of human corpses in Victorian culture were symbolically dense in that they were understood both legally and socially to possess claims on the living to treat them appropriately, which are here specifically denied. Stripped of its symbolic density as a human being in this setting, neither exactly a person nor a thing, although it approaches the status of both, the Hindoo baby thus occupies a unique place in the domestic novel, in which India is everywhere represented, but rarely by fully realized Indian characters.⁷ Rather, the complicated and evolving relationship of England to India is mediated in novels through the relationship of English people to what were understood to be Indian things. The baby

in the bottle may thus be seen to reference the ongoing effort to fix the colonies through the production of scientific knowledge even as it speaks to the need simultaneously to control and profit from a place frequently described in the press and in Parliament as uniquely uncontrollable and unprofitable—a nation, as Ranajit Guha has noted, understood to be without history, in its infancy.⁸ The transmogrification of the dead body of an Indian infant into a commodity is also, of course, a profound act of dehumanization, a refusal of the social meaning of its death,⁹ which suggests in turn the need to disembody those Indians living under British rule even as it makes literal the fantasy of being able at once to contain, control, and understand British India in a way that so complex and contingent an entity could never be. Finally, the “Hindoo” baby in the bottle figures synecdochically something that the British called “India” itself, just as the African baby represents Africa in some sense. Making Indian things, which may be owned without complications or ramifications, stand in for India thus works to create the illusion of absolute possession of a geographically dispersed, politically volatile, and still contested set of territories.

In his seminal essay “Modernism and Imperialism,” Fredric Jameson observes that by the late nineteenth century,

colonialism means that a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere, beyond the metropolis, outside of the daily life and existential experience of the home country, in colonies over the water whose own life experience and life world—very different from that of the imperial power—remains unknown and unimaginable for the subjects of the imperial power, whatever social class they may belong to. Such spatial disjunction has as its immediate consequence the inability to grasp the way the system functions as a whole. . . . Daily life and existential experience in the metropolis . . . which is necessarily the very content of the national literature itself, can now no longer be grasped immanently; it no longer has its meaning, its deeper reason for being, within itself.¹⁰

Jameson’s insights may be said to build upon Raymond Williams’s thesis in *The Country and the City* that urbanization affected nineteenth-century novelists’ ability to create “knowable communities”¹¹ that are themselves inevitably structured by exclusions. Jameson is careful to explain that he is leaving imperial adventure tales out of the discussion and is

concerned only with central or canonical Modernist literature, in which he observes a “systematic block on any adequate consciousness of the structure of the imperial system.”¹² I wish to argue that this block is everywhere evident in mid-Victorian literature, and that Indian commodities function as the political unconscious of the text in the Jamesonian sense, regularly gesturing at what is just off the page. Furthermore, the erratic relationship of these representations of things to the world of commerce—unquestionably commodities, they are most frequently portrayed in novels as gifts, possessions, and household goods—bespeaks a conflicted sense of the role India plays in the world of British commerce and finance.

To speak of “India” as a stable or ontologically coherent entity, however, would be an anachronism, and mid-Victorian newspapers and magazines registered this fact regularly. Military engagement punctuated the nineteenth century as England expanded its holdings in South Asia, and myths of absolute dominion were thus culturally necessary to mark an imagined outcome as well as an imaginary present. This book finds meaning in the histories of three entwined phenomena: the nineteenth-century history of Indian commodities that had a significant effect on Great Britain either economically or culturally; the history of territorial acquisition in this period that impacted the production and flow of these commodities; and the commodities’ ubiquity in so-called domestic literature.

Bill Brown has used the term *material unconscious* to describe “literature’s repository of disparate and fragmented, unevenly developed, even contradictory images of the material everyday.” According to Brown, a “materialist hermeneutic seeks to retrieve . . . images not as the historical context that explains (away) the idiosyncratic details of the literary artifact but as a historical text that relations between such details allow us to write.”¹³ Much excellent work has been done on the British *in India* that shows how nineteenth-century domestic culture was affected by England’s engagements there, and this book is animated by and deeply indebted to these studies.¹⁴ More recently, scholars of history and literature have taken up the relationship between the British Empire and English culture from the standpoint of the metropole.¹⁵ My aim in examining the British at home and in looking specifically at material objects is to work out the implications of the argument that in making something called “India,” the English also remade themselves. I do so by resorting to Brown’s notion of the historical text as intertext: India should not be

made to function merely as the backdrop to a narrative of English national identity. Rather, while England's imperial ambitions in India are integral to an understanding of Victorian literature and culture, India is central to the story, not merely the occasion for someone else's narrative. I therefore read the images that the English constructed of themselves at home, from home, as part of a dialectic; while ideas and beliefs about India-as-colony that circulated widely in Victorian England were a significant part of the discursive field utilized by novelists who appear on the surface to concern themselves solely with England and Englishness, the history of the British occupation of India, I argue, subtends these mystifications and must be brought to light in order to comprehend them fully. Material histories give us glimpses of human histories, stories of exploitation and agency that the novels will not tell but cannot leave alone either. India is thus woven deeply into the texture of English domesticity, but in such a way as to need unraveling at this remove. Things that Victorians understood to concern or be "about" India, in other words, are intimately present if not immediately apparent. Furthermore, as Elaine Freedgood has noted, our reading practices themselves militate against paying attention to objects.

In *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*, Freedgood observes that while "the Victorian novel describes, catalogs, quantifies, and in general showers us with things . . . we have learned to understand them as largely meaningless: the protocols for reading the realist novel have long focused us on subjects and plots; they have implicitly enjoined us *not* to interpret many or most of its objects."¹⁶ Freedgood describes the manner in which objects are thus "lightly read" as "weak metonymy": objects merely "suggest, or reinforce, something we already know about the subjects who use them."¹⁷ Objects, she argues, must be followed off the page in order to understand how "the knowledge that is stockpiled in these things bears on the grisly specifics of conflicts and conquests that a culture can neither regularly acknowledge nor permanently destroy if it is going to be able to count on its own history to know itself and realize a future."¹⁸ In this reading, representations of objects in novels occupy a medial position in the cultural imaginary; objects stand between history and memory, for they contain traces of that which the nation can neither confirm nor deny but must hide from itself because this knowledge cannot be done away with.

Similarly for Brown, recourse to the history of objects opens the pos-

sibility for more perfectly comprehending the culture that produces the art in which things are named with such insistent regularity. In *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, Brown has argued that paying close attention to material culture in literature allows us to see “how we use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies.”¹⁹ In the Anglo-Indian context, I would argue, these issues are equally compelling, but my answers to these inherently psychoanalytic queries turn us back toward the materiality of the thing, the history of its production, sale, and consumption. This book, then, examines the ways in which Victorian novels offer readers ways to make sense of emerging notions of both British India and the British home through the medium of Indian imports, but it does so by attending to the material histories of mythologized things. I take up their movement through the intricate and unevenly developed spaces of the colonial enterprise, and into the homes in which novelists unflinchingly enshrine them, to argue that these fictional imports mediate culturally the very idea of imperialism, just as actual imports mediated and stood in for the multifarious processes of colonial wealth extraction. In *Rule of Darkness*, Patrick Brantlinger argues that a key purpose of Victorian imperialist doctrine was to weld together or disguise the contradictions inherent in the goals of “military conquest and rapacious economic exploitation [and] idealistic although nonetheless authoritarian schemes of cultural domination.”²⁰ Military action, he suggests, was often explained away by the expediencies of the “civilizing mission,” but commerce was a harder sell; it “generally seemed antithetical to heroism and high ideals.”²¹ Yet a central term in nineteenth-century imperial discourse labors mightily to undo that contradiction: the idea of “industry,” both as a Christian virtue to be imparted to the “natives” and as the motor of the barely hidden economic agenda behind the Christianizing, civilizing, or reformist doctrines of the imperial enterprise. Will to industry serves as a counterpoint to Brantlinger’s insight that class difference in England both remains in place and is externalized onto colonial subjects over and against an anachronistic (to the degree that it is not totally phantasmatic) “Englishness.” How, I want to ask, is Englishness shored up by a particular brand of commodity fetishism that turns goods produced in British India into emblems of English identity?

Faced with the idea that colonial India was in some ill-defined way

connected to, if not a part of, their nation, English novelists helped to domesticate and contain the *idea* of India by writing Indian imports into the novels as indispensable accoutrements of middle-class English life. In so doing, they provide a powerful demonstration of the ways in which the economic imperatives of imperialism shaped the English imaginary from the inside.²² At the same time, as the novels appear to consolidate the role of women in an emerging model of private life wherein they make meaning inside the home, Indian commodities connect middle-class women to the economic, cultural, and military work of empire building even as actual women are being evacuated from the realm of economic productivity.²³ The four constellations of commodities on which I focus—Kashmir shawls, cotton textiles, tea, and gemstones, particularly diamonds—are all strongly identified with women, although in profoundly different ways. While in Britain the material culture of India inevitably suggests or refers to India on some level, Indian things may work in several possibly contradictory registers at once: at different moments, they may speak to English class aspirations, gender, morality, or national identity even as they gesture obliquely at their place of origin.

In *A Sense of Things*, Brown argues that scholars and theorists of material culture must necessarily confront “the indeterminate ontology where things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like”;²⁴ this study locates such indeterminacy in a form of fetishism that imbues foreign goods with both human and mythical, “Oriental” attributes while allowing these attributes to stand in for the labor that is congealed (if not embodied) in them. Brown further cautions that even “as the prose fiction of the nineteenth century represents and variously registers the way commodity relations came to saturate everyday life, so too . . . this fiction demonstrates that the human investment in the physical object world, and the mutual constitution of human subject and inanimate object, can hardly be reduced to those relations.”²⁵ My aim is not to reduce the study of colonial material culture to commodity relations but to explore the colonial commodity form in detail as a crucial part of the trajectory of these objects’ existence that in turn reveals the ways that the costly British desire for Indian territory and wealth was justified and popularized through a range of costly and desirable commodities. Nevertheless, *The Empire Inside* registers and analyzes numerous moments at which inanimate objects are made to come to life and “speak,” although such speaking almost invariably tells a story about their English posses-

sors. But commodities cannot speak for themselves; in attempting to speak for them I hope to shed light on the ways that their fictional counterparts are made to mean.

The desirability of Indian commodities was not promulgated solely through the novel. Throughout the mid-Victorian period, periodicals aimed at both middle- and working-class readerships were consistently and overtly concerned not only to describe the geography, history, and politics of India but to explain the origins of the imported goods that ordinary Britons might own or wish to own. Novels and magazines make use of the same Indian commodities to sell copies, but they rarely do so for the same purposes: magazines played up the “exotic” origins of colonial goods, while novels tended to occlude those origins. Yet most of the novelists in this study were deeply involved in magazine journalism: Charles Dickens was, perhaps most famously, the founder of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*; Elizabeth Gaskell wrote for Dickens and published most of her novels in serial form; Mary Elizabeth Braddon edited *Belgravia*; Margaret Oliphant wrote for *Blackwood's Magazine*; Sheridan LeFanu edited the *Dublin University Magazine*; Anthony Trollope edited *St. Paul's Magazine* and founded the *Fortnightly Review*. As part of a continuum of print culture, magazines and novels do not represent the literal and the figurative; rather, each assists in the process of uncovering that which is implied or assumed in the other. Victorian journalism on India ranges from sober analyses of the political landscape to the more common travelogues that tend to read like expository passages from imperial adventure tales. Such essays as “Assam and the Hill Tribes,” “A Visit to Cashmere, by a Captain in Her Majesty's Service,” and “The Cotton Fields of India” are less interested in fact-finding than in mythmaking, and their success in this endeavor may be measured by the degree to which Indian exports retain the trace of the “Oriental” in the Victorian cultural imaginary.

To understand the role of Indian commodities in this imaginary it is useful to consider not just what the commodities do in the home but how they arrived there. This practice follows Arjun Appadurai's dictum that in order to understand fully the ways in which commodities affect culture and vice versa, it is necessary to “follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, and their trajectories.”²⁶ In so doing, we begin to see how and why they were produced for export, information that Marx held to be occulted by commodity

fetishism.²⁷ What emerges is a constellation of Indian industries that, while driven by Indian labor, were often founded and owned by the British themselves. Tracing what Appadurai terms the “social life” of Indian commodities leads us directly to concrete instances of phenomena that are too often spoken of in the abstract: ruralization, annexation, the widespread conversion of Indian workforces to wage labor, and what Byron Farwell has called Queen Victoria’s “little wars,” those wars of imperial expansion that are frequently forgotten in what we tend to think of as Victoria’s largely peaceful reign.²⁸ It thus becomes clear that accounts of the Manchester textile industry (to give the most obvious example of an industry heavily represented in Victorian novels) are inadequate unless placed squarely in a colonial context.

As this context makes apparent, however, British rule in India was hardly a unified enterprise but rather was fraught with contradictions. Its goals, strategies, and outcomes were bitterly contested and divergently pursued, largely (until its dissolution in 1858) by the East India Company and the British regiments attached to it, but also by more or less independent capitalists who invested in colonial ventures; by missionaries; by colonial administrators in the field; and by cabinet members and bureaucrats in England. Details of these conflicts may be found in such contemporary sources as the *Times* of London and the Parliamentary Papers, but midcentury novelists rarely resort to imperial politics as plot devices: India appears only as deep background, the provider of things the provenance of which is neither explicated nor questioned.

Midcentury novels thus permit us to read more clearly the cultural work that colonial imports were doing within the realm of “the domestic,” understood both as the household and the nation-state. (As Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat have observed, “home” in this double meaning is the “verso to the recto of ideologies of imperial gregariousness.”)²⁹ Social historians have argued that the nineteenth century saw the consolidation of the nonproductive household—that in which no yarn was spun, cheese made, poultry kept, and so forth. This shift was partly the result of the intertwined phenomena of urbanization and industrialization, partly the result of the (not unrelated) rise of the middle class and a concomitant shift in thinking about the nature of the middle-class home and the role of women within it.³⁰ Looking at Indian imports through the role they play in Victorian novels works to broaden an understanding of Victorian ideologies of both work and home as they intersect with the

novel, and the facts of British intervention in India are indispensable to piecing together these belief systems. But in turning to historiography, we begin to see India as the English imagined it, or India not necessarily as it was, but as it was understood to be. Therefore, this project is as much about India as a dreamscape, a mirror, and the site of abjected identities as it is about India as a geographic or political entity; I attempt to demonstrate how the various, competing ideas of India that find their way into the novels were created and contested. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has written that in the nineteenth century, “Europe had consolidated itself as sovereign subject by defining its colonies as ‘Others,’ even as it constituted them, for purposes of administration and the expansion of markets, into programmed near-images of that very sovereign self”;³¹ that is to say that in the interests of wealth extraction, the British labored mightily to make certain aspects of India operate on British principles. At the same time, Teresa Hubel observes that in the colonial period if not beyond, “India’s reality extends beyond its geographical presence. It has also an imaginative dimension. . . . The potential for appropriating India increases when it is recognized as the property of the imagination.”³² Reading between magazine journalism and domestic novels of the mid-Victorian period brings these competing visions of India into focus, revealing how uneven were the processes of consolidation and administration to which Spivak refers, as well as the management of image and reality with which Hubel is concerned. Novels and print journalism document the ways in which “foreign affairs” influenced or determined how Indian commodities were understood by the English people who bought, sold, used, wore, consumed, and thought and wrote about them and what was at stake in these understandings.

My central problematic, then, is grounded in the study of material culture as it intersects both art and commerce: at a moment when the systems that produced and distributed Indian commodities were in flux, why were certain of these things being enshrined in novels as objects of desire or markers of middle-class status? What kind of work were they doing, and what did they mean to the middle-class readers whose lives the novels both reflected and helped to structure? And how does the presence of commodities relate to the absence of Indian people in certain privileged forms of cultural production? Working out the ways in which different commodities functioned at specific moments to make multiple and contradictory meanings will, I contend, assist in ameliorating the

universalizing tendencies in the words *English* and *Englishness* and at the same time give the lie to the novels' invocation of a static and conquered India. When in India, Indian material culture points us to the wildly varying responses to and effects of British rule; when in England, it works not so much to consolidate English identities as to fragment them, marking sometimes minute distinctions of taste, class, and income level in English society. The frequency with which this fragmenting occurs in domestic novels, and the regularity with which Indian goods were called upon to perform this work, speaks to the need simultaneously to engage with and to disavow the coming-into-being of the peculiar and contradictory historical configuration known as British India. *The Empire Inside* argues that examining these strands of imperial and cultural politics in relation to one another opens up new readings of canonical Victorian novels' relationship to India as not just a means of individual self-definition but as the ground on which a phantasmatic idea of India was both disseminated and undermined; the novels' gestures at the historicity of British India, however oblique, allow us to undo their hypostasizing of Indian commodities as timeless embodiments of cultural difference recuperated as British status symbols.