ETHNOGRAPHIES AS BOOKS: OR, HOMAGE TO THE IMAGE

CHRISTOPHER PINNEY
SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES,
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

... the *Golden bough* as I think of it, deep green covers, mysterious, a dark row of volumes on a shelf in a house remembered from childhood.  

Much ostensibly 'post-modern' anthropology perpetuates a realist distinction between 'discourse' and 'text' which replicates the logocentric dualism of 'speech' and 'writing'. This paper examines the consequences of introducing a third term – the 'book' – the sign of the text and the meta-sign of discourse which turns the linear trajectory of 'discourse' and 'text' into a non-originating circle. The argument is also developed with reference to the practice of image-making and photography in India. It is suggested that any anthropological practice which continues to view 'discourse' as anterior to 'texts' remains bound by age-old perplexities of how best to 'represent' a before-ness, and that 'writing culture' becomes merely a strategy of how to tinker with a copy of an original and does nothing to question the nature of this duality.

TEXTS AS BOOKS

Ethnographies as 'texts' are also, unavoidably, ethnographies as books. This is not paradoxical, rather such a 'contradiction' lies at the very heart of the concept. Like Plato's *pharmakon* (which Derrida reveals to be used variously to denote *poison* and *cure*), the notion of 'text' (as any dictionary will amply testify) is fractured by a division as to its nature and effects, being on the one hand a mark of physicality and on the other, one of immateriality:

*Textual:* . . .

4. the constitution, structure, or substance of anything with regard to its constituents, formative elements or physical characters.

5. *fig.* Of immaterial things: Constitution; nature or quality, as resulting from composition. Of the mind . . .  

(Oxford English Dictionary)


In anthropological writing and writing about anthropological writing the 'text' functions precisely in these two opposed modalities, paralleling Susan Stewart's observation that 'the oxymoron of the sign is particularly foregrounded in the book'. It is on the one hand a cultural and material invention, a set of immaterial ideas governed by literary codes, and on the other it is a coercive object whose solidity comes to have power over a fluid oral and aural reality. But both terms of this duality place the 'text' as something quite different from 'reality'. They are separated only by their different relations to reality.

It is for this reason that empiricist attacks on Texan and Californian 'reflexivity' are so vehement. The mutual insecurity produced by this 'experiment' is a function of their nearness. Each struggles against the other in an attempt to wrest true identity and ownership of presence. 'Text' in its North American incarnation, far from being subversive, is a staging post on the way to the attainment of 'dialogic' truth, a polyphony of voices which rather than conceding the impossibility of other than a circular babble yearns for the transmission of 'native voices' from deep within 'discourse'. Already (and obviously) it is Malinowski (especially his Coral gardens) who is now emerging as the original Kevin Dwyer, the purveyor of real 'unmediated' conversational voices.

THE IM/POSSIBILITY OF 'SPEECH'
The interpretative and 'post-modern' stress on texts presents them as a woolly form of 'discourse'. Clifford Geertz and James Clifford draw on Emile Benveniste (discourse as dialogic presence) and Paul Ricoeur (text as 'autonomous' and disembodied). This distinction between 'discourse' and 'text' mirrors very closely the distinction between 'speech' and 'writing' developed by Jacques Derrida in his discussion of 'phonocentrism'. Ricoeur's own argument replicates almost precisely Plato's account of Socrates's argument against writing in Phaedrus:

Discourse does not transcend the specific occasion in which a subject appropriates the resources of language in order to communicate dialogically. Ricoeur argues that discourse cannot be interpreted in the open-ended, potentially public way in which a text is 'read'. To understand discourse 'you had to have been there,' in the presence of the discoursing subject...

However, as with all mirror images, because of the absolute congruence of what is mirrored, we imagine an inversion. The inversion

---

4 Susan Stewart, On longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 33.
5 See Kevin Dwyer, Moroccan dialogues (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).
8 Clifford, 'Ethnographic authority', 39.
stems in this instance from the following different perspectives of the observers: the Writing Culturalist hopes through experimentation to achieve a textual form which recaptures 'discourse' as the origin ('both Crapanzano and Dwyer seek to represent the research experience in ways that tear open the textualized fabric of the other . . .'\(^{10}\)); the Derridean strives to reveal the 'preface' and 'pre-text' of 'speech' as merely the 'post-face' of 'text.' It is easy to confuse these two very different approaches because Writing Culturalism deploys a quasi-Derridean language in its initial arguments that earlier anthropological writings were primarily *writing* rather than forms of self-present *speech*, but this is by way of a criticism of earlier genres, rather than a thoroughgoing attempt to reveal all speech to be subject to the deferral and dissemination of writing. As their arguments unfold it becomes increasingly clear that the value of acknowledging 'writing' lies in the possibility it offers of producing textual forms which can better capture the self-presence of 'speech'. Similar ideas underpin several contributions to this volume in which the anthropological utility of texts is argued for precisely in terms of the access they give to the 'voice of the native'. The argument concerning texts shifts almost from a Derridean view of 'writing' as a concession that all meaning is always displaced, to one which approximates more closely to Goody's view of the text as embodying a Socratic fixity of speech.

For Derrida, Plato's *Phaedrus* which attacks writing as a pollution of the self-present meaning of *logos* exemplifies a Western tradition of logocentrism and also 'paradoxically' demonstrates at the same time the violence within this written text that upholds within its *inscriptions* the primacy of speech. Speech is privileged for Plato, as also for many of the Writing Culturalists, because in entering into a relationship with it one is necessarily brought into proximity with the speaker and the hearer can interrogate the speaker as to his intentions and desired meanings. Oral speech has a privileged proximity to the communicating presence which can adjudicate as to the intended meaning of any utterance. Within this paradigm (which Derrida argues forcefully against), the problem of the text becomes that of how to work backwards towards a point of originating speech, how to convey the 'true voice of the native'.\(^{11}\) In the *Writing culture* version, textual experimentation is indulged in with the aim *not* of revealing that anthropological texts represent (recycle) cultural texts of the real, but rather with the attainment of a higher state of transparency in which the authentic shining voice of informants is not occluded by the egos and outmoded textual strategies of anthropologists.

 Appropriately, Clifford's and Marcus's paean to the powers of

---

\(^{10}\) Clifford, 'Ethnographic authority', 43, emphasis added.

\(^{11}\) See Julie Stephens, 'Feminist fictions: a critique of the category "Non-western women" in Feminist writings on India', *Subaltern Studies*, VI, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 92–125, for a critique of this position.
speech, to orality and aurality, starts with a discussion of the photograph on the cover establishing that this new 'voice' in anthropology takes the form of written text onto which is stuck a flat pictorial image. *Writing culture* may well be an argument, an idea (one which is exciting and in many respects admirable), but it is also certainly a book, *Writing culture* defined through its visual signs, one of which is a photograph representing Stephen Tyler in the act of textualization while dispossessed speech in the form of a seated Indian looks nonchalantly on.

'THERE IS NOTHING OUTSIDE THE TEXT'
Foucault, and latterly Said and recently within mainstream anthropology Spencer, have interpreted Derrida's motto that 'there is nothing outside of the text' in a particular and pejorative way. I do not say 'misconstructed' for I wish to gloss it in a manner which some who give textual exegesis of Derrida would assert misreads the specific resonances of this phrase.

Said sees this injunction as a kind of formalism – parallel to American New Criticism's exclusive concern with the self-enclosed rhetorical structures of the text. This approach (which Derrida's work attempts to subvert) amounts, Said claims, to a political dereliction of duty by 'deconstructionists' which fails to account for the conjuncture of texts with legitimizing practices of power and truth. Almost identical criticisms are made as part of the empiricist response within British social anthropology.

A Derridean response might argue that this muscular insistence on the need for 'context' and the political decidability of texts further demonstrates the hold of logocentrism, a continuing enslavement within a duality of 'world' and 'text' as Said describes it in his *The world, the text, and the critic* (1983). A continuing adherence to a distinction between presence and representation (an originary 'discourse' and a secondary 'text') ensures that what its opponents all refer to as this 'slogan' is always read as a plea for formalism. Thus Jonathan Spencer accuses *Writing culture* of being Derridean in this sense (!):

the pervading assumption in *Writing Culture* seems to be that texts can be compared as formal objects, regardless of the conditions of their own production. Derrida's slogan 'There is nothing outside of the text' may have its strategic value in the style wars currently raging in the literature faculty . . .

16 Spencer, 'Anthropology', 159–60.
This seems an unfair claim to make about a book that strives for a view of ‘culture’ (including those processes concerned with the production of ethnographies) as ‘always relational, an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically between subjects in relations of power’, 17 and which stresses ‘the contingency and historical movement of all readings’ 18 in its disavowal of formalism.

However, it suggests the observation that Writing culture has played the curious role of being attacked by those who agree with its basic suppositions and supported by those who are quite alienated from its basic desires but who see it as the thin end of an exciting idealist wedge. This is because Writing culture shares most of the suppositions of those empiricists who attack it. In his Introduction Clifford warns of the dangers of ‘putting the whole world in quotation marks’ 19 and finally reassures us that “Poetry” is not limited to romantic or modernist subjectivism: it can be historical, precise, objective. 20 In the end he is forced back onto con-text, pre-text and discourse – all those things which used to be called ‘facts’.

To read ‘there is nothing outside the text’ as a suggestion that there is nothing outside of the text which is not already itself a text – that there is no Ur-text, or before text which is not also, already a text, forces the conclusion that ‘con-texts’, ‘pre-texts’ cannot lie outside of this text. They are not against, or before the text, rather they are with and after the text. Likewise ‘discourse’ must surrender its privileged stance of priority and become a mere textual shadow.

However, still trapped by dichotomies of presence and absence, both Writing culture and its purported critics argue over the relative balance between the two. Clifford placates a potentially hostile profession by pledges of the strengthening and objectifying properties of poesis. Similarly and inversely, Spencer advocates a return to ‘doing’ rather than ‘theorizing’, ‘working’ rather than ‘writing’. These articulate an elaborate metaphorical duality between cold Britain and sunbelt U.S.A.; heavy and light; scholarship and industry to mention just a few. Such logocentrisms also assume a urinary hue (‘rivers’ versus ‘piss’ 21) and seem to depend on an ultimate faith in a blend of bleak puritanism and indexicality (what really matters is being there and not enjoying yourself; pleasure, and experience which does not involve some brutal confrontation with material reality, are discounted).

Destroying the idea of linearity – a trajectory from discourse to text (from speech to writing) over whose course presence decays, and

19 Ibid., 25.
20 Ibid., 26.
replacing this with a non-originating circle allows us to understand why it is that 'books' – the material signs of the 'text' – can come to function not only (if indeed at all) as signs of 'textuality' and constructedness (as symbols of displacement), but also as the ultimate verifiers of the self-presence of speech.

The 'paradox' I am referring to here concerns the manner in which the metasign of the 'text' (for example the book as a mark of ethnography) comes to stand not after text, but as something that comes before. The 'book' would appear to embody the ultimate textuality, to embody in its very substance the acknowledgement that it is a text, a cultural construct reflecting a post-Gutenberg culturally specific history. However, the double-edged text transforms itself into logos the after of discourse which is also its before. Text embodied in this meta-sign moves around in a circle towards speech and discourse through its material and physical form. The possibility that 'the book as meaning and idea is ... distanced from the book as object and material' can only be a 'deliberate and false split'.

THE PHOTOGRAPH OF THE PHOTOGRAPH: SOME INDIAN EXAMPLES
I will now turn to the relevance of these questions in the consideration of the nature of popular images and iconography in central India. I turn to India not because it is 'different' on account of being over the seas, but because on account of its being over the seas such distanitation and objectification allows us, within anthropology's own terms, to see that our own photographic and imagistic practice is equally 'strange', and in precisely similar ways.

The proliferation of Indian images was, from the sixteenth century onwards, a source of concern to the West because of the absence of single originary sources which, through their privileged priority, could serve to underwrite and guarantee the value of the image as a kind of substitute currency. The Hindu pantheon itself, embodying an 'inconceivable polytheism' was sufficiently problematic but, even worse, were the three-dimensional and two-dimensional images which ran riot across India. Protestant missionary discourse's iconoclastic heritage impelled it to fierce criticism of all these texts floating free of any logos.

Ostensibly at least, the power of photography derives from exactly the same dual movement as the power of ethnographic texts, a movement which Writing culture to its great credit has done much to delineate. Firstly, they both depend on a causal, or indexical connection to their referent. Thus the photographic print is made from a

---

22 Stewart, 'Longing', 33.
negative which at some stage has been actually exposed to the pattern of light which is recorded on its surface; the ethnographic text is similarly the result of a fieldworker’s physical immersion within a different culture whose ‘abroad-ness’ and ‘other-ness’ corresponds to the negative state. Secondly, having established the nature of the indexical link, both aspire towards a state of transparency. Thus the ‘truth’ of photography depends on the smoothness of its picture surface and the effacement of any marks of its ‘bringing into being’. Likewise the ethnographic monograph, having established that the authorial ‘I’ was there through an initial arrival scene, or a picture of a tent on the beach, then proceeds to banish the creator of the text from the product.  

The missionaries’ fear was that of the ‘fetish’ – a sign that signifies itself and which through its lack of subordination to an original is both empty and overpowered (the ‘original’ which empowers mimetic copies also confines their fecundity). This fear emerges, significantly, at the same time that doubts are being expressed at the growing proliferation of paper money and the process which would eventually lead to ‘xenomoney’ – the modern form of money which values itself, regardless of any gold, or other, standard. Paper money implied ‘the loss of anteriority . . . instead of being a representation of some prior wealth, of some anterior pre-existing quantity of real gold or silver specie (it) became the creator, guarantee and sole evidence for this wealth’.

Art historians, such as Coomaraswamy, have invested much effort into presenting a case for the Hindu image as something other than a fetish, something other than what its external appearance and ritual positioning suggested. Here I side with the missionaries and observe that they were wrong only in suggesting that such fetishistic ‘idolatry’ was specific to India, although in so doing I am simplifying complex differences between bhakti and other traditions. I use the Indian example only to argue that what is true of many Hindu images is precisely true of most images in the West, and certainly true of a western practice of photography. The only ‘difference’ stems from the partial extent to which this Western practice was willing to admit to such an ideology.

The Religious Tract Society’s Rays from the East (n.d.) found confirmation of Jeremiah X.3. and other biblical verses in the district of Kydapore in Calcutta, the centre of production of Kali images:


as you gaze at the busy operations of the scores of image makers and hear all around the sounding tokens of the presence of hundreds more, how you must be forced to feel that the language of the prophets and of the psalmist is not yet obsolete!

( . . . )

As the great day approaches (for which these idols are used) symptoms of increasing preparation thicken and multiply all around . . . . The materials for wonder-stirring exhibitions and ceremonial observances are everywhere accumulating.27

Missionary accounts mobilize metaphors of proliferation, reproduction and abandon. The fecundity of the ‘copy’ is part of a threatening and impenetrable jungle of signs and suggests an imaginary and monetary inflation.

Such missionary discourse was an important factor motivating iconoclastic Hindu reform movements during the nineteenth century such as the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj.28 Later writers, such as Coomaraswamy, while adopting a nationalistic outlook, were unable to evade the missionary certainty that the fetishis were evil, a corruption of a Platonic pure Idea, and a single immaterial God - a non-physical text. Ananda Coomaraswamy (as I have already suggested) argued that behind each concrete rūpa (form) or mūrti (statue) lay an arūpa (non-form) and an amūrta beyond form and likeness. Divinity, he argued, was conceived through the image by means of ‘symbolic filiation’. The invisible and atemporal were of needs represented by the visible and temporal.29

All such accounts remain trapped within the dichotomy of original and copy, reality and representation, deity and idol, gold and paper. The use of images and representations within ritual practice in central India belies the usefulness of maintaining such distinctions. Once ‘fetishism’ looses its pejorative force and comes to be recognized as a normative state, we can, from an Indian perspective, set about stigmatizing originary illusions and hierarchies rooted in the prioritization of speech and manifested in forms such as photography, ‘real’ money, and missionary and other discourses.

In Nagda, an industrial centre in Madhya Pradesh, both Hindus and Jains are pleased to agree that nearly all temple munis (statues) were originally pieces of stone which have been crafted by the hand of man (although a few have risen from the earth or dropped from the sky ready-made, as self-born images). The same is true of many Hindu sacred texts in which, as we shall later see, the circumstances of their own production are often fully dealt with.

In the case of the mūrti, the life breath (prāṇa) is introduced through


Figure 1: The eyes are completed last during the repainting of a wayside shrine to *Sri Kāla Bhairav Mahārāja* in the town of Nagda, Madhya Pradesh, 1989. (Photo: C. Pinney).
Figure 2: Contemporary calendar print showing Siva and Parvati within the form of a Sivalinga. Such calendars which are usually printed in Bombay and Delhi are overprinted by local companies (in this case a spice manufacturer in Indore).
Figure 3: Oleograph of the God Hanuman (c. 1960) created from the Devanagari name of his master 'Rama'. For a similar, more elaborate, example see Berjouhi Bowler. The word as image (London: Studio Vista, 1970), fig. 22.
Figure 4: Contemporary calendar print of Indira Gandhi captioned
mera khun ka har kataro desa ko mazbut karega (‘every drop of my blood
will strengthen the nation’). Some of this blood can be seen on the
surface of the image in the bottom left corner. (Artist: H.R. Raja, c.
1986).
Figure 5: ‘Teen Nidhi’ (‘the three oceans of divinity’). Contemporary oleograph by Brijbasi and Sons showing Radha garlanding the svarūpa of Srinathaji, in the centre, and the Tilakayat giving ārati.
Figure 6: The widow of Badrilal Mukati (c. 1910-86), photographed with his portrait. Bhatisuda Village, Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh. (Photo: C. Pinney).
Figure 7: Photograph from Dinesh and Pushpa Khandelwal's wedding album, 1980, showing the groom as a moon caught in the folds of his bride's outstretched sari.

(Photomontage: Suhag Studios, Nagda)
Figure 8: Photographs of Dinesh bursting out from an imaginary film canister. Photomontage created by Suhag Studios, Nagda, as part of his wedding album, 1980.
a procedure known as prānapratisthā. In the installation of Jain mūrtis in Nagda (this would also apply to Hindu mūrtis although I have not observed this), mantras (sacred words which exist as tangible physical objects) are chanted while a Jain āchārya installs the prāna by placing a gold rule across the image’s eyes. After this the power is so intense and potentially dangerous that mirrors are placed in front of the statue’s eyes lest anyone cross its path during this liminal phase. When the prāna is fully installed in the mūrti the mirror is broken and puja can then be given to the deity in the image. As Diana Eck describes the similar Hindu practice ‘the eyes of the image, which to this point have been sealed with a thick coat of honey and ghee, are now “opened” by the Brahman priest, who removes the coating with a golden needle’. 30 (See figure 1.)

The connection between divine power and the mūrti may be seen, initially at least, as ‘indexical’, like that between the photograph and its referent. As in the relation between smoke and fire, to use C.S. Peirce’s example, there is a relation of physical causality between signifier and signified. Like the photograph, the mūrti becomes the God itself, and two-dimensional images of mūrtis and deities also assume this power. Thus a calendar print of a Sivalinga (a stone mūrti in the form of an erect phallus recognized as the God Siva) depicts the physical forms of Siva and Parvati dwelling within it (figure 2), and to many purchasers of the print the physical substance of the paper also embodies some, at least, of this power. Paper images and photographs are not subject to prānapratisthā, perhaps because their mechanical process of production assures an adequate indexical contiguity, but they are nevertheless imbued with a residue of divine power. It is well known that oleographs and photographs of the saint Satya Sai Baba can materialize honey and ashes, 31 and particular images are capable of stepping outside of their own virtual realities in quite exceptional ways.

Further, it is formally agreed (although no-one practises this) that damaged and unwanted oleographs and photographs should be ‘dismissed’ or ‘cooled’ (given visarjana) in a well, or river, in precisely the same way that festival images are (for instance small statues of Ganesha on Anant Chaturthi or of the Goddess Durga on the ninth day of Nau Durga). This is not a practice different from that of the West, merely one which, unoppressed by a Protestant conscience, is content with the spreading of the real onto a surplus of signs. For the West, one might argue, photography performs exactly the same function but because of a particular religious and fiscal practice we are unable, as yet, to generally accept this (beyond the confines of Godard films). However, a recognition of this lies, unarticulated, within all manner of

30 Eck, Darsan, 52-3.
quotidian gestures: ‘nothing could be more natural than . . . a man pulling a snapshot from his wallet and saying “This is my dog”’. 32

And, of course, he is almost certainly correct. What else are dogs – or at least the kind of dogs owned by people who keep photographs of them in their wallets – but strains engineered by breeders to conform to the anticipated desires of people who keep photographs of dogs in their wallets?

In August 1897, Church Missionary Society personnel in Poona created an open-air map of India. The outline was marked with flints and a six-inch band of whitewash. The rivers were rendered in a blue wash. The Himalayas were ‘enormous chunks of flint’ and, according to *Wide World Magazine,* ‘missionary stations were shown on this most marvellous of maps by means of cards stuck on sticks, these sticks having coloured papers attached like pennants to indicate the scope of different missionary societies’. 33

The photograph’s caption declares this to be a map ‘wrought in the sand at Poona’. Does this sand remain a part of India now that it is also a part of the map? Would the map also encompass a part of itself – would it encompass as a minute fragment of its own representation that territory on which it is constructed? According to Jean Baudrillard such questions are surpassed – made irrelevant – by the emergence of a hyper-reality in which territories are created by maps. Baudrillard discusses Borges’ allegory in which the cartographers of Empire draw up so precise a map that it finally covers exactly that territory which it represents. With the decline of empire this map becomes frayed and only a few rotting shreds are to be found in deserts. But in an age of simulation, in ‘a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth’ – it is no longer possible to privilege a particular order of the originary and the copy, or the real and re-presentation: ‘the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it . . . it is the map that engenders the territory.’ When the difference between the real and the representation implodes ‘it is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself.’ 34 The sand at Poona has been absorbed by the map. That which precedes now succeeds inside a non-originary circle. ‘Discourse’ is ‘text’ is ‘discourse’.

THE FRAME OF THE TEXT
A.K. Ramanujan has argued that it is not until the nineteenth century that Indian texts shed their ‘frames’ – contextualizing devices which

33 *Wide World Magazine,* 1898, 172.
situate the listener and the reader. These texts are prefaced by *phalasruti* verses which relate the good that will come from listening to them. Each story is situated within a reflexive meta-story. The outer story illuminates the inner, and the inner story reflects the outer while at the same time situating the listener within it. Ramanujan recounts that a friend was read the *Nādisāstra*. The pandits 'brought out an old palm-leaf manuscript which, in archaic verses, mentioned his full-name, age, birthplace and said suddenly— "At this point, the listener is crossing his legs—he should uncross them".'\(^{35}\)

One of the most striking 'frames' is constructed in the prologue (the Balakanda) to Valmiki's *Rāmāyana*, which in its medieval Hindi version by Tulsi Das is probably the most widely read and recited text throughout India. On the advice of Narada, Valmiki journeyed to a river near the Ganges. Here he saw two Krauncha birds 'sporting, never apart from each other, and singing sweetly'. Almost immediately the male bird of the two was killed by a hunter's arrow and 'the female bird, seeing its mate rolling dead on the earth with its limbs covered all over with blood uttered a plaintive cry'.\(^{36}\)

Valmiki felt the bird's grief deeply and spoke to the hunter with a voice marked by a 'strange new music and rhythm':\(^{37}\) 'this which has issued forth from me suffering from grief, divided into four parts, with the same number of letters in each, with rhythm and tone complete, this can only be a *Sloka* and nothing else.'\(^{38}\)

Brahma hearing this beautifully modulated speech declared that this was indeed a musical language fit to record the history of the god Rama. Valmiki then proceeded to utter the whole of the narrative of the *Rāmāyana* in a form that perfectly mirrored the rhythmical structure of Valmiki's utterance to the hunter.

The *Rāmāyana* is thus a text which replicates a noise, a particular rhythmic *sloka* which is configured differently over the many tens of thousands of *slokas* in the original text. This transference of the grief of the bereaved Krauncha bird into the speech of Valmiki with the help of the goddess of speech and into the *Rāmāyana* is the subject of popular illustrations.\(^{39}\) The noise here becomes a material surface, a sign of 'textuality'. But this is only one example of the fecundity of words, noises and rhythms associated with the stories of the *Rāmāyana*. Later in the narrative an epic battle takes place between Ravana the king of Lanka and Rama, the hero, who is assisted by Hanuman a muscular monkey. In popular ritual practice Rama is usually approa-
ched through his servant Hanuman, and followers of Rama are as likely to visit Hanuman temples and worship pictures of Hanuman in their homes as those of Rama. A popular print owned by many people in Nagda creates the visual form of Hanuman through a conglomer­ation of the word ‘Rama’ which is given here as a mantra, an empowered and self-sufficient symbol of identity (figure 3). As it is told elsewhere in the later Hindi Tulsi Das Rāmāyana:

A name can be regarded as equivalent to what is named, the connection being such as subsists between a master and servant. Both name and form are shadows of the lord who, rightly understood, is unspeakable and uncreated. They are sometimes wrongly distinguished as greater and less, but the wise will understand my explanation of the difference between them. See now, the form is subordinate to the name for without the name you cannot come to a knowledge of the form; if the very form be in your hand, still knowing the name it is not recognised; but meditate on the name without seeing the form, and your soul is filled with devotion.40

The name Rama – the mantra – exists here as a self-sufficient object referring not to what it ‘names’, but rather, like ‘xenomoney’, ‘what it signifies is its capacity to further signify’.41 It is certainly a pre-Saussurian conflation of the signifier with the signified in which the arbitrary and symbolic nature of language is denied, just as the rhythms of the whole of the Rāmāyana testify within their very being to the original poetic grief of the Krauncha bird. But there is nothing naive about this. Indeed, rather than seeing this as ‘pre-’ Saussurian, one might equally view it as an acknowledgement that there is no signified before the signifier. But this is not a Derridean critique of the Saussurian sign in which it is argued that all is displacement and deferral; rather it is an argument that there is nothing beyond the enclosed completeness of the power of naming. In this light the common anthropological observation that many Brahman priests clearly do not ‘understand’ the Sanskrit mantras they recite42 rather misses the point that the power of the mantra does not lie in its intelligibility as part of a symbolic language system, but as its own object, as a thing that refers only to itself. To phrase this in the terms with which we commenced this paper, the displacement of meaning on to the signifier (for example the word Rama) to the extent of pushing its material qualities to the extreme limits (so that for example we can draw pictures – divine presences – with these material words) does not (as a dichotomy between ‘discourse’ and ‘text’ would suggest) in any sense serve to undermine the ‘truth’ of the signified. In fact precisely the reverse happens – this intensified textuality serves to underwrite this ‘truth’. What should subvert it guarantees it: ‘place

41 Rotman, Signifying nothing, 102.
the name of Rama as a jewelled lamp at the door of your lips and there will be light... As his tongue repeats his name the ascetic wakes to life... 

In the more general terms of this paper, speech comes to be spoken by books, the power of the word comes from the object placed between lips, the arbitrary comes to signify only itself. We can describe parallel strategies within Indian images in which the power of the image often stems from the presentation of it precisely as an image. Representations of political figures on calendars often, through the use of 'frames' or a stylized backdrop, present the politician through an image of an image. Thus one popular, post-assassination, portrait of Indira Gandhi depicts her blood (which is referred to in the picture's caption) splattered against the surface of the image (figure 4), and uses the veined yellow and green background which has become a conventionalized sign of portraiture. Similar ritual examples can be found such as the common Vallabha representation of Srinathaji (a Visnu avatār with a popular temple at Nathdwara in Rajasthan) in the oleograph 'Teen Nidhi' (figure 5). This shows the image in the form of a svarūpa, or living deity of Sri Nathaji which was brought to the town from north India in 1672 as the object of pūjā by the Tilakayat (the chief Gosūmī of Pushti Marga) who is giving ārāti and Radha who is garlanding. Like Indira Gandhi, Srinathaji is venerated by the people of Nagda in the form of an image of an image. Both these images are mobilized within very demanding contexts as objects of veneration by Congress supporters on the one hand, and devotees of Srinathaji on the other, and it is evident that the power of these images is an effect of their textuality and materiality. It does not stem from a representational realist strategy in which the viewer surveys a priorness within the depth of the image. Such transpositions of the power of representation onto the material possibility of re-presenting, and the replicative fecundity that this permits, is a common feature of popular photography. I was most forcefully made aware of this on my last day in Bhatisuda village at the conclusion of my main fieldwork during 1982 and 1983. This had been concerned with village resident labourers in a nearby viscose rayon plant, and in a departure ceremony organized by the locally-dominant group of Jains, my wife and I were presented with various mementoes. This was photographed by a roving employee of the Suhag Photographic Studios in the nearby town of Nagda, and the resulting photographic album became (after a short delay) the last in a long line of presentations. One of the images records the gift to us of a large black and white portrait of Bhairav Bharatiya, the father of the then Jain village council leader (sarpanc) and a lifelong communist and campaigner for farmers' rights against the factory's management. On subsequent visits I have been asked on

43 Tulsi Das, Ramayau, 17.
44 Ambalal, Krishna, 12.
many occasions to photograph both village and town residents holding photographs of deceased spouses and parents (figure 6). All these are self-posed and very similar and suggest the format I first recognized in the Suhag Studio’s photograph of Bhairav’s photograph. All these images are of the dead and might be dismissed, perhaps, as touching but unremarkable attempts to reincorporate the past in the present through what still remains – photographic traces. This would be convincing were it not for the fact that the living and the divinely omnipotent also appear in such a guise. Wedding photographs, for instance, utilize montage and trick effects that allow the staging of the participants as a series of images. A groom can appear trapped in the folds of the bride’s sari, his face beaming down from a glowing moon (figure 7); brides and grooms are magically doubled, look out from the screens of televisions, and burst out from film canisters in a duplicating exuberance (figure 8).

The strangeness of Indian practice need only be provisional, for similar strategies have been identified at the heart of Western ideology by Heidegger and Said, among others. Both Heidegger’s and Said’s view of a particular aspect of modernity, and the role of ‘picturization’ and ‘textualization’ within it, parallel closely the way of having power over things which the Rāmāyaṇa manifests in the circumstances of its creation and the themes with which it is concerned, although I would certainly part company with them when they suppose that there is any alternative to this. Heidegger, in attacking what he sees as a kind of ‘super-Cartesianism’ in which cogito, the foundation of rationalist objective thought, enables man to re-present reality to himself and make it an object of thought assumes that there is an alternative to this, a before-state of presence. Likewise, Said is, as numerous commentators have observed, decidedly equivocal as to whether there is a ‘real’ Orient – and he is, of course, unable to hypothesize any different mode of textualization or apprehension which would avoid the objectifying sins of Orientalism.

ETHNOGRAPHIES AS XENOTEXTS

The main sources for the materials on which I have built are the following: Barth F. 1971 and field notes [sic] from 1967, 1968 and 1982.

So far, I have tried to show how India’s apparent strangeness is of a similar order to the strangeness which lies at the heart of Western

---

image-making. Social anthropology can also be seen at the heart of this process of Western image-making and shares all the features of the photograph of the dog; it too embodies the apparent paradox that while, justified ontologically in a peculiarly privileged manner, it comes to validate itself by reference, *not* to what it purportedly signifies, but by reference to its own nature as a text, and by its membership of a common class of *books*. The 'worth' of anthropology's realist depictions is rarely authenticated in terms of a vertical correspondence between signifier and signified. Rather, value is increasingly calculated on the basis of its position as an object in a realm of equivalent signs (other ethnographies, other books). Ethnographies become books, the academic *mantras*. Like xenomoney, the xenotext; 'floating and inconvertible to anything outside itself signifies itself. More specifically, it signifies the possible relationship it can establish with future states of itself'.

Anthropology still defines itself through salvage, and ethnographies – the chief product of the discipline – must signify a disappeared world if they are to be properly considered as anthropology at all. It will be protested that this is a nineteenth-century concern and that anthropology today is preoccupied with *living* cultures. It would be foolish to deny changes of emphasis, but the disappearance paradigm has thrived throughout – from Malinowski to Lévi-Strauss and today's television para-ethnography.

The need for the disappearance of what we study is a consequence of a historical tradition, the need to define the discipline as against others which don't articulate this mode and, most importantly, the necessary nature of the *original* whose effect of existence can only be made to appear at the point of its disappearance:

Ethnology is in the sadly ludicrous, not to say tragic, position, that at the very moment when it begins to put its workshop in order, to forge its proper tools, to start ready for work on its appointed task, the material of its study melts away with hopeless rapidity. Just now, when the methods and aims of scientific field ethnology have taken shape, when men fully trained for the work have begun to travel into savage countries and study their inhabitants – these die away under our very eyes.

That such a declaration should open the founding text of modern fieldwork (the ontological and empirical justification of ethnography) is not in any sense paradoxical. Indeed it is uncannily close to what one might predict, for it signifies 'the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance'. At precisely the moment when anthropo-

50 Derrida, *Of grammatology*, 112.
logy appeared on the point of locating its collateral, it revealed itself to be concerned with the production of non-redeemable paper texts.

Ethnographies are in no sense peculiar in this regard, for paper money and photographs also share this quality, referring to a redeemable value, a signified which no longer exists, which is now irredeemable. Malinowski’s declaration parallels the ‘loss of transcendental origin, the end of a “grounding” of money signs in some natural thing imagined to have a pre-monetary worth’. 51 This is a cultural fact of great importance which needs to be written into the history of imperialism – a machine for the alliance of these three great sources of loss – paper and xenomoney, anthropology and photography.

And the sense of loss is continually regenerated within the discipline. One curious feature of contemporary British social anthropology is that individuals who once, albeit briefly, flirted with the ‘literary turn’ are now among the most vocal eulogists of the worth of the ‘classics’. Nothing, it seems, can ever attain the perfection of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Set against these early works all subsequent ethnographies are devalued shadows, inadequate renderings of a completeness which was once attainable. Within its own logocentric precepts such an argument may well be demonstrably true. It is difficult to think of an ethnography which ‘stands up to’, ‘matches the yardstick of’, ‘will stand the test of time like’ *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. But this might also be a function of a certain system of value in which ethnographies, as books, come to signify themselves, and which – as later paper products proliferate – suffers rampant inflation. When Malinowski claims that this is how it is in the Trobriands he makes the same claim as the governor of the Bank of England on a five pound note, when he pledges ‘I promise to pay the bearer on demand . . .’ because, of course, all he does is validate this promise in the speech act of saying. He has ‘promised’, but he will not pay. Only the teleology of the speech act comes into play, for the five pound note is not redeemable. Similarly, from a contemporary perspective, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* is not underpinned by a set of referential facts, anything ‘real to itself without the agency of signs’. 52 Like the five-pound note, it can function only as a paper sign. During the twentieth century, both anthropology and money have evolved in parallel towards ‘xenotexts’ and ‘xenomoney’ in which:

Divorced by fiat from any source of ‘intrinsic’ value outside its own universe of signs, it is forced as a sign to engage in the creation of its own signified – one written in the only terms available to it, that is future states of itself. By buying and selling itself through time, that is commoditising the difference between its spot and forward value, xenomoney achieves a certain sort of self-creation. It is a time-bound sign that scandalously manufactures its own signified, what it insists is its value, as it goes along. 53

---

51 Rotman, *Signifying nothing*, 96.
52 Ibid., 100.
53 Ibid., 101.
Classic anthropology, concerned with salvaging facts from worlds which were then forced to disappear, performs the same necessary function once reduced to the status of the empty paper signs signifying only itself. Its referent (like the gold in the Bank of England) disappears as soon as the sign is created (this is indeed a prerequisite of its foundation), and this irrevocably inserts it within an inflationary world, in which present value is determined by a nominal future price. Hence, what matters to the writer of ethnography is that his/her work should ‘stand the test of time’ and not be part of a mere ‘valueless’ ‘fad’, ‘fancy’, ‘trend’ or ‘passing whim’ or other signs of insubstantiality. As Stewart notes: ‘in the mass-market paperback, the book is consumed, destroyed by reading, and in the academic paperback the “value” of academic discourse is displayed within the pulp of cheap materials’, its ‘value’ becomes merely ‘the relation between what it was worth . . . and what the market judges it will be worth at different points in the future’.55

The peculiar academic intensification of this xenotextual economy, under certain current conditions, is evident through the extent to which the privileged relation of texts to the prior world is underwritten not through any re-tracing of the presumed contiguous relationship between discourse and text (gold and paper), but through a circulating babble of other academics: ‘the best known measure used as a surrogate for “quality” is citation analysis’. Xenotexts can be seen here as the basic units of currency in the Thatcherite ‘bibliometric’ economy of ‘performance indicators’ (University of London, 18 August 198956). But it also suggests a much deeper doubt about the nature of the line running between ‘discourse’ and ‘text.’ Those few historians who still cling to some notion of historical ‘truth’ are unable to produce arguments about priority in this relationship, preferring instead to cede the question of ‘what really happened’ to what today’s and tomorrow’s experts concur might have happened: ‘one can be reasonably sure that historical descriptions which have won the approval of unsympathetic or impartial expert critics are not biased, but are well justified and merit belief’.57 In history, as with anthropology, ‘discourse’ is the product of an economy of ‘texts’, just as in the monetary economy value is an effect of xenomoney.

Fittingly, such an argument has inevitably been made already and more incisively by another text:

54 Stewart, On longing, 33.
55 Rotman, Signifying nothing, 92.
mind. It seems to me, indeed, that this page speaks of something there has been talk about during these past days . . . But I cannot recall what. I must think it over. Perhaps I'll have to read other books.'

'Why? To know what one book says you must read others?'

(...) Until then I had thought each book spoke of the things, human or divine, that lie outside books. Now I realized that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves. In the light of this reflection, the library seemed all the more disturbing to me. It was then the place of a long, centuries-old murmuring, an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another . . .